TENNYSON'S DRAMAS: A CRITICAL STUDY

by

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A DISSERTATION

IN

ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August, 1974

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1974

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any thorough student of Tennyson must necessarily depend on the primary collections of the poet's manuscripts in the Trinity College Library, Cambridge, England, the City Library of Lincoln, England, and the Harvard University Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts. I am grateful to the two former libraries for information on the plays communicated to me by the chairman of my committee, Dr. Thomas A. Langford, and to the Harvard University Library for permission to quote excerpts from the play manuscripts. I also am indebted to the Texas Tech Institute for University Research for partial support of this study, including travel to Harvard University, in the form of a part-time assistantship for general research on the plays of Tennyson. My special gratitude is extended to Professor Langford for his direction of this dissertation and to the other members of my committee, Professors James W. Culp, Kenneth W. Davis, and Alexis S. Tan, for their helpful criticism.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
I. THE LAUREATE AS VICTORIAN DRAMATIST	6
The State of Nineteenth-Century English Theater	6
Motivations of Tennyson's Dramatic Work	14
History of Composition and Production . .	23
General Criticism of the Plays	35
The Unity of Tennyson's Dramatic Work . .	46
II. <u>QUEEN MARY</u> --"THRO' WARPING GLASSES"	55
III. <u>HAROLD</u> --"WORDS ARE THE MAN"	94
IV. <u>BECKET</u> --"THIS PESTILENT PRIEST"	128
V. <u>THE FALCON</u> AND <u>THE CUP</u> --"LOVE . . . OUTVALUES ALL"	163
<u>The Falcon</u>	165
<u>The Cup</u>	180
VI. <u>THE FORESTERS</u> AND <u>THE PROMISE OF MAY</u> -- "IF THE BLOSSOM 'OWDS"	196
<u>The Foresters</u>	200
<u>The Promise of May</u>	217
CONCLUSION	232
BIBLIOGRAPHY	238

INTRODUCTION

Exactly one hundred years ago Alfred Tennyson, at the age of sixty-five and with a poetic reputation secure and unsurpassed in England, entered intrepidly a new stage in his career by beginning work on the historical drama Queen Mary. Although the roots of this incursion into drama stretched far into the past, including the exuberantly youthful comedy fragment The Devil and the Lady from his boyhood and various poems from his mature canon which exhibit dramatic tendencies, it nevertheless seemed a striking departure that the aging Laureate should now direct his talents toward the stage. If proof were needed that Queen Mary was not merely the isolated product of a frivolous literary impulse, it came in the form of six more dramas in the next ten years, this productivity continuing despite what was at best only modest critical and popular success.

The century that has passed since Tennyson first turned to a career as playwright has been no kinder to the fruits of that venture than was the poet's own age. Today, the plays of the most famous Victorian poet are generally consigned to the musty obscurity of the annals of nineteenth-century drama; or, if they are known at all, they are usually regarded as curiosity pieces, the embarrassing failures of an imagination unsuited to the peculiar demands of the

drama. Tennyson's biographers, scarcely able to ignore a period which produced between one-fourth and one-third of the poet's total work, have naturally tried to explain why he turned to writing plays. Similarly, critics surveying the Tennyson canon have been obliged to deal with so substantial a segment of his work, but most often have done so in a cursory and even apologetic manner. Therefore, while it is not especially difficult to find comment on the plays, one cannot avoid the conclusion that this sizable portion of Tennyson's output has been sorely neglected, especially in comparison to his other verse.

Particularly lacking in the treatment of the dramas is the close reading of the plays as works of art, the kind of critical approach for which the mid-twentieth century is noted. The fullest studies of the plays to date are limited in purpose and scope: three German dissertations discuss the sources of Tennyson's historical trilogy of Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket;¹ Mary Poteat's 1935 dissertation from Duke University is a critical edition of Becket; and the only published book-length treatment of the plays, The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson by Cornelia Geetrui Japikse,

¹Louis Grünert, Tennysons Drama "Becket": Eine Quellenuntersuchung, Diss. Leipzig 1913 (Weimar, 1913); Paul Jellinghaus, Tennysons Drama "Harold": Eine Quellenuntersuchung, Diss. Münster 1905 (Borna-Leipzig, 1905); and Werner Martin, Die Quellen zu Tennysons erstem Drama "Queen Mary," Diss. Halle-Wittenberg 1912 (Halle, 1912).

also focuses on the plays' sources, as well as surveying their contemporary reception.

Miss Japikse is almost certainly too enthusiastic about the merits of the plays and their potential fame, but her call for scholarly notice of them is altogether appropriate:

It may be that the time has come for the dramas to be properly studied and to get the attention they are entitled to, and no doubt, in that case the appreciation which was given by only a few during his lifetime will be awarded by many when the interest in them is revived.²

Henry Van Dyke, another Tennyson scholar of the same era, expresses a similar reaction to the quality of the criticism when he notes that despite Tennyson's shortcomings as a playwright, "the wholesale condemnation and neglect of his dramatic work is a reproach to the intelligence of our critics."³

The rebirth of interest, however, has not yet come. The wave of reassessment and new appreciation that has generally characterized Tennyson scholarship in the last three decades has not touched the shores of the Laureate's dramatic endeavors. The kind of critical attention that has rescued the reputation of such a work as Idylls of the King,

²The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson ([1926]; rpt. New York, 1966), pp. 157-58.

³Studies in Tennyson, 2nd ed. (1920; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y., 1966), p. 185.

as well as enhancing Tennyson's earlier and always more admired poems, has not yet been applied to the plays. It is clear that the dramas, whatever their merit as acting-pieces, are a body of literature which deserves the objective analysis of a critical approach detached from both the contemporary adulation of Tennyson and the later unfavorable reaction to the poet. The ultimate goal of this study is not to propose a general assessment of the quality of the dramas, either as stage plays or as works to be read, though some such conclusions are inevitable; certainly the criticism that exists has covered that subjective ground rather thoroughly. What this study offers, on the other hand, is an analysis of Tennyson's artistry at work, particularly as seen through his handling of themes, symbols, and images, and their contribution to the literary effectiveness of the dramas.

As background for the individual analyses of Tennyson's seven plays, Chapter I discusses several areas essential to an understanding of the Laureate as a Victorian dramatist: his relationship to the theater of his age, the motivations for his writing of plays, the history of composition and production of his dramas, and a survey of criticism of the plays. Finally, the last section of the chapter sets forth some concepts by which Tennyson's total dramatic effort can be seen as a unit, suggesting the moral and artistic threads which run through the plays.

The remainder of the study consists of chapters devoted to the seven mature plays, in the order of their composition: Queen Mary, Harold, Becket, The Falcon, The Cup, The Foresters, and The Promise of May. Tennyson's first play, The Devil and the Lady, is excluded from analysis for three reasons: because it is unfinished, because its favorable critical reception is due largely to the fact that it is the work of a juvenile, and, most importantly, because it is widely separated from the later plays in both time and intent. Of interest only peripherally, The Devil and the Lady is regarded chiefly in terms of the development of Tennyson's interest in the theater.

A discovery of the dramas' artistic elements, which is the primary aim of this study, will not, of course, necessarily alter anyone's final judgment of a particular play or of the plays as a group. However, it may indeed help to place the dramas more clearly in the context of Tennyson's total poetic output, establishing them as pieces which, if not worthy of highest praise, at least are able to reward critical scrutiny as serious works of art.

CHAPTER I

THE LAUREATE AS VICTORIAN DRAMATIST

The State of Nineteenth-Century English Theater

One of the first reviews of Queen Mary began with this understatement: "The appearance of Tennyson in the field of drama is an event of interest both for English poetry and for the English stage."¹ The critic welcomed the poet as the new hope for the rescue of Victorian theater, but of course Tennyson no more revived great drama in England than had the many nineteenth-century poets and playwrights before him. Although it is true that British drama had been at a comparatively low level for many decades, it nevertheless has been described as a century of "intense dramatic activity," with more than 30,000 plays produced.² Yet until the advent of the "new drama" at the very end of the century, no truly important playwright emerged during the 1800's. If the century is noted for any drama at all, it is for closet drama. J. O. Bailey, noting such works

¹Richard Jebb, "Queen Mary," The Times of London, 19 June 1875, rpt. in The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam Tennyson (1908; rpt. Westport, Ct., 1970), VIII, 343. This is the standard edition which includes the plays and is commonly known as the Eversley Edition, which name will be used in subsequent citations.

²J. O. Bailey, British Plays of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1966), p. v.

as Byron's Manfred, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, Browning's Pippa Passes, Tennyson's Maud, Arnold's Empedocles on Etna, and Swinburne's Atalanta in Calydon, remarks: "Perhaps if these and other writers had used as much imagination and ingenuity in writing plays for the stage as they did in writing for the reader, the verse drama could have survived."³ In his The Deserted Stage Terry Otten further indicts the stage efforts of these and other writers:

Never have so many major authors contributed so little to the history of English drama. Despite the fact that every major nineteenth-century poet wrote dramas and almost all of them condemned the current stage, not one could rescue the theater from senile plots, pseudo-Elizabethan techniques, melodramatic claptrap, stock characterization, and bombastic language. Moreover, these literary giants contributed to rather than arrested the decline and committed the further offense of forever sentencing unsuspecting graduate students and literary coroners to the odious chore of exhuming the corpse. How it was possible for such poets to produce a body of dramas so bad has baffled more than one critic.⁴

What, then, caused the general failure of nineteenth-century drama, a situation into which Tennyson entered and to which he soon contributed? Critics have attempted to answer that question in terms of three overlapping problem areas: the actual staging of plays, the prevailing literary and intellectual climate of the age,

³Bailey, p. 27.

⁴The Deserted Stage: The Search for Dramatic Form in Nineteenth-Century England (Athens, O., 1972), p. 3.

and the approach of the playwrights themselves.

The easiest answers to the problem of dramatic inferiority are the obvious factors associated with production itself. Of these, perhaps the most striking concerns the nature of the audience and its expectations. From the Restoration until about 1800, the drama had been mainly the province of the upper class, but the nineteenth century's extensions of rights and prosperity to a great portion of the English masses also brought out the theater as the "entertainment of an increasingly democratic society."⁵ What the middle and lower classes were interested in seeing, however, was not the traditional kinds of drama that the best actors and managers were producing and the best authors were imitating. One critic remarks that "the newly emancipated and rambunctious audiences generally could not stomach Shakespeare without some mitigating novelty. As for the verse tragedies of Coleridge and Shelley or, later, Tennyson and Swinburne, they were found unpalatable indeed."⁶ Instead, audiences were calling for more realism, "pictures of the 'glad, confident morning' of their own age of prosperity and progress."⁷ The response to this

⁵Bailey, p. vi.

⁶Leonard R. N. Ashley, ed., Nineteenth-Century British Drama: An Anthology of Representative Plays (Glenview, Ill., 1967), p. 6.

⁷Ibid., p. 7.

demand took the shape of melodrama, the dominant popular form until melodrama itself evolved late in the century into the "new drama" of Shaw, Jones, and Pinero.

The stylized aspects of melodrama were encouraged not only by the audience's expectations, but also by the theaters themselves. The immensity of such "legitimate" theaters as Drury Lane and Covent Garden required broad acting, oratorical delivery, and spectacular effects if audiences were to catch all the action and dialogue. The smaller theaters, catering generally to lower classes, were if anything more spectacular and diverting in their offerings in order to please the customers. Other production factors frequently mentioned in connection with the failure of nineteenth-century drama are censorship, the star system of actors, and increasing expenses.

To the extent that creative artists are responsive to public taste, the nineteenth-century audience certainly contributed to a second obstacle for Victorian drama: the prevailing intellectual and artistic standards. Ernest Reynolds, considering this question, lists five conditions necessary for the production of good drama, none of which he finds in the 1800's. Significantly for this study, he illustrates the absence of three of these conditions with material from Tennyson's plays. The following characteristics, Reynolds says, will mark an age which produces good drama: literature will be regarded as art rather than

propaganda; the age will be morally vigorous, free from spiritual unrest or self-consciousness; literary taste will encourage condensation and restraint; literary expression will tend to be objective, the artist's personality being hidden; and the artistic spirit will respect tradition but also progressiveness.⁸ To Reynolds and others, the age itself was clearly unsuited to the drama.

Aside from the playwright's relationship to the matters of literary taste and practice noted in Reynolds' list, there is one other specific area of authorial responsibility which has been noted in the failure of Victorian drama. It is bardolatry, the persistent imitation of traditional techniques and forms, especially those Shakespearian. One critic insists that it killed invention by defining drama "not as an imitation of life, but an imitation of art, an emulation of Shakespeare, Dryden, or Otway," and further, that although the need for stylized acting gradually disappeared, "the custom of writing heroic rhetoric for the platform stage was carried on. Thus the old aristocratic forms prevented new dramatic poets from developing the substance of a living drama for an increasingly democratic time."⁹

⁸Early Victorian Drama (1830-1870) (1936; rpt. New York, 1965), p. 7.

⁹Bailey, p. 21.

Otten also sees imitation as the chief flaw of nineteenth-century play writing, but his analysis is more thorough than that of others. Using as an ideal Browning's well-known desire to depict the subjective "action in character" rather than "character in action," Otten finds that the dominant Victorian impulse of introspection simply was not suited to dramatization within the conventional forms offered by past masters. He writes:

Adopting Elizabethan dramaturgy to express modern subjective matter was too much like grafting an alien myth onto a new vision. The modern concern with the individual and the internal "dialogue of the mind with itself" worked at odds with a communal drama directed to a homogeneous body of believers.¹⁰

Consequently, Otten finds in experimental forms such as some of the closet drama and Tennyson's Maud the forerunners of modern drama; but he believes that dramatists consistently failed in their goals when they wrote expressly for the stage.

Today the relationship of Tennyson to the drama of his age is quite clear. The plays of Tennyson, modeled on traditional forms, may be seen as a sort of last effort to restore the English stage to its former greatness. What was happening elsewhere in Europe, and what was to dawn in Britain very soon, of course, was not a restoration but a revolution in drama. Thus, to one modern critic, Tennyson's

¹⁰Otten, pp. 7-8.

plays were a futile gesture:

To contemplate Tennyson's timid and derivative contribution to the drama in the light of Ibsen's and other Continental playwrights' nearly simultaneous wrenching of it in the direction of social realism provides an almost grotesque reminder of how irrelevant to the course of theatrical history Tennyson's plays were.¹¹

Similarly, Allardyce Nicoll regards the cultivation of poetic dramas such as Tennyson's as one of many attempts in the late 1800's to escape the trend toward naturalistic theater.¹² Still another scholar characterizes Tennyson's work as "a late afterglow of the sunset of the romantic drama in England."¹³

Critics closer to Tennyson's time, lacking the valuable perspective of history, had more difficulty in properly relating the poet to the dramatic movements of the age. One, for example, saw Tennyson as something of an innovator in that he sought to develop characterization rather than strong conflicts in plot.¹⁴ The contemporary

¹¹James D. Kissane, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1970), pp. 145-46.

¹²A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, 1850-1900 (1946; rpt. Cambridge, 1949), I, 208.

¹³Thomas H. Dickinson, The Contemporary Drama of England (Boston, 1931), p. 27.

¹⁴Louis J. Block, "The Dramatic Sentiment and Tennyson's Plays," Poet-Lore, 8 (1896), 512-27.

reviewer Richard Jebb regarded the chronicle plays as significant works but timidly delegated their final judgment to future generations.¹⁵

One useful idea emerging from the problem of classifying Tennyson's plays in dramatic history is the concept of their value as closet drama.¹⁶ While most scholars would not agree with the claim that the reading of a drama is a higher standard of consideration than the staging of it,¹⁷ the validity of dramas for reading is well established, as evidenced by numerous literary analyses of major playwrights of every period. Jebb recognized this aspect of drama in his review of the published Becket:

It is easy to see that there are varieties and degrees of dramatic excellence, and that the criterion of successful performance on the actual stage is only one of the tests whereby a dramatic work of serious and permanent pretensions is to be tried.¹⁸

Even the harshest readers realize that Tennyson's work appreciates when regarded as closet drama. One such critic

¹⁵"Becket," in Eversley, IX, 433.

¹⁶Although the term "closet drama" technically refers to plays written to be read rather than acted, it often is applied to works such as Tennyson's, whose merit as literature outweighs their success as staged dramas. Tennyson undoubtedly wanted his plays performed, but he just as surely meant them to be read as well.

¹⁷See Henry Van Dyke, Studies in Tennyson, 2nd ed. (1920; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y., 1966), p. 170.

¹⁸Eversley, IX, 453.

admits that Becket is as good as any other reading drama of the century, although he scarcely veils his distaste for plays of that type.¹⁹

Motivations of Tennyson's Dramatic Work

Regardless of the value of the plays as closet drama, Tennyson clearly intended them to be more than just some additional poems. He was taking a new step, one which ever since has provoked the question of why the Laureate, at the height of his popularity as a lyric and narrative poet, would risk his reputation by turning to the stage. One of the most important answers to the question is Tennyson's long interest in and respect for the drama as literature. This is the first reason Hallam Tennyson gives in explaining his father's new direction, and indeed the Memoir is sprinkled throughout with evidence of "the liveliest interest in the theatre."²⁰ Hallam notes that his father loved the stage and freely offered criticism not only to younger actors, but also to the famous Henry Irving himself.²¹ Although he told Irving how Hamlet should be played, Tennyson admired Irving's interpretation of the role, which the poet called "the greatest creation

¹⁹Kissane, p. 153.

²⁰Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1898), II, 174.

²¹Ibid., pp. 85, 151.

in literature that I know of."²² Tennyson's reverence for Shakespeare was deep and lasting; in his dying days Hallam often read him the bard's works, and a volume of Shakespeare was in his hands when he died. It is no wonder that Tennyson's own first efforts were imitative of the dramatist he valued so highly. Nor is it surprising that it was the historical play which attracted his first talents, for Hallam thus writes of his father's belief in the cultural efficacy of such drama:

He regarded the drama as one of the most humanising of influences. He always hoped that the State, or the municipalities, as well as the public schools, would produce our great English historical plays, so that they might form part of the Englishman's ordinary educational curriculum.²³

In addition to the fact of Tennyson's long interest in the drama as a reader, spectator, and critic, most scholars are also convinced that the poet's own work had been moving toward the dramatic. One critic, for example, says that the direction of Tennyson's total work had been that of "passing out of itself into the sufferings and achievements of others."²⁴ Certainly most of the poetry after In Memoriam is marked by a generally public quality, in

²²Memoir, II, 291.

²³Ibid., p. 174.

²⁴Arthur Waugh, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Study of His Life and Work, 3rd ed. (London, 1894), p. 172.

contrast to his earlier, more subjective verse.

As has been noted, however, even in the earliest writing there was evidence of dramatic talent. In 1930 Sir Charles Tennyson, the Laureate's grandson, published The Devil and the Lady and Unpublished Early Poems, giving the world the first view of an astonishingly precocious dramatic fragment, consisting of 1,675 lines in blank verse. Composed when Tennyson was only fourteen, The Devil and the Lady is a remarkable work for any young writer, so impressive as a foretaste of poetic genius, in fact, that it has won the most universal acclaim of any of the plays. Modeled somewhat after the Jonsonian comedy of humours, it contains a cast of vivid, if stereotyped, characters headed by a most engagingly human Devil. The Devil is commissioned by the aged necromancer Magus, who is leaving on a journey, to guard the chastity of his beautiful young wife Amoret from would-be suitors, a series of six who dutifully appear on the scene when Magus is gone. Some of the suitors' names reflect their livelihoods, in the comedy of humours tradition; for example, Angulo is an astronomer and a mathematician, Pharmaceutus an apothecary. The most amusing moments in The Devil and the Lady are provided by the virulent speech of Amoret, which reveals her disgust for her departed husband, and by the spirited dialogue of the suitors, each man's speech filled with the metaphors of his trade. Matters are only partially under control when

Magus returns in Act III, where the fragment breaks off, and one naturally wishes the brilliant young poet had completed the play.

Along with The Devil and the Lady, the young Tennyson also sketched out a few promising lines of a second play which are available only in the Memoir. Also in blank verse, this fragment is set in Spain and involves two characters: Carlos, "a spirited stripling with a spice of suspicion and a preponderance of pride," and his old attendant Michael.²⁵

Although Tennyson apparently wrote no other conventional dramatic verse until some fifty years later, several of his early and middle poems, particularly the monologues, reflect a sense of the dramatic revelation of character. Such a quality has been found in "St. Simeon Stylites,"²⁶ and in the dialogue poem "Walking to the Mail," "The Grandmother," and the two "Northern Farmer" poems.²⁷ Peter Thomson, noting a melodramatic quality in many of the poems, especially "Dora," also believes that Tennyson had "a histrionic temperament that was gratified by melodrama."²⁸

²⁵Memoir, I, 23.

²⁶Block, p. 515.

²⁷Peter Thomson, "Tennyson's Plays and Their Production," in Tennyson, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1973), pp. 231-32.

²⁸Ibid., p. 232.

For perhaps his most innovative work, Maud, Tennyson used the term "monodrama" to indicate the form by which he depicts the stages of action and passion through which the speaker-hero moves. Although most contemporaries were confused by the poem, a few recognized its incisive portrayal of emotional life; Hallam quotes two correspondents of his father who favorably compared the poem, which Tennyson called his "little Hamlet," with Shakespeare's efforts in representing both madness and ecstatic love.²⁹ As has been noted, Otten regards Maud as a forerunner of modern drama, although he believes Tennyson never saw the stage as a medium for the kind of subjective action represented in the poem. He says:

But if Maud sheds little light on the effort of nineteenth-century poets to writeactable plays, it provides irrefutable evidence that Tennyson could conceive of dramatic action in a modern sense. . . . [I]ts dramatic movement, if not its form, suggests the outlines of a new drama.³⁰

Otten further sees the setting of Maud described in terms much like that of modern expressionist theater.³¹

The concept of the dramatic also surrounds Tennyson's longest work, Idylls of the King. That Tennyson considered casting the Arthurian legends in theatrical form is

²⁹Memoir, I, 398, 400.

³⁰Otten, p. 78.

³¹Ibid., p. 89.

indicated by the fact that one of his early manuscript notebooks contains a rough draft scenario of a five-act musical masque based on the material.³² Even when he was well into the series, he once complained of the inconvenience of having to tie together with the narrative "'said' and its varieties" the dialogue of "Gareth and Lynette," wishing he could simply print speakers' names above their lines.³³ Paull F. Baum finds elements of dramatic form in "The Last Tournament" as well as in "Gareth and Lynette,"³⁴ and Thomson believes the frustration Tennyson felt in handling dialogue influenced his movement toward writing plays.

He says:

The extreme difficulty of composition arose partly from the irritated consciousness that he was being slowed down by the narrative convention of reported speech. Mere translation of narrative into drama was not, at this point, a possibility. Tennyson was reaching his story through its dialogue.³⁵

Thomson notes other dramatic qualities of the Idylls:

. . . it was above all the strenuous composition of the Idylls of the King that led Tennyson decisively towards the drama. Properly to present the sequence of Arthurian legends, he chose to

³²Memoir, II, 124.

³³Ibid., p. 113 n.

³⁴Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), p. 61.

³⁵Thomson, p. 233.

imagine a set for them, and to select and deploy his own cast. Moreover, the narrative conventions he had to establish led through ritual towards drama rather than through suspense towards the short story or novel.³⁶

Another indication of the existence of dramatic elements in Tennyson's poetry was the contemporary stage adaptations of some of the poems. Both "Enoch Arden" and "Dora" were put on the stage in the United States in the 1860's, with considerable popular success, and W. S. Gilbert won acclaim in 1870 with what Jerome Buckley calls a "respectful parody" of The Princess.³⁷ Since Tennyson was aware of these developments, several critics have suggested that the adaptations encouraged him to try his hand at drama. Buckley, for example, notes that while Tennyson usually disliked stage adaptations of his poems, he nevertheless might have been impressed by their success. Referring to Tennyson's publication of a song cycle, The Window; or, The Song of the Wrens, written for theatrical musician Arthur S. Sullivan's composing, Buckley adds:

. . . the mere fact that he had agreed to write the verses may be taken as evidence of his growing interest in the possibility of reaching an assembled audience directly and so more or less dramatically.³⁸

³⁶Thomson, pp. 232-33.

³⁷Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 198.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 198-99. See also John Olin Eidson, "Tennyson's First Play on the American Stage," American Literature, 35 (1964), 528; and Baum, p. 61.

Although it had more to do with the continuation than the inception of Tennyson's experiment with the drama, still another influence was the encouragement of friends and acquaintances. The effusive congratulations of Browning and the historian J. A. Froude followed his first efforts, and Hallam also notes the consistent support of James Spedding, George H. Lewes, and George Eliot.³⁹ Charles Tennyson's biography names the drama scholar W. G. Ward and Sabine Greville as major reinforcers of his grandfather's theatrical interest.⁴⁰ In addition, Charles Tennyson believes that to the poet the time must have seemed right for serious new drama. Although the prevailing public taste was still low, Henry Irving had achieved considerable success in his Shakespearian roles, and advances in scenery and lighting had made impressive effects possible.⁴¹ Tennyson must have believed the drama to be within his power and important enough a challenge to hazard failure, for without such confidence in himself and a conviction in the rightness of the drama for his poetic development, surely no amount of external pressure could have persuaded Tennyson to turn to the stage.

³⁹Memoir, II, 174.

⁴⁰Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 410.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 411.

There is one final influence, however, that deserves attention; both internal and external in nature, it probably is the most important reason of all for Tennyson's decision to write dramas. It concerns Tennyson's position as Poet Laureate of England. Scholars generally accept the idea that while the Laureateship did not dominate Tennyson's poetic career, he nevertheless was sensitive to his role as literary spokesman for his age. In a recently published essay, Charles Tennyson discusses his grandfather's poetic response to his country and his century as Laureate, commenting that while he believes no one has suggested it, the position logically seems to have influenced the writing of the dramas, particularly the histories.⁴² Yet the point was made earlier, and quite forcefully, by Valerie Pitt in Tennyson Laureate. She is convinced that Tennyson's sense of vocation, finding fulfillment in the Laureateship, led him to a "monumental and public meditation of England's past, on the history of that empire and civilization of which he believed himself to be the appointed voice." The Laureateship, she contends, turned Tennyson into a dramatist, specifically a historical verse dramatist; this development was the natural result of the realization that drama is the most public form of literature, that dramatic poetry is part of England's heritage, and

⁴²"Tennyson as Poet Laureate," in Palmer, p. 221.

that English history is part of "England's glory."⁴³ Apart from the supporting views of Sir Charles and Miss Pitt, one need only recall Hallam's assessment of his father's respect for the humanizing power of historical drama to become convinced that Tennyson's histories were motivated by public as well as aesthetic aspirations. As Hallam also notes, Tennyson was in effect trying to fill the gaps left by Shakespeare's chronicles,⁴⁴ thus offering to nineteenth-century Britain an instructive and inspirational view of the events and personalities which had made England what it was. Such a goal was entirely consonant with his assumed responsibilities as Laureate.

History of Composition and Production

The first part of the historical trilogy in which Tennyson intended to portray "the making of England"⁴⁵ was Queen Mary, published in May, 1875. Like Harold and Becket, which were next to come, Queen Mary dealt with a critical juncture in English history, the final important assertion of Roman Catholicism in the country and, as Hallam Tennyson notes, "the dawning of a new age: . . . the era of the freedom of the individual."⁴⁶ The entire five years of

⁴³(London, 1962), p. 221.

⁴⁴Memoir, II, 174.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 173.

⁴⁶Ibid.

Mary Tudor's reign are encompassed, 1553-58, and Tennyson densely wove his play, really a dramatized chronicle, with virtually every relevant thread in the political and religious fabric of Mary's age. To prepare for the play he studied many histories, notably Froude's History of England and Holinshed's Chronicles of England. His intense concern for historical accuracy and fairness were primarily responsible for the great length of the play, the numerous scenes, and the cast of forty-five speaking roles. Predictably, extensive editing was required before Queen Mary could be performed; in the first production, a version staged in Philadelphia by Stephen Fiske on October 4, 1875 (of which, incidentally, Tennyson was probably not aware), the play was cut to eight scenes and seventeen characters,⁴⁷ and the better-known London production at the Lyceum Theatre in the spring of 1876 cut the cast nearly by half and deleted the important subplots of Cranmer's martyrdom and Wyatt's insurrection.⁴⁸ Thomson finds the changes in this acting edition so unwise that he cannot believe the poet made most of them himself, as has been assumed by some, such as Phyllis Grosskurth.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Harley

⁴⁷Eidson, "Tennyson's First Play," pp. 519-21.

⁴⁸See Japikse, p. 66; and Thomson, p. 239.

⁴⁹Thomson, p. 239; Phyllis Grosskurth, "Tennyson, Froude, and Queen Mary," Tennyson Research Bulletin, 2 (1973), 51-53.

Granville-Barker regards the revisions as improvements over the printed play.⁵⁰ The American version of Queen Mary, starring the Irish actress Augusta Dargon, played more than fifty times over three years in various cities, and Miss Dargon continued to use Mary as her favorite role after sailing to Australia in 1879.⁵¹

The experience of having to pare his first play to suit the limits of the stage doubtless prompted Tennyson to adjust his aims and his approach for his second drama, Harold, published in 1876; Hallam notes that his father, "to meet the conditions of the modern drama," studied many recent plays and also "refreshed his mind with the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles."⁵² Chronologically first in the historical events of the trilogy, Harold leads up to and culminates with the Norman Conquest of 1066. Tennyson deliberately simplified some of the less important issues associated with the historical moment and sharpened his plot lines to produce a more conventional drama than Queen Mary had been, both in structure and in length. Tennyson liked to call Harold his "Tragedy of Doom,"⁵³ but he surely

⁵⁰"Tennyson, Swinburne, Meredith--and the Theatre," in The Eighteen Seventies, ed. Harley Granville-Barker (New York, 1929), p. 168.

⁵¹Eidson, "Tennyson's First Play," pp. 525-27.

⁵²Memoir, II, 188.

⁵³Ibid., p. 186.

felt that catharsis for his hero's death was found in the sense that the play, according to Hallam, also showed "the awakening of the English people and clergy from the slumber into which they had for the most part fallen, and the forecast of the greatness of our composite race."⁵⁴ Ironically, although Harold as published was decidedly more suitable for the stage than Queen Mary, it was never produced during the author's lifetime. Until the American scholar John Eidson discovered in 1964 that Harold had been produced in 1915 by the Yale University Dramatic Association,⁵⁵ it was thought that the play had not been performed until April 1928 at the Court Theatre in London.

Becket, probably the best known and most admired of Tennyson's plays, shared Harold's difficulty in getting to the stage. The poet began the work soon after Harold was completed, printed it privately in early 1879 (it was published in 1884), and offered it that year to Irving, who had played the role of Philip in Queen Mary. However, Irving refused Becket at first, and it was not until 1891 that he asked to produce it. Tennyson, in failing health, cooperated in the production of an acting edition by Irving, but the play was still in preparation when the Laureate

⁵⁴Memoir, II, 173.

⁵⁵"The First Performance of Tennyson's Harold," New England Quarterly, 37 (1964), 387-90.

died in 1892. Thus Tennyson missed seeing the greatest stage success of any of his plays when Becket made a long run at the Lyceum in 1893 and two profitable tours of America in 1893-94 and 1895. The subject matter of Becket, familiar to English-speaking peoples of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the struggle between Church and State represented in the powerful figures of Archbishop Thomas Becket and King Henry II. To the dominant theme of their conflict Tennyson added a romantic subplot involving Henry, his beloved Rosamund, and the jealous Queen Eleanor.

Although Hallam Tennyson says that his father "was aware that he wanted intimate knowledge of the mechanical details necessary for the modern stage"⁵⁶ and thus wrote dramas "with the intention that actors should edit them for the stage,"⁵⁷ it is difficult to avoid the impression that such was a realization eventually forced upon Tennyson rather than acknowledged from the first. Thus, when in his dedication to Becket (already refused by Irving, one must remember) the author wrote that the play was "not intended in its present form to meet the exigencies of our modern theatre," one feels, as Jebb notes, that he was defensively saying more about the deficiencies of the

⁵⁶Memoir, II, 174.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 175.

theater than about those of Becket.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the poet indeed did agree to considerable alteration of his play, though the changes do not seem so drastic as the son of Irving suggests.⁵⁹ Some scenes are rearranged and some of the dialogue cut in reducing the prologue and five acts to prologue and four acts. Most critics agree, however, that the changes were for the best,⁶⁰ and it is acknowledged that Becket owes its stage success to Irving's acting, called by one writer the "most remarkable performance of his whole splendid career."⁶¹

Tennyson's remaining four plays were not as ambitious as the histories, and their content suggests that the author, his trilogy not having met with stage success, might have grown rather disillusioned about the chances of reaching the theater-going public with serious chronicle plays. Indeed, it is known that he had considered other historical dramas and even mapped out plans for one, but they were never written. Mrs. Tennyson's diary mentions that prior to Queen Mary her husband had talked of writing

⁵⁸"Becket," in Eversley, IX, 434-35.

⁵⁹Laurence Irving, Henry Irving: The Actor and His World (New York, 1952), p. 364.

⁶⁰See, for example, Thomson, pp. 244-46; and the anonymous reviewer in The Critic, 18 Nov. 1893, p. 326.

⁶¹Ashley, p. 14.

a play on Lady Jane Gray and had thought of another on William the Silent, but decided against the latter in favor of English subjects.⁶² Hallam expresses the wish that his father had added a play he had considered which dealt with Simon de Montfort of the thirteenth century.⁶³ Perhaps the farthest Tennyson went with an abandoned plan was a five-act drama on Elizabeth and Essex covering the years 1596 to 1601.⁶⁴ Tennyson's prose summaries of the content of the five acts, as well as a few verses, are found in a heavily mutilated manuscript notebook, in which a similar plan for Becket is sketched, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.⁶⁵ The proximity of these two outlines seems to indicate that as late as the composition of Becket Tennyson was thinking of another historical drama.

Always sensitive to adverse criticism, the poet nevertheless apparently had enough encouragement from friends like Browning and enough personal determination

⁶²Memoir, II, 155, 156.

⁶³Ibid., p. 176.

⁶⁴Hallam mentions merely that Tennyson wrote a few lines of this play (Memoir, II, 156 n.).

⁶⁵Notebook 62, MS. The excellent Tennyson collection in Houghton Library, Cambridge, Mass., contains manuscripts of all the plays.

to succeed in drama that he was able, as Hallam puts it, "to persevere in spite of all discouragement."⁶⁶ But his relative failure surely influenced a change in direction. This is not to suggest that he did not take his last plays seriously, but that he was trying to please his audience and so turned to lighter fare.

Two of his last plays, The Cup and The Falcon, were published together in 1884, after both had been put on stage. The Falcon was completed in late 1879, and the one-act dramatization of the ninth novel of the fifth day of Boccaccio's Decameron had a run of sixty-seven nights beginning in December, 1879, at St. James' Theatre. It is probably Tennyson's slightest dramatic effort, a curious amalgam of noble romance and low comedy underlined by irony. The tale of Count Federigo's sacrifice of his beloved falcon for the love of Lady Giovanna seems ripe for mock treatment, which Tennyson's handling approaches but apparently is not intended to achieve. The Cup, in contrast, has a clear unity of purpose and one of the best reputations of all the plays. Tennyson's source was a story from Plutarch, which outlines the tale, set in Galatia, of the revenge of Camma upon Synorix, the murderer of her husband and suitor for her hand. With Attic conciseness Tennyson refined his material to only two acts

⁶⁶Memoir, II, 174.

and thereby achieved considerable tragic power, but perhaps at the expense of subtle character development. The Cup proved to be Tennyson's greatest stage success in England before Becket, running for more than 120 nights⁶⁷ in 1881 in a lavish production at the Lyceum with Irving as Synorix and Ellen Terry as Camma. The play had been written primarily during 1880.

Tennyson's next play, The Foresters, was written and privately printed in 1881, but not acted or published until 1892. Based on the legend of Robin Hood, the play is allied to the earlier trilogy in historical interest; Tennyson wrote that in the play he had "sketched the state of the people in another great transition period of the making of England, when the barons sided with the people and eventually won for them the Magna Charta."⁶⁸ But the mood and technique of The Foresters contrast sharply with the sober business of Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket. The pastoral simplicity of Tennyson's play diffuses its realism, the result being a charming idyll of Sherwood Forest which has been compared to the libretto of a light opera.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Various accounts range from 125 to more than 130 nights.

⁶⁸Memoir, II, 173.

⁶⁹See William Archer, The Theatrical 'World' for 1893 (1894; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 234; and Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, p. 458.

Irving again had first chance at the play, but when he refused it, Tennyson eventually negotiated with Augustin Daly for the production. As always, the author cooperated patiently with the producers in editing the work for the stage. When The Foresters opened in New York on March 17, 1892, the enthusiastic reception probably exceeded the feeble Laureate's greatest expectations. Americans were enchanted by the pastoral story and even more by the elaborate and innovative staging of such scenes as the fairy dance, and the play enjoyed considerable success not only in two New York runs but also in two national tours in 1892 and 1893.⁷⁰ However, when Daly introduced The Foresters to the London audience in October, 1893, the popular glow was gone. Eidson postulates that the failure in England might have been due to the fact that it was not the world premiere, that it came after the successful Becket of Irving and was therefore an artistic disappointment, or that Daly's showmanship did not appeal to Britons as it had to Americans.⁷¹ Daly, understandably defensive about the London run of less than two weeks, is quoted by his biographer as believing all along that the play would not succeed in

⁷⁰See John Olin Eidson, "Tennyson's 'The Foresters' on the American Stage," Philological Quarterly, 43 (1964), 549-57.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 557.

England: "I felt from the first that it had no life-- because there was no advance take, no preliminary interest. Tennyson is a dead lion, you know, and no one cares for him just now."⁷²

In content and setting, The Promise of May stands out as distinctly from the rest of Tennyson's plays as Maud must have seemed to stand out from the body of his early poetry. It was the author's only attempt at a drama set in modern times, and his leading character was fully as controversial as the personain Maud. Unlike the poem, however, The Promise of May proved to lack redeeming features, the critical and popular verdict being almost unanimously harsh. The most consistent target of derision has been the character of Edgar, a selfish free-thinker who spouts the cliches of nineteenth-century isms while seducing an innocent country lass, abandoning her, and then returning to charm her sister.

The play was staged at the Globe Theatre by Mrs. Bernard Beere after both Irving and Mr. and Mrs. Kendal, producers of The Falcon, had turned it down. Because of unfortunate advertising which had billed the play as treating Socialism,⁷³ its five-week run in late 1882 was

⁷²Joseph Francis Daly, The Life of Augustin Daly (New York, 1917), p. 571.

⁷³Memoir, II, 267.

marred partially by the confusion of audience expectations about the nature of Edgar. In a notorious early performance fairly typical of the play's rowdy, irreverent reception, the Marquis of Queensberry even rose during the first act to protest what he construed to be Tennyson's unjust attack on Free Thought. Mary Gladstone Drew, who was present opening night with Tennyson's sons, reported, "It was most painful, there being a brutal Bradlaugh gallery and pit who jeered and hissed and greeted with peals of laughter the special points of pathos, morality or tragedy."⁷⁴

The play's critical history has been so generally dismal that Arthur Waugh calls it "the only work of Tennyson, perhaps, which his admirers would be glad to forget."⁷⁵ This attitude seems to be true even of Hallam, who is most apologetic about The Promise of May; he claims that his father wrote it "somewhat unwillingly, at the importunate entreaty of a friend who had urged him to try his hand on a modern village tragedy."⁷⁶ The play as acted was in prose, but the eventual published version was rewritten

⁷⁴Lucy Masterman, ed., Mary Gladstone (Mrs. Drew) : Her Diaries and Letters (New York, n.d.), p. 273.

⁷⁵Waugh, p. 210.

⁷⁶Memoir, II, 267. In his biography Charles Tennyson identifies the friend as Sabine Greville (p. 458).

largely in verse.⁷⁷ It appeared in the 1886 volume Locksley Hall Sixty Years After Etc.

General Criticism of the Plays

Although The Promise of May received the most notorious contemporary reviews of any of Tennyson's plays, all of the dramas have been subjected to attacks through the years. A few specific points of criticism are noted as each play is discussed; however, an overview of Tennyson's dramatic effort requires a summary of the salient opinions concerning both the successes and failures of the plays in general. Although unfavorable comment dominates, many critics find kind things to say and some even are thoroughly enthusiastic about the dramas. Considered as stage productions, the plays consistently are said to owe their limited success primarily to the skillful production of Irving and others.⁷⁸ As literature, they gain more of a following, even though many critics offer only faint or qualified praise. It is highly unusual to find such an unequivocal defense of Tennyson as that offered by Van Dyke in reference to the histories:

⁷⁷See Baum, p. 227.

⁷⁸See, for example, A. E. Morgan, Tendencies of Modern English Drama (New York, 1924), p. 23. Even Hallam grants this point (Memoir, II, 175-76).

These tragedies are not to be dismissed as the mistakes and follies of an over-confident and fatally fluent genius. A poet like Tennyson does not make three such mistakes in succession. They are not the idle recreations of one who has finished his life-work and retired. They are not the feeble and mechanical productions of a man in his dotage. On the contrary, they are full of fire and force; and if they err at all it is on the side of exuberance. . . . [T]hey have a clear and strong purpose which makes them worthy of careful study.⁷⁹

More typical of the restrained sort of praise often encountered in the criticism is that which finds little poetry and few dramatic moments in the plays but says there is "always eloquence and a sort of stateliness, which, though frigid, has effectiveness of a kind."⁸⁰ Some readers are more impressed by the surprisingly virile energy of the poet as revealed in this dramatic experiment than by the partial success of the plays, and Buckley in particular believes Tennyson's experience as dramatist positively influenced his last poems.⁸¹ Another viewpoint, as has been noted, recognizes but applauds the paucity of theatricality in the histories, finding in Tennyson's studies of human motivation the admirable mark of modern drama.

⁷⁹Van Dyke, pp. 171-72.

⁸⁰Cornelius Weygandt, The Time of Tennyson (1936; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y., 1968), p. 109.

⁸¹Buckley, p. 214. See also Dickinson, p. 26.

Among the few outspoken supporters of the plays, Cornelia Japikse offers a favorable assessment of the quality of Tennyson's dramatic verse, asserting that "for depth of thought and beauty of expression, the dramas contain some of Tennyson's finest work."⁸² Hers is a point many are willing to concede, though apparently few would consider occasional lines a sufficiently redeeming virtue. Another frequent object of praise in the dramas is Tennyson's handling of specific characters; as in subjective judgments of this type, however, one critic is apt to find dull and unmotivated the very character another reader regards as subtly developed.

Still a third aspect of the plays which generally elicits favorable response is Tennyson's treatment of history, though there has been censure along with praise on this point. The praise has been for his scrupulous fairness, his fullness of view, and his effort to modify some reputations, such as Mary's, which he felt had been undeservedly defamed. For example, although many insist that in the histories his anti-Catholic bias shows through too clearly, it is to his credit that his presentations of both Queen Mary and Becket are quite objective and even sympathetic. Hallam says that his father held a rigorous view of the responsibilities of a historical playwright,

⁸²Japikse, p. 140.

"seeing that 'exact history' has taken the place of the chance chronicle."⁸³

It is the meticulous attention to historical detail at the expense of dramatic focus that has prompted criticism of Tennyson's use of chronicle material.⁸⁴ Otten, for

⁸³Memoir, II, 175.

⁸⁴Although this is in no way a source study, on the question of Tennyson's faithfulness to history it is interesting to note the opinions of those who have undertaken such research. Concerning Tennyson's debt to his sources for Queen Mary, Werner Martin writes of an "almost slavish" use:

Tennyson's "Queen Mary" ist ein historisches Drama in des Wortes vollster Bedeutung. Alle Begebenheiten hierin sind geschichtlich zu belegen; nur an einigen wenigen Stellen hat der Dichter seiner Phantasie die Zügel schiessen lassen.

.

In welcher Weise hat Tennyson nun die verschiedenen Quellen verwerter? Man muss sagen, beinahe sklavisch; denn an den geschichtlichen Tatsachen hat er keine wesentlichen Aenderungen vorgenommen, sondern das, was er in den Geschichtswerker fand, meistens dem Inhalte nach benutzt und teilweise sogar fast wörtlich übernommen.

Auch bei der Charakterzeichnung der einzelnen Personen hat sich Tennyson eng an die von ihm benutzten Historiker angeschlossen. . . . (Die Quellen zu Tennysons erstem Drama "Queen Mary," Diss.

Halle-Wittenberg 1912 (Halle, 1912), pp. 147-48)

Phyllis Grosskurth agrees that in Queen Mary the poet "slavishly follows Froude's narrative sequence" and generally draws his characters as Froude does (pp. 50, 51).

Miss Japikse, on the other hand, is willing to impute more creativity to Tennyson in the histories. She says he keeps close to the central historical facts but is "completely free in selecting, rejecting and re-adjusting details as he deem[s] fit for a clear, dramatic and life-like representation of his characters and their doings" (p. 30). Part of the apparent disagreement among the scholars is probably due to the fact that Martin and Grosskurth are speaking only of Queen Mary while Japikse is speaking more

example, says that although Tennyson desired to examine closely the major figures, "the very nature of his historical perspective negated the possibility of any real treatment of character."⁸⁵ Certainly in Queen Mary the historical overburdening is seen; but the problem is much less apparent in Harold and Becket, and if they too seem weighted with chronicle fact, probably it is because modern readers are accustomed to very different sorts of histories like T. S. Eliot's Becket play, Murder in the Cathedral.

The proliferation of historical detail, however, is only one of several areas of evidence and explanation offered by critics who discuss Tennyson's failure as a dramatist. Surely the most frequently mentioned shortcoming is what scholars see as Tennyson's unfamiliarity with the peculiar demands of the drama. As far as the technical problems of production are concerned, Tennyson himself apparently realized--or came to realize, through experience--that his knowledge of this area was lacking. Some critics believe that if Tennyson had begun his dramatic work early enough to benefit from contact with managers

generally. Nevertheless, it illustrates the fact that fine distinctions in the assessment of a writer's debt to his sources are just as subjective as most other literary judgments.

⁸⁵ Otten, p. 92.

like Irving, this weakness would have been overcome.⁸⁶ Even Irving's son, who usually is condescending to Tennyson, admits that it was a pity the poet did not possess knowledge of the stage, "for much of his verse had the authentic ring of the theatre."⁸⁷

Several critics who consider Tennyson unsuited for the drama, however, speak not necessarily of ignorance of the stage, but of a basic lack of dramatic instinct. Arthur C. Benson, for example, thus characterizes the poet's departure into the writing of plays: "It was as though a musician who had reached almost perfection on the violin, took up at threescore the practice of the organ."⁸⁸ Benson adds that Tennyson's mind was "quite without the vivacity and the minuteness which can throw itself with instinctive rapidity into the swift give-and-take of dramatic situation," his plays displaying "faultless execution" but no interest.⁸⁹ One other damning opinion on this point is that of Hugh Fausset, who, discussing the chronicle plays, maintains that Tennyson was "reclaiming" but not "renewing"

⁸⁶See Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson, 2nd ed. (1901; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 170; and Bram Stoker, Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving (London, 1907), p. 132.

⁸⁷Irving, p. 555.

⁸⁸Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1907), pp. 57-58.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 59.

history with his lifeless characters:

Mellifluous though their printed utterance be,
they are shadows, proud, pathetic, sensual or
heroic, counselling compromise, practicing
coquetry, or drifting with laborious eloquence
across a creaking stage.⁹⁰

As has been suggested in the general survey of drama of the nineteenth century, imitation of traditional forms is regarded as one of the failings of playwrights of the period. This bardolatry is one of the frequent charges advanced to explain Tennyson's lack of dramatic success. Although one critic believes that all the plays reveal "gifted mimicry rather than . . . authentic creative power,"⁹¹ it is really the histories that most clearly show Tennyson's following of Shakespearian models. Such imitation brings, at worst, charges of "artistic insincerity"⁹² and the conclusion that the poet "dissipated the Shakespearean tragic form by retaining its mechanical semblance and turning it into a series of interrupted monologues."⁹³ A specific example cited by at least two critics

⁹⁰Tennyson: A Modern Portrait (New York, 1923), p. 251. On this point, see also Pitt, p. 221; Richard Holt Hutton, Literary Essays, 3rd. ed. (London, 1888), p. 421; and Christopher Ricks, Tennyson (New York, 1972), p. 292.

⁹¹Kissane, p. 146.

⁹²J. M. Robertson, "The Art of Tennyson," in Tennyson: The Critical Heritage, ed. John Jump (New York, 1967), p. 440.

⁹³Denis Donoghue, The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama (Princeton, N. J., 1959), p. 25. See also Archer, p. 41.

as indicative of the hazards of imitation is Tennyson's attempt at humor. One complains that when the author tries for Elizabethan comedy, "his drama becomes rather lower than second rate";⁹⁴ the other declares, "He mistook uncouthness for humor, and bad burlesque for wit. The lighter passages . . . are intolerable. . . ."⁹⁵

The fullest cases against imitation, however, are drawn by Baum and Otten. Both insist that Tennyson's only chance at success was to initiate a new dramatic form to suit the nineteenth-century's tendency to subjective introspection. Baum particularly is distressed by the fact that Tennyson, in turning to the chronicle play, chose a model which Shakespeare himself had abandoned and which had been extinct on stage for two hundred years.⁹⁶ Otten summarizes his view of Tennyson's major failing:

His labor is the last illustration of a major nineteenth-century poet's attempt to bring life to an Elizabethan stage form long since held in disrepute. His child was stillborn, the too human product of a marriage between ancient form and modern matter.⁹⁷

Another aspect of the plays often criticized is the handling of dialogue. Baum sees Tennyson's problem here

⁹⁴Dickinson, p. 27.

⁹⁵J. Cuming Walters, Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist (London, 1893), p. 269.

⁹⁶Baum, p. 214.

⁹⁷Otten, p. 76.

stemming from his following of Shakespeare; the imitation, he says, "induced Tennyson to write in a no-language, a synthetic Elizabethan compounded of the sixteenth century and standard poetic diction with modern touches."⁹⁸

Granville-Barker also notes with regret the Shakespearian influence in the verse, which he says lacks the underlying strength of Shakespeare's emotional rhetoric and therefore "does not vibrate."⁹⁹ Still another scholar believes the problem of dialogue is simply the consequence of Tennyson's inability to distinguish lyric or epic verse from dramatic dialogue.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the most perceptive analysis of Tennyson's problem with dialogue, and surely the most eloquent, is that of Henry James:

With the poets who are natural chroniclers of movement, the words fall into their places as with some throw of the dice, which fortune should always favor. With Scott and Byron they leap into the verse à pieds joint, and shake it with their coming; with Tennyson they arrive slowly and settle cautiously into their attitudes, after having well scanned the locality. In consequence they are generally exquisite, and make exquisite combinations; but the result is intellectual poetry and not passionate--poetry which, if the term is not too pedantic, one may qualify as static poetry.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸Baum, p. 215.

⁹⁹Granville-Barker, p. 175. Archer similarly denounces much of the dialogue as "inert, superfluous" (p. 41).

¹⁰⁰Barret H. Clark, The British and American Drama of To-day (New York, 1915), p. 99.

¹⁰¹Views and Reviews (Boston, 1908), p. 172.

The last general point of adverse criticism is a familiar one in the reactionary segment of Tennyson scholarship; it is the charge of overweening didacticism. Both Morton Luce and Allardyce Nicoll contend that the plays' effectiveness is diluted by their prevailing moral and/or political tone.¹⁰² Similarly, Waugh believes that the major reason for Tennyson's lack of dramatic success is his subservience of the physiological--"the necessity of progress and the obligation of action"--to the psychological, the tendency to mental analysis.¹⁰³ The strongest condemnation comes from Granville-Barker, who says that Tennyson apparently regards

drama and the theatre as a sort of House of Lords and House of Commons, with the play as a Bill sent down to be pulled about a bit, rewritten a little and at last turned out as an effective Act. Such practical politics make for poor art. He thinks of the theatre, apparently, as a place of mechanical craftsmanship, more or less, in which an absolute art of drama is adulterated and turned to account.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps more than any other of these criticisms, this charge reflects a reader's personal bias. To wish Tennyson not to be moralizing in his verse is to wish for a different poet altogether, and it may be suspected that critics who find

¹⁰²A Handbook to the Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (London, 1908), p. 400; and Nicoll, p. 208.

¹⁰³Waugh, p. 173.

¹⁰⁴Granville-Barker, p. 168.

that the plays exceed the bounds of acceptable didacticism are not quite comfortable with Tennyson under most circumstances.

Of all the criticisms summarized here, it seems that only one requires a thorough rejoinder. It is obvious that some evaluations--such as didacticism, the failure of humor, and the overall deficiency of dialogue--may stand as subjective conclusions which individual readers will accept or reject to varying degrees. Also, it is likely to be agreed that a lack of stage knowledge will impede effective composition and that an artistic imitation is rarely if ever as good as its model. But is it necessarily true that a writer's form must reflect the conditions, intellectual or otherwise, of his age before he can succeed as an artist? Critics such as Baum and Otten imply that it is; they attack Tennyson for what he did not do, suggesting that he doomed himself as a dramatist by choosing a "dead" form which could not speak to the concerns of nineteenth-century man. It would seem that these scholars may be explaining with some insight the reasons for Tennyson's failure in his own time, but not fairly judging his work as art. As E. M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel does with his novelists, why may not one profitably study dramatists detached from their times? If Shakespeare's chronicle plays have artistic validity today, why may not those of Tennyson as well? This defense is not meant to

imply any necessary appreciation of Tennyson's plays at this point; it simply suggests that condemnation of the dramas should not be based on the assumption that success was impossible on the terms the poet chose.

The Unity of Tennyson's Dramatic Work

One obligation of a student of Tennyson's dramas is to find a principle which links the plays not only to one another but to the rest of the poet's work as well. If the plays were not merely the caprice of an aging author, but rather a substantial and meaningful portion of his lifework, then surely they represent a significant statement in his artistic legacy.

That which seems to have been the controlling influence in Tennyson's dramatic composition has already been mentioned: the Laureateship. All the plays--especially the three histories, but also the four shorter works--can be read in terms of the author's response to moral, religious, political, and intellectual issues of concern to the nineteenth-century Englishman. While the dramas might well be regarded as striking departures in form, in content they fall clearly in the mainstream of Tennyson's thought and intent. His voice in almost all his mature poetry is a public voice, and as Valerie Pitt has noted, there is no literary form more public than the drama.

As a sort of interpreter for his age, Tennyson surely regarded the past as the most useful tool in showing his country where it had been and in providing mettle with which to face the future. With his longest work, Idylls of the King, the Laureate had the luxury of legendary materials with which to construct a moral-philosophical-political system for speaking to the contemporary needs of his age. But in turning to the harder facts of history, he felt far less flexibility in molding the personalities and events of his dramas. No clearer evidence of his respect for the difficulty of his task may be found than that in the three prefatory sonnets he composed for the trilogy. Only the sonnet for Harold was actually published with the play; the Becket poem remained unpublished until the Memoir, and the Queen Mary sonnet until Sir Charles Tennyson printed it in 1931.¹⁰⁵ Composed first, the sonnet for Queen Mary contrasts the scientist's relatively easy work with that of the historian, who must deal with the elusive material of men's souls. The version in Christopher Ricks' 1969 edition of the poems reads as follows:

Guess well, and that is well. Our age can find
The shower that fell a million years ago,
An ever-vanished ocean's ebb and flow
Rock-written; but no man can send his mind
Into man's past so well, that he can form

¹⁰⁵"Tennyson's Unpublished Poems," The Nineteenth Century, 109 (1931), 628.

A perfect likeness of long-vanished souls,
 Whate'er new lights be let on ancient scrolls
 And secular perforations of the worm.
 Courage, old Clio! we have read the rocks,
 You see the past dilated through the fog
 Of ages. Do your best, for that remains.
 More will you do. We are more than goat or ox,
 More than the long-descended horse and dog,
 Whose one dumb record is their limbs and brains.¹⁰⁶

In an early manuscript draft of this sonnet in Harvard Notebook 32, Tennyson composed a different sestet, addressing not the muse of history but historians and especially playwrights. Although two words are illegible, the sense comes through distinctly (punctuation supplied):

Let him that writes our annals not abuse,
 Far as he knows, the deeds that once have been.
 The playwright [] more because to confuse
 This date with that and make a [] scene.
 I do command the voices that I use,
 And am not Froude or Freeman, Hook or Greene.

The fact that in the same manuscript the author crossed out these lines and wrote a version close to that quoted from Ricks perhaps indicates that he was unwilling in Queen Mary to claim the independence implied by the last two cancelled lines, in which he sets himself apart from four noted historians.

The Harold preface, "Show-Day at Battle Abbey, 1876," is of far more thematic import to the play than the previous sonnet is to Queen Mary, and so has less to say about history in general. Yet, in looking back some eight

¹⁰⁶The Poems of Tennyson (New York, 1969), p. 1232.

centuries, Tennyson recognizes the ability of passing time, the "hate-healer," to objectify man's view of history.

It reads:

A garden here--May breath and bloom of spring--
 The cuckoo yonder from an English elm
 Crying 'with my false egg I overwhelm
 The native nest:' and fancy hears the ring
 Of harness, and that deathful arrow sing,
 And Saxon battleaxe clang on Norman helm.
 Here rose the dragon-banner of our realm:
 Here fought, here fell, our Norman-slandered King.
 O Garden blossoming out of English blood!
 O strange hate-healer Time! We stroll and stare
 Where might made right eight hundred years ago;
 Might, right? ay good, so all things make for good--
 But he and he, if soul be soul, are where
 Each stands full face with all he did below.¹⁰⁷

The heroes and villains of Harold are quite clearly outlined, but Thomas Becket, like Mary Tudor, is a complex historical figure demanding more authorial interpretation than required by, say, Harold. Perhaps this is the reason Tennyson's Becket sonnet returns to the idea of the difficulty of reconstructing the past. And for whatever reason, Tennyson is more defensive in this poem, gently asserting that one cannot write even one's own history; much less should some other person be expected to write it truly.

The Ricks edition has this reading:

Old ghosts whose day was done ere mine began,
 If earth be seen from your conjectured heaven,
 Ye know that History is half-dream--ay even
 The man's life in the letters of the man.
 There lies the letter, but it is not he
 As he retires into himself and is:

¹⁰⁷Eversley, VII, 211.

Sender and sent-to go to make up this,
 Their offspring of this union. And on me
 Frown not, old ghosts, if I be one of those
 Who make you utter things you did not say,
 And mould you all awry and mar your worth;
 For whatsoever knows us truly, knows
 That none can truly write his single day,
 And none can write it for him upon earth.¹⁰⁸

This sonnet offers abundant evidence of Tennyson's desire to do justice to those in their graves, however rigorous that task may be.

The three great periods of crisis which are dramatized in Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket have at their centers both political and religious conflicts, themes which are virtually inseparable in most of English history. In each play, however, the emphasis is basically different. In Queen Mary the conflict is, to a great extent, between Church and Church--Romanism versus Anglicanism. In Harold it is primarily State versus State--England versus France. And in Becket, of course, the lines are sharply drawn between Church and State. But in each play both political and religious currents are clear.

In handling these themes, Tennyson was in part responding to contemporary issues, particularly religious ones. Sir Charles Tennyson believes the direction of the histories was determined by the national controversy surrounding the Tractarian movement.¹⁰⁹ Tennyson always

¹⁰⁸The Poems of Tennyson, p. 1342.

¹⁰⁹Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, p. 413.

shared with many Britons a fear of foreign domination in matters religious, and that feeling is apparent in the merging of the political and ecclesiastical threats of Catholicism in the plays. Mary Poteat uses evidence from the author's own comments in the Memoir and from the plays themselves to conclude that the overriding concern in the trilogy is the achievement of English freedom from Rome, Tennyson's artistic reaction to a threat he felt even in his own time.¹¹⁰

Tennyson was not only dealing with current topics, however. He also was attempting to show Englishmen how their country had been made. The trilogy, G. Wilson Knight says, "disentangles the lines of her development," with Tennyson finally placing his confidence in Britain's Constitution and her established religion.¹¹¹ Valerie Pitt stands a little farther back to capture Tennyson's great overview of history. She believes that the central concept is that of unending process, a theme seen in much of the poet's mature work, and perhaps most strikingly in Idylls of the King, wherein old orders yield place to new. The figures of Mary, Becket, and Harold, Miss Pitt says,

¹¹⁰"A Critical Edition of Tennyson's Becket," Diss. Duke 1935, p. lii.

¹¹¹The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama (New York, 1962), pp. 268-69.

are examples of such orders which have necessarily passed away in the course of English history.¹¹²

The more purely political considerations in the dramas are colored by Tennyson's view of the moral qualities desirable in the monarchy. As in Idylls of the King he sketched the ideal state, in the plays he identifies, at least by implication, the traits which should characterize sovereigns. One such attribute that is easily traceable in the plays as well as in his other works is the responsible attention to practical duties; selfish religious goals are pursued at the expense of effective government. As the quest for the Holy Grail weakens Camelot, so Edward the Confessor's blinding piety helps the Norman cause in Harold and Richard the Lionhearted's crusades in The Foresters allows the country to sink into lawlessness.

The last four plays, naturally, do not reflect the same degree of concern for political themes as do the three histories. However, two of them, The Foresters and The Cup, do involve such an interest. The quality of lightness and popular entertainment in The Foresters does not obscure a regard for responsible, moral leadership in government. The Cup, though set outside England, is marked by occasional lofty patriotic sentiment of universal appeal and application. In The Promise of May Tennyson is dealing

¹¹²pitt, pp. 222-23.

not so much with political or even religious ideas as he is with the societal dangers found in the irresponsible, selfish embracing of radical philosophies. Finally, in his shortest play, The Falcon, the poet has narrowed down his view to the most personal level; for neither society nor the state is of any relevance in this little drama of very limited application, especially in comparison to the public dimensions of the other six. But this play, like the others, reveals the human qualities which Tennyson holds up to his contemporaries as those attributes which can protect individual dignity and contribute positively to the nation's destiny.

Surely the most succinct and memorable expression of the personal traits which Tennyson exalts is found in his early poem "Oenone," in which the goddess Pallas offers Paris wisdom in the form of the famous triad of "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control." The eminent Tennyson scholar Buckley has asserted that these three "became the cornerstones" of Tennyson's philosophy, which held that "the individual will would henceforth find perfect freedom only in conformity to an impersonal moral order."¹¹³ The underlying didactic purpose of the dramas may therefore be illuminated by a consideration of the

¹¹³The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1951), p. 80.

extent to which the major characters achieve self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control. If the dramas possess artistic coherence and force, their symbolism and imagery, as well as their themes, will be found to contribute aesthetically to this overriding objective.

It will be seen that the external conflicts in the plays, especially the five tragedies, are intensified and often caused by the characters' deficiencies in the qualities of self-esteem, self-understanding, and self-restraint. Just as the political and religious order of Idylls of the King owes its collapse to self-illusions and the intemperate giving over of Soul to Sense, so the stability of the various dramatic "worlds" of Tennyson's plays is undermined by the same kinds of failings. Ultimately the dramas stand as testimony to the Laureate's concern for his nation, present and future. Like virtually all his mature work, they speak steadying words of caution to an intellectually tumultuous age.

CHAPTER II

QUEEN MARY--"THRO' WARPING GLASSES"

Queen Mary is a play which probably requires more than one reading if it is to be understood, much less appreciated. If the reader is not steeped in the history of Marian England, his first encounter with the play is quite likely to produce bewilderment and even frustration because of the array of characters and the many lines of intrigue that twist through the five long acts. Even when one begins to sort out the plot elements and the characters' motives, however, the uneasy feeling remains. It eventually becomes clear that Queen Mary, despite its Elizabethan trappings, is not a conventional drama; it does not fulfill expectations with regard to a central plot line and tight dramatic structure. In fact, instead of condensing and sharpening events, the play seems to work toward expansion, with Tennyson trying to deal with almost every public issue and figure of significance during Mary's reign. Among the lines of interest in the play are these: Mary's unrequited love of her husband, Prince Philip of Spain; her obsession with providing a male heir; her desire to restore Roman Catholicism to England; the ecclesiastical challenge of Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury; the rebellion led by William Wyatt, son of the famous poet; the political machinations with France and Spain; and the question of Princess

Elizabeth as potential heir. The relationship of these various elements is made clear enough by Tennyson, but it cannot be said that he really fuses them in a dramatically coherent way.

Almost every critic of Queen Mary has found fault with the play for this reason: because of Tennyson's immoderate concern for historical details, the drama lacks cohesiveness and a strong center of interest. Henry James, although he praises certain aspects of the play, summarizes the overall problem this way:

It is simply a dramatized chronicle, without an internal structure, taking its material in pieces, as history hands them over, and working each one up into an independent scene--usually with rich ability. It has no shape; it is cast into no mould; it has neither beginning, middle, nor end, save the chronological ones.¹

Critics agree, and quite rightly, that even a chronicle play must have organic unity if it is to be successful, both on the stage and as literature. What some seem to forget, however, is that there are many ways of achieving

¹Views and Reviews (Boston, 1908), p. 183. For more comments on the problem of unity, see the anonymous review in Atlantic Monthly, 36 (Aug. 1875), 241; Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1948), pp. 215, 218; Jerome H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp. 200-02; Harley Granville-Barker, "Tennyson, Swinburne, Meredith--and the Theatre," in The Eighteen Seventies, ed. Harley Granville-Barker (New York, 1929), p. 177; Morton Luce, A Handbook to the Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (London, 1908), p. 407; and Peter Thomson, "Tennyson's Plays and Their Production," in Tennyson, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1973), p. 234.

coherence, of which plot structure is only the most apparent. Since one is justified in expecting a skilled poet like Tennyson to answer the aesthetic demand of unity, in whatever genre, it is likely that scholars who quickly note the loose structure of Queen Mary, and thereupon prematurely condemn it, are not sufficiently aware of subtler artistry in the play. To be sure, subtlety can be a risk in the theater, but in the library it should be appreciated as one mark of genius.

Since Queen Mary was Tennyson's first play, however, there is strong reason to believe that the surface weaknesses of form in the drama are just that--weaknesses. It is logical to suppose that an author's first efforts in the drama, especially if his creativity has been long accustomed to lyric and narrative verse, might exhibit the flaws of inexperience. On the other hand, perhaps it is not unreasonable to suggest that Tennyson did essentially what he wanted to do with Queen Mary, and that the form of his drama reflects his purpose. The play itself indicates that Mary is the central interest, but only in a loose sense; Tennyson surrounds the Queen and her reign with the many forces and counterforces at work in midsixteenth-century England, complicating and sometimes even obscuring the issues that arise in the drama. It may be that the author's primary aim was not to dramatize a portion of Mary's life, but indeed to chronicle a period of English history. James, in

fact, comments that in a sense the heroine of the play is England herself.² It is even possible that Tennyson consciously though informally was following the literary tradition of the late medieval morality plays such as Respublica and Magnificence, in which the body politic is the persona of the drama. If one may indeed properly regard a country in turmoil as the central idea of Queen Mary, then a relatively formless or chaotic framework may be an appropriate vehicle. Tennyson's structure might thus be viewed as an artistic supplement to his theme.

This view of the form of Queen Mary is almost certainly too defensive of Tennyson to win much acceptance, and it is probably true that the Laureate simply was too unaware of stage requirements, or too committed to a full historical view, to refine from all his material a coherent product for the stage. The fact that his other plays are much more tightly structured also may indicate that Queen Mary was something of a preliminary experiment for Tennyson. Regardless of the playwright's intentions, however, the complex, amorphous immensity of the play has a not altogether unpleasant effect on the drama's impact. While the force of the action itself may be debilitated, the dominant atmosphere is actually enhanced by the sense of disunity.

²James, p. 190.

An atmosphere of confusion, of doubt, of anxiety pervades Queen Mary, enveloping the reader like the smoke of Bloody Mary's burnings. The theological and political controversies, embodied in the powerful figures of Mary, Philip, Gardiner, Cranmer, and others, emerge at times as starkly as the heretics' execution stakes, but it is the smoke of opinion and dissension swirling around them, half hiding them, that impresses the reader as the essential feature of the age. Jerome Buckley finds Tennyson's capturing of this mood one of the greatest achievements of the play; he says that the author's "sharp sense of the instability, conflict, and confusion of Marian England" allows him to succeed "admirably in suggesting the temper of an age, the fear-shaken time. . . ." ³ Peter Thomson also sees this prevailing spirit in Queen Mary, and he further believes it mirrors the mood of Victorian England as well:

The lurking doubt, and the tides of strange opinion which were flowing again over Tennyson's England, bewilder Lords and commoners alike. . . . [O]n this background of confused values leading to violence (Queen Mary follows soon after "The Last Tournament," and lies full in the gloom with which Tennyson contemplated England in the seventies) Tennyson has sketched a Hegelian outline, with Mary's thesis that England should be under Rome met by a bewildering quantity of antithesis, and the synthesis

³Buckley, p. 200.

provided by the simple patriotism of which Lord Howard is the courtliest and Sir Ralph Bagenhall the bluffest embodiment.⁴

As the values of the play are explored, it will be clear that the message, as well as the mood, of Queen Mary relates to nineteenth-century England's issues and needs as well as to those three hundred years earlier.

It can be asserted, finally, that the artistic unity of Queen Mary is a product not of plot but of atmosphere. The pervasive mood, moreover, is essential to the play's central theme: the destructiveness of the emotional instability of the Queen, who, by allowing passion to rule over reason, violates Tennysonian as well as Renaissance standards for heads of state. While the spirit of national confusion predates Mary's accession and therefore contributes somewhat to her failures as Queen, her own weaknesses serve to intensify that atmosphere, the deficiencies of the Crown being reflected in the tortured health of the country. The intimate relationship of the drama's atmosphere and message, therefore, along with the patterns of imagery, symbolism, and allusion which help to establish both tone and theme, will be seen to provide a subtle, underlying structure for what may on the surface appear to be a rambling literary work.

⁴Thomson, p. 236.

The idea of confusion and doubt may be traced in Queen Mary literally from beginning to end. In the opening scene commoners are watching the royal procession and trying to set themselves straight on whether Mary or Elizabeth, or both, have been made bastards by Acts of Parliament. In the final scene the certainty of Bagenhall's "The Papacy is no more" is tempered by the unsettling aside of Paget: "Are we so sure of that?" (V.v.p.206).⁵ The unstable state of affairs dramatized between those two points is described by some of Tennyson's most vivid metaphors. When Wyatt's rebellion is building, Lord Howard speaks of the "low pulse and palsy of the state" (II.ii.p.56), and Stafford, plotting another insurrection, tells Bagenhall that "oversea they say that this state of yours / Hath no more mortice than a tower of cards; / And that a puff would do it" (III.i.p.88). Gardiner, exasperated by consecutive challenges to the throne, says that the "land is like a hill of fire, / One crater opens when another shuts" (III.i.p.85). In perhaps the darkest moment of the drama, the scene of Cranmer's execution, Howard and Paget decry the excesses of both Protestants and Catholics. Howard sees Protestant "Ignorance crying in the streets, and all men /

⁵Citations of act and scene will be to the Eversley Edition, The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam Tennyson (1908; rpt. Westport, Ct., 1970), VIII. Because in this edition the lines of the plays are not numbered, page numbers will be given, as in the above note.

Regarding her" (IV.iii.p.158),⁶ and Paget diagnoses the national disease: "Action and re-action, / The miserable see-saw of our child-world, / Make us despise it at odd hours, my Lord" (IV.iii.p.158). After Howard's observation that the world is mad, Paget continues:

My Lord, the world is like a drunken man,
Who cannot move straight to his end--but reels
Now to the right, then as far to the left,
Push'd by the crowd beside--and underfoot
An earthquake; for since Henry for a doubt--
Which a young lust had clapt upon the back,
Crying, 'Forward!'--set our old church rocking, men
Have hardly known what to believe, or whether
They should believe in anything, the currents
So shift and change, they see not how they are borne,
Nor whither.

(IV.iii.p.158)

The scene and act end with Paget's despondent, cynical assertion that "it is a world of fools" (IV.iii.p.165).

The mood of public confusion in Queen Mary is engendered primarily by the political-theological controversies at the heart of Paget's comments. Cardinal Pole's dialogue also reflects awareness of the problem. When he first arrives in England, he can rather blithely say, "State-policy and church-policy are conjoint, / But Janus-faces looking diverse ways" (III.ii.p.91). However, Pole is more conscious of the conflicting interests of the institutions when he counsels tolerance in opposition to Gardiner's drive for burnings. He poses and answers a

⁶Hallam Tennyson notes Proverbs 1:20 as a source (Eversley, VIII, 339).

central question of the drama in these lines:

. . . when men are tost
On tides of strange opinion, and not sure
Of their own selves, they are wroth with their own
selves,
And thence with others; then who lights the faggot?
Not the full faith, no, but the lurking doubt.
(III.iv.p.109)

The violent disruption of English life in Mary's reign is precisely a result of the uncertainty and fear of the people, the instability of both Church and State.

Tennyson conveys the idea of shifting opinions not only in such sweeping statements as Pole's, but also in the vacillating or ambiguous stances of specific characters. For example, even the ultimately heroic Cranmer is said by Gardiner to have "turn'd so often, / He knows not where he stands" (III.iv.p.117); and, of course, Gardiner's own loyalties are represented as quite changeable. In addition, the black-blooded Bagenhall speaks a sentiment which typifies the position of many patriots: "'Who knows?' I am for England. But who knows, / That knows the Queen, the Spaniard, and the Pope, / Whether I be for Wyatt, or the Queen?" (II.ii.p.65). Mary's England is a nation in which few know exactly where to stand. The bewilderment, the disillusion is strikingly presented in a variety of characters.

The spirit of confusion and doubt in the nation is largely a consequence of the blurred distinctions between truth and illusion, and it is this same problem that stimulates Mary's disastrous actions. The important motif of

ambiguous, misleading appearances runs throughout the play, sometimes seen in the honest doubt of some of the lines already noted, but, as touching the Queen, more often in deliberate acts of deception. By tracing Mary's inability or unwillingness to separate illusion from reality, it is possible to analyze the motives behind her mistakes.

Introduction of the idea of deception, however, should not be taken as an implication that Mary is merely an innocent dupe in this drama, for the real responsibility for her bloody reign rests solidly on her. While many of Mary's illusions are imposed from the outside, the most important ones are self-imposed, and the Queen, deceiving herself, avoids certain realities with as much zeal as she perpetrates terrors on her enemies. In terms of the ideals Tennyson exalts in his poem "Oenone," Mary lacks the essential quality of self-knowledge. This flaw in her character, moreover, is linked to the more destructive flaw of lack of self-control, the weakness which finds expression in violence.

Although Tennyson's treatment of Mary defends her against the historical charges of heartless cruelty, the poet by no means exonerates her; to Tennyson, a monarch without the virtues of self-knowledge and self-control invites national calamity. Mary's humanity and tragedy

mitigate reader animosity toward her,⁷ but it is because she cannot rein her passions, born of unswerving illusions

⁷Hallam Tennyson says that to his father, there was "nothing more mournful than the final tragedy of this woman" (Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir [London, 1898], II, 178). Most critics agree that Tennyson was able to arouse sympathy for Mary without overlooking her terrible deeds, and that the balance between these two facets is one of the play's triumphs (see Richard Jebb, The Times of London, 19 June 1875, rpt. in Eversley, VIII, 348; Henry Van Dyke, Studies in Tennyson, 2nd ed. [1920; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y., 1966], p. 183; and James, p. 186). It is interesting, however, to note that some early readers, unable to forget their own image of "Bloody Mary," felt that Tennyson attempted the impossible in his favorable treatment of the Queen (see Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson, 2nd ed. [1901; rpt. New York, 1970], p. 175; and the anonymous review, Quarterly Review, 139 [1875], 243).

It also is interesting to see from the Queen Mary manuscript (Harvard Notebook 32) that Tennyson originally perceived Mary in a somewhat harsher light. If the manuscript is compared with the printed text, one realizes that the poet worked toward presenting Mary as a basically gentle woman whose frustrated passions gradually lead her into murderous acts. In the manuscript, Mary is fiery and intemperate from the first. In reaction to news of a heretical statement of Lady Jane's, she rages (spelling and punctuation regularized):

Monstrous and blasphemous--she ought to burn.
Hence [to Alice]. No, she's an attainted traitor.
Her head will fall. A pretty head, full of grace
and beauty. I would mine were as pretty, O my
love and my lord to be, for your sake only. And
I am eleven years his elder. Will he care for
that? Nay, by the Holy Virgin, being noble, he will
love me only; then my sister, the bastard, the
daughter of that murderous heretic--she is far fairer
than I am. Will he be drawn to her? No, being of
the true faith, as I am. O my love, we will sweep
the land clean--with fire.

In contrast, the expanded printed version softens dramatically her outburst at Jane and also changes from destructive fire to healing water the imagery of her desire to restore Catholicism to England:

Monstrous! Blasphemous!
She ought to burn. Hence, thou (Exit Alice). No--
being traitor

of Philip's worth and of her divine mission as defender of the faith, that her reign degenerates into chaos. Buckley has commented that, as Guinevere's desire precipitated the fall of Camelot, Mary's "unleashed passion could lead only to moral collapse and social disintegration."⁸ It is clear, also, that Tennyson uses the recurrent imagery of burning and fire to symbolize unbridled passions and the destruction they bring to England.

Her head will fall: shall it? she is but a child.
 We do not kill the child for doing that
 His father whipt him into doing--a head
 So full of grace and beauty! Would that mine
 Were half as gracious! O, my lord to be,
 My love, for thy sake only.
 I am eleven years older than he is.
 But will he care for that?
 No, by the holy Virgin, being noble,
 But love me only: then the bastard sprout,
 My sister, is far fairer than myself.
 Will he be drawn to her?
 No, being of the true faith with myself.

Holy Virgin,
 Plead with thy blessed Son; grant me my prayer:
 Give me my Philip; and we two will lead
 The living waters of the Faith again
 Back thro' their widow'd channel here, and watch
 The parch'd banks rolling incense, as of old,
 To heaven, and kindled with the palms of Christ!
 (I.v.pp.29-30)

MS evidence thus supports the conclusion of Phyllis Grosskurth in her study of Tennyson's use of Froude's history:

In the interest of dramatic development, it seems possible that for once Tennyson departed from historical fact in order to depict Mary as succumbing gradually to passion and to external pressure--in other words, he modified Froude's view of her as a Tudor spitfire to a more tragic victim of circumstance ("Tennyson, Froude, and Queen Mary," Tennyson Research Bulletin, 2 [1973], 51).

⁸The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1951), p. 80.

The most significant kind of deception in the play revolves around Mary's relationship with Philip, but the motif of conflicting appearances and reality occurs as well in numerous other situations deserving of attention. The broadest comprehension of the theme of illusion is found in Cranmer, who, facing execution, recognizes physical existence itself for what it is: "this bubble world, / Whose colours in a moment break and fly" (IV.iii.p.152). The words of Cranmer are later quoted by Pole, another doomed and disillusioned cleric. Illusion is also suggested in the use of disguises twice in Queen Mary: the first by the colleague of the French Ambassador Noailles who incites a crowd against Philip and Mary, and the second by the patriot Stafford, who is plotting insurrection.

Deception is so prevalent in the atmosphere of Mary's reign that everyone is suspicious of appearances. A few examples will illustrate. Mary tells the French emissaries to stop their diplomatic games: "You play at hide and seek. / Show me your faces!" (I.v.p.36). Lord Howard counsels Elizabeth in the same terms: "Ay, good niece! / You should be plain and open with me, niece. / You should not play upon me" (I.iv.p.25). An alderman suspects Gardiner's loyalty to the Queen, and Mary's woman Alice doubts the allegiance of Pembroke. Mary believes that the Kentish rebels' opposition to her marriage is only a "pretext," "the least / Of all their quarrel"

(II.ii.pp.57,58), and she learns, as she has suspected, that Courtenay was in league with Wyatt while pretending to oppose him. After Cranmer's execution, Paget predicts that Bonner will misreport, to Catholic benefit, the martyr's theological position. A final example of suspicion is the perceptive assessment by Bagenhall of the apparent public contentment of the royal couple: "A smile abroad is oft a scowl at home" (III.ii.p.81).

This unhappy marriage which Bagenhall detects is the point of the greatest and most far-reaching deception in the play. There is scarcely ever a doubt to anyone but Mary that Philip's love of his Queen is an illusion; for him the marriage means political expediency and nothing more. Bagenhall realizes the sham when he describes Mary's jewelry on her wedding day:

A diamond,
And Philip's gift, as proof of Philip's love,
Who hath not any for any,--tho' a true one,
Blazed false upon her heart.

(III.i.p.77)

Philip's accomplice in deceiving Mary is the Spanish Ambassador Renard,⁹ who assures the gullible Queen of

⁹In having one character refer to Renard as a fox, Tennyson predictably plays on the name of the wily ambassador. That is only one example, however, of a prominent pattern of animal metaphors in Queen Mary. Virtually all of the figures are used to denigrate their objects, and many of them illustrate thematic concepts. For example, the passionate, destructive Queen is called a tigress and a wild cat; the dangerous Philip is a wasp, while the shallow, harmless Courtenay is a vain butterfly. The Protestant

Philip's noble qualities, while muttering an aside: "Whew-- the folly of all follies / Is to be love-sick for a shadow" (I.v.p.42). Later in the play Renard advises Philip not to "drop the mask before / The masquerade is over" (III.vi.p. 129) but to continue to hide the face that loathes both Mary and her land. Philip's efforts to continue the charade are extremely crude, providing the bitterest irony in the play. When he agrees to delay his departure one more day "to please her Majesty," Mary is ecstatic: "The sunshine sweeps across my life again. / O if I knew you felt this parting, Philip, / As I do!" Philip's passionless response provides a chilling close for the act:

By St. James I do protest,
Upon the faith and honour of a Spaniard,
I am vastly grieved to leave your Majesty.
Simon, is supper ready?

(III.iv.p.133)

The final interview of the two is no less marked by the contrast of unequal passions. Mary, unable this time to persuade Philip to postpone a journey, whimpers that her

heretics are likened to flies, at one point stinging the flesh and at another swarming into the fire. Gardiner's opportunism is captured in his comparison to a chameleon, a serpent shedding his skin, and a buzzard. The passive Parliament is criticized as imitative apes, docile sheep, and fawning spaniels. Other derogatory metaphors used often are beast, swine, and dog. The prevalence of bestial imagery recalls particularly the pattern of Idylls of the King, in which Arthur reclaims the land from the "beasts" and establishes for a time the supremacy of Soul over Sense. Mary's England, in the opinions of the drama's characters, is dominated by the lowest human nature.

husband seems changed. "You do mistake," he answers. "I am not one to change. / I never loved you more" (V.i.p.171). Surely reader pity for Mary is heightened by the poignant realization that these sarcastic words are the truest ones Philip ever speaks to his devoted wife.

To an overwhelming extent, however, Mary's deception is her own, the result of limited vision. Tennyson follows the historian J. A. Froude in using the fact of Mary's poor eyesight as a metaphor for her emotional myopia.¹⁰ The passing references to the Queen's physiological deficiency might be considered, on a casual reading, to be part of the chronicle detail that seems to clutter the play, but in reality the allusions subtly reinforce the dominant theme of illusions. When, for example, Philip asks Renard, "Or would you have me turn a sonneteer, / And warble those brief-sighted eyes of hers?" (III.vi.p.130) the reader is struck not only by the Spaniard's callous distaste for his homely wife, but also by the symbolic significance of Mary's poor vision. It is clear that the Queen's passions, far more than her weak eyes, distort her view of reality.

¹⁰James Anthony Froude, History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elizabeth (New York, 1871), V, 342: "Her eyes were dauntless, bright, steady, and apparently piercing; but she was short-sighted, and insight into character or thing was not among her capabilities."

From the beginning the Queen, driven by a compulsion to have her Philip despite the objections of her countrymen, will hear no criticism of him. Nowhere is her self-imposed blindness more apparent than in Act I, Scene 5, in which she successively shows to four people a miniature portrait of Philip, seeking their approval of both his appearance and his character. Tennyson's use of the portrait as a symbol--in fact, the principal physical symbol in the drama--is an artistic stroke, for the fact that it is only an image of the deceitful Spaniard supports the theme of appearance versus reality. Mary, unwilling to accept realistic reports or honest opinions concerning Philip, wants only to hear her own illusory impressions corroborated; and though her interviews in this scene touch on important matters of state, the Queen seems preoccupied with seeking out the romantic reinforcement she craves. First the Queen shows the miniature to her woman Alice, asking if Philip is not goodly and noble. Alice replies, "Goodly enough, your Grace, and yet, methinks, / I have seen goodlier" (I.v.p.28), avoiding comment on Philip's character, of which she has heard and repeated many slanderous rumors. Shortly the Lord Chancellor Gardiner enters, and he, counseling Mary against marriage to Philip on the grounds of opposition to foreign domination, is willing to be frank with the Queen. Their interchange follows:

Mary (showing the picture). Is this the face of
 one who plays the tyrant?
 Peruse it; is it not goodly, ay, and gentle?
Gardiner. Madam, methinks a cold face and a
 haughty.
 And when your Highness talks of Courtenay--
 Ay, true--a goodly one. I would his life
 Were half as goodly (aside).
Mary. What is that you mutter?
Gardiner. Oh Madam, take it bluntly; marry
 Philip,
 And be stepmother of a score of sons!
 The prince is known in Spain, in Flanders, ha!
 For Philip--
Mary. You offend us; you may leave us.
 You see thro' warping glasses.

(I.v.p.33)

Of course, it is Mary's vision that is distorted by the
 "warping glasses" of her impassioned nature. Undaunted
 in her search for reassurance of her myopic judgment, she
 tries another visitor, the French ambassador. Noailles,
 however, opposing the marriage in order to prevent an al-
 liance of Britain and Spain against his country, is even
 more candid than Gardiner. When shown the portrait, he
 comments that it is "nobler-looking" than Philip, whom he
 characterizes as "Stone-hard, ice-cold--no dash of daring
 in him."¹¹ Mary's response is typically rationalizing:

Mary. If cold, his life is pure.
Noailles. Why (smiling), no, indeed.
Mary. Sayst thou?

¹¹Coldness is an image used several times in con-
 nection with Philip. As an indication of his lack of pas-
 sion for Mary, the image is quite conventional; however,
 it gains interest for its contrast to the recurrent imag-
 ery of fire and burning, the symbolic expression of Mary's
 passions. It is the "cold" Philip, in fact, who advises
 the Queen's fiery execution of heretics.

Noailles. A very wanton life indeed (smiling).
Mary. Your audience is concluded, sir.

[Exit Noailles.

You cannot

Learn a man's nature from his natural foe.

(I.v.pp.36,37)

Finally, in Renard, the infatuated Queen finds the support she desires. Although she surely knows that one's natural ally may be just as committed to distortion as his natural foe, Mary does not hesitate to embrace the Spanish ambassador's flattering picture of his master. Renard, reacting to the question of the miniature's likeness to Philip, says it is "a daub to Philip," "the most princelike Prince beneath the sun," and his testimony to Philip's purity contrasts ironically with the word of others:

As an angel among angels. Yea, by Heaven,
 The text--Your Highness knows it, 'Whosoever
 Looketh after a woman,' would not graze
 The Prince of Spain. You are happy in him there,
 Chaste as your Grace!

(I.v.p.40)

Thus, Mary allows herself to be deluded concerning the nobility of Philip. Perhaps more significantly, she also deludes herself by being unwilling to admit her own motives for marriage. There are three central motives, each closely linked to the others; they are the love of Philip, the hope for an heir, and the desire to restore Catholicism to England. Yet Mary publicly conceives her primary goal to be Britain's welfare, and in her powerful speech to the London citizens she emphasizes only her selfless motives. She assures the crowd that she loves

them as if they were her children, then presents the proposed marriage as merely a political union:

As to myself,
 I am not so set on wedlock as to choose
 But where I list, nor yet so amorous
 That I must needs be husbanded; I thank God,
 I have lived a virgin, and I noway doubt
 But that with God's grace, I can live so still.
 Yet if it might please God that I should leave
 Some fruit of mine own body after me
 To be your king, ye would rejoice thereat,
 And it would be your comfort, as I trust;
 And truly, if I either thought or knew
 This marriage should bring loss or danger to you,
 My subjects, or impair in any way
 This royal state of England, I would never
 Consent thereto, nor marry while I live. . . .

(II.ii.pp.59-60)

While Mary may indeed have convinced herself that her interest in Philip is dispassionate, this bit of domestic diplomacy rings false in view of her private doting on Philip's portrait and her strong-willed insistence that she will have him, no matter who opposes her. As one critic has pointed out, the love Mary claims for her country is not a reality to her, for she defies all its wishes to pursue her own plan.¹²

Mary's concern for her plainness and the difference in her and Philip's ages makes it clear that to her the prospect of marriage is a romantic exhilaration, not, as her public speech implies, a take-it-or-leave-it

¹²William Clark Gordon, The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time (n.d.; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 137.

proposition. Indeed, the thirty-eight-year-old virgin monarch seems to have been moved by the same kind of "young lust" which slapped her father Henry on the back years earlier. The Tudor wisdom which Mary claims to possess is obviously dominated by the intemperance of her passions, and most of all by her yearning for Philip.¹³

Almost as strong a passion in Mary is her desire for a son. The compulsion to perpetuate the royal line through a male heir is a familiar pattern in British history, perhaps most strikingly illustrated in Mary's father, Henry VIII. While the Queen's obsession is not as radical as her father's, it is nevertheless intense. In fact, it could be argued that Mary's longing to gratify Philip, not finding fulfillment in producing an heir, motivates the Queen to acquiesce to his demands for increasingly fanatical religious and political purgings. In this sense the frustrated hope for a son becomes an agent in the destructive fervor of Mary's reign.

The Queen's desire for a male heir, however, transcends the normal romantic and maternal instincts. Tennyson skillfully develops in his characterization of Mary the idea that she gradually sees herself as a second Virgin Mary, ordained by history if not by God to bring forth a

¹³Richard Holt Hutton, Literary Essays, 3rd ed. (London, 1888) has an interesting discussion of the contrast of sagacity and fanaticism in Mary and Elizabeth.

new savior to lead England back into the paths of the Catholic faith. In Mary's own consciousness at least, the religious motive is the strongest factor in her obsession with giving birth. Again, as in her love for Philip, the passion is fed by others as well as by the Queen herself; Mary's illusion of sacred grandeur is built from without and within.

Tennyson introduces the pattern of biblical allusion of Mary as the Virgin in the opening scene when the senile commoner Old Nokes, told that Queen Mary is passing in procession, falls on his knees with the cry, "The blessed Mary's a-passing!" (I.i.p.6).¹⁴ The second suggestion of Mary's sacred identity is provided by the Catholic preacher, Father Bourne, who speaks to the crowd concerning "our gracious Virgin Queen," saying, "let me call her our second Virgin Mary" (I.iii.pp.14,15). It is soon clear that some of the supporters of the Queen have begun to see her in terms of a divine agent; one member of a crowd is described by Lord Howard: "Here a pious Catholic, / Mumbling and mixing up in his sacred prayers / Heaven and earth's Maries" (II.ii.p.56).

¹⁴Manuscript evidence suggests that Tennyson consciously developed this line of allusion. Harvard Notebook 32 has this scene essentially identical to the printed version, except for the omission of Old Nokes' line. Although the Harvard MS has the other allusions to the Holy Virgin, the first reference appears only as a marginal addition in the later MS of the play in the City Library of Lincoln, England.

Mary too, even if she is not aware of these claims by her followers, is provided stimulus for self-identification with the mother of Jesus. One of the unspoken influences is the Tudor doctrine of divine right, with which Mary would have been intimately acquainted. Perhaps the first direct suggestion, however, comes from the crafty Renard, who predicts that Mary's "star will rise," the star being her "princely son" (I.v.p.39). The biblical metaphor of Christ as the "bright and morning star"¹⁵ would not likely be recalled in this context, but Mary's later use of the word "star" in connection with her messiah-son suggests that Renard's language has a religious impact on her thinking. The most obvious allusions spoken to Mary, however, come from her cousin, Cardinal Pole. Although Pole's speech is sprinkled with numerous biblical references, his comments to Mary seem particularly pointed. In his first appearance he greets her with the words of the Roman Catholic prayer to the Virgin: "Ave Maria, gratia plena, Benedicta tu in mulieribus" (III.ii.p.89). Later in the same scene he adds another portion of the prayer: "'Hail, / Daughter of God, and saver of the faith. / Sit benedictus fructus ventris tui!'" (III.ii.p.91).¹⁶ It is not

¹⁵Revelation 22:16.

¹⁶Pole's greeting is another historical detail which Tennyson uses thematically (see Froude, VI, 260). Tennyson did not create the pattern of allusion, however,

surprising that when she is momentarily left alone, Mary, inspired by religious purpose and the obsession to please Philip, exults in the illusory belief that she feels within her the movement of her son. This soliloquy, powerfully and pathetically fusing all her passions, is probably the most critically admired passage in the drama:

He hath awaked! he hath awaked!
 He stirs within the darkness!
 Oh, Philip, husband! now thy love to mine
 Will cling more close, and those bleak manners thaw,
 That make me shamed and tongue-tied in my love.
 The second Prince of Peace--
 The great unborn defender of the Faith,
 Who will avenge me of mine enemies--
 He comes, and my star rises.
 The stormy Wyatts and Northumberlands,
 The proud ambitions of Elizabeth,
 And all her fieriest partisans--are pale
 Before my star!
 The light of this new learning wanes and dies:
 The ghosts of Luther and Zuinglius fade
 Into the deathless hell which is their doom
 Before my star!
 His sceptre shall go forth from Ind to Ind!
 His sword shall hew the heretic peoples down!
 His faith shall clothe the world that will be his,
 Like universal air and sunshine! Open,
 Ye everlasting gates! The King is here!--
 My star, my son!

(III.ii.pp.93-94)

since Froude presents many references to the popular identification of Mary as the Virgin and to the Queen's sense of divine mission (see, for example, VI, pp. 82, 117, 121, and 275). Concerning the poet's imaginative handling of Froude's materials for this view of Mary's passions, James E. Sait says, "Mary's failure and death are historically imperative, but the dramatization of the effects of sexual frustration (even while dependent on Froude as a source) is particularly Tennysonian" ("Tennyson's The Princess and Queen Mary: Two Examinations of Sex and Politics," forthcoming in Durham University Journal).

In a reign dominated by depression, frustration, and violence, this is the pinnacle of Mary's happiness. The Queen, her spirits soaring into visions of her son as an agent of divine justice, becomes a deluded messianic prophet heralding a new incarnation, and from such a height her fall is inevitable and tragic.

The outlet for Mary's thwarted hopes is the persecution of her religious enemies. Her third great passion, the restoration of Catholicism, seems to her the only goal over which she can exercise control, but even here she is strongly influenced by Philip. Upon his advice, and against the counsel of Paget and Pole, she revives the Lollard acts and begins to burn heretics. The persistent, almost overwhelming image of fire and burning, which has singed virtually every scene of the play,¹⁷ now flares into literal reality. Attention focuses on the deposed Archbishop Cranmer, whom Mary hates because of his central role in the divorce of Henry VIII and her Catholic mother, Catherine of Aragon. Mary's desire to avenge her mother's treatment, in fact, is perhaps just as strong a factor in her religious fanaticism as are her submission to Philip and her sincere love of the faith. Even though Cranmer has signed papers of recantation of heresy, she will not save him from the stake.

¹⁷There are at least sixty-eight references to fire, burning, or heat in Queen Mary.

In several senses, Mary's denial of pardon for Cranmer is a climactic point in the drama. The most important personal result of the decision is the spiritual redemption of Cranmer. Only when he sees no chance for escape from the fire does Cranmer reassert the integrity which has glimmered earlier in his life, finding courage to repent of the weakness which caused him to recant. Furthermore, Cranmer's bold speech before his death throws into sharp relief the thematic and artistic significance of his earlier signing of recantation papers. The signing of statements he did not believe (for example, he never accepts the doctrine of transubstantiation: "It is but a communion, not a mass: / A holy supper, not a sacrifice" [IV.ii.p.141]) is the most dramatic theological expression of the theme of deceptive appearances.

In addition, the signing leads to a significant concentration of two lines of imagery. One of these is Cranmer's own pattern of putting his hand to important documents: three others besides the recantation papers are the Letters Patent, which declared Lady Jane Gray the Queen; a fierce letter denouncing the Catholic mass, which angered Mary; and an order for the execution of Joan of Kent. The second line of imagery is that of fire. In prison, Cranmer, in anguish because of his inconstancy, declares, "Disgraced, dishonour'd!--not by them, indeed, / By mine own self--by mine own hand!" (IV.ii.p.146), and

consigns his right hand to be burnt first when he dies.¹⁸

Indeed, the witness of the burning thus describes the scene:

Then Cranmer lifted his left hand to heaven,
And thrust his right hand into the bitter flame;
And crying, in his deep voice, more than once,
'This hath offended--this unworthy hand!'
So held it till it all was burn'd, before
The flame had reach'd his body.

(IV.iii.p.164)¹⁹

While the decision to burn Cranmer effects the priest's spiritual regeneration, in contrast it also contributes to the emotional disintegration of the Queen. Throughout the last act, Tennyson uses the image of the burning hand to reflect the guilt that weighs on Mary's enfeebled mind and the unquenched passions that have devastated her reign. The final scenes present Mary as the embodiment of emotional instability, fluctuating with manic rapidity from abject despair to raging defiance. Shown some libelous papers directed against her and Pole, the

¹⁸The speech of Cranmer in the Harleian MSS and Froude's history, noted by Hallam Tennyson in the Eversley Edition (VIII, 338-39), includes this condemnation of his offending hand. This fact illustrates again Tennyson's ability to turn a historical detail into an artistic device.

¹⁹Granville-Barker cites this passage to illustrate Tennyson's overuse of narrative rather than immediately dramatic verse (p. 176). While his general criticism may have merit, the example is an unfortunate choice; one wonders just how Granville-Barker would have the playwright burn a character onstage.

Queen erupts, "The hands that write them should be burnt clean off / As Cranmer's" (V.ii.p.179). She later flares out with the fear that she has been too slack with heretics, ordering more to be burned; and, still unable to remove the martyr from her memory, she hallucinates in a defensive, troubled apostrophe:

--Ah, weak and meek old man,
 Seven-fold dishonour'd even in the sight
 Of thine own sectaries--No, no. No pardon!--
 Why that was false: there is the right hand still
 Beckons me hence.
 Sir, you were burnt for heresy, not for treason,
 Remember that! 'twas I and Bonner did it,
 And Pole; we are three to one--Have you found mercy
 there,
 Grant it me here: and see, he smiles and goes,
 Gentle as in life.

(V.v.p.202)

Perhaps Tennyson's finest unifying touch, however, comes with the transference of the burning hand and all its symbolic meaning to the body of Mary herself. An attendant of Philip, the Count de Feria, arrives with a message for the dying Queen, and when he kneels and kisses her hand he is alarmed by her fever, commenting aside, "How her hand burns!" (V.ii.p.190). Apparently to emphasize the point further, the playwright has the messenger repeat the line later at the scene's end.²⁰ The burning hand, to Cranmer symbolic of the dishonor of his weak will, becomes the emblem of Mary's intemperate passions, over which she

²⁰Harvard MS Notebook 32 has only one occurrence of the line, but the Lincoln MS has both.

exercises no control and which therefore spell the doom of her reign and her life.

In the final scene Mary's problem of self-control is demonstrated by yet another narrative detail, one which completes a pattern developed throughout the play. Tennyson uses repeated references to children and childish action to signify the irresponsibility and lack of restraint that afflict England. His final occasion for the motif brings the flaws of character to rest on the Queen herself, the moral and political leader whose instability at least indirectly has produced similar unrest in her subjects.²¹ Her lady Alice brings word that the dying monarch, having lost touch with reality, is "Back in her childhood--prattling to her mother / Of her betrothal to the Emperor Charles, / And childlike-jealous of him again" (V.v.p.205). However, this is not the first time that Mary has been called childish; Gardiner, rebuffed for his criticism of Philip, complains of Mary, "These princes are like children, must be physick'd, / The bitter in the sweet" (I.v.p.34). Ironically, Mary can see childishness in others but not in herself. She excuses for a time the heresy of Jane because Jane is only a child obeying her father, and she wisely

²¹Arthur Waugh, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Study of His Life and Work, 3rd ed. (London, 1894), p. 178, says that everything in the play centers on Mary's childishness, which he finds undramatic and unpleasant.

discerns the immature foppishness of Courtenay, who pouts, "'Fore God, I think she entreats me like a child" (I.iii. p.16). What the Queen does not realize is that in her own way she is just as childish as Courtenay, and that, moreover, her actions have far greater consequence than those of others.

However, Tennyson's picture of Marian England is one in which not only the monarch but many other adults are acting like children. Immature behavior can be seen in two passages quoted earlier: Cranmer's charge that too many dote on "this bubble world," and Paget's diagnosis that action and reaction are the "miserable see-saw of our child-world." In addition, political intrigue is depicted by Bagenhall in terms of child's play: "England now / Is but a ball chuck'd between France and Spain" (III.i.p.78). Some of the images of childhood convey merely the criticism of foolishness; for example, Howard compares a ridiculing member of the Council to a "nursery-cocker'd child" who "will jeer at aught / That may seem strange beyond his nursery" (II.ii.p.64). Most of the passages, however, are concerned with malicious or destructive behavior. Paget characterizes the age of heretic-burning:

I have some time, for curiousness, my Lord,
Watch'd children playing at their life to be,
And cruel at it, killing helpless flies;
Such is our time--all times for aught I know.

After a defensive comment by Gardiner, he continues:

They had not reach'd right reason; little children!
They kill'd but for their pleasure and the power
They felt in killing.

(III.iv.p.108)

Later, Gardiner specifically becomes the target of the metaphor of cruelty. Pole tells him, "Thou Christian bishop, thou Lord Chancellor / Of England! no more rein upon their anger / Than any child!" (III.iv.p.114), and Howard, drawing on the imagery of fire, says that Gardiner and Bonner "play with fire as children do, / And burn the house" (III.vi.p.127). The absence of self-control which plagues troubled Britain, therefore, is forcefully represented in the motif of childishness, and most pathetically of all in Queen Mary.

Mary's confusion of illusion and reality, of which her lack of self-control is both a cause and a consequence, persists until her death. If there is to be found any catharsis in the tragic fall of Mary Tudor, it is only in the few fleeting moments of lucid insight which the Queen experiences in her last days. But when the whole of Mary's state of mind in the final act is considered, it must be admitted that her enlightenment is very limited. Sunk so deeply in despair that at one point she sits on the floor to dramatize her low condition, Mary actually faces only three important realities. In the first place, she realizes that she is hated by her people. Secondly, she knows

that she will never bear a child. Finally, she accepts the fact that she has struggled against for years--that Philip has never loved her--and this last is the most painful to the pitiful, dying Queen.

The realization of her loss of Philip is one of the most impressive developments in Queen Mary, capturing the agony of unrequited love in emotionally powerful verse without ever sinking into melodrama. Act V opens with Mary once again begging Philip to postpone a journey and Philip working to extract political concessions from her. At war on the emotional level are Mary the woman's lovesick weakness and Mary the Queen's governmental sagacity, but the heartless Philip is the only possible victor. Even after agreeing reluctantly to each demand--to burn more heretics, to raise support for a war against France, and to proclaim Elizabeth heir to the throne--Mary still cannot persuade Philip to delay his departure. An important metaphor marks the crushing of the Queen's hope: to her insistent pleas Philip replies, "You beat upon the rock," and Mary responds, "And I am broken there" (V.i.p.171). In the next scene the forlorn, disheveled Queen at one moment sobs that her husband hates her and desires her death, and vows never to see another man except Pole; in the next instant, however, hope is kindled by the announcement of the arrival of Philip's attendant, and Mary is the foolish infatuate again:

Philip! quick! loop up my hair!
 Throw cushions on that seat, and make it throne-like.
 Arrange my dress--the gorgeous Indian shawl
 That Philip brought me in our happy days!--
 That covers all. So--am I somewhat Queenlike,
 Bride of the mightiest sovereign upon earth?
 (V.ii.p.189)

Disappointment in Feria's message hardens into self-knowledge:

Return,
 And tell him that I know he comes no more.
 Tell him at last I know his love is dead,
 And that I am in state to bring forth death.
 (V.ii.p.191)

In the final scene all hope in Mary is gone. She returns to her portrait of Philip and notes its illusory nature: "How he smiles / As if he loved me yet! / . . . He never loved me--nay, he could not love me" (V.v.p.199). Later she reaches a precise awareness of Philip's character:

Women, when I am dead,
 Open my heart, and there you will find written
 Two names, Philip and Calais; open his,--
 So that he have one,--
 You will find Philip only, policy, policy,--
 Ay, worse than that--not one hour true to me!
 (V.v.p.202)

The aroused Queen, taking a knife, then attacks the picture:

This Philip shall not
 Stare in upon me in my haggardness;
 Old, miserable, diseased,
 Incapable of children. Come thou down.
[Cuts out the picture and throws it down.]
 Lie there. (Wails) O God, I have kill'd my Philip!
 (V.v.p.203)

By destroying the picture Mary has symbolically destroyed her illusions of Philip, but her final wail mirrors the intense pain of shattered dreams.

If Mary were able to understand her other mistakes of misspent passion as clearly as she understands her failure with Philip, she might well qualify as a truly tragic figure. However, she never is able to grasp the horror of her religious and political excesses. The most remarkable example of her blindness is her obsessive fear for the garrison at Calais; there is tremendous irony, in light of her historical infamy as "Bloody Mary," in the Queen's plea to preserve the line of defense:

Suffer not
That my brief reign in England be defamed
Thro' all her angry chronicles hereafter
By loss of Calais.

(V.ii.pp.182-83)

Her perspective simply cannot grant the truth of her catastrophic policies, nor can she ever quite comprehend her guilt, though she feels its effects:

Clarence, Clarence, what have I done? What sin
Beyond all grace, all pardon? Mother of God,
Thou knowest never woman meant so well,
And fared so ill in this disastrous world.
My people hate me and desire my death.

(V.ii.p.184)

The Queen's confusion is pathetic and moving, and her claim of pure motives is basically valid. Tennyson, however, employs a very similar sentence structure at the play's end in lines summarizing Mary's central flaw and the ruinous consequences to the realm. Cecil says, in response to Elizabeth's statement that Mary "loved much": "Yet she loved one so much--I must say-- / That never English monarch dying left / England so little" (V.v.p.206).

Mary's speech, and these lines which echo the rhythms of the former, become a rhetorical pair which epitomize the drama's theme: Mary's lines as illusion, and Cecil's as reality.

The clearsighted wisdom of men such as Lord Cecil cannot prevail in England as long as Mary reigns, for her government rests on the unstable, even holocaustic, foundation of deceit and uncontrolled passions. The relief from the chaos of Mary's rule, however, comes primarily from the contrasting temperament of the Princess Elizabeth. To be sure, there is strength in such figures as Paget, Howard, and Bagenhall; but it is Elizabeth who is to guide the nation after Mary, and in her must reside Tennyson's cardinal virtues.

The responses of critics to the character of Elizabeth are interesting in their variety. One critic, for example, would have the role eliminated from the play altogether, claiming that it is superfluous and distracting to the play as staged drama.²² As chronicler, however, Tennyson must provide a prospect for the future of England, and it seems ridiculous, both historically and thematically, that Elizabeth should be omitted. Other critics, misled by ambiguity in the poet's treatment of the Princess, especially in what other characters say about her,

²²Thomson, p. 240.

see her as a woman too susceptible to flattery,²³ or, still worse, "either a suspicious intriguante or a frivolous dame."²⁴ If this is Elizabeth, however, there is no desirable alternative to Mary and her flaws. It seems clear that Tennyson, despite the repeated suggestion by both friend and foe that Elizabeth "is none of those who loathe the honeycomb" (V.i.p.173), portrays the Princess as essentially a levelheaded woman in whom, as one critic says, the "strong instinct of policy" rules over personal emotions.²⁵

Unlike Queen Mary, Elizabeth possesses both self-knowledge and self-control. In addition, none of the self-pity and despair, seen in Mary as marks of the absence of self-reverence, are found to characterize Elizabeth. She is cautious, patient, confident of her royal attributes. Early in the play she tells Lord Howard:

I think my time will come.
Uncle,
I am of sovereign nature, that I know,
Not to be quell'd; and I have felt within me
Stirrings of some great doom when God's just hour
Peals--

(I.iv.p.26)

Cecil describes her in a similar way: "Brave, wary, sane to the heart of her--a Tudor / School'd by the shadow of

²³Cornelia Geetrui Japikse, The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson ([1926]; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 114.

²⁴J. Cuming Walters, Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist (London, 1893), p. 173.

²⁵Hutton, p. 424.

death--a Boleyn, too, / Glancing across the Tudor--not so well" (V.v.p.204). The Boleyn, or emotional, side of Elizabeth may love flattery, yet she is able to meet the overtures of men with good sense and even craftiness. For example, to protect her position she decides to toy with Philip's choice for her, Philibert of Savoy, without ever intending to marry him; and when calculated, extravagant praise is offered in Feria's salutation, "Fair island star!" she responds with at least a touch of sarcasm, "I shine! What else, Sir Count?" (V.iii.p.192).

The contrast between Mary's folly and Elizabeth's wisdom, between Mary's deception by illusion and Elizabeth's grasp of reality, is subtly but impressively revealed in Tennyson's imagery of sunken rocks. In her first scene the Princess indicates her perceptive caution with regard to the danger of Gardiner and Philip; unencumbered by Mary's "warping glasses," she tells Howard, "I spy the rock beneath the smiling sea" (I.iv.p.27). As has been noted, Philip is described later as the rock on which Mary has been broken. Finally, Cecil ponders the hazardous future of the Queen-to-be, recognizing the various rocks which threaten to destroy her as they have Mary:

Many points weather'd, many perilous ones,
At last a harbour opens; but therein
Sunk rocks--they need fine steering--much it is
To be nor mad, nor bigot--have a mind--
Nor let Priests' talk, or dream of worlds to be,
Miscolour things about her--sudden touches

For him, or him--sunk rocks; no passionate faith--
 But--if let be--balance and compromise. . . .
 (V.v.p.204)

Elizabeth, it is clear, has no illusions about the calm of the harbor she is about to enter. She says, "Sir, I swear I have no heart / To be your Queen. To reign is restless fence, / Tierce, quart, and trickery" (V.v.p.205). However, she does possess enough confidence in self and belief in others to resolve that she can lead her country forward: "But with Cecil's aid / And others, if our person be secured / From traitor stabs--we will make England great" (V.v.p.206). The prosperous reign of Elizabeth, towards which Queen Mary looks, illustrates the powerful influence of a life governed by self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control. Though in another context, the words of Bagenhall seem eminently descriptive of the ideal monarch: "Yet thoroughly to believe in one's own self, / So one's own self be thorough, were to do / Great things, my Lord" (II.ii.p.64).

The whole of Queen Mary is pervaded by an atmosphere of doubt and confusion, reflective of the central problems of illusions and unrestrained passions. The symbols and images which mirror these themes generally point to the defective center of the realm, the Queen herself. Yet piercing through all the smoke and gloom are rays of hope--the few stalwart Englishmen, the Princess Elizabeth, and their lofty commitments to the ideals of their nation. These are

the qualities which prompt Henry James to praise "the thoroughly elevated spirit of the whole"²⁶ as the play's greatest merit, and G. Wilson Knight to say, "From this 'world of fools' . . . what most vividly emerges is a pride beyond all theologies, in England. . . ."²⁷ In Queen Mary Tennyson faces the world realistically, even somewhat pessimistically, but the ultimate ideal is never totally obscured. Through this, his first drama, he speaks both as historian and prophet, penetrating into the temper of a past age and artistically rendering its messages for his own time.

²⁶James, p. 195.

²⁷The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama (New York, 1962), p. 264.

CHAPTER III

HAROLD--"WORDS ARE THE MAN"

The most concise expression of Alfred Tennyson's thematic perspective of the events covered in his historical dramas is found in the prefatory sonnet to Harold, in which the poet, viewing the triumph of might over right in the monumental Battle of Hastings, declares that such an outcome was good, in the sense that "all things make for good."¹ By echoing the optimism of St. Paul in Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good to them that love the Lord," Tennyson appropriates one of Christianity's profoundest and most difficult paradoxes, establishing the apparently catastrophic moments of English history as events which may be seen ultimately as productive of good. This belief, a corollary of the Victorian poet's underlying faith in progress, informs the periods of crisis depicted in Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket and presents them as fires in which England's greatness was forged, not destroyed.

Although it may therefore be said that the broad purpose of all three histories is essentially the same, their execution differs markedly. A contrast is especially noted between Queen Mary and Harold, two plays which

¹The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam Tennyson (1908; rpt. Westport, Ct., 1970), VIII, 211.

attempt to analyze, in terms of character, what went wrong with the ill-fated reigns of their respective monarchs. The most obvious difference in the plays is the clean, economical plot of Harold compared to the loose chronicle form of Queen Mary. While it may be true that Tennyson was improving his command of dramatic structure, it is also beyond question that the historical material of Harold adapted itself more easily than that of Queen Mary to conventional stage requirements. Since Mary's reign had no central event for a dramatic pivot, in his first play the poet turned to creation of atmosphere and analysis of psychological motivation. In Harold, however, the great Norman Conquest provides the inevitable dramatic moment toward which every element in the play works, giving Tennyson's second drama an easier, surer unity of action.²

Another important difference in the two plays is the prominence of the title character. Mary is the central human interest in her play, but not so dominantly as Harold is in his. With the exception of the final scene (and even here his body is discovered amid the war dead), Harold appears in every scene as the true focus of the play. Unlike Queen Mary, with its several side-issues, Harold is constant in its attention to the character and the dilemma of its

²William Archer, The Theatrical 'World' for 1893 (1894; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 42, calls Harold Tennyson's masterpiece in point of form.

hero in his conflict with William of Normandy.³ Only two subplots exist--the romantic triangle with Edith and Aldwyth, and the domestic political threat, first of discontent in Northumberland and later of the invasion led by Tostig--and these too are intimately connected with Harold's undoing. Therefore, the role of Harold himself provides a kind of unity in the play which Queen Mary lacks.

A final point of structural contrast between the two plays may be seen in the function of atmosphere. In some ways the atmosphere of Harold is similar to that of Queen Mary. The latter is dominated by a mood of confusion and doubt, a pervasive tone that characterizes the historical age and unifies the diverse elements of the play. The overriding atmosphere of Harold is that of doom, of superstition, of frightful curses; and this spirit, like that of Queen Mary, provides tonal coherence and suggests an important facet of life in pre-Norman England--the Anglo-Saxon pessimism and sense of fate. However, a significant difference exists in the thematic functions of atmosphere. In Queen Mary the idea of personal and national instability governs the whole, representing both cause and consequence

³Jerome H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 203, supports this view of the centrality of focus on Harold. A dissenting critical voice is that of Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), p. 220, who believes that the play has too many interests to produce one which can dominate.

of the tragic events of Mary's reign; the atmosphere is part and parcel of Tennyson's statement. In contrast, in Harold the playwright does not appear to be investing his ominous mood with any inherent potency. Although he is, ironically, willing to use prophetic elements to foreshadow events in the drama, the sense of doom and fate does not come across to the reader as something in which Tennyson really believes; one does not gather that the poet is interpreting Harold's failure as direct retribution for his lie or as the supernatural consequence of curses called down upon him. Instead, atmosphere is subservient to rather than coequal with theme, existing primarily as a measure of Harold's rational wisdom and self-confidence; it is Harold's shifting response to the many portents, not the signs themselves, that is significant to Tennyson's theme.

The structural coherence of Harold, then, is basically simpler, more theatrically suitable than that of Queen Mary. The plot is tighter, the main character more central, and the atmosphere supportive rather than thematic. It should not be assumed, however, that Tennyson's second play is deficient in subtle artistry. To be sure, Queen Mary is a more complex work, but then the age of Tudor England was more complicated in every way than that of Anglo-Saxon England. The cleaner lines, the less muddled motives of Harold may well have been intended by Tennyson to mirror the simpler, more masculine time. The poet's

friend Aubrey de Vere, in fact, found the greatest characteristic of the play to be "an heroic strength blended with heroic simplicity,"⁴ qualities customarily associated with Harold's age. The relative simplicity of the play may therefore have been a product of conscious effort rather than waning inspiration.

Within the uncomplicated structure of the drama, moreover, are important themes which often are illuminated by Tennyson's patterns of imagery. The primary motif in the drama is the question of honesty, and Tennyson's central theme is that the foremost cause of Harold's fall is his broken oath--not because of the curses pronounced on him, but because of his agonizing, weakening self-disillusion. Aside from the recurrent idea of honesty, the two major patterns in Harold are the ominous prophecies and images of enclosure and freedom, both of which reflect aspects of Harold's conflicts with William and his own conscience. In addition, the several other forces which destiny ranges against Harold can be regarded as the result of the failure of various leaders to achieve the classic Tennysonian virtues of wisdom: self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control. Emerging from all these artistic and thematic concerns is a sharp sense of irony, a feeling that builds

⁴Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1898), II, 191.

through the play and finds its most remarkable outlet in the "fortunate fall" thesis that Tennyson wraps around his story of Harold's defeat.

An appropriate starting-point for an analysis of Harold is the sonnet, "Show-Day at Battle Abbey, 1876" (see the full text on page 49), despite the fact that critics generally ignore it, presumably because it is not part of the drama proper. It is, in fact, a quite respectable poem, even when regarded in isolation from the play. Its best features become clear, however, when it is seen in relation to the drama, for then it appears as a miniaturized mirror reflection of Harold. In the center stands the Battle of Hastings, occasion for both poem and play; on one side stands the play, foreshadowing the conflict, arraying the forces of might and right; on the other, the sonnet, looking back through "fancy" to the event which the play prophesies with its visions.

As a sort of reflected image of the play, moreover, the sonnet throws out ideas and details which are developed more fully in the drama. It has already been suggested that the "might-right" conflict and philosophic resolution in the sonnet are a summary commentary on Harold as a whole. Tennyson's natural patriotic sympathies with the Saxon king are revealed, however, in this poignant conceit: "The cuckoo yonder from an English elm / Crying 'with my false egg I overwhelm / The native nest.'" By comparing William's

invasion of Britain to the cuckoo's usurpation of another bird's nest in an "English elm," Tennyson not only implies the deceit of the Norman, but also introduces the image of the tree, which is of considerable prominence in the play itself. Other images in the sonnet which achieve importance later are the sights and sounds of battle, particularly the "deathful arrow" which Edward foresees and which Stigand watches in its work, and the "English blood" out of which blossoms the Battle Abbey garden. There is even in the sonnet a hint of the Anglo-Saxon quality which is suggested by the simplicity of the drama; for although the poet obviously is not trying for the same kind of effect of Old English verse as he did in his "Battle of Brunanburh," the kenning "hate-healer Time" and the several alliterations ("native nest," "Here fought, here fell," "blossoming out of blood," etc.) strike familiar poetic chords.⁵

⁵The drama by no means abounds in Anglo-Saxon elements, but there are a few besides the aforementioned sense of fate and the predictable heroic battle description and realistic weaponry. One of the best poetic details is the occasional use of the metaphor of iron, which suggests the harsh physical existence of the age; for example, Edith speaks of prayer as "A breath that fleets beyond this iron world, / And touches Him that made it" (III.ii.p.282 [As in the previous chapter, citations of the play are from the Eversley Edition, VIII.]). Another Anglo-Saxon idea that emerges is the view of nature as harsh and foreboding. In addition to the literal occurrences of the ominous comet and the storm that wrecks Harold's ship, there are frequent uses of metaphors of wind, thunder, and flood, nearly always linked to the idea of personal or national doom. Finally, the old Germanic gods also are objects of interest, despite

The sonnet ends with a reference to the protagonists of this great crisis in history, asserting that they must answer for their own deeds. In an appropriate way these closing lines lead into the play itself, for it is the personalities in Harold that are foremost. The event, after all, as important as it is, is a matter of fact; but the human elements behind that conflict are the stuff of drama, and it is to these that Tennyson turns.

The relationship between Harold and William is the most significant in the play, but their conflict is not the only cause of the battle nor of its outcome. Three other figures of nobility--Aldwyth, Tostig, and King Edward--share the responsibility for the English defeat. Of these, Aldwyth is the least important and probably the least interesting; her function in the drama is that of the scheming villainess who is intent on restoring the primacy of her house of Alfgar and who therefore snares the new King Harold into a politically necessary marriage. Aldwyth's inciting of rebellion against Tostig in her native Northumbria

the fact of England's Christianization. Distressed by the conspiracy of Christian saints against him, Harold wishes for the better days of "Woden, all / Our cancell'd warrior-gods, our grim Walhalla, / Eternal war" (III.ii.p.278); and even the saintly Edith becomes so desperate during the last battle that her prayer to the "God of battles," with his "bolts that fall on crimeful heads" (V.i.p.318), seems directed more to the old Norse god Thor than to her Christian God.

precipitates the events which lead to Tostig's invasion with the Norse warriors, which in turn weakens Harold's forces for their conflict with the Normans. In addition to producing this strategic military consequence, her deceit also provides one of the final blows to the disillusioned and disheartened Harold. Although Aldwyth's love-hate response to Harold supplies her with a dimension removed from the stock melodrama figure, her role is primarily of importance with regard to plot and not to theme.

Harold's brother Tostig is an interesting character who, as potential king of England, also becomes significant to the play's didactic purpose. Of all Tennyson's dramatic creations, Tostig is the most extreme example of an individual with no self-control. Like the passions of Queen Mary, Tostig's intemperance destroys not only himself but others as well. His fiery temperament, the chink in the armor of the house of Godwin, creates the climate of unrest in his earldom of Northumbria which enables Aldwyth to plot his overthrow there. Subsequently banished from England, Tostig is spurred by jealousy of Harold to lead an invasion with the forces of Norway, and though the invaders are repelled by the Saxons, the conflict saps Harold's army and thus contributes to its defeat at Senlac.

The playwright draws Tostig's character excellently, using the warrior's own words as well as those of others to reveal his nature. The best scene in this respect is the

first in the play, wherein the four free sons of Godwin (a fifth, Wulfnoth, is imprisoned in Normandy) are quickly sketched as vivid personalities--wise, rational Harold, conciliatory old Gurth, sharp-tongued Leofwin, and Tostig, the ill-tempered object of his brothers' advice on governing his subjects. Before Tostig enters, Harold characterizes him as "passionate but honest" (I.i.p.219), but Leofwin believes him to be hypocritically worming his way into King Edward's favor in order to be named the King's successor. The enmity Tostig feels for his brother erupts at Harold's first polite inquiry about Northumbria; he defensively snaps, "Leave me alone, brother, with my Northumbria; / She is my mistress, let me look to her!" (I.i.p.224).

The patience of Gurth and Harold temporarily soothes Tostig, who admits, "Why chafe me then? Thou knowest I soon go wild" (I.i.p.224), but as he hears more counsel on wise government he becomes enraged again. Told of a slight "movement" in his earldom, Tostig bursts out, "Crush it at once / With all the power I have!--I must--I will!-- / Crush it half-born!" (I.i.p.226) and to Harold's advice of temperance responds sarcastically; "Good counsel tho' scarce needed. Pour not water / In the full vessel running out at top / To swamp the house" (I.i.p.226). Absurdly asserting, "I am not vext, / --Altho' ye seek to vex me, one and all. / . . . --I am not vext at all" (I.i.p.227), he leaves with the pledge to try to thwart Harold's winning of the throne,

and Leofwin marks the departure with this clever analysis of his brother's self-defeating passion: "Tostig . . . galls himself; / He cannot smell a rose but pricks his nose / Against the thorn, and rails against the rose" (I. i.p.228).

To emphasize Tostig's lack of self-control, Tennyson uses the metaphor of childishness, the same figure which in Queen Mary represented irresponsibility and lack of restraint. The poet hints at the childhood psychology of Tostig, who Harold says was spoiled early by his sister, now Edward's Queen. Harold tells her,

Why, boys will fight.

 but Tostig--
 On a sudden--at a something--for a nothing--
 The boy would fist me hard, and when we fought
 I conquer'd, and he loved me none the less,
 Till thou wouldst get him all apart, and tell him
 That where he was but worsted, he was wrong'd.
 (I.i.p.228)

He still calls Tostig a "spoilt child" and warns his sister to remember that they are no longer boy and girl. Later, in sorrow at the death of the rebellious brother, Harold tells Aldwyth he is sad for "the childish fist / That cannot strike again" (IV.iii.p.295).

Tostig's awareness of his lack of control over his passions produces yet another fault that makes him doubly unfit to be a wise king: lack of self-reverence. In his last meeting with Harold, Tostig attempts to defend himself concerning the murder of Gamel, the event which provokes

his overthrow in Northumbria. Both his uncontrollable temper and his self-loathing are pathetically clear:

The slow, fat fool!
He drawl'd and prated so, I smote him suddenly,
I knew not what I did. He held with Morcar.--
I hate myself for all things that I do.
(IV.ii.p.292)

The problems of self-control and self-reverence which afflict Tostig also undermine the reign of Edward, though in an interestingly different way. Tennyson shows that Edward's central defect is not a lack of self-reverence, but an excess; in fact, it could be said that his extreme piety is a manifestation of the absence of control over his religious passions. The Confessor is the second religious zealot in the plays of Tennyson. While Mary's fanatical faith found external, ruinous expression, Edward's is all turned inward, causing him selfishly to abdicate his royal responsibilities for the sake of ascetic self-exaltation. In consequence, despite the aid of Harold, the King's neglect of his country contributes to its fall. A stronger, wiser King, better balanced in his theological and political concerns, might have provided the national unity which would have saved England from the Normans. And doubtless a more farsighted prospective monarch would not have carelessly promised William that he someday would help him to the English throne. It is this promise, long since retracted by Edward, which Harold says brought the curse upon his head; and although Edward's word is only one lever used to extract

Harold's oath, it is nevertheless an important encouragement to the crafty designs of the Norman.

Edward's excessive piety puts him in the tradition of the knights in Idylls of the King who allow the religious self-interest of pursuing the Holy Grail to weaken the realm. As Aldwyth says, Edward the Confessor is "more saint than king" (I.ii.p.234), but Edward's brand of sainthood is clearly repulsive to the playwright. The following lines of the King illustrate Jerome Buckley's comment that Edward "speaks with all the self-righteous unction of Tennyson's St. Simeon Stylites":⁶

. . . I go
To find the sweet refreshment of the Saints.
I have lived a life of utter purity:
I have builded the great church of Holy Peter:
I have wrought miracles--to God the glory--
And miracles will in my name be wrought
Hereafter.--I have fought the fight and go--
I see the flashing of the gates of pearl--
And it is well with me. . . .

(I.i.pp.220-21)

A cautious resentment of Edward's sanctimonious withdrawal from duty is seen in Harold, who says, "The king? the king is ever at his prayers; / In all that handles matter of the State / I am the king" (I.i.p.227). Harold's preference for a natural religion is suggested in his remark that the "nightingales in Havering-in-the-Bower / Sang out their loves so loud, that Edward's prayers / Were

⁶Buckley, p. 204.

And flung them streaming o'er the battlements" (II.ii.p. 252), but William also allows Harold to hear his command that a slanderer's tongue and eyes be torn out. When Harold objects that he, as ruler in his own land, would have "scorn'd the man, / Or lash'd his rascal back, and let him go" (II.ii.p.255), an important contrast is seen between the sovereign natures of Harold and William. The difference is not one of wisdom, ultimately, because both their actions would likely remedy the problem of slander; rather, the primary difference in the two men is that of goodness. The vital concept of the wedding of wisdom and goodness is raised later by Harold himself. Musing on the vanity of his false marriage to Aldwyth, however noble the desired end might have been, he says, "Evil for good, it seems, / Is oft as childless of the good as evil / For evil." Leofwin answers that even the good sometimes produces a "bastard as false as William," to which Harold replies, "Ay, if Wisdom / Pair'd not with Good" (V.i.p. 306). William's flaw as a ruler is not that he is not wise, but that he is not good.

The character of William, however, creates a problem for the drama, a problem which Tennyson's "all things make for good" solves only partially. It is true that Edward's vision of a greater England after its baptism by blood goes some way toward clarifying what G. Wilson Knight calls Tennyson's view of "the enigmatic workings of the

historical process."⁷ However, some more immediate, dramatic evidence is needed to alleviate the tragedy of the fall of Harold and his nation; visions alone can scarcely achieve such an end, even in a play where every other prophecy is fulfilled. There are only two places where Tennyson attempts to soften his portrayal of William, and unfortunately they are insufficient to overcome reader hostility to the Norman. The first occasion follows the extraction of the oath from Harold; in view of William's trickery just completed, his noble-sounding goals ring hypocritically:

. . . I, the Count--the King--
Thy friend--am grateful for thine honest oath,
Not coming fiercely like a conqueror, now,
But softly as a bridegroom to his own.
For I shall rule according to your laws,
And make your ever-jarring Earldoms move
To music and in order--Angle, Jute,
Dane, Saxon, Norman, help to build a throne
Out-towering hers of France. . . .

(II.ii.p.263)

William, with his "friendly-fiendly smile" (III.i.p.267), has given Harold no reason to trust his word here, nor do his actions through the rest of the play, as militarily brilliant as they are, encourage whole-hearted acceptance of the final portrait of the magnanimous victor. Standing on the field of battle, William praises the valor of Harold and the loyalty of the English soldiers, sees a new and

⁷The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama
(New York, 1962), p. 265.

powerful national coalition, and pledges the end of bloodshed:

. . . They loved him: and, pray God
 My Normans may but move as true with me
 To the door of death. Of one self-stock at first,
 Make them English, Norman; we should have a hand
 To grasp the world with, and a foot to stamp it . . .
 Flat. Praise the Saints. It is over. No more blood!
 I am king of England, so they thwart me not,
 And I will rule according to their laws.
 (V.ii.p.327)

Paull Baum has well expressed the problematic consequences of Tennyson's shaping his plot along the lines of might and right:

Finally, Tennyson's nationalistic enthusiasm tends to minimize the chaos into which Edward's piety and the feuds of the native rulers had thrown the country, and he is rather embarrassed at the end to assert the future greatness of England under a foreign conqueror. It was a logical difficulty requiring drastic sacrifice and Tennyson sacrificed the logic of tragedy to the facts of history.⁸

As unsettling as this problem is, it is not as damaging to the play as Baum believes, for the primary interest throughout is not William but Harold, whose characterization is consistent and convincing. Tennyson presents the Saxon earl as almost a model ruler: judicious, rational, compassionate, strong, and honest.⁹ In a milieu in which treachery and deceit are commonplace, Harold cannot "believe that lying / And ruling are fatal twins that cannot /

⁸Baum, p. 223.

⁹It is impossible to concur with Baum's assessment of Harold as "self-indulgent . . . and treacherous" (p. 223).

Move one without the other" (III.i.p.268). To both allies and enemies Harold is famous for his truthfulness; Aldwyth, Edward, William, and Malet all remark on his honesty. Yet it is one of the chief ironies of the play that the very trait which most ennobles Harold is the one which proves his undoing. Manipulated into the torturing violation of his strong conscience, Harold vainly attempts to rationalize his dishonesty and eventually loses heart, going to meet William with firm premonitions of defeat. While William and Harold both see the result of the battle at Senlac as God's vengeance for the broken oath of Harold, Tennyson implies instead that Harold's fall was produced by the unfortunate coincidence of pragmatic factors already mentioned, and most of all by the debilitating psychological effect of Harold's personal disillusionment.

In searching for the flaw of character which destroys Harold, one is tempted to conclude wrongly that it is his stubborn adherence to an ideal. His twice-stated credo, "Better die than lie!" (I.i.p.220; II.ii.p.248), rings with overtones of self-righteousness, perhaps, but Tennyson seems not to be demeaning the ideal of absolute honesty, rather analyzing the effect of a shattered self-concept. In other words, it is not Harold's ideal that is wrong, but his inability to accept it as such, an unattainable standard. The theme is vividly reminiscent of that of Idylls of the King; in that work the ideal of Camelot is clearly

beyond ridicule, but King Arthur's depressing decline is attributed to, among other external factors, the anguish of a broken dream. In Harold, the hero is flawed by one small but significant element: the lack of self-knowledge. Although he presumes that he is capable of living by the ideal of utter truthfulness, he misjudges himself, and when he encounters the soul-shaking conflict of principle and necessity he learns the truth of his fallible will.

The swearing of the oath is in one sense the climax of the play, although it comes in only the second act, and Tennyson handles the scene superbly. It is full of tension, bitter irony, and unbearable pressures on the integrity of Harold. Before the imprisoned Harold knows what is demanded for his release, he insists that he will not lie to William, and in response the Norman noble Malet sets forth Harold's gloomy option: "Choose therefore whether thou wilt have thy conscience / White as a maiden's hand, or whether England / Be shatter'd into fragments" (II.ii.p.249). Though he is disturbed by the unrest in his homeland and craves to return, even when his captive brother Wulfnoth implores him to appease William with words, he asserts, "Is it not better still to speak the truth?" (II.ii.p.251). Wulfnoth catalogues William's horrors and begs his brother to save them both, but Harold's resolve is firm:

Wulfnoth. Oh, no, no--speak him fair!
Call it to temporize; and not to lie;
Harold, I do not counsel thee to lie.

The man that hath to foil a murderous aim
 May, surely, play with words.
Harold. Words are the man.¹⁰
 Not ev'n for thy sake, brother, would I lie.
 (II.ii.p.252)

When Wulfnoth, however, introduces the idea of the safety of Edith and England, Harold begins to show signs of weakening, and upon his brother's graphic vision of interment in a dungeon, Harold cries, "Thy fears infect me beyond reason. Peace!" (II.ii.p.253). Tennyson, by putting Wulfnoth's description of the dungeon confinement in the second person, makes it unclear whether Harold is reacting out of fear for his brother or fear for himself, or both. Although Harold seems personally intrepid, at a later point he admits he "lied like a lad / That dreads the pendant scourge" (II.ii.p.260), so the possibility must exist that some degree of self-interest mars the otherwise noble motives for his lapse of honesty. At any rate, the passage points up the idea that the loss of reason is precisely the thing against which Harold must guard; that he cannot, finally, contribute to his destruction.

After William extracts the initial promise of Harold's assistance in gaining the English throne, Harold sinks temporarily, but then immediately rationalizes his action. Employing another biblical paradox, he says, "For

¹⁰The expression of Harold's ideal is almost identical to that of King Arthur: "Man's word is God in man" (Balin and Balan, Eversley, V, 158).

having lost myself to save myself, / Said 'ay' when I meant
'no'" (II.ii.pp.259-60), suggesting that the price he paid
for physical freedom was spiritual condemnation.¹¹ Sud-
denly, however, comes the temporizing:

Ay! No!--he hath not bound me by an oath--
Is 'ay' an oath? is 'ay' strong as an oath?
Or is it the same sin to break my word
As break mine oath? He call'd my word my bond!
He is a liar who knows I am a liar,
And makes believe that he believes my word--
The crime be on his head--not bounden--no.
(II.ii.p.260)

As an idealist who moments earlier declared that "words are
the man," Harold would doubtless soon find his conscience
troubled by the mere breaking of his unsworn word, despite
this early attempt to shift the blame to William. However,
the Norman assures Harold's downfall by immediately trick-
ing him into the formal oath upon the bones of Norman
saints.

From this moment Harold's fate is sealed; in spite
of his absolution by Stigand and the assurance of Leofwin
that "Of all the lies that ever men have lied, / Thine is
the pardonablest" (III.i.p.268), Harold feels the guilt of
his dishonesty and becomes increasingly convinced that he

¹¹Thomas G. Burton points out that Harold's state-
ment is an ironic reversal of the meaning of the passage
in Matthew 10:39, in which Christ admonishes his followers
to sacrifice the physical to save the spiritual ("The Use
of Biblical Allusions in Tennyson's Harold," in Essays in
Memory of Christine Burleson in Language and Literature by
Former Colleagues and Students, ed. Thomas G. Burton
[Johnson City, Tenn., 1969], p. 155).

must meet the doom of God. He reaches such a degree of self-accusation that he believes he has sinned in his marriage "against / The truth of love" (V.i.pp.305-6), although when he accepted Aldwyth he was totally open in confessing to her his undying love for Edith. That Harold places his "lie" to Aldwyth on the plane of his lie to William indicates the extent to which he is obsessed by guilt, and in fact he approaches, through excessive contempt for his actions, the ruinous loss of self-reverence:

. . . mine own self
Takes part against myself! Why? for a spark
Of self-disdain born in me when I swore
Falsely to him, the falser Norman. . . .
(V.i.p.309)

Loss of self-control is yet another consequence of the pressure of Harold's troubled heart, completing the destruction of his fitness to reign as a sagacious king. Even though there is only one passionate outburst from Harold--his rage against and attempt to strike a Norman monk--Gurth's warning, "Thou hast lost thine even temper, brother Harold!" (V.i.p.304), suggests one result of his increasing domination by emotion rather than reason.

The clearest measure of Harold's loss of self-confidence and rational wisdom is seen, however, by tracing his response to many of the omens that unify the play by their recurrence and their foreshadowing of events. Tennyson's use of the portents in this way permits an indirect, and quite artistically sophisticated, development

of Harold's character. The drama begins with the appearance of a comet, which many frightful Englishmen, including the King, believe to signify a scourge on their country. Harold, however, reacts to the phenomenon with no superstition whatever:

Why not the doom of all the world as well?
 For all the world sees it as well as England.
 These meteors came and went before our day,
 Not harming any: it threatens us no more
 Than French or Norman. War? the worst that follows
 Things that seem jerk'd out of the common rut
 Of Nature is the hot religious fool,
 Who, seeing war in heaven, for heaven's credit
 Make it on earth. . . .

(I.i.p.219)

When Edward cautions Harold about being "too hard, / Not stagger'd by this ominous earth and heaven" (I.i.p.221), Harold reflects that he loves the King "but not his phantasies" (I.i.p.223).

The second portent in Harold is a dream of Edith's which sees her wedding day transformed into a deadly struggle between Harold and a church full of "dead men upright from their graves" (I.ii.p.230); the dream is an obvious prediction of the barrier to marriage caused by the oath upon the bones of the Norman saints. Still, Harold is thoroughly skeptical: "Well, well--a dream--no more!" (I.ii.p.232); he romantically reinterprets her nightmare and kisses her eyelids into dreams of wedding bells. Harold's refusal to bow to superstition persists into his hunting holiday to Flanders, when his shipwreck on the

coast of Normandy marks yet another omen. One of his men links the comet with the storm which drove them into the rocks, but Harold replies angrily, "Put thou thyself and thy mother-wit together. / Be not a fool!" (II.ii.p.237).

Nevertheless, the emotional pressures of his consequent confinement by William begin to break Harold's rational spirit. The obvious start of his collapse into superstition follows his oath and William's harrowing prediction of divine retribution on England if Harold breaks the vow. Left alone momentarily, Harold agonizes over his plight, alternately raging against William's duplicity and his own ethical weakness, when suddenly his declaration of intent to be forsworn is interrupted by the illusion that the chest of skeletons has moved. The oath, then, is the real turning point for Harold. From this frightening moment he places more and more faith in signs and visions; as one critic says, he loses self-trust and is seized by "petty fears and false sentiments."¹²

Although Harold does not descend into superstition quickly, maintaining for a time a surface skepticism, it is easy to detect his new interest in signs and visions as their accumulation begins to deepen the shadows of doom. The next portent in the drama is Edward's deathbed vision

¹²Arthur Waugh, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Study of His Life and Work, 3rd ed. (London, 1894), p. 188.

of England's troubled yet glorious future, justly regarded as one of the best passages in the play:

The green tree!
Then a great Angel past along the highest
Crying 'the doom of England,' and at once
He stood beside me, in his grasp a sword
Of lightnings, wherewithal he cleft the tree
From off the bearing trunk, and hurl'd it from him
Three fields away, and then he dash'd and drench'd,
He dyed, he soak'd the trunk with human blood,
And brought the sunder'd tree again, and set it
Straight on the trunk, that thus baptized in blood
Grew ever high and higher, beyond my seeing,
And shot out sidelong boughs across the deep
That dropt themselves, and rooted in far isles
Beyond my seeing: and the great Angel rose
And past again along the highest crying
'The doom of England!' . . .

(III.i.pp.268-69)¹³

To this hallucination Harold responds by asking (Tennyson notes "coldly"), "Ay--Stigand, unriddle / This vision, canst thou?" and doubtless his cynicism is gratified by Stigand's curt reply, "Dotage!" (III.i.p.270).

Harold's nonchalant attitude toward the omens continues in the same scene with the Archbishop Aldred reporting that a man recently heard ghostly noises of battle as

¹³The image of the tree, first appearing in the introductory sonnet, is also used by Tennyson in the great battle scene, which is the first part of the fulfillment of Edward's vision. Stigand describes the fighting with images of forestry, calling Harold the "War-woodman of old Woden" who fells the "mortal copse of faces" (V.i.p.319) and picturing the English warriors swinging battle-axes by which "heads / And arms are sliver'd off and splinter'd" (V.i.p.317). When the Norman strategy turns the battle against the English, Stigand's tree imagery is shifted to the men of his doomed homeland as he cries, "[H]old, ash! hold, willow!" (V.i.p.320).

he passed Senlac hill; but while Harold meets the beginning of the account sarcastically, his last remark concerning the story is the subdued query, "At Senlac?" (III.i.p.275). It seems obvious that he is now at least a little worried by the avalanche of frightful prophecies, and the scene ends without recording his response to the King's dying vision of the fatal arrow at "Senlac! Sanguelac, / The Lake of Blood!" (III.i.p.275).

In his next meeting with Edith, whom Edward has consigned to a nunnery to pray away the Norman curse on Harold, thereby placing another curse on the pair if they should consummate their love, Harold reveals the mixture of emotions with which he now regards Edward's dire prediction of his fate: "Fool and wise, I fear / This curse, and scorn it" (III.ii.p.278). However, at least by appearances, his reaction to news of the Pope's curse is less superstitious; he laughs, despite Edith's fears, and derides the pretensions of the papacy: "The Lord was God and came as man--the Pope / Is man and comes as God" (III.ii.p.281).

It is when Harold himself begins to have premonitions that his rational resolve is irreparably broken. Before the battle against Tostig, the King confesses to Gurth that he has dreamed that Edward told him he would conquer, and although he hastily adds, "I am no woman to put faith in dreams" (IV.i.p.291), he promptly turns and reports the

vision to his forces, ostensibly to encourage their valor. Since this vision comes true, though it is the only one favorable to Harold, he surely must be moved by its fulfillment. His next sign, however, is less hopeful, and he is clearly disturbed by it. Just after he angrily casts out the doomsaying Norman monk Margot, self-described as "the messenger of God, / His Norman Daniel!" (V.i.p.302), Harold tells his brother of a troubling, ambiguous incident:

Gurth, when I past by Waltham, my foundation
 For men who serve the neighbour, not themselves,
 I cast me down prone, praying; and, when I rose,
 They told me that the Holy Rood had lean'd
 And bow'd above me; whether that which held it
 Had weaken'd, and the Rood itself were bound
 To that necessity which binds us down;
 Whether it bow'd at all but in their fancy;
 Or if it bow'd, whether it symbol'd ruin
 Or glory, who shall tell? but they were sad,
 And somewhat sadden'd me.

(V.i.p.304)

Though he is temporarily reassured by his brothers that England will be safe, Harold falls asleep and dreams an overwhelming prophecy of his doom. In succession come visions of King Edward, Wulfnoth, Tostig, and the Norman saints, each foretelling his death at "Sanguelac." Harold rises, battle-axe in hand, still defensive of the ultimate rightness of his position against William's treachery, but with an unavoidable sense of defeat:

The king's last word--'the arrow!' I shall die--
 I die for England then, who lived for England--
 What nobler? men must die.
 I cannot fall into a falser world--

(V.i.p.308)

When he leaves his Edith to go into battle moments later, he goes courageously, but with the conviction that he is destined to die. For the first time he admits faith in the omens:

Edith,
 The sign in heaven--the sudden blast at sea--
 My fatal oath--the dead Saints--the dark dreams--
 The Pope's Anathema--the Holy Rood
 That bow'd to me at Waltham--Edith, if
 I, the last English King of England--
 (V.i.pp.311-12)

Thus he enters the fatal conflict believing that he is going to "front the doom of God" (V.i.p.313), doomed more clearly by his own spirit than by divine will.

As important as the various portents are to the drama as tests of Harold's self-confidence, their added function as unifying symbols is fairly mechanical. A much more artistically impressive pattern of imagery which mirrors Harold's predicament and its results is found in the language of enclosure and freedom.¹⁴ Images of confinement or enclosure are used by Tennyson to suggest two opposing ideas--bondage on one hand and protection on the other--but the breaking of the former leads ironically and inevitably to the breaking of the latter. Thus the poet employs artistic balance to represent and emphasize the profounder equity of moral justice. The achievement of

¹⁴James D. Kissane, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1970), pp. 148-49, refers to this pattern of imagery but does not trace it in detail.

freedom in one sense results ironically in its loss in another; the concept is bound up in Harold's paradoxical comment that he lost himself to save himself.

In these images Harold is the primary object. The most vivid depictions of bondage are the literal ones of his confinement in Normandy after the shipwreck; here William calls Harold a "Saxon woodcock in the springe" (II.ii.p.240) who must be made to feel that "a fold of danger nets him round" (II.ii.p.241). Harold tells his captor-host that he is distressed by the Norman winds that "cross and jostle among these towers" (II.ii.p.245), longing to "Breathe the free wind" of Saxony (II.ii.p.246), and when he is left alone his sense of confinement intensifies: "The walls oppress me, / And yon huge keep that hinders half the heaven. / Free air! free field!" (II.ii.p.247). Against Harold's pledge to escape, "I'll hack my way to the sea," Malet responds, in effect tightening the cords of captivity:

Thou canst not, Harold;
Our Duke is all between thee and the sea,
Our Duke is all about thee like a God;
All passes block'd.

(II.ii.pp.249-50)

The ultimate horror of physical bondage, however, is suggested by Wulfnoth, who foresees Harold "upright in thy living grave, / Where there is barely room to shift thy side" (II.ii.p.253).

The effect of the images of literal enclosure, of course, is to dramatize the moral and emotional bondage which is in store for Harold. His oath constitutes an obligation both to William and to his own conscience, and the Norman's solemn intonation, "I am content, / For thou art truthful, and thy word thy bond" (II.ii.p.259), must surely stir the deepest anguish of Harold's honest heart. He craves to settle his account with William, not in the rigid confines of sworn vows, but in free, open combat: "O God, that I were in some wide, waste field / With nothing but my battle-axe and him / To spatter his brains!" (II.ii.p.263). Even if he could destroy William, however, Harold still must cope with his religiously trained conscience, which he also regards as a sort of prison. He cries:

Oh God! I cannot help it, but at times
They seem to me too narrow, all the faiths
Of this grown world of ours, whose baby eye
Saw them sufficient.

(III.ii.p.278)

Eventually Harold breaks all three forms of bondage--literal captivity, his oath to William, and his honest conscience--but at tragic expense. Not only does the violated oath torment him to the end, but, ironically, all the reasons for his lie are in vain: Wulfnoth is not freed, the safety of Edith and England is not secured, and ultimately his own life is not saved.

Just as Tennyson presents Harold's unfulfilled responsibilities to William and conscience in terms of

broken confinement, so the playwright shows the national consequences of that action by using the same pattern of imagery. The meaning of the pattern is ironically inverted, however, for the rupture comes not in a restraining enclosure, but in a protective one. The unity and security of Britain are symbolized from the play's beginning by the wall of shields. In Act I Gurth attempts to arrest the sibling argument with this plea:

Come, come,
Join hands, let brethren dwell in unity;
Let kith and kin stand close as our shield-wall,
Who breaks us then?

(I.i.p.227)

The foreshadowing of defeat is continued later when Harold boasts, "No Norman horse / Can shatter England, standing shield by shield" (V.i.p.306), and Edith prays God to fortify their wall of shields in battle.

The climactic, historical collapse of the shield-wall at the Battle of Hastings is a factual detail which Tennyson skillfully appropriates as a symbolic concentration and culmination of the several forces which fuse to bring Harold to defeat. First, the break in the wall suggests the disunity of the house of Godwin which Gurth desires, seen in Tostig's rebellion and the consequent weakening of Harold's army. Secondly, it signifies the overall fragmentation of tribal interests in England, caused in part by Edward's careless rule and Aldwyth's deception. Next, the false retreat of the Norman forces, which inspires

the three histories, because, unlike in the other plays, England itself is overthrown, and, in addition, the fallen hero is nobler than either Mary or Becket, at least as Tennyson presents them. Since nobility alone does not make for interest, however, the inherent advantages of Harold unfortunately do not insure that the drama live up to its promise. Within its limits Harold is a fine play, with adept handling of symbolic imagery and subtle development of Harold's emotional deterioration. However, one feels that the drama could have been considerably stronger, for example, if it had more of the poignancy of Queen Mary. Somehow--perhaps in part because the story is so far removed in time, perhaps because the hero simply is not as intriguing as others--the events and emotions of Tennyson's Harold do not seem quite important enough to stir a powerful response in the reader.

Nevertheless, the playwright has a worthwhile statement to make, and the drama's greatest strength is finally the relevance, especially to the nineteenth century, of the Laureate's implicit comment on the problem of change. While Victorian England faced no military challenge comparable to that of Harold's Britain, it was being intimidated by the constant pressure of liberal philosophies and new scientific knowledge, which to many seemed to sweep away most of the cherished ideals of their age. To Tennyson's mind, these new developments were not so great a threat to English

strength as the brittle will that could not adapt rationally to change. The Victorian Englishman could, like Harold, meet the challenge to his human values by descending into self-despair and doomsaying (one hears echoes of the young, searching poet in Harold's plaint on the old, "narrow" faiths), or he could, like Tennyson's theoretical modeling, face inevitable process with the wisdom won by an appropriate reverence for one's worth, an accurate knowledge of one's own mind and heart, and a thoughtful control of one's conduct. The Laureate's choice, proved through his own personal experience and expounded in much of his mature poetry, is unmistakable.

CHAPTER IV

BECKET--"THIS PESTILENT PRIEST"

One of the famous quotations from the life of Henry Irving is the answer he gave to an admirer who credited the actor with having "made" the play Becket, Tennyson's greatest stage success. Irving is said to have responded, "No, no, the play made me. It changed my whole view of life."¹ The idea is striking not only because of the apparent impression the role of Thomas Becket made on the experienced Shakespearian player, but also because it calls to mind a problem that long has puzzled many historians and dramatists. Irving said the play made him, but a larger question remains: What made Becket? What can explain the transformation of the loyal friend and Chancellor of Henry II into a man who, as Archbishop of Canterbury, opposed the King at almost every turn and therefore died a martyr's death at implicit royal command?

For centuries the history and literature of Protestant England generally regarded the Roman Catholic Becket as a hypocritical opportunist who became the tool of a foreign ecclesiastical power. The extreme opposite viewpoint, often held in this century, has seen Becket as a

¹Laurence Irving, Henry Irving: The Actor and His World (New York, 1952), p. 559.

true man of God, a saint dying for a genuine cause. In the middle ground, however, are those who believe Becket to have been sincerely converted to the responsibilities of his new office, but overcome by a pride which pressed him into immoderate positions and ultimately into death.

It is easy enough to place Tennyson somewhere near the center of this spectrum of interpretations. He is obviously too sympathetic with Becket to hold the harsh view; in fact, he allows Becket to dissociate himself from the corrupt aspects of Roman Catholicism and thus emerge, as G. Wilson Knight says, as a sort of forecaster of Protestantism.² On the other hand, neither is Tennyson's Becket an embodiment of absolute virtue, nor is his Henry totally villainous. As Jerome Buckley points out, the might versus right conflict of Harold is continued in Becket, but without sharp distinctions; the King and the Archbishop are mixtures of right and wrong.³

Yet it is impossible to say precisely what Tennyson's view is, either of the motives for Becket's change or of the wisdom of his later course. Many critics note this element of ambiguity, and while a few accept it as an

²The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama (New York, 1962), p. 267.

³Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 204.

admirable result of the author's objectivity,⁴ more find it a definite weakness in the drama. One critic says of Tennyson's failure to come to terms with the psychological implications of the conflict of Henry and Becket, "The poet is not impartial; he is only indefinite."⁵ Terry Otten regards Becket as Tennyson's best play for psychological realism, but he complains that the main character seems to be playing out a predetermined role rather than genuinely struggling with subjective conflicts. The critic further says that every time Tennyson tries to expose Becket's inner motives, "these passages are lost in the inchoate movement of the external action: plot consistently overrides character."⁶ Finally, in comparing Becket with T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, Louise Rehak comments on the relative weakness of Tennyson's point of view:

We cannot know whether the historical Becket was inspired by God or deluded by pride; the playwright

⁴See Cornelia Geetrui Japikse, The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson ([1926]; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 23.

⁵William Archer, The Theatrical 'World' for 1893 (1894; rpt., New York, 1969), p. 47. James D. Kissane, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1970), p. 150, and Peter Thomson, "Tennyson's Plays and Their Production," in Tennyson, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1973), p. 242, also complain of the lack of intellectual clarity.

⁶The Deserted Stage: The Search for Dramatic Form in Nineteenth-Century England (Athens, O., 1972), pp. 95-96.

is entitled to accept either possibility, or to use both. Eliot assumes the former, and draws a theatrically effective sermon therefrom; Tennyson makes no final declaration. If in the body of the play he suggests the latter, in the conclusion he tempers skepticism with a possibility of genuine sacrificial faith, covering the death with a terrible irony.⁷

This critic goes on to say that in Tennyson's play none of the characters learn anything; the conflict is not resolved, but just ends, leaving Becket's death only ironic and ambiguous.⁸

Although Becket has many fine qualities, enough, in fact, to make it an enjoyable play to read and see, and enough to cause many observers to rate it Tennyson's best, there is finally nothing that can quite compensate for the poet's failure to develop a satisfactory theme concerning his main characters. The most important theme that he does present--that of the dangers of excess--helps to explain only so much, namely that two strong wills set on a collision course will result in destruction. But there are too many more intriguing questions that Tennyson leaves unanswered: What accounts for Becket's conversion to his immovable support of the Church? How important a role does pride play in his staunch opposition to the State?

⁷"On the Use of Martyrs: Tennyson and Eliot on Thomas Becket," University of Toronto Quarterly, 33 (1963), 45.

⁸Ibid., pp. 46-47.

Does he determine upon a course of martyrdom or only come to see it as the inevitable result of God's will? Tennyson plays with these issues but never makes his views clear. Without the firm control of a strong unifying theme, the coherence of the drama is unfortunately weakened.

Of course, Becket is not deficient in every aspect of artistic coherence. Too often, however, the literary devices which ordinarily would enhance the drama are made less effective because of Tennyson's indefinite judgment of characters, particularly Becket. A motif or an image or an allusion may emerge, but its significance is sometimes obscured by the difficulty of relating it to any dominant viewpoint in the play. This chapter will analyze Tennyson's artistic successes and failures in Becket by dealing with three general areas: the structural comparison of Becket with the two earlier history plays; the theme of excess, as well as other motives, as seen in Henry and Becket; and the function of symbolism in the play.

Tennyson's third drama inevitably invites comparison with both Queen Mary and Harold. Perhaps the most significant difference between Becket and the earlier plays is the lack of a dominant statement about the events it covers. Although the interests in Queen Mary are more numerous and diffuse than those in Becket, the former drama is united by a pervasive atmosphere and a clear, though complex, portrayal of the main character; Tennyson's

conclusions about Mary's disastrous reign are obvious. Harold, a less complicated figure than Becket or Mary, is also distinctly presented in terms of the theme of Tennyson's second drama, which is relatively straightforward but nonetheless artistically sophisticated. In each of the first two plays, the development of a vivid thesis helps to ameliorate the apparent weaknesses of the drama--in Queen Mary a loose chronicle structure, in Harold a too-simple conflict of might and right. Becket, however, although its structure is better than that of Queen Mary and its conflict more engaging than that of Harold, suffers because of the playwright's inconclusiveness. Queen Mary and Harold are each more than the sum of their parts; Becket is less.

In terms of the amount of chronicle material, Becket falls between Queen Mary and Harold. An interesting contrast can be seen in Tennyson's response to historical details for Queen Mary and Becket; the difference probably helps explain why the poet is relatively vague about the character Becket. In Queen Mary the chronicle material overburdens the plot, providing too many superfluous elements; but as it touches the central idea of the characterization of Mary, such material enhances the art, inspiring Tennyson's imagination. Two factual details that the poet incorporates thematically, for example, are the Queen's nearsightedness and Cardinal Pole's greeting to

the religiously impassioned monarch. In Becket, however, the chronicle details hinder not the plot, but the characterization of Becket himself. Buckley believes that Tennyson was "embarrassed by the raw materials of history and too cautious to take imaginative liberties," producing a "succession of accurate tableaux" that fails to achieve dramatic movement.⁹ The best primary evidence of the playwright's timidity with Becket is the prefatory sonnet for the drama. In it the poet, instead of claiming creative independence from historians as he had done in a draft of the sonnet for Queen Mary, addresses dead souls on the difficulty of writing accurate biography and requests, "Frown not, old ghosts, if I be one of those / Who make you utter things you did not say, / And mould you all awry and mar your worth. . . ."¹⁰ By attempting to be true to history, Tennyson succeeded in being false to one demand of the drama; his character does not emerge sufficiently well defined, and since readers cannot know exactly how to take Becket the man, they also cannot know how to take Becket the play. There is never that sort of problem with a careful reading of Queen Mary.

⁹Buckley, p. 206.

¹⁰The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York, 1969), p. 1342.

At least three structural elements in Becket provide interesting comparisons with Harold. Tennyson almost seems to have been consciously copying himself, sometimes with more success and sometimes with less. One of the similarities is the use of a subplot involving a romantic triangle, two points of which are a jealous villainess and a lovely, innocent heroine. The crafty plotting of Queen Eleanor and Fitzurse in the Prologue of Becket is especially reminiscent of the similar scheming of Aldwyth in the first act of Harold. The subplot of Harold, however, is more skillfully integrated into the main action than is that of Becket; while Aldwyth's deceit works directly to sap Harold's military strength and moral resolve, thereby contributing to his final defeat, the treachery of Eleanor is only indirectly aimed at Becket. It is true that Tennyson uses Eleanor's vindictiveness for Becket's protection of Rosamund as the deciding factor in arousing the jealous Henry to end his conflict with the Archbishop in murder; as one critic puts it, Eleanor is a "catalyst speeding an inevitable reaction."¹¹ The connection, however, despite its irony, is quite mechanical and melodramatic, and the Becket subplot too often detracts from the main thematic current. Since it usually involves the central character

¹¹A. Fred Sochatoff, "Four Variations on the Becket Theme in Modern Drama," Modern Drama, 12 (1969), 87.

only peripherally, it hardly merits the time Tennyson spends on it, and one suspects that the secondary plot is primarily the author's sop to his audience's romantic, melodramatic tastes.¹²

It should be admitted, on the other hand, that the subplot, for all its structural weakness, provides some excellent moments in the play. Parts of the bower scenes involving Henry, Rosamund, and their son Geoffrey are poignantly charming, and the sarcastic interchanges between Eleanor and Becket make superb dialogue. Even the character of Eleanor, perhaps too patently evil, can be appreciated more fully in the light of Henry's explanation of the source of her antagonism toward Becket; it is precisely the reaction of Tennyson's arch-villainess, Vivien, toward King Arthur, "A sane and natural loathing for a soul / Purer, and truer and nobler than herself" (II.i.p.93).¹³

A second structural similarity of Harold and Becket is the existence of pivotal scenes in which the main

¹²Only one critic, G. Wilson Knight, is enthusiastic about the dramatic integration of the subplot; he calls it a "brilliant stroke" to have Henry led to calling for Becket's death by his own thwarted erotic passions (p. 267). For opposite opinions of varying intensity, see Archer, p. 44; Richard Holt Hutton, Literary Essays, 3rd ed. (London, 1888), p. 436; Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson, 2nd ed. (1901; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 190; Rehak, p. 43; and Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 446.

¹³Citations of the play are from the Eversley Edition, IX.

characters are coerced into giving their word to principles they do not hold, thereby violating their consciences and suffering guilt. In the first place, the pressures on Becket to sign the royal customs are similar to those on Harold to promise help for William in England. Becket, protesting that he cannot betray his responsibilities to the Church, is told by Hilary that his signing would only be a gesture to save Henry's face. But like Harold, for whom "temporizing" is the same as lying, Becket disagrees with the argument to pacify Henry:

Hilary. O my good lord, I do entreat thee--sign.
 Save the King's honour here before his barons.
 He hath sworn that thou shouldst sign, and now but
 shuns
 The semblance of defeat; I have heard him say
 He means no more; so if thou sign, my lord,
 That were but as the shadow of an assent.
Becket. 'Twould seem too like the substance, if
 I sign'd.

(I.iii.pp.52-53)

Next, the welfare of the Church is set before Becket as a reason for his signing, as he is told that the Pope counsels appeasement of Henry; but Becket continues to stand on principles: "If Rome be feeble, then should I be firm" (I.iii.p.54). Becket finally submits when two templars, one young and one old, entreat him to sign for their sake. Compared to the tense building to a climax in the similar scene of Harold, this last development is decidedly weak; one really does not understand why Becket signs at this point, unless it is only because of the implicit pressure

of accumulated arguments, or, perhaps, because Tennyson is wanting to show Becket's sensitivity to the needs of the people, represented by the anonymous templars. Nevertheless, the reaction of Becket to his signing and Harold to the initial giving of his word are also quite similar: each feels immediate guilt but sees a way out. Becket moans, "False to myself--it is the will of God / To break me, prove me nothing of myself" (I.iii.p.56); then, as Harold realizes he has not sworn an oath, the Archbishop is reminded that he has not sealed.

At this point, however, an important difference in the two patterns occurs: Harold is tricked into swearing and thus lives with a tortured conscience which emasculates his self-confidence; Becket does not ratify his signature and therefore manages to escape lasting remorse. The cleric declares simply, "I hold not by my signing" (I.iii.p.65), and except for Becket's continuing belief that the occasion is God's way of humbling him, the event has no real significance beyond its part in the ruptured relations between him and Henry. The oath scene in Harold is essential to the hero's emotional decline and literal defeat; the signing scene in Becket indicates only one aspect of the hero's motivation and merely widens the existing breach between Church and State.

A final similarity between Harold and Becket is the frequent foreshadowing of the deaths of the two heroes.

On this point, Becket is superior to the earlier play. While in Harold Tennyson uses explicit omens and visions to which the characters respond consciously, in Becket the foreshadowing is generally more subtle, requiring for effect no superstitious reaction of characters. One important segment of the anticipation of the drama's conclusion is the Archbishop's growing view of himself as a martyr, but consideration of this idea will be postponed until the discussion of Becket's motivations.

The key scene of foreshadowing in Becket is the Prologue, one of the best scenes in all of Tennyson's dramatic works, in which the playwright symbolically prefigures the nature and outcome of both the central action and the subplot.¹⁴ The scene opens with Henry and Becket, now the King's Chancellor, playing at chess, but Henry is so preoccupied with Church problems and thoughts of a successor for the dying Archbishop Theobald that Becket has to prompt his attention to the game. Each successive comment on the chess match becomes more symbolically significant:

¹⁴Most critics praise this, the "chess scene"; for example, Kissane commends the artistic exposition (p. 149); Knight calls it "brilliantly symbolical" (p. 266); and even Thomas H. Dickinson, not an admirer of Tennyson as a playwright, in The Contemporary Drama of England (Boston, 1931), p. 27, says it is the only dramatically vital scene in all the plays. On the other hand, Otten, p. 98, and Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), p. 225, criticize the scene for its lack of symbolic subtlety.

line" on the map leading to the hiding place (Prologue, p. 8), Tennyson suggests the impending tragedy which results from Becket's responsibility of keeping Rosamund safe from the jealous Eleanor. While Henry fears for Rosamund's blood if Becket does not guard her, ironically it is Becket's blood that is spilled in carrying out his duty. Eleanor's entry toward the end of the Prologue, marked by her suspicion of Henry and her bitterness toward Becket, indicates the perilous undertaking of Becket in protecting Rosamund. When the wily Queen sings,

Over! the sweet summer closes,
 The reign of the roses is done;
 Over and gone with the roses,
 And over and gone with the sun.
 (Prologue, p. 15)

she may or may not be consciously taunting Henry with ominous wordplay on the name "Rosamund" and the kingly image of the sun, but her lyric nevertheless provides another hint of personal disaster for the King.

The prophetic elements of the Prologue are the most artistically handled in the drama, but there are also, in addition to Becket's own sensing of his martyr's mission, at least three other occasions of foreshadowing of doom. One of these is the rather crude inclusion of a "voice" that speaks during Becket's banquet for beggars, saying, "Becket, beware of the knife!" (I.iv.p.79). No one but the Archbishop seems to hear the voice, but it apparently adds enough to Becket's fear of being murdered that he

leaves the feast to sleep between the altars for protection. Probably Tennyson intended the voice to be that of Becket's own anxiety, but there are sufficient indications of his preoccupation with martyrdom to preclude the necessity of this disruptive kind of device. The other two portents of Becket's death, imposed from outside himself, come from his eventual murderers. In the first encounter with Fitzurse, Becket sees that the knight is drunk and contemptuously tells him that his eyes "Glare stupid-wild with wine" (I.i.p.32); in the actual murder scene the four knights fortify their courage with Christmas wines. Another confrontation of Becket and the four barons occurs before the signing of the customs. Becket, justifying his refusal to bow to the demands of the Crown, arouses the wrath of De Broc, who says, "The King is quick to anger; if thou anger him, / We wait but the King's word to strike thee dead" (I.iii.p.51). All of these elements of foreshadowing, however explicit they may be, do not carry the supernatural connotations of the omens in Harold, and so Tennyson is not faced with the problem of using fatalistic tools which do not directly serve his own thematic interests in the drama. The poet thus integrates the prophetic unifying devices into Becket more artistically than in his earlier play.

The coherence provided by foreshadowing is significant primarily to the plot of Becket, but a unifying motif

that molds the theme of the drama is the idea of excess. This motif is easily applied to Tennyson's belief in the value of self-control, one of the hallmarks of wisdom. Many of the problems which confront Becket have their roots in lack of self-restraint: Eleanor's hatred of Rosamund is excessive, as are the beastly passions of Fitzurse, "the bear"; an immoderate consumption of wine dulls the sensibilities of not only Fitzurse and the other knights, but also the careless warder of Rosamund's bower; the unwise traditions of the Church, which tend to undercut Becket's stand for spiritual integrity against secular powers, are the works, the Archbishop says, of "men / Defective or excessive" (II.iii.p.108). The most important threat to Becket's position, however, is King Henry, whose volatile temper betrays his absence of self-control. Tennyson crowds his portrait of the King with suggestions that impulsive anger is his dominant trait. His upsetting of the chess board is only a mild foretaste of his wrath; he is so enraged at Becket's returning of the Chancellor's Great Seal that he is said to have "all but pluck'd the bearer's eyes away" (I.iii.p.45); when Becket opposes him on the customs, he threatens to blind the Archbishop and tear out his tongue. Both Eleanor and Becket know the King well enough to realize that he "Says many a thing in sudden heats, which he / Gainsays by next sunrising" (IV.ii.p.160), but it is the Queen who understands how to manipulate

The King, because he is aware of his weakness, is not truly a slave to his anger; in fact, he indulges himself by blaming others for arousing his wrath. When his counselors advise the elimination of Becket, he weakly protests, "What? . . . Ay . . . but pray you do not work upon me. / I see your drift . . . it may be so . . . and yet / You know me easily anger'd" (V.i.pp.168-69). Only on one occasion does Henry manage to stifle his impulsive rage, and if it were not for the monarch's potential for terrible power, the ironic moment of sovereign self-control would be comic. At the abortive meeting at Montmirail, Henry first believes Becket to have capitulated, then flares when Becket hedges with "Saving God's honor!":

Out upon thee, man!
 Saving the Devil's honor, his yes and no.
 Knights, bishops, earls, this London spawn--by
 Mahound,
 I had sooner have been born a Mussulman--
 Less clashing with their priests--
 I am half-way down the slope--will no man stay me?
 I dash myself to pieces--I stay myself--
 Puff--it is gone. . . .

(II.ii.p.106)

Although it is not related to the theme of excess, another important facet of Henry's responsibility for the rift between him and Becket is the fact that the Crown initiates the moves to limit the Church's authority. Before Becket is made Archbishop, Henry tells him,

. . . thou didst help me to my throne
 In Theobald's time, and after by thy wisdom
 Hast kept it firm from shaking; but now I,
 For my realm's sake, myself must be the wizard

To raise that tempest which will set it trembling
 Only to base it deeper. I, true son
 Of Holy Church--no croucher to the Gregories
 That tread the kings their children underheel--
 Must curb her. . . .

(Prologue, p. 10)

Thus Henry calculates the turmoil his actions will bring, but of course does not count on his dearest friend becoming his adversary in the stormy events.

The images of turbulence that are used in this passage are ones that recur through the drama, aesthetically characterizing the basic conflict with its potential violence and ironic inversions. The violent conclusion forecast in Henry's rash upsetting of the chess board continues to be suggested in the references to the ideological conflict as a "rift" (I.i.p.29) and a "wound" never to be healed (I.i.p.30), in the figure of "Sceptre and crozier clashing" (II.i.p.88), and in Henry's epithet for Becket as "this turbulent priest" (II.i.p.100). Of particular interest, in view of Tennyson's use of the same imagery in both Queen Mary and Harold, is the metaphor of ships and the hazards of smooth passage. As in Harold, both rock and storms are presented as dangers. Henry says that his "course, albeit not glassy-smooth, / Had prosper'd in the main, but suddenly / Jarr'd on this rock" (I.iii.p.58), in this case an apparent miscarriage of justice by an ecclesiastical court; it is the event which stirs Henry to restrain the powers of the Church. When at Montmirail

Henry sees the necessity for a deceptive reconciliation,
he says,

I must patch up a peace--
A piece in this long-tugg'd-at, threadbare-worn
Quarrel of Crown and Church--to rend again.
His Holiness cannot steer straight thro' shoals,
Nor I.

(II.ii.p.103)

Storm imagery is seen several times--in Henry's desire to raise a "tempest" (Prologue, p. 10), in a description of Becket's angry, shamed face as "stormy-red" (I.iii.p.57), in the French King Louis' insistence that

Holy Church
May rock, but will not wreck, nor our Archbishop
Stagger on the slope decks for any rough sea
Blown by the breath of kings.

(II.ii.p.104-5)

When the Montmirail meeting fails, Henry says "the storm begins again" (II.ii.p.117), and later Walter Map tells Becket, "I am none of those that would raise a storm between you, lest ye should draw together like two ships in a calm" (III.iii.p.144).

A final metaphor suggestive of the tumultuous consequences of the clash of King and Archbishop is a conceit developed consciously by Henry as he plays with his and Rosamund's son Geoffrey. Teasing the child with the idea of making him Chancellor, Henry sardonically tells him what it is to be Chancellor of England:

Henry. It is, my boy, to side with the King
when Chancellor, and then to be made Archbishop,
and go against the King who made him, and turn the
world upside down.

Geoffrey. I won't have it then. Nay, but give it me, and I promise thee not to turn the world upside down.

Henry. (giving him a ball). Here is a ball, my boy, thy world, to turn anyway and play with as thou wilt--which is more than I can do with mine.

(II.i.pp.96-97)

Henry's world indeed is inverted, but he eschews any blame for upsetting it. Perhaps it is symbolic of the King's impulsiveness when at the end of the scene Geoffrey tosses his ball into the brook and there is the fear he will drown in chasing it. Nor is it easy to dismiss Becket's later remark, when he has saved Rosamund and is preparing to seclude her and her son, that he will find Geoffrey's ball for him--"Or something manlier" (IV.ii.p.163). The ideal world Becket can offer--the standard of conduct he represents--is surely favored by Tennyson above Henry's way of life, and the poet apparently uses the figure of the child's ball-world to carry that implication.

Tennyson spends considerable time near the beginning of the drama contrasting the characteristics of Henry and Becket; for example, there is Henry's lasciviousness and Becket's sexual purity, Henry's callousness and Becket's grief at Theobald's death. As the play proceeds, however, the portraits begin to become rounder, with virtues and vices mingling in each. Henry's tender side is seen in his meetings with Rosamund, and Becket's old martial impulsiveness surfaces to make him not unlike the King in his

tendency to rashness. In fact, the theme of excess is centered more consistently in the Archbishop than in any other character, even Henry. The poet evidently is suggesting that Becket is just as responsible as Henry for the impasse of wills and the ultimate fatal collision.

Becket's admirable traits--his sincere concern for the poor, his gentle sympathy toward Rosamund and Geoffrey, his faithfulness to Henry's charge to protect Rosamund--need not be documented here, although some of the play's best moments come in scenes where the Archbishop's tenderness is being demonstrated. More to the point are his motives in the conflict with Henry and the excesses which hinder a resolution. The question of Becket's motives in accepting the Archbishopric is one of Tennyson's most ambiguous areas, for two somewhat contradictory answers are given, both by Becket. In the first of these, the clear implication is that the decision is influenced by his perception of divine will. He poses the question "Am I the man?" and relates three early dreams or experiences which seemed to foretell his coming to the position of Archbishop. Then Becket recounts for Herbert a dream he had the previous night in which God directly answered him, "'Thou art the man, and all the more the man'" (I.i. p.28), and then smote him to the Minster floor. Although he is puzzled by the fall, Becket is assured by Herbert that the dream signifies God's will that he cast his power

and wisdom on the side of Canterbury. The second explanation of Becket's motive for becoming Archbishop occurs near the end of the signing scene, when the chasm between Church and State has been opened wide and when Becket feels shame for having signed the royal customs. The Archbishop ponders his unhappy state:

I had been so true
To Henry and mine office that the King
Would throne me in the great Archbishoprick:
And I, that knew mine own infirmity,
For the King's pleasure rather than God's cause
Took it upon me--err'd thro' love of him.
Now therefore God from me withdraws Himself,
And the King too.

(I.iii.p.70)

Here Becket suggests, then, that his motive was not spiritual, but secular. Perhaps Tennyson is implying with these two scenes that Becket's original desire was to please Henry, but that once in the position he felt a divine sanction to which he was obligated. On the other hand, perhaps the playwright is saying that even Becket does not perceive his own motives, but if that is the point Tennyson is trying to make, he needs to be more specific. Whatever is to be made of these passages, Becket simply does not struggle enough with this important problem to convince readers that subjective motivation is a major concern of the poet.

Regardless of Becket's original reason for accepting the position of Archbishop and the cause of his turning to oppose the King, it is clear that in his own mind his chief aim is protection of the Church and her prerogatives. To

others, however, Becket's motives are tainted. His ecclesiastical foes, Roger of York, Foliot, and Hilary, accuse him of "stubbornness and pride" (I.iii.p.46), ambition, and "boundless arrogance" (V.i.p.166). King Henry sarcastically rages that the new Christian doctrine is "you shall have / None other God but me--me, Thomas, son / Of Gilbert Becket, London merchant" (II.ii.pp.108-9), and Becket's protector, King Louis of France, worries that the priest may be trying to set himself up as "greater than the Saints, / More than St. Peter" (II.ii.p.108). The most damning accusation, because it comes from a friend, is John of Salisbury's; when, against the counsel to pardon his enemies, Becket answers that he could bless his foes, but not Heaven's, John says,

And may there not be something
 Of this world's leaven in thee too, when crying
 On Holy Church to thunder out her rights
 And thine own wrong so pitilessly? Ah, Thomas,
 The lightnings that we think are only Heaven's
 Flash sometimes out of earth against the heavens.
 The soldier, when he lets his whole self go
 Lost in the common good, the common wrong,
 Strikes truest ev'n for his own self. I crave
 Thy pardon--I have still thy leave to speak.
 Thou hast waged God's war against the King; and yet
 We are self-uncertain creatures, and we may,
 Yea, even when we know not, mix our spites
 And private hates with our defence of Heaven.
 (V.ii.pp.177-78)

Tennyson frustrates expectation at this point by not showing Becket's response to the charge, since two entrances occur in quick succession. All that is revealed in the way of reaction is Becket's description of John as "my other self, / Who like my conscience never lets me be" (V.ii.p.179).

Whether Becket is really moved by this attack on his motives, however, is not known; again, no inner conflict is illuminated, and readers do not know whether the Archbishop learns anything about himself.

The only flaw which Tennyson lets Becket admit is the error of excess, but the excess is acknowledged only as it applies to his methods, not to his motives. Apparently it is the soldier in Becket that produces immoderate actions, even in the cause of moral right. Just after the new Archbishop, ecstatically inspired by his divine vision, has been warned by Herbert, "Thomas, thou art moved too much" (I.i.p.30), Becket's warrior passion flares out at the drunken Fitzurse, who comes seeking Rosamund:

Back, man, I tell thee! What!
 Shall I forget my new archbishoprick
 And smite thee with my crozier on the skull?
 'Fore God, I am a mightier man than thou.
(I.i.p.32)

A few moments later he is subdued and confesses his impulsive weakness. Noting that a headache is "Nature's moral / Against excess" in drinking, he adds,

Against the moral excess
 No physical ache, but failure it may be
 Of all we aim'd at. John of Salisbury
 Hath often laid a cold hand on my heats,
 And Herbert hath rebuked me even now.
 I will be wise and wary, not the soldier
 As Foliot swears it.
(I.i.p.39)

The pattern of excess, rebuke, and repentance continues through the play. Foliot tells Becket, "As Chancellor

thou wast against the Church, / Now as Archbishop goest
 against the King; / For, like a fool, thou knowst no mid-
 dle way" (I.iii.p.64); and shortly, when Becket lashes out
 at the knights who call him traitor, Herbert stays him with
 "Enough, my lord," to which Becket answers, "More than
 enough. I play the fool again" (I.iii.p.72). Again, after
 the reproof of King Louis, Becket confesses to Herbert what
 is the encapsulated thesis of the drama: "I am too like
 the King here; both of us / Too headlong for our office"
 (II.ii.p.111).

Ironically, just as Henry's awareness of his hot
 temper does not mean that he can control it, neither do
 Becket's recurrent admissions of his excessive nature in-
 sure a command of his problem. In fact, the Archbishop's
 drastic steps continue; Eleanor tells him that he is known
 "Thro' all the courts of Christendom as one / That mars a
 cause with over-violence" (IV.ii.p.162), and the oracular
 Walter Map cautions that Becket's many excommunications
 will be counterproductive:

My Lord, you have put so many of the King's
 household out of communion, that they begin
 to smile at it. . . . --For tho' the drop
 may hollow out the dead stone, doth not the
 living skin thicken against perpetual
 whippings?

(III.iii.pp.144-45)

Even to the end Becket cannot rationally check his rashness
 or even recognize it on his own. When the four knights
 confront him in the Cathedral and a verbal battle ensues,

Becket misjudges the intensity of his response. After John chides him for losing his temper and the Archbishop says he thought he "answer'd moderately enough," John replies, "As one that blows the coal to cool the fire. / My lord, I marvel why you never lean / On any man's advising but your own" (V.ii.pp.197-98).

While Becket's actions are obviously represented as excessive, prolonging the conflict with the Crown and provoking the state of mind in Henry that allows the King to be prodded into murder by unfounded sexual jealousy, Tennyson does not provide enough evidence to allow a charge of excessiveness against Becket's motives. Some critics state flatly that Becket is consumed by spiritual pride,¹⁶ but at least one wisely cautions that it cannot be known if Tennyson had that idea in mind.¹⁷ The strongest evidence for the existence of hubris is the statements of others about Becket, but it is significant that the priest himself, though he confesses to overreaction, never admits to pride. What appears to observers as pride may possibly be only an insistent conviction that one is doing God's will, a conviction which, when coupled with an aggressive demeanor, looks even more like arrogance. Ultimately, it is impossible to condemn or acclaim Becket's motives, for

¹⁶See Kissane, p. 150, and Buckley, p. 205.

¹⁷Sochatoff, p. 88.

Tennyson does not supply enough clues. If he had let Becket come to grips with the charges of pride, as Eliot does, then one might better know what to think of the Laureate's Archbishop. But pride is an accusation that this Becket is allowed to disregard, and the drama suffers as a result.

It must be added that there are two interrelated patterns--one of biblical allusion and one of foreshadowing--that can be read as evidence of Becket's pride. The biblical allusions present Becket as a Christ figure,¹⁸ and the foreshadowing is provided by Becket's growing perception that he is to be a martyr. Both of the patterns illustrate the problem of applying such material to an interpretation of Tennyson's attitude toward Becket; for although each can support the depiction of a prideful arrogance, they also can be regarded as indicative of a sincerely Christlike spirit attuned to divine will. In the case of the allusions, for example, not all of the suggestions of the Archbishop as Christ come from Becket himself and therefore cannot be construed as proof of his spiritual presumption. Even the lines of Becket which echo Jesus' words can be explained as impassioned utterances of an

¹⁸There also are numerous biblical echoes which do not relate to this identification. They seem quite natural to the speech of clerics and others conversant with the language of the Bible.

appointed spiritual leader who longs to emulate his Lord, especially in His sacrificial death.

Among the passages that identify Becket as Christ are both sarcastic actions and statements by his opponents and honest responses of his followers. After he has defied the King's request to seal his signature on the customs, Becket leaves the Hall of Northampton Castle in a sort of ironic reversal of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, with the barons throwing wisps of rushes at him and jeering with the epithets "perjured prelate," "turncoat shaveling," and "traitor" (I.iii.p.72). The comparison to Christ's entry is underlined when the outer doors are opened and a crowd of commoners greets the beloved leader with the biblical cry, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" (I.iii.p.73). Later, when he returns from France, Becket is met with the adulation suggestive of another triumphal entry:

Oh, ay--the bells rang out even to deafening,
Organ and pipe, and dulcimer, chants and hymns
In all the churches, trumpets in the halls,
Sobs, laughter, cries: they spread their raiment
down
Before me--would have made my pathway flowers,
Save that it was mid-winter in the street,
But full mid-summer in those honest hearts.
(V.ii.p.190)

Still more suggestions of Becket's role as a Christ figure come at the time of his murder. Preparing himself for vespers, he asks for his bishop's Cross, and the loyal Grim replies, "Would that I could bear thy cross indeed!"

(V.ii.p.201), the lowercase "cross" signifying its use in the sacrificial sense. Comments of the murderous knights add to the identification of Christ and Becket. De Brito reacts almost incredulously to what he considers the arrogance of the Archbishop: "How the good priest gods himself! / He is not yet ascended to the Father" (V.iii.p.209), and when Becket is slain and a storm bursts, De Morville asks fearfully, "Will the earth gape and swallow us?" (V.iii.p.213), recalling the earthquake at Christ's crucifixion.

There are many passages which relate Becket to a close follower of Christ, but among those in which he himself uses the words of Jesus are the following. When he is pressured to compromise with Henry, his responses are reminiscent of those of Christ in his great temptation: to Roger of York's advice to yield, Becket answers, "Hence, Satan!" (I.iii.p.67), and he notes that the King's promise of reconciliation at Fréteval is qualified with an "if"--"like the Devil's 'if / Thou wilt fall down and worship me'" (III.iii.p.144). Especially near his death does the Archbishop appropriate Christ's words. He says, "Why, John, my kingdom is not of this world" (V.ii.p.177); he commands that the cathedral doors be unlocked to the murderers with the words "Knock, and it shall be open'd" (V.iii.p.205); he describes the hour as belonging to "the power of darkness" (V.iii.p.206). Finally, he greets the

knights with "I am he ye seek" (V.iii.p.207),¹⁹ and dies with Christ's last words on his lips: "Into Thy hands, O Lord--into Thy hands!" (V.iii.p.212).²⁰

Becket's perception of his impending martyrdom is another indication that he sees himself as a type of Christ figure, but again Tennyson doesn't delve into the Archbishop's motives with much insight. Although almost from the beginning Becket is thinking about martyrdom (when he sends back the Great Seal, he says to himself, "I may come to martyrdom. / I am martyr in myself already" [I.i.p.38]), his initial reaction is not to hasten his death, but to escape, which he does by fleeing to France. He eventually becomes convinced that he must not run away again, and furthermore that his early vision of God striking him down was a prophecy of his unavoidable death at the hands of assassins. He tells John and Grim, as they attempt to protect him,

¹⁹See John 18:5.

²⁰Louis Grünert, Tennyson's Drama "Becket": Eine Quellenuntersuchung, Diss. Leipzig 1913 (Weimar, 1913), p. 28, points out the debt of the wording "the power of darkness" to a statement of Christ at the time of his arrest: ". . . but this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). Concerning the line "Into thy hands," Grünert finds this quotation in only one source, William Fitzstephen's biography of Becket, and doubts its historical reliability, proposing that Tennyson used the passage because it supported the identification of Becket and Christ (pp. 117-18).

What matters murder'd here, or murder'd there?
 And yet my dream foretold my martyrdom
 In mine own church. It is God's will. Go on.
 Nay, drag me not. We must not seem to fly.
 (V.ii.p.202)

To his followers it appears that he is wanting to die, and the wise John tells him, "He loses half the meed of martyrdom / Who will be martyr when he might escape" (V.ii.p.186) and "We must not force the crown of Martyrdom" (V.iii.p.203). Unfortunately for the drama's subjective impact, the important issue of dying for spiritual glory is never raised, except in the sarcastic taunts of the knights. It cannot really be said whether Becket acts out of delusions of divine grandeur or of sincere belief in God's will for him.

Tennyson's indefinite feelings about Becket also hinder somewhat the function of the most obvious symbol in the play, the cross. One of the crosses, which Eleanor gives to Henry, then Henry to Rosamund, serves as a plot device, for Eleanor's discovery of the crucifix around Rosamund's neck confirms her suspicions of Henry's secret affair and solidifies her resolve to do away with her rival. The other crosses in the drama are those belonging to ecclesiastical figures, notably Becket, as symbols of their offices. The problem of symbolic interpretation lies in relating these two functions. Otten sees Eleanor's crucifix as merely a plot convention, with perhaps a "veiled ironic reference to Becket," but contends that Tennyson makes

little use of it as a symbol.²¹ Mrs. Rehak, on the other hand, asserts that the cross, as it is exchanged and used in Becket, "comes to involve the sentiments of each [character] about love and value, contrasting all with its own meaning." She notes that even the clergy often misuse it, thus symbolizing the corruption of church attitudes.²² Mrs. Rehak's interpretation is convincing, but it would be even more so if Tennyson's attitude toward Becket were clearer. If the poet is indeed criticizing the Archbishop early in the play when he carries the cross as protection against Henry and struggles over it with Foliot, then how is one to read the function of Becket's cross as he is murdered? Is Becket here presented as dying a true martyr's death, or is he further presuming to play the part of the Messiah?

Without having to deal with these sorts of questions, which only the poet could answer by being more definite in his portrayal of Becket, one may nevertheless suggest another symbolic function of the cross which links its relation to both the Eleanor-Rosamund subplot and the main Henry-Becket conflict. This interpretation requires for balance some attention to another symbol in Becket, the Great Seal of the Chancellor. The seal signifies the

²¹Otten, p. 101.

²²Rehak, p. 56.

harmonious union of Becket and Henry, while the cross symbolizes the rift between them; as Becket becomes convinced that he is "the man, and all the more the man" to carry the Canterbury Cross, he realizes that he must return to Henry the emblem of their secular partnership. Thus the seal and the cross represent the State-Church clash of the drama, and Becket's impassioned apostrophe to the Great Seal captures better than any other passage in the play the agony of Becket's decision to part with his King and friend.

Both the seal and the cross are gifts of Henry, but while the former binds the King and Becket, the latter separates them. It is really Henry, rather than Becket, who becomes the main interest in relation to the symbol of the cross, for in both the main plot and the subplot Henry's manipulation of the cross for his own purposes is met with tragic, ironic defeat. The King's calculated plan to install Becket as Archbishop and thus to subdue the Church goes all awry when Becket no longer sides with the Crown. Henry's misuse of Eleanor's crucifix serves not to protect his and Rosamund's secret, but instead to shatter it and lead to the death of Becket, Henry's ally in protecting Rosamund. The various abuses of Eleanor's cross--Henry falsely swears on it his love for the Queen, he gives it to Rosamund as a token of his love, he dashes it down irreverently when Eleanor shows it to him after taking it from Rosamund--mirror Henry's profounder mishandling of the

Church. As both of Henry's plans fail, it is ironically fitting that the cross should be the tool that proves their downfall. Eleanor's discovery of Rosamund's crucifix comes just at the point when the Queen is thinking of letting her go free, but her rage builds instead so that she must be stayed by Becket from plunging a dagger into Rosamund's breast. Consequently, Eleanor plots revenge on the Archbishop. In an important sense, then, the thing that comes between Becket and Henry is a cross--Eleanor's crucifix as well as the symbol of Canterbury.

Tennyson's Becket, though it was his most popular stage play and is today the most often admired of all his dramas, is nevertheless a disappointment. While there are many fine things about the play, including the inherent appeal of the famous historical story, Becket is weakest where it needs to be strongest--in the author's attitude toward his hero. This play has all the artistic devices of symbolism, imagery, and allusion which enhance Queen Mary and Harold, but because in Becket these elements often have nothing firm to hold onto, they cannot provide as much support for the work as they should. Queen Mary, something of a diamond in the rough, has a basic solidity which the discerning eye can appreciate; Becket, in contrast, is more like an attractively cut and polished gem, drastically devalued by an unmistakable flaw at its center.

CHAPTER V

THE FALCON AND THE CUP--"LOVE

. . . OUTVALUES ALL"

Following his three long chronicle plays, Tennyson turned to composition of two much shorter dramas, one set in thirteenth-century Italy and the other in ancient Galatia. Because Tennyson printed the two plays together in one volume and because they are his only dramas without English settings, it is appropriate that they be discussed in one chapter. Since the stories probably are not as familiar or accessible as those of the historical dramas, it also is fitting that the plots of the plays be summarized briefly (as will also be done with the two final plays).

The Falcon, based on a tale from Boccaccio's Decameron, is the story of Count Federigo, an Italian noble who has impoverished himself by giving expensive gifts to the widowed Lady Giovanna, whom he has loved patiently from young manhood. One day the Lady comes to his humble cottage to ask, on behalf of her grievously ill son, for the Count's most prized possession, a falcon. Before she can summon courage to make her plea, however, Federigo, who has no food, privately orders the bird killed so that a meal might be served to the Lady. When Giovanna learns what a sacrifice the Count has made, she is won by his devotion and dares to front the family feud that has kept her from

responding to his love. Together they pledge to reconcile families and to heal her son.

Love also is the victorious moving force in The Cup, but there is no happy ending to this story taken from Plutarch. Synorix, driven from his tetrarchy of Galatia three years previously, returns as part of a Roman army to exact tribute from the province. However, Synorix also hopes to seduce Camma, wife of the new tetrarch, Sinnatus, and eventually regain control of Galatia. When he tricks Camma into meeting him and then Sinnatus comes to her rescue, Synorix kills Sinnatus, and Camma flees for refuge to the temple of Artemis, where she soon becomes a priestess. The second act, set six months later, opens with Camma's decision to marry Synorix, who is being crowned king of the region. Using the cup which Synorix gave her at the play's beginning, Camma poisons with the marriage wine both herself and Synorix, thus avenging the death of Sinnatus and going triumphantly to meet him.

Although there are some points of kinship between the two plays, including the importance of the concept of love, in other respects The Falcon and The Cup provide marked contrasts. One general difference is that The Falcon is probably Tennyson's weakest dramatic effort, while The Cup, though its overall significance ranks below that of the historical trilogy, is one of his best. A second contrast, particularly of interest to this study, concerns the

relevance of the plays to the national themes which dominate the dramas as a group. The Falcon has less topical application than any of the works; its theme is moral and universal, but it seems not to have been developed by Tennyson in response to the specific needs of his century, as were his other plays. Count Federigo, moreover, is not beset with the kinds of personal shortcomings--the failure to achieve self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control--which stir the conflicts of the other dramas, and therefore is less interesting as a character. On the other hand, The Cup, despite its exotic setting, is linked indirectly to the concerns of Tennyson's English plays. In *Sinnatus* and *Camma* there is a strong patriotic resistance to foreign domination, and in the antagonist *Synorix* is found evidence of lack of the Tennysonian virtues of wisdom. These elements cause The Cup to speak to the Laureate's time almost as clearly as his English histories.

The Falcon

In most ways Tennyson's fourth play proved to be a polar opposite of the three historical dramas: The Falcon is a one-act piece whose performance takes only about one-half hour; it is of course not based on fact; it makes no pretensions to great national themes; and its tendency is comic rather than tragic. The play, Tennyson's most obvious effort to satisfy popular theatrical taste, exhibits a

general weakness which indicates clearly that the Laureate's dramatic skills were far more suited to the weightier material of the chronicles, despite the flaws of those works.

The problem with The Falcon is not that the poet fails in his attempt to create a light, amusing, "romantic little idyll,"¹ or even that that type of work is necessarily unworthy of praise as good literature. Although it is true that the subject matter has no great appeal, it is not really adequate from a critical standpoint to charge that the play fails because it is too light, "too thin and bizarre to be amusing or even interesting."² Indeed, there are passages in the play which perhaps justify other critics' comments that The Falcon is "exquisitely written,"³ "graceful,"⁴ and "delicate and modestly inventive."⁵

¹Cornelia Geetrui Japikse, The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson ([1926]; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 122. This critic adds (p. 123) that the play gives her artistic joy when regarded as a sort of delicate masque.

²Morton Luce, A Handbook to the Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (London, 1908), p. 410. See similar comments by the anonymous reviewer in The Spectator, 8 March 1884, p. 317; J. Cuming Walters, Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist (London, 1893), p. 167; and Arthur Waugh, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Study of His Life and Work, 3rd. ed. (London, 1894), p. 192.

³William Archer, The Theatrical 'World' for 1893 (1894; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 43.

⁴Stephen Gwynn, Tennyson: A Critical Study (London, 1899), p. 185.

⁵Peter Thomson, "Tennyson's Plays and Their Production," in Tennyson, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1973), p. 250.

Nor is the play's weakness due, as is the case with Becket, to the lack of a strong, viable theme. In fact, the best feature of The Falcon is the gradual evolution of Tennyson's statement on the relative value of material and spiritual possessions; the play's thematic interest centers on the reassessment of various physical symbols of worth, climaxing in Count Federigo's observation, "It should be love that thus outvalues all" (p. 249).⁶ A substantial portion of this part of the chapter will treat the handling of this theme and the symbols which serve it.

The greatest problem with The Falcon, then, lies not in Tennyson's light material or his theme, but in an inconsistency of tone. The playwright fails to blend artistically the nobly romantic elements of the play with the persistent comic touches, and the result is some confusion as to what Tennyson is trying to achieve with his humor. Apparently the poet intends it to temper the sentimentality toward which the tale naturally leans, but the comedy often occurs at such times that it tends to mock the values which the play otherwise sets forth. As a result, the main character of Federigo must be taken somewhat ambiguously, just as was necessary with Becket; the magnanimous Count, badgered by his loquacious nurse Elisabetta and his witty

⁶Citations of the play are to the Eversley Edition, IX.

foster-brother Filippo, is not only made more human by the comedy, but he also is occasionally made to look foolish. One critic expresses his dissatisfaction with the humorous elements, stating that the two comic roles

lower the poetical tone of the piece, and when it is remembered that the chief scene represents Lady Giovanna dining on Count Federigo's favourite bird, it will be conceived that the piece appealed more to the mirth than to the sympathy of an audience.⁷

Following a consideration of the theme of The Falcon, this problem of tone will be discussed further, and it will be shown that the flaw affects one's total response to the play, including its explicit moral.

The theme of The Falcon, which is the transcendent worth of sacrificial love, is developed quite skillfully

⁷Walters, p. 184. It should be noted, by way of qualification, that the stage directions of the printed play do not actually mention Giovanna eating the bird, and when she rises from the table it is unclear whether she has tasted anything besides the salad:

Lady Giovanna (rising slowly). I can eat no more!
Count. You have but trifled with our homely salad,
 But dallied with a single lettuce-leaf;
 Not eaten anything.

(p. 245)

MS evidence from Harvard Notebook 64 is interesting but inconclusive on this point. For some reason the poet crossed out stage directions of Giovanna beginning to eat, along with her question, "What breed of pullets hath these crooked claws?" and Filippo's reply that the bird's parents were a hawk and a hen. The best explanation is that Tennyson found the idea of actual consumption of the beloved fowl too grotesque and therefore omitted it. By doing so, he doubled the irony of Federigo's sacrifice, since Giovanna does not eat the priceless meal.

by Tennyson, for he communicates the idea not only by Federigo's explicit statement, but also by contrasting and balancing various paired elements in the play. From an overview, the entire action of the play is ironic; Federigo seemingly moves toward abject poverty, while in a higher sense he actually enriches himself. In the end, of course, he wins both spiritual and material bounty when his love is returned by the wealthy Lady Giovanna. Because of the truth of his belief that "love . . . outvalues all," Federigo is able to sacrifice all his worldly possessions in a sincere, generous demonstration that conquers Giovanna's heart and her fear of the family feud that has separated her from her admirer.

One of the points of comparison Tennyson uses in drawing the theme of values is the general idea of Federigo's poverty contrasted with Giovanna's affluence. Since the Count sold his palace to buy Giovanna a diamond necklace, which he presented anonymously, he lives in a humble cottage near her magnificent palace. When the Lady comes calling, the reciprocal courtesy of host and guest places material destitution in proper perspective. She says, "[W]elcome turns a cottage to a palace" (p. 227), and he replies,

Lady, you bring your light into my cottage
 Who never deign'd to shine into my palace.
 My palace wanting you was but a cottage;
 My cottage, while you grace it, is a palace.
 (p. 228)

Giovanna answers with praise for Federigo's nobility of character: "In cottage or in palace, being still / Beyond your fortunes, you are still the king / Of courtesy and liberality" (p. 228). Later the same general theme is struck again when Giovanna quotes the saying, "'Better a man without riches, than riches without a man'" (p. 249), and when, fearing the death of her son, she cries,

[M]ore blessed were the rags
Of some pale beggar-woman seeking alms
For her sick son, if he were like to live,
Than all my childless wealth, if mine must die.
(p. 252)

With this lament Lady Giovanna asserts, as do all the actions and words of Federigo throughout the play, that material opulence apart from human love is worthless.

In the paradoxical value system that Tennyson constructs in The Falcon, an important pair of contrasted symbols are the diamond necklace in Giovanna's possession and the withered wreath hanging on Federigo's wall. Both of the objects represent the Count's love for Giovanna, the jewelry purchased and given at the cost of his estate, the chaplet woven for her ten years previously by his own hand. Yet, while from a purely material point of view the diamonds are infinitely more valuable than the wreath of dead flowers, Federigo clings to the latter just as tenaciously as he offers the necklace willingly.

The great sentimental value of the wreath is due to the fact that when long ago he placed it on her brow she

flushed with a color, he says, "which has colour'd all my life" (p. 231). The memory of that response, and the lingering hope it engenders in his heart, has made the chaplet dear to him, despite the fact that he found his gift in the grass and mistakenly believed the young beauty had discarded it. When the widowed Giovanna visits his cottage in the course of the play, the Count tells her, "That wither'd wreath is of more worth to me / Than all the blossom, all the leaf of this / New-wakening year" (p. 230). The song that he sings about the garland also testifies to the value it has accumulated through time:

'Dead mountain flowers, dead mountain flowers,
 Dearer than when you made your mountain gay,
 Sweeter than any violet of to-day,
 Richer than all the wide world-wealth of May,
 To me, tho' all your bloom had died away,
 You bloom again, dead mountain-meadow flowers.'
 (p. 236)

Still another facet of the symbolic value of the wreath is that it bears the blood-stains of the Count, who carried it with him into battle as a token of his abiding love for Giovanna.

Both the wreath, because it carries traces of his blood, and the necklace, because its purchase has impoverished him, suggest the truly sacrificial nature of Federigo's devotion. Through them he expresses a willingness to give his very life for the sake of Giovanna. The monetary worth of the two objects is of no concern to this romantic hero; in fact, when he learns that Giovanna has

not worn the diamonds because that would seem to signify acceptance of his love, he says, "The wreath / That once you wore outvalues twentyfold / The diamonds that you never deign'd to wear" (p. 249). Only when the Lady finally decides to break with her family and return Federigo's love do the diamonds regain their worth. The Count explains the reassessment: "These diamonds are both yours and mine-- have won / Their value again--beyond all markets--there / I lay them for the first time round your neck" (p. 253). The chaplet too is seen in a new light, as an emblem of the reconciliation Federigo pledges for the feuding houses; he strips away the leaves stained by battle and once again places the crown of peace on the head of his beloved.

One of the manuscripts of the play, Harvard Notebook 64, shows that Tennyson considered entitling the work The Falcon and the Diamond Necklace. His shortening of the title, however, was a wise decision both for the virtue of brevity and for the greater importance of the falcon in the story.⁸ Both plot and theme hinge on Federigo's sacrifice of his pet, his dearest possession and the most significant symbol in the play.

The element against which the playwright weighs the Count's love for his falcon is his surpassing love for

⁸The necklace, as well as the wreath, is one of several subordinate elements which Tennyson added to Boccaccio's tale.

Lady Giovanna, the devotion that is the pinnacle of Federigo's hierarchy of values. In the Count's first speech Tennyson accomplishes the difficult task of establishing Federigo's affection for the bird while hinting that only Giovanna could cause him to part with his pet. In response to news that the Lady has returned to her castle after a long absence, he says:

Hear that, my bird! Art thou not jealous of her?
 My princess of the cloud, my plumed purveyor,
 My far-eyed queen of the winds--thou that canst soar
 Beyond the morning lark, and howsoe'er
 The quarry wind and wheel, swoop down upon him
 Eagle-like, lightning-like--strike, make his feathers
 Glance in mid heaven.

.
 Giovanna here! Ay, ruffle thyself--be jealous!
 Thou should'st be jealous of her. Tho' I bred thee
 The full-train'd marvel of all falconry,
 And love thee and thou me, yet if Giovanna
 Be here again--No, no! Buss me, my bird!
 The stately widow has no heart for me.⁹

(pp. 217-18)

⁹In Harvard Notebook 64 this passage is somewhat different, the varying lines reading as follows:
 My wing'd sky-hound, my bright-eyed Prince of the air,
 My hook-nosed King of the wind.

.

Yet if Giovanna
 Should ask me for thee, thou wouldst have to go
 Even at a wink. No, no: buss me, my bird.
 The stately widow loves nor thee nor me.
 She wants thee not, thou wilt not have to go.

The first difference, the masculine references to the falcon, are changed to feminine by Tennyson, along with all such references in the play, in Notebook 65, which was the prompt-copy for the 1879 performance. Apparently the dramatist concluded that a more appropriate rivalry for the Count's affections would be served by a female bird. However, the second difference, the explicit foreshadowing of the sacrifice of the falcon, is retained in the prompt-copy MS. Perhaps the actual staging of the play convinced Tennyson, wisely, that he could and should be more subtle in this regard, as reflected in the published version.

Just as Federigo enthrones his pet with the titles of royalty, Tennyson similarly uses the speech of the Count and Elisabetta to exalt Lady Giovanna, yet with an extra dimension of quasi-religious adoration which reflects the ultimate esteem in which she is held by Federigo. Like Queen Mary, Giovanna becomes a sort of Virgin Mary figure, though with this heroine the playwright limits the allusion's significance to the Count's veneration of his Lady. One indication of this identification is the term "Madonna" by which she is often called; although this was a familiar form of address for Italian women of the time, on one occasion the religious connotation is consciously evoked: Elisabetta, thrilled by the Lady's visit, says, " . . . and bless your sweet face, you look as beautiful this morning as the very Madonna her own self" (p. 225). A more convincing occurrence of religious allusion is found in Federigo's revelation that in battle he wore the withered wreath around his neck as "a blessed rosary" (p. 243). In addition to these testimonials to the Lady's revered status is Federigo's emphasis on the spatial elevation of Giovanna's castle; just as he prizes his falcon's ability to mount high into the sky, he seems to assign a transcendent majesty to Giovanna with his comment, "We lie too deep down in the shadow here. / Your ladyship lives higher in the sun" (p. 241).

The Count's values are quickly put to the test when Giovanna comes unannounced to share a meal with him, but apparently without hesitation he orders Filippo to prepare the falcon, the only meat he can offer the Lady. Because the reader knows what Federigo does not--that Giovanna has come to ask for the falcon for her ill son--and what Giovanna does not--that Federigo has killed the bird for her meal--their dialogue is filled with irony. Particularly poignant are comments about the falcon's worth, for they emphasize how meaningful a gesture Federigo has made. In giving up his falcon, the Count in a sense has given up his own life, for the bird is not only the last thing of real value that he possesses, but also his only means of sustenance. Giovanna herself suspects that "He hath become so beggar'd, that his falcon / Ev'n wins his dinner for him in the field" (p. 226). Federigo tells her that he once refused a hundred gold pieces in exchange for the bird because he "had no heart to part with her for money" (p. 230).

While he cannot be moved by money, it is already clear to the audience that Federigo has been moved by love, even to the point of becoming a complete pauper; and when he finally tells Giovanna what has become of the falcon--"She had to die for it--she died for you" (p. 252)--the Lady is won by the magnificence of his sacrifice. Just as the cottage, the diamonds, and the wreath all acquire new value because of their relationship to Giovanna, so even

the beloved falcon is reappraised by Federigo as a result of the winning of the Lady's love. He says, "Why then the dying of my noble bird / Hath served me better than her living" (p. 253). Not only does the unselfish offering of the Count result in a loving, fulfilling union, but it also brings the hope of peace and reconciliation of the two houses and healing of Giovanna's son. With Federigo's comment that even the dead garland seems ready to bloom, Tennyson adds a sort of resurrection to the list of transformations achieved by the sacrifice, thus casting the story as a whole in the ancient archetypal mold.

Although this reading of the play makes its theme appear less subtle than it actually is, many readers would doubtless find Tennyson too overtly didactic in The Falcon. It seems, however, that explicitness is not so much a problem of the play as is the artistic failure of Tennyson's humor. Most of the comedy in The Falcon is enjoyed at the expense of the hero; and since Federigo embodies the virtues the play expounds, the dramatist thus frustrates a consistent moral response to his work. Discussion of various examples of humor will illustrate this tonal ambiguity.

One aspect of the problem is Federigo's attitude toward himself. The Count is definitely a good-natured man who takes the teasing of Filippo and the nagging of Elisabetta with equanimity, and on occasion he also engages in the wordplay that lightens the drama. For example, when

the nurse says her tablecloth will be as white as the snow on the mountaintop, he says, "And yet to speak white truth, my good old mother, / I have seen it like the snow on the moraine" (p. 237), and when he cannot get Filippo to stop talking about a dish of prunes, he puns, "Ay, prune our company of thine own and go!" (p. 246).

Even in these two illustrations, however, it is difficult to detect much of a smile on the Count's face. On the whole he is quite earnest about his actions in the play, never laughing at himself. The one reference to Federigo's laughter was deleted from the manuscript (Harvard Notebook 64); the cancelled stage direction occurs in connection with a significant passage, when the Count interrupts and completes Elisabetta's thought that the Lady knows who sent the diamonds because there is no other such "Madman anywhere. / Speak freely, tho' to call a madman mad / Will hardly help to make him sane again" (p. 220). Had Tennyson let Federigo laugh at himself here and elsewhere, the Count would have appeared to take himself less seriously and the theme could have shone through the play's then uniformly light, fantastic atmosphere as an idealistic moral. As it stands, the Count is too solemn, his insanity in fact becomes a possibility, and The Falcon therefore on one hand tends toward a realism which jars with most of the comedy and sets the play's theme somewhat adrift.

In contrast to Federigo's sobriety toward his course is the ridicule of it by the two servants. Their gentle mockery of the Count, especially that of the clever Filippo, invites a similar reaction from the reader and thus complicates one's response to the play's moral. Many examples of their humor could be cited, but among the most interesting, though not the most amusing, are two passages in which Tennyson utilizes bird metaphors, obviously drawing on Federigo's attachment to his falcon. When Elisabetta explains to the Count why she is darning, she says, "We cannot flaunt it in new feathers now: / Nay, if we will buy diamond necklaces / To please our lady, we must darn, my lord" (p. 218). The source of their poverty also is the subject of Filippo's sarcastic trope:

Here has our master been a-glorying and a-velveting
and a-silking himself, and a-peacocking and a-spread-
ing to catch her eye for a dozen year, till he
hasn't an eye left in his own tail to flourish
among the peahens, and all along o' you, Monna
Giovanna, all along o' you!

(p. 221)

On the question of Tennyson's attitude toward Federigo, even more confusing than the jibes of Elisabetta and Filippo are the more physical elements of humor that the playwright invents, again at the Count's expense, because in these examples it seems that Tennyson himself, not his characters, is making fun of the hero. The examples occur during the hurried preparation for the meal to be served Giovanna. The audience already suspects that the falcon has

been sacrificed, but then even more losses begin to beset the Count, humorously intensifying his poverty and consequently cheapening the emotional impact of the offering of his pet. While Federigo entertains the increasingly distraught Lady with the history of the withered wreath, Filippo interrupts him with news that in his haste he has stepped on and broken their last unsold silver spoon. Then, almost as soon as the Count returns to Giovanna, Elisabetta intrudes with more bad news: the valuable china bowl, never used for fear of breakage, has indeed been broken.

Elisabetta's interruption is particularly amusing, but it, more than any other element of the play, also makes the Count appear quite foolish. Entering while Federigo is fervently singing to Giovanna the poignant refrain, "Dead mountain flowers!" the nurse must speak three times, in increasing volume, before she gains his attention. The spectacle of a frantic old nurse screaming louder and louder at an oblivious, passionately crooning Don Quixote seems more a scenario for a farce than a noble romance. The vignette illustrates succinctly the comic problem of The Falcon.

Because the elevated theme of the play is consonant with the kind of values expounded in Tennyson's total body of work, there is no doubt that the poet means his moral of the worth of sacrificial love to be taken just as seriously as it is by his hero. However, when he tries to use comedy

to humanize his incurably idealistic Count Federigo and to make his didacticism more palatable, he falls instead into a tonal no-man's-land between diverting amusement and satiric mockery. Even if Tennyson had succeeded artistically in blending low humor and high purpose, his victory would have been a modest one; for while the poet's moral is appealing in the abstract, the plot that supports it is at best quaint. How relatively fortunate, then, that the Laureate did not expend more energy--or lines--on this minor piece, which, of all his dramas, has the least to say to his century or this.

The Cup

When Henry Irving's lavish production of Tennyson's The Cup hit the London stage in 1881, one year after The Falcon, an anonymous reviewer responded with effusive praise for the play, lauding the "perfect adequacy of the thought, and of the expression of the thought, to the grandeur of the situations and of the scenes" and then concluding, "We had thought it nearly impossible that tragedy should survive in England, that dramatic art, to succeed, must consent to be Philistine and bourgeois; but The Cup has given us hope."¹⁰ Although the two-act play is too short--it is only about fifty per cent longer than The Falcon--to offer much more

¹⁰The Spectator, 15 Jan. 1881, pp. 81, 82.

than a "hope," a taste of dramatic power, the critic's general assessment is perhaps not too extravagant. With The Cup Tennyson comes closer to achieving artistically what he intends to do than in any other of his plays, and it is only regrettable that his relative success is achieved in a work whose scope is limited and whose content is surely not as dear to the Laureate's heart as that of his chronicles.

The brevity of the play keeps it from being a major work, to be sure, but other effects of the conciseness are debatable. One critic, for example, argues that Tennyson missed the psychological moment of the drama by not dealing with Camma's developing determination upon revenge; nothing is shown between the murder of her husband Sinnatus and her decision to kill Synorix with the poisoned marriage-cup.¹¹ On the other hand, another reviewer contends that although there is only the barest outline of tragedy, "the few strokes in which that outline is drawn are so vivid and powerful, that the effect of the whole is thoroughly impressive and satisfying to the imagination of the reader."¹²

¹¹Archer, p. 43.

¹²The Spectator, 8 March 1884, p. 316. For other critical praise of the economical, incisive writing, see Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 457; and Waugh, p. 199.

Both arguments have merit. With the first critic, one could wish that the drama were one act longer, with the middle act tracing Camma's grief and growing vengeance as well as Synorix's new rise to power and popularity in Galatia. As the second reader notes, however, these elements are not really missing from the play as it stands; all motives and plot developments are clearly sketched, leaving one's attention to concentrate on the final climactic moments of the drama. The action is swift, uncomplicated, and terrifying, providing a perfectly controlled unity; indeed, for overall coherence The Cup is the best of all the Tennyson plays.

In addition to its length, perhaps another factor that marks The Cup as one of Tennyson's minor works is the subject matter. Among the plays at least, The Cup joins The Falcon as the only works separated from the Laureate's concern with material explicitly English, to which he gave his most intense and prolonged effort. However, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, The Cup is quite easily linked, though indirectly, to the themes of the plays as a group. One connection is the universally applicable patriotism seen in *Sinnatus* and particularly Camma; the sentiments which they express on personal loyalty and national independence from outside powers are also those of Tennyson's black-blooded Englishmen of the histories. It is not unreasonable even to propose that the Laureate, in writing a

play with a monolithic "Rome" as lurking, potential villain, was once more casting to his audience words of caution concerning the contemporary ecclesiastical threat of Roman Catholicism.

Rome, however, whether Empire or Church, is not the real target of criticism in The Cup. Tennyson's primary thematic focus is on the character of Synorix, a man who thinks himself wise but is ironically foiled in playing the very game at which he believes himself a master. Synorix, flawed by lack of self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control, precipitates the conflict of the drama and thereby brings ruin upon himself, just as do many of Tennyson's main characters. Thus it may be said that while the plot and setting of The Cup may be different, the Laureate's goal is very much like that of his strictly English dramas.

Although the play is a revenge tragedy, Tennyson avoids most of the brutal aspects of that genre by qualifying the merely bloodthirsty character of vengeance. One of the tempering qualities of Camma's revenge is that it is thorough poetic justice; the ironic suitability of Synorix's fate is summed up in Camma's double-edged comment--actually the dominant theme of the play--as she offers him the marriage wine: "Synorix should drink from his own cup" (II. p.245).¹³ The second qualifying facet of the revenge is

¹³Citations are to the Eversley Edition, VII.

that in Camma it is not mechanically urged on by tradition or associates. Instead, it is an act with significant social purpose as well as the customary personal motivation. This discussion of The Cup, then, will center on these important elements: the nature of Synorix as revealed and supported by various motifs and image patterns in the play, and the contrasting nature of Camma and her irony-filled act of vengeance.

Of the flaws of Synorix, the most obvious ones are those of excess; the villain of The Cup lacks control over his sexual passions, his drive for power, and his pride. These traits are clearly identified when the priestess Phoebe, describing Synorix's coronation, cries, "Hot blood, ambition, pride / So bloat and redden his face-- . . . / . . . O bestial!" (II.p.239). While each of these traits is natural and human, in all of them Synorix goes beyond the acceptable bounds of wise conduct, and because of his excesses he is overthrown in the most ironic way possible.

The strongest motive in Synorix is lust. Driven from Galatia three years previously "For some unprincely violence to a woman" (I.i.p.203), he returns under a compulsion to take Camma, of whom he says, "I never felt such passion for a woman" (I.i.p.198). So intense is his desire for her that he even believes she could forever satisfy his lusts, and the thought stuns him, foreshadowing his doom:

A woman I could live and die for. What!
 Die for a woman, what new faith is this?
 I am not mad, not sick, not old enough
 To doat on one alone. Yes, mad for her,
 Camma the stately, Camma the great-hearted,
 So mad, I fear some strange and evil chance
 Coming upon me, for by the Gods I seem
 Strange to myself.

(I.iii.p.227)

Tennyson's subtlest expression of Synorix's lascivious attitude toward women is the use of hunting metaphors in his dialogue. To Synorix, Camma is little more than the object of a thrilling chase, a new prize in a contest which he has never lost. He maps his strategy by planning "No rushing on the game--the net,--the net" (I.i.p.204) and determines, "I must lure my game into the camp" (I.iii.p.227).¹⁴ When he sees Camma approaching, he says, "See, see, my white bird stepping toward the snare" (I.iii.p.225). Since the figurative pattern already has been suggested by the time Synorix meets Sinnatus, when he asks to join the tetrarch's literal hunt the reader appreciates the ironic dimension of "I am a life-long lover of the chase" (I.i.p.205). Later, when the two men are debating whose arrow brought down the stag,

¹⁴That Tennyson consciously developed this pattern of imagery is indicated by the manuscripts of the play. Harvard Loose Papers 33 has the first occurrence of the image, "no rushing the game," added on a facing page of the MS. A later MS, Harvard Notebook 47, has the line, "But I must lure her to the Roman camp," altered to read "And I must lure my game into the camp." The same MS also has another one-word revision involving the imagery, when Synorix's "I need not fear the crowd that followed me" is changed to ". . . that hunted me."

Synorix delivers a telling aside: "And I may strike your game when you are gone" (I.ii.p.208).

The hunting metaphors fall naturally and unobtrusively into the material of the story because of the actual deer hunt of Sinnatus. In addition, although Hallam Tennyson only indicates that the goddess Artemis in the play is supposed to be the goddess of Nature,¹⁵ it seems certain that Tennyson would also have been aware of the tradition of Artemis' related role as the virgin huntress. Since Camma becomes a priestess of Artemis, it is ironically fitting that the goddess of the hunt, who blesses the marriage wish of Camma, is a sort of agent in the death of Synorix, the proud hunter of women. The irony is only one aspect of Synorix's being forced to "drink from his own cup."

Another interesting irony in the fall of Synorix involves both his lust and his ambition; for, despite his remarkable caution in pursuit of these desires, he apparently goes one step too far. When he sets out with Sinnatus' hunting party, he reveals his wariness but also unwittingly foreshadows his doom: "Slowly but surely--till I see my way. / It is the one step in the dark beyond / Our expectation, that amazes us" (I.i.p.206). Then, in a soliloquy in which his two obsessions are fused into one ambition, Synorix

¹⁵See the letter of Tennyson's consulting archaeologist, Sir Charles Newton, in Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1898), II, 257.

shows himself to be a sensualist and a cunning gambler. He begins in reference to Sinnatus, whom he has just killed:

So end all passions. Then what use in passions?
 To warm the cold bounds of our dying life
 And, lest we freeze in mortal apathy,
 Employ us, heat us, quicken us, help us, keep us
 From seeing all too near that urn, those ashes
 Which all must be. Well used, they serve us well.
 I heard a saying in Egypt, that ambition
 Is like the sea wave, which the more you drink,
 The more you thirst--yea--drink too much, as men
 Have done on rafts of wrecks--it drives you mad.
 I will be no such wreck, am no such gamester
 As, having won the stake, would dare the chance
 Of double, or losing all. The Roman Senate,
 For I have always play'd into their hands,
 Means me the crown. And Camma for my bride--
 The people love her--if I win her love,
 They too will cleave to me, as one with her.
 There then I rest, Rome's tributary king.

(I.iii.pp.229-30)

The political ambitions of Synorix are in his grasp in the second act--he has won the crown--but because he does not realize that in effect he is trying to double the stakes by winning Camma too, he loses all. His lack of self-control causes him to go against not only his own precautions, but also the advice of the Roman general, Antonius. Early in the play Antonius, seeing Synorix's lechery, warns him that he may be foiled if he follows "Not the dry light of Rome's straight-going policy, / But the fool-fire of love or lust" (I.i.p.203). This advice, unheeded, portends the tragedy.

The chief tool of Synorix in capturing his prey, both female and political, is a net of deception and lies. Using the cup as a lure, he insinuates his way into Camma's

confidence¹⁶ by appearing to be a Galatian patriot seeking to save Sinnatus from Roman tortures, while to Rome he feigns an unshakable loyalty. Both faces are untrue, however. His motive with Camma is to win her thanks while at the same time secretly provoking Sinnatus into punishable treason against Rome and thus removing his rival for Camma's affection. Synorix's loyalty to Rome, of course, is only deep enough to serve his own drive for political power. While he asserts repeatedly, "I am most true to Rome" (I.i.p.203), he actually is as false to Rome as he is to Camma; he misrepresents Antonius' army as brutally savage, lying to Camma of Rome's intentions in dealing with Sinnatus. Again, it is ironically fitting that the fall of Synorix is achieved with the same kind of treachery which has been the basis of his evil success. When Camma lures him to the marriage wine, she causes him to drink both literally and figuratively from his own cup of deception, a superbly weighted symbol.

Pride, the third excessive trait of Synorix, actually encompasses the other two, lust and ambition, as well. Pride in his ability to manipulate Rome ("I have always

¹⁶On two occasions the devious Synorix is characterized by the metaphor of a worm. The first comes from the villain himself, when he tells Antonius that the cup will provide entry to the house of Sinnatus and that once he is there he will "worm thro' all their windings" (I.i.p.200) in order to catch Sinnatus in rebellious acts. The second occurrence is just as Synorix dies, when Camma says, "[P]oor worm, crawl down thine own black hole / To the lowest Hell" (II.p.251).

play'd into their hands") is exceeded only by his arrogance concerning women. Tennyson lets Antonius express disgust with Synorix in the aside, "I hate the man! / What filthy tools our Senate works with!" (I.i.p.203), but the poet also gives the reader ample evidence to react accordingly, especially in the villain's boasts of his sexual triumphs. To Antonius' warning about lust, Synorix answers, "Tut-- fear me not; / I ever had my victories among women" (I.i.p.203). He refers once to "all [his] range of women" (I.i.p.199) and another time, momentarily fearing he has lost Camma because of murdering Sinnatus, muses with incredible self-satisfaction, "Camma--well, well, I never found the woman / I could not force or wheedle to my will. / She will be glad at last to wear my crown" (I.iii.p.230). The excess of pride which encourages him to dare to seek the love of a woman whose husband he has killed, blinds him to the folly of this last step. Thus, when he feels the poison in his veins, he reacts with as much incredulity as terror, stunned by his ironic defeat by a woman: "Monstrous! I that loved her. / . . . / Too late--thought myself wise-- / A woman's dupe" (II.p.251).

Excesses of lust, ambition, and pride are not the only flaws of Synorix, however. As a man and especially as a ruler, he is hampered by a lack of both self-reverence and self-knowledge. These two concepts are closely related in Synorix, for both are governed by his view of the nature of

man. The passage with which Tennyson conveys this central idea is a soliloquy in which Synorix apparently acknowledges the social unattractiveness of his actions but shuns ultimate responsibility for them:

Will she come to me
Now that she knows me Synorix? Not if Sinnatus
Has told her all the truth about me. Well,
I cannot help the mould that I was cast in.
I fling all that upon my fate, my star.
I know that I am genial, I would be
Happy, and make all others happy so
They did not thwart me. . . .

(I.iii.p.225)

The determinist in Synorix causes him to degrade the worth of his own human will, just as the sensualist in him makes him debase others in an attempt to gratify his cravings. Furthermore, by attributing his character to fate, he not only exhibits a lack of self-reverence but also provides a comforting, self-deluding explanation for his vices. The other references to fate in The Cup tend to suggest the conventional idea of destiny or fortune; only Synorix uses the concept as an excuse, as a form of supernatural approbation.¹⁷

¹⁷James Kissane, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1970), p. 151, complains because Tennyson lets Synorix talk of fate but as a playwright instills "no sense of cosmic forces at work, only at best the rusty machinery of inferior revenge tragedy." However, while it is true that Tennyson does not incorporate a supernatural air into the play, he seems to be under no obligation to do so, even if "fate" is a recurrent motif. In fact, the idea of fate is probably more impressive as it is used, as a form of evasive rationalization in Synorix.

Once again Tennyson creates on the villain's own terms an irony to intensify the fall of Synorix. Among the first lines of the play are these in which Synorix speaks of Camma as his destiny: "She is my fate--else wherefore has my fate / Brought me again to her own city?" (I.i. p.197). When his self-serving prophecy has been fulfilled, but in a tragically inverse manner, Synorix dies with the statement that "the Fates are throned, not we." Yet even here he persists in avoiding his due shame, gaining no self-knowledge by his experience, for he adds immediately, "Not guilty of ourselves" (II.p.251).

Synorix's idea of foreordained character is only one manifestation of his lack of genuine self-knowledge. Another is the fact that he mistakes his lechery and ambition-fed hypocrisy for mere joviality. Sinnatus analyzes perceptively his technique when he says that as tetrarch Synorix "Would clap his honest citizens on the back, / . . . be curious / About the welfare of their babes, their wives, / O ay--their wives--their wives" (I.ii.pp.220-21). Perhaps the most significant example of the villain's flawed self-concept, however, is his tragic miscalculation of how far he can push Camma. To be sure, part of his mistake is in underestimating her, but that misjudgment stems primarily from an inflated concept of his own powers.

The center of the tragedy of The Cup, then, is the personal failings of Synorix. Against this defective

character, moreover, Tennyson sets in contrast the noble, formidable heroine Camma, whom the playwright draws just as skillfully as he does her antagonist. As a worshipper of Artemis, one of whose roles is patroness of chastity, Camma serves as a foil for Synorix in his lewdness; she reacts with disbelief to the idea that wives of her region might have willingly accepted the advances of the former tetrarch:

Do not say so.
I know of no such wives in all Galatia.
There may be courtesans for aught I know
Whose life is one dishonour.

(I.ii.p.213)

In her contrast to the weakness of Synorix, however, the most eloquently expressed quality of Camma is her patriotism. While Synorix craftily and selfishly plays his homeland against the Roman Empire, standing loyal only to his own ambition, Camma epitomizes the independent spirit who resists tyranny at all cost. Answering Synorix's argument to submit to Rome rather than wage a hopeless war, her speech on patriotism resounds with universal, historical appeal:

Sir, I had once
A boy who died a babe; but were he living
And grown to man and Sinnatus will'd it, I
Would set him in the front rank of the fight
With scarce a pang. (Rises.) Sir, if a state submit
At once, she may be blotted out at once
And swallow'd in the conqueror's chronicle.
Whereas in wars of freedom and defence
The glory and grief of battle won or lost
Solders a race together--yea--tho' they fail,
The names of those who fought and fell are like

A bank'd-up fire that flashes out again
 From century to century, and at last
 May lead them on to victory--I hope so--
 Like phantoms of the Gods.

(I.ii.p.212)

This passage is an important one both for its power and for an understanding of the act of vengeance Camma later commits. Although the reader does not actually see Camma in the process of determining upon the murder of Synorix and her suicide, Tennyson's understated handling of the heroine throughout the second act, one of his most effective dramatic achievements, makes her motives clear. As the suspicion builds that her marriage to Synorix is only a pretense for imminent, violent retribution, every comment of Camma becomes doubly meaningful through irony. On the one hand she veils her intentions, from even the sympathetic priestess Phoebe, while on the other she reveals with the same words her motives and means for the coming action.

Perhaps the most significant comment of all suggests that Camma's primary motive is patriotic. In explaining why she will marry Synorix, she says,

We cannot fight imperial Rome,
 But he and I are both Galatian-born,
 And tributary sovereigns, he and I
 Might teach this Rome--from knowledge of our people--
 Where to lay on her tribute--heavily here
 And lightly there. Might I not live for that,
 And drown all poor self-passion in the sense
 Of public good?

(II.p.236)

Although to her hearers she is justifying marriage, in reality she is precisely defining the goal of the murder of

Synorix and her heroic suicide: to teach Rome, through knowledge of the noble Galatian people, to respect her country. That Camma is an example for and of the nation is recognized by the Roman representative Antonius, who tells the dying heroine, "Thou art one / With thine own people, and though a Roman I / Forgive thee, Camma" (II. p.252).

Camma's words also indicate that while the murder is for personal satisfaction as well as for a sign of Galatian integrity, her suicide is essentially a selfless act serving only the latter cause. Indeed, although she hopes to join her beloved Sinnatus and in fact dies calling his name, Camma's instinct for life must first be overcome. Evidence for this reading is provided not only by her stated intention to "drown all poor self-passion in the sense / Of public good," but also by her dying cry: "I will go / To meet him, crown'd! crown'd victor of my will" (II.p.252). As a sign to Rome of the fiercely independent spirit of Galatians, the self-sacrifice of Camma is necessary. Thus in Camma Tennyson presents a sovereign thoroughly possessed, unlike Queen Mary, of self-control and a knowledge of what is required to serve her people best.

Tennyson's artistic success in The Cup is due to a combination of forceful expression of theme, economic rendering of character, and skillful development of symbolism. The theme of love's supremacy is not new, even to Tennyson's

plays, but the poet freshens it by showing that Camma's love for her land and her husband--two forms of pure devotion which Synorix knows nothing about--prove to be the undoing of her worldly-wise foe. A particularly impressive aspect of the Laureate's theme, moreover, is Camma's stirring reiteration of the concept found earlier in Harold: that a patriotic defense of liberty, even in a losing cause, "Solders a race together" and burns as "A bank'd-up fire that flashes out again / From century to century."

The conciseness of the portraits of Camma and Synorix and their part in the rapid action produce genuine dramatic power overall, which the poet matches only occasionally in a few scenes from the historical trilogy. Finally, and perhaps most interesting artistically, the rich symbolic value of the cup imparts significance to both Tennyson's theme and the tragic clash of his main characters. If, because of the desired public impact, Camma is forced to resort to treachery and deception to attain her noble ends, she is only responding in a poetically just and fitting manner to the baser means of Synorix. The result is a brilliantly ironic picture of a man being made to "drink from his own cup."

CHAPTER VI

THE FORESTERS AND THE PROMISE OF MAY--

"IF THE BLOSSOM 'OWDS"

Like The Falcon and The Cup, Tennyson's last two dramas are such that they can be paired for study, despite apparent dissimilarities. One of the differences, for example, is that The Foresters, like The Falcon, is a comedy, while The Promise of May, like The Cup, is a tragedy. A second obvious contrast between the two is their setting in time; The Foresters recreates the legendary days of Robin Hood in the twelfth century, while The Promise of May moves forward seven hundred years as Tennyson's only play with a contemporary setting.

However, although widely separated in time, the two plays have in common a pastoral English setting, a feature that imparts to the plays a certain charm: in The Foresters it appears in the form of a pervasive idyllic mood; in The Promise of May it allows Tennyson to exhibit his fondness for and considerable skill with rural English dialect. Among Tennyson's plays, another characteristic unique to these two is their relative lack of dependence on sources. The Promise of May is the poet's only completely original drama, and even The Foresters, although it incorporates the familiar material of folklore, apparently was based on no particular source

among the Robin Hood ballads Tennyson knew.¹

A summary of the plots of the plays will suggest less obvious points of comparison and contrast. In The Foresters a national crisis and a local crisis are interwoven, with the heroic Robin Hood, former Earl of Huntingdon, called upon to resolve both. By his absence King Richard the Lionhearted, rumored to have died in prison while leading a Crusade to the Holy Lands, has allowed England to degenerate into a lawless land administered by the evil Prince John and his corrupt following of church and state officials. Meanwhile, one of the nobles, Sir Richard Lea, who has borrowed 2,000 marks from the Abbot of York to ransom his son from a Moorish prison, is faced with loss of his estate if his bond to the Abbot is not repaid. His plight is complicated by the fact that he can save his land by marrying his daughter, the Maid Marian, to the Abbot's brother, the Sheriff of Nottingham. Marian, however, loves Robin Hood but has vowed only to wed whom the King approves.

Fleeing from John and the Sheriff, Marian and her father join Robin and his men in Sherwood Forest, where the Earl has become an outlaw seeking to right the monetary injustices of oppressive authorities. Disguised as a knight,

¹See Cornelia Geetrui Japikse, The Dramas of Alfred, Lord Tennyson ([1926]; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 31.

King Richard returns, admires the patriotism of Robin's band, witnesses the corruption of English institutions, and finally with Robin's help routs the scoundrels, setting the land in order and revealing his identity. Robin pays off the bond, thereby saving Sir Richard's land, and wins the approval of the King to wed Marian. Also at the play's end is the union of the comic lovers, Marian's woman Kate and Robin's Little John.

The Promise of May begins as fortuitously as The Foresters ends, setting the stage for tragic movement. On a spring day Farmer Steer optimistically celebrates his eightieth birthday with his daughters Dora and Eva, innocent young women whom he has given the refining advantages of education. Eva, however, has been secretly seduced by Philip Edgar, a city gentleman who dabbles superficially in modern philosophies which justify his hedonism. To escape her, Edgar promises Eva that he will write to her when they can marry, and as he leaves she vows to die if he doesn't keep his word.

In Act II, set five years later, Dora has returned to manage her father's failing farm, blighted by Steer's blindness and his distressing shame over the supposed suicide of the wayward, lovelorn Eva. At the same time Edgar, disguised and using the name Harold, returns, driven by a troubled conscience. When he meets Dora, who has never seen him, and hears what has happened, he determines to make

restitution by marrying Dora and, since he has come into an inheritance, rescuing Steer's land. In the third act, unknown to Edgar, Eva returns home and is nursed in secret by her sister, who is now in love with "Harold." When Edgar tells Dora she is his first true love, Eva rushes into the room with a horrified cry of recognition, wails her forgiveness of Edgar, and falls dead. Stunned by her suitor's villainy, Dora condemns the distraught Edgar, who crumples at her feet at the final curtain.

Like The Falcon and The Cup, these last plays differ in their quality, though both The Foresters and The Promise of May have been underestimated. Of the two, the former is more successful, perhaps because with its light tone it is less ambitious and therefore less diluted by the sentimentality that afflicts both dramas; certainly it is an improvement over Tennyson's earlier comic attempt, The Falcon. The Promise of May aspires to a significance beyond that which its melodramatic plot can support, thus failing overall; however, the drama is saved to an extent by Tennyson's characterization of his most interesting villain, Edgar.

In both The Foresters and The Promise of May the Laureate continues his dramatized didacticism on issues of concern to his nation. Though the danger in the former play is institutional and in the latter is individual, each play relates explicitly to the English values Tennyson consistently espouses. With both dramas the poet is concerned with the

preservation of "the land"--Sir Richard Lea's, Farmer Steer's, Britain itself. In both plays young women represent the ideals to be protected and upheld. Finally, Tennyson deals in both with the promise of a bright national future, a promise that can reach fruition "if," as Farmer Steer says, "the blossom 'owds," if the materials of tomorrow are not despoiled today.

The Foresters

No one would argue that The Foresters, Tennyson's charming version of the Robin Hood legend, is the Laureate's best dramatic work; even the poet himself is quoted as telling the producer Augustin Daly that he did not care for the play as he did Becket or Harold.² This admission, however, does not justify the conclusion of Peter Thomson that "Tennyson knew it to be the unworthiest of his dramatic work,"³ nor does a careful reading of the play support the kind of criticism that dismisses The Foresters as "little more than a sentimental melodrama"⁴ or "a pretty curiosity, no more."⁵

²Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1898), II, 390.

³"Tennyson's Plays and Their Production," in Tennyson, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1973), p. 248.

⁴Terry Otten, The Deserted Stage: The Search for Dramatic Form in Nineteenth-Century England (Athens, O., 1972), p. 93.

⁵William Archer, The Theatrical 'World' for 1893 (1894; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 239.

To appreciate The Foresters one cannot expect to judge it against the serious chronicle plays; for although it is somewhat historically based, the drama differs strikingly from the trilogy in authenticity, tone, and purpose. While Tennyson in the histories attempted to depict realistically the times and personalities which molded England, in The Foresters he claimed only to have "sketched the state of the people in another great transition period,"⁶ his sole historical obligation being to the general "state of the people" under Prince John's oppressive rule. Thus, because his authenticity is qualified, the poet is free to treat his subject with a much lighter tone than is found in the trilogy, and his purpose correspondingly is less sombre. The result is a play that is more like The Falcon than Queen Mary, more an idealized romance than a socio-psychological analysis. Therefore, judged within its limits, The Foresters may be found, as one critic sees it, "almost a flawless piece of workmanship--an idyll glowing with colour, a poem sparkling and spontaneous, a drama skilful and impressive."⁷

⁶Memoir, II, 173.

⁷J. Cuming Walters, Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist (London, 1893), p. 167. James D. Kissane, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1970), p. 151, is one who disagrees with this favorable aesthetic judgment, saying that "Tennyson's simple-hearted delight in the doings of Robin Hood and Maid Marian would be almost touching if the artistic result were less painfully bad. . . ."

The comparison of The Foresters with The Falcon is also useful in understanding the artistic success of the later play. While the humor, the fantastic atmosphere, and the happy ending make the two plays kindred, in The Foresters Tennyson resolves the kind of technical problems encountered in The Falcon and therefore produces a coherent drama of consistent, unambiguous tone. Rather than confusing one's response to the play's values, as is the case with The Falcon, the comedy of The Foresters complements the more serious themes as well as providing amusement and often delight. A discussion of the play's themes will demonstrate how the humorous elements lighten the tone without tending to mockery.

The pastoral idealism of The Foresters has too frequently caused critics to miss seeing the more mature ideas of the play. Admirers generally base their praise only on Tennyson's creation of idyllic charm, probing no deeper; those who are repelled by the sentimentality of the piece usually conclude, as Jerome Buckley does, that the poet's spirit is too boyish and playful to support more sober themes.⁸ However, The Foresters is not devoid of serious comment, nor is that comment inappropriate to the predominantly optimistic, perhaps even simplistic, framework in

⁸Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 210.

which it is cast. As in all his plays, Tennyson here expresses a sincerely felt moral theme; and, as in his other English dramas, that theme concerns the great issues of national integrity and independence. The Foresters, since it reveals no really new perspectives of the Laureate, exists primarily as a lively reaffirmation of traditional British values, a pastoral morality tale with clearly drawn issues and generally stereotyped characters.

The values of The Foresters are set against the background of a historical period which shares some of the turmoil that marks the time of Queen Mary. Weakened by the absence of King Richard, the country suffers under the oppression of the evil Prince John and his corrupt cohorts in both State and Church. The central plot element, the attempt to save the property of Richard Lea, represents in microcosm the play's larger theme, the saving of England itself, for the forces of attack and defense in both cases are identical. Capitalizing on humor to heighten the comparison, Tennyson defines the conflict by contrasting the attitudes of the opposing sides toward three main values: chivalry, loyalty, and justice. Through the use of these three motifs and a pattern of biblical allusion, his picture of England quickly takes form, revealing a nation of inverted values and institutions, a land which must be preserved, ironically, by outlaws. Finally, perhaps the most important question of all emerges--that of the basic concept of "the land" itself.

Further consideration of this question in the latter part of the chapter will suggest Tennyson's most significant statement in The Foresters.

In this play the poet continues his use of biblical allusion as a dramatic tool, employing it here to characterize the plight of England under Prince John. Without overworking the pattern, Tennyson evokes the familiar idea of man's fall from Eden. On three occasions the oppressive figures of authority are referred to as demonic agents in the ruin of England: Robin speaks of "these proud priests, and these Barons, / Devils, that make this blessed England hell" (III.p.346);⁹ Robin's man Scarlet announces the approach of the Sheriff and John by saying they must have sprung up "like the Devils they are, straight up from Hell" (IV.p.390); and Robin thus describes John's sensual overture to Marian: "She struck him, . . . / The serpent that had crept into the garden / And coil'd himself about her sacred waist" (II.i.pp.301-2). In the same soliloquy Robin returns to the allusion when he yearns for union with Marian: "O would she stood before me as my queen, / To make this Sherwood Eden o'er again, / And these rough oaks the palms of Paradise!" (II.i.p.302). Thus with the biblical analogy Tennyson presents England as a spoiled Eden, but with the potential for restoration as a paradise.

⁹Citations are from the Eversley Edition, IX.

Once Tennyson also refers to the Fall for comic effect, though Friar Tuck's joke serves as well to emphasize the low state into which the country has descended. Alluding to one part of the punishment of man after being driven from Eden, Tuck says,

In the sweat of thy brow, says Holy Writ,
 shalt thou eat bread, but in the sweat of thy
 brow and thy breast, and thine arms, and thy
 legs, and thy heart, and thy liver, and in the
 fear of thy life shalt thou eat the King's
 venison

(IV.p.374)

Another appropriation of scripture is involved in Robin's justification of his robbery of clerics; his analysis of their corruption illustrates the inverted order of English ideals and institutions:

We spoil'd the prior, friar, abbot, monk,
 For playing upside down with Holy Writ.
 'Sell all thou hast and give it to the poor;'
 Take all they have and give it to thyself!

(III.p.347)

Three major motifs--chivalry, loyalty, and justice--recur in The Foresters as measures of the moral fabric of the forces of good and evil. Since this play, unlike Tennyson's more complex dramas, has almost no subtlety of characterization, the poet relies on humor to add interest and offset the potential vapidness of an uncomplicated clash of absolute good and evil. At no time, however, do Tennyson's comic touches invalidate his own commitment to the pure standards of Robin Hood and Maid Marian or his attack on the depraved morality of John's followers.

On the question of the proper treatment of women, Tennyson's comic foils are Robin's men, Little John and Scarlet. In the play's first scene Little John, flustered by the erratic behavior of his sweetheart Kate, who kisses him but will not be kissed in return, indirectly expresses the root of the nation's larger problem. He tells Marian that he is confused about what is proper in kissing, saying, "I cannot tell. Manners be so corrupt, and these are the days of Prince John" (I.i.p.265). With regard to his teasing, high-spirited Kate, throughout the play Little John struggles to apply appropriately Robin's injunction, as he remembers it, to

handle all womankind gently, and hold them in
all honour, and speak small to 'em, and not scare
'em, but go about to come at their love with all
manner of homages, and observances, and circum-
bendibuses.

(I.i.p.261)

Scarlet has even more difficulty than Little John because he is already married to a termagant. When Robin comments on Scarlet's moodiness, he answers,

'Tis for no lack of love to you, my lord,
But lack of happiness in a blatant wife.
She broke my head on Tuesday with a dish.
I would have thwack'd the woman, but I did not,
Because thou sayest such fine things of women,
But I shall have to thwack her if I stay.

(I.iii.p.293)

At least one of the merry men, then, gladly leaves family behind to join Robin's band in Sherwood Forest.

Robin's creed is not so blind that it overlooks cases like the wife of Scarlet, but it nonetheless holds

all women in reverence. The foresters hymn the praise of fair and chaste English wives in the song "There is no land like England" (II.i.p.298); they crown the lovely, virtuous Marian as Queen of the woods and even in their outlawry they treat all women with respect. Contrasting his men's behavior with that of the Normans who rule the land, Robin tells Marian,

Dear, in these days of Norman license, when
Our English maidens are their prey, if ever
A Norman damsel fell into our hands,
In this dark wood when all was in our power
We never wrong'd a woman.

(III.p.347)

Opposed to Robin's ideal treatment of women, and particularly his reverent though earnest courtship of Marian, are the shameful examples of Prince John, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and others in their train. Sir Richard warns Marian of John and the Sheriff, saying, "They hunt in couples, and when they look at a maid they blast her" (I.i.p.268). Although Robin is reluctant to criticize the acting monarch, he says of John,

I hate him for his want of chivalry.
He that can pluck the flower of maidenhood
From off the stalk and trample it in the mire,
And boast that he hath trampled it.

(I.ii.p.278)

Because she is the object of their lustful pursuit, Marian knows the depth of the degradation of John and the Sheriff, and thus she guards herself from those who "dishonour / The daughters and wives of [their] own faction-- / Who hunger for the body, not the soul," who value "neither man / Nor

woman save as tools" (IV.p.395). Even the friars stopped for toll by the foresters have been guilty of seducing their female parishioners.

A second measure of the extent to which the authorities have wrenched English values from their foundations is the principle of loyalty. The play's noblest example of faithfulness is Marian's fidelity to her vow to King Richard, allowing her to marry only him whom the King wills. Even in Richard's extended absence and rumored death she remains loyal to her word, thus emphasizing by contrast the disastrously violated trust between Richard and his brother John. John's crushing rule has so embittered the people against royalty that the very structure of the state is threatened. This danger is reflected in the amusing plight of the fairies in Robin's dream; the queen Titania reacts angrily to being called "Tit," warning, "Fairy realm is breaking down / When the fairy slights the crown" (II.ii.p.333).

When Richard returns at the play's close, he sets in perspective the "lawful" actions of John and others and the "unlawful" deeds of Robin's men. He properly recognizes the Abbot and Justiciary as "utter traitors" (IV.p.401) and envies Robin's claim, "I never found one traitor in my band" (IV.p.401). True loyalty to the throne, therefore, is found only in fidelity to the high principles to which it aspires, of which Richard, but not John, is a representative.

A specific contrast to Marian's vow is provided by John's insincere promise (he will not actually vow) to the Sheriff, assuring the Sheriff that he will not interfere with the attempt to win the hand of Marian. In a literal sense John keeps his word, for he desires only a "honeymoon" (IV.p.397) with Marian, not marriage. The Sheriff, however, is abruptly disenchanted by John's intention to remove the maiden to his own castle, and thus in his disillusion pays for consorting with the unprincipled Prince.

It must be admitted that Tennyson in his idealism occasionally oversteps the bounds of legitimate sentiment. One such excess is Marian's pledge of undying loyalty to Robin's love, an intensely lyrical speech whose passion becomes cloying:

Forget him--never--by this Holy Cross
Which good King Richard gave me when a child--
Never!
Not while the swallow skims along the ground,
And while the lark flies up and touches heaven!
Not while the smoke floats from the cottage roof,
And the white cloud is roll'd along the sky!
Not while the rivulet babbles by the door,
And the great breaker beats upon the beach!
Never--
Till Nature, high and low, and great and small
Forgets herself, and all her loves and hates
Sink again into chaos.

(I.ii.pp.287-88)

Fortunately, such shallow sentimentalism is rare, and that which does exist is countered somewhat by humor. On the question of loyalty the comic relief comes again from the romantic subplot of Kate and Little John,

particularly in Little John's charge of infidelity for Kate's kissing another man, actually Marian in disguise. Kate then, in mock anger at her sweetheart's jealousy, vows not to be his again until he sees her "kiss a man indeed" (II.ii.p. 330). All is well, of course, when in the final scene Robin, in the flush of happiness, kisses Kate and thus insures Little John's own romantic success.

The concept of justice is a more important principle in The Foresters than even loyalty or chivalry. Because he finds that the traditional institutions of justice--the State and the Church--are misusing the supportive cords of law, twisting them into cruel bonds instead, Robin Hood is forced to pursue true justice as an outlaw. In no other way does England's upside-down order emerge so clearly. Robin himself expresses the irony of his role: "being outlaw'd in a land / Where law lies dead, we make ourselves the law" (II.i.p.300). Robin's strategy involves not indiscriminate robbing of the rich to give to the poor, but seeks to rectify violations of the law. He tells Marian,

However wise, we must at times have wrought
Some great injustice, yet, far as we knew,
We never robb'd one friend of the true King.
We robb'd the traitors that are leagued with John;
We robb'd the lawyer who went against the law;
We spared the craftsman, chapman, all that live
By their own hands, the labourer, the poor
priest

(III.p.347)

In Friar Tuck's judgment, the civil disobedience of the foresters is an expression of a superior, absolute justice:

"If the king and the law work injustice, is not he that goes against the king and the law the true king in the sight of the King of kings?" (IV.p.375).

It is God's justice, then, toward which Robin Hood is striving, while the forces of corruption manipulate or circumvent human justice to suit their ends. When it serves their evil purpose, those of John's ilk can hold pitilessly to the law, as is the case with the slightly late payment of the bond owed by Sir Richard. "The letter--O how often justice drowns / Between the law and the letter of the law!" (IV.p.387), Marian cries in response, setting the scene for Tennyson's comic retaliation against the cruelty of the Abbot and the Justiciary. Announcing, "When the church and the law have forgotten God's music, they shall dance to the music of the wild wood" (IV.p.388), Robin sets the unjust ecclesiastical and legal pair capering to Little John's music by pricking their calves with arrows. Not lost in the broad comedy, however, is the idea that true justice, "God's music," will finally be served.

The battle over the land--both Sir Richard's and King Richard's--is defined, therefore, in terms of the opposing values relating to chivalry, loyalty, and justice. The most significant concept with which Tennyson deals in The Foresters, however, is the ultimate value of "the land" itself. Robin Hood is to be the heroic savior of the land, to be sure, but exactly what is being saved? The answer to

this question should acquit the Laureate of charges of mindless patriotism, for Tennyson's love of England, at least as represented in The Foresters, is firmly based on humanistic ideals. The meaning of "the land" for the poet can best be understood by comparing the meaning it holds for various characters in the play.

Sir Richard Lea and King Richard are perhaps the only important characters which Tennyson does not align absolutely with the forces of either Robin or John. Although both are well-meaning and certainly not villainous, their attitudes toward the land meet with the playwright's criticism. To Sir Richard, his estate is an ultimate value in itself, so much so that he is willing to sacrifice his daughter in marriage to the Sheriff to avoid losing the land so long held by his family. At a sort of extreme from this aristocratic concept is the King's relative neglect of his nation. Like the knights of Idylls of the King in search of the Holy Grail, Richard regards his holy wars as more important than "this realm of England, all the crowns / Of all this world" (IV.p.382); and while Richard is not condemned as strongly as other zealously religious monarchs, such as Edward in Harold, Tennyson uses Friar Tuck's bombast and the general ill health of the country to denounce the King's casual attitude toward the needs of the land.

The vilest concept of the land, of course, is held by Prince John and those who degrade it by wasting its

people. In particular, the Sheriff of Nottingham has a calculating, doubly selfish attitude; he craves to take not only Marian, but also the estate of her family. His brother the Abbot pictures him as magnanimous, saying, "He is all for love, he cares not for the land" (IV.p.385), but Robin detects the fuller motives in noting, "[W]ho marries [Marian] / Marries the land. Most honourable Sheriff!" (II.p.302). To John, the Sheriff, and their following, the land means only wealth and power.

In Robin Hood resides the noblest concept of the land, a view that regards not the geographical entity or its monetary worth so much as the people that inhabit it. Robin's love of England is a love of its people, and his fight "to save his country" is, as Marian knows, a struggle to preserve "the liberties of his people" (I.i.p.268). From one of Robin's finest speeches emerge several significant aspects of his attitude toward England: he sees the ancient trees as symbols of Englishmen; he grieves at the oppression of the people; and finally he identifies Marian with the beloved spirit of English independence. Robin calls Marian to him:

Sit here by me, where the most beaten track
Runs thro' the forest, hundreds of huge oaks,
Gnarl'd--older than the thrones of Europe--look,
What breadth, height, strength--torrents of eddying
bark!
Some hollow-hearted from exceeding age--
That never be thy lot or mine!--and some
Pillaring a leaf-sky on their monstrous boles,
Sound at the core as we are. Fifty leagues

Of woodland hear and know my horn, that scares
The Baron at the torture of his churls,
The pillage of his vassals.

O maiden-wife,
The oppression of our people moves me so,
That when I think of it hotly, Love himself
Seems but a ghost, but when thou feel'st with me
The ghost returns to Marian, clothes itself
In maiden flesh and blood, and looks at once
Maid Marian, and that maiden freedom which
Would never brook the tyrant. Live thou maiden!
(III.p.345)

By loving Marian, Robin Hood also loves the spirit of English people, and when Robin marries Marian he "marries the land," in a nonmaterialistic sense. Thus "the land" in The Foresters is saved by the highest qualities of Marian and Robin themselves--their chastity, loyalty, and love of justice. Even Sir Richard and the King arrive at a proper appreciation of their land at the play's end; the King returns home to restore a just rule, and Sir Richard greets his long-lost son Walter with the happy confession of the supremacy of human love: "Thou art worth thy weight in all those marks of gold, / Yea, and the weight of the very land itself, / Down to the inmost centre" (IV.p.408). As in The Falcon, Tennyson works toward the theme of the relative value of physical and spiritual possessions, suggesting once again that apart from human love, devotion to "the land," even if it be the English isle itself, is meaningless.

So far in this discussion of The Foresters a key descriptive word has been avoided, for it seems appropriate

that it be reserved for a summary look at this idyllic work of Tennyson's old age. The word is nostalgia. Even an unsympathetic critic admits that "Charity might allow The Foresters as a nostalgic old man's pastoral pipe dream";¹⁰ however, there seems to be no need to be condescending toward a fond, fresh glance backward to a life that perhaps never was in fact, but surely has existed in spirit. If anything, The Foresters gains from its nostalgia; the wistful quality not only envelops the whole of the play with a pleasant sense of yearning, but also imparts a special, gentle glow to certain passages in which the voice is almost that of the aging Laureate. For example, Robin greets his thirtieth birthday with a tinge of melancholy, the mood reflecting the experience and wisdom of a man who has known more than three decades:

I am only merry for an hour or two
 Upon a birthday: if this life of ours
 Be a good glad thing, why should we make us merry
 Because a year of it is gone? but Hope
 Smiles from the threshold of the year to come
 Whispering 'it will be happier,' and old faces
 Press round us, and warm hands close with warm hands,
 And thro' the blood the wine leaps to the brain
 Like April sap to the topmost tree, that shoots
 New buds to heaven, whereon the throstle rock'd
 Sings a new song to the new year

(I.iii.pp.288-89)

And the similarity to Prospero's famous parting words in Shakespeare's last play, The Tempest, is unmistakable in

¹⁰Kissane, p. 151.

Robin's departure from Sherwood Forest at the play's end:

Our forest games are ended, our free life,
And we must hence to the King's court. I trust
We shall return to the wood. Meanwhile, farewell
Old friends, old patriarch oaks. A thousand
winters
Will strip you bare as death, a thousand summers
Robe you life-green again. You seem, as it were,
Immortal, and we mortal. How few Junes
Will heat our pulses quicker! How few frosts
Will chill the hearts that beat for Robin Hood!
(IV.pp.409-10)

Since some parts of The Foresters are among the last lines Tennyson ever wrote, one is tempted, perhaps, to make too much of the play's nostalgia, reading the work as a sort of farewell to the stage or even to poetry; it must be remembered, however, that the play was first written some eleven years before being revised for publication and performance in the year of the Laureate's death. On the other hand, it is altogether possible that Tennyson intended The Foresters to be his last drama, since The Promise of May apparently was produced at the specific urging of friends. If such be the case, The Foresters can be regarded in a sense as the playwright's final legacy to his country--not in the form of the grave historical trilogy with its towering figures, but in a joyous celebration of the sovereign spirit of the common men and women of England.

When Tennyson visited Sherwood Forest in preparation for writing the play, he must surely have been caught up in the spell of romantic legend, resolving to endow it with the ephemeral, though renewable, life of the theater. With

Marian's closing lines the Laureate seems to attempt to cast that spell onto future generations, which, crushed by injustice or dulled by complacency, might need to learn again what it means to be Englishmen. Marian speaks to the heroic foresters, whose spirits are immortal:

Your names will cling like ivy to the wood.
 And here perhaps a hundred years away
 Some hunter in day-dreams or half asleep
 Will hear our arrows whizzing overhead,
 And catch the winding of a phantom horn.

(IV.p.410)

The Promise of May

From the idyllic nostalgia of The Foresters Tennyson turned in The Promise of May to a rather realistic look at his own times. One of the elements he used to reflect the modern setting was extensive prose rather than the blank verse that had dominated his previous dramas. In fact, the play as performed was entirely in prose, and this factor, along with the extremely unfavorable reception of the stage production, "gave rise," one critic notes, "to the witty saying that the poet-laureate, after filling the world with his verse, was now emptying the Globe with his prose."¹¹

With very few exceptions, critics since that time have continued to use The Promise of May as target for their most eloquent derision, often employing labels such as "the

¹¹Stephen Gwynn, Tennyson: A Critical Study (London, 1899), p. 185.

one unqualified and irremediable blunder of the poet's career."¹² Even Tennyson's grandson concludes that the play "did not deserve to succeed."¹³ One of the most frequent points of criticism, and the most important and valid, is that of the weak plot, which has been called awkward, ridiculous, improbable, and, with good reason, melodramatic. Whatever one finds admirable in The Promise of May, he cannot lose the unpleasant aftertaste of the plot, especially Tennyson's implausible, stylized last scene. Not unlike the action of the play itself, the drama seems to hold considerable promise at the beginning but unfortunately is spoiled along the way.¹⁴

Although the melodramatic plot prevents The Promise of May from succeeding overall, the play does possess at least two redeeming features, one which has not been discussed by critics and another which has usually been misjudged. The first is the recurrent imagery of flowers, a device that assumes several levels of symbolic significance

¹²Archer, p. 44.

¹³Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 464.

¹⁴For opinions on Tennyson's handling of plot, see the anonymous review in The Spectator, 18 Nov. 1882, p. 1475; Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), p. 227; Buckley, p. 212; Charles Tennyson, p. 465; and Cornelius Weygandt, The Time of Tennyson (1936; rpt. Port Washington, N.Y., 1968), p. 108.

and figures prominently in the interrelated title and theme of the play. The second is the characterization of Edgar, who, though he is the villain bringing ruin on the spring-time promise of the drama's pastoral world, is the main character of the play. A consideration of his motives, flaws, and representativeness will show Edgar to be one of Tennyson's best-drawn and most interesting characters. Following discussion of the drama's theme these two elements will be analyzed.

The central theme of The Promise of May is suggested by the play's title, which itself may be understood concurrently in several ways. In one sense the promise is that given by Nature, the expectation of maturation, ripening, and fulfillment of the phenomenal world. Opening in the month of May among apple blossoms and other heralds of a productive, propitious future, the play proceeds to dramatize the blight which descends on Farmer Steer's land. On the human level, the promise of May is the hope of Eva's mature happiness, destroyed by Edgar's desertion and in consequence causing Steer's farm to fail. These interlocking tragedies are presaged early in the play when Dora sings,

The town lay still in the low sun-light,
 The hen cluckt late by the white farm gate,
 The maid to her dairy came in from the cow,
 The stock-dove coo'd at the fall of night,
 The blossom had open'd on every bough;
 O joy for the promise of May, of May,
 O joy for the promise of May.

But a red fire woke in the heart of the town,
 And a fox from the glen ran away with the hen,
 And a cat to the cream, and a rat to the cheese;
 And the stock-dove coo'd, till a kite dropt down,
 And a salt wind burnt the blossoming trees;
 O grief for the promise of May, of May,
 O grief for the promise of May.

(I.p.259)¹⁵

Significantly, the refrains of these two stanzas are heard again later when literal promises are exchanged between Eva and Edgar. As her lover prepares to leave, Eva declares that she will go mad and die if he does not soon call her to come and marry him; her delight at his promise is echoed by the words "O joy for the promise of May" heard in the distance as sung by her sister. When Dora is nearer, the contrasting refrain of grief is heard as Edgar, in a soliloquy, reveals his intention to deceive Eva. Thus, Edgar's broken promise given in May becomes the curse of the promise of May. The play depicts the spoilation of a natural innocence and beauty, represented by both Eva and the land, by a careless, sophisticated sensuality without moral foundation.

With the blossom or flower Tennyson creates an ideal symbol with which to communicate the theme of his play; for while the bloom is lovely in itself, its greater function is to herald fruition. Therefore, when the blossom is destroyed by an alien force, there is sorrow both for the loss

¹⁵Citations are from the Eversley Edition, VII.

of beauty and for the loss of the promised harvest. The expectation of the productivity of Farmer Steer's land is announced early in the play, once in Dora's verse, "The blossom had open'd on every bough," and also in her father's prediction, as he sits beneath his apple tree, "Well, I reckons they'll hev' a fine cider-crop to-year if the blossom 'owds" (I.p.271). However, just as Dora's song records the blossom's destruction by wind, symbolic ruin soon comes upon Steer's fortune when Edgar, talking with Eva, thoughtlessly breaks off a sweet-smelling branch of the tree.

Edgar's breaking of the bough is fraught with meaning, for it not only epitomizes his casual, sensual self-indulgence, but also signifies his deflowering of Steer's daughter as well as his tree. When Eva cries, "But, look, how wasteful of the blossom you are!" (I.p.281), she unknowingly analyzes Edgar's actions with regard to both the tree and herself. The point is unmistakable in Eva's repeated connection with flower imagery: Farmer Dobson brings Dora a bouquet of roses from a bush planted for him by Eva, whom he says "wur as sweet as ony on 'em . . . 'er oân sen" (II.p.291); Dora, grieving for her dead sister, tells Edgar that Eva was "the sweetest flower of all the wolds, / So lovely in the promise of her May" (III.p.348); and Edgar, while calling her "the most beautiful blossom of the May" (I.p.280), rationalizes his jilting of Eva by saying to himself that soon "her affections / Will flower toward the

light in some new face" (I.p.277).

Edgar's speech actually is filled with flower images, not solely in regard to Eva. In Tennyson's epicurean villain, whose self-proclaimed desire is "to crop the flower and pass" (I.p.268), the pattern of imagery primarily suggests Edgar's craving for sensual pleasures, an appetite which, because it is not controlled, inevitably destroys as it enjoys. His hedonistic philosophy is revealed again in another such image; deriding human aspirations to morality, he tells Eva,

. . . [I]f we did not strain to make ourselves
Better and higher than Nature, we might be
As happy as the bees there at their honey
In these sweet blossoms.

(I.p.281)

Edgar also uses floral imagery to relate his distaste for such conventions as marriage, saying that one at first may "take his bonds for flowers" (I.p.283) but eventually becomes oppressed by the restraints of wedlock. Later he again expresses the same aversion by comparing the traditional floral emblems of marriage and death: "I . . . held the orange blossom / Dark as the yew" (II.p.312).

Another significant occurrence of flower imagery is found in a soliloquy by Edgar in which he considers the despairing condition "When man has surely learnt at last that all / His old-world faith, the blossom of his youth, / Has faded, falling fruitless" (II.p.302). This passage, coupled with other examples of Edgar's scoffing at religion, indicates

that to Tennyson faith is at least one casualty in the devastation brought about by the blighting ideologies of modern times.

Although floral imagery is thus most often linked with the tragic consequences of the play, the poet also uses the image to offer some hope of amelioration. This effect is achieved through the preservation of one healthy blossom, Dora, whose cheeks Farmer Dobson calls "redder blossoms" than those of the rosy apple tree (I.p.261) and whom Edgar speaks of as "my flower" (III.p.338). Because circumstances permit one of Farmer Steer's "blossoms" to hold fast, at least a measure of the promise of May is implicitly fulfilled.

While The Promise of May can and should be read as a rustic parable with societal and even national implications, the theme of the corruption of innocence by evil may be taken only so far. Tennyson is concerned in this drama not so much with the specific effects of evil as with the motivations of it; attention is focused more on the psychology of Edgar than on the consequences of his actions. In this sense The Promise of May is a modern subjective drama, with Edgar serving as a kind of antihero at war with his environment and groping for his identity. Had Tennyson been able to mount this character and his intellectual dilemma in a plot that supported him rather than drowned him in melodrama, the play might well be considered as a true forerunner of modern drama.

Misunderstandings about the nature of Edgar began when the role first was portrayed on the stage. Offended free-thinkers took the character to be Tennyson's attempt to stereotype them, and they vigorously objected. During the reactionary period of Tennyson criticism in the decades following his death, readers continued to see Edgar as the poet's straw man, detestable and ridiculous, which the Laureate constructed only to beat down with his club of morality.¹⁶ More recent critics, however, have generally concurred in a valid analysis of Edgar, paying due attention to the important epigraph heading the play: "A surface man of theories, true to none" (p. 254). The character is seen not as a true philosophical radical, but "a sensualist who, having followed the course of self-indulgence to the point of satiation, seeks to rationalize his conduct by the logic of various disturbing new philosophies."¹⁷

This view of Edgar as driven primarily by sensual self-seeking is certainly not to be disputed, but it seems

¹⁶Archer, p. 44, calls Edgar a "grotesque, even humorous, caricature"; Hugh Fausset, Tennyson: A Modern Portrait (New York, 1923), p. 259, says he is "the conscienceless egotist that Tennyson was too prone to suppose every rebel against conventional morality"; and Andrew Lang, Alfred Tennyson, 2nd ed. (1901; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 186, huffs, "A man would give all other bliss and all his worldly wealth for this, to waste his whole strength in one kick upon this perfect prig."

¹⁷Buckley, p. 213.

that a fuller picture of the character is possible and in order. By concentrating on Edgar's self-justifying appropriation of his various isms, critics perhaps have not acknowledged the extent to which the philosophies themselves exert an influence on Edgar's actions. Mindlessly gratifying one's lusts is a deplorable thing; but while acting under the impulse of both lust and a confused mind is perhaps no less noble, it surely is worthy of more understanding. The point is that Edgar is a victim of his philosophies as well as a manipulator of them, and this fact should make him a more sympathetic character than normally acknowledged.

Another motive for Edgar's conduct also has not received due attention--disinheritance by his father.¹⁸

¹⁸The issue of disinheritance brings to mind an interesting pattern in The Promise of May which strongly suggests that King Lear was a casual source for the play. The fact that Shakespeare's drama is mentioned by name on one occasion supports the belief that Tennyson at least was thinking of the earlier tragedy as he wrote his own; in one of his soliloquies Edgar muses, "'What are we,' says the blind old man in Lear? / 'As flies to the Gods; they kill us for their sport'" (I.p.268). There is also the similarity of the Edgars of both plays being disinherited sons, although Shakespeare's is heroic rather than villainous. In his depiction of the aged Farmer Steer, Tennyson seems to have combined, perhaps unconsciously, the blindness of Gloucester and the near madness of Lear. Finally, in both plays there is a poignant recognition scene between father and daughter, although Tennyson's old man does not accept the identity of the daughter he believes to be dead.

Edgar refers to this factor while reacting negatively to Eva's desire for marriage:

Marriage is but an old tradition. I hate
Traditions, ever since my narrow father,
After my frolic with his tenant's girl,
Made younger elder son, violated the whole
Tradition of our land, and left his heir,
Born, happily, with some sense of art, to live
By brush and pencil. . . .

(I.pp.277-78)

To an extent, the basis of Edgar's hatred of traditions provides another excuse for his unfettered pursuit of pleasure, but the psychological effect of being disowned by a Puritanical father is still not to be dismissed. At the very least, alienation from his father's affection heightens the rupture between Edgar and the other traditional values he now flaunts. Set adrift from his family moorings, Edgar is a natural prey for libertinism and the materialistic doctrines which justify it. It is not surprising that later in the play Edgar's swelling of conscience, however slight, and his rejection of "Utopian idiotcies" (III.p.341) coincide with the inheritance of his uncle's estate, his reentry into the ordered, traditional world.

If one considers Edgar properly, then, he will see that Tennyson's villain, who is not truly malicious, deserves pity as much as scorn. The poet sets Edgar up as a product of the times--not an average man, surely, nor even an average atheist, but perhaps typical of the worst that an individual may become when, influenced by whatever causes,

he consciously embraces a dissolute life. It is especially profitable to analyze Edgar, the modern man, by judging him against the standards used for Tennyson's characters of the past, the standards of self-reverence, self-knowledge and self-control.

Edgar's lack of restraint over his physical drives is obvious, as illustrated in the earlier discussion of floral imagery; in fact, he makes no real effort to control his erotic passions. Even when he feels stirrings of remorse for Eva's supposed death, he is unwilling to stifle a simultaneous attraction for her sister. As he determines to "set all right again" and "be more at peace" with himself (II.p.313) by rescuing Steer's fortunes, he is thinking at the same time of winning Dora's love. Happy to find an ostensibly humanitarian justification for his actions, Edgar unwittingly specifies the selfish nature of his greater goal:

Colour
Flows thro' my life again, and I have lighted
On a new pleasure. Anyhow we must
Move in the line of least resistance when
The stronger motive rules.

(II.p.313)

In Edgar, of course, the line of least resistance ever leads to satisfaction of his physical lusts.

Tennyson's villain also is afflicted by a lack of self-reverence. This characteristic is betrayed by the naturalistic axioms to which he frequently turns to glaze

his conscience, beliefs which reduce human dignity to the animal level. For example, Edgar speaks of man "following his own instincts as his God" (I.p.280); he says one moves "in the iron grooves of Destiny" (II.p.300);¹⁹ referring to hereditary influences, he calls the body a "mortal house, / . . . haunted by / The ghosts of the dead passions of dead men" (II.p.300); and, finally, he shrinks mankind to "poor earthworms . . . / Here crawling in this boundless Nature" (III.p.343). With his natural determinism Edgar emerges as a modern version of Tennyson's ancient Galatian, Synorix. While the villain of The Cup blames his character on the gods, nineteenth-century man casts his on an indifferent universe. Following his quotation of "[T]he Gods . . . kill us for their sport," Edgar reflects,

The Gods! but they, the shadows of ourselves,
Have past for ever. It is Nature kills,
And not for her sport either. She knows nothing.
Man only knows, the worse for him! for why
Cannot he take his pastime like the flies?
And if my pleasure breed another's pain,
Well--is not that the course of Nature too,
From the dim dawn of Being--her main law
Whereby she grows in beauty--that her flies
Must massacre each other? this poor Nature!
(I.pp.268-69)

In Edgar, as in Synorix, the absence of respect for human will degrades both himself and those he exploits.

Perhaps the most pathetic flaw of Edgar is his lack of self-knowledge. Again like Synorix, because he misjudges

¹⁹This is an obvious echo of the famous phrase "the ringing grooves of change" in the poet's "Locksley Hall."

himself he also misjudges the woman he seeks to win. Possessing only the most rudimentary conscience, Edgar is able to feel remorse for Eva's fate but at the same time cannot properly appreciate Dora's hatred of him who ruined her sister; thus he tragically supposes that by covertly winning her gratitude and love he will hold Dora even after she learns his true identity. Therefore, while in one sense Edgar's pursuit of Dora is the most damnable action of his lascivious life, in another respect it is only appallingly pitiful. Edgar is as blind to human nature--his own and that of others--as is Synorix to the profound loyalties of Camma.

The lack of self-knowledge in Edgar, however, goes beyond mere mistakes in strategy, for his entire existence is governed by a quest for self-identity. All of his grasping at contemporary ideologies reveals a search not simply for self-justification, but also for self-identification. And although the search is muddled by base motives and hindered by shallow thinking, the existence of the search at all is commendable; indeed, with his "surface man of theories" Tennyson probably came closer to depicting a typically modern soul than if he had portrayed a truly philosophical thinker.

In connection with the idea of Edgar's search for himself, an interesting passage occurs which also links the concept ironically to the play's pervasive floral imagery. Edgar remembers his courtship of Eva, when they stood on the bank of the brook among lush spring growth and he "Taught

her the learned names, anatomized / The flowers for her" (II.p.301); but, sadly, although he is able to "anatomize" the literal blossom of nature, he cannot analyze the nature of his metaphorical blossoms, Eva and Dora, or, still worse, his own nature. When, after meeting Dora and settling on regeneration, he confesses, "Ay, . . . how slightly have I known myself" (II.p.306), he supposes that he has reached self-understanding, but subsequent events prove him wrong. Like Synorix, Edgar meets a devastating fate with as much bewilderment and shocked disbelief as horror.

Finally, The Promise of May, with its ruination of idyllic promise by a presumptive agent of evil, assumes the archetypal pattern of the fall of man. It is entirely likely that with this play Tennyson, as he did more explicitly with The Foresters, is suggesting a loose analogy to the biblical story of the loss of Eden: the setting is pastoral, fresh, hopeful; the woman Eva, like Eve, succumbs to the sensual temptation of a lost, disinherited, alien spirit; and, perhaps not coincidentally, the scene is bowered in apple blossoms. If indeed his country is to Tennyson a type of Eden, then perhaps it is valid to see The Promise of May as the Laureate's Paradise Lost and, chronology laid aside, The Foresters his Paradise Regained.

Despite Tennyson's inability to sustain in either play an elevated spirit which matches his love for England (or which truly deserves the Miltonic analogy), that

devotion, as evidenced in his last two dramatic efforts, is nevertheless moving. In The Foresters the poet chooses an overtly patriotic stance, but in The Promise of May his regard for the native land is generally implicit. The one exception to this rule in his last play is Dora's modest response to Edgar's observation on the charms of the countryside:

I am glad it pleases you:
 Yet I, born here, not only love the country,
 But its inhabitants too; and you, I doubt not,
 Would take to them kindly, if you cared
 To live some time among them.

(II.p.309)

While this passage may not roll majestically like those of The Foresters, it is all the more impressive for its honest simplicity--and for the voice behind it of the aged Laureate, whose faith in his nation remains true as long as the blossom holds.

CONCLUSION

Except for revising Becket and The Foresters for production, Alfred Tennyson abandoned play writing after the "disastrous failure" of The Promise of May on stage, which, his grandson notes, "was a great blow to the poet."¹ However, in a letter to an admirer of his last play the Laureate defended his dramas, despite the fact that he surely must have been disappointed by the general lack of critical and popular acceptance of an entire decade's work. He wrote, "I had a feeling that I would at least strive (in my plays) to bring the true drama of character and life back again. I gave them one leaf out of the great book of truth and nature."²

As Tennyson at the close of his dramatic venture attempted to assess his contribution through the stage, it also is appropriate that this study now address itself to the same question: What did the great Victorian poet accomplish with his seven plays?

The question must be approached from three directions, the first of which considers the dramas as acting-pieces. While this study has not been specifically concerned

¹Tennyson Collection: Usher Gallery Lincoln (Lincoln, 1963), p. 13.

²Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1898), II, 269.

with the theatrical aspects of Tennyson's plays, surely enough has been said in the review of production history and implied in the treatment of each play to suggest that these works are not neglected masterpieces of the stage. To be sure, there are some excellent dramatic moments in almost all of the plays, especially in the histories and The Cup; but there are perhaps as many examples of melodrama, awkward stage business, and overlong soliloquies. The Laureate, despite his efforts, did not rejuvenate the English theater, nor did he become the great new successor to Shakespeare that all devotees of the Victorian stage were longing for.

The second approach to the question of Tennyson's achievement is to view the plays for their literary artistry. As noted in earlier chapters, occasionally the Laureate's lack of experience with the drama hampers his aesthetic success; for example, the diverse elements of Queen Mary and the subplot of Becket make for problems of coherence in those plays, and the humor of The Falcon often works at odds with the poet's theme. In most respects, however, Tennyson's dramas are enriched by the author's poetic skill and experience. Through the development of symbols such as the cross in Becket and the chalice in The Cup, of patterns of imagery such as fire in Queen Mary and confinement in Harold, and of biblical allusions in Queen Mary, Becket, and The Foresters, the playwright successfully enhances his

characterizations, conflicts, and themes. Further, Tennyson's artistry is constantly apparent in his usual facility with lyric and narrative verse, and also frequently in realistically powerful dialogue.

The third and final measure of Tennyson's achievement in drama concerns his didactic purpose. No more obvious conclusion about the plays can be drawn than the fact that while they represent bold departures in form for the poet, their content reflects the same interests that are seen in the bulk of his mature poetry. Tennyson explores no new thematic fields in his plays, but instead discovers new ways to propound the familiar; as a Laureate striving to give his audience "one leaf out of the great book of truth and nature," the poet uses the most public of literary platforms to focus attention on the nature of man, particularly the Englishman, and on the state of the nation.

Tennyson's analysis of human nature encompasses a wide range of character types--from the frustrated, pathetic Queen Mary and the enigmatic Thomas Becket to the doomed but noble Harold and the alienated atheist Philip Edgar. Yet through these and his other tragic figures the playwright sets forth a consistent philosophy, a reiterated belief in basic human values that may be traced back to his early poem "Oenone." In that work the poet expressed the ideal standard of human wisdom: Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control. Although nearly all of Tennyson's

important characters fall short of these standards, the ideal is nevertheless communicated by implication; the personal and national tragedies that result from flaws of self-disdain, self-illusion, and self-indulgence serve well to preach indirectly the Tennysonian virtues of wise thinking and conduct.

While the poet's human ideals are universally appealing, the dominant subject matter of his dramas and his acknowledged role as a sort of literary spokesman for Victorian England make it clear that his message is specifically for his own nation. As a young artist Tennyson had struggled with what are now regarded as the typical conflicts in the Victorian dilemma: doubt vs. faith, reform vs. tradition, despair vs. affirmation. Out of that encounter emerged a poet who, although aware of modern thought and intellectually reconciled to the concept of inevitable change, nevertheless finally cast his lot with established values as the most beneficent for mankind. Moreover, he committed himself to the role of prophet, speaking those values in a public voice to the needs of his countrymen.

Tennyson's dramas have not just one statement to make, but perhaps the most inclusive theme of all is the nobility, independence, and heroism of the British people. The poet's concern for the nation's present and future leads him most often to look to the English past for examples by which to inspire his country to conquer its problems and to

preserve its ideals. In Queen Mary there are the portraits of the patient Elizabeth, the martyred Cranmer, and the black-blooded Bagenhall; in Harold, the courageous, though disheartened, Saxon king resisting Norman might; in Becket, the Archbishop in his idealistic stand for the integrity of the Church and the welfare of the common man; in The Foresters, Robin Hood with the purity and justice of his cause against the tyranny of wayward institutions. Even in his two non-English plays and his modern English tragedy Tennyson dramatizes the kinds of virtuous action that will sustain the nation: in The Falcon, the self-denying offering of Count Federigo; in The Cup, the patriotic sacrifice of Camma; and in The Promise of May, the faithful resistance of Dora to the destructive new ideologies of Edgar.

In a later age, even more hardened and skeptical than the poet's own, Tennyson's ideals have sometimes been judged archaic, hypocritical, or blissfully naive; and the plays, because they epitomize the poet's conservative convictions, have been dismissed at the same time. However, more readers, whether they embrace Tennysonian values or not, are seeing that the poet came by his beliefs honestly and did not blithely take up the cause of traditionalism. Although the Laureate's dramas came late in his career, so late in fact that his opinions, as well as his poetic style, are fairly predictable, perhaps the most admirable quality of Tennyson's plays is the remarkable energy, the continuing

creativity, the fresh reaffirmation of commitment to his country. Surely the drama, which the poet esteemed as the most humanizing of literary influences, may finally be regarded in Tennyson criticism not as a frivolous mistake unworthy of attention, but instead as a rich deposit from which may be mined a fuller understanding of both the art and the humanity of Victorian England's greatest literary spokesman.

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