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Beyond Compare: Nineteenth Century Poets and the Stigmatization of Genre

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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What is "a classic"? The OED defines it as: "A writer, or a literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence". Significantly the etymology also links it with another English noun: "class". This suggests that the idea of literary worth conveyed by "classic", and the idea of categorization implied by "class" are deeply intertwined. Starting in what is usually referred to as the Romantic Period, many writers seemed eager to reject such labels altogether. I believe that this is because, around the turn of the nineteenth century, genre itself acquired a kind of stigma, which continued to be felt keenly throughout Victorian period -consciously literary writers, such as Keats and Tennyson, seemed particularly sensitive to this stigma, and both poets apparently took pains to evade overt classification in their work. By examining the various strategies that two these influential poets adopted for avoiding established definitions throughout their careers, I hope, not only to show their own growing suspicion towards fixed labels, but also to make a case that this trend in their writing reflects a more widespread change in attitude towards genre; a change which not only colored the work of many nineteenth century writers, but can be seen even today, in our ideas about what is worth reading and studying.

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Introduction: Classics without Class?

What is a classic?

What is "a classic?" For most people, the word brings to mind something very like the OED's leading entry: "**1.** A writer, or a literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence." But, if the definition is unsurprising, the etymology provided is more interesting. The dictionary traces this use of "classic" in English to the French *classique* or the Latin *classicus.* It then, significantly, refers the reader to another English noun: "class" combined with the suffix "-ic." The final part of this etymology stands out because it suggests that the idea of literary worth conveyed by "classic," and the idea of categorization implied by "class" are deeply intertwined. Naturally, the exact nature of this relationship varies greatly from period to period. Starting in what is usually referred to as the Romantic Period, many writers seemed eager to reject such labels altogether. I believe that this is because, around the turn of the nineteenth century, genre itself acquired a kind of stigma, which continued to be felt keenly throughout Victorian period. Self-consciously literary writers, such as Keats and Tennyson, seemed particularly sensitive to this stigma, and both poets apparently took pains to evade overt classification in their work. By examining the various strategies that these two influential poets adopted for avoiding established definitions throughout their careers, I hope, not only to show their own growing suspicion towards fixed labels, but also to make a case that this trend in their writing reflects a more widespread change in attitude towards genre, a change which not only colored the work of many nineteenth century

writers, but can also be seen in our ideas about what is worth reading and studying well into the twentieth century.

Each after is Kind: The Response to Paradise Lost as an Illustration of Pre-Romantic Genre and its Functions

Before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a work's classification generally affected the judgment of its literary merit in two ways. Firstly, it located the work within a hierarchy of "types". Secondly, it provided a standard which allowed the writing to be measured against other works of the same type. This is not to imply that notions of genre were rigid or unchanging before the advent of "Romanticism." On the contrary, both the categories themselves and the amount of prestige they carried were subject to change. But no matter how drastically a genre was redefined or revaluated, its basic role in determining a work's status was fairly stable.

The early criticism surrounding *Paradise Lost* provides one particularly influential case in point. A glance through the 17th and early 18th century documents included in *The Critical Response to John Milton's Paradise Lost* shows what a pervasive concern genre was in the discussion. Indeed, it is the lens through which the overwhelming majority of these responses examine the poem. The question of whether *Paradise Lost* could be considered "epic" or "heroic" was so pervasive that in 1712, Addison begins one of his first articles on the poem in *The Spectator* by brusquely dismissing the controversy in terms that simply assume his readers' familiarity with it.

…I shall wave the Discussion of that Point which has started some

Years since, Whether *Milton's Paradise Lost* may be called an Heroic

Poem? Those who will not give it that Title, may call it (if they

please) a Divine Poem. It will be sufficient… if it has in it all the

Beauties of the highest kind of Poetry; and as for those who allege it is

not an Heroick Poem, they advance no more to the Diminution of it,

than if they should say *Adam* is not *Aeneas*, nor *Eve Helen*."

(Addison, 66)

Clearly, Addison felt that the "Discussion" in question had been widespread and

prominent enough that there was no need to remind the reader of its details, and, indeed,

his weary tone implies that so much has already been written on the subject that it would

be redundant to say more. In addition to indicating the central place that the "point" of

generic labels held in earlier discussions of the poem, the fact that Addison still feels the

need to begin his essay by addressing a question that he admits has little interest for him,

in itself, suggests just how important the issue was. Moreover, in spite of his decision to

"wave" the question of exactly what to call the poem, Addison goes on to assess it in

distinctly generic terms. His implication seems to be that even if the work is not exactly

an epic in the strict classical sense, as the highest form of poetry this category still

provides the best framework of rules and comparisons on which to base his judgments.

The fact that the idea of trying to form a critical judgment without such a framework, or

in other words of "waving the discussion" of genre altogether, never seems to occur to

him, although he is clearly impatient with the semantics of classification, is perhaps one

of the clearest illustrations of the importance such definitions held as critical tools before

the turn of the nineteenth century.

In addition to illustrating the overall importance of genre for pre-Romantic

critics, the controversy over how to "class" *Paradise Lost* provides enough examples of

exactly how this relationship between classification and evaluation functioned to suggest

a few basic patterns. The concern was not, as later eras might assume, simply a

reflection of the neo-classical obsession with order and rules. Certainly, genre was used,

at least in part, as a measure of prestige. Comparing *Paradise Lost* favorably to the

works of Homer and Virgil has been one of the most common ways of praising the poem

almost since its publication. One of the most prominent instances is Dryden's epigram,

which was used as the frontispiece of the fourth edition of the poem,

> Three poets in three distant ages born,
>
> Greece Italy and England did adorn
>
> The first in loftiness of thought surpassed
>
> The next in majesty, in both the last:
>
> The force of nature could no farther go;
>
> To make a third, she joined the former two. (Dryden 31)

The highest compliment that Dryden can pay his fellow author is to claim that he

embodied the best qualities of his two most famous epic predecessors.[1] Moreover,

Milton's departures from his classical models were a consistent focus of the criticism

leveled against *Paradise Lost*, even among those who admired it. Dryden's tentative

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[1] Samuel Barrows Latin poem, "In Paradisum Ammissum' Summi Poetae Johannis Miltoni," which was actually included in the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, takes a similar tack in praising the poem (Barrow 27).

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objection that "his [Milton's] Subject is not that of an Heroique poem; properly so called…" because "his Event is not prosperous, like all that of all other *Epique* works," is a perfect example of this attitude (Dryden 32). Although Dryden's "epigram" shows the high regard in which he held Milton and clearly implies that he considered *Paradise Lost* at least the equal of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, he is still troubled enough by its departure from those models to raise the "point" about its genre that Addison would later feel compelled to acknowledge, even while dismissing it. Likewise, some of the poem's detractors did directly dispute its worth by denying its epic status. Charles Leslie's contemptuous assertion that *Paradise Lost* has "degraded" scripture to "even into a *Play*, which was Design'd to have been *Acted* upon the *Stage"* not only places Milton's poem in a less prestigious category than "Heroic poetry," it explicitly presents that category as a "degradation," (Leslie 48).

As Addison's comments imply, however, uncertainly about whether *Paradise Lost* ought to be considered an epic was not always intended to denigrate the work. The poem's defenders, for instance, did not respond solely by minimizing Milton's departures from classical models, or by trying to draw them back in line with more traditional conceptions of epic. Some did follow this strategy, of course. [2] But just as many argued that there was no need for such justification. These critics claimed that Milton's work redefined or even transcended classical epic and therefore was not bound

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[2] Although he was, in general, no admirer of *Paradise Lost*, Johnson takes this line when he answers those charges against the poem that he feels are misplaced. For instance, he replies Dryden's claim that the hero of *Paradise Lost* is difficult to identify by making a clear case that it is Adam, rather than following an argument like Addison's, which claimed that a hero was unnecessary to Milton's design for the poem. (Johnson 106; Addison 82)

by its conventions. Perhaps the clearest formulation of this viewpoint was Samuel Wesley's assertion that "He [Milton] seems rather above the common Rules of Epic than ignorant of them" (Wesley 36). John Dennis' defense of the poem, which claims "the choice of *Milton's* subject …set him free from the Obligation which he lay under to the Poetical Laws," is another instance of this logic (Dennis 56).

Even those who did consider the poem's generic ambiguities a significant flaw did not necessarily base their arguments around its formal departures from the conventions of epic. In many cases, they seem to take much the same view of the subject as Addison. The question of whether *Paradise Lost* could be called an epic, in the strictest sense of the word, was a secondary concern in determining whether it was worthy of a place beside the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Most of these critics also seemed to view genre as a framework that defined the terms in which any literary work could be evaluated. Their objections appear to be less a response to the poem's particular departures from the guidelines of its chosen framework than to the sense that they stem from an attempt to operate outside that framework, leaving critics no valid standard on which to base their judgment of the work. This reaction suggests a second function of genre in determining literary worth. In addition to serving as measures of prestige in themselves, generic labels were also crucial in determining exactly what made an exemplary work of any type. Not only did Milton's early critics consider it unnecessary for a great work to invent an entirely original literary category, many of them frowned on the attempt, because it robbed the reader of a valuable tool for understanding, and forming an opinion of, the text.

Romance and Romanticism: Embracing an anti-genre?

An examination of works published during and after the turn of the nineteenth century, and the critical responses surrounding them suggests a very different view of genre. In the first place, unlike earlier works, even those which, like *Paradise Lost*, attempted to redefine the categories to which they belonged, the most influential works of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century seem deliberately to evade such classifications altogether. This idea gains credibility from the fact that such an attitude would be a plausible -- even likely -- reaction to the social and political upheavals of the time. The French Revolution provided a vivid challenge to the very idea of "class" as something pure or natural. In many ways, the notion of clear divisions, based on innate, stable, characteristics was not simply undesirable, it was no longer viable. It is easy to believe that these developments served to bring home the problematic and constructed nature of all types of categorization. This realization struck conservative writers like Edmund Burke, who lamented this apparent disintegration as forcefully as the more liberal authors who celebrated it.[3]

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[3] I do not think it is a coincidence that Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the "open letter" which contains his famous dirge for the "the age of chivalry" and the order and stability it represented was ostensibly prompted by what amounts to a violation of genre. Burke claims to be writing his treatise at least partially in response to Richard Prices' "extraordinary miscellaneous sermon." He describes at as piece "in which there are some good moral and religious sentiments, and not ill expressed, *mixed up* in a sort of porridge of *various* political opinions and reflections," (Burke 7, emphasis mine). The language which equates "mixing" and "miscellany" with disorder and impropriety is clear, as is its opposition to the vanishing world of chivalry, with its significant virtue of not "confounding ranks" (Burke 43) . It is not equally apparent that violation he complains of is specifically one of genre. Still, the sermon *was* an established literary "type," and a scholar like Burke would no doubt have been conscious of this. Indeed, his emphasis on the traditions and expectations associated with the form, his enumeration of its various "strains" (healthy and unhealthy), and his pointed reference to the speaker's "literary" reputation all suggest that this was precisely how he was thinking of them this particular passage (Burke 7). Viewed in this light, his diatribe against "harangues from the pulpit," and his assertion that "politics and the pulpit are terms that have little agreement" seem to be prompted as much by the sense that including worldly,

Certainly, authors of every shade of political opinion made analogies between literature

and social questions. This link is in fact, one of the few things on which Burke, the

archconservative, and Percy Shelley, the radical liberal, agreed. Burke, in *Reflections on*

the Revolution in France, asserts that the

> …precept given by a wise man, as well as a great critic, for the construction of
>
> poems is equally true as to states: — Non satis est pulchra esse poemata, dulcia
>
> sunto. There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-
>
> informed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our
>
> country ought to be lovely (Burke 44);

Shelley takes the same logic one step further. The central argument of his *Defense of*

Poetry, summed up in his conclusion that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of

the world," is that literature is not only a fitting analogy for a country's political system

and moral ethos but that it is also quite literally both the reflection of and the motive

force behind them.

The very characterization of Romanticism as a rejection of "established forms,"

impatient with all authority dates back to hostile conservative reviews of the poets,

which quite deliberately conflated their political opinions with the stylistic traits they

adopted in their writing (Perkins 131). In light of such conflations, it is easy to believe

that even those authors who longed for a return of the kind of order and stability

represented by clearly defined genres would have trouble crediting such absolute

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government affairs in a religious address was a violation of rhetorical "decorum" as by a strong belief in
the separation of church and state (Burke 7).

boundaries-- and would therefore view any work that too easily or confidently laid claim to them with suspicion.

Nor was this suggestive questioning of class and classification in the social and political realm the only trend likely to lead to suspicion of genre around the turn of the nineteenth century. The same period also saw a widespread valorization of obscurity and indescribability in art and literature.[4] Burke's highly influential characterization of "the sublime" in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, which depends in no small part on vagueness and uncertainty, is probably the clearest statement of this aesthetic (Burke 99110). The idea that classifiability could, in itself, be a sign of inferiority is not only a plausible extension of this aesthetic: it is an almost inevitable consequence of it. If, as Burke argues, "a clear idea is but another name for a little idea" how can a "great" piece of writing submit to the boundaries of a clearly defined genre (Burke 108)?

Finally, the notion that genre became stigmatized during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century makes sense of several inexplicable, even apparently contradictory, trends typically associated with this period. For instance, this suspicion of genre may shed some light on why the concern with originality and creativity appeared to take on a new, perhaps unprecedented, urgency and intensity. Even though, as many critics have pointed out, an interest in these attributes was by no means unique to the turn of the nineteenth century, there seemed to be an almost qualitative shift in the

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[4] This is not the place to pursue the question of whether the two trends were related, although given the common conflation of poetry and politics discussed above, some link seems more than plausible.

emphasis placed on them. This change in attitude would make perfect sense, however, if one of the primary methods that earlier authors used to negotiate this kind of tricky interaction with their predecessors was in the process of becoming a literary taboo.

Generic frameworks, would, in fact, give writers just such a means of acknowledging, and even joining, a tradition without threatening their sense of "individual talent." Again, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a useful case in point. The invocation to the muse is one of the strongest generic markers of epic. It seems particularly significant, therefore that Milton voices his ambition to "soar above the Aonian Mount" in his *own* invocation (Milton 1:14-15). This statement is, perhaps, the clearest example of how he can simultaneously tie his work to, and distinguish it from, that of his classical predecessors. But the force of his claims depend on the reader's recognition of the poem's genre. Many of the other generic markers in *Paradise Lost* function in almost the same way. For example, the catalogue of devils in book one at once references the similar listing of ships and armies in the works of Homer and Virgil and doubly repudiates those works. Not only does Milton use this standard feature of classical epic to literally transform his predecessors' deities into demons; by applying it to Satan's troop, he implicitly condemns the glorification of martial values such catalogues embodied in earlier epics (Milton 1: 376-586). But, if, as I suggest, generic signals as clear Milton's invocation were increasingly being branded as signs of literary inferiority around the turn of the nineteenth century, they would no longer be readily available as a way of connecting to the past. In short, a growing suspicion of genre could

easily produce exactly the kind of anxiety over poetic roots that has long been seen as a trademark of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The idea that generic labels developed a kind of stigma also provides a new lens through which to view the suspicion of "established forms" that has become almost proverbial in descriptions of the period. Even if this trait has been exaggerated or oversimplified, the sense that *something* in the way writers and critics approached these traditional forms changed drastically around the time in question has been far too widely accepted by scholars in the field to simply dismiss it. Yet on some levels, this is assumption is somewhat puzzling. As Stuart Curran persuasively argues in his book *Poetic Form and British Romanticism,* an examination of the poetry written around the turn of the nineteenth century hardly shows a rejection of poetic *form*, as such. Meter, rhyme-scheme, and the other "formal" components received just as much critical attention as at any other period, and were just as widely and intricately used. But, form, as Curran himself points out, is not necessarily synonymous with genre (Curran, 9). Therefore, there is no reason why it should, in itself, provoke the same ambivalent reaction. At the same time, formal elements have typically functioned as some of the strongest *markers* of genre, particularly in poetry. Given this, it makes perfect sense that authors would take pains to separate their own use of form as necessary and flexible poetic resource, from its more restrictive function, as a means classification. Curran notes just such a separation, although he argues that it is the former, rather than the latter which fell out of favor during the period in question (9-13; 3637). Nonetheless his very descriptions of the Romantic penchant for redefining or transforming each of the genres

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he discusses fits far more neatly with my own explanations (Curran 13, 36, 99). This persistent need to alter and revise generic categories suggests that, although the authors in question were perfectly willing to evoke aspects of traditional genres, their names, and what Alistair Fowler might call their features, they were reluctant to adopt these labels as they were, an attitude which might well indicate a certain wariness about the fixed definitions such labels represented (Fowler 55-56).

It is true that the notion of form becoming suspect in the early nineteenth century can, in part, be traced to a simple preference for irregular meters in a number influential works, such as Samuel Coleridge's "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan," and Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Furthermore, this irregularity was, itself, a generic marker associated with medieval verse romances. This explanation implies a mere reevaluation of the existing generic hierarchy, rather than the wholesale rejection of genre itself that I have been suggesting. The fact that the most common designation for the period in question, "The Romantic Period," presumably stems from its affinities with this same romance genre would tend to support this view. But, as David Perkins' article, "The Construction of the 'Romantic Movement' as a Literary Classification" points out, the designation is, at best, retrospective, and, at worst, anachronistic and politically motivated (Perkins, 129-143). Moreover, I would argue that, even if one does choose to take the description "romantic" at face value, the title is still more suggestive of a resistance to easy labels than the opposite.

To begin with, by the time Coleridge used the term in an 1812 lecture, "romantic" was not simply a generic designation. The word had also become recognized

antonym for "classical." In fact, according to the dates recorded in the OED, this appears to have been its most common usage in the early nineteenth century.[5] But, even taking, "romance" in the narrowest sense -- as a generic category in its own right -- the point stands. As genres go, "romance" is notoriously amorphous. Gillian Beer's survey on the topic for the *Critical Idiom* series, *The Romance,* begins by readily conceding the difficulty of the subsuming what she calls its "wildly various" forms under a single definition (Beer 4). Northrup Frye's study of the subject, *Secular Scripture*, also recognizes this breath of definition and even Patricia Parker's far more specific examination of verse-romances in *Inescapable Romance* explicitly acknowledges this aspect of the genre (Frye 4-5, Parker 4-5, 14). Virginia Woolf, half a century earlier, makes the point even more strongly and succinctly, claiming simply, "You cannot define Romance" (*Collected Essays* 2: 73). The word has been applied plausibly to works ranging in date from ancient Greece to the twentieth century; it covers verse, prose, and drama equally, and spans both sides of the literary-popular divide. While no classification is absolute, and all genres have their muddy areas, it would be hard to imagine a similar diversity in a discussion of the epic or, on the other side of the "high"/ "low" culture gap, the detective story.

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[5] Between the years 1812-1830 there are five entries for this definition. No other variant has more than three entries, and most have only one. Though this definition does not include any explicit suggestion that "romance" is resistant to categorization, the way that it was placed deliberately in opposition to a word whose etymology ties it so closely to the *class*ification certainly allows for the inference. The idea is strengthened by the fact that "classic" seems to have fallen out of favor as term of praise around the same time. The OED only gives one example of the adjective being used this sense between 1780 and 1830, and records none for the noun.

Neither the suggestion that the label changed over time, nor the assumption that it was applied uncritically can fully account for this variety. Such assumptions, even if they were satisfactory on all other levels, still suggest no reason why "romance" is so much more prone to this kind of sloppy labeling than other, more uniform genres. These suggestions also do not explain what made these labels plausible enough to be as widely and persistently accepted as they have been. But, most importantly, the idea that the diversity of romance is purely the result "misclassification" simply does not hold up under close scrutiny. As varied as "romances" are in comparison to works in other genres, they still share enough significant elements to make it both plausible and productive to consider them as a group. The various critical discussions which trace the structural and thematic continuities between "romances" all demonstrate this point in one way or another.[6] Thematically, preoccupations with mysterious origins, naming, and doubling, as well as a fascination with wandering, transformation, and hybridity are frequently cited as distinguishing features of Romance. These points, notably, all center on blurring boundaries and shifting, uncertain identities (Frye 4-5; Parker 8-9). Likewise, the formal characteristic most commonly associated with romance as a generic label is a tendency towards "looseness" "openness" and "expansion." Both David Quint in *Epic and Empire* and Parker emphasize not only the preference for irregular metrical schemes, which had such an impact on poets writing around the turn of the nineteenth century but also the loosely connected, episodic plot structures of the

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[6] I have already mentioned several examples, most notably Frye's *Secular Scripture*, and Beer's *Romance.*

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verse romances they discuss, which, as a result, seem to have no fixed or natural endpoint. Moreover, Quint and Parker each connect these formal attributes with the works' thematic tendency to question or resist identity (Parker 3-15, Quint 248).[7] While neither critic explicitly extends these implications to category itself, it is no great leap to connect individual romances' penchant for challenging or disregarding limits on so many levels with the breadth and flexibility of "Romance" as a whole. When questions of identity are such a prevalent and troubled subject within the works themselves, is it any wonder that it presents a problem for the critics studying them? The very traits that make it plausible to link so many disparate types of writing under the heading of "romance" are, by and large, the same elements which give the term its shifting, protean quality. This suggests that the real hallmark of "romance" may be its propensity to actively resist classification, that, in fact, the "indefinability" of romance is in itself, its defining trait. Viewed in this light, romance is less a genre, marked by a concrete set of rules and traditions, to be followed, engaged with, questioned, or even defied, than an anti-genre, held together by its resistance to the very notion of such classification. If so, its attraction for the writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century only strengthens the impression that they shared this same mistrust of easy categorization. In this sense "romantic" is, indeed, an apt description of the period, no matter how anachronistic its application.

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[7] Although Beer does not draw the same conclusion, she also notes this tendency, particularly in Medieval and Renaissance romances (20-21).

At the very least, a tendency to blur generic distinctions was a trait shared by many of the most influential poets of the period. Even limiting the discussion to the poets whose work formed the core of the "Romantic" curriculum for the better part of the twentieth century, the trend is clear. William Blake not only questioned the boundaries between poetic genres, but even between poetry and other forms of art, particularly the visual arts. He refused to publish his poetry in any form except his own handmade engravings, which deliberately intertwined words and images so as to make them all but inseparable. Even if one could comfortably ignore that fact and focus solely on verbal components of Blake's work, only *Songs of Innocence*, which does roughly follow the conventions of the pastoral lyric, could plausibly be described in the established generic terms of the late eighteenth century. Its companion piece, *Songs of Experience*, which formally also appears to be composed of lyrics, begins with an invocation more suggestive of epic (Blake "Introduction" 1-20). Blake's other works, such as *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* are even harder to place within traditional categories. Both works mix prose and verse freely, and as the title of the latter suggests, are just as eager to challenge accepted boundaries in their content.

Likewise, many of George Gordon Byron's most successful works subtly challenge traditional generic boundaries. *Manfred*, for instance, draws on Gothic fiction for its plot and subject matter; the use of curses, ghosts, and demons, as well as the suggestion of incest all suggest a common ancestry with such works as *The Monk* and *The Castle of Otranto*. And yet it presents these elements, already branded as "lowbrow"

and "popular," in the form of Aristotle's most prestigious genre: the tragedy. Stage adaptations of gothic fiction were commonplace to the point of cliché in the late eighteenth century. But *Manfred*'s structure as a series of confrontations, its compression into a single day, and, perhaps most significantly, its flawedbutnoble hero, who brings about his own downfall, all bear a closer resemblance to Sophocles than to the novels of Matthew "Monk" Lewis or Anne Radcliff. *Don Juan* shows similar generic ambiguities. At first glance, the poem seems like a clear example of mock-epic. Yet it rises repeatedly out of the satiric register in which it begins. The echoes of Homer and Virgil surrounding Don Juan's waking on the beach after the shipwreck read without a trace of satire or sarcasm (Byron 2: 857- 880). Likewise, despite a certain ironic distance towards the strictures of conventional morality, the Miltonic allusions to Adam and Eve in the descriptions of Juan and Haidee later in the canto are more poignant than comic (Byron 2:1505-1544). These shifts are not, in themselves, incompatible with the conventions mock-epic. Both *The Dunciad* and *The Rape of the Lock*, for instance, contain similar ambiguities in tone. But they are not the poem's only generic contradiction. *Don Juan*'s loose, seemingly irresolvable structure of departs from the conventions of *both* epic and its parodic twin. The fact that the poem is unfinished seems particularly significant, given that the two other best known attempts to write traditional epics during the early nineteenth century are also incomplete: William Wordsworth's *The Recluse* and John Keats' *Hyperion*. I will return this point in more detail; for now it is enough to say that genre appears to be a conscious concern in both these works, and

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that *Hyperion* in particular seems to use its fragmentary nature quite deliberately to evade generic strictures.

Whether or not a desire to avoid clear labels was the reason for this flurry of unfinished epics, it is certain that the trend coincided with an equally strong tendency towards works which challenged traditional generic boundaries. William Wordsworth, in most other ways the polar opposite of Byron, either challenged or ignored these strictures almost from the beginning of his career. His first major publication, *Lyrical Ballads*, contains a distinct generic contradiction its very title. Current descriptions of "lyric" and "ballad" present them as almost diametrically opposed forms. The glossary of the *Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Romantics and their Contemporaries* defines "ballad" as "a *narrative* poem in short stanzas," while "lyric" is described as "a poem, brief and discontinuous, emphasizing sound and pictorial imagery *rather than narrative or dramatic movement*," (1106, 1117 emphasis mine). Even if the sharp distinction the Longman glossary makes between the genres, based on their different attitudes towards narrative, was less firmly established during Wordsworth's lifetime, there is little doubt that it was forming. [8] Wordsworth himself seems to link ballads implicitly with the idea of narrative and presents his own departures from this convention as one of his collections "innovations." In particular, the narrator's assumption that the reader "expects a tale" in "Simon Lee," one of the few poems in the collection written entirely in traditional ballad meter, indicates how closely Wordsworth

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[8] In fact, far from distinguishing the two forms, the OED actually defines ballad as a type of lyric, though this usage is marked as obsolete.

associates the two ideas (72-73). His pointed refusal to relate the anticipated tale also suggests a desire to challenge this convention-- perhaps in an effort to make this ballad "lyrical." Furthermore, even if "lyric" and "ballad" were not yet seen as mutually exclusive in their formal elements, the two genres had already migrated to opposite sides of the divide between high and low culture.[9]

One can see traces of this same (perhaps unacknowledged) frustration with generic conventions in the *Preface* that accompanied the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads.* Indeed, I would argue that this frustration is at the root of much of Wordsworth's defensiveness against the "mechanical devices of style" he claims to be rejecting (Wordsworth 244).[i] The impression is strengthened by the way he attributes the reader's desire for these "conventions" to the false expectations they have taken from former works -- in much the same way as generic conventions are absorbed Certainly his speculation that "by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association;" cannot help but recall John Frow's description of the way generic markers can guide readers' responses (Wordsworth 241, Frow 6-12). Moreover, the manner in which Wordsworth's *Preface* cautions his readers against "convention" is very much like the one that he adopts within

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[9] This split can even be seen to some extent in words' respective etymologies. Ballad is derived from the vernacular for "to dance" (old French and Spanish rather than Latin or Greek). It is even possible to view dancing itself as a more or less "popular" pastime, in that people of any class or level of refinement could participate in it, and in that, perhaps as result, it had a certain carnivalesque potential to challenge such boundaries. "Lyric" on the other hand is derived directly from the Greek for Lyre. This ties the word doubly to the classical world, both through its literal linguistic origins, and through its source in the connection between poetry and the mythical figure of Apollo and his chosen instrument. The fact that it is a sacred instrument only increases the suggestion of prestige around the genre.

his works when he is challenging generic strictures. For example, frustration at the "degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation" that he claims is responsible for forming such erroneous expectations bears a marked resemblance the gentler admonition against the distinctly generic hunger for narrative in *Simon Lee*, which the narrator suggests would be better satisfied by "such silent stores/ as thought can bring" (Wordsworth, *Preface* 224"Simon Lee" 74).). The parallel strengthens the impression that the sentiments expressed in the preface are prompted by the same impulse to balk easy classification that can be seen in his deliberate refusal to "relate a tale" in "Simon Lee."

The fact that this challenge is expressed in large part as a challenge to the traditional boundaries between prose and verse further strengthens the idea that Wordsworth's attitude is intimately linked to, and perhaps even prompted by, questions about literary classification. Indeed, in some ways the *Preface* almost seems like an effort to fulfill some of genre's traditional functions while avoiding the limitations associated with the more standard labels and conventions. Wordsworth's stated reason for writing the *Preface* -- to clarify "what I have proposed to myself to perform; and also….to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined the me in the choice of my purpose," and thus prevent his readers from misunderstanding his "innovative" work, is highly reminiscent of the way Milton's critics used generic definitions to determine exactly how given work should be judged (Wordsworth 242). By setting his goals out in his preface, Wordsworth gives his readers an alternative, individualized, frame work on which to base their judgments.

Shelley, likewise, was no lover of convention, or of any system of firm and absolute classification. If nothing else, the broad definition of "poetry" that he offers in his *Defense of Poetry* gives some indication of his attitude (Shelley 290-293). The highly personalized, and by no means "classical," ideas about what gives a poem "epic" status that he expresses in the same work confirm and strengthen this impression (302,303). [10] As one might expect, his own writing seldom acknowledges traditional generic boundaries. In several cases the point can be made simply by examining the titles of his works. For instance, as a self-declared sequel to Aeschylus, one would expect *Prometheus Unbound* to fall clearly within the tradition of Greek tragedy. But Shelley complicates this identification almost instantly, with the subtitle that labels the work, instead, a "Lyrical Drama," a designation which challenges the standard definitions of the categories it refers to at least as pointedly as *Lyrical Ballads*. Not coincidentally, the preface that follows this highly ambiguous subtitle consists largely of a defense of the work's originality, which suggests just how closely this quality was linked with the ability to evade genre. *The Mask of Anarchy* contains an even more striking contradiction. Shelley's spelling of the title, when he mentions it in his letter to

[10] This attempt to redefine epic might be taken as evidence that, far from rejecting the idea of genre as I have been suggesting, Shelley was just as concerned with questions of classifications as his predecessors. However, there is a qualitative difference between Shelley's deliberations and earlier debates about the subject, such as the one detailed above surrounding *Paradise Lost.* Those discussions centered on exactly how far a known and accepted definition could be extended. Shelley, on the other hand, appears to be questioning the meaning of the category altogether. The fact that he felt it necessary to ask this question, especially of a genre as strongly defined as epic has been for most of its history, only shows how unstable the classical literary definitions had become for him. Furthermore, I would argue that by the time Shelley finally does "define" what constitutes an epic, it is not really a generic term in the classical sense at all. On the contrary, it seems to function far more like an ordinary adjective, a word that describes the qualities of linguistic grandeur, lasting impact, and social insight common to the works he is discussing, without implying any more specific formal or thematic connections between them.

Leigh Hunt, makes it clear that "Mask" refers as much to the theatrical genre of the "masque" as to the common noun (Damrosch et al, "Introductory note to 'Mask of Anarchy'" 824). It has often been observed that since masques were traditionally a royalist genre, held in honor of the king and his court, identifying a poem of political protest with the form, even indirectly, holds a certain biting irony (Damrosch et al, 824). But the equally pointed defiance of *generic* conventions in the title has been largely overlooked. In addition to, or perhaps because of, their conservative political tendencies, masques as a genre were practically synonymous with the celebration of harmony and order. In dedicating his masque/mask to anarchy, Shelley turns his title into a deliberate generic oxymoron. The example is a particularly useful one, because, in addition to demonstrating Shelley's complete disregard for established literary categories, the way that the challenge to literary classification in the title of "The Mask of Anarchy" is almost inextricably intertwined with its political protest suggests how just how strong the link between such *class*ification and its etymological roots in "class" remained at this point in the early nineteenth century.

Further examples could be multiplied almost endlessly. But, though they certainly suggests a penchant for questioning generic boundaries in the early nineteenth century, in themselves, they give no indication of what prompted this questioning. A suspicion of classification would provide one plausible explanation for the trend, but more is needed to make the case that genre was actually stigmatized. Far more significant, from this point of view, were the difficulties that works which *did* define themselves clearly in terms of genre frequently encountered. Sometimes firm generic

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labels appeared to daunt the writers themselves so badly that they found themselves

unable to even complete the works in question. I have already mentioned that most of

the poems cast explicitly in the epic model during this period remained unfinished.

While there is little evidence to suggest whether or not anxiety about classification

played any role in determining the form of *Don Juan*, it was certainly in the forefront of

Wordsworth's mind when he began planning his unfinished epic, *The Recluse*. Even his

"Prospectus" for the poem begins with a flurry of unmistakable, almost ostentatious

generic markers.[11] But, despite this clear cut plan for the poem, which seems to have

been in place at least as early as 1799, Wordsworth never completed the project --

finishing only one of the three intended books. The terms in which he writes about his

magnum opus, particularly his references to it in *The Prelude*, suggest that it was not

simply a lack of time, or absorption in other work that prevented him from completing

the poem. He describes his attempts to write a traditional epic as though he is literally

unable to do so (Prelude 1:146-269). Nor does it seem plausible that he was merely

daunted by the magnitude of the project. *The Prelude,* after all, is comparable in length,

and no less ambitious in subject matter. [12] Furthermore, Wordsworth had the constant

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[11] The first eighteen lines of the "Prospectus" are essentially an elaborate invocation to the muses. In fact, it is possible to read the entire piece as an invocation, which is one of the strongest, most clear-cut signals that the author is embarking on a classical epic. The point is underlined by the almost continuous references to *Paradise Lost* in the piece. Milton's poem was widely considered the foremost example of epic English at the time. Although allusions to it were frequent in works of every genre, this reputation meant that references to the poem were often used to lay claim, if not to epic status *per se*, at least to a certain type of poetic grandeur. In this context, where they openly invite comparison between Milton's opus and Wordsworth's promised work, they almost certainly serve to emphasize *The Recluse's* generic aspirations.

[12] In fact, not only are the subjects comparable, they bear a striking resemblance. In his prospectus to *The Recluse* he announces "the main region of my song" as "…my soul…the soul of man…" (Wordsworth, "Prospectus" 28-29). "The Growth of the Poet's mind," the subtitle and stated topic of *The Prelude*, may

encouragement and reassurance of friends, particularly Coleridge.[13] Wordsworth himself seems at a loss to understand the source of this poetic paralysis, prompting the lengthy "self-examination" of *The Prelude* (I: 129-286).[14] But what I find most significant about this "preparatory" poem is its notoriously protean form. Wordsworth radically reconceived its structure at least four times. [15] Even the final, fourteen-book version is remarkably difficult to pin down in generic terms, drawing almost equally on the traditions of epic, the epistolary poem, the autobiography and too many others to count (Damrosch et al 452).

Of course, as Derrida reminds us, *all* writing incorporates features from multiple genres. ("Law of Genre" 65). And yet, in most classes of writing, one set of conventions clearly predominates. Even where other traditions are explicitly acknowledged, this is typically done in ways that subordinate them to the works "main" genre, and therefore leave little doubt in the readers' mind as to how they are intended to place the text. For instance, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the classical epic *par excellence,* incorporates many features

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be slightly more specific, but is certainly related, and no less grand. Indeed, considering the central role that the cultivation of such a "higher mind" plays in Wordsworth's very concept of spirituality, one might argue that the themes are virtually interchangeable (Prelude 10: 63-119).

[13] Coleridge's letter of May 30, 1815 is a good example of his confidence in his friend's abilities to produce such a sublime work, despite his opinion that *The Excursion*, the only completed part of the projected opus, falls short of those abilities.

[14] Harold Bloom would doubtless attribute his difficulties to an "anxiety of influence" prompted by the explicitly

Miltonic terms in which Wordsworth conceived the *Recluse* (Bloom 31-32). But this "covering cherub" is just as visibly present in the *Prelude* (which, after all, begins by declaring that "the earth is all before him") suggesting some other, more complex source of anxiety at work in *Recluse* (Wordsworth *Prelude*, 14).

[15] The original *Two Part Prelude*, *The Five Book Prelude*, *The Thirteen Book Prelude*, and the final *Fourteen Book Prelude*.

usually associated with "romance" through its absorption of Homer's *Odyssey*. But those

features are included in ways which contain and ultimately reject them (Quint 315,

Parker 43). Though the associations are extensive, they are almost exclusively with

Dido, Carthage, and all that the hero must ultimately leave behind. Consequently, there

is no confusion over where the poem's generic allegiance lies. Indeed, this explicit

rejection of "romance" confirms the *Aeneid*'s identity as epic far more firmly than

simple avoidance could. Even David Quint, who grants the *Aeneid*'s use of romance

conventions such importance that he suggests no epic after it can avoid incorporating

such "romance" elements still does not question the generic classification of either the

Aeneid or its decedents (Quint 340). *The Prelude* does not use any such strong cues to

tell us which of the numerous, and sometimes conflicting, generic signals to attend to,

and which to ignore or reject. The "glad preamble" begins with a pointed allusion to the

ending of *Paradise Lost*, suggesting that his poem is deliberately picking up just where

its epic predecessor left off. The consideration of "some old/ romantic tale by Milton left

unsung" for his subject which follows seems to confirm this reading. At first glance,

both references seem like clear invitations to read *The Prelude* as a part the epic

tradition. And yet, these unmistakable epic signals occur in a "preamble," not a classical

invocation, and the unwritten Miltonic work he wishes to complete is, specifically, a

romance. These kind of contradictory, yet equally valid, and more importantly, equally

prominent, generic markers continue throughout the poem, and they make classifying

The Prelude a qualitatively different kind of problem from analyzing the importance of

similar signals in more clearly defined poems like the *Aeneid*. Indeed, Wordsworth was,

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apparently, so reluctant to define the poem that he did not even give it a title, let alone a generic label. During his lifetime he referred to it simply as his "Poem to Coleridge: Title not yet Fixed Upon" (Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill ix). The fact that this attempt to "prepare himself" for the rigors of classical epic, and even more strikingly, to analyze why *The Recluse* had daunted him, ends in such a refusal all of labels, such an insistence on radical indeterminacy, lends a certain credence to the idea that his hesitation had to do with genre. Taken together with Wordsworth's tendency to evade or challenge generic boundaries in his other work, and the lack of other satisfactory explanations for his anxiety, the theory becomes even more convincing. As I have already indicated, anxieties about firm, poetic definitions are even more evident in Keats' struggles with *Hyperion*, a point I will address in detail in my first chapter. In many ways his unfinished epic, and indeed his entire body of work, can be read as a case and point which comes as close as possible to crystallizing the stigmatization of genre that I have been describing.

This brings me to another point I wish to emphasize: it was not any particular genre, but generic labels in themselves that became stigmatized around the turn of the nineteenth century. If the discussion above focuses largely on epic, it is not because it was any more subject to this stigma than other genres. The epic simply formed a particularly clear focus of the kind of tensions I wish examine. Works, such as sensation novels or detective stories, which fit too readily into newer, less established genres were dismissed as "mechanical" or "formulaic." The high prestige that had always been accorded to epic poetry made it difficult, if not impossible, to reject it in those terms.

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And yet, this "highest" form of literature was defined by just the sort of strong, fixed, generic markers that were rapidly becoming considered signs of inferior writing in most other contexts. Keats, Wordsworth, and their contemporaries seemed to experience this contradiction as a sense of paralysis when faced with the genre. In the later nineteenth century, I believe, it played a key role in the "death of epic," a point I will elaborate in more detail my discussions of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. But the main point I wish to make about this phenomenon here is the way it demonstrates that whether texts that defined themselves too clearly were lamented as the failures of traditional forms or scoffed at as mere mechanical entertainment, they were almost always regarded as unsatisfactory.

Of course, the small sampling of works discussed above is not, in itself, enough to establish this claim. It does, however, suggest a pattern in the way that several of the authors who have been consistently influential in forming our conception of "Romanticism" engaged with the question of genre. The fact that this apparent suspicion of generic classification is one of the few areas in which it is possible to find similarities in their attitudes lends the pattern a significance that a reading of so few works might not otherwise justify. At the very least, it seems safe to say that any attitude common to writers of different classes, ages and educational backgrounds, who held different political views, focused on different subjects, adopted different styles, and expressed

widely disparate views on the subject of writing itself probably represents a widespread and pervasive viewpoint.[16]

Keats' work, which my first chapter will discuss in detail, may be the clearest illustration of this growing uneasiness with genre. Although he never explicitly comments on genre, throughout his writing Keats increasingly seems to associate clear and stable identities with a sense of imprisonment and paralysis. Of all his major works, the one with which he expressed the greatest dissatisfaction is also the one that underlines its generic associations most emphatically: *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*. Even the subtitle explicitly labels the work. Of course, as established above, "Romance" is a remarkably slippery and amorphous category. But the epigram that follows narrows that broad field by aligning the poem with a very specific type of medieval verse romance that had recently regained popularity. The allusion to "the stretched meter of an antique rhyme" seems like an unmistakable attempt to associate his writing with this particular class of poems. The use of an irregular meter, and the nostalgic attitude toward the past suggested by the term "antique" were two of the most consistent hallmarks of such medievalized romances. In placing the poem so emphatically within a particular tradition, Keats robs his "romance" of the very indefinability that drew him to the category in the first place. I believe it was this sense of being trapped by genre that provoked Keats' dissatisfaction with the poem, rather than the sense of incompletion, irregularity, and liminality which he claims are its causes in his preface. Indeed, I would

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[16] David Perkins' article, "The Construction of 'the Romantic Movement' as a Literary Classification" points out how little most of the writers we have come to group together almost automatically had in common.

attribute his feelings precisely the lack of those qualities. On some level, that preface, which might otherwise seem like an almost masochistic invitation to the kind of critical savaging the poem did, in fact receive, may even have been an attempt to supply these qualities, or at very least to direct all the reader's attention to them within the poem.

The connection between genre and paralysis becomes even clearer when Keats confronts the more strictly defined form of epic, in *Hyperion*. In many ways, Keats' inability to complete the poem seems like another manifestation of the same force that, within the poem's narrative, virtually freezes the old, and emphatically classical, gods into statues. The very fact that in the poem's second incarnation this paralysis is refigured as the narrator/poet's struggle to reach and converse with the past, or at least "the shade of memory," only reinforces the connection (Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* I: 81-140, I: 282). Most significantly of all, in both versions, Keats resolves his inability to go forward with the poem by changing its generic claims. The various subtitles mark its shift, from a traditional epic to a fragment-poem, then, in its final form, to a dream-vision.

Finally, such a suspicion of genre would fit exceptionally well with the concerns about identity and the theories about how it related to the poetic process that Keats expressed in his letters around this time. It was less a year before beginning *Hyperion* that Keats first coined the phrase "negative capability," and it was during his struggles with the poem that he began to develop his ideas about "the chameleon poet" more fully (Keats, ed. Damrosch, David et al 994, 1000). Like the poems themselves, these theories do not bear explicitly on genre. But it is no great leap to connect Keats'

conviction that a successful poet must, above all, avoid being trapped within a fixed

identity with the desire to avoid labels and definitions that can be seen in his work.[17]

This consideration of genre adds another level of resonance to the more general

ambivalence towards selfhood, and the desire for liminality seen in Keats' late poems.
[1818] It is as if, by the end of his career, Keats equated any solid definition with artistic

paralysis, and ultimately death.

But, if, as I argue, this suspicion of genre first gained widespread acceptance in

the Romantic period, once established it had a lasting impact. Its influence was

particularly marked throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is no

surprise that Alfred Tennyson, with his acute sensitivity to the social and literary

questions of his time, and the ability to encapsulate these dilemmas in his writing that

helped to make him England's poet Laureate, was haunted by concerns about identity

throughout his career. In his early lyrics especially, his attitude is markedly similar to

Keats' -- equating fixed identities with paralysis, confinement, and death. While both

his overall stance about the effect of definition on an artist, and the images that used to

express that view closely resemble his predecessor's, however, and, in fact, their work

was compared in more than one review, Tennyson never embraced the romantic poet's

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[17] If this talent is indeed connected with the ability to sidestep generic boundaries, it would make sense that he would cite Shakespeare as it exemplar. Not only does the lack of biographical information, and the lack of a single, definitive narrative voice in most of his work make the bard in question mysterious enough to be "everything and nothing"; his work was also known for its tendency to blend different "types" and "modes," as Thomas Rymer's infamous neo-classical critique makes clear (Keats, ed. Damrosch et al 1000).

[18] I am thinking both of the general desire to lose his own identity expressed in poems such as "Ode to a Nightingale," and of more specific instances of ambivalence, such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where the timeless, formalized beauties of classical art are, nonetheless, recognized as lifeless and frozen.

solution of relinquishing identity altogether. This is not surprising. The two poets came from vastly different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, which would predispose them to have different attitudes towards classification in general, and genre in particular. Likewise, the fact that the strategy had been used prominently enough by Keats to be identified with him, and thus become a label in its own right, would weaken its effectiveness for Tennyson.

The result was an impasse about selfhood and definition that is reflected in many of his early lyrics. The key figures in these poems are often trapped between the collapse into utter dissolution that inevitably results from a complete rejection of identity and the paralysis attendant on "becoming a name." Moreover, many of the characters faced with such predicaments can be linked to Tennyson himself, either because their status as artists invites a comparison with the poet, or because he left specific biographical evidence that he identified with their point of view. In "The Lady of Shallot," for example, the title character faces a choice between continuing her work as a singer and weaver at the price of an anonymous existence within the shadows of her tower, or joining the public concrete world of Camelot, at a the price of a curse that plunges her into stony paralysis. It is difficult to imagine a more apt metaphor for the dilemma about artistic identity that Tennyson himself was facing. In "Ulysses," which Tennyson claimed held "more about [him]self" than the ostensibly autobiographical *In Memoriam*, the roving classical hero has become an "idle king," lamenting the confinement comes with his position as a ruler (qtd. Ricks, 560). This position itself, and the feelings of imprisonment and paralysis associated with it are arguably direct

consequences of the vast reputation that the narrator forged during his adventures in the *Odyssey*. Nonetheless, Tennyson's Ulysses appears to base his sense of his own worth primarily on this very reputation. Perhaps as a result, he can think of no way out of his current predicament except a voyage which amounts repetition of his earlier adventures, and therefore, ultimately, can only enmesh him further in the same stifling, lifeless system of definitions he is seeking to escape.

The seemingly irresolvable nature of this paradox may be one reason that, as Tennyson's career progressed, his anxiety became narrower and more precise, focusing less on the broad notion of artistic identity than on the specific idea of generic labels. This development can be seen particularly clearly in his career-long work on *Idylls of the Kings*. Although he made frequent use of generic markers throughout all of the poem's various stages of composition, he was careful to avoid actually placing the work within any class of literature. Tennyson's attitude toward the cycle's relation to the epic tradition is a particularly revealing case-in-point. He evoked the genre indirectly from the outset of his Arthurian project, even framing the first section he completed as the last part of a twelve-book poem cast explicitly in the Homeric model. Nonetheless, he steadfastly refused to identify cycle as an epic in its own right, and took exception when others referred to it by that title (Sugimura 169). My second and third chapters will trace the progress of Tennyson's growing ambivalence towards genre, from its early parallels with Keats' career-long struggles with the overall question of poetic identity, through the increasingly direct and specific desire to avoid classification that can be seen in his development of the *Idylls*.

Through my examination these two influential authors and their work, I also hope to make a lager point about the changes in the way that nineteenth century writers, particularly those who viewed their work from a self-consciously literary standpoint, related to the idea of genre. I believe that their attitudes reflected a widespread and pervasive change, whose impact can still be seen in many of our own assumptions about what is worth reading and studying. I wish my study of Keats' and Tennyson's approaches towards classification in their work, and the continuities and differences in those approaches, to serve, in addition, as an illustration of the nineteenth century stigmatization of genre.

Chapter One: "Everything and Nothing": Generic Classification and Poetic Identity

in Keats' Writing

"Siren Romance": *Endymion,* the "Cockney School," and the dangers of being

"classed."

John Keats' work serves as a particularly clear illustration of the growing

uneasiness with genre around turn of the nineteenth century. Although he left behind

very few explicit comments about literary classification, the problem of artistic identity

was one that haunted him throughout his career. As that career progressed, Keats seemed

to equate all fixed definitions of a poet or his work more and more firmly with images of

confinement, paralysis and deathlike stasis. Keats would have had ample precedent for

connecting labels with artistic lifelessness. Similar assumptions are implicit in many of

his contemporaries' discussions of his work. The early review of *Poems* in the

September 1817 edition of the *Eclectic Review* serves as one particularly revealing case

in point. It is an especially valuable example, because, as Schwartz's introduction to

the article points out, the article's author uses Keats' collection as a starting point for a

much larger argument about the flaws he sees in the of the art of poetry in general and

that of his contemporaries in particular (84). Moreover, the striking similarities between

the terms in which the anonymous reviewer expresses these objections, and the ones

which Wordsworth uses to criticize contemporary poetic trends in his "Introduction" to

Lyrical Ballads suggest that he shared the suspicion traditional literary boundaries that I

argue pervades that text. This resemblance is somewhat ironic because, when the author

of the review addresses Wordsworth's writing directly, he makes it fairly clear that he sees the "Introduction" to *Lyrical Ballads* itself as an example of the very "false theory" which "misleads" even such a "deep thinker" as Wordsworth into "a puerile style of composition," (*Eclectic* Review 86-87). Even so, its influence on this aspect of the reviewer's thinking is unmistakable; the very fact that even someone so adamantly opposed to the poet's philosophy as a whole apparently finds common ground with him on the subject of pre-determined forms and their corrosive effect on writers' originality indicates just how widespread and ingrained this viewpoint had become by the time the article was written.

Like Wordsworth, the *Eclectic*'s reviewer implies that dependence on fixed or predetermined forms inevitably produces inferior writing because they discourage or even preclude independent thought. In other branches of literature, the reviewer claims, even in productions "which rank at the very lowest degree of mediocrity, there is occasionally displayed a struggling effort of the mind to do its best, which gives an interest and a character to what possesses no claims to originality of genius, or to intrinsic value" (85). In the first case, the casual equation of genius with originality is telling and seems to add weight to my general argument. That association, in itself, would be bound to cast suspicion on any work that was similar enough to its predecessors to fit easily into an existing category. The statement also has resonance because it implies that the interest inherent in a work of art depends, not only, or even primarily, on the quality of the finished product but on the details of the process that the artist goes through in creating it. The most interesting thing about this particular

reviewer's emphasis on process lies in the *way* it can redeem an otherwise mediocre piece of writing. The reason is never explicitly stated, but there is a sense that, since the process of writing is, by its nature, a highly personal, and individualized one, an examination of it can, in itself, supply the uniqueness and originality that is lacking in the work itself. In, poetry, however, the reviewer goes on to claim, the emphasis on formal qualities over content robs this sense of individuality from the act of composition. "Poetry," he writes, "is that one class of written compositions, in which the business of expression seems often so completely to engross the author's attention, as to suspend altogether that exercise of rational faculties which we term thinking," (86). Because the author is so focused on the way in which he says things, he does not think about the things he is in fact saying enough to produce this kind of interesting "struggle of the mind to do its best," which may elevate an author's failed attempts in other branches of writing. Indeed, the reviewer implies that, because of its tendency to value what Pope might call "sound" over "sense," poetry actually encourages its writers to dispense with originality altogether. "It is not surprising," he asserts, "that the generality of those who sit down to write verses should aim at no higher intellectual exertion, than the melodious arrangement of the 'cross-readings of memory'." Or, in other words, in poetry the process of creation depends, not, as in other the other arts, on an attempt, however feeble, to make something new but on the simple rearrangement of previously encountered words and lines. The description of the process as "arrangement" already suggests that the composition is made from pre-existing elements, rather than being freshly created. With the addition of the cross-readings of "memory" this process

becomes a mere mechanical rearrangement and recitation of existing work. In the wake of such reviews, it does not seem coincidental that of all Keats' major works the one that was most notoriously savaged by contemporary critics and with which Keats himself expressed the greatest dissatisfaction is also the one that underlines its generic associations most emphatically: *Endymion: A Poetic Romance.*

Even before the poem begins, its subtitle, *A Poetic Romance*, labels and therefore "classes" it. The effect is ironic because Keats may very well have intended this designation, not to identify his poem with an established literary "type," but, on the contrary, to signal his independence from the restrictions of such generic boundaries. As I have argued, "romance," in its broadest sense, is more liable to resist inflexible definitions than to become one, and many of Keats' contemporaries seemed aware of this. In his preface to *The Story of Rimini*, the poet's friend and mentor, Leigh Hunt, goes out of his way to link "Romance," especially medieval verse romances and their descendants, with the kind of originality that was rapidly coming to be seen as the distinguishing feature of great writing. In particular, Hunt associates the use of an irregular meter with poetic freshness and creativity, referring to more than once it as a sort of "freedom" (Hunt xv). Such influential works as Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), Coleridge's "Christabel" (1816), the Ossian poems (1760-1762) had already done much to make a looser more varied metrical schemes a hallmark of medieval and medievalized "romance." Hunt tacitly reinforces the connection within the preface, by presenting this stylistic choice as a deliberate contrast to "marked and

uniform regularity" of "Pope and the French School," with their strict neoclassical aesthetic.

Furthermore, Hunt links this "endeavour to recur to a freer spirit of versification" to the "even greater" pursuit of a "free and idiomatic cast of language" which sounds very much like that recommended by Wordsworth, in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (Hunt xv). He then goes on to connect these interwoven "freedoms" explicitly with the freshness and originality that made a great work of art. "The poet," he says, "should do as Chaucer or Shakespeare did,--not copy what is obsolete or peculiar in either, any more than they copied from their predecessors" (Hunt xvi). This statement not only presents the less formal approach to meter and diction that Hunt advocates as a key aspect of poetic merit by tracing it to the example of two poets who were almost universally acknowledged as great artists and whom he had gone out of way to praise earlier in the preface; it implicitly attributes both their use of this approach and the greatness of their work to their refusal to "cop[y] from their predecessors."

In addition to these comments on the meter, Hunt's preface also emphasizes the numerous other ways that his poem draws on medieval verse romances for inspiration, both in form and content. (Hunt x- xv). Indeed, Hunt highlights his debt to this particular strain of the Romance tradition throughout *Rimini*. He describes elaborate processions of knights and ladies in loving detail. He chooses evocative, Arthurian names, such as Tristan, for his secondary characters. Most significantly of all, he actually builds his tale around that quintessential "bright romance," *Launcelot of the Lake*, which not only clearly provides the pattern for the affair between two main characters, but actually

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facilitates it, since they literally fall in love over the book. By laying such stress on his use of Romance tropes, Hunt implicitly associates the entire concept of romance with the freedom from confining influences that his preface links so emphatically to its most prominent stylistic maker, the use of an irregular meter.

Given this association, it is no wonder that Keats would wholeheartedly embrace the sort of Romance that his mentor had identified so closely with the creativity and innovation needed to produce truly worthwhile poetry. He would, therefore, adopt every means to identify *Endymion* as clearly and explicitly as possible with that liberating category. In doing so, however, Keats inadvertently identifies his poem, not with "romance" in its broadest sense, but with one particular, narrowly defined strand of the Romance tradition, with a clearly delineated group of antecedents, and a distinctive set of formal and thematic markers. This narrowing robs "Romance" of the Protean quality that, I argue, made the designation so attractive, both to "the spirit of the age" and to Keats himself.

There can be little doubt that it was indeed, this more specific view of Romance that Keats had in mind when he applied the term to *Endymion*. If the label that the subtitle adopts has the potential to be almost infinitely flexible, the epigraph that follows, with its reference to "the stretched meter of an antique rhyme," immediately aligns the poem with the same type of medieval or medievalized verse romance that Hunt had looked to in his "preface to *Rimini*." The phrase highlights two of the qualities that particularly distinguished this type of romance; namely the use of an irregular, or "stretched," meter and the kind of wistful desire to recapture or preserve the past that the

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word "antique" captures perfectly. In fact, establishing the poem's genre seems to be the epigraph's primary purpose as there are no other significant formal or thematic connections between Keats' poem and the Shakespearean sonnet from which the line is drawn.[19]

Throughout *Endymion*, Keats follows the conventions of his stated genre scrupulously— perhaps too scrupulously. Even before the first scene begins, the narrator portrays the writing of the poem as a journey through forest streams in a "little boat" (Keats *Endymion* I.45-62). In his book *Epic and Empire,* David Quint makes a strong case that this kind of wandering water journey is an essential trope of "romance" in general and of early verse romance in particular (Quint 249-267). Likewise, in speaking of his writing as "wayfaring" Keats' narrator evokes both the loose episodic structure and the theme of indefinite journeying which are generally associated with Romance (Parker 3-15, Quint 248). Even when Keats invokes the muse at the beginning of the procession to Pan's altar, in what seems like a certain prelude to an epic catalogue, it is in Chaucer's footsteps, rather than Homer's, Virgil's or Milton's that he asks her to lead him.

Even those critics whose work places the most emphasis on Endymion's classical sources, such as Mario L. D'Avanzo's article "Keats's and Vergil's Underworlds: Source

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[19] As Ronald Sharp points out, both works are specifically concerned with their own credibility and its effect on their ability to last in "time to come," but, as he also argues, one of the primary effects of this concern is to highlight *Endymion*'s status as romance (Sharp 24). Both works do address the broad theme of the male poet pursuing an idealized and unattainable love. But this theme is so common in both the sonnet cycle and sort of romance that Keats is drawing on that it might be read more plausibly as a parallel between the two genres than as a connection between the two individual works.

and Meaning in Book II of 'Endymion'," not only acknowledge the prevalence of romance sources in shaping both the poem itself and readers' view of it; they also point out the ways that Keats' allusions to the classics transform and reshape them to serve a less clearly defined and teleological ideal than the Epic poet's tale of Rome's origins (70-72). It is pure irony that, by placing the poem so emphatically within a particular strand of the Romance tradition, Keats robbed his work of the very indefinability drew him to "romance" as a concept. His use of Romance tropes in *Endymion* is so thorough and exact that they become a defining formula in themselves. For, although there is every reason to believe that Keats saw the poem's generic markers as a way of signaling his freedom from inflexible labels and categories, they were interpreted by Keats' contemporaries as proof of his slavish devotion to formulas that originated in medieval verse cycles and had recently been adopted by contemporary poets such Leigh Hunt whose social and political agendas would provoke conservative critics to christen them "the Cockney School."

I believe it was this unconscious sense of being trapped by genre that provoked Keats' dissatisfaction with the poem. It is a far more plausible source of unease than the sense of incompletion, irregularity, and liminality that Keats himself claims are its causes in the Preface (Keats, "Preface to *Endymion*" 38). Keats' letters from the period when he was composing *Endymion* never state these worries about influence outright, but they do indicate that he was deeply concerned with the poem's originality, even before it was completed. In an 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey he describes the project as "a test, a trial of my powers of *imagination*, and chiefly of my *invention*," (qtd Milnes

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61, emphasis mine). The choice of words -- imagination, and especially invention-- strongly imply that Keats sees his creative powers as directly connected with his capacity for innovation from what came before. Furthermore, the rhetoric of "testing" and "trials" makes it clear that he feels that this capacity is being challenged by the composition of *Endymion*. It seems as though, on some level, Keats had doubts about the extent of his poem's dependence on its predecessors almost from the beginning and was uncertain about his own ability to break free of that dependence. It is true that genre, as such, is never explicitly mentioned as an aspect of this unease, but given the emphasis on romance, it is a plausible, even an obvious, connection. Viewed in light of this background, the Preface (which might, otherwise, seem like an almost masochistic invitation to the kind of critical savaging the poem did, in fact, receive) may have actually been an attempt to supply the ambiguity which the work itself lacked, or at very least to direct all the reader's attention to as much of it as does exist within the poem.

Much the same could be said about the most famous attack on the poem, Lockhart's "Cockney School of Poetry." Lockhart uses the same rhetoric of unruliness and boundary crossing that Keats himself introduced in his Preface, even down to the same metaphors of illness. But, just as I do not believe this sense of instability is truly at the root Keats' dissatisfaction with his poem, I do not think they are the reason for Lockhart's ire against *Endymion*. After all, his first reference to the poem describes it, not as a continuation of, but a contrast to, the disordered "phrensy" of Keats' first work. It is, like *Poems*, dismissed as "driveling idiocy" (Lockhart 121). But, unlike the earlier collection, *Endymion*'s "madness" is described as "calm, settled, imperturbable"

(Lockhart 121). These adjectives suggest not wild transgression, but staleness and rigidity. Likewise, his final snide comparison of the poem is to "soporifics and extenuatives," which do not agitate, but rather still and sedate their recipient (Lockhart 127). This seems like a far more appropriate metaphor for the kind of stagnation that Keats and his circle associated with established definitions than for the dangerous unruliness of a poem marked by its unwillingness to submit to decorous boundaries.

Of course, Lockhart *is* predictably offended by Keats' violations of classical and neoclassical precepts, in *Endymion* and elsewhere. Keats' inability to read Greek, and consequent lack of firsthand knowledge about the classics, his devaluation of Pope, and his choice of an irregular meter (what Lockhart calls his "loose, nerveless versification") all come in for their fair share of invective (Lockhart 122-125). But even these charges are made in terms which imply that Keats' work is inferior, not so much because it challenges the established categories of the "classicism" that Lockhart held so dear, but because it is so obviously part of an equally well defined, but far inferior category. What he emphasizes about the irregular meter of *Endymion* is not its violation of conventional verse form, but its derivative quality. The first is acknowledged only tangentially, by way of Lockhart's contemptuous explanation that it is "meant to be" heroic verse, and the consequent implication that the meter is unrecognizable (Lockhart 125). He places far more emphasis on the fact that Keats "adopted" his style from his mentor Hunt—and did so poorly at that (Lockhart 125). Likewise, Keats' dislike of Pope is not attributed to genuine, if ill-advised and dangerous, rebellion against neoclassical authority, but to the overbearing influence of the current literary "fashions" (Lockhart 123). As if to confirm

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this impression, Lockhart goes on to explain Keats' lack of appreciation for Pope by saying that he, like all of the cockney poets, is "without…imagination enough to form one original image" (Lockhart 123). Clearly, although Lockhart has many objections to Keats' writing, they do not stem from a sense that his work is new or unsettlingly radical. Even Keats' ignorance of the classics is not criticized primarily because it leads him to violate the rules of composition or to blur generic boundaries. Rather, it seems to offend Lockhart because he feels that it causes Keats to betray his low origins, and turn his hero from a Greek Shepherd into "Cockney Rhymester" (Lockhart 125). This class-laden aspect of his criticism is underlined by the shift in how he refers to the poet, from "Mr." or "John" Keats, at the start of the review to insultingly familiar "Johnny Keats" by the end.

Most telling of all, however, is the way that Lockhart uses the poem's genre almost interchangeably with its title. Throughout the review, he refers to it simply as "a romance" or "poetic romance" as often as he calls it *Endymion*. The point is underlined by his final comment on the subject -- a contemptuous observation of the poem's conformity to the conventions of its genre. "Like many other romances," he writes, "terminates the 'Poetic Romance' of Johnny Keats, in a patched-up wedding," (Lockhart 127). This comment seems to sum up Lockhart's views on *Endymion*. The emphasis on the poem's similarity to others of its kind and the implicit disapproval of the poet's lack of originality embedded in it are only the beginning. The description of the wedding, which fulfills the convention in question as "patched up" both amplifies this tone of disapproval and confirms that it is prompted by considerations of class in every sense.

The phrase contains a particularly rich blend of insulting overtones. To begin with, it implies that the verses in question were created by a prosaic and mechanical process, calling up images of precut shapes being stitched together. It also suggests that in using this convention, that Keats is trying (perhaps clumsily) to mend something that is already old and worn out. Finally, like most of his invective, these images are loaded with connotations about class. After all, only the lower orders of society, who could afford no better, would be forced resort to patched up goods of any kind -- or would consent to do so, regardless of the circumstances. These connotations are only reinforced by Lockhart's insolent reference to the poet as "Johnny." In this passage, Lockhart betrays the real reason for criticism of *Endymion* and of Keats himself. His objections boil down to a single point: as representatives of the "Cockney school", both poet and poem belong to an inferior class.

Certainly, I am not the first to see a lack of originality as one of the main charges leveled by Lockhart's review. Richard Milnes' references to the infamous critique in his *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats*, (one of the first published biographies of the poet), suggests that, he, at least, interpreted the attack in "the Cockney School of Poetry" this way. He writes:

> With a singular anticipation of the injustice and calumny he should be subject to as belonging to "the Cockney School," Keats stood up most stoutly for the independence of all personal association with which the poem has been composed, and admiring as he did the talents and spirit of his friend Hunt, he expresses himself almost indignantly… at the thought that his originality,

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whatever it was, should be suffered to have been marred by the assistance,

influence, or counsel of Hunt, or anyone else. (Milnes 60)

In the first place, this description confirms just how pervasive Keats' concern with the

poem's originality was (perhaps pervasive enough to suggest that he had his own doubts

about it). But, even more importantly, by describing this concern with the poem's

individuality and freshness as an "anticipation of the injustice and calumny" of

Lockhart's review, Milnes makes it clear that he, at least, sees the "Cockney School of

Poetry" as impugning *Endymion* for its lack of these qualities. He may even be

implying that Keats shared that view. Clearly, although the general tenor of his rhetoric,

with its emphasis on neo-classical propriety, might lead one to expect the opposite,

Lockhart makes his feeling that *Endymion* is overly formulaic and conventional obvious,

even if it is one of the few criticisms of the poem that he refrains from voicing outright.

A similar pattern holds true among most of Keats' other attackers at this period.

John Wilson Crocker's scathing article in the *Quarterly Review*, for instance, contains

many of the same elements as Lockhart's. Like Lockhart, he primarily identifies the

poem by its genre, rather than its title. In both his opening and closing paragraphs, he

refers to the work not as *Endymion*, but as "this poetic romance" (Crocker 129, 133). His

other statements on the subject all follow in much the same vein. Though Crocker does

not comment further on genre as such, he blames the poem's failures on the fact that his

author is a "disciple" of the "Cockney School." This fact, he intimates, negates all value

that the poem might have had, although its author does have some "powers of language,

rays of fancy, and gleams of genius" (Crocker 129). Despite these admittedly promising

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attributes, Keats' stylistic traits brand him as a "copiest of Mr. Hunt" (Crocker 129).

Hunt's own theories of composition, as laid out in the "Preface to *Rimini*" discussed

above, are casually dismissed as "pleasant recipes" (Crocker 129). This description

suggests the inferiority of Hunt's writing, by associating it with such feminine and

presumably low-class "kitchen things". Even more significantly, it also implies a certain

scripted, or formulaic quality in Keats' process of composition. After all what is a recipe

if not a formula?

Furthermore, according to Crocker, Keats is not simply guilty of succumbing to

this formula. The critic implies that he is so confined by it that his borrowed form

dictates and obscures his content. Crocker writes that the poet "wanders from one

subject to another, from the association, not of ideas but of sounds…" (131). Although

he does not explicitly attribute this shortcoming to Hunt's influence, it leads him to a

more general examination of verse and diction. This examination, of course, segues,

almost at once, back into a commentary on the "cockney school's" pernicious influence

on the work. Even the "new words" that Keats creates in his poem, which, whatever

one's opinion of neologisms, might at least be expected to stand as evidence of his

originality, are attributed, not to an unwise excess of feverish creativity, but to his

"imitation" of Hunt (Crocker 133). Like Lockhart before him, Crocker's accusations

against Keats' work all center around the fact that the poem can be neatly labeled as a

"romance" of the "Cockney School."

The point is made even more emphatically by third, and, if possible, even more

contemptuous review printed in the *British Critic*. The opening of this critique, which

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begins in a vein of mocking praise, emphasizes both *Endymion's* genre and its derivative

nature. Indeed, in the critic's sardonic burst of admiration, the two things become almost

inseparable. The author describes the poem, pointedly, as "the most delicious poem, of

its *kind*, which has fallen within our notice," (emphasis mine, 134). He goes on to

qualify this distinctly backhanded compliment with his observations about Hunt's

influence on Keats' writing, saying that, if not for Hunt's work:

> We might have pronounced it to be *sui generis* without fear of contradiction.
>
> That gentleman, however, has talked so much about 'daisies and
>
> daffodils, clover and sweet peas, blossoming and lushiness,' that we
>
> fear Keats must be content to share but half the laurel (134)

This passage is telling for several reasons. In the first place, it implicitly assumes that a

poem must be "*sui generis*" to merit 'laurels'. Furthermore, it insinuates that Keats'

Endymion lacks this quality, to its detriment, because of its association with the Hunt

and "The Cockney School." Even the poem's alleged moral failings are attributed to

Keats' membership in his chosen "school." Indeed, the reviewer claims these failings

are a kind of proof that Keats "is not contented with a half-initiation in the school that he

has chosen" (137). He goes on to explain that the poet "can strike from unmeaning

absurdity into the gross slang of voluptuousness *with as much skill as the worthy*

prototype whom he has selected," suggesting that his transgressions stem from an

imitation of his mentor, rather than from his own, unrestrained flights of fantasy (137

emphasis mine). Clearly, whatever the general tenor of their rhetoric, with its

implications of unruliness and boundary crossing, almost all the harshest criticisms of

the poem are bound up with the critics' ability to label it. For Lockhart and the other critics who disliked Keats' *Endymion*, both the poem and the author are simply too easy to class. Paralyzed before "The Shade of Memory": *Hyperion*, Epic, and genre as at confrontation with

<div align="center">the "Class" –ic.</div>

The connection between genre and paralysis becomes even clearer when Keats confronts the more strictly defined form of epic in the two unfinished versions of *Hyperion*. The idea that the poem serves Keats as a sort of Harold Bloomian Oedipal confrontation with his predecessors particularly that ubiquitous "covering Cherub," Milton-- is nothing new. Indeed, in many ways, with its pervasive theme of generational conflict, its extensive use of allusion both in form and content, and, of course, its abrupt conclusion, *Hyperion* has become a nearly archetypal example of such a confrontation. (Bloom "Introduction" 2-3, Bloom 105-126) Likewise, the poem's incompleteness has often been viewed as an emblem the modern poet's fate, when confronted with what Longfellow might call "the bards sublime/ whose distant footsteps echo through the corridor of time." Overshadowed and belated, the contemporary writer is doomed to fail into a paralysis which can only be forestalled by incompletion (Bloom "Introduction" 2-3).

Keats' own letters tend to reinforce the reading of the poem as a sort of grand poetic wrestling match with Milton. In his September 1819 letter to Reynolds, for instance, Keats explicitly claims to have abandoned the poem because of his inability to escape Milton's overbearing influence -- or at least to avoid an overabundance of

"Miltonic inversions" in writing it (Keats qtd Milnes 25). His letter to George and Georgiana Keats, written in the same week, is even more explicit, providing what Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence* called "the motto of English poetry since Milton": "Life to him would be Death to me" (Bloom 32). Clearly there *is* anxiety at work here, and Keats' conscious commentaries seem to fix on Milton as its source. Nevertheless, I believe that Keats was confronting a far larger and more universal "covering cherub" than the shadow of a single predecessor. I believe that, in *Hyperion*, Keats was grappling with the very concept of the epic and, perhaps, by extension, the notion of genre itself.

My introduction has already outlined some of the reasons why the epic would be particularly vulnerable to the sort of deep ambivalence towards labels that would inevitably accompany a stigmatization of genre. It had, after all, long been regarded as the "highest" form of literature. Yet, it was defined by the exactly the kind of strong and overt markers that were rapidly becoming signs of literary inferiority. In light of such sharp contradictions, it is no wonder that the genre became problematic for the writers of the nineteenth century, especially those as sensitive as Keats was to the nuances of poetic tradition and his own potential place in it. Nor is it surprising that Keats would fix on Milton, not only as a prime exemplar of the genre, but as a kind of representative symbol for it. After all, of the undisputed epics of his time, *Paradise Lost* was certainly the most readily accessible for him.

As his sonnet "On Reading Chapmen's Homer" famously reminds us, Keats could not read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the original. Therefore, these works, which, as the oldest known examples of the genre, tended to fill this emblematic role for his

more classically educated contemporaries, would not have been directly available to him. As much as Keats admired Chapman's text, it seems unlikely he would trust to any secondary source for the complex and intricate nuances of generic signals. If nothing else, his friend and mentor, Leigh Hunt's, feelings on the subject would have discouraged him. Those feelings can be easily inferred from the casual dismissal of Homers' beauties "in translation" in his preface to *Rimini* (Hunt xvii). The very brevity of the aside suggests something bordering on contempt for such poor substitutes; and, while the extent to which Hunt's writing influenced any particular work in Keats' oeuvre is debatable, there can be little doubt that, overall, his views played large part in shaping Keats' ideas about poetry.

Virgil would have been more accessible to the poet. There is ample evidence that Keats studied the original text of *The Aeneid* closely, and even undertook his own translation of it (D'Avanzo 62, Milnes 7-8, Clarke 124-125, Colvin 9-11, Warren 62-69). Nevertheless, despite the proficiently in Latin indicated by this exercise, the extent of the poet's confidence in the language is very much open to question. The accounts of Keats' first exposure to Latin, through Virgil's *Aeneid* at the Enfield school, all portray his study as a solitary pursuit, with no formal guidance or instruction. In fact most of them emphasize this aspect of Keats' first classical endeavor. Colvin's early biography of the poet describes the translation of Virgil as "a voluntary task" that Keats "imposed upon himself" over and above his "proper work," and speaks of how, in devoting all his free time to his reading, he gave up the more social recreations of "playhours" and "school games" (Colvin 9). Milnes' anecdote not only indicates that Keats' dedication to his

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books came at the price of virtual isolation from the other students, keeping him "at home translating his Virgil" while "the school was all play;" it also suggests that his teachers' main reaction to the poet's diligence was not to provide encouragement and additional instruction, but, on the contrary, to "frequently" take him away from his work by "…forc[ing] him out into the open air for his heath" (Milnes 7-8). Haydon marvels that the young poet made this early translation "without ever have been regularly educated," (*Diary* April 7th, 1817). The tone of these narratives is, almost universally, one of well-justified admiration for the industry, intelligence and perseverance demonstrated by Keats' study of the Latin text. Nonetheless such a solitary and unguided introduction to the language would not be likely to encourage the poet's confidence in his ability to catch the kind of nuances of tone and style that usually serve as generic markers.

Moreover, all these sources agree that, as well as he apparently knew Virgil, this was virtually Keats' only exposure to Latin. Clarke specifies that "his amount of classical attainment extended no farther than the *Aeneid*," and Milnes confesses that "he does not appear to have been familiar with much other and more difficult Latin poetry," (124, 8). Therefore, even in the unlikely event that Keats felt his lone efforts with Virgil's poetry had enabled him to adequately grasp all nuances that might serve as generic signals, he would have no context in which to place those markers. None of these factors would encourage Keats to look to Vigil's work as model for "heroic poetry," or any other literary type, regardless of how much he admired, or how closely he had studied, the Latin poet.

All the details that we have about Keats' early translation suggest that this was, indeed, his attitude towards the *Aeneid*. It was a prose translation, which implies that the writer was more focused on capturing the sense of the words than on the kind of formal and stylistic tropes which are the most common generic markers (Colvin 9). Moreover what Clarke reports of Keats' attitude towards his translation suggests that he was not entirely content with the product of his labor,

> …notwithstanding, and through all its
>
> incidental attractiveness, he hazarded the
>
> opinion to me (and the expression riveted my
>
> surprise), that there was feebleness in the
>
> structure of the work. (Clarke 125)

Clarke's account leaves it unclear whether "the work" that Keats referred to was the *Aeneid* itself, or his own translation of it, but the continued fascination with, and evident admiration for, the Latin poet's writing strongly suggests the latter. Moreover, the specific source of Keats' reservations about the work, its "structure," implies that the "feebleness" that troubled him lies in precisely the kind of formal and stylistic elements that frequently serve as the clearest and most prominent ways of classifying poetry.

Later letters indicate that Keats was still far from fully satisfied with his command of Virgil's native tongue at the time he was composing *Hyperion*. In the same letter where Keats so emphatically rejects the Miltonic style as "death to him," he writes that he intends "to get complete in Latin" as soon as he has mastered Italian to his

satisfaction (Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats September 1819").[20] The

rhetoric of incompleteness in which Keats couches his plans for future study implies that

he felt some deficiency in his current understanding of the language. And this, in turn,

suggests that, despite his ability to understand the basic meaning of the *Aeneid's* text

without translation, he may well have continued to harbor significant doubts about his

grasp of the language's more subtle shadings. Such doubts would only be exacerbated

by Lockhart's snide accusations about the "Cockney School's" lack of classical learning

in his attack on *Endymion* (125). Whether these doubts were actually justified, or simply

resulted from the solitary, informal nature of the only course of study open to him is

immaterial. The doubts themselves would be enough to make a reader as exquisitely

aware of such nuances as Keats almost as reluctant to model his conceptions of a genre

even partially on a work in which he feared they might elude him than he would be to

trust to a translation. In light of this it seems safe to question how much impact Virgil

could have had on Keats' idea of epic poetry. Certainly, whatever the extent of his

familiarity with *The Aeneid*, he could hardly have approached it with anything like ease

and readiness with which he came to Milton's work. At most, it would have been a

secondary influence, coming far later and less directly than *Paradise Lost*, and, as such,

would not have nearly the same power of association as the English poem.

It seems even less likely that Keats could have looked directly to any of the other

customary models of epic. The letter to his brother George in which Keats expresses his

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[20] Not coincidentally, he makes this statement in the very same paragraph that contains the famous
dismissal of Milton mentioned above, which only bolsters all the other evidence that he did indeed
associate his predecessor with the languages of "classical" poetry.

disillusionment with Milton and his desire to improve his Latin also mentions that he was studying Italian by working through Ariosto "eight or six stanzas at a time," and that one of his goals in doing so is be able to read Dante (Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819"). This means that even if one does consider *The Divine Comedy* and *Orlando Furioso* "standard" models for the classical epic, a highly problematic assumption in itself, Keats' firsthand exposure to them could not have occurred until after he wrote this letter, and therefore after he had already abandoned his first, "Miltonic" version of *Hyperion*. Of course Keats' affinity for Spenser is well known, and he doubtless knew the *Faerie Queene* as well as any poet ever has. But as I have already argued, the *Faerie Queene* is notoriously difficult to classify in formal terms, and Keats and his contemporaries were well aware of this. Even if they sometimes referred to it as an "epic," the context makes it clear that the label is intended as a homage to its scope and importance, rather than generic designation.

Indeed, as early as 1715, critics such a John Hughes made this distinction clear, espousing what Greg Kucich, in his book *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* designates the "gothic" view of the poem (20). Hughes argues that "The whole frame of it [*The Faerie Queene*] would appear monstrous if it were to be examined by the Rules of Epick Poetry…But as it is plain the Author never design'd it by those Rules, I think it ought rather to be consider'd as a Poem of a particular kind…" (Qtd in Kucich 20-21). In other words, Hughes defends *The Faerie Queene* against his contemporaries' charges that it was flawed as an epic by arguing that it never was an epic in the first place. Kucich goes to show convincingly how, although by no means universal, this view

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gradually became the prevailing one of the neoclassical theorists of the eighteenth

century. Furthermore, he demonstrates just how this "gothic" reading of Spenser's poem

served to make it an alternative to the more strictly defined classical epic which they,

too, saw as Milton's province (Kucich 20-64). Finally he makes a strong case that Keats

and his contemporaries, particularly Hunt, not only accepted this division, but

emphasized, and even widened it, celebrating Spenser's propensities for "Mixing up all

creeds and mythologies" (Kucich 130). Under these circumstances, as Kucich himself

argues, implicitly, Keats came to see Spenser's work an alternative to, rather than a

representative of, the kind of artistic strictures which defined the classical epic, as such

(138-153). *Paradise Lost*, therefore, was certainly the most prominent, and possibly the

only clear-cut example of the genre that Keats could look to readily. Under such

circumstances, "Miltonic" may well have become synonymous with "Epic" in his mind.

Close reading of both the letters where Keats explicitly discusses Milton's role in

his decision to abandon his first *Hyperion* poem supports the idea that Keats' apparent

reaction against the author of *Paradise Lost* is actually directed at the epic form with

which he had every reason to identify him. The specific reasons that he gives for

rejecting the "Miltonic mode" can all be traced back to that mode's associations with

classical forms and formulas. In his letter to Reynolds he states that he has "given up

Hyperion" because "there were too many Miltonic inversions in it." (Keats, qtd Milnes

25). This comment has given rise to a great deal of critical speculation about Keats'

overall relations to his predecessor, but little about just why he traced his dissatisfaction

with "Miltonic verse" so explicitly to this particular stylistic quirk. Out of all of the

distinctive formal traits of Milton's poetry, what makes this one so important to Keats that he feels the need to mention it specifically? Furthermore, out of all the echoes of *Paradise Lost*, both formal and thematic, which Keats incorporates into *Hyperion*, why would he single out grammatical inversion as the factor which prevents him from completing it?

The answer, I believe lies in the other letter Keats wrote on the subject that same week, the one where he declares that "life" to "Milton" would be "death" to him. In that letter, Keats calls *Paradise Lost* "The most remarkable Production of the world –A northern dialect accommodating itself to Greek and Latin inversions and intonations," (Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats September 1819). This statement unequivocally equates Milton's "inversions" in *Paradise Lost* with the poet's ability to incorporate, or in his words "accommodate," the work's classical roots. Although Keats is speaking in linguistic terms-- specifically of the way that Milton adapts "the northern dialect" to a Greek and Latin sentence structure-- it is no great leap to connect such deliberate quirks of grammar with the all the other classical features inherent in the poem's structure, including those that mark it as an epic. Explicitly, Keats' letters may associate inversions with Milton in particular. Nevertheless his reasons for objecting to them suggest he sees them as a hallmark of the classical world in general, and the epic genre in particular, far more than as the defining trait of any single writer's work.

This reading is all the more plausible in light of the fact that inversion is also a prominent feature of another work that seems likely to have played a role in shaping Keats' ideas of epic -- George Chapman's translations of Homer. Chapman's influence

on Keats' conception the genre was probably far less direct than Milton's, since, as I've argued, it is doubtful that the poet would have trusted any secondary source entirely to convey such nuances. Nevertheless, Keats did specifically credit these translations with giving him his first true glimpse into the world that "deep brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne" (Keats, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" 6). This claim implies that, like *Paradise Lost*, Chapman's works stood out in Keats' mind for their ability to capture the essence of ancient forms and "intonations" in his own "northern dialect." The references to Homer, in themselves, naturally call up associations with classical epic. In addition, Keats' description of the "wide expanse" that Chapman's renderings opened to him contain other subtle evocations of the genre. Apollo, for example was the god of all poetry, but as the projected hero of Keats' own attempt at epic, in *Hyperion*, it seems likely that the poet linked him with this form in particular. Furthermore, while there is no way to know whether or not Keats attributed this classical, epic quality of Chapman's verse to his translations' frequent use of inversion, the sonnet itself suggests that, at the very least, he strongly linked the construction with Chapman's work. "On First Looking into Chapmen's Homer" contains notably more inversions than any of Keats' other sonnets from this period. In this sonnet, the poet reverses expected word order in eight of the fourteen lines. In comparison, even his earliest and most formal sonnets, such as "To Solitude," and "Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison," where he uses inversion far more frequently than in his later poems, contain, at most, five or six such lines. The unusual prevalence of inversion in "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" suggests that it has some particular connection with the poem's

subject. Since Chapman's text did, itself, make significant use of such inversions, it would have been plausible for Keats to link the translator's partiality for the construction with the power of conveying the original "heroic" grandeur of the Greek texts that he attributes to the translations. In any case, the sonnet where Keats himself uses inversion so prominently has no overt connection with Milton, although it is unmistakably bound up with his view of epic.

Conversely, the most explicitly Miltonic of Keats' early sonnets, "To one who has been long in city pent," contains only three inversions, including the first line, which takes its structure directly from the line in *Paradise Lost* to which it alludes. While this sonnet does deliberately evoke Milton, however, there is nothing in it to suggest that, in this instance, he is being cast in the role of quintessential epic bard which Keats so frequently attributed to him. The reference to *Paradise Lost* comes from the section of the poem most frequently associated, not with the poem's overarching of epic structure, but with its incorporation of pastoral and romance elements (Quint 282 302-3, Dillon 130,). The idea that Keats' homage to his predecessor in this poem has nothing to with the epic grandeur that Milton's name calls up elsewhere is bolstered by the way the narrator goes on to associate his opening allusion to *Paradise Lost* with the pleasures of reading "a… gentle tale of love and languishment." This description, with its emphasis on the theme of "love" and the lingering, contemplative attitude implicit in term "languishment," suggests the polar opposite of the active, martial values and steadily forwardmarching pace that ordinarily distinguish the "heroic mode" of poetry. Keats would hardly link his predecessor's words with such a tale if he were thinking of him as

the exemplar of that mode. Therefore it seems that, although Keats elsewhere identifies "inversion" as a specifically "Miltonic" trait, he does not make any especially prominent use of the construction, even in works directly concerned with Milton, when he is not approaching him as the representative of epic. This fact, together with the prevalence of inversions in poems that have ties to the epic genre, but never allude to Milton, such as "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," strengthens the impression that Keats actually associates this stylistic marker far more closely with a type of writing than with any single writer.

Likewise, the terms in which Keats explains his dissatisfaction with the pervasiveness of the "Miltonic" influence in *Hyperion* bear a remarkable resemblance to those in which the more widespread suspicions of generic labels outlined above were couched. Both use the rhetoric of artifice. For example, in the same "Preface to *The Story of Rimini"* discussed above, Hunt, whose key role in shaping Keats' ideas about literature has already been well established, slides effortlessly from his repudiation of "Pope and the French School," with its strict, neoclassical rules and categories, to a similar rejection of the "artificial" style, that he associates with "dead idioms, tragedy phrases, and exaggerations of dignity" (Hunt xvi). Although Hunt does not explicitly equate the later with the former, the context, in its progression, implies a logical connection between the two ideas. In fact, Hunt's preface intertwines his critique of neoclassicism with his arguments for avoiding "artificiality" so closely, that, by the end of the piece, it is difficult to separate the two.

The terms in which Keats voices his doubts about Milton's influence on *Hyperion* are all but identical. In the same letter to Reynolds where the poet mentions his objections to inversion, he elaborates on the statement by saying that the Miltonic flavor the construction gave *Hyperion* was unsatisfactory because such verse "cannot be written but in an artful—or, rather, artist's humor," (Keats, qtd Milnes 25). In claiming that "Miltonic verse" requires the author to compose it in an "artful humor" he implicitly links the style with the same kind falsity for the sake of ornamentation that formed the keystone of Hunt's critique. The slight correction that Keats makes-- changing "artful" to "artist's" --may, at first, seem like an attempt to redeem this quality, by substituting a more positively inflected word. But, ultimately, the substitution only serves to cast suspicion on second adjective, by underscoring the etymological links between all "art" and "artifice." The suggestion which follows, that Reynolds "pick out some lines from "Hyperion," and "put a mark, +, to the false beauty, Proceeding from art" makes this equation between "art" and "falsity" explicit (Keats, qtd Milnes 25). Keats goes on to further emphasize how closely he associates Milton's influence on *Hyperion* with the poem's lapses into "art." His admission of how difficult he finds it to distinguish such "false beauty" from the "the true voice of feeling" in his poem, immediately leads him back to a consideration of role his predecessor's writing plays in his own work. "I cannot make the distinction--," he writes, "every now and then there is a Miltonic intonation-but I cannot make the division properly," (Keats, qtd Milnes 25). Although this particular statement never specifies on which side of the "division" between "false beauty" and "true feeling" Keats places these "Miltonic intonations," given his earlier

description of "Miltonic verse" as the product of an "artful humor," they seem far more likely to reflect the former than the latter. The repetition only serves to underline how closely Keats linked Milton's detrimental influence with the rhetoric of "art" and "artifice." That is to say, the same rhetoric that Hunt and others used in connection with the overly rigid schemes of classification and reliance on predetermined formal makers, which they explicitly identified as hallmarks of Pope and followers, but which are, to some extent, qualities of any strict or absolute generic definition.

Keats' other letter on the subject, the one containing the famous declaration that "life to him [Milton] would be death me," is entirely consistent with this reading (Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819"). In fact, the explanation that follows the apparent dismissal, which Bloom claims has been the motto of "strong poets" ever since, reiterates the one discussed above nearly word for word. "Miltonic verse" he writes, "cannot be written but it [*for* in] the vein of art - I wish to devote myself to another sensation" (Keats, "Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819"). Once again, Keats associates the Miltonic style that would be "death" to him specifically with the "art" that his mentor's comments linked with the "French school" and its strict formal guidelines and classificatory schemes.

An examination of *Hyperion* itself confirms the idea that Keats' anxiety was provoked by a broad concept, of which Milton was only a representative. Just as he only seems to link the inversions that so troubled him with his predecessor when approaching him as the quintessential epic bard, on the few occasions when Keats does makes allusions to Milton which do not contain generic overtones, and thus evoke his

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predecessor as an individual, rather than the emblem of all epic poets, they show little evidence of the kind of awe-struck, half-rebellious anxiety one might expect from the tone of his letters. On the contrary they suggest that Keats viewed him with genuine sympathy, more as a companion than a rival, even a rival he admired and wished to emulate.

The best example of Keats' attitude can probably be seen in his portrayal of Saturn. It is easy to establish that the figure of the fallen God strongly recalls Milton in too many ways to overlook. Paul Sherwin's article, "Dying into Life: Keats' Struggle with Milton in *Hyperion"* clearly enumerates the numerous symbolic parallels between the two (391).[21] There is also a quite literal analogy between the situation of the fallen God, and Milton's own position of political defeat later in life, a biographical fact of which the romantics were notoriously conscious. Finally, Keats' initial description of Saturn is accompanied by echoes of *Paradise Lost* that link him with the earlier poet. The poet-narrator of Milton's epic describes himself as "fallen on evil days," (Milton, *Paradise Lost* VII: 25-26). In *Hyperion*, Keats likens the expression with which Thea (or Moneta, in his second version of the poem) first contemplates the figure of the deposed god to that of someone looking at the signs that "evil days" have only just begun (Keats, *Hyperion* III:39). By incorporating the phrase that Milton's poetic persona applies to his own circumstances into the reader's first glimpse of Saturn through the eyes of his

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[21] Although, the as the title implies, Sherwin reads an Oedipal hostility into the portrayal that I do not see in my own reading.

companion in misfortune, Keats strengthens the numerous connections that already exist between the elder poet and the elder god.

But although this combination of factors leaves little doubt that Saturn can be, in some sense, identified with Milton, there is little evidence of oedipal hostility in Keats' portrayal of the fallen God. It is true that, symbolically, portraying his predecessor as defeated renders him impotent and therefore minimizes his threat to the younger poet. But there is no sign that it was Keats or any analogous character that effected this defeat, nor that, even as *fait accompli*, the downfall of the unmistakably Miltonic Saturn is instrumental in allowing his own creativity to flourish. There is no sense of triumph, even mixed with regret, in Saturn's fall, such as one would expect if it represented the removal of a repressive father figure. On the contrary, some critics have even speculated that, had Keats completed the poem, it would have ended with Saturn restored to a second throne (Vitoux 165). Without digressing to discuss the merits of any particular argument about *Hyperion*'s projected course, the very fact that it is possible to make a plausible case for Saturn's return to power, in itself, suggests that impulse of the poem is not to replace but rather to revive and effect a reconciliation with the ancient ruler. Surely, such a symbolic reawakening of a powerful predecessor that one had already succeeded in casting down at the beginning of the poem is the last thing a Bloomian "strong poet" would desire.

Moreover, it is difficult see Keats' fallen Saturn in the authoritarian, oppressive role which Bloom's Oedipal reading of influence assumes that all such father-figures occupy. There is nothing even mildly repressive in Keats' portrayal of the deposed god.

He is certainly no tyrant. [22] On the contrary, even in Saturn's most heavily Miltonic moments, Keats goes out of the way to emphasize his compassion and benevolence. For instance, particularly in Keats' first version of the poem, there are clear parallels between the structure and diction of Saturn's first lines on waking and those spoken by Milton's Satan when he rises from the burning lake In direct contrast to his predecessor, however, Keats' Saturn never laments his loss of power on his own account. Rather he appears to mourn his fall primarily because it robs him of the ability to benefit the mortal world. He complains of being "buried from godlike exercise/Of influence *benign* on planets pale," deprived "Of *peaceful* sway above man's harvesting," and, in short, cut off from "All those acts which Deity supreme/Doth ease its heart of love in." (Keats, *Hyperion* I: 107-112, emphasis mine). The first part of this statement may indeed seem like the prelude to any deposed ruler's self-serving complaint, and the reader is not obliged to take his assurance that the influence he misses is a purely "benign" one at face value. Still, considering that his only audience is the already devoted Thea, there is also no real reason to question its sincerity, and one must assume that its inclusion serves some purpose. The fact that this same stress on Saturn's benevolence is repeated throughout the lines that follow only serves to strengthen the impression that it is genuine. Some suggestion of a precursor's kindness and generosity might be consistent with a Bloomian reading, in that these traits further reduce the threat he represents, but it would hardly form a key-note of his description, as it does in this case. This continued

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[22] If anything, his successor, Zeus, whose reputation as tyrant among the younger generation of Romantics has been well established through works such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, seems a far more likely candidate for that role.

emphasis on the compassion and magnanimity that distinguished Saturn's reign, and the real regret over his fall that is its natural consequence, strengthens the impression that Keats wishes to ally himself with, or even restore, the old God rather than replace, eclipse, or otherwise overcome him.

Even when he recasts his poem as *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream,* in a conscious attempt to purge his work of Milton's influence, he removes only those allusions to *Paradise Lost* which are connected its status as an epic, such as the echoes of Satan's rallying speech to his compatriots that occur in Saturn's lines when Thea wakes him. Other lines, however, that evoke his predecessor just as strongly, without specifically recalling Milton's links with epic remain untouched. For example, the reference to "evil days" that I pointed out above as a link between the fallen god and the author of *Paradise Lost* is no less prominent in *The Fall of Hyperion* than it is in the first *Hyperion* poem. Although the phrase was drawn directly from *Paradise Lost*, it comes from of one of the most personal passages in Milton's epic. The poet-narrator does not simply describe his muse's nightly visits, and the ideal, spiritual inspiration they provide; he also reminds the reader of the very human obstacles that he must face "within the visible diurnal sphere" (PL VII: 22). Moreover, the first person narrator alludes to actual historical and biographical events in Milton's life, making it nearly impossible, in this instance, to separate the idealized authorial persona from the author himself as he actually existed. These particular lines encourage readers to envision the poet as an individual, rather than in any more abstract terms-- such as a symbolic representation of the quintessential epic bard.

In addition to its highly personal tone, the passage in which Milton speaks of "evil days" has several other qualities that distance it from the epic tradition, which the poem as a whole seems to exemplify. The phrase comes the third of four invocations that the poet-narrator addresses to his "heav'nly muse" (P.L. III: 19). Since the use of multiple invocations is, itself, one of Milton's most striking formal departures from his classical models, any allusion to them is more likely to differentiate *Paradise Lost* from its predecessors and their traditions than to foster an image of the work as the embodiment of that tradition. Moreover, in addition to the structural innovation that these repeated invocations represent, they also contain some of Milton's most prominent and explicit assertions of his Christian muse's superiority to the pagan goddesses called upon in earlier "heroic" poems. In both form and content, therefore, Milton's added invocations seem almost designed to set *Paradise Lost* apart from other epics. As a result, even if Keats had come to think of Milton's name as virtually synonymous with the epic form in other contexts, it seems unlikely that a reader as sensitive to the nuances of tone and form would entirely ignore the numerous cues to see the author as an individual in the passage from which he draws the phrase "evil days."

This focus on the author as an individual would do little to reduce the threat that Keats evidently saw in Milton's work, if that threat were rooted in a Bloomian/Oedipal view of his predecessor as a repressive father. Such a reading suggests no reason why Keats would retain an allusion to "evil days" in a composition that is, elsewhere, deliberately recast as anti-Miltonic. It would make all the difference, however, if, as I believe, Keats' desire to rid *Hyperion* of Milton's influence sprang from a need to free

himself, not from a single poet's overwhelming power, but from the strictly defined genre that the poet's work had come to represent for him. In that case, Milton would pose no threat at all for him, once separated from those generic associations and viewed simply as an individual writer. Consequently, Keats would feel no need to remove or alter an allusion such as the reference to "evil days", which there is every reason to believe presented his predecessor this light.

The notion that Keats' wariness of Milton is motivated by something other than Oedipal rivalry with his poetic forbearer gains still more credibility from the fact that, if the fallen Saturn has unmistakable affinities with Milton, he can be linked just as strongly with Keats himself. In Keats' first version of the poem, when the figure of a narrator is only an implicit presence, rather than a first-person voice within the narrative, this link is only a suggestion. Still, the frozen figure of the deposed God that Keats describes in the poem's opening lines does seem like a particularly apt and fitting emblem for the authors' increasing struggle to complete the poem. This struggle might well be described as a growing sense of literary paralysis. Moreover, similar images of stasis and confinement in the first version of *Hyperion* steadily increase in frequency and intensity as the work itself draws toward its abrupt conclusion. The parallel suggests a direct relationship between the poet-narrator, whose attempts to compose "verses which may live" are brought to a standstill by a confrontation with established tradition, and the distinctly Miltonic characters who are immobilized as they face analogous thematic issues within the narrative. It is as though the verse itself and the characters within it

freeze in tandem. [23] In the poem's second incarnation, the inclusion of a first person

narrator as a character allows Keats to all but spell out the connection. His opening

account of his struggle with deathlike paralysis on the altar steps is closely mirrored in

the picture that he paints of Saturn in his frozen sleep. In the most general terms, of

course, the two figures are connected by their stony immobility, and their attempts to

break from it. This threat, in and of itself, seems almost too apt a metaphor for the risks

that any poet runs in taking on a definite and concrete label not to at least raise the

possibility of some association, even without the more specific echoes in the wording

which solidify the link.

There is no shortage of such specific echoes. In their struggles with immobility

and its aftermath, both Saturn and the narrator are "palsied," and "cold" (Hyperion I:

122, I: 129, I: 322, I: 426). Likewise, the narrator speaks of his foot as "iced," and the

fallen God as "frozen," indicating the same sensation (*Hyperion* I.132, I.386). Finally his

description Saturn's "old right hand" as "nerveless, listless, dead," recalls his own

earlier "numbness" and the "slow, heavy deadly…" motions that he makes in fighting it

(*Fall of Hyperion* I:323; I:129). Nor are these similarities in diction the only parallel

between the narrator and Saturn. The bond between the two is further reinforced by the

fact that, through the vision granted by Moneta, the poet-narrator not only witnesses, but

actually, in some measure, shares fallen God's paralysis. Although he speaks of having

"no stay or prop/ but my own weak mortality," to help him "bear the lode of this eternal

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[23] Parker, in fact, suggests something very like this, although she does not explicitly extend it to the
poem's form (167).

quietude," in his dreaming state at least, he seems no more subject to mortality in its

most literal sense than the figures he observes (Keats, *Fall of Hyperion* I:388-391). In

any case, he almost seems to believe himself outside of time and death. His prayer "that

death would take [him] from the vale and all its burdens," quickly gives way to "despair

of change" (Keats, *Fall of Hyperion* I: 396-399). Even if one argues that the narrator's

sense of near-eternal stillness is an illusion, this distinction merely suggests that Saturn's

experience has been altered to accommodate his "mortal weakness," and the very clarity

of the comparison still does more to strengthen than to weaken the association.

Certainly, there is no question that the narrator comes as near as any human being can to

seeing the world from Saturn's viewpoint. The result blurs the lines between his own

sensations and those of the fallen Titan and once more emphasizes the link between

them. Keats' identification with the Miltonic figure of the fallen god suggests, not

awestruck anxiety but sympathy, and even empathy, with the earlier poet when taken as

individual. This, in turn, implies that, when he speaks so differently in his letters of

"Milton," as the repressive force whose overbearing influence causes him to abandon

Hyperion, it is because, in that context, the poet's name represents something altogether

different, and far larger.

It is true that this does not, in itself, prove that what it represented was the epic

genre. Several factors, however, do suggest the possibility. I have already discussed

both the biographical elements that would predispose Keats to see Milton as an emblem

of "heroic poetry." Likewise, I have noted the similarities between the terms that Keats

uses to discuss Milton's influence in his letters and those that his contemporaries used to

object to works they saw as too rigidly formal. The poem itself, in all its various

incarnations, adds still more weight to the notion that genre and classification were the

primary cause of Keats' sense of immobility. The sense of confinement and paralysis

that suggests a link between the poet-narrator and the figures of the fallen Saturn and his

fellow-titans in *The Fall of Hyperion*, throughout the earlier version of the poem, is

constantly associated with strong, well defined, generic signals. Like the images of

frozen immobility themselves, Keats' use of such strong generic markers becomes ever

clearer and more frequent as the poem draws towards its abrupt conclusion. It is as

though, the more neatly the poem falls into the traditional generic lines, the more

completely both its author and its characters succumb to the irresistible inertia that

comes from being bound by forms and labels. Perhaps even more suggestively, this

apparent correlation comes in large part from the fact that the images of paralysis in

Hyperion coincide with precisely the type of strong generic signals that play such a

crucial role in defining a work as "epic." Indeed, many, if not most, of Keats' strongest

images in this vein are actually expressed in passages which make clear use of such

formal or thematic conventions. One of Keats' first epic similes, for instance, is a

description of the defeated titans standing

...like a dismal cirque

Of Druid stones, upon a forlorn moor,

When the chill rain begins at shut of eve,

In dull November, and their chancel vault,

The Heaven itself, is blinded throughout night," (*Hyperion* 2:34-38).

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Although the poem is naturally full of comparisons, the first book contains few if any similarly extended or exotic similes on a scale which could recall such well known passages as the one where Milton likens Satan's shield to the moon, observed through Galileo's telescope (*Paradise Lost* I.284-289). It hardly seems coincidental that the image this first consciously "epic" simile expresses is one of lifeless immobility. This pattern holds throughout the work

It is fairly clear from the beginning of *Hyperion* that Keats is drawing on the structures and traditions of the epic. And yet, the first book of the poem contains relatively few explicit markers of the genre, particularly in the shape of formal signals. Although, as I will demonstrate, the poem's opening image of dead leaves calls up enough classical associations to make the work's generic ambitions clear, it is a distinctly roundabout and subtle gesture compared to the literal and figurative trumpet blasts which typically signal the opening of epic. Most conspicuously, *Hyperion* does not begin with an invocation to the muse. It is true that Keats' education in the classics was less formal and extensive than that of many of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, given the breadth and scope of his reading, it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that he was unaware of the convention and its significance. If nothing else, Keats' letters suggest that he was fairly preoccupied with Milton in general and *Paradise Lost* in particular while he was working on *Hyperion*. Given how many of that work's most prominent and often quoted lines come from its invocation, this absorption, in itself, might well have been enough to keep the convention at the forefront of Keats' mind; all

the more so if, as I believe, he saw his predecessor largely through the lens of genre.

Under these circumstances, the omission is too glaring to be anything but deliberate.

This deliberate omission raises the question of why Keats decided to forgo the traditional invocation. It does not appear to be an attempt to keep the poem from being identified with epic, as such, or even to complicate its identification, in the way that Wordsworth's "glad preamble" does in *The Prelude*. There is no attempt to mix epic conventions with markers from other genres, or to present generic signals in ways that renders their significance ambiguous, as in Wordsworth's poem. Evidence both from the poem itself and from the external references to it in his notes and letters, indicates that even at this early stage, Keats was clearly and avowedly envisioning his poem as an epic. Nonetheless, he declines to begin it with the expected formal marker. This conspicuous absence begins to make more sense, however, in light of the link between conventional generic markers and paralysis. The opening scene, after all, describes a successful attempt to break the paralysis of a classical figure who has been frozen by the despair of having outlived his time. Viewed in this light, it is not difficult to see Saturn's ancient, motionless form as a kind of metaphor for the epic genre itself -- a noble giant from another time, frozen into a statue, waiting to be revived. Such a re-awakening can hardly begin with an extended example of very kind of formal signal which Keats consistently associates with that paralysis.

As I have indicated, the image of fallen leaves with which Keats does begin, is also, in itself, closely associated with the classical epic, especially when linked with the leader of a defeated force. Homer's description of the ranks of fallen soldiers, in which

he likens them to autumn leaves, is one of the most famous passages in the *Iliad*, and the allusions that Virgil, Dante, and Milton, among others, make to it in their own epic poems connect it still more closely with the genre. Even so, the metaphor of leaves is a far more flexible and localized kind of epic marker than the invocation. Unlike the invocation, its position is not fixed by any formula, and it is certainly not a prescribed opening. Furthermore, it is a highly specific gesture. An invocation, by its very nature, is a formula that encompasses the entire work. The generic implications in the image of the fallen leaves, in contrast, although they may be almost as emphatic, do not necessarily extend beyond the passage where they occur. This is not to suggest that Keats was consciously attempting to avoid having his work labeled as an epic; as I've made clear, there is every reason to believe the opposite was true. Rather, I argue that he found himself in the paradoxical position of *intending* to place his work within the epic genre, yet, at the same time, fearing that, on some level at least, the formal and thematic signals of that genre would inevitably limit and detract from the poem. Beginning with a traditional comparison that is unambiguous in its associations yet limited in scope is one way that he attempts to resolve this paradox. This compromise allows him to clearly establish his generic aspirations without openly resorting to a standard formula.

A close reading of the passage in question further supports the idea that, in Keats' mind, such formulas and strong generic markers were already linked implicitly with stasis and paralysis. For, limited though it may be, like the other formal and thematic markers which align *Hyperion* with the traditions of the classical epic, the

image of the fallen leaves is one of lifelessness. "No stir of air was there," Keats writes,

describing the clearing where Saturn waits,

> Not so much life as on a summer's day
>
> Robs not one light seed from the feather'd
>
> grass But where the dead leaf fell, there
>
> did it rest,
>
> (*Hyperion* I: 7-10).

This emphasis on death and stillness is all the more remarkable because it is

diametrically opposed to the connotations that the metaphor carries in earlier epics. In

those poems the image is a far more hopeful one, intended to evoke a cycle of death and

renewal, rather than a final end. Homer emphasizes this explicitly.

> Like the race of leaves
>
> The race of man is, that deserves no
>
> Question…The wind /in autumn strews
>
> The earth with old leaves; then the spring
>
> The woods with new endows;
>
> And so death scatters men on earth, so
>
> Life puts out again
>
> Man's leavy issue," (Homer trans. Chapman VI: 141-146).[24]

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[24] Here, and throughout this chapter, I quote from George Chapman's translation, as the one Keats' writings indicate that he preferred.

Later authors, such as Virgil and Milton make no such outright declaration, but, given the image's pedigree, its implications would be immediately apparent to a "fit audience," and they may well have considered it unnecessary to belabor the point. In Milton's case especially, any attempt to underline the possibilities of revival implicit in the metaphor of fallen leaves with an outright statement may have seemed redundant. After all, in the first book of *Paradise Lost* the defeated army in question when he makes the comparison is quite literally about to rise again, enacting literally what can only be symbolically expressed where human armies are concerned. Keats' image, on the other hand, though its context is nearly identical to Milton's, explicitly cuts off all possibility of such rebirth and regeneration. Its finality is unequivocal: "Where the dead leaf fell, there it did rest," (*Hyperion* I: 10). Not only does the wording emphasize the presence of death, it also cuts off any potential for future motion. Even the structure of the line, the first one in the poem to conclude with an end-stop, reinforces this sense of an abrupt and final halt. These factors make the leaves an almost astonishingly appropriate comparison for Saturn's motionless figure as we first see him, both in form and content. Not only do they provide a vivid analogy for the Titan's stillness, as a traditional signal of epic, the convention in itself serves as a kind metaphor for his position--a noble relic of the ancient world, whom the passage of time has rendered dead and lifeless.

Just as the epic associations of this particular convention are limited, Saturn's deathlike paralysis is not permanent. Thea revives him, and perhaps, in doing so serves a sort of surrogate muse. Certainly this reading of her role would dovetail nicely with the other indications of Keats' initial strategies for trying to establish *Hyperion*'s generic

claims. By opening with the simile of leaves he clearly indicates his work's intended genre without resorting to a standard formula. In much the same way, making a powerful goddess the figure that both literally and figuratively animates his verse and yet not portraying that figure as a muse, allows him to both recall and sidestep the convention. By rousing Saturn from his deathlike sleep, Thea's intervention grants life and motion to the poem as well. In awakening the first book's central figure her influence also allows the narrative that follows to unfold, not unlike those other goddesses, who breathed life into or "inspired" the creations of the poets whom they favored. The parallel grows even stronger if, as I've suggested, Keats himself identified with Saturn. In that case, she also animates the *poet*, in some sense, and so really does appear to be a muse in all but name. One might say that, through Thea, Keats is able evoke the muses without actually invoking them.

The idea that Thea functions as a muse also gives all the more significance to the way Keats describes her, through a series of comparisons which proclaim her superiority to a whole succession of more traditional figures from the classical pantheon. First he tells us, "By her in stature the tall Amazon/ Had stood a pigmy's height:" (*Hyperion* I: 27-28). He goes on, even more significantly in light of his focus on the epic, to assert that "she would have ta'en/ Achilles by the hair and bent his neck; /Or with a finger stay'd Ixion's wheel." (*Hyperion* I: 28-30). This statement establishes Thea's superiority, not only, predictably, to the ancient heroes that Keats mentions, but even to the Homeric Gods who have, in the timeline of *Hyperion*, only just replaced such deities of "the infant world." It does not seem accidental that the feats with which

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he chooses to credit Thea are ones which these later Gods either cannot or will not perform. Achilles' Mother, Thetis, after all, wished desperately to bend her proud son's neck, and forestall his death, but all her attempts to do so failed. And Zeus himself decreed Ixion's punishment on the perpetually spinning wheel, so any goddess who could stop it with her finger must be both stronger and more merciful than the king of Olympus whose victory she is lamenting when Keats' introduces her.[25] Although its intricacy makes it well worth lingering over, thus far the passage contains nothing unexpected from a generic point of view. Indeed the need to "overgoe" one's predecessors, is in some ways, as much a standard feature of the epic genre as a military catalogue or an invocation.

The position of defeat in which Keats introduces Thea, however, seems to belie these implications. If she does, indeed, have some quality which places her above the other figures Keats compares her to, it is certainly not any power which enables her to literally overcome them. Nor is there is there any suggestion that he is attempting to invest her with the sort of deliberately understated moral superiority with which Milton invests his heroes, as a conscious contrast to the military splendor which he associates with the epics of the classical world. This may not entirely negate a reading of the passage as a variation of the traditional attempt to surpass his predecessors, which has

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[25] This last line may also contain a larger claim, albeit a distinctly indirect one, about the power of song and poetry, since, according to legend the only the time the wheel did, in fact, pause was at the sound of Orpheus' song. Nor is the connection as tenuous as it might sound at first. Certainly, it would explain why Keats would chooses to reference such a relatively obscure tale as that of Ixion's punishment, when it has no clear or obvious connection with his larger narrative. And any connection with the archetypal poet, Orpheus, and therefore with poetry itself, can only lend weight to the other indications that Thea functions as a kind of surrogate muse, even if it is too slender to confirm that reading in and of itself.

marked epics at least since Virgil's *Aeneid*, but it surely complicates it. The next few lines further distinguish Keats' description of Thea from similar "overgoing" passages in earlier poems. "Her face" he writes, "was large as that of Memphian sphinx/Pedestal'd haply in a palace court/…. But oh! how unlike marble was that face," (*Hyperion* I: 31-34). Unlike the previous lines, this comparison makes no claims, even indirectly, about the superiority of Thea's power to that of other classical figures. Thea's face is not larger, or more beautiful than that of the Memphian sphinx. It is simply "unlike" it. Indeed, in the strictest sense, the comparison is not made to the mythological sphinx at all, but to the statue of that figure, and, significantly, the "marble" out of which it is carved. Keats never specifies exactly what this difference consists of, but mobility and warmth both spring to mind as qualities that contrast with the decidedly classical stone. Furthermore, the way that the comparison leads Keats into a description of her sorrow suggests that her ability to feel emotion is a major factor in this qualitative difference. The suggestion in these lines that this ability to feel is unusual for an immortal --"as if just there [her heart], / *though* an immortal, she felt cruel pain" -- bolsters this reading (*Hyperion* I: 43-44, emphasis mine). Likewise, the intrinsic opposition of the traits which distinguish Thea, namely her mobility and her feeling, to those which dominate the description of Saturn, who is actually likened to a statue, make it no great leap to speculate that they are the qualities which enable her to revive the fallen titan. This revival can be only be a temporary one, however, as long as the poem's narrative structure leads inevitably back to the confines of a genre as strictly defined as the classical epic.

Therefore, neither the proliferation of epic markers nor the images of stasis and confinement that most of them express ought to come as a surprise. The second book, in keeping with the traditions of the genre, describes a council of war. It is also at the beginning of this book, which might be said to lock the poem firmly into the pattern of the classical epic that it had been delicately negotiating in the first book, that Keats makes use of the extended simile whose significance as a generic signal I discussed above. Even more revealing is the way that Keats uses the epic catalogue -- one of the genre's strongest formal markers -- to introduce the frozen Titans:

> All their limbs
>
> Locked up like veins of metal,
>
> Crampt and screw'd; Without a motion….
>
> Scarce images of life… (*Hyperion* II: 25-33).

Almost everything about the list of names that follows serves to align it with the traditions of the epic (*Hyperion* II: 53-56; 66-68). The diction itself is formal, and makes frequent use of Miltonic inversions. The careful attention to each figure's lineage, for instance

> Asia, born of most enormous Caf,
>
> Who cost her mother Tellus keener pangs… Than
>
> any of her sons…"

is also in keeping with the epic model. Finally, the tone of the descriptions themselves, such as "Shadow'd Enceladus…tiger-passioned, lion-thoughted, wroth," bears a distinct resemblance to the standard epithets that were such an integral part of classical epic. It

is as if the formal conventions which Keats uses to introduce these inert, statue-like characters, in themselves, serve as an echo of the "opaque element" which confines them.

This sense of generic conventions as a source of confinement is further highlighted by the way that Keats concludes the catalogue. After his description of Ops, he ends the list almost abruptly with the statement that there are "many whose names may not be told." He expands on this by adding: "For when the muse's wings are air-ward spread, /Who shall delay her flight?" (*Hyperion* II: 81-83). At first glance, the protestation seems as conventional as the catalogue itself. It is, in fact, a feature of the epic list that dates back to Homer's catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*. When examined more closely, however, the reason that Keats gives for breaking off his recitation not does not accord with that offered by the earlier poets he is emulating. It actually reverses it. Keats' declaration that he has made some omissions in the catalogue, is, indeed, traditional enough. As I mentioned above, Homer begins his epic list of ships in the *Iliad* with a nearly identical assertion:

> The multitude exceed my song, though fitted to my choice
>
> Ten tongues were, harden'd palates ten, a breast of brass, a voice
>
> Infract and trump-like; that great work, unless the seed of Jove,
>
> The deathless Muses, undertake, maintains a pitch above
>
> All mortal powers. The princes then, and navy that did bring
>
> These so inenarrable troops, and all their soils, I sing. (Homer trans. Chapman II)

Clearly, the suggestion that the list is truncated dates back to the very roots of epic as a genre. Furthermore, echoes in the catalogues of later epics establish this as an integral part of the convention.[26] Milton, for example, ends his catalogue of fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* (perhaps the most closely related antecedent of Keats' list of Titans), by saying that the "the rest were long to tell," and for this reason, he has only enumerated "the prime in order and in might" (Milton, *Paradise Lost* I: 306-307). But, if the protestation is itself a standard feature of the epic catalogue, the reason Keats gives for it not only differs from his predecessors' explanations but is diametrically opposed to them. Homer's verse states outright that the omissions in his list are the result of his own human limitations and that it is only the muse's strength that allows him to continue for as long as he does. Milton is somewhat less explicit, but his explanation still leaves little room for doubt that it is his own-- or perhaps his readers'-- human limitations that force him to abbreviate his catalogue. The fact that a complete listing of the fallen angels would be "long to tell," could only concern a being bound by mortal time. Certainly, it would hardly deter the muse whose aid he invokes at the beginning of the catalogue. She is an immortal entity, who

> …from the first
>
> Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
>
> Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss
>
> And mad'st it pregnant… (*Paradise Lost* I: 19-22).

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[26] For instance Virgil's *Aeneid* xi:664

It is doubtful whether such an eternal being would even have a concept of a list or story taking too much time to complete; and given the way the image of a dove creating matter in the abyss identifies her with the Holy Spirit, it would verge on blasphemy to suggest that it was beyond her power. In all these cases, however she is envisioned, it is clear that the muse is the sustaining force behind the poet's recitation, and that the list is cut short in spite of, rather than because of, her divine promptings. Keats' muse, in contrast, is directly responsible for his abbreviations. He ends the comparatively brief list of names not, like his predecessors, because his human limitations cannot sustain it any longer, but because the muse herself refuses to linger on the catalogue, and so forbids him to do. He cuts the list short, he tells us, because his "muse's wings are air-ward spread," and attempting to prolong the list would only threaten to "delay her flight," (*Hyperion* II: 81-83). The image is especially suggestive in light of the long-standing association of flight with both freedom and inspiration. In the first place, his claim that the muse's spread wings prompt him to move on implies that they had *not* been spread, and that, therefore, she had not been an active presence, let alone the driving force, during his recitation of the catalogue. Furthermore, the wording suggests that to soar freely she must leave behind the list of names, and by extension, the tradition which it represents. Rather than the expansive demonstration of the muse's infinite power that the epic catalogue functions as in the works of Keats' predecessors, in *Hyperion* it becomes a confining force which hampers her flight. It is only in leaving behind the generic marker that she can truly cause the verse to soar.

Even more important than the individual associations each of these generic markers has with paralysis is the way that both these signals and the sense of paralysis

that they bring with them become more and more prominent. *Hyperion* increasingly

comes to be shaped by the epic genre and its formal and thematic markers until they

dominate the work entirely. At that point, Keats finds himself unable to continue.

Hyperion breaks off, leaving characters, narrator, and verse in what amounts to a state of

suspended animation. In the second version of the poem, the link between "classical"

tradition and paralysis is even more direct. The poet-narrator's struggle with immobility

is precipitated by his attempt to approach and communicate with the distinctly classical

goddess, Moneta, whom he addresses as the "Shade of Memory" (*Fall of Hyperion* I:

282). The circumstances of this struggle certainly suggest that that the deadly immobility

he must overcome is linked, if not with genre itself, at least with a figure who seems to

represents the past. Moreover, Moneta's role as the mother of the muses, her praise of

poets, and her indulgent attitude towards dreamers who aspire to become worthy of that

title make her easy to connect with the concept of literary tradition. Likewise the fact

that the first question the narrator asks this figure concerns his own identity, the repeated

exclamation "what am I?" cannot help but link her, not only with the past, but

specifically with questions of naming and classification (*Fall of Hyperion* 282). Since all

of these questions ultimately lead the narrator back to a consideration of his own status

as a poet, tradition and identity seem intimately linked, making Moneta an ideal emblem

for the kind of generic labels that define a literary "classic."

 "Writ in Water": The Desire for Dissolution and the Resistance to Stable Identity Keats'

Later Writing.

Accepting this interpretation of *Hyperion*'s development, it is hardly surprising that Keats first coined the phrase "negative capability" less a year before beginning the poem and that he began to develop his ideas about "the chameleon poet" in more detail during his struggles with that work (Keats, ed. Damrosch et al, "To Woodhouse 27 October 1818," 1000). Like the poems themselves, these concepts do not bear explicitly on genre. It is, however, no great leap to connect Keats' conviction that a successful poet must, above all, avoid being trapped within a fixed identity with the desire to avoid labels and definitions that can be seen throughout his work. Even Keats' choice of Shakespeare as the prime exemplar of this talent lends itself to the suggestion that it is, at least in part, connected with the ability to sidestep generic boundaries. Shakespeare's work was known, after all, for its tendency to blend different "types" and "modes," as Thomas Rymer's infamous neo-classical critique makes clear (Keats, ed. Damrosch et al, "To Woodhouse 27 October 1818," 1000). And, although there is no doubt that both the scarcity of biographical details about the bard, and the absence of a clear narrator in Shakespeare's works to provide a unifying voice, played a large part in creating the impression that he was "everything and nothing," I suggest that amorphous, indefinable nature of the works themselves was equally, if not more, important in establishing him as a "chameleon" (Keats, ed. Damrosch et al. 1000).

In fact, a strong case can be made that it is this just this tendency to challenge boundaries, especially those surrounding generic labels, which Keats is calling on when he invokes the playwright to aid him in his own poetry. It is Shakespeare, after all, whom Keats summons to dismiss the limitations of "golden tongued romance," (Keats,

"Lear," 1). This reference seems all the more significant because it is one of the few direct mentions of genre that Keats makes in his oeuvre. It is true, of course, that the poet's wish to escape one genre in particular, namely "romance," does not, in itself, imply a similar aversion to all such literary labels. Indeed, many critics attribute Keats' apparent disillusionment with that "fair plumed Siren!" specifically to his dissatisfaction with *Endymion* ("Lear" 2; Parker 166-167). This explanation appears eminently plausible, so far as it goes, and, if true, it only lends weight to the idea that much of his dissatisfaction with the earlier work had to do with its genre and the ways in which it shaped the poem.[27] But, as my arguments above suggest, there is good reason to view Keats' uneasiness with "romance" in *Endymion* as a reflection of a larger discomfort with the notion of genre itself. Therefore, even if one attributes the attempt to dismiss "romance" in "Sitting down to read King Lear Again" entirely to Keats' disappointment with *Endymion*, it can still easily be read as one more manifestation of his broader doubts about fixed literary labels. [28] His disillusioning experience with the earlier poem may well have been responsible for focusing his attention on romance" in particular as the confining force to be escaped, but I believe it was an uneasiness with genre as a whole that made the work a source of discontentment in the first place. In light of this, invoking Shakespeare's writing in particular to release him from its confines strongly

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[27] Always understanding "romance" in the same strictly defined sense of medieval or medievalized verse romance discussed above. As Parker herself points out, by the time Keats was composing his famous Odes, he had come to see "Romance" as something more than a generic designation. (Parker 169-170) [28] An oversimplification, whose assumption of linear progress Parker herself decidedly rejects, even while connecting Keats' sonnet on *King Lear* more broadly with his presumed desire to move on to a more complex or mature stylistic mode than the one he uses in *Endymion* (167).

suggests that Keats saw the ability to transcend such labels an integral aspect of the

"chameleon poet's" works (Keats, ed. Damrosch et al. "1000). The fact that *Lear's* genre

was, itself, a vexed question at the time the sonnet was written, particularly as it relates

to romance, can only lend weight to the idea that Keats' was turning to it, at least in part,

because of its ability to defy easy classification.

It is no new observation that, in Keats' time, enacting the death of a mad king in

England had dangerously apt political overtones, and, that therefore, when Keats wrote

his sonnet, the only version of *King Lear* performed in public was Nahum Tate's

revision, which the Longman anthology actually refers to as a "romance." In this

adaptation Cordelia lives and Lear resumes his proper place as king. Passing over all

political considerations for the moment, the performance version of play does indeed

resemble the "serene" and "golden-tongued" tales Keats is seeking to escape (Damrosch

et al. 934, n.1). In a sense, therefore, simply by sitting down to *read* the play, Keats is

already turning away from this "fair plumed Siren," (Keats, "Lear" 2).[28] The way that

this "queen of far away" is associated, throughout the poem, with sound further supports

this interpretation ("Lear" 2). The description of "Romance" as "golden tongued," a

"siren," who "melodizes" with her "lute" can easily be seen as allusion to the

deceptively "serene" version of Lear, which could be heard aloud in theaters ("Lear" 1-

4). Likewise, couching her banishment as an order to "be mute" can equally be read as

Keats way of emphasizing the turn from the audible performance of "romance" to the

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[28] Again, I will not digress to speak explicitly about this gesture's more political aspects, which are
complex enough to form a chapter in and of themselves.

more powerful, if tragic, version of the work, which was only available through the silence of the printed text ("Lear" 4)

Compelling as this reading is, however, it is only a partial one. Certainly, Keats seems to have had the differences between Tate's performance version of *King Lear* and Shakespeare's printed one in mind. And yet, the stage adaptation of *King Lear* cannot be the only "romance" he was rejecting. After all, the injunction to "shut up thine olden pages" which accompanies the command to "be mute," could only apply to printed book ("Lear" 4). Naturally, this gesture towards the printed word does not, in itself, imply that Keats was thinking about any one specific volume of romance, and, even assuming that he did have one in mind, it would be impossible to know which one it was. But, just as when Keats speaks of reading Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an antidote to the more vocal "Siren Romance," it seems reasonable to identify that siren, at least in part, with the adaptations of the play that Keats would have seen and listened to in theaters, likewise, when he speaks of "olden pages" it is equally logical to think especially about the early sources Shakespeare drew on for the basic plot of *King Lear*. Particularly in a sonnet which, from its title, tacitly invokes the "other versions" of the tale in circulation, it is no great leap to link this reference to an "olden" text with the medieval histories that also present variants of King Lear's story. After all, the works in question date from roughly the same time as the more self-evident works of verse romance that inspired writers such as Keats' mentor, Hunt, to attempt a revival of the form in their own writing. Furthermore, and even more importantly, these early variants all had fairy-tale

like resolutions far closer to the ending of the Tate version discussed above than to that of Shakespeare's troubling and complex tragedy (Orgel xl; xliii).

Of course, we cannot be certain how aware Keats was of Shakespeare's sources for *King Lear* at the time when he composed his sonnet. Nonetheless, there is good reason to believe he was familiar with least one of them. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* is widely considered to be among Shakespeare's most influential sources for the story of *King Lear* (Orgel xl). It is, therefore, highly suggestive that, in his November 17 letter to John Taylor, written less than year after "Sitting down to read King Lear again," Keats specifically mentions consulting one of the later chapters in this volume (Qtd Milnes 36). At the very least it shows that he had ready access to the book, and that he had an interest in it.

This fact raises some new and thought-provoking questions about just how stable, or how fluid, Keats considered the Shakespearean text in terms of its relation to romance and to literary classification as a whole. If nothing else, it suggests that Keats was sufficiently aware of just how deeply rooted in "siren Romance" Shakespeare's *King Lear* was to implicitly acknowledge that connection ("Lear" 2). Furthermore, this implied acknowledgement, in itself, serves to point out just how fragile the boundaries created by such labels are. Banishing "old" "golden-tongued romance" by calling on a tragedy which, in its earliest known incarnation, was exactly such a romance not only has more than a touch of irony; it would also make anyone who was aware of Shakespeare's sources likely to reflect on just how easily those borders can be crossed

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("Lear" 1-4). It demonstrates how effortlessly a tale can slip from one "type" into another, particularly in the hands of a "chameleon poet" such as Shakespeare, who Keats seems to identify by his amorphous nature. Even more importantly, this unspoken recognition of just how drastically Shakespeare departed from the genre of his source material in writing *King Lear* is a reminder of the *process* of generic change which the play itself went through in its creation. This reminder, especially when set against the backdrop of Tate's adaptation, which places *King Lear* firmly back within the realm of romance, suggests that it was this quality of transformation, far more than its final status as a "tragedy," which drew Keats to *King Lear* in particular as a way to free his writing, not only from the constraints of romance, but from all such confining labels. This protean aspect of work composed by a poet Keats already saw as "everything and nothing," would make *King Lear* a more than fitting emblem of the freedom Keats is seeking in the sonnet's opening (Keats, To Woodhouse 27 October 1818" 1000).

This reading would also explain why, out of all the tragedies in the Shakespearean canon, Keats seeks inspiration in the one which most closely resembles the very romance he is supposedly rejecting. Viewing the play as a static object, it would be a puzzling choice, even on the most direct and basic level. Surely, if Keats wanted to invoke Shakespeare's writing as a kind of stern role-model, an antidote to the temptations of the brand of romance he fell into in *Endymion*, he would focus on a work more diametrically opposed to such romance. *King Lear*, on the contrary, clearly remains steeped in the tradition he is turning from, despite its inarguable designation as a tragedy. At first glance, it might seem possible to argue that, in Keats' eyes, the very

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elements of romance which remain in Shakespeare's *King Lear* are exactly what make

the play's ultimate rejection of that mode so completely, and so crushingly, emphatic. In

the same vein, one might even speculate that *King Lear*'s roots in something very like an

old medieval romance would only make the darker version left by Shakespeare a more

fitting antidote against its former genre. If so, rather than raising the sort of problematic

questions about just how completely any version of the legend could separate itself from

that original tradition, Shakespeare's metamorphosis of the tale into tragedy would serve

as a precise enactment of the turn Keats hopes to make when he invokes it.

This reading only stands, however, if one views the turn away from romance in

Shakespeare's *King Lear* as final and definitive, and its rejection of the genre as

complete. I would argue that, on the contrary, a play as intricate and fond of ambiguities

as Shakespeare's *King Lear* simply cannot sustain this kind of clear-cut, black and white

interpretation, particularly for a reader as imaginative and sensitive to nuances as Keats.

Until now I have focused on external factors, such as the multiple and contradictory

versions of *King Lear* in circulation during Keats' lifetime, which would be likely to

create a sense of instability around the genre of Shakespeare's text. [29] But, important as

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[29] Nor does the fact that these conflicting versions are presented separately negate the sense of contradiction; As Claude Levi Struass sensibly points out, in practical terms "a myth [consists] of all its versions; or to put it otherwise, a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such." (435). Certainly, any eighteenth or nineteenth century scholar would have been hard pressed to choose one version of the *King Lear* legend as definitive, enabling them to dismiss the conflicting variants as insignificant "corruptions" of the correct ending. After all, in most circumstances, one would instinctively look at the oldest documented versions of the tale, if one were searching for "authenticity." But in this case the "original" sources in medieval histories are directly at odds with the presumably "authoritative" Shakespearian version. And this dilemma does not even take into account the troubled textual history of the supposedly unitary "Shakespearean" version, which is, itself, preserved in two vastly different, yet equally compelling forms and, by the late eighteenth century, had been conflated, edited, and revised by countless publishers

such external factors doubtless were, I believe that they were secondary to, and perhaps in some ways only symptoms of, an innate resistance to being "classed" or "labeled" in the text of Shakespeare's play itself. [30] Although the play is generally referred to as a tragedy, based on its placement in the first Folio, and certainly, of all the available generic labels, tragedy is by far the most appropriate, it still does not fully or adequately describe the work. It does, not, for instance, take into account Shakespeare's other departure from his source material -- his use of the double plot. Gloucester's story, which intertwines with and mirrors that of the unfortunate King so closely as to be inseparable from it, preserves many of "romance" overtones that Cordelia's death shatters in the "main" plot. Here, the loyal and worthy younger brother is vindicated to his dying and repentant father. He then goes on to claim his birthright and foil his wicked older brother's plot, appearing as a nameless hero to defeat him in single combat--a climax worthy of any fairytale (Lear V.iii.110-262) The idealized, "romantic" feel of Edgar's triumph, and the relatively just, if admittedly harsh, ending of the Glouster subplot as a whole, tends to get lost in the larger darkness of the play's conclusion. Still, as a deliberate addition, which seems to have little direct impact on the action of the "main" plot, the inclusion of this more traditional romance sub-plot must serve some purpose, and its significance should not be overlooked. I believe that one of

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and critics. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that even the most narrowly origin-obsessed critic could consider one version of the story in isolation.

[30] Certainly, the stability or instability of names and titles is a prevailing theme within *King Lear*. This is not the place to undertake a detailed examination of this theme, and for reasons of time and space I will confine my comments on the play to its broad, structural elements. But the fact that this resistance can be seen, to some extent, at every level of the text, only bolsters the idea it is an integral feature of Shakespeare's work.

its most important roles is to complicate what would otherwise be a purely tragic ending. We certainly cannot write "happily ever after" at the conclusion of the play, but, with the kind, loyal, and much-tested Edgar assuming power, neither can we quite agree with Glouster, that "As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods;/ They kill us for their sport" (Lear IV: 1:37-38).

This hopeful ambiguity is heightened by the way that, throughout play, the main plot and the subplot quite deliberately mirror one another (Orgel xl). The constant parallels, both literal and symbolic, between Lear's conflict with his daughters and Glouster's troubles with his sons intertwines the two plots inextricably, and makes it impossible to neatly separate their resolutions at the end. As the wronged but loyal child, victimized by his greedy but eloquent sibling's plot, and banished by his father's hasty and unfair reaction, Edwin is, structurally, at least, Cordelia's double. Therefore, just as Cordelia's death darkens the triumph of her mirror image, Edgar, and veers the play sharply away from "Siren Romance," the glimmer of hope that Edgar's victory provides must, in turn, reflect back on the ending of the main plot, and redeem it from complete and total tragedy.

Certainly, Keats himself seems to see the work this way. In his sonnet, he associates the play almost entirely with images of contradiction, and the act of reading it with boundary crossing, transgression in its strictest etymological sense. He first describes the work as a "fierce dispute/ betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay," ("Lear" 5-6). Ostensibly this is intended to describe the numerous and bitter conflicts in the plot. But the exact construction of the phrase, which makes play itself the subject of

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the sentence, also carries the strong suggestion that the work not only relates such "fierce disputes," but *is*, in fact, a kind of conflict in its own right. The impression is heightened by his description of the work as a "bitter-sweet Shakespearian fruit" ("Lear" 8). This pairing of opposites confirms the earlier impression that Keats viewed the play as something inherently contradictory. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the contradiction, or "dispute," he has in mind is generic in nature. But by starting with a rejection of "romance," Keats ensures the reader has genre in mind from the first line of the sonnet. This makes questions of literately classification a plausible, even obvious, place to start in theorizing about the sources of the conflict which is suggested by the lines that follow. Taken together with the evidence above, this view comes to seem not only plausible, but probable. It suggests that *King Lear* is not important to Keats, only, or even primarily, because it is a great tragedy. It does not merely represent a much more "serious" mode than "romance," a step up on his personal Virgilian Rota. Rather, the play appears to draw Keats' attention because, in writing it, Shakespeare turns a "romance" not merely into a tragedy, but into something which defies all labels and cannot be defined by any genre. Like its author, Shakespeare's *King Lear* can be described as "everything and nothing" (Keats, "To Woodhouse 27 October 1818" 1000). In contrasting this amorphous work with the confines of a genre like "romance," and calling on it as a remedy for his own work, Keats suggests just how important this ability to sidestep genre is to his ideal of the "chameleon poet."

This consideration of genre adds another level of resonance to the more general ambivalence towards selfhood, and the desire for liminality in Keats' poems. Perhaps

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the clearest example of this kind of tension can be seen in the choice he draws in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," between the frozen immortality of the "classic," and the ephemeral but fulfilling benefits of human "life"--and perhaps, likewise, of "verses that may live." The paradox that Keats explores within the poem is common knowledge. What *has* gone largely unremarked is the striking similarity between the dilemma raised by this emphatically *classical* object, and the predicaments about poetic *classification* and identity discussed above, questions whose importance to the poet, as I've established, was becoming increasingly evident in his letters and his other works. There is no explicit link between the two. The suggestion of a common etymology in their descriptions, which I gestured at above in tying "class" to "classical," is the closest thing to a direct connection between genre and the Grecian urn. This connection begins to seem a great deal less far-fetched, however, when one considers just how numerous and apt the parallels between the two dilemmas are.

Certainly, although it never mentions genre, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" does explicitly invite us to consider the dilemma it presents in terms of how the theme applies to the process of poetic creation. It opens, after all, with a direct comparison of the urn's power to that of poetry. Keats apostrophizes the artifact as a "Sylvan historian, who canst express/ a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme," ("Urn," 3-4). Clearly, Keats (or his first person narrator) is interested in the relationship between the urn and his own medium, and, therefore, must see them as connected. What *is* puzzling is that, at first glance, poetry appears to come off second-best in the comparison. I believe, however, that Keats' use of the first person pronoun, even in the plural, goes some distance

towards explaining this surprising statement. There are, in fact, some strong indications, that the line refers, not just to poetry in general, but specifically to Keats' own "rhymes," and to one of his earlier works in particular-- namely *Endymion*.

To begin with the broadest and most general factors, the reference to "rhymes," specifically, rather than verses, lines, or songs, seems telling, since among the other "class"laden invective discussed above, some of the harshest comments on *Endymion* criticize it for the dependence it appears to place on its rhyme-scheme. [31] And one can certainly make the case, that, in retrospect, at least, Keats saw the poem as a lifeless "thing of beauty," very much like the "still unravished Bride of quietness" described in the Ode, a point I will return to in more detail below (Keats, Endymion 1; "Urn" 1). But even more importantly, a close comparison between the two poems reveals a striking resemblance between the scene depicted on the urn, and the opening procession in *Endymion*. On the most basic level, both are concerned with the same ritual -- a procession from a village to a sacrifice at a woodland alter in ancient Greece. While this alone does not justify reading the figures on the "urn" as a commentary on the earlier poem, in light of just how well the reading fits, it does at least raise the question of that intriguing possibility. There are also more specific similarities in the wording of the two descriptions, which bolster the idea that there is some deliberate parallel between them. References to Arcadia, flowering garlands, and piping shepherds, all of which occur in both poems, might be dismissed as stock elements in any pastoral, cold or otherwise. But

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[31] Croker's review for instance, accuses him of "wander[ing] from one subject to another, from the association, not of ideas but of sounds…" (131).

they are far from the only, or most distinctive, echoes. For instance, it is specifically a

"flowery" tale the urn "expresses," and narrator in *Endymion's* prologue tells us he

aspires to create a "*flowery* band" with his poem (Keats, "Urn" 3-4; *Endymion* 1:7). It is

true that, in this case, the description refers, not to the tale itself, but to the way that all

such "things of beauty" work "to bind us to the earth." Nonetheless, given the context, it

is surely no great leap to read the adjective as something integrally linked with the poem

as a whole, or to suggest that its prominence implies that Keats saw Endymion itself as a

"flowery tale". [32]

 Likewise, the

<blockquote>
Young companies nimbly… dancing

To the swift treble pipe, and humming string… To

tunes forgotten—out of memory
</blockquote>

in *Endymion*" are difficult *not* to connect with the "Fair youth, beneath the trees" whom

Keats urges to "pipe to spirit ditties of no tone" in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" when the two

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[32] In addition to creating one more link between the diction of the two poems, this description of a tale as "flowery" may also have generic overtones in and of itself. Of course, "flowery" is hardly a recognized literary classification, and, in the ode at least, it is possible that the adjective is only meant to suggest a literal element of the scene depicted on the urn. A strong case can be made, however, that Keats associated it, not only with *Endymion*, but with the whole "romance" tradition that so shaped it. Certainly, the adjective had associations with this type of "verse Romance" that went far beyond his own use of it in the poem's prologue. For instance, it was often applied to the work of Leigh Hunt, whose influence on the style of *Endymion* formed such a crucial aspect of the critical response to the poem. Hostile reviewers, in particular, tended to portray such "floweriness" as a hallmark of "Cockney School." One such early critic actually went so far as to descry Keats debt to Hunt , quite literally, in terms of parallels in floral imagery ."If Mr. Leigh Hunt had never written," he says "We might have pronounced it [Endymion] to be *sui generis* without fear of contradiction. That gentleman, however, has talked so much about 'daisies and daffodils, clover and sweet peas, blossoming and lushiness,' that we fear Keats must be content to share but half the laurel." The fact that Hunt himself entitled his 1818 volume of poetry *Foliage* would only strengthen this association between "flowery" writing, and the type of verse romance that Hunt embraced

works are read side by side (*Endymion* 1:314-316; "Urn" 14-15). And, if even this image, of a youth piping silent or forgotten songs is not specific enough to imply a close connection between the two poems, there are still more parallels in the image of the rite itself to lend weight to that idea.

The participants in both processions, for example, appear to come from a remarkably similar array of landscapes. In *Endymion,* we are told the "men of Latamos" taking part in the procession include those "descended from beneath the rocks that overtop your mountains;" and those "whose precious charge/ nibble their fill at ocean's very marge" (Keats, *Endymion* 1:198204). In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the narrator speculates in the procession originates in a "little town by river or sea-shore/ Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel," ("Urn" 35-36). Given the other echoes, this hypothetical description cannot help but recall the backdrop of pastoral mountains and calm villages bordering on the sea elaborated in *Endymion*. Certainly, the "venerable priest" who leads *Endymion*'s procession to the "woodland altar," so they can thank Pan for their "lowing heifers," bears a distinct resemblance to the urn's "mysterious priest" who "Lead'st…that heifer, lowing at the skies" to some "green altar" (*Endymion* 1:149,128,214; "Urn" 32-33). Perhaps most suggestive of all is the way that Keats concludes his description of the procession in *Endymion*. The passage closes with an apparently casual reference to the descendants of the men and women who take part in the ritual – descendants Keats describes as "not yet dead, but in old marbles ever beautiful," (*Endymion* 1:318-319). On the heels of all the other echoes, this image seems

like a final confirmation that the "Men of Latamos" were equally the poetic ancestors of

the "marble men and maidens overwrought" whom Keats describes on the

Grecian urn (Keats, "Urn" 42).

Any one of these resemblances, in itself, might be no more than vaguely

suggestive of some link between the works, but taken all together, in such close

succession, they imply a more significant connection. They imply, in fact, that Keats

saw the paradox of static immortality embodied in the urn as relevant, not only to the urn

itself, and to the proverbially formal and unchanging beauty of the "classical" that it

comes to represent, but also to both poetry in general, and to his own earlier work in

particular. This idea is borne out by striking similarities between the tone of the

narrator's observations on the Grecian urn and the comments that Keats left on

Endymion. As I have already suggested, like the urn itself, *Endymion* is a created to be

"thing of beauty," that its author hopes will be "a joy forever," and which, as such

might, well aspire to "….remain, in midst of other woe/ Than ours, a friend to man,"

(*Endymion* 1; "Urn" 47-48). But, also like that "cold pastoral" with its frozen figures, the

poem's beauty turns out to be, in some sense, lifeless ("Urn" 45). Indeed, when looking

back on it, Keats explicitly contrasts the poem with the "verses fit to live" that he hopes

to write in days to come ("Preface to Endymion" 38).

Of course, however numerous the parallels, the two scenes are by no means

identical. In many ways, though, the differences are just as telling as the similarities.

Unlike the figures on the urn, whose "silent form…dost tease us out of thought/ as does

eternity," the celebrants in *Endymion* do "Cull/times' sweet fruits" ("Urn" 44-25;

Endymion 1: 320). In direct contrast to the "happy melodist, unwearièd," depicted on the urn, "forever piping songs forever new," these worshipers "dance to weariness," and we can only presume that they will return to enliven the streets of their respective towns when the festivities are over ("Urn" 23-24; *Endymion* 1:321). The suggestion that their decedents will live on "in old marbles, ever beautiful," may bear the first dim traces of Keats' later realization that the logical outcome of such eternal life is to more or less freeze one into a statue (*Endymion* 318-319). And yet the passage in *Endymion* betrays no trace of the uneasiness about this consequence, which can be seen in Keats' later writing, even in works as chronologically close to it as the first version of *Hyperion*. Just has he never hesitates to define *Endymion* itself as a "romance," within the poem he has no compunction about portraying the figures as gorgeous statues. By looking back reimagining the opening of *Endymion*, which in the first poem appears as animated as any other scene, as the static image on the Grecian urn, Keats seems to be acknowledging the essential of lifelessness inherent in such eternally unchanging "things of beauty." By the time Keats writes "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the fate that seemed a consummation devoutly to wished when he began his first poem on the ancient world, has become a far more troubling and complex idea for him. Furthermore, in beginning his meditation on the pros and cons of such a frozen immortality with a reconsideration of a work, which was, from the beginning, both defined and limited by "class," in all its senses. Keats implicitly invites the reader to consider the parallels between the effect produced by such a generically and socially "classed" poem, and that of the lovely but

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unchanging artifact, which is defined just as strongly, if, at first glance, more positively, by its "Classicism."

A similar interpretation of the narrator's attitude towards the Grecian urn is suggested by the contrast seen in two of Keats' other Odes. Both "Ode to Psyche" and "Ode to a Nightingale" are addressed to beings whose immortality results, not from a hard and stony fixity, but from their very dreamlike insubstantiality. This difference is even reflected formally. Both "Ode to Psyche," with its flowing, irregular stanzas, and "Ode to a Nightingale" with its unexpected pauses and truncations, are comparatively loose in structure, especially when read alongside the steady pentameter and fixed rhyme scheme of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Both are deliberately separated from, and even tacitly opposed to, the world of classical art which produced the urn. Psyche is, of course, quite literally a figure out of classical mythology. And yet Keats takes pains to differentiate her from the rest of the Greek and Roman pantheon, whom he describes as a "faded hierarchy" in comparison ("Psyche" 25). She is distinguished from them not only by her comparative youth, as the "latest born," and by being "fairer" than the rest, the "loveliest vision far," but also by the lack of any physical or concrete legacy. Unlike them, she has no "temple" and no "altar" to commemorate her, and, therefore, is not, presumably, associated with the kind of statues and architectural monuments that the idea of "classical" art brings instantly to mind. The nightingale is linked with both the Judeo-Christian traditions through references to Ruth, and with the kind of "natural" and "unruly" folk-myths which evoke "romance" in its broadest sense, through its association with "faery lands" and "fays" (Nightingale 65-67, 70, 37). But, with the possible exception of the vague description of it as a "light winged dryad" in the first verse, the "immoral bird" is never connected, even

implicitly, with any aspect of Greek or Roman world ("Nightingale" 7; 61). There is no reference to the tale of Philomel, for instance. The "blushful Hippocrene" and "Bacchus and his pards" are explicitly rejected as a means of reaching the unseen singer ("Nightingale"16; 32). Of course, in literal terms, the narrator is simply rejecting drunkenness as a means of seeking inspiration. But in the context, is certainly plausible to imagine that it is not only the earthy intoxication of wine which Keats finds incompatible with the "viewless wings of poetry," but also its particular incarnation in the equally substantial figure of the classical god Bacchus ("Nightingale" 33). Indeed, it would be hard to find a better foil than the God of wine for the ethereal and elusive nightingale, who, like the "poesy" that he invokes in contrast to the ancient god, is a "winged" and "viewless" entity. Nor do I think it in the least coincidental that this being who seems so incompatible with "classicism" also has a long history of breaking down "class" boundaries, by bestowing its song equally "in ancient days" on "emperor and clown," ("Nightingale" 64). It suggests, yet again that, on some level Keats increasingly saw all these different types of "class" as interlinked.

But even more important than this difference in origins is the qualitative difference, which, is not only related to but follows from it. In contrast to the urn's precise, marble solidity, both Psyche and the nightingale exist in a shadowy, twilight realm, as indefinable as the urn is distinct. They are both glimpsed in liminal, uncertain states somewhere between dream and reality. Keats takes care to emphasize this, with the questions that begin "Ode to Psyche" ("Surely I dream'd to-day, or did I see/ The wingèd Psyche with awaken'd eyes?"), and conclude "Ode to a Nightingale," ("Was it a

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vision or a waking dream/ Fled id that music—Do I wake or sleep?"), (Psyche 5-6;

Nightingale 79-80). The way that both Psyche and the nightingale are able to transcend

the boundaries physical existence. Unlike the rest of "Olympus' faded hierarchy,"

Psyche (who, not coincidentally, is neither faded, nor easily placed within a hierarchy)

has neither a visible star to represent her nor a concrete temple as a monument ("Psyche"

25). And the nightingale, of course, remains elusive and unseen throughout the poem.

And yet, in both cases, this ethereal quality adds to, rather than detracts from, their

power.

It is true that Keats never explicitly attributes either figure's power to its

insubstantially, but both poems readily lend themselves to this reading. In "Ode to

Psyche" the way the narrator's lament over the fact that Psyche joined the ancient

pantheon too late to receive "antique vows" and all the material signs of worship that

went with them, leads to his statement of his own, present devotion. This progression

suggests that it is precisely this lack which inspires the poem's speaker to dedicate

himself to her. In this way, she quite literally "outlives" others, in that she has a living

devotee to perpetuate her presence in the poem's narrator, long after all the "virgin

choirs" and "pale mouthed prophets" who made their "antique vows" to the rest of the

classical pantheon have disappeared, leaving only lifeless monuments behind ("Psyche"

30-35;36). Furthermore, there is some suggestion that his offerings, which are, likewise,

outwardly insubstantial will, in the same way, be more lasting because, like the goddess

to whom they are dedicated, they are not bound by physical existence. Like Psyche

herself the "branched thoughts …instead of pines," "the wreathed trellis of a working

brain," the "buds, and bells, and stars without a name," invented by that "Gardner fancy" cannot fade, as literal trees and flowers would, since their existence is purely intellectual ("Psyche" 52; 60-63).

In "Ode to a Nightingale" the narrator's repeated emphasis on the nightingale's invisibility underlines the importance of this trait and implies that it is connected to the "immortal bird's" power. The way that this invisibility seems to expand to all the objects around the narrator as he draws closer to the bird (his inability to "see the flowers at his feet," for instance) lends still more weight to this reading ("Nightingale" 41). Even the words in which he declares the bird's immortality fall in with this interpretation. "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" he writes ("Nightingale" 61). The basic purport of the words is clear, of course. The structure of the sentence, however, which begins the assertion that the nightingale cannot die by saying that it "was not born," suggests, not only that the bird's creation did not fate it for death, but that it may be immortal precisely *because* it was it was not born. After all, if the nightingale was never given tangible, flesh and blood existence as a living creature, it cannot be subject to the limits of mortality. As a dreamlike, half imagined presence, whose physical existence is uncertain, the nightingale is outside the realm of death. [33]

All of this may well cast a new light on what might be considered Keats' final piece of writing-- the epitaph that he himself requested on his tombstone "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Most critics have unhesitatingly accepted the

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[33] Logic similar to that which Tennyson would later make explicit, when he describes Camelot as "A city built to music, and therefore never built at all, and therefore built forever," (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:272-274).

interpretation these words offered by the poet's grief-stricken friends after his death--namely that Keats was referring to his frequently expressed fear that he would be forgotten on his death, that his identity was transient, and would be obliterated when his physical existence ended, since he had, in own words "left no immortal work behind," (Keats to Fanny Brawne, February 1820). This explanation is, indeed, quite literally engraved in stone, in the words that Keats' companion Severn added to the single line that the poet had requested; the full inscription reads

This Grave contains all that was mortal, of a Young English Poet, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his enemies, desired these words to be Engraven on his Tomb Stone: Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water. Certainly this is a natural, even self-evident reading, particularly in light of its resonance with the images of mortal frailty that recur in much of Keats' poetry, such as "When I Have Fears." Indeed, Severn explicitly assumes the meaning of the words would be clear to anyone who knew the poet; in the letter where he describes Keats' request for this inscription, he adds "you will understand this so well that I need not say a word about it," (qtd Milnes 91). And yet, a close examination of the context raises serious questions about this seemingly obvious interpretation of the words. To begin with, the depression it suggests seems at odds with the actual reception of Keats' work in 1821. Keats' final volume of poetry was actually quite well received, and he lived long enough to be aware of the fact. In one of his last letters to Brown he actually refers to his latest book as "very highly rated," although it was "slow" to sell (qtd Milnes 67). Furthermore, it does not accord with what we know about the poet's state of mind before

his death. Severn's own description of the conversation in which Keats actually requested this line for his epitaph emphasizes the poet's serene, almost joyful, demeanor on that evening, in contrast with the agitation that his illness had produced in the preceding days. Severn reports that he "talked very much, but *so easily*, that he fell at last into a *pleasant* sleep," adding that "he seems to have *happy* dreams" (all emphasis mine) (qtd. Milnes 90-91). This rosy account suggests that Keats did not intend the words in question solely as a memorial to his disappointed literary hopes. While it is certainly possible to imagine Keats requesting such a purely disillusioned epitaph in tones of tranquil resignation, it is difficult to picture his devoted friend describing the resulting talk as "easy," or to imagine the discussion leading not simply to a undisturbed or peaceful sleep, but to a "pleasant" one, containing "happy dreams."   These adjectives imply, not simply a calm acceptance of the inevitable, or even a detached, philosophical contentment, but a kind of active if subdued enjoyment that suggests a more hopeful construction for the words. The regret that they express is obvious, but it does not necessarily imply despair.

An examination of the source from which Keats draws the words also supports this reading. They are adapted from a line in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster or Love Lies ABleeding*, in which the title character warns the King that, if he goes through with his plan to execute his innocent daughter, he will be remembered only for his cruelty. "All your better deeds/ Shall be in water writ," he says, "but this in marble ;"(V.3.83-84). In its original context, therefore, to be "writ in water" is a preferable, if not precisely a desirable, alternative to the threat of an enduring, marble monument that can

preserve only one's worst qualities. Taken together with Severn's description of the mood in which Keats composed the epitaph and the poet's frequently expressed suspicion of the kind of fixed identity that a name engraved in stone would surely represent, this background seems like confirmation of the idea that the words might have a far more positive interpretation they have ordinarily been given. Just as stasis is the price of immortality, since the same capacity for change allows for both decay and motion, a similar paralysis is the price of fixed identity, whether of the work or its creator. Not only must a poet learn to be everything and nothing; He must be willing risk to becoming nothing, relinquishing all claims to a fixed identity, in order to become everything.

Chapter Two: Making a Name: Genre and Identity in Tennyson's Early Lyrics

Praise and Blame: Keats and the Reviews of Tennyson's Early Poems

It is no surprise that Tennyson shares many of Keats' concerns about poetic identity, particularly in his early poems. After all, Keats' profound influence on the Victorian Poet Laureate has already been widely acknowledged. In the introduction to

Anxiety of Influence, for instance, Harold Bloom refers to the connection as an established fact (Bloom 12). In fact, almost from the outset of Tennyson's career, readers recognized significant affinities between his work and Keats' As early as the reviews of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* in 1830, critics, both hostile and admiring, implicitly drew parallels between the two authors (North, ed. Jump 50-52). It is true that neither the current criticism nor the contemporary reviews of Tennyson's work specifically point out the similarities in the poets' attitude toward classification and poetic identity. Nonetheless, as the preceding chapter establishes, these questions held a crucial importance for Keats. It seems unlikely that his work could have had the deep impact on Tennyson's writing that all the criticism indicates it did without affecting this particular aspect of his poetry as well.

Indeed, both Tennyson's attitude towards questions of classification and poetic identity and the images he uses to express that attitude bear a marked resemblance to Keats' work. Keats tended to equate artistic survival with the ability to avoid defining labels, to be a "chameleon," able to be "everything and nothing" (Keats, ed. Damrosch, David et al 1000). Furthermore, he typically expressed the alternative through images of eternal, deathlike stasis, such as those he uses to describe the fallen titans in *Hyperion* or the figures on the "Grecian Urn." Likewise, Tennyson's poetry, especially his early lyrics, frequently associates fixed and definite statements of identity with images of confinement and paralysis. Herbert Tucker, in *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* notes the prevalence of these motifs in Tennyson's poetry; he even suggests that the young poet's use of them was, at least in part, shaped by Keats' influence (Tucker 22-

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30). Tucker, however, attributes the qualities in question to Tennyson's sense of the

inevitable doom that is a fundamental condition of mortality, rather than to any specific

dilemma surrounding artistic identity and classification. For instance, Tucker observes a

general tendency towards images of stasis in Tennyson's writing, but never connects this

friezelike, even frozen, quality specifically with the question of identity. Instead, he

interprets the prevalence of this motif as evidence of poet's post-romantic feeling of

belatedness. He argues, convincingly, that this characteristic of Tennyson's writing

springs from the author's sense of predestination-- the inevitable consequence of the

impression that the most important elements of his poems had already been laid out by

his predecessors (Tucker 14-18).

In fact, this explanation dovetails neatly with the idea that Tennyson's

concerns about poetic labeling and reputation are at the root of his fascination with

the state of suspended animation. The Bloomian overtones in Tucker's reading

suggest that the trope is closely linked to Tennyson's conception of his predecessors.

By extension, therefore, it must also be connected with the traditions and conventions

through which his classically-oriented education had taught him to define those

predecessors. This extrapolation seems at all the more plausible since the clearest

images of confinement, paralysis, and even death in his work do, in fact, tend to

coincide with the discovery or revelation of some defining characteristic by a major

figure in the poem, a moment which, in some sense, establishes their identity.[34]

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[34] Even the Kraken, who "shall rise and on the surface die" at the sound of the final trumpet, is fated "once by man and angels to be seen," in its last moments. Indeed the construction of the lines almost appears to

Moreover, as I will discuss in detail below, many of these characters can be read as figures for the poet. In some cases, such as "The Lady of Shalott," their pursuits clearly mark them as artists. In others, such as "Ulysses," Tennyson openly identified with them. In any case, however the link is created, its presence in so many poems suggests that such crises of identity hold a particular significance for the writer himself.

Certainly, it is not difficult to see why a young poet, determined to establish a lasting reputation, would be especially concerned with the problems and perils of identity. From his childhood, Tennyson *was* determined to forge just such a reputation. According to an anecdote in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoirs*, during one boyhood discussion with his brother Arthur, the poet declared "most emphatically 'Well, Arthur, I mean to be famous' " (Hallam Tennyson Vol. I: 17). Arthur Tennyson goes on add that "from his earliest years he felt he was a poet and earnestly desired to be worthy of his vocation," leaving no doubt as to the means by which Tennyson hoped to achieve this goal (Hallam Tennyson Vol. I: 17). By its very nature, this task would require him to establish some sort of clear poetic identity.

Tennyson's classical education would naturally lead the young poet to look to his predecessors for examples of this kind of artistic self-definition. The very

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suggest that this exposure to public view not only coincides with, but is actually a necessary condition of the Kraken's destruction At first glance the wording seems to signify, not only that the beast will be seen "once" before it dies, but that that death will occur specifically *once it has been seen* by all creation. A closer reading of the line resolves the question in favor of the first interpretation. Nonetheless, in light of Tennyson's attention to the details of sound in his writing, the momentary ambiguity seems quite deliberate, particularly since we are expressly told that the Kraken dies in the open, on the *surface* (Tennyson, "Kraken" 13-14)

training that taught him to revere these forebears, however, would also have taught him to define the vast majority of them according to a firmly established set of traditions and conventions. This conception would inevitably, jar with the widespread suspicion of fixed labels that I believe prevailed around the turn of the nineteenth century-- a suspicion which any attentive reader of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats would almost certainly be attuned to. Despite the reverence in which Tennyson clearly held these elder poets and their work, therefore, they could not serve as direct models for his own artistic development. However profoundly they might have influenced his writing in other, more subtle ways, following their example in matters of identity would mean enmeshing himself in the same conventions through which his own education had defined them. This, in turn, would expose him to the sense of confinement and paralysis that the post- romantic skepticism of classification had taught him to associate with such clear defining markers. His forbearers' reliance on such systems turned them into magnificent artifacts of a dead past, awe inspiring in their endurance and innate grandeur, but nonetheless devoid of present life and motion. To follow their example would be to risk rendering himself equally lifeless.

This interpretation fits almost uncannily well with Tennyson's readiness to endorse the notion that "the artist is known by his self-limitation," which, according to his son's *Memoir* "was a favorite adage of his" (118). The specific context in which Hallam Tennyson places this quotation does suggest that the "limitation" in question represents the tasteful self-restraint that is the hallmark by which the true artist is

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"known;" but I would not be the first to connect the statement to the poet's more fundamental concerns about identity (Tucker 24). The mere fact that Tennyson implicitly equates poetic identity (that by which "an artist is known") with limitation is suggestive. The logical conclusion of the statement seems clear: one can only establish a lasting reputation as a poet-- become "known" as an "artist" -- by limiting oneself

This kind of limitation would not, in itself, present an insoluble dilemma for a young poet It is more than possible to imagine Tennyson accepting, even welcoming, the constraints imposed by the formation of a poetic identity. He could easily have viewed these defining limitations as, at worst, a necessity and, at best, a wholesome source of discipline in his work. Both the tone of the maxim and the way that Hallam Tennyson presents it imply a cheerful acquiescence to the inevitable "limits" of identity, very different from the almost suffocating sense of claustrophobia and paralysis that such limitations seem to evoke in Tennyson's poetry. Perhaps this difference stems from the fact that the defining boundaries prescribed by Tennyson's "favorite aphorism" are emphatically self-imposed. It is by *self-l*imitation that artists make themselves known, not by accepting the limits laid out for them by others. It is one thing to acknowledge that boundaries are an inherent part of individual identity and to submit to whatever restrictions inevitably result from the process of distinguishing one's self as poet. It is quite another to allow such an artistic identity to be shaped by predetermined limitations prescribed by an external source, either the reputation established by one's contemporaries, or the generic traditions molded by one's forbearers. Furthermore, there are indications that Tennyson did not accept even these flexible and self-determined

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limitations quite as readily or completely as his words suggest at first glance. Hallam

Tennyson himself points out that the poet willingly allowed the lines that he removed

from "The Palace of Art" in the name of artistic "self- limitation" to be quoted and even

published elsewhere, although he had repeatedly expressed objections to this practice

that seem more in keeping with his "favorite aphorism" (118). Nor was this simply an

isolated exception to a general rule, as Hallam Tennyson's emphasis on those objections

seems to imply. In his 1833 volume, for example, he makes similar gestures frequently

enough that Croker's review singles the technique out for ridicule (Croker ed. Jump 79-

80). If removing the lines in the first place represented an act of artistic self- definition,

the "limitation" by which the poet could make himself "known," his apparently

contradictory desire to preserve and publish those lines, even in the face of his own

theoretical protests, seems to indicate a reluctance to fully accept these self-forged

boundaries of identity.

This interpretation would also explain many other prominent features of

Tennyson's work.[35] For example the poet's reluctance to "[fix] the inevitable power"

that Tucker identifies as the driving force behind his poetry "…to a form or [link] its

manifestations to any inherited or devised intellectual system" would make perfect

sense, assuming the limitations of identity itself were at the root of the deathlike stasis to

which this power seems the only antidote (Tucker 20). According to my reading, this

sense of liminality and indefinability is not only, as Tucker notes, a key aspect of this

force; it is, itself, the quality that gives it the power of creating the infinite change and

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[35] Once again, I am particularly indebted to Herbert Tucker for pointing out many of these patterns

movement that seem to be the hallmarks of artistic life for Tennyson and many of his contemporaries (Tucker 19-22). This reading also explains why, for both Keats and Tennyson, immortality only can be achieved at the price of individual identity (Tucker 22). For both poets, to define was not only to limit, but to immobilize--to fix in place. If, as the recurring images of paralysis in both poets' work suggest, to immobilize poetry was to deprive it of life, to fix one's identity as a poet was, in symbolic terms, to decree one's own death as an artist.

This similarity, however, is also where we see the greatest difference between Tennyson and his predecessor. While Keats apparently came to welcome, and even seek the dissolution of individual self necessary to achieve poetic immortality, Tennyson found it difficult or impossible to embrace the same solution. As Tucker's seminal reading so eloquently puts it "What Tennyson never could accept was Keats' acceptance of natural process," (Tucker 77). Tucker, however, makes it clear that he reads this difference in the two poets' work as a reflection of their disparate reactions to the human condition, with all its inevitable processes "whether manifested as the frank embrace of sexuality or…the benevolent welcoming of death," (Tucker 77). On the contrary, I suggest that, like the eternal paralysis which seems to be the only alternative, this relinquishing of identity may represent something less universal, and more specific to poets and artists. Namely, I believe that it represents a strategy, conscious or unconscious, for creating works capable of resisting the inexorable processes that come with times. A careful reading of both authors' poems further supports this interpretation. If nothing else, the prominence of artist figures, which I have already mentioned in Tennyson's work, and which is also visible in

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Keats' poetry, seems to suggest that this recurring dilemma has particular significance for the creative process and those engaged in it.

This reading would also account for many of the differences in the two poets' attitudes towards the question of identity. After all, Keats and Tennyson came from vastly different social and economic backgrounds, and this fact alone would inevitability result in equally different attitudes towards literary classification. In the first place, ideas about literary classification are, to some extent, always implicitly intertwined with notions about social class; and, as I argue in my introduction, writers and critics were especially conscious of this relationship around the turn of the nineteenth century. Keats, in particular, had good reason, not only to question the validity of both social and literary labels, but to actively dislike them. Almost from the moment that his poems came to the attention of his contemporaries, many of them used his humble origins to attack his work. The most direct and prominent example of this tendency is, of course, Lockhart's infamous diatribe on *Endymion*. In christening Keats' style as the "Cockney school of poetry" Lockhart explicitly turns a class-based insult into a literary term, which functions at once as a category and a slight. In light of these experiences, Keats would naturally view freedom from the kind of fixed labels which had been used as critical weapons against him as a purely positive, liberating prospect. He would welcome their dissolution unequivocally, even if it also meant the dissolution of individual identity.

Tennyson, on the other hand, came from a family immensely proud of their lineage and their place in the social hierarchy. This pride can be clearly seen in the

carefully drawn family tree, and the elaborate genealogy at the opening of his son's

memoirs. Even the lighthearted anecdotes about the poet's early childhood home that

Hallam Tennyson relates are unmistakably colored by a certain consciousness of the

Tennyson's' social position. The amused, almost affectionate tone in which he describes

the various local characters does not disguise his sense of superiority to the

"Lincolnshire folk among whom he lived," (Hallam Tennyson Vol. I 14). Though he

portrays these people as good hearted, and devoted to his family, he also says that they

"were…apt to be uncouth and mannerless," (Hallam Tennyson Vol. I 14-15). This

observation in itself is laden with class overtones, and the example that he chooses to

illustrate the point further underlines the role that social status and its markers play in his

attitude. Among others, he speaks of a servant, possibly the coachman, who "at the time

of the Reform Bill said 'I suppose, Master Awlfred, your aunt Mrs. Bourne will be going

up to London before they begin *to kill the quality*,'" (Hallam Tennyson Vol I: 14-15,

emphasis original). Hallam Tennyson's awareness of class distinctions is almost

painfully clear in this description. It is shown overtly, by the man's own reference to

"the quality," which he emphasizes with italics, and by the combination of political

radicalism and naïveté inherent in his assumption that the Reform Bill would serve as a

signal for the wholesale slaughter of the wealthy. It is also expressed more subtly, in the

phonetic reproduction of his speech ("Master Awlfred") that underscores his accent

(*Memoir* 14). These class distinctions are, if anything, further highlighted by contrast

evident in Hallam Tennyson's description of the Poet's father, only few paragraphs later.

This "sketch" of the family patriarch carries equally distinct, if diametrically opposed,

indications of his, and by extension, his family's status. The stress that Hallam Tennyson lays on "the stern doctor's" excellent education and the "social powers," which he claims were "famous throughout the countryside," are only two of the most obvious ways that he makes Dr. Tennyson's high standing in the social hierarchy clear (15-16). It is true that these nuances come from Hallam Tennyson's account of his father's childhood, rather than directly from the poet himself. Nonetheless, as the preface indicates, throughout *Memoirs* Hallam Tennyson was acutely conscious of his father's attitudes and opinions, and took unusual pains to convey them as accurately as possible in his own account of the poet's life (xvi). Furthermore, given the relatively remote situation of Tennyson's childhood home in the Lincolnshire countryside, the most likely sources for such detailed anecdotes about his early years are either the poet himself or one of the siblings who grew up in the same household, according to the same values. Therefore, the stories Hallam Tennyson relates seem more likely than not to reflect the poet's own views of the incidents in question. At the very least, it seems safe to infer that Tennyson's upbringing instilled him with a sensitivity to class distinctions that was keen and lasting enough for him to pass this awareness on to his son. In light of this background, Tennyson would be understandably reluctant to let go of such distinctions entirely, even if he had no faith in their inherent validity.

Even more directly, the differences in the two poets' upbringings would have resulted in vastly different styles of education. These disparate introductions to literary tradition would, necessarily, produce equally disparate attitudes towards its conventions and markers. Keats was largely self-educated. He acquired his knowledge and

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appreciation of the "classics" outside of the formal settings which emphasized established hierarchies of labeling and definition. In contrast, Tennyson was steeped in such classical traditions from his earliest years. Hallam Tennyson's list of the books his father used in Grammar School includes such traditional works as "*Ovid, Delectus, Analecta Graca Minora*, and the old *Eton Latin Grammar* originally put together by Erasmus Lilly and Colet," (*Memoires* 6). He also reports that the poet had Horace "'thoroughly drummed' into him" as a boy, and that Tennyson's father was "A Hebrew and Syriac Scholar" who also "perfected himself in Greek, in order that he might teach his sons," (*Memoires* 16). The influence of this training can be seen even in Tennyson's earliest surviving letter: a commentary on Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, with references to the influence of Dante, as well as various Greek and Latin sources (*Memoires* 10). His subsequent years at Cambridge, with its long illustrious history, and the consequent value that it placed on custom and tradition, could only have reinforced the young poet's reverence for the classics and the conventions by which they were defined. This education would naturally make it far more difficult for Tennyson to turn away completely from the established network of markers, names, and definitions associated with his forbearers than it was for Keats, regardless of how suspicious the Victorian poet might have been about their impact on contemporary works.

Furthermore, if self-renunciation did represent a strategy for evading the sort labels that define and limit an artist, the very fact that Tennyson's immediate predecessor had already adopted it as an integral part of his own technique would, in itself, weaken its effectiveness. If the association was distinct enough, it would have the

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potential to turn the trope into the very sort of identifying marker it was originally designed to evade. In this case, there is every reason to think that the association was very strong indeed. As the preceding chapter makes clear, a deliberate dissolution of identity was, if not actually a defining hallmark of Keats' style, at the very least, a persistently recurring theme in his work. Certainly the gesture is prevalent enough throughout his writing to link it firmly with him in the mind of any attentive reader. Tennyson, of course, was scrupulously attentive. He also had reason be particularly sensitive to any aspect of Keats' work that might link it with his own. As I began this chapter by pointing out, the early reviews of Tennyson's poems often compared them, implicitly or explicitly, to Keats' works. Not only would the parallel itself be likely to increase his anxiety about definitions, by linking him to an identifiable tradition; the terms in which the many of the reviews pointed out these similarities were frankly unflattering in their own right.

Perhaps the most direct -- and hostile -- comparison of this sort opens Croker's characteristically savage critique of Tennyson's 1833 volume, *Poems*, in *The Quarterly Review*. Croker avowedly wrote the article specifically "to make another Keats" of the young poet (qtd. Jump 2).[36] Moreover, Croker deliberately introduces Tennyson as "another and a brighter star of that galaxy or *Milky Way* of poetry of which the lamented

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[36] Of course, there are some significant differences between the *tour de force* of ridicule he launches against Tennyson and his earlier diatribe on Keats' work. For example, perhaps in unconscious deference to the class differences discussed above, Croker chooses to deploy his cutting sarcasm against Tennyson under the guise of mockingly extravagant praise, rather than repeating the direct, unvarnished nastiness which marked the tone of his article on Keats. In light of the explicit parallels that he repeatedly draws between the poets, however, these subtle distinctions do little to differentiate them.

Keats was the harbinger," (Croker, ed. Jump 66). It is hard to imagine any clearer

portrayal of Tennyson as Keats' immediate successor, or, given the source, any less

flattering comparison. The ironic "palinode" he offers, in which he claims to retract his

earlier harsh criticism of *Endymion* on account of the poem's popularity, does nothing to

soften this impression.[37] In light of the sardonic tone that dominates the article, the

apparently conciliatory words mean little. If anything, the reference to the earlier

venomous review only underlines the scorn implicit in the association, by reminding the

reader pointedly of Crocker's contempt for Keats. This belittling comparison would be

bound to make Tennyson particularly sensitive to any similarities between his work and

Keats', and consequently wary of using a technique that was apt to associate him with

his predecessor. Christopher North's review of *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* is an earlier, and

more nuanced, example of the same comparison. Although North never actually

mentions Keats by name, it is clear that he draws a parallel between the two writers.

North begins his discussion of Tennyson's work by expressing his fear that the Victorian

poet was in danger of becoming the latest "pet" of the literary "Coterie" he describes as

"Cockneydom" (North ed. Jump 50). Since this term was coined, as a poetic epithet,

specifically to criticize Keats' style, in Lockhart's infamous review of *Endymion*,

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[37] It is also worth noting that Crocker's digression on Keats also deliberately underlines the earlier poet's popular "fame," citing this as the reason for his supposed "conversion" regarding *Endymion*'s merits (Croker 66). In light of the author's clear contempt for every aspect of Keats' writing, any quality that he singles out for particular notice has the potential to become a kind of insult. Under the circumstances, his implication that the Victorian poet's work was destined for a similar popularity seems more condemnation than compliment. Not only would all of this increase whatever anxiety Tennyson already felt about forging a clearly defined public reputation; it also suggests that a resemblance between his own work and his Romantic predecessor's might actually constitute such a reputation in itself

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North's use of it to introduce his assessment of Tennyson's volume cannot help but imply a strong connection between the two poets. The critic's next observation, that acclaim for Tennyson's work had issued "even from Hampstead Hill" where Keats lived for most of his brief poetic career, seems to confirm the idea that he intends a deliberate comparison (North ed. Jump 50). Furthermore, in drawing this comparison, North makes it clear that he is responding to similarities, not only in the works themselves, but to their reception by other critics. This suggests that, even if these earlier reviews do not draw the comparison as clearly, there is something in their tone that implies a recognizable likeness between the two poets. Whether or not this is, in fact, the case, North's own review draws the parallel emphatically enough to make any writer as conscious of his work's reception as Tennyson particularly sensitive to the association.

Even if one entirely dismisses the Bloomian assumption that *any* close resemblance to an immediate predecessor would make a young poet uncomfortable, the tone of North's review, in itself, contains an implicit warning against following too closely in Keats' footsteps. Unlike Croker's savage condemnation, North's review is a highly critical, but not essentially unfriendly, assessment of Tennyson's work. North mingles harsh denunciations of what he considers the volume's weaker points with equally enthusiastic praise of the author's strengths and overall potential. Much of his disapproval seems to spring from similarities between Tennyson's poetry and his romantic predecessor's. Sometimes, as in the initial caveat about becoming "the Pet of…Cockneydom," the link is clear (North 50). In other passages, the association is less direct, but no less present. For instance, North's final admonishment to the young poet,

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that if he wishes to create truly "immortal works" he must move beyond the humble

scenes which have been his primary focus until now, and learn to deal with nature on a"

grand[er] scale," may not, at first glance, seem to connect strongly, if at all, with Keats'

work (64-65). But the fact that he specifically associates the lowly pastoral scenes that

Tennyson must learn to transcend with "the birthplace of the Silent People -- the

Fairies," a realm that held a prominent enough place in Keats' oeuvre to be firmly

associated with him, makes the possibility of a connection far more plausible (North 64).
[38]

Perhaps most telling of all is North's fierce, almost strident opposition to the

notion, suggested by William Fox's article in the *Westminster Review*, that Tennyson "

'has the secret of transmigration of the soul'" and "'…can cast his own spirit into any

living thing, real or imaginary,'" (Fox, qtd. North 53). North found this particular

assessment of Tennyson's abilities so objectionable that he actually quotes the entire

passage in which it appears solely in order to make a case for its absurdity. Furthermore,

his response, not only to the article which credits Tennyson with this "secret of

transmigration," but also to the poems which supposedly demonstrated the ability, is

undoubtedly the harshest part of the review, descending, at times, into pure invective

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[38] Not that Keats was the only poet to be fascinated by such "faerie-lands." Far from it, as North's own list of poets with the gift of portraying the "preternatural"-- a list in which Keats' name does not even figure-- amply demonstrates (North 55). Despite this absence, however, a strong case that can be made that Keats' work is a natural, if unspoken, point of reference in any discussion of the poetry of enchanted realms. The oblique but unmistakable references to the poet that North himself makes elsewhere in the article show that Keats occupied a prominent enough place in current critical discussions to be a recognizable figure, even when not actually singled out by name; and it is certain that few other poets of the period devoted so much of their work so explicitly to the realm of "Faerie," (North 50-55).

(North 53-58). Clearly, although it is far from the only fault that North finds with Tennyson's writing, there is something about this particular aspect of his work, and the praise that other critics lavished on it, that he finds especially disturbing. It is true that the article gives no direct indication of *why* this is the case. Nonetheless, the striking similarity between Fox's description of Tennyson's talent for "transmigration" and Keats' picture of the ideal poet as a "chameleon" who can become "everything and nothing" and "is continually... filling, some other body" is, to say the least, suggestive (Fox 27; Keats ed. Damrosch et al. 1000). Especially on the heels of his repeatedly expressed worries about the influence of "cockneydom" on Tennyson, North's reaction to this resemblance confirms and amplifies his implicit warning against using Keats' work as an example for his own (North 50-53). Even more importantly, the parallel which provokes this burst of dismay is one which goes to the heart of Keats' theories about poetic identity, or more specifically, to his idea that a true poet must relinquish all identity. Therefore, in addition to increasing Tennyson's overall wariness of becoming too like his Romantic predecessor, North's article would be likely to intensify his reluctance to emulate this particular strategy for avoiding the traps of fixed identity.

North's comments on the individual poems in Tennyson's collection bear out this reading as well. His critique of the "The Owl," for instance, not only supports the idea that he means to caution the young poet against trying to escape explicit labels through feats of artistic "transmigration;" it suggests that any attempt to do so is apt to result in exactly the same sort of lifeless paralysis he is hoping to evade. When Tennyson writes in the character of this bird, North claims, "All he wants is to be shot, stuffed, and stuck

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into a glass case, to be made immortal in a museum," (North 58). The mockery in this reference to "immortality" is obvious. Nonetheless, there is a strong argument that the comparison also has more serious implications, in spite of its sardonic tone. The image of an artist dying to be preserved for all time as a display in a museum-case is simply too close to the other, all-too-serious images of static, lifeless eternity that so many poets and critics of the time used to express their anxiety about rigid definitions to dismiss North's "stuffed owl" as mere sarcasm. There is no doubt that the comparison to a specimen of taxidermy lacks the dignity inherent in Keats' depictions of ancient titans fallen into stony immobility, or figures frozen on a Grecian urn. On the other hand, North doubtless considered the "cockney" label that he was warning Tennyson against equally far below the dignity of the classical categories at issue in Keats' work.

Ironically, however, at the same time as North discourages Tennyson from following Keats' example of self-dissolution, other remarks in the article seem equally calculated to reinforce a post-Romantic suspicion of labels, and the kind of clearly defined character that so often accompanies artistic fame. Like the images both Tennyson and Keats associate with inflexible definitions throughout their work, those that North uses to express his fears about the effects of premature fame, particularly when produced by the admiration of a specific group or "coterie," center on stasis and paralysis. For example, his opening paragraphs accuse these well- meaning but misguided critics of trying to immortalize the object of their admiration by turning the living poet into a statue. Even these unsuccessful attempts threaten the poet with ever more undignified versions of the same permanent immobility. In North's opinion, the

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extravagant reviewers make Tennyson first an "Idol," then an "absurdly" misplaced "Image," and finally a mere "Post" (North 50-51). North does not indicate whether he sees the increasingly ridiculous effect of these laudatory endeavors as evidence that Tennyson's work is, as yet, inherently unworthy of immortality, or as a result of the fact that, to his credit, the young poet instinctively resists the critics' ill-advised efforts, or both. In either case, however, the tendency of such excessive praise, and the reputation it creates, to freeze its object into something inanimate is clear. Moreover the comparison that North uses to describe the critics' response to Tennyson, which he portrays as a process of coating the young poet with some unnamed substance intended to preserve his likeness for all time, actually amounts to a form a live entombment (North 5051). It is true that the critic never calls attention to this aspect of his metaphor; nonetheless its logical implication is that the reviewers' veneration would be even more certain to suffocate and paralyze the poet if it succeeded in making an "Idol" of him.

This interpretation appears even more appropriate in light of North's next metaphor for such critiques, which compares them to a lethal "narcotic dose." This image not only confirms, but emphasizes the deadly effects of premature or excessive praise. Furthermore, like his previous comparison, it is specific enough to allow for certain extrapolations. He likens the laudatory articles, not simply to any overdose, but to the effects of a narcotic, a drug which slows one's responses, and induces an unnatural and, in excess, an eternal sleep. This seems almost as apt an image for the dangerously stifling results of an established reputation, and the labels that it imposes on the artist, as the fatal transformation of the poet into statue imagined in the

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paragraph before. Nor would North be the first to use the metaphor in just this way. In "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats likens the oppressive awareness of his "sole self" that he feels at the beginning of the poem to the "drowsy numbness" brought on by "some dull opiate," (Keats, "Nightingale" 73; 1; 3).

Perhaps even more pertinently, the final sentence of Lockhart's infamous attack on Keats' writing, in "The Cockney School of Poetry," specifically compares his work to "soporifics and extenuatives," which are only other names for sleep inducing medicines (Lockhart 127). Throughout the article, the reviewer's main charge against the "cockney poet" is that both he and his poetry are too easily classed. It is only natural, therefore, to read this parting shot as the conclusion and extension of his argument. Certainly, it no great leap to interpret his portrayal of Keats' poems as a sleeping drug, and the sense of dullness and stagnation that the image suggests, as a direct reflection of his contempt for the ease with which the author and his work could be classified and labeled. North's own repeated references to literary "cockneydom" suggest that he had Lockhart's article very much in mind when writing his own critique of Tennyson. Therefore, the presence of these connotations in the earlier review make it all the more likely that North would, in his own right, link the idea of a "narcotic dose" with the potentially stultifying effects of definition. This may be why, although North frequently seems to have Keats' work quite specifically in mind when he points out the "flaws" in Tennyson's writing, he never actually names the other poet. This omission would make perfect sense if, as deeply as he disapproves of the resemblance between the writers, North is more concerned about Keats' influence as the primary representative of

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a "school" than as an individual predecessor. This seems even more likely, since, in contrast, he *does* warn Tennyson, repeatedly and explicitly, against the dangers of the "Cockney School."

It is true that this admonition against a particular label does not, in itself, imply a warning against all labels. In fact, at first glance, North's vehemence against the "Cockney school" may even seem like an indirect encouragement to return to a more traditional, classically orientated, style of composition. The terms in which North expresses his concerns, however, are nearly identical to those in which the *opponents* of strict neoclassicism, including Keats, Hunt, and other members of the very "Cockney school" he sees as such a dangerous example for young Tennyson, conveyed their own doubts about rigid labels and conventions. For example, North laments that "Cockneyism" has lured Tennyson into an "impotent straining after originality," and "cold conceits—devoid of ingenuity," (North 52). Likewise, he attributes the "failure" of the poet's forays into the world of the "preternatural" to his "'affectations'" (North 55). The wording of these critiques suggests that the "Cockney school's" influence mars Tennyson's "otherwise often exquisite" verses with precisely the same sort of staleness and artificially that were so often the target of its own censure (North 52-53).

This parallel does not seem to be a deliberate rhetorical flourish, an attempt on North's part to drive his point home by turning his opponents' vocabulary against them. There is no indication in the article that North is interested in defending neoclassicism, or any related critical philosophy. Indeed, many of the poets he cites with evident

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admiration as models for Tennyson's benefit, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, were no more sympathetic to the constraints imposed by established literary categories than Keats and his circle (North 52, 55, 59, 64). It seems more likely that the charges North levels at the "Cockney" school resemble those that other poets leveled at more established forms of classification so closely, simply because from his point of view, this newer label is liable to have the same deleterious effect on the poet who succumbs to it. If anything, far from encouraging a young poet to return to classical traditions, North's critique would only serve to reinforce the notion that any form of classification, newly devised or ancient, may be deadly to an artist's work.

Tennyson seems to have taken particular notice of North's opinion. Shortly after learning who had penned the review in question, Tennyson replied to North in verse. Although he later disowned the poem as a "silly squib," its very existence shows that he took the article, and its cautions, to heart (Tennyson, *Letters* 109). The only portion of the "squib" itself that Tennyson allowed to be published later suggests that he found the criticism offered in the review worth attending to. The poem in question claims,

When I learnt

From whom it [the review] came

I forgave you all the blame,

but adds, "I could not forgive the praise," (Tennyson, "To Christopher North"). Standing alone, out of context, the verse seems to imply that that, while he fears that North's positive comments may be exaggerated or misplaced (why else would he be unable to

forgive praise?), he has no real quarrel with his "blame." Under these circumstances, Tennyson necessarily found himself at something of an artistic impasse. On the one hand, the prevailing post-Romantic skepticism about labels would make him reluctant to define himself through traditional conventions. On the other, articles such as North and Croker's would make him equally wary of following in his predecessor's footsteps, and trying to escape the limits of classification by relinquishing identity altogether. Given these early experiences, it is no wonder that dilemmas about "name and fame" continued to haunt Tennyson and his protagonists, in one form or another, all throughout his long career (Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* VI:212, 968).

"Half Sick of Shadows": "The Lady of Shalott" and the problems of self-renunciation

"The Lady of Shalott" can be read as a more extended examination of this strategy of self-dissolution, and its limitations as a long term way of avoiding fixed artistic definitions. The Lady herself begins the poem as an essentially Keatsian figure-- an unseen singer with ties to the land of "faerie," not unlike the nightingale of the "Ode." In addition to this general resemblance, Tennyson's description of the Lady contains several more specific echoes of Keats' "Ode to Nightingale." For example, he refers to her window as a "casement," a term that Keats also uses in the last verse of the "Ode." Likewise, the image of the reapers listening to theLady's song recalls Keats' reference to "Ruth…among the alien corn" (Tennyson "Lady of Shalott" 25, 2829; Keats, "Nightingale" 66-67; Tucker, 107-8). Taken together, all these similarities hardly seem coincidental. Furthermore, like Keats' ideal poet, the Lady's work, as a singer and a weaver, has an almost magical ability to bring pleasure to herself and others. Also like

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that ideal poet, however, who must be a "chameleon," able to become "everything and nothing," this artistic success depends on her ability to avoid any clear and definite identity of her own.

Tennyson takes great care to introduce the Lady as an ambiguous figure. He makes it clear that, like Keats' "immortal bird," his Lady is entirely unseen, known to those around her only through her song:

> …who hath seen her wave her hand?
>
> Or at the casement seen her stand?
>
> Is she known in all the land, The Lady of Shalott? (24-27)

These apparently rhetorical questions are no mere poetic flourishes. Tennyson goes out of his way to avoid making the Lady too concrete even to the reader. The brief description of the Lady that he includes in his first 1833 version of the poem is deliberately struck from his final 1842 revision. This change places a clear emphasis on the Lady's invisibility, confirming that it, and the air of insubstantiality that it imparts to her, are key aspects of her character. The fact that, as we are told in the next stanza, her name is spoken only in "whispers" by the listening "reapers" further increases this sense of mystery. It suggests that there is something about the poem's title character that literally cannot be put into words (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 28-35). The reference to her as a "fairy Lady" at the end of the verse heightens the effect still more. Not only does this description associate her with the shadowy, intrinsically fluid world of "fairyland" that so fascinated Keats; it also implicitly raises questions about whether she

can even be defined as a mortal woman, let alone in any narrower or more specific terms.

Her home, too, is a liminal space. It is an island, a piece of land which is, necessarily, both connected to and separated from the world around it by the ever-flowing river. Tennyson's description emphasizes this quality by beginning, not with the island itself, but with the surrounding banks and water, giving the reader a sense of the Lady's home as a place suspended between the fields that "[lie]… on either side," (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 1-2). The feeling of perpetual motion in the images that Tennyson uses to describe the island reinforces this air of insubstantiality, by suggesting an ever shifting place, a private world in a state of constant transformation.

> Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
>
> Little breezes dusk and shiver
>
> Through the wave that runs for ever…
>
> (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 10-13).

Even the trees around the Lady's home are never still, their foliage "whitening" and "quivering"-- wavering like the scenery in a dream. And, of course, all these images lead back to the river, which, with its "wave that runs forever," could serve as the very emblem of endless change. Most significantly of all, there is a pointed air of ineffability about the Lady's art itself. To begin with, her "web" is described as "magic." This epithet places it, like its creator and the island from which she takes her name, within the shifting, indefinable realm of "Faerie." Furthermore, the Lady's "magic web" is just

as ever-changing as her home. We are told that she works on it constantly, adding to, and thus altering, it "by night and day" (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 37). Even more importantly, she draws the inspiration for this shifting, "magical" work exclusively from intangible images, the "Shadows of the world" reflected in her mirror (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 38, 48). Like everything else associated with the Lady and her creative process at the beginning of the poem, these images are never still for long enough to be defined. In fact, "moving" is virtually the first word in Tennyson's description of them. This construction not only emphasizes the importance of the word itself, but, by beginning the phrase with a verb, contributes even further to the sense of motion and activity. As if to underline this point, one of the first things to "appear" in the mirror is the river, which Tennyson has already associated with a similar sense of constant motion in the preceding stanzas. Even Tennyson's description of the reflections as "shadows," which implies that they are indistinct, although the line before describes the mirror as "clear," seems deliberately designed to reinforce the air of mystery and insubstantiality surrounding the Lady's "web." Like the Lady herself, the art which more than anything else defines her existence is characterized by its own indefinability.

This resistance to definition is not merely the primary characteristic of the Lady's art, but also a necessary condition of its creation. Her success as an artist, and even her survival, seem to be directly contingent on maintaining this sense of intangibility. She is kept in her liminal state by a curse -- or by the rumor of one. In fact, the curse itself is emphatically nameless and unspecified. Like the Lady's name, it is

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spoken of only in "whispers;" and we are told explicitly that she had been given no concrete idea about the consequences that threaten her if she violates its terms: "she knows not what the curse may be" ("Lady of Shalott" 42). The curse's namelessness and indescribably, in themselves, suggest that it is something inherently opposed to definitions.

Everything we do know about it serves to reinforce this notion. As vague as the curse is in some respects, it is specific enough about what would lead to its fulfillment: "a curse is on her if she stay/ to look down on Camelot" ("Lady of Shalott" 40). Not only does the curse confine the Lady and her work to the liminal space of her island, its wording implies that it will be brought on by the combination of two conditions: prolonged stillness ("if she stay") and direct contact with wider word of Camelot. This combination alone may not be enough to link the curse decisively with the kind of rigid classification imposed on an artist by a clear identity. Nonetheless it fits that reading well enough to make the parallels difficult to dismiss as mere coincidence.

I have already established that Tennyson, like Keats before him, frequently expressed his wariness of inflexible labels through metaphors of paralysis -- enforced motionlessness. This makes it only natural to connect a curse that is brought on by immobility and results in "freezing" its victim with these same labels. The fact that the fulfillment of this curse is also connected with the sight of Camelot further reinforces the idea that it represents the dangers of set identity. In contrast to the repeatedly emphasized isolation of the Lady's tower, any city is, necessarily, a public forum. This kind of public setting is a key factor in creating and enforcing fixed boundaries such as

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class, genre, and even reputation. Even more significantly, the city's legendary status connects it with a specific literary tradition. It is, in fact, associated with the very sort of verse romance that figured so prominently in Keats' struggles with identify and artistic definition. From *Endymion* onwards, Keats sought ways to draw on this model without allowing it to define, and so limit, his work with any explicit label. In much the same way, the Lady, as a Keatsian artist, can and does draw on the city indirectly for inspiration, through the reflected images that she incorporates into her own work. The moment that she turns to it directly, however, she is doomed to the same sort of paralysis that so often threatens Keats' characters in connection with clearly established definitions.

Which is, in fact, just what ultimately happens. Almost everything about the fulfillment of the curse confirms the idea that it is associated with the perils of fixed identity in general, and with literary tradition in particular. First, and perhaps most directly, the Lady actually begins her fatal journey by marking the boat she travels in with her name, which until then has only been spoken in whispers (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 125). This gesture both makes her identity concrete, by fixing it in writing, and serves as a public declaration of that concrete label. Tennyson emphasizes the importance of the inscription by drawing attention to it again in the final verses, when the citizens of Camelot gather to read and puzzle over it (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 159-162).[39] The "knight[s] and burger[s], lord[s] and dame[s]" also provide the public

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[39] In the 1833 edition of the poem, this connection is even more clear-cut. In this early version the message on the boat's prow is both reiterated and amplified by the parchment that she carries. Not only does this

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forum necessary for creating such dangerously inflexible definitions. On this note, it hardly seems coincidental that the actual moment of the Lady's death coincides precisely with her entry into public view, as she passes the first house of the city. The timing reinforces the idea that her demise, and the curse that precipitates it, are related to the problem of identity.

The fact that the Lady's death is figured specifically as a fatal paralysis also supports this interpretation. We are told that, as her "eyes are darkened wholly," and her final "carol" fades "her blood was frozen slowly," (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 145-148). This description fits in perfectly with the type of metaphor that Keats, Tennyson, and many of their contemporaries used to express their anxiety about labels and definitions. In fact, in many ways, her death seems almost like a deliberate echo of the fate that threatens the narrator at the beginning of Keats' *The Fall of Hyperion*, when he faces the ancient statue of Moneta. On attempting to approach the figure Keats' narrator is struck by a "palsied chill," and feels a "cold grasp upon those streams that pulse beside the throat," that eventually threatens to reach and "stifle" his heart-- essentially to freeze his blood (Keats, *Fall of Hyperion* 1:122-130) . In the preceding chapter, I outlined my reasons for believing that this confrontation represents the poet's struggle with the boundaries and distinctions imposed by the kind of classical art that the statue

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paper once again repeat her name, it turns the repetition into, perhaps, the most clear-cut statement of identity possible "this is I/ The Lady of Shalott" (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 170).

seems to embody. Particularly given the context surrounding the Lady's curse, this parallel at the moment of its fulfillment cannot help but suggest a similar reading.

Certainly, the sense of stasis that one would expect if, indeed, the curse does represent the paralyzing effects of too-rigid classification can be seen in various elements of the poem's form from the very instant that it overtakes the Lady. In the section of the poem which describes the Lady's first glimpse of Lancelot and its immediate consequences, the primary verb shifts from the present to the past tense. The former, like everything else in the first part of the poem, suggests both vitality and indefinition-- ongoing action, with results that are yet to be determined. The latter, on the other hand, indicates a *fait accompli* with a fixed and inalterable ending. Even the poem's meter seems to reflect the shift. Until that point, Tennyson had primarily made use long, elaborate phrases enjambed over several lines. These draw the reader's eye continually onward, reinforcing the sense of constant motion suggested by the images themselves. But after the Lady sees Lancelot in the mirror Tennyson's description abruptly becomes a series of short, direct, end-stopped phrases: "she left the web, she left the loom/ she made three paces round the room," (Tennyson, "Lady of Shallot" 109-110). At first glance, the staccato rhythm may appear to speed up the pace of the narrative as a whole. The description itself, however, fragments into a series of static images, in contrast to the sense of continuous movement that pervades the earlier more flowing lines. As the metaphor of "freezing" suggests, the same sense of stillness overtakes the Lady herself, almost as soon as she leaves the tower. Likewise, the fulfillment of the curse is emphatically connected with silence, which, if anything, seems

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an even more pertinent metaphor for the stifling of poetic life. As I pointed out above, the Lady's death is marked specifically by the ending of her song. In fact, Tennyson actually seems to treat silence and death as synonyms. In the 1833 version of the poem, he tells us that the boat carried her "dead into towered Camelot," while in the 1842 version he substitutes "silent into Camelot," almost as though two words were same (Tennyson, "Lady of Shalott" 158).

Most importantly of all, however, the curse can be directly connected to literary tradition on several levels. As I've pointed out, the way that both its terms, and the circumstances of its fulfillment are linked with Camelot, in itself, gives the curse literary overtones. The Arthurian reference may even suggest a particular connection with the kind of medieval or medievalized verse romance whose conventions Keats so frequently wrestled with. More specifically, the way that Tennyson describes the Lady's first fatal view of Lancelot emphasizes the knight's extensive literary pedigree. Tennyson repeatedly evokes Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, both directly and indirectly. The "Red-cross knight" on Lancelot's shield, for example, is unusual symbol for the knight to carry, but serves as an unmistakable link to Spenser's poem (Ricks, 357 notes to ln.46). This link is further underlined by the numerous parallels that Tennyson draws between the Lady's first glimpse of Lancelot and Britomart's view first of Arthegall in Merlin's glass in book three of *The Faerie Queene* (Ricks, 357 notes to ln. 46). In both cases, the peaceshattering vision that provokes desire in the heroine occurs in an enchanted mirror. Even more tellingly, both descriptions use the metaphor of a flying

arrow to describe the result. Spenser speaks of the effect Arthegall's image on

Britomart as the work of

<blockquote>The false Archer, which that arrow shot</blockquote>

<blockquote>So slyly, that she did not feele the wound (Spenser III: ii: 232-233).</blockquote>

When Tennyson, likewise, refers to the Lady's view of Lancelot as "a bow shot from the

bower eve," it seems clear that he had Spenser's poem, in mind (Tennyson, "Lady of

Shalott" 73).

This fact, in turn, brings us back to the question of generic classification in

general and of the romance genre in particular. A strong case can made that, despite

The Faerie Queen's inherent complexity and resistance to definition, Tennyson and

many of his contemporaries had come to consider it, like Camelot, an emblem of a

specific type of verse romance. Keats' friend and mentor, Leigh Hunt, speaks of

Spenser's work along with Shakespeare's, as the essential contrast to the neoclassical

"miniatures of Pope" (Hunt ed., Jump, 135). Perhaps this opinion accounts for the fact

that the same type of romance had, in a more rigidly defined form, also become the

primary generic association for Keats' own work, when it was labeled "cockney

romance." Moreover, even if *The Faerie Queene* had no link at all to the brand of

romance in question, there would be ample reason to connect it with Keats' work, and

the struggles with classification that can be seen throughout it. The romantic poet's

fascination with Spenser, in general, and with *The Faerie Queen* in particular, was well

known. Keats' first recorded poem was titled "An Imitation of Spenser," and Milnes,

in "Life, Letters, and Literary Remains," credits *The Faerie Queen* with sparking his

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interest in poetry (Milnes 9-11). It is therefore doubly linked to a particular romance

tradition, both through Spenser's original poem, and through that work's later

influence on Keats. By tying Lancelot, as the catalyst which prompts the Lady to brave

the curse, so clearly to the Spenserian poem, Tennyson also links the curse's

fulfillment with the labels and definitions that had become associated with it.

In addition to the double link with romance that any allusion to the *Faerie Queen*

might suggest in this context, the particular passage which Tennyson references also

connects Lancelot with an entire line of literary antecedents that go far beyond Spenser's

poem and whatever generic connotations it carried. Spenser's description of Athegall

deliberately portrays *his* knight errant as the rightful heir of a varied poetic tradition

stretching back all the way to *The Iliad*:

> And all his armour seemd of antique mould
>
> But wondrous massy and assured sownd,
>
> And round about yfretted all with gold,
>
> In which there written was, with cyphres old
>
> *Achilles armes, which Arthegall did win*   (Spenser III.ii.218-222)

Particularly given the emblematic status of Achilles' shield in the epic genre, it is no

great leap to read this passage as Spenser's way of staking his claim to a place this

tradition. It seems only reasonable to suppose that, having won the epic hero's armor

Arthegall has also inherited his status as the prime representative of the genre, and that

his creator likewise considers himself the rightful heir of Homer and Virgil. The fact

that Tennyson links the Lady's first fatal sight of Lancelot with this particular passage

seems significant, not only because it is so overtly concerned with poetic convention, but also because it ties *The Faerie Queene* to a tradition outside the romance genre. By tying his description of the knight to a moment in Spenser's poem which calls up generic associations beyond the one with which he primarily identified the work as a whole, Tennyson makes it possible to link Lancelot, not only to a specific literary tradition, but to literary tradition itself. When the Lady leaves her tower to follow him, particularly towards Camelot, a public forum with its own generic associations, she opens herself to the kind of rigid definition that is ultimately fatal to the true artist. Her death by paralysis, in a boat deliberately marked with her name, a pattern which, in itself, suggests a similar interpretation, only seems like further confirmation of this reading.

And yet, if this journey into the public, genre-defined world of Camelot, and the marks of fixed identity that it imposes are fatal to the Lady, there is ample reason to believe that avoiding it by remaining in the liminal space of her tower, and thus, staying perpetually undefined, would be equally untenable. The phrasing and enjambment of the lines which introduce the "curse" hovering over the Lady seem deliberately chosen to bring to light the paradox involved in maintaining such a lack of fixed identity. We are told

A curse is on her if she stay

To look down to Camelot ("Lady of Shalott" 40).

With the line break after "stay," at first glance this appears to suggest that the curse would result from remaining as she is, not from leaving. Even once further reading shows that this is not the case, the initial suggestion is too distinct to be simply

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dismissed, particularly with a poet as conscious of linguistic detail and sound as Tennyson. The result is an insoluble dilemma; a curse that is unavoidable, no matter what the Lady does (Tucker 108).

Nor is this the only indication, that, even if she had never seen Lancelot, the Lady could not have continued to find fulfillment in her tower indefinitely. She is already "half sick of shadows" *before* she sees him passing in the mirror. In fact, the very phrasing of her complaint contains a subtle suggestion of this. At first glance, the Lady seems simply to be saying that she is, to borrow a refrain from another of Tennyson's heroines, "aweary" to the point of disgust with the insubstantiality the curse imposes on her. Certainly this interpretation is more than plausible, whether the "shadows" in question refer to the images in the mirror that are her only contact with the outer world, but are too ephemeral to offer her genuine satisfaction, or to the "shadowy" quality of her existence as whole, or both. It is, however, also possible to see a slightly darker, and far more literal meaning in her words. The phrase "sick *of* shadows" leaves open the possibility those "shadows" are not only the object, but the cause, of her "sickness"-- that her reliance on them does not merely bore or tire her, but actually threatens her well-being. It is a relatively minor difference in itself; but there are logical implications in this second reading which seem almost deliberately calculated to highlight the ambiguities in the initial wording of the curse. If the "shadows" of her life in the tower, do indeed, have the power to "sicken" her, then remaining there among them, is, ultimately, as dangerous as leaving it to face the curse.

Tennyson's later gloss on the line also supports this interpretation; he describes it as "the new born love of something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows to that of realities" (qtd. Hallam Tennyson, vol. I: 117). In the first place, this gloss confirms the basic idea that she is moving from the realm of the insubstantial -- "the region of shadows" -- to the more clearly defined, public world outside her tower-- "the wide world…of realities." It also presents this motion as the first stirrings of the impulse that, in the end, proves fatal to the Lady as something inevitable, perhaps even necessary. This commentary confirms the sense of inescapable predicament already implied by the wording of the lines which first describe the curse. And its association with love gives a surprisingly positive inflection, coming from the poet who would later pen the famous line about having "loved and lost." Clearly, as destructive as the trip to the world of labels, names, and traditional conventions represented by Camelot is for the Lady, the retreat into Keatsian self- dissolution represented by her life in the tower is equally impossible to sustain.

"Becoming a Name": Genre, Fame, and the Dangers of Public Labeling in "Ulysses"

If "The Lady of Shalott" can be read as exploration of the impossibility of avoiding labels, even in the face of their fatal effects, "Ulysses" can be seen as a more thorough exploration of those effects.[40] By its very nature, "Ulysses" seems to invite

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[40] Nonetheless, the fact that Tennyson specifically links his poem "Tithonus" with it as a "pendent" in his 1833 volume indicates that he was still very much interested in the alternative (Qtd. Weinfield 356). After all, in many ways Tithonus himself can be seen as the ultimate example of someone who achieves immortality at the price of continual change, which ultimately costs him his individuality. Significantly, unlike the enraptured narrators in Keats' Odes, he takes no satisfaction in his bargain, eternally lamenting his eternal loss of self. He begins the second strophe, saying Alas for this gray shadow, once a man…" suggesting that the speaker feels so far removed from who he was that he no longer even considers himself

questions about influence and reputation. In taking a Homeric hero for his speaker, Tennyson inevitably draws his reader's attention to his engagement with his predecessors-- particularly the bards associated with epic. For, although the *Odyssey* has long been recognized as embodying many of the qualities of the verse romance, its scope, its classical, Homeric roots, and its use of such clearly defined formal markers as the invocation to the muse, meant that, in Tennyson's time at least, it was still seen primarily as an epic. Even those critics who make the strongest argument about the *Odyssey*'s connections to Romance acknowledge this. John Dean, for instance, in his 1976 article "The *Odyssey* as Romance," presents his view of the poem's genre as something new, perhaps even radical.[41] Dean's subsequent examination of critical reactions to the poem from Aristotle onwards makes it clear that, although the works in question, including Tennyson's "Ulysses," all implicitly suggest some link between the *Odyssey* and romance, none of them consciously explore the significance of this link, let alone question their classification of the poem on the basis of it (Dean 228- 229, 234).

Any ambiguity surrounding the genre of the *Odyssey* would have been increased by the influence of Virgil's *Aeneid.* Virgil's poem supports its own claim to epic status by deliberately intertwining the motifs and themes of his predecessor's two great works,

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human (Tennyson, "Tithonus" 11). He confirms this sense of lost identity even more poignantly a few lines later when he mourns that "all [he] was" is now "in ashes (Tennyson, "Tithonus" 23). Most directly of all, in the final section of the poem, he actually voices this feeling of separation outright. When he describes watching Aurora appear in his early years as her consort he begins by saying , "I used to watch," but actually breaks of in the middle of the reminiscence to add, "if I be he that watched." Clearly Tennyson wished to emphasize the gulf between his speaker's former condition and his sense of himself as he is now. While the presence of such a gulf does not necessarily indicate an entire loss of selfhood, but the wispy, amorphous images with which he associates his current state of being seem to encourage such a reading. In fact, the speaker repeatedly describes himself as a "shadow" the very phrase so intimately associated with the Lady of Shalott's liminal existence in her tower ("Tithonus" 8 11; "Lady of Shalott " 58, 71) . Of course, the echo may be mere coincidence. Given the context, however, it does seem enough to justify the reader in speculating whether Tithonus' fate might not serve as an example of what lies in store for any artist who attempts to evade death by relinquishing his or her identity.

[41] He begins the article by stating, "Here and there along the edges and in the footnotes of scholarship for at least the last century the vague realization has existed that there is 'something about' Homer's *Odyssey* which is 'like' the genre of romance… nobody has talked more than vaguely about the connection between the *Odyssey* and the genre of romance. " (Dean 228).

in effect combining the *Odyssey* with the more sharply defined *Iliad*, and, so, adding

another layer of complexity to the question of the poem's generic status. David Quint,

who strongly emphasizes the *Odyssey's* links with romance, argues convincingly that,

by joining the two works in this way, the *Aeneid* actually makes certain romance motifs

an integral part of the epic formula (Quint 315); and if the *Aeneid*'s references to the

Odyssey, were, indeed, influential enough to leave its imprint on the conventions of the

entire genre, it is only reasonable to suppose that it had an equally profound effect on

how the *Odyssey* itself was viewed and classified. By intertwining the more generically

ambiguous Homeric poem with its unmistakably, quintessentially, epic companion, and

then invoking it as part of his own clearly defined epic, Virgil associates the *Odyssey*

even more closely with the epic genre. Given Virgil's profound influence on Tennyson,

it is easy to believe that the Roman poet's use of *Odyssey* was instrumental in shaping

his successor's conception of it.[42]

This view of the *Odyssey* as an epic, albeit a far less clear-cut example of the

genre than the *Iliad*, would have been further cemented by the allusions to it in that

touchstone of English epic, *Paradise Lost*. In the first six books that poem, Milton pays

homage to Virgil and Homer alike by following the *Aeneid's* strategy of deliberately

"combining" the two Homeric poems. The result is a view of the *Odyssey* as a poem

that is, on some level, trapped between genres-- perhaps even of a work that is, at heart,

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[42] The depth and significance of this influence has long been widely accepted. As early as 1899, critic Wilfred Mustard opens an article on Tennyson by stating, confidently that "It is sometimes said that Tennyson is the most Virgilian of modern poets," suggesting the connection between the two poets was already viewed as an established fact (Mustard 186).

meant to be a romance, being forced uneasily into the constricting mold of epic. [43] This

interpretation certainly fits Tennyson's characterization of Homer's hero in his own

dramatic monologue. The emphasis, in the poem's opening lines, on Ulysses'

transformation from the wanderer of the *Odyssey*, to a monarch and lawgiver, who,

however reluctantly, appears destined to play a role not unlike Virgil's Aeneas seems

almost like a deliberate declaration of the shift from the mobile and uncertain world of

"romance" to the clearly ordered, teleological world of epic. His position as a king, a

national leader, would, in itself, be linked with the epic tradition.[44] Even more

significantly, Tennyson's Ulysses is portrayed specifically as a *founding* ruler, who must

try to build a civilization out of the "savage race" that exists only to "hoard and sleep

and feed." [45] This task would surely make a fitting epic theme, by any definition, for the

poet (or the leader) who chose to take it up (Tennyson, "Ulysses" 4-5). The project has

the potential for both the universal historical significance and the national emphasis that

many influential critics concerned with epic in the early nineteenth century, such as

Robert Southey, saw as an integral part of the form (Wilkie 35-36, Curran 167). The

subject even has the potential to imbue a story from the ancient past with widespread

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[43] Although I do associate the *Odyssey* particularly with the same type of verse-romance I mentioned in my discussion of Keats' *Endymion*, I use the term "romance" here in broad sense laid out in my introduction, to suggest a work marked by its active resistance to classification, rather than to indicate the formal and stylistic conventions associated with any particular period's use of the term.

[44] Steven Dillon suggests implicitly just how strong and ingrained this association is, in his article "Milton and
Tennyson's 'Guinevere'," where he argues that the use of "the genitive 'of the king'" in the title of Tennyson's completed *Idylls* contributes to the work's sense of "epic gravitas." (Dillon 129)

[45] use the word "ruler" deliberately, in the strictly etymological, as well as the ordinary sense of the word, since rules themselves are one of his primary concerns

contemporary significance, in the same way that Southey, following the traditional

"critical prescripts" for the epic, attempted to when he engaged the genre in his own

work (Wilkie 36). This potential is amply demonstrated by the countless readings of

"Ulysses" that convincingly connect the speaker's plight, not only with Tennyson's own

personal struggles and anxieties (a connection Tennyson himself made explicitly, in his

later comments on the poem, as I will address in depth below), but also with the larger

concerns of British society in the nineteenth century.[46]

Even the fact that Tennyson chose to compose "Ulysses" in blank verse suggests

that he linked the poem and its subject with epic. He would hardly have been the first

nineteenth- century poet to consider blank verse the meter of choice for epic projects in

English.[47] It is true that this form was also associated with Shakespeare's theatrical

works, and that, particularly in a dramatic monologue that contains recognizable echoes

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[46] To cite every source that makes such connections would require a chapter in itself. A few specific
examples that highlight the poem's potential to reflect the overarching social and political concerns of
Tennyson's England, however, include James Nohrnberg's article "Eight Reflections of Tennyson's
'Ulysses,'" Matthew Rowlinson's article " The Ideological Moment of Tennyson's 'Ulysses,'" and
Lynne B. O'Brien's article "Male Heroism: Tennyson's Divided View." Nohrnberg connects both the
narrator's strained relations with a "savage race" and his hunger to explore with the Britain's colonial
ambitions (111-114). Rowlinson links the poem more broadly with the formation of imperialist
ideology in Victorian Britain, and explores its complex interaction with the nascent language of
imperialism (265-276). O'Brien reads the poem as an implicit interrogation of Victorian gender roles,
particularly the consequences of a male ideal based entirely on concepts of martial grandeur. She
speculates that Tennyson's exploration of the old warrior's inability to find a satisfactory role on his
return to peacetime Ithaca reflects the poet's own ambivalence towards "his country's materialistic
values," and the view of military virtue as the apex of male heroism which helped to shape those values
(171-182).

[47] Again, Wilkes speaks at length about the way that Southey, who he convincingly argues serves as a
"valuable barometer" of the "literary currents" of his day, marked that meter as the most appropriate to the
"inherent grandeur" of a truly epic subject (30, 36-37)

of several Shakespearean texts, this association cannot be altogether dismissed. Nonetheless, there is good reason to believe that, throughout his career, Tennyson's *strongest* associations with blank verse centered on the epic genre. Studies of his younger works indicate that Tennyson began writing blank verse as an imitation of Milton, whose role as the quintessential bard of English epic I have already discussed in my chapter on Keats (Nelson 110). Furthermore, this early association of the meter with Milton, and with the epic form for which he was most famous, seems to have remained remarkably consistent throughout his long career. Even in his last years, when considering the most effective way of rendering Virgil's Latin hexameters into English, it was a passage from *Paradise Lost*, with its "elaborate blank verse," that Tennyson cited as a model of how the Roman exemplar of heroic grandeur "ought to be translated" (Nelson 122).[48] On the contrary, although Tennyson shared the universal admiration of Shakespeare's writing, his praises of the playwright's work rarely, if ever, single out the use of blank verse as significant aspect of his genius. In light of his usual attention to such details, the omission, in itself seems striking, particularly in contrast with the repeated and effusive praise he lavishes on Milton's use of the form.

Tennyson's reaction to Keats' forays into blank verse is, in many ways, even more telling. Although Tennyson expressed great admiration for almost every aspect of Keats' work, he had one specific reservation: "his blank verse was poor," (qtd. Hallam

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[48] Although this observation may be simply intended as a homage to Milton's style, or yet another expression of the long acknowledged parallel between the two conspicuously epic poets, the specific mention of the verses' meter also suggests that there is something in the form itself which makes it particularly well suited to conveying the grandeur of "Heroic" verse in English.

Tennyson vol. I: 152). He also specified that Keats' attempts at the form "lacked

originality in movement," (qtd. Nelson 120). Nor was this an isolated comment. Even at

the very end of his life, he maintained that Keats "was not a master of blank verse," (qtd.

Hallam Tennyson vol II: 421). The way that Tennyson repeatedly singles out this form

as one of the few real weaknesses in Keats' writing, in itself, suggests that he saw the

meter as ill-suited to the projects of a writer who was already widely viewed as the "the

poet of romance," as opposed to epic (Parker 190). Even more significantly, a strong

case can be made that these comments also, implicitly, reveal a certain dissatisfaction

with the use of the form in the broader Shakespearean tradition in which Keats cast

himself.

It is unlikely that a young Victorian poet with Tennyson's reverence for tradition

would presume to criticize any aspect of Shakespeare's writing directly, even in his own

mind, let alone in his letters to others.[49] Keats, however, despite the profound respect

that Tennyson clearly had for him, was near enough to approach on far more equal

grounds. He was a great contemporary talent, whose overall poetic genius Tennyson

never questions, but whose particular strengths and weaknesses were still open for

discussion. And since Keats repeatedly makes a point of looking to Shakespeare, as

opposed to Milton, for an ideal poetic model in his letters, it is surely reasonable to

conjecture that anyone familiar with those letters would, implicitly, tend link his style

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[49] One can catch something of the awe in which Tennyson and his contemporaries held Shakespeare's
work in his son's *Memoirs*. Even the admission that his father sometimes ("in his weaker moments")
preferred the "minor" poem that made up the playwright's sonnet cycles to the more widely acclaimed
dramas is presented apologetically, almost guiltily, as a kind of confession of his youthful foibles (Hallam
Tennyson Vol I: 152).

with the playwright's. It is true that there is no way to be certain whether Tennyson was acquainted with those letters at the time he wrote "Ulysses." We do, however, know that Keats' earliest biographer, Richard Milnes, who first collected and published the poet's correspondence, was one of Tennyson's good friends and fellow apostles during his years at Cambridge (Hallam Tennyson, Vol. I: 35). Milnes' introduction to the 1848 volume of the *Life Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* indicates that both his interest in Keats and his acquaintance with several of the poets' surviving friends dates back at least far as the early eighteen thirties, when he and Tennyson were both students at the university (Milnes IX).[50] Since, according to Hallam Tennyson's account, Keats and his work were a frequent topic of discussion among this Cambridge circle, it seems likely that, even if Tennyson did not know the specific contents of Keats' letters, he would, at least, have been aware of the general tenor of opinion expressed in them (Hallam Tennyson Vol I: 36 n1). In short, there is every reason to believe that Tennyson viewed his young predecessor as the follower of Shakespeare that he cast himself as in his letters. Consequently, it seems plausible that his criticism of Keats' poetry may also reflect, in some measure at least, his attitude towards the young poet's chosen model.

Naturally, this, in itself, does not mean that any individual comment on Keats' work can be read as an indication of Tennyson's views on Shakespeare. Nonetheless, the

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[50] Milnes specifies that he first met Charles Brown "15 years ago," which would place the meeting in 1833, just after the period in question (the same year that Tennyson first composed Ulysses, in fact). On the hand, Milnes also implies that this introduction was the culmination of a longstanding fascination with the Keats' life and work. "Mr. Severn…" he writes, referring to the friend who nursed Keats in his last illness, "had already satisfied much of my curiosity respecting… [Keats]," suggesting that he was already familiar with many details of the poet's life at this point. (Milnes IX)

way that his criticism of Keats' blank verse, in particular, is presented in his son's *Memoirs* certainly indicates a link.

> My father also read Keats and Milton: saying that…"Keats…would have been, if he had lived, the greatest of us all (though his blank verse was poor), and that there is something…of the inmost soul of poetry in almost everything he wrote." Then, perhaps in his weaker moments, he used to think Shakespeare greater in his sonnets than in his plays.
>
> (Hallam Tennyson Vol. I: 152)

Not only does the discussion of Keats' work lead seamlessly to that of Shakespeare's, even the wording of the transition implies a connection. Hallam Tennyson introduces his father's views on Shakespeare with a simple "then," as though to suggest that they are a mere logical progression from what went before.[51] This shows, if nothing else, how closely linked Hallam Tennyson perceived the two poets as being in his father's mind. The strength of this association makes it all the more reasonable to read a broader, more general significance into Tennyson's repeated criticisms of Keats' blank verse, particularly in light of his comparative silence on Shakespeare's use of the form elsewhere in his writing. Certainly, it seems safe to conclude that, if, as several studies have suggested, it was a "commonplace" of nineteenth century criticism to contrast the

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[51] This reading, which implies a veiled criticism of the great dramatic bard, would also explain the oddly defensive tone noted above, in Hallam Tennyson's admission that father occasionally preferred Shakespeare's sonnets to his dramas. This interpretation seems even more plausible, in light of the fact that the preference expressed is, incidentally, for works that do not use blank verse, over those that do.

playwright's work with that of Milton, it is with the latter's self-consciously epic style

that Tennyson associated the meter of "Ulysses" (Gray, *Milton and the Victorians* 19;

Nelson 13-19). Combined with title character's Homeric pedigree and the emphasis on

Ulysses' role as a king, the choice of blank verse for the poem's meter is yet another

confirmation of the impression that world the speaker inhabits when he is introduced is

that of the classical epic.

And, despite its brevity, Tennyson's contemporaries *did* associate the poem with

that genre. John Sterling, one of the "Ulysses'" earliest reviewers, specifically refers to

its "delightful epic tone," (Sterling 120). The description of the poem that follows, as an

example of "a clear unimpassioned wisdom quietly carving its sage words and noble

figures on pale but lasting marble," though clearly intended as further praise also reveals

the dangers of this flattering description. In its implicit comparison of the "delightfully

epic" poem to a marble sculpture, it implicitly associates the compliment with exactly

the sort of beautiful but lifeless fixity that Tennyson, like Keats, seems to fear. The

figures depicted may be "noble," but, as permanently engraved carvings, are just as

incapable of true life or movement as the eternally suspended characters on Keats' Urn.

The "marble" in which the poet depicts them, a medium already associated with the

classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, is, like those traditions, "lasting." On

the other hand, it is also "pale," a word that carries ominous connotations of mortality

and death. Sterling's phrasing, which implies a contrast between the two qualities ("pale

but lasting") suggests that he is well aware of the word's darker undertones, and of the

paradox inherent in the kind of classical immortality he attributes to the poem.[52] His one

direct criticism of the poem, namely that "a modern English poet should write of

Ulysses, rather than of the great voyagers of the modern world…" also supports the idea

that the latent reservations which betray themselves in Sterling's laudatory description of

"Ulysses" can be traced to its links with the classical (120). It is as if, in recognizing the

poem's links to the epic form, he also recognizes the deadly stasis that a too rigid

adherence to such classical traditions can produce.

For it quickly becomes apparent that, for the narrator of "Ulysses," the most

salient characteristic of the "epic" world in which he finds himself is its paralyzing,

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[52] These subtle intimations would be all the clearer, in light of the fact that Sterling had leveled similar criticisms more explicitly at several other poems in the volume, directly before his discussion of "Ulysses." In speaking of
Tennyson's handling of classical and mythological subjects he writes that "any of these legendary poems...might be cited as examples of solid and luminous painting…." But, though he admires their beauty, he regrets that "Mr. Tennyson has scarcely succeeded…to unite any powerful impression on the feelings with his coloured blaze. It is painted—though well painted—fire." In keeping with this metaphor of painting, he goes on to praise the grace and skill with which these lovely but static compositions are executed by comparing them to the work of "Paolo Veronese." "[Tennyson's] figures are distinct as those of brazen statuary on tombs, brilliant as stained glass, musical as the organ-tones of chapels," he writes. This comparison of these poems, not merely to sculpture, but to *funeral* sculpture, associates their motionless beauty with images of death far more clearly and explicitly than the reference to pallor in the similar metaphor Sterling uses to describe "Ulysses." It also aligns the poems with art of the Middle Ages, implying specifically generic undertones in his description of them as "romantic" a few lines later. The way that Sterling's description of Tennyson's work mingles the two ideas – lifelessness and a clear affinity for the genre of medieval romance—certainly suggests that the two are closely linked. Nor, as his attitude toward Ulysses suggests, are other, more classical genres any less prone to this connection between definition and paralysis. "As some of these romantic songs remind us of Paul Cagliari," he writes "others—those especially …dreamt upon the lap of the Greek muse- are akin to the work of a still greater painter than the Veronese, Correggio. So mild and mournful in interest are these, so perfect in harmony of images and rhythm, we almost grieve… to waken from our trance, and find we have been deluded by …the echoes of oracles now dumb." This description does suggest that Sterling distinguishes the work inspired by the "Greek muse" from Tennyson's "romantic songs," and that he sees these more 'classical' poems as somehow "greater" than the others. His continuation of the painting metaphor, however, along with his likening of poems' effect on the reader to a trance, and the and reference to the dead and silent oracle make it clear that, however noble, the beauty of these poems is just as motionless and frozen as that of Tennyson's other works (129).

deathlike stasis. His first words firmly link his role of "king" with his sense of "idleness" (Tennyson 1). As we have already established, this title carries strong generic implications of its own. Furthermore, in Ulysses' case it also entails the equally well-defined, and potentially epic, responsibility of enforcing "unequal laws" to bring order to "a savage race," (Tennyson 1-4). Ulysses' immediate association of his title with his frustrating sense inactivity suggests that, from the first, such overt generic markers are closely tied to his suffocating sense of constraint (Tennyson 1-4). The lines that follow bear out this reading. Again and again, Ulysses describes his home in Ithaca and the role he is expected to fulfill there in terms of motionlessness that border on complete paralysis. The ancestral hearth, for instance, which so stifles the narrator, and which, as R. F. Storch points out, is as much an integral part of the epic tradition as it is a symbol of domesticity, is "still" (Storch 288; Tennyson "Ulysses" 2). In fact, the narrator implies that his entire "dull" life since his return has been a kind of "pause," a state that he equates with "mak[ing] an end," (Tennyson "Ulysses" 22). Furthermore, the progression of the lines strongly suggests that he sees anyone who submits to such a pause is doomed "to rust unburnish'd/ not to shine in use," (Tennyson 22-23). For Tennyson's Ulysses, it seems, any stillness is uncomfortably, even dangerously, close to the "eternal silence" that he resists so fiercely (Tennyson 27). If it is also the single most prominent aspect of his experience as King of Ithaca, with all its implicit links to the classical epic, the logical conclusion is clear. To label oneself, whether by accepting a royal title, surrounding oneself with elements that imply a clearly defined poetic scheme,

or even, perhaps, simply by "becoming a name," is, in symbolic terms, to risk a paralytic death.

In fact, it may be that these various types of labeling are not as separate as they seem. Although "Ulysses" is presented as a dramatic monologue, spoken by a fictional character, Tennyson made no secret of the fact that he identified strongly with the narrator. In fact, he claimed that "there [was] more about [him]self in Ulysses" than in the ostensibly autobiographical *In Memoriam* (qtd. Ricks 560). When examined closely, this is a rather puzzling assertion. Tennyson explains that he was referring to the speaker's need to fight on through life despite overwhelming losses, and his acute awareness of the inevitability of death (qtd. Ricks 560). He also, however, attributes the strength of this feeling to the influence of Hallam's death. As *The Norton Critical Edition* of Tennyson's works points out, he did not learn of that death until several months *after* the date which follows the earliest known completed draft of the poem, in the Trinity manuscript (Hill 82).

The dates *are* close, of course, and doubtless the news of his friend's death had a profound impact on the poem's later revisions. Given this proximity, it is not surprising that "Ulysses" was linked so closely in Tennyson's mind with the aftermath of Hallam's death that, when he spoke of it years later, he attributed it entirely to the influence of that tragedy. This conjecture explains Tennyson's apparent inconsistency in dates, but it does not make it clear why a young, able-bodied poet would, by his own admission, identify so powerfully with an aged failing, narrator whose death is clearly immanent. Nor does it explain why the twentyfour year old Tennyson would be so haunted by these images

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of death and decay *before* Hallam's unexpected death would naturally explain his preoccupation with these themes. Of course, such questions can never be answered with any degree of certainty. Even if they could be, a strong case could be made that the answers would be, at best, limited and, at worst, limiting cues for later readers to depend on. In this particular case, however, Tennyson's own insistence that there was an autobiographical element in "Ulysses" justifies and even invites a certain amount of speculation on the subject. At the very least, once one puts aside the obvious explanation of Hallam's death, the question of why Tennyson was so concerned with mortality at the time he wrote the poem provides a fresh angle from which to view it. If Tennyson did indeed "put... [him]self" into "Ulysses," as he claimed, and yet had no reason to be thinking about literal, physical death at the time he wrote his first draft, as all the available biographical information seems to intimate, it suggests that the images of eternal silence and paralysis that pervade the poem represent some other, more symbolic type of failure.

The fact that the poem's speaker couches his first overt reference to this kind of death specifically in terms of *silence,* rather than using the same analogies of fixedness and motion that dominated the poem up until that point, strongly suggests exactly what the much feared "ending" represents for the young poet.[53] Certainly, given his classical

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[53] At the risk of committing the intentional fallacy, I believe there is a strong case to be made that it *is* Tennyson's own anxiety that comes through most prominently in these lines. In the first place, the metaphor of death as silence is a departure from the poem's earlier imagery. In the second, when examined closely, it is also somewhat out of character for the relentlessly action-oriented Ulysses that Tennyson creates.

education, Tennyson would be no stranger to the idea that a writer's truest, most enduring life is made up of the words he leaves behind. And if words *are* life to an aspiring poet, it is no great leap to associate the silence that cancels them with death. It is true that, as Tennyson was no doubt aware, silence was also one of the most prominent aspects of the underworld that Ulysses visits in Homer's *Odyssey*.[54] Even so, there are numerous indications that both Tennyson's view of the poem's speaker and his conception of the afterlife have far more in common with other, later, sources than with Homer's original portrayal.

From the outset, Tennyson distances himself from his Greek sources by using the Latin version of the hero's name, aligning him far more closely with Virgil and Dante's vision of the character than Homer's. This is no mere linguistic quibble. Naturally, Virgil, who traces his own country's roots to the defeated Trojans, takes a far dimmer view than Homer of the man whose clever ruse destroyed his forbearer's beloved city. Dante, as a literal and figurative follower of Virgil in the *Inferno*, adopts both his guide's unsympathetic view of the Greek hero and his example of translating Odysseus' name into his own tongue. And the name is only the first of many indications that these more ambivalent portrayals of Ulysses were at least as instrumental as the original, Homeric poem in shaping Tennyson's depiction of the character-- if not more so. It is, after all, in *The Inferno* that we find the first account of the final sea-voyage that Tennyson's narrator is on the point of undertaking. Furthermore, Tennyson's monologue contains

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[54] The spirits that Homer's hero encounters can only speak once he has refreshed them with his living blood.

distinctive echoes of the reasoning, and even the specific rhetoric, that Dante's Ulysses uses to convince his fellow mariners to join him on his ill-fated journey (Ricks *Selected Editions*138-139). In light of the profound impact that Dante, in particular, clearly had on Tennyson's conception of his narrator, it seems worth questioning whether or not the afterlife that he has in mind is also closer to Dante's than to Homer's. A fair argument could be made that Dante's Judeo-Christian hell has even less common with Homer's Greek underworld than his view of Ulysses as soul damned for his trickery has with Homer's celebration of Odysseus' cleverness.

Certainly, in Dante's underworld, silence does not figure prominently, if at all, among the numerous and graphic tortures that the inhabitants must undergo. If this is, indeed, the case, it would also explain why Tennyson's monologue seems to ignore, or even subtly contradict, Homer's account of Odysseus' journey to the underworld. According to Homer, after all, the hero's encounter with Achilles' shade is one of the most important incidents in that journey. It is primarily from the lamentations of his old friend's spirit that Odysseus learns what Homer's underworld is like. Yet Tennyson's Ulysses speculates on the possibility that his crew will "touch the Happy Isles /And see the great Achilles, whom we knew," as though no such encounter ever happened (Tennyson, "Ulysses" 63-64). There is no suggestion in these lines that Ulysses has already met his dead friend's spirit during his prior journey, or even that he has any firsthand knowledge of its whereabouts. Surely, no one who had heard actually heard Achilles' spirit declare that he would be

... a laborer on earth, and serve for hire
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> Some man of mean estate, who makes scant cheer
>
> Rather than reign over all who have gone down
>
> To death

as he does in Homer, would be half as eager to join him as Ulysses seems to be (Homer trans. Bryant XI: 602-606).[55] This discrepancy, particularly taken together with the other, more general evidence discussed above, which seems to indicate that Tennyson is distancing himself from the original Greek *Odyssey*, makes it seem unlikely that his use of silence as a metaphor for death is intended as specific reference to the Homeric underworld.

Nor, as I have indicated, does it fit particularly well Tennyson's characterization of Ulysses. Surely, a speaker who bitterly laments the confinements of his role as king, a role whose duties consist primarily of such distasteful speech-acts as the need to "meet and dole/unequal laws," would be unlikely to think of his downfall as a loss of voice, figurative or literal. For a writer only just establishing his reputation, on the other hand, particularly one as exquisitely conscious of poetic tradition and his own potential place in it as Tennyson was, it is hard to find a more apt or telling metaphor for death. The comparison that would be so out of character for the action-oriented speaker of the poem would make perfect sense, viewed as a kind selfreflexive turn: a conscious or

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[55] The way in which the imagined details of his projected journey become apparently unconscious repetitions of his earlier adventures also carries other implications, which I will examine in more detail below.

unconscious expression of the author's own anxiety about the fate of his voice and words.

It is even possible that Tennyson had a powerful example of this argument in mind when he composed the passage: John Milton's *Areopagitica*. Milton's tract opens with one of the most eloquent and explicit developments of the idea that a book can represent a kind of immortality. For its writer, he claims, a book can be "the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life" [sic] (Milton *Areopagitica*, 4). Given the context, Ulysses' longing for "life piled on life," stated not three lines before he compares death to silence, seems like a deliberate echo of Milton's wording.[56] Taken together with the biographical information that makes it seem unlikely that Tennyson would be preoccupied with literal, physical death at the time he wrote the poem, the presence of such echoes further suggests that the images of impending death, silence, and paralysis which pervade the poem are at least as much about literary failure as any kind of physical demise. And, as I have shown, this failure coincides, structurally and thematically, with the use of labels and clear generic markers.

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[56] Although Tennyson left no direct commentary on *Areopagitica* during this part of his of career, the tract was readily available, and, given his longstanding fascination with Milton, there is every reason to believe that he was familiar with it. Certainly his good friend Arthur Hallam, whose memory Tennyson associated so intimately with this particular poem, knew it. Hallam quotes Milton's essay familiarly in an 1829 letter to Gladstone (Hallam, *Letters* 284). Perhaps even more significantly his father, Henry Hallam, singled it out as the best of Milton's political prose in his own survey, *Introduction to Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century* (Henry Hallam, Vol III: 379).

At the same time, the poem's speaker, at least, can find no easy escape from such constricting labels. Not surprisingly, he turns first to the traditional emblem of "romance"-- the sea. Although it is difficult to pinpoint any single trope or image as "typical" of such a flexible and amorphous category, critics whose concepts of "romance" differ as broadly as Northrop Frye's archetypal interpretation and David Quint's historical-political reading associate it with the ocean (Frye *Anatomy of Criticism* 190-192; Quint 248-249). Ulysses' desire for an endless quest where

> …all experience is an arch wherethrough
>
> Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades
>
> For ever and for ever when I move…

also recalls the loosely episodic, even fragmentary structure which many critics associate with "romance" in general, and the kind of verse romance with which *The Odyssey* itself is often grouped in particular (Tennyson "Ulysses" 19-21; Parker 3-15, Beer 20-21; Quint 248- 250). This suggests that, like many of the poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the narrator in Tennyson's "Ulysses" sees "romance" as the clearest path to the kind of freedom from generic boundaries that he seeks.

Nonetheless, for Tennyson's speaker, this promise of liberty turns out to be a false one. Perhaps this is because, like Keats' use of romance tropes in *Endymion,* the very specificity with which he attempts to evoke the tradition defeats him. As I have already mentioned, although it was almost universally spoken of as an epic, for Tennyson and his contemporaries *The Odyssey*, also had strong, if more implicit, links

with the same type of medieval verse romance that Keats falls into in *Endymion*.

Renaissance authors such as Ariosto, for example, deliberately looked to the poem as the

quintessential model of the wandering, episodic journey (Parker 43). Indeed, in his

initial draft of the poem, Tennyson himself almost seems make deliberate reference to

the role that *The Odyssey* and its title character play as the prime exemplar of such

works. Ulysses' lament that he has "become a name" is, in itself, a telling compliant in

an examination of labels and their implications. It suggests that his sense of paralysis is

connected to, perhaps even the result of, the prominence and consequent fixity of his

public identity. Before the insertion of a semicolon in a later version clarifies the

sentiment, however, the way that this line spills into the one that follows gives Ulysses'

grievance an even more distinctly generic overtone. In Tennyson's initial draft, the

narrator appears to mourn, not merely that he has "become a name," but specifically that

he has "become a name/ for always roaming with a hungry heart," (Tennyson, "Ulysses"

11-12). It is no leap to read these words, spoken by the title character of a poem that was

rapidly becoming an emblem for the endless, episodic structure of a certain kind of verse

romance, as a lament that he himself has, somehow, become synonymous with this

"always…roaming" genre. Although the added semicolon shows that the second line

actually begins a new thought, rather than a continuing the first one, the initial ambiguity

in the phrasing seems too perfect, and too telling, to be entirely coincidental.

Assuming that Ulysses and his first adventure are, indeed, so strongly identified

with one specific strand of the romance tradition that they have already become

synonymous with it, it is small wonder that the speaker's attempts to gain his freedom

by turning back to the trappings of romance prove futile. The poem's status as a marker for a particular strand of "romance" robs the category of the very flexibility and freedom from generic restraint that made it such a valuable tool. Furthermore, the narrator's return to a genre that is not only clearly defined, but already identified with his first journey, suggests a tendency towards repetition in Ulysses' second trip that makes it ill-fitted to be a force for "life." Early in the monologue, the narrator implicitly describes "every hour…saved from that eternal silence" as "a bringer of *new* things," (26-28 emphasis mine). This description not only reinforces the links between labeling, stasis, and death that I have already established, by equating vitality with the kind of newness and innovation that a fixed and concrete label generally precludes; it also serves to highlight, and to cast particular suspicion on, any more specific instances of repetition in the narrator's speech.

There are many such instances, and they are by no means confined to overall generic signals. John Peters, for instance, makes a convincing argument that Ulysses' speech bears a disturbing resemblance to the song of the sirens that the hero himself heard and resisted in Homer's account (Peters 134-141). The narrator's fantasy of meeting Achilles' spirit on his journey is an even clearer example of this kind of repetition. As I have already pointed out, exactly such a meeting figured prominently in Homer's account of Odysseus' adventures, although the narrator himself appears unconscious of this fact. This apparent discrepancy with the earlier poem does more than simply distance Tennyson's conception of the character from Homer's portrayal. The fact that one of the most specific ambitions Tennyson's Ulysses expresses when

envisioning his second journey is actually a repetition of an episode from the earlier adventures that were so instrumental in making him "a name," strongly implies that his projected sea-voyage will not bring him the sense of "newness" that he hopes for.

Simultaneously, the mention of Achilles also serves to bring the poem back firmly into the domain of classical epic. It is as if Ulysses' flight back to the type of "romance" which marked his first sea-voyage not only fails to free him from the overall sense of generic restraint, it does not even extricate him from the specific marks of epic that troubled him so deeply at the beginning of the poem. On the contrary, perhaps because of the *Odyssey*'s unusual dual status among Tennyson's contemporaries, who explicitly recognized the poem as an epic, even while implicitly taking it as a model for romance, the narrator becomes ever more enmeshed in such generic signals as the poem progresses.

Structurally, this can be seen in the metrical variations for which the poem is so justly famous.[57] I suggest that, in addition to providing dramatic cues about the speaker's state of mind, these variations, like many aspects of poetic form, also function as a type of allusion -- one particularly rich with generic overtones in this context. I have already spoken at length about my reasons for believing that Tennyson associated blank verse specifically with the epic form. In light of this association, the fact that the regularity of the meter falters noticeably when Ulysses begins to speak of his projected ocean voyage, may serve, not only as an indication of some hesitation on the speaker's part, or a

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[57] So much so, that in his classic introduction to the study of poetry, *Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine twice uses "Ulysses" to exemplify metrical variation (203-205).

poignant reminder of the frailty that comes with age, but also as an attempt to break free from the formal constraints associated with the world he currently inhabits by turning to a looser, less structured meter. The idea is all the more plausible since such metrical irregularities were associated with the sort of verse-romance this ocean voyage seems to represent (Parker 3-15; Beer 20-21; Quint 248- 250). But, since this type of romance only leads back to the *Odyssey* itself, with its double status as a generic model, inevitably, the verse regains its former strict uniformity by the poem's final lines. If anything, it deliberately emphasizes its iambic rhythm. Laurence Perrine uses this line to exemplify a meter that is "not only regular …but heavily regular" (205). Certainty, if blank verse is a mark of epic, with all its stifling rigidity, Ulysses has not only failed to escape from it, but is more firmly and prominently entrenched in it than ever.

This interpretation is bolstered by the way that, immediately after this line, the poem falls, not only back into the iambic regularity of blank verse, but also into an almost perfect echo of that quintessential English epic, *Paradise Lost*. Ulysses' declaration that

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in

will To strive, to seek, to find, and not to

yield. (65-70)

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is all but identical to Satan's claim that "Though chang'd in outward lustre;" his

condition is nonetheless bearable, because he still has

> that fixt mind…
>
> That with the mightiest rais'd me to contend,
>
> And to the fierce contention brought along
>
> Innumerable force of Spirits arm'd
>
> That durst dislike his reign…."
>
> (Milton I: 97-101)

Ulysses' final lines recall the assertion that concludes Satan's speech even more

strongly. The "apostate angel" claims that

> Though the field be lost…
>
> All is not lost; the unconquerable Will
>
> And study of revenge, immortal hate
>
> And courage never to submit or yield:
>
> (Milton I: 105-108)

The echoes of this speech in the conclusion of Tennyson's "Ulysses," both in language

and in general sentiment, are unmistakable. In the first place, this pointed allusion

confirms the idea that Ulysses' projected journey can only lead him back further into the

domain of fixed identity and labels so strongly linked with classical epic. Even if his

broader education in Greek and Latin made Tennyson's associations between Milton and

epic less exclusive than Keats', he still had every reason to view *Paradise Lost* as an

emblem of the genre, at the very least the foremost example of it in his own language.

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Furthermore, the specific passage in the earlier poem which Ulysses' lines recall is probably one of Milton's strongest, most deliberate evocations of the genre he is engaging, harking back quite consciously to the same tradition of the military epic suggested by the initial mention of Achilles.

In many ways, however, the reference represents an even more ominous shift than a simple return to the paralyzing confines of genre and definition from which Ulysses seeks to free himself at the beginning of the poem. Homer's Achilles, after all, for all his flaws, is still clearly a hero, while Milton's Satan occupies, to say the least, a far more ambiguous moral ground. Despite the sympathetic view of Milton's "Archangel ruined" advanced by writers such as Blake and Shelley, this slide into what might well be seen as the devil's rhetoric raises serious questions about the ethics of the narrator's decision. It suggests that Ulysses' attempt to escape the restrictions of his current position in the epic world of law and kingship through a repetition of his earlier more romance-like adventures is not only futile, but morally flawed. It implies that the journey the narrator is contemplating will not only enmesh him still more deeply in the stifling forms and formulas of epic from which he is fleeing, but that it is, quite literally, leading him into a *fallen* version of the genre.

The fact that Dante, whose profound influence on Tennyson's portrayal of Ulysses I have already discussed, traces the character's damnation to exactly such a second ocean voyage, dovetails perfectly with this interpretation. Instead of the hubris and unseemly curiosity which the journey seems to represent for Dante, however, Tennyson's uneasiness with the imagined quest seems to be prompted mainly by its too-

apt resemblance to the narrator's earlier adventures, which make it an almost literal

regression. Unlike his prototype in *The Inferno*, Tennyson's Ulysses is condemned, not

by a desire for forbidden knowledge that leads him to transgress established boundaries,

but by his very inability to see or think beyond those boundaries. It is precisely because

he cannot conceive of any alternative to his current, stiflingly over-defined existence

besides a repetition of his first, and by now equally defined, adventures, that he is, in

some sense, condemned to an endless repetition of the same generically determined

patterns.

There is a third alternative suggested, briefly at least, in *The Odyssey* itself -- the

inland journey that Tiresias' shade advises the hero to undertake after his return to

Ithaca, in order to appease Neptune and to make reparation for the lives of the suitors he

will slaughter on his homecoming (Homer trans. Bryant XI: 145-165). *The Odyssey* ends

with Odysseus' and Dante homecoming, leaving this second voyage in realm of

prophecy. But, although both Tennyson focus quite specifically on the portion of

Ulysses' life which follows his return to Ithaca, and though both envision him as setting

out from home on further travels, both also make it clear that this second voyage is, like

his first, a sea-bound one. It bears no resemblance to the search for "men/who have not

known the sea nor eaten food/ seasoned with salt, nor ever have beheld Galleys with

crimson prows/ nor stately oars…" that Tiresias tells him he must make (Homer trans.

Bryant XI: 150-153). In Dante's case, this may be no more than an attempt to emphasize

the contrast between the Greek hero's waywardness and the virtuous obedience shown

by Aeneas, that "pious" hero created by his own guide to the underworld (Logan 2324).

But although Tennyson's portrayal of Ulysses was deeply influenced by Dante, the main concerns which the character expresses in the monologue center, not around his willingness to follow orders from Olympus, but around *identity*, and there is no reason to believe that this an exception. For identity is, in many ways, precisely what would be at stake in such an inland journey. This journey would mean turning away, not only from the sea and all its symbols, as represented by oars, but specifically from the identifying vocabulary of his first adventure. The sign he seeks is someone who lacks not only knowledge of the oar's true function, but of its proper name. Leaving behind the language of the sea in this way also, necessarily, means leaving behind his own fame as a traveler-- in a very real sense, giving up his name for the duration of this second journey. Certainly this would be a fitting penance for the hero. As Dimmock, in "The Name of Odysseus," points out, establishing his name is one of Greek character's primary motivations throughout the *Odyssey* (52-70). Even more specifically, his insistence on proclaiming that name to Polyphemus after blinding him, his unwillingness to remain "nobody," is directly responsible for provoking Poseidon's rage (Dimmock 55-56). And although Tiresias' reference to the wholesale slaughter of his wife's suitors directly before describing the inland voyage that he prescribes for Odysseus after his return, seems to imply that the journey is intended to atone for this act, the fact that the voyage is to culminate in a sacrifice to pacify the angry sea-god whose son he blinded suggests that the incident with Polyphemus is also one the main transgressions that the inland journey is meant to expiate. Appropriately, the reparation he must make for this insistence on declaring his identity too publicly is to relinquish it completely for a time.

In many ways, it is his name itself, rather than the livestock he is to offer, which

constitutes the journey's most important sacrifice.

Nonetheless, however appropriate that sacrifice may be, it is one that Tennyson's

Ulysses either cannot or will not make. Although the poem's speaker apparently laments

having "become a name," immediately after this line, he appears to take great comfort of

his fame.

<div style="text-align:center">

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known; cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honoured of them all; (Tennyson 11-14 emphasis mine)

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Such lines imply that Tennyson's Ulysses pines, not only for the opportunities his

travels gave him to acquire new experience and knowledge, but also for the recognition,

the "honor," which was accorded to him on those same adventures. Even the structure

of the final line, beginning with the speakers sense of "self" and the value which he

places on it ("not least"), and segueing seamlessly into his widespread reputation

("honoured of them all") shows how integrally these factors are related, and the extent to

which they depend on one another. Indeed, the phrase "honored of them all," an unusual,

even awkward, construction in English, in itself, suggests it. By using "of," which

implies that the antecedent is a literal part of the object being described, rather than "by"

or "in," Tennyson's narrator seems to hint that the honor is paid to him is actually what

forms the self he values. It is not difficult see how this dilemma would resonate with

Tennyson. As the reviews of his early work discussed above and Tennyson's responses

to those reviews, make clear, the poet was himself experiencing considerable

ambivalence surrounding questions of fame and reputation. With Keats' example of

willing self- dissolution closed to him, the young poet might well identify with a narrator

who is faced with the choice between the stagnation of "becoming a name" and the

complete collapse of identity involved in relinquishing that name entirely.

Chapter Three: The Riddling of the Bards: Tennyson's Generic Evasion in the
Idylls of the King

"Remodeling Models":

"The Epic" and the shift from identity to classification as the focus of anxiety

Tennyson's aversion to labeling becomes even more pronounced as his career

progresses. By the middle of that career, the uncertainties and tensions about identity

that pervade his early poems seem to coalesce into a more overt resistance to defining

his work along traditional generic lines. For example, he was hesitant to describe *In*

Memoriam as an elegy, although the poem unquestionably falls within that genre. Even

once the connection was too clear to deny, Tennyson continued to distance his work

from that or any other explicit category as plausibly as possible. In their article,

"Tennyson, Hallam's Corpse, Milton's Murder, and Poetic Exhibitionism," McMullen

and Kincaid point out this reluctance to classify the poem. As evidence of the poet's

desire to resist any obvious generic associations, they cite Tennyson's

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"muting of the trappings of pastoral elegy… the long period of

composition, and the avowal that he was not intending to write an

 elegy for Hallam and, in fact, was surprised to find one day that all

those little verses just happened to arrange themselves into—not an

elegy, exactly, but— 'Fragments of an Elegy'" (182).

 They read Tennyson's apparent discomfort with labels as a strategy to avoid placing his

poem in direct competition with one particular elegy, namely Milton's "Lycidas," rather

than as a suspicion of either the elegiac tradition or of classification itself.[58] Nonetheless,

they make a convincing case that Tennyson deliberately tried to keep from defining *In

Memorium* in conventional generic terms.

This kind of avoidance would be a logical outgrowth of the more general

ambivalence about identity and definition that I have already pointed out in Tennyson's

early poems. Certainly, anxieties about the stifling effects of a too-firmly-established

identity would account not only for Tennyson's unwillingness to categorize the poem

itself but also for his choice to publish it anonymously although he was widely known to

be the author (McMullin and Kincaid 182). It is hard to think of any clearer rejection of

poetic reputation and the limitations that it threatens to impose on the artist than this

complete refusal to fix his name to the work on publication. The fact that this particular

evasion of identity is specifically accompanied by a comparable evasion of genre and

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[58] It is true that these evasions of tradition and convention could have been occasioned by a Bloomian anxiety surrounding Milton. It seems equally likely, however, that Tennyson's attempts to outdo and eclipse his predecessor's poem, which form the main focus of their article, were motivated by an uneasiness about the tradition that Milton's poem had come to represent.

generic markers only serves as one more indication that the two ideas, with all their inherent parallels were indeed linked in the author's mind by the time that he made *In Memorium* public. Similar connections between generic classification and the dangers of a too-rigidly defined identity continue appear throughout Tennyson's work. Most particularly, his increasingly direct engagement with the question of genre and his growing suspicion of such classificatory systems can be seen in his career-long development of *The Idylls of the King.*

It is clear that Tennyson was deeply concerned with questions of genre and classification from the very outset of his work on the Arthurian cycle. The frame poem that he wrote to introduce the first completed portion of *The Idylls of the King*—originally published as "Morte d'Arthur" and later expanded into the concluding segment of the poem's final, twelve book version—is probably the most explicit discussion of the subject in his entire oeuvre. This frame, which is set in Tennyson's own time, was actually entitled "The Epic." It presents "Morte d'Arthur" as the last surviving fragment of a longer project that Everett Hall, the fictional author to whom Tennyson's frame attributes the enclosed poem, burned. Hall claims to have destroyed the poem this way specifically because its strict adherence to generic tradition robbed it of originality and rendered it unsuitable for the times. We are told that he discarded his work because:

> He thought that nothing new was said, or else
>
> Something so said 'twas nothing--that a truth
>
> Looks freshest in the fashion of the day (30-32).

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In the first place, this explanation once more gives voice to the assumption that a work must say something new to have any worth, to be more than "nothing." Even more telling is the emphasis that the poet places on the *form* of his composition (Klein 625). It is not simply "that nothing new was said," an objection that is nearly lost among the longer, more specific criticisms that follow, but that "Something *so* said 'twas nothing," (Tennyson, "Epic" 30-31 emphasis mine). The phrasing suggests that Hall was less troubled by the fact that the subject matter itself was not original, than by the lack of innovation in poem's manner of treating that subject. He amplifies on this line of reasoning by adding that "a truth looks freshest in the fashion of the day," once again implying that he is dissatisfied, not so much with *what* the poem says, which may well be "a truth," but with *how* it is expressed, which is at odds with "the fashion of the day" (Tennyson, "Epic" 32). To further underline the point, when his friend and host Francis Allen objects that the work "pleased *me* well enough," Hall reiterates and expands on this initial argument (Tennyson, "Epic" 34, emphasis original). He says:

> Why take the style of those heroic times?
>
> For nature brings not back the mastodon,
>
> Nor we those times; and why should any man
>
> Remodel models? These twelve books of mine
>
> Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth…
>
> (Tennyson "Epic," 35-40)

Not only does the explanation that Hall offers in this passage once more overly blame the poem's failure on its "style," but his comparison to Homer, and his description of the

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faulty verse as "heroic" clearly link these flaws of style with the work's strict adherence to epic conventions. Given the emphasis already placed on the genre of Hall's unsatisfactory foray into Arthurian lore by the title of the frame and by Francis' first reference to Hall's poem as "his epic," it is difficult to imagine a more explicit illustration of a poet's growing discomfort with classical models (Tennyson, "Epic" 28).

At first glance, this attitude seems difficult to reconcile with the habitual reverence for tradition that can be seen both in the way Tennyson uses classical themes and allusions throughout his work and in many of the biographical anecdotes related by his son in *Memoirs*. Furthermore the apparent dismissal of epic seems at odds with the classical education which introduced him to the "heroic" verse of Homer, Virgil and their followers as the highest form of poetry (Sugimura 163). Nor would a simple disenchantment with "the style of those heroic times" explain the clear, if apparently paradoxical, desire to revive the form that so many critics see lurking behind the poem's portrayal of epic as a lifeless although impressive artifact (Tennyson, "Epic" 35; Sugimura 164; Tucker 442-444; Culver 60). On the other hand, if this view of epic were the result of a more widespread suspicion about the effect of any attempt to classify an artist's work, Tennyson's conflicted attitude would make perfect sense. In that case, the poet's deep admiration for the scope and grandeur of the "heroic" tradition might well have been at odds with his sense that any category as strictly defined as the classical epic, with all its specific tropes and formulae, is ultimately bound to paralyze and stifle creative talent. The inevitable result of such a clash in values would be an ambivalence

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towards the form in question, very much like that expressed by the author's fictional counterpart in "The Epic."

For it does seem likely that Hall, who provides most of the direct commentary about the problem of writing an epic in the nineteenth century, serves as a kind of alter-ego for Tennyson. Naturally, we cannot simply equate Tennyson's point of view with Hall's, any more than with Ulysses' or the Lady of Shalott's. Nonetheless, as I have shown, there is good evidence that Tennyson identified with these figures, though their outward character and circumstances did not resembled his own. Surely, when he actually attributes his own Arthurian fragment to the character of a contemporary poet of his own approximate age and social position, he not only allows but actively invites the reader to draw a comparison. Moreover, the attitude suggested by Hall's comment is perfectly consistent both with the views that Tennyson expresses elsewhere and with those voiced by the other characters in the frame including the first person narrator. This narrator disagrees with Hall's assertion that his poem is worthless, not because he believes that the "style of those heroic times" is, in fact, viable, but, on the contrary, because "some modern touches here and there/ redeemed it from the charge of nothingness" (Tennyson, "Epic" 35, 329-330). In other words, the poem's narrator accepts Hall's "epic" from the general lifelessness associated with the genre, only because he believes that it does depart from the conventions associated with "heroic" verse enough to make it something new. This point is further underlined by the conclusion of the frame, the half-waking, sunrise dream that follows the enclosed poem and serves as an extension of Hall's fragment. This dream actually brings King Arthur

back to life by envisioning him "as a modern gentleman," which further suggests that the only way to revive the ancient legend is by literally presenting it in contemporary garb (Tennyson, "Epic" 345).

And yet, although this solution apparently serves well enough in context, it does not seem to completely satisfy Tennyson. The poet, after all, continued to revise, restructure, and experiment with the Arthurian project first suggested by this fragment for most of his long career. This continuous expansion, in itself, might only indicate the depth and persistence of his interest in poem's subject. Tennyson's deliberate presentation of "Morte d'Arthur" as the last remainder of a failed project, however, implies that he did indeed feel there was something inadequate about this first foray into what would become *The Idylls of the King*. This, in turn, makes his subsequent versions of the poem seem, at least in part, like efforts to correct this lack. The fact that in the completed *Idylls* Tennyson returns to the same twelve book structure that he specified for Hall's failed "epic" only reinforces the idea that the poem's various incarnations are on some level attempts to fulfill the original "heroic" vision glimpsed in that first abortive project.[59]

In many ways, Tennyson's need to find a more definitive means of fulfilling the promise suggested by "Morte d'Arthur" and its frame is only to be expected. Apart from anything else, the series of transformations that the poem undergoes in order to produce this hopeful resolution -- from the hypothetical epic originally conceived and written by

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[59] Hallam Tennyson explicitly points out this later connection, in his discussion of his father's gradual development of the *Idylls* (Memoirs II. 126).

Hall, the actual fragment-poem that remains after he abandons his first design, to the dream-vision inspired by that fragment -- bears an uncomfortably distinct resemblance to the development of Keats' *Hyperion* poems. All the information we have about the composition of *Hyperion*: *A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion* suggests that Keats, like Hall, initially set out to write an "epic," but became disenchanted with the form as the work progressed. Keats, of course, abandoned his project with the poem still conspicuously incomplete, rather than burning a completed work, but the result in both cases is very much what the first *Hyperion's* subtitle declares it: "a fragment." Although Tennyson does not label his piece quite so explicitly, he is every bit as careful to highlight the poem's unfinished status. "Morte d'Arthur" could easily stand as a complete work in a volume of short poems, many of which focus on a single episode in the story of an established literary figure. And yet, Tennyson takes pains to frame it as one small surviving piece of a longer work, first written, and then burnt, by his fictional counterpart.

One such similarity might be no more than coincidence. In this case, however, the two works are also tied together by the fact that both "fragments" undergo a further shift into the realm of dream vision. When Keats refigured *Hyperion: A Fragment* as *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* his primary change was not to complete, or even add to, the poem's narrative, but to frame it as a first-person narrator's dream. As in the earlier version, he uses a subtitle to call attention to the shift in modes, explicitly transforming "a fragment" into "a dream." In the final section of Tennyson's frame poem, Hall's epic fragment goes through an all but identical transformation, when the remnant of the burnt

"King Arthur" is similarly revived in form of the first-person narrator's dream. While it is possible to read this concluding dream of Arthur's return separately from Hall's poem, the way that the narrator introduces it – "*yet* in sleep, I seemed/ to sail…" – implies that his vision is a continuation of what went before (Tennyson "The Epic" 339-340, emphasis mine). Furthermore, fact that Tennyson had earlier identified "Morte d'Arthur" as coming from the *eleventh* of Hall's original twelve books, although the fragment deals with Arthur's death, suggests that some such continuation of the story was always part of the poet's design. Several critics have already offered readings of the narrator's dream as an extension of Hall's poem and even pointed out the redemptive quality in the way that this extension allows the narrator to share the function of the poet (Klein 232-234; Sugimura 165). They do not, however, associate the continuation of the poem with a particular literary tradition. Nonetheless, there are some indications that Tennyson deliberately intended to mark the conclusion of "The Epic" as a kind of dream vision. Just as he originally relied on cues within the narrative frame in order to establish "Morte d'Arthur" as a fragment, he uses specific words and phrases within the tale itself to signal the shift to dream vision. For instance, Tennyson begins his description of the king's return with the slightly archaic "Methought" (Tennyson, "Epic" 343). Not only is this word, which Tennyson rarely used elsewhere in his writing, tied to a formula for the narration of dreams in poetry that dates back to Shakespeare and Milton; it is also the very word that Keats uses to introduce *his* narrator's vision in *The Fall of Hyperion* (Cook 43, 38, 42). In light of all these separate parallels, it seems likely that, at the very

least, the forms in which the two works were presented were influenced by similar concerns.

These similarities would be natural enough if both poets were confronting the same ambivalence towards clearly established genres as embodied by the classical epic with its strict reliance on ancient forms and formulae. An emphasis on a work's fragmentary nature and its subsequent conversion into a dream vision might well function as a way of combating such generic limitations. Individually, both of the forms in question may indeed be associated with a poetic tradition specific enough to be considered a genre in its own right. Even taken separately, however, neither type of poem is as firmly distinguished from other literary categories as the epic, with its unmistakable stylistic markers and clearly delineated themes. A fragment after all is defined by its incompletion. Therefore, if it can be said to constitute a distinct class of poetry, it is one which implicitly looks beyond its own borders by highlighting its unfinished status. Labeling a poem a fragment inevitably encourages the reader to speculate about what would be necessary to make the existing text "whole," drawing his or her attention to what is not there and so cannot be defined. It also calls attention to the possibility of future revision and change by holding out the unspoken potential of a 'finished' work to come. Likewise dreams, while they may be associated with a particular set of poetic conventions, are also fluid and ephemeral. The inherently amorphous quality of dreams themselves makes any literary form that centers on them far less likely to seem rigid or inflexible. Combining the dream vision with the fragment-poem serves to distance the work from any one particular literary category even more

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effectively. The deliberate shift in modes in itself associates the poem simultaneously with multiple traditions. Finally, for late eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers, such as Keats and Tennyson, this particular series of transformations also had the potential to evoke such recent icons of poetic freedom and innovation as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan: A Vision in a Dream," which also presents itself at once as both a fragment poem and a dream-vision. Given all these factors, it is small wonder that both Keats and Tennyson chose to call on this combination of generic cues in response to the dilemma posed by epic in a period where overt classification was associated with artistic paralysis and death.

As discussed in the previous chapter, however, Tennyson's anxieties about identity were likely to make him especially sensitive not only to generic labels but also to any significant resemblance between his own work and his predecessors. Moreover, numerous unflattering comparisons to Keats in the reviews of his early work gave him reason to be especially wary of associating himself with the romantic poet. Even if no other considerations influenced Tennyson to expand on "Morte d'Arthur," therefore, he would have had ample reason to revise the work. The strategy suggested by "The Epic" for dealing with the constraints imposed by genre, namely transforming the work in question from an epic, to a fragment, to a dream vision, is simply too close to the one that Keats used to confront the problem of working with classical forms in his *Hyperion* poems for it to function successfully as means of deflecting Tennyson's fears about the work's originality.

Furthermore, this Keatsian method of evading conventional labels seems to at least discourage, if not actually preclude, narrative. Certainly, in the case of *Hyperion*, it does nothing to either expand on or resolve the abruptly truncated plot. Nor does this appear to be a mere fluke. Although none of Keats' other works breaks off quite as dramatically as *Hyperion* or *The Fall of Hyperion,* almost all of the narrative poems from the later part of his career are marked, in one way or another, by a similar sense of indeterminacy and irresolution. For example, both *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia* are ostensibly complete. Even so, neither the former, with its final image of the lovers fleeing through the snowstorm towards an unknown fate, nor the later*,* with its radically divided sympathies, and sudden if not unexpected termination in the death of both protagonists, offers a much more conclusive ending than the avowedly unfinished work (Stillinger 213-215; Parker 168-170). Indeed, as Keats' ideal develops more and more into that of the indefinable "chameleon" poet, his poems tend to turn away from narrative altogether. Most often, these later works portray fulfillment, not as the climax or conclusion of a plot, but, like the odes, as an all too brief instant of lyric rapture (Stillinger 219-221; Parker 173-178). In light of the emphasis on fluidity and ineffability involved in relinquishing a stable identity to become "everything and nothing," this shift makes perfect sense; but it also makes the approach ill-suited to any work that is focused specifically on narrative. Tennyson's own experiments with the solution seem to bear this out. For example, the glimpse of Arthur that the narrator's dream offers at the end of Tennyson's "Epic" is necessarily, fleeting and impressionistic (Klein 629-633). In Ann Klein's words "while the vitality is clear the meaning is vague"

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(633). The result, while vivid and hopeful, is an essentially different project from the one that Hall first contemplated and Tennyson ultimately aspired to.

<center>"New things and Old Cotwisted": Merlin, Gareth, and the way into</center>

<center>Camelot</center>

The second book in the final, twelve-part *Idyll*s, which Tennyson also presents as the first fully realized "quest" in his cycle, may hint at an alternative solution. From the beginning, "Gareth and Lynette" seems to invite a self-reflexive reading. Even the gateway through which the hero passes into Arthur's realm, with its "living" depictions of the kingdom's history, appears like a perfect metaphor for what Tennyson himself hopes to accomplish. In fact, in many ways, the gate's ability to intertwine "New things and old… as if Time/ Were nothing" seems almost like a direct response to the concerns raised by Hall's failed Arthurian epic (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:222-223). That work, after all, was rendered "nothing" in its author's eyes by its too-strict adherence to the trappings of a lifeless past (Tennyson "Epic" 31, 330). Even more importantly, what tentative solutions the early poem offers for this sense of emptiness all hinge on a similar ability to mingle "new things and old." The narrator's speculation, after hearing the surviving fragment of Hall's work, that "some modern touches here and there redeemed it from the charge of nothingness" certainly implies that it is by adding something new -- those "modern touches"-- to the ancient, and essentially extinct form of his "epic" that Hall prevents it from becoming "nothing" (Tennyson, "Epic" 329-330). Likewise, the narrator's dream, featuring a resurrected "King Arthur, like a modern gentlemen" appears to revitalize the central character by placing him in a contemporary setting

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(Tennyson, "Epic" 345). Hall's "modern touches," however, are insufficient to satisfy the poet himself as to the project's viability; and while the narrator's dream may give "life" to its main figure by introducing him into the "modern" world, it appears to evade the "nothingness" that threatens Hall's epic only by sacrificing the scope and narrative continuity of the initial project. Merlin's gateway, on the other hand, not only manages to escape the nullifying effects of time that Hall laments but actually reverses them. Unlike the poem that its creator discards as "nothing" because it is too deeply embedded in a dead past, we are told that Merlin's gate makes "time…nothing" through its skillful combination of "new things and old" (Tennyson, *Idylls* 2:223-224).

In addition to these echoes surrounding the ideas of time and nothingness, several other factors link the gate if not specifically with Hall's imagined project then at least with the more general ambition to create an Arthurian epic. The subject depicted on the gateway, "Arthur's wars," is just the sort of large-scale military narrative traditionally associated with the epic form (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 221). There may even be some indications that, like the classical epic Hall abandons, as well as the *Idylls* that Tennyson eventually completes, this gate presents its story in twelve parts. Although we are never told explicitly how many scenes the gate in question shows, at the end of the preceding idyll, two hundred fifty lines before we see this gate, Tennyson goes out of his way to specify that "Arthurs' war's" consisted of "twelve great battles," (Tennyson, *Idylls* I:517). Given the proximity of this detail to the description of the gate that shows those wars, it seems only natural for a careful reader to incorporate it into their picture of the "living gateway." Tennyson may not actually tell us, in so many words, that Merlin's

gate presents a twelve part narrative, but the suggestion that it does seems clear; and there is good reason to believe that Tennyson, with his classical education, consistently associated such a form with epic. In this way, Tennyson creates an implicit connection between the classical traditions that he so valued and the gate that seems to represent his own work, without marking either gate or work clearly enough to explicitly define or label it.

Similarly, the way the scenes of martial valor shown by the gate are preceded and introduced by that powerful and benevolent female presence, the Lady of the Lake, recalls the traditional invocation to the muse. Of course no architectural work can have a literal invocation. Likewise, though it is possible see many of the qualities of a classical muse in the Lady of the Lake, who is also a powerful, and possibly immortal woman with a beautiful voice and the ability to bestow gifts on the worthy, the resemblance is far too general and amorphous to support any case for clear, one to one correspondence between the two (Tennyson *Idylls* I: 290). Like the idea that gate's tale of "Arthur's wars" is a twelve part narrative, the notion that it is presided over by a sort of Muse is only a suggestion. But, nonetheless, it is one that, particularly in conjunction with the other aspects I have mentioned, is distinctive enough to appear significant for a reader attentive to generic signals.

In fact, I believe that it is this very quality -- the ability to imply the presence of generic markers without ever actually using them outright -- that forms the most crucial the difference between Hall's work and Merlin's, and perhaps, ultimately, Tennyson's own. With its military theme, and its oblique hints of a twelve part structure and a

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muse-like presence, the "living gate" carries enough subtle resonances with the classical

epic to evoke the sense of grandeur and illustrious tradition that Tennyson associated

with that genre. At the same time, it avoids actually using any of these markers directly

enough to place it definitively within the reach of that, or any other, confining label. The

gate is therefore able to partake of "the fashion of those heroic times" in a way that the

earlier dream-vision of "Arthur as a modern gentleman" does not, without becoming a

mere artifact of those times, the way that Hall's overtly labeled "epic" does

(Tennyson, "Epic" 35, 345). Rather, it "co-twists" these "old things" with "new" ones,

intertwining innovation and tradition. This combination gives the work a semblance of

life that makes "time/… nothing," and enables it to defy the paralyzing effects of age

that afflict works such as Hall's whose clear genre links them with the style of a specific

period (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:22-223). For while there is every indication that Merlin's

gate is, in some sense, as much a descendant of Hall's failed "epic" as the *Idylls*

themselves are, it is never threatened with the sort of lifeless rigidity of form that leads

Hall to burn his work. On the contrary, a sense of life and motion seem to be the gate's

most prominent characteristic. As Gareth and his companions study the "figures" on the

gate, we are told that they appear "to move, seethe, twine and curl…" in such a way that

the young knight's friends declare "the gateway is alive," (Tennyson, *Idylls* 2:230-231).

And surely, there can be no better emblem for the work that Tennyson himself aspired to

create in the *Idylls* than such a living depiction of Arthur's career—a depiction which

incorporates the grandeur of an epic without ever directly invoking the genre, let alone

defining itself as part of it. The ability to "co-twist" "new things and old," which seems

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so crucial to the gate's creation also seems like an ideal description of Tennyson's efforts to integrate his own, original contributions to Arthurian lore and the keen awareness of contemporary concerns that shaped them with his knowledge of, and admiration for, the long line of great works that inspired him.

Aside from the almost uncanny aptness of the parallel, the poem's text seems to invite this reading of the gate as a sort ideal symbol for the work itself. Merlin's gate is, after all, the first clear glimpse of Camelot that the poem's readers, as well as Gareth and his companions, are given. As such, it becomes a kind of introduction to the realm beyond it. Furthermore, Tennyson's description of the gate echoes Gareth's account of the city as a whole as he approaches it so distinctly that it seems almost like a representation of the kingdom in microcosm. We are told, for instance, that Merlin's gateway is covered in "weird devices" that "move and seethe and twine and curl," while Gareth speaks of Camelot as "*moving weirdly* in the mist," (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 221, 230, 241; emphasis mine). Even more than a fitting emblem for and introduction to Arthur's kingdom, however, Merlin's gateway is quite literally and concretely the way into Camelot. This structure, with its living narrative and its ability to "cotwist new things and old," is the means by which one enters Arthur's realm (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 222).

Perhaps most importantly of all, numerous links exist both in the *Idylls* and elsewhere between Merlin, who creates the living Arthurian narrative embodied by the gate, and Tennyson, who is attempting to give life to his own tales of Arthur through the *Idylls*. In a separate poem, "Merlin and the Gleam" Tennyson takes the unusual step of

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explicitly adopting the persona of the Arthurian magician in order to discuss his own artistic growth (Hallam Tennyson xii-xiii; Haight 550, 560-566). Within the *Idylls* themselves, his identification with the wizard is less explicit, but all the evidence suggests that it remains nearly as strong (Kaplan 286-288). Throughout the cycle, Merlin is repeatedly referred to as a "bard"-- a choice of words that implies a connection between the wizard and the poet (Kaplan 287). The fact that one such reference occurs not fifty lines after the description of the gate itself further suggests that the bond holds some particular significance for this section of the poem. Even the mediums in which the two "bards" work, as different as they appear at first glance, are linked by the fact Merlin's magical feats of architecture are accomplished through music, which, if no longer actually synonymous with poetry by Tennyson's period, had, since ancient times, been inextricably intertwined with it (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 272-273).[60] Taking all these facts together, the implication that Tennyson saw Merlin's "arts" as closely allied to his own poetic pursuits seems all but unavoidable.

This reading of Merlin as Tennyson's avatar within the *Idylls* lends particular significance to his presence near the gate at the beginning of "Gareth and Lynette." In the first place, it draws attention to the structure's "authorship" by the character whom Tennyson elsewhere portrays as a kind of fictional counterpart for himself. This supports the view that, on some level, the living gateway does indeed represent the larger poem's goals. Secondly, the fact that a figure with whom Tennyson so clearly identifies is

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[60] Tennyson also seems to be aware of this this link at other points in the *Idylls*. For example, the use of the word "charm" in "Merlin and Vivien," which I will discuss in more detail below, appears to take much significance from its origin in the Latin "carmen," which meant both song and poem.

waiting to greet Gareth on his arrival in the kingdom indicates that the young knight himself is also associated with the poet. Gareth is, after all, the only one of Arthur's knights that we see interacting directly with the mage. Merlin even seems to recognize him as a kind of kindred spirit. When Gareth responds to the wizard's first enigmatic speech by asking, angrily "Why mockest thou the stranger that hath been/ To thee fair-spoken?" Merlin answers, "Know ye not then the riddling of the Bards?" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 278-280). The construction of the question suggests surprise that Gareth is not more familiar with such "'Confusion, and illusion, and relation, /Elusion, and occasion, and evasion'…" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 280-282). This surprise makes perfect sense, if, as I theorize, the wizard identifies Gareth's own activities as a version of this same riddling. By the end of his speech Merlin makes this parallel explicit "I mock thee not but as thou mockest me," he tells the young knight (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 283). Gareth, abashed, takes this simply as recognition of his deception. It is that of course, but it is also a recognition whose phrasing specifically likens that deception to Merlin's own activities with their poetic overtones. In fact, almost everything about the exchange implies that Gareth, like Merlin, functions as a figure for the artist.

These connections, in turn, suggest that the trials the young knight undergoes in order to pass through Merlin's gateway, and the details of the adventures to which that gateway leads him, may hold a special significance for the structure of the *Idylls* as a whole. In particular, it does not seem like a coincidence that to find and enter Camelot, Gareth must first specifically relinquish his *name* and the noble station it represents. I have already discussed the reasons why I believe that Tennyson's ambivalence towards

names, which can be seen to varying degrees throughout his work, is closely related to if not directly reflective of his attitude towards genre. The parallel seems especially telling in Gareth's case, where questions of prestige and rank are openly concerned, and are being weighed explicitly against the dangers of confinement. Tennyson tells us that,

> …The Queen believed that when her son
>
> Beheld his only way to glory lead
>
> Low down through villain kitchen-vassalage,
>
> Her own true Gareth was too princely-proud
>
> To pass thereby; so should he rest with her,
>
> Closed in her castle from the sound of arms.
>
> (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:155-160)

To escape the stagnation of being "closed in" his mother's castle, Gareth must put aside his "princely-pride" in his rank and identity by going to Camelot anonymously as a servant. In many ways, the choice the young knight faces is essentially a more direct version of the dilemma that I have argued is implicit in "Ulysses." According to my reading, the "idle king" who narrates the earlier poem could only truly free himself from the sense of confinement that he laments by embarking on the inland quest Tiresias' shade prescribes in the *Odyssey* itself, because such a quest would mean traveling beyond the reach of his own fame (Tennyson, "Ulysses" 1). Likewise, Gareth can only escape the stifling limits of his mother's palace and carve out a narrative for himself by deliberately agreeing to renounce his name, and the privileged place in the social hierarchy that it represents. It is only by willingly submitting to such anonymity and the

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quite literal loss of status that it entails that Gareth can gain the freedom to find and enter Arthur's realm.

Of course, there are important differences between Ulysses' choice and Gareth's. Besides the obvious disparities in context, not the least of which involves the shift from an overtly classical theme to an Arthurian one, almost forty years separate the two works. This latter change alone is enough to account for the fact that Gareth's decision is so much more explicitly delineated than Ulysses'. It seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that what was only an amorphous discomfort with the notion of a fixed identity in the late eighteen twenties and early eighteen thirties, when Tennyson was writing and revising "Ulysses," had solidified into something far more focused and precise by the time he penned "Gareth and Lynette" in the eighteen seventies. Namely, that it had developed into a definite suspicion, not so much of identity in general, but specifically of literary classification. This might also explain the other, even more striking difference between the two. While Ulysses apparently cannot make the required sacrifice of "name and fame," Gareth willing embraces it. The young knight manages to give up his name and all the other external markers of his identity, without experiencing the total dissolution of self that threatened to bring many of Tennyson's early narrators to an impasse. On the contrary, he is able to retain the qualities he values in his name, even in the absence of a title or any other outwardly recognizable trappings of nobility. Gareth himself explains his willingness to submit to the anonymity that his mother makes a condition of his journey through his conviction that it is possible to maintain one's identity regardless of all external signs: "The thrall in person may be free in soul," he

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tells his mother (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 162). Such inner "freedom" is possible to preserve without the marks of rank which would usually distinguish a young man of Gareth's birth from a "thrall." Indeed, because his mother's injunction has, in effect, turned these signals of prestige into sources of restriction which will keep him "closed in the castle" if he clings to them, it is *only* in their absence that Gareth can cultivate the true "freedom of soul" which allows him to find and enter the living world of Camelot (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 160).

Once inside Arthur's realm, Gareth goes on to prove the assertion that he can, indeed, maintain the most essential aspects of his nobility, even after decisively giving up all its outward signals. Despite being "clad like [a tiller] of the soil," he has a core of innate dignity that is recognized and acknowledged both by Arthur himself and by Lancelot (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:178). The king, on hearing Gareth's request to serve in the kitchen, calls him a "'A goodly youth and worth a goodlier boon!'" suggesting that, despite the boy's ragged appearance, he senses a nature deserving of more outward prestige than his request would confer (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:440). Lancelot is even more explicit. "Or from sheep-cot or king's hall, the boy/ Is noblenatured," he tells Sir Kay, in their first conversation about Gareth (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 457458). This latter comment, in particular, makes it clear that he is reacting to more than some superficial flaw in the young knight's disguise. It implicitly acknowledges that, whatever private opinion Lancelot may have about Gareth's background, the "noble natured" boy is as likely to hail from a "sheep-cot" as a "king's hall." This does not read like the kind of claim about the boy's literal origins that indicates Lancelot has simply seen past his tattered

clothing to detect his birth. Rather, it suggests that his actual lineage is unimportant and that nobility rests instead in some innate aspect of one's "nature." These marks of outward recognition are only the least important signs that Gareth is able to retain his own essential character even when striped of his name and all other external markers of identity. Tennyson's description of his behavior provides even more telling evidence to this effect. He tells us outright that the young knight "wrought/all kind of service with a noble ease/ that graced the lowliest act in doing it" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 478-480). In other words, the innate worth of Gareth's identity not only remains intact, regardless of the outward circumstances of class and name; it is actually powerful enough to lend those circumstances a dignity equal to itself.

This general lesson is connected more specifically to Tennyson's own process of composition by the fact that some of the most conspicuous proofs of Gareth's innate nobility take the form of singing and story-telling. Both activities are distinctly reminiscent of the poet's pursuits. In particular, Tennyson tells us that Gareth uses various forms of music as a way to rise above the unworthy or vulgar aspects of his surroundings:

> …If their [his fellow servants'] talk were foul
>
> Then would he whistle rapid as any lark,
>
> Or carol some old roundelay, and so loud
>
> That first they mocked, but, after, reverenced him…
>
> (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 494-497)

Thus, by whistling or singing, Gareth is able to signal his unwillingness to join in the "foul talk" of his fellow knaves without bringing his own status into question by overtly separating himself from them. His songs allow him to avoid the unsavory gossip to which his outward loss of rank exposes him without either directly criticizing the other servants' conversation or literally shunning their company. Furthermore, like the seeds of "fruitful wit" scattered by the quintessential poet Tennyson describes in his early lyric of that title, which

> Where'er they fell…
>
> Like to the mother plant in semblance, grew
>
> A flower all gold…
>
> (Tennyson "The Poet" 22-24)

Gareth's music also has a salutary effect on those around him. Not only does Tennyson's emphasis on how loudly the young knight sings imply that his "roundelays" improve his immediate surroundings by drowning out unseemly talk when it occurs, but his listeners' progression from "mockery" to "reverence" further implies that he, like a true poet, has effected a lasting improvement in their taste.

In the next few lines we also learn of Gareth's penchant as a storyteller. Tennyson describes how he

> telling some prodigious tale
>
> Of knights,…held
>
> All in a gap-mouthed circle his good his mates
>
> Lying or sitting round him, idle hands,

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Charmed…"

It is not difficult to connect this image of Gareth holding his companions spellbound with knightly tales to the endeavors of the poet who is himself creating an Arthurian cycle. The use of the word "charmed," which ultimately derives from the Latin for both song and poem, also suggests that his tale has some connection with poets and poetry. Indeed, there may even be a faint hint that overt generic makers can disrupt the young knight's tale in much way that "The Epic" suggests they are able to halt the progress of Tennyson's own Arthurian narrative. At first glance, the comparison of Gareth's circle of rapt listeners upon Sir Kay's approach to "dead leaves" scattered by the wind may seem a far cry from the famous simile for the aftermath of battle that has marked epics from the *Iliad* onwards (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 503-505). Nonetheless, it is still interesting that Tennyson chooses this particular image, with its potential generic resonances, to describe the interruption of Gareth's story by the seneschal. Certainly, if Tennyson *did* have any such implication in mind, Sir Kay, the staunch upholder of traditional hierarchies and all their outward superficial markers, would be the ideal character to make the point. At the very least, the passage suggests enough parallels between Gareth's activities and Tennyson's to bolster the impression that that the young knight's struggle to maintain his sense of a "noble" self while shunning all external signals of class has some particular bearing on the poet's approach to his own work.

The importance of Gareth's anonymity to this task is underlined by the fact that he chooses to maintain it, even after the external constraints, which originally prompted

him to keep his identity a secret, are lifted. His reasons for wishing continue in the guise

of an unnamed kitchen knave are compelling enough to convince an initially reluctant

Arthur to agree his unusual request. His answers to the king's questions make it clear

that he is not motivated by any paradoxical desire to increase his public fame by the

effect of a sudden contrast. He does not wish to hide his origins merely so that "men

should wonder at" him, or "to be noised of" when they are revealed (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:

557-560). As Arthur's own questions imply, such a scheme would ultimately highlight,

rather than diminish, the importance of the outward marks of class and classification that

he is ostensibly relinquishing. Gareth's response to Arthur's doubts, however, satisfies

the king that this is not the reason for his request. Rather, his reply suggests just the

opposite motivation: "Let be my name until I make my name! / My deeds will speak…"

(Tennyson, Idylls II: 561-562). In other words, he wishes his status, the "name" that he

intends to make, to be determined solely by his own actions, the "deeds" that he hopes

will "speak," instead of by the external marks of rank and title. It seems that, during his

service as a knave Gareth has come to see such outward signals of class as unimportant.

If anything, his desire to avoid them suggests that he sees these signs, which are

arbitrarily inherited from an unchanging past, as impediments to the cultivation of the

true nobility that has nothing to do with exterior marks of status.

The numerous parallels between the young knight and the "bard," as well as the

prominent introduction of Merlin's gate, with its strong resemblance to Tennyson's own

project, all seem to encourage the reader to apply this message to the *Idylls* as a whole.

Therefore it seems reasonable to suppose that such a willing rejection of class markers--

in this case generic signals-- also forms an integral part of the author's search for Arthur's realm. In addition, this reading suggests that the poem itself may harbor a grander, more heroic character under the humble guise of pastoral romance implied by the term "idylls." Just as Gareth must hide his real lineage to keep from being stifled by the well-intentioned confines imposed by his mother, Tennyson's Arthurian cycle must avoid openly proclaiming its true roots in that "highest" class of poetry, the classical epic, in order to escape stagnation. Nonetheless, also like the knight whose adventures form this first tale of the round table, the work's real "noble" nature is perceptible to those who examine it closely, and judge it on its own terms, rather than by seeking to place it within an established hierarchy.

This interpretation would also explain why Tennyson resisted framing the poem more overtly as an epic despite the urgings of his contemporaries. As early as 1859, when only five of the twelve idylls that would eventually make up the work had been published, William Gladstone recognized their affinities with the genre and explicitly urged Tennyson to treat the subject according to the epic model. Early in his review Gladstone writes "The Arthurian Romance has every recommendation that should win its way to the homage of a great poet. It is national: it is Christian. It is also human in the in the largest and deepest sense; and, therefore though highly national it is also universal…" (Gladstone 250). As Amanda Hodgson points out in her article "'The Highest Poetry': Epic narrative in *The Earthly Paradise* and *Idylls of the King*," this description identifies the legend of King Arthur with precisely the qualities that Tennyson and his contemporaries considered necessary for an epic (341-342). The critic

goes on to add that he is "rather disposed to quarrel with the title of 'Idylls': for no diminutive can be adequate to the breath, vigour, and majesty which belong to the subjects, as well as the execution of the volume," suggesting that he sees the sort of grandeur usually associated with epic in the style as well as in the in the raw material of the poems (Gladstone 251). Later in the article he is even more specific

> The history of King Arthur is not an epic as it stands, but neither was the Cyclic song, of which the greatest of all epics, *The Iliad*, handles a part….Though the Arthurian Romance be no epic, it does not follow that no epic can be made from out of it. (Gladstone 260)

It is hard to imagine any more explicit call for an Arthurian poem in the "heroic" style rejected by Hall in Tennyson's initial frame for "Morte d'Arthur." Furthermore, Gladstone makes it clear that he sees Tennyson as the ideal person to undertake this project, and indeed believes that he has already begun it "…as the Laureate has evidently grasped the genuine law which makes man and not the acts of man the basis of epic song," he writes, "we should not be surprised were he hereafter to realize the great achievement towards which he seems to be feeling his way" (Gladstone 260). Even in the existing pieces, separate as they are, he claims to see "a moral unity and living relationship" which makes him confident enough to predict that the poet will "achieve on the basis he has chosen the structure of a full formed epic" (Gladstone 260). On the face of it, Gladstone's review seems like a definitive answer to the doubts about the viability of an Arthurian epic in the nineteenth century that Tennyson voiced in the frame he initially composed for "Morte d'Arthur." Clearly, some critics at least,

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were not only willing but eager to see "the fashion of those heroic times" revived (Tennyson, "Epic" 35).

Despite this encouragement, not only does Tennyson avoid directly courting or adopting the title of epic, but throughout his work on the cycle he continued to deny it actively. As late as 1886 Tennyson's friend Theodore Watts noted that "Tennyson disapproves of my referring to *The Idylls* as an epic," adding "he thinks the Idylls more original" (qtd. Sugimura 169). This emphasis on the originality of his composition as the reason for excluding it from the category of "epic" indicates that, to some extent, Tennyson continued to share Hall's concern that "nothing new" could be expressed if one adhered too closely to the classical model. Tennyson appears to be denying the title of epic, not through mere modesty, but because he was reluctant to limit his poem by placing it within reach of what Gladstone called "the severe laws of that lofty and inexorable class of poems," (260). Even his deliberate spelling of "idylls," with two "l"s rather than the usual one, reads like an attempt to suggest that his composition is something so new that no adequate label exists, and that even the most applicable existing label must be altered to differentiate his poem from others in that category (Sugimura 169).

And yet, although Tennyson refused to classify his Arthurian project according to any established label, including epic, there are also strong indications that he did not wish to separate his the work from that tradition altogether. The very fact that such explicit protestations about the poem's genre were necessary shows that Gladstone was not the only critic to see distinct traces of classical epic in this Arthurian cycle.

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Tennyson's decision to compose the poem in blank verse seems like one such cue. As I established in my discussion of "Ulysses," there is every reason to believe that Tennyson himself associated that meter, more than any other, with the epic tradition. His decision to use it here, in a series of long narrative poems, cannot help but suggest a link to the genre. Likewise, his return to a twelve book structure ties the *Idylls* to such quintessentially "epic" works as *Paradise Lost* and the *Aeneid*, as well as to the initial design for an avowedly "heroic" poem glanced at Hall's "epic." In many ways, Tennyson's return to the very format of the poem that he rejected as obsolete in the frame of "Morte d'Arthur" seems almost like a declaration that, with his final version of the *Idylls*, the poet finally feels that he has found a solution to the problem posed by his fictional counterpart in "The Epic." I suggest that he chooses to introduce this completed project with a tale that centers around the concealment of a noble name and lineage because, like Gareth, the poem has deliberately laid aside the prestigious title that most accurately reflects its true origins. The fate of Hall's original attempt at an Arthurian epic shows that, in Tennyson's mind, clinging too closely to such established systems of classification would only mean stagnation. To avoid this, the poem not only strips itself of the title, but also of the most prominent external markers of that title— such unambiguous generic signals as for instance the invocation to the muse or the epic catalogue. In much the same way, Gareth renounces all the outward signs of his "true" station to escape confinement in his mother's castle.

The nature of the task that Gareth is given when the time finally does come for him to prove himself by going on a knightly quest fits this interpretation almost

uncannily well. Like his initial entry into Camelot, the quest depends upon his ability to

fight narrowly-defined labels, this time in a way directly connected with the idea of

poetic classification. The first half of his dual challenge consists of defeating a series of

opponents who attempt to establish their own rank and identities by imposing a rigid,

and readily recognizable, generic scheme on the world around them. The knights that

Gareth must face both define themselves and impose their will on others by enacting, not

an epic, but a kind of miniature Spenserian allegory. When Lynnette is first asked to

describe the men who have taken her sister captive, she replies that they are "of…the

fashion of… old knight errantry" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 614). Ostensibly she is referring

to their wandering tendencies and lack of allegiance to a particular sovereign.

Nonetheless, her words also seem like an almost perfect description of the kind of

medieval verse-romance that Tennyson drew on for his source material. The next few

lines confirm the possibility of such generic overtones in Lynette's words.

> Three of these…
> Proud in their fantasy call themselves the Day,
> Morning-Star, Noon-Sun, and Evening-Star…
> The fourth, who always rideth armed in black…
> Names himself the Night and oftener Death,
> And wears a helmet mounted with a skull,
> And bears a skeleton figured on his arms

To show that who may slay or scape the three,

Slain by himself, shall enter endless night.

(Tennyson,

Idylls II: 617-627)

Her account, complete with a clear interpretive gloss, places Gareth's foes firmly within

the realm of allegory. Lynnette herself actually applies this term to their arrangement

more than once as the poem progresses (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1059; 1169). Not every

allegory is Spenserian, of course, but in this case the Arthurian setting and the mention

of "old knight errantry" make the author of *The Faerie Queene* a natural point of

reference. Furthermore Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was one of Tennyson's acknowledged

sources for the *Idylls*. This fact would make the category associated with that work at

least as apt as classical epic to be affixed to Tennyson's own poem and therefore just as

likely to threaten the *Idylls* with the lifelessness that is the consequence of such clearly

defined categories.[61]

Indeed, Tennyson may actually have considered this possibility. At the very

outset, even before composing "The Epic" and "Morte d'Arthur" the poet seems to have

considered adopting the Spenserian model quite directly for his own Arthurian project

(Culver 52). Later, he would claim that it was the overwhelming grief of his friend

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[61] As I mentioned in my discussion of the "Lady of Shallot," although a good argument can be made that *The Faerie Queen* itself is a romance in the broadest sense, and is, in many ways, as resistant to definition as the *Idylls* themselves, there is also some reason to believe that Tennyson may have associated the poem both with a particular, narrowly defined type of romance, and with his immediate predecessor's use of that tradition.

Hallam's death which caused him to abandon this initial scheme for a large-scale, cohesive allegory on King Arthur in favor of the more fragmentary approach that eventually formed the *Idylls* (Culver 52-53). Undoubtedly, the news of his friend's death did have a profound effect on Tennyson's rethinking of his Arthurian project, as it did on almost all his compositions from this period, particularly given the coincidence of Arthur Hallam's name. The fact that it is easy to see highly personal overtones in "Morte d'Arthur," however, does not in itself indicate that biographical factors were solely or even primarily responsible for the shift in modes that this piece seems to represent (Culver 6061).

If anything, the evidence points to very different motives for the change. Whatever his later comments may suggest, at the time he composed "Morte d'Arthur," Tennyson deliberately chose to frame the poem as the work of an author who, like himself, pointedly decided to forgo a longer, and more clearly unified treatment of the Arthurian legend. Even given the differences between the allegorical project that Tennyson initially seems to have contemplated and the "Homeric" epic destroyed by his fictional counterpart, Hall, the parallels between the two are impossible to ignore. In the latter case we are explicitly told that the project was abandoned, not because of despair, general disillusionment or any emotional reaction that could be traced to a private loss on its author's part, but because of a specific artistic principle (Tennyson, "The Epic," 30-39). Hall destroyed his poem because he felt that its style adhered too closely to the ancient traditions associated with the epic genre to be viable in his own time. Naturally, it is impossible to be certain that the parallels between Hall's project and Tennyson's

own extend to their reasons for abandoning their respective schemes. Nonetheless, the fictional poet's comments about the unsuitability of antiquated forms for contemporary writers would surely be just as applicable to a Spenserian allegory, with its highly defined structure and deliberate archaisms, as to the classical models more directly under discussion in the passage. All of this suggests that artistic concerns about the constraints imposed by genre were at least as instrumental in convincing Tennyson to give up his initial concept for an Arthurian allegory as his grief over Hallam's death.

In light of this, it does not seem coincidental that, when Tennyson finally returns to the project of an extended Arthurian narrative in the twelve book *Idylls,* he chooses to begin his tale with the story of a knight who must ultimately prove himself by overcoming a series of opponents who present themselves as just such an allegory. The literary overtones inherent in this arrangement seem to be yet one more factor encouraging the reader to draw parallels between Gareth's adventures and author's process of composition. The fact that their scheme is specifically based on a genre that Tennyson had openly considered and rejected as a model for his own work only strengthens this impression. Following this reading to its logical conclusion further suggests that grappling with such established categories is an integral part of both the young knight's endeavors and the poet's own. Just as Tennyson seems at pains to avoid associating his work directly with any existing generic formula or label, almost every stage of Gareth's quest is marked by some type of resistance to rigid systems of classification. The initial period of trial that requires him to give up all external signals of his own rank leads him immediately to the task of defeating the hostile knights'

clearly defined allegory. Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, in the process of carrying out this second mission, Gareth must also prove his own worth to a doubtful audience, without compromising the anonymity he had previously pledged to maintain by resorting to the standard marks of class through which such concepts are traditionally conveyed.

For overcoming the knights who have taken Lynnette's sister, Lyonors, prisoner is only half of what Gareth must accomplish in the course if his quest. He also has to conquer the prejudices of the very lady on whose behalf he challenges them. These prejudices are rooted in the same kind of inflexible structures of definition that the rogue knights are trying to enforce. Although Lynette is adamantly opposed their allegorical scheme, it soon becomes clear that she subscribes to the same basic rules of class and hierarchy that shape their "parable." Indeed, to some extent, her ready recognition and interpretation of their arrangement, in itself, suggests this. Even more telling, her attitude throughout the idyll is marked by an excessive concern with rank and lineage no less narrowly defined than the plan that her enemies are trying to impose. The first thing that Lynnette tells the king after her name, before she even describes her plight, is that she is "noble" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II.592). She goes on to repeat this assertion of her family's high position at least three more times in the course of her journey with Gareth (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:592, 594, 845, 1136). A similar concern for status seems to be the motive for her wish to fetch only Lancelot, and no other knight, from Arthur's court. She asks for him, not simply because of his great skill in battle but because he is the king's "chief man" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 604). This reason for her request is no mere casual

matter, mentioned in passing. She repeats the phrase almost exactly in her distress when

Arthur allows Gareth to undertake the quest instead. "I asked for thy chief knight/ And

thou hast given me but a kitchen-knave," she says, deliberately contrasting her

admiration for Lancelot's high standing with her contempt for Gareth's apparently

humble station (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 642-643).

The reappearance of the "weird white gate," which Lynnette passes as she flees

the hall in shame a few lines later, seems to hint at both the nature of her mistake and its

connection to Tennyson's own poetic endeavors (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:648). At first

glance, this detail might seem almost out of place, since Tennyson must then double

back to describe the hall itself. The apparent incongruity suggests that the author had

some particular reason for drawing the reader's attention to the structure when he does.

More than any other attribute, Tennyson's initial picture of the gateway emphasizes the

sense of fluidity and motion that makes its images appear "alive" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:

231). It is no great leap to connect this ever-shifting, amorphous quality, which amounts

to a sort of indefinability, with an ability to operate outside the boundaries imposed by

traditional definitions. Other details from the passage, which introduces Merlin's

gateway at the beginning of the idyll, also lend themselves this interpretation. The very

first thing that the reader is told about the entrance is that "there was no gate like it under

heaven"

(Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 209). This assertion of absolute uniqueness places Merlin's

gateway outside of any established framework. Likewise, the intertwining of "new

things and old" that I argue is so vital to the gate's construction implies that it is capable,

not only of bridging diametrically opposed categories, but of "co-twisting" their elements so thoroughly that the distinctions between them are actually blurred (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:222).

This propensity for dispensing with fixed definitions, which seems to mark nearly every aspect of the "weird white gate," makes the structure's reappearance here a pointed reminder of exactly why Lynette's immediate class-based reaction to Gareth is so misplaced (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:648). Like the allegorical arrangement imposed by her enemies, her response is rooted in a view of the social order that depends on precisely sort of absolute inflexible labels whose existence Merlin's creation with its defiance of all such clear-cut categories seems designed to refute. Moreover, the self-reflexive quality that I pointed out in my earlier discussion of the gateway gives this apparently minor detail a significance it might not otherwise seem to have. It suggests that Tennyson's conception of "the weird white gate" is intimately bound up with his vision for his own work in the twelve book *Idylls*. This not only highlights the structure's importance, drawing the reader's attention to even this passing mention of it as a possible commentary on Lynette's actions; it also implicitly connects those actions and the hypersensitivity to external marks of status that they represent back to the process of poetic composition.

Lynette's excessive concern with labels and hierarchies is, of course, most directly expressed in her treatment of Gareth. Her taunts about his status as a "knave" and his response to her insults are one of the central themes around which the tale is structured. Crucially, Gareth overcomes Lynnette's initial scorn, not with a revelation of

his own impressive lineage, but by conducting himself according to a code of nobility that has nothing to do with birth. I believe that his determination to prove himself to her without resorting to inherited systems of rank is as vital an aspect of his trial as the courtesy and courage that he shows in the process. In the first place, by following through on his previously expressed intention to keep his true identity secret even in the face of Lynette's scorn, Gareth once more demonstrates his willingness to keep his commitments despite all temptations to the contrary. Even more, his steadfastness underlines the importance of the ideals that originally prompted his commitment to anonymity.

When Gareth asks Arthur's permission to remain in the guise of a servant until he has succeeded in his first quest, the explanation which convinces the king to grant his odd request suggests that the young knight is motivated by a desire to shape his identity solely through his own actions, rather than by relying on the name and legacy passed down by his family. This desire implies that, although Gareth is described as being "princely proud" at the beginning of the idyll, by the time that embarks on his first knightly mission, he has not only come to see "nobility" as a quality that can be cultivated without such hereditary marks of status, but he has also come see arbitrary class distinctions as an entirely inadequate measure of worth (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 158). The fact that Arthur endorsees this motive by consenting to Gareth's unusual plan indicates that his new conception of nobility is a worthwhile characteristic that the king is willing to take exceptional measures to encourage in his knights. The lengths to which "proud" Gareth goes in order to maintain his disguise, enduring Lynnette's unmerited

abuse, further underlines just what a central role the rejection of traditional hierarchies that seems to motivate his secrecy plays in his ambition to become a worthy knight of Camelot. Moreover, Lynnette's constant class-based insults serve as a way to keep his earlier decision to relinquish his rank actively before the reader as a crucial aspect of his quest. Without these continual reminders, his Gareth's initial sacrifice might fade into the background as he is called to face more direct, external conflicts. Not that these two challenges are, by any means unrelated. I have already observed the symmetry in the fact that Gareth's opponents define themselves according to precisely the sort of rigid system from which the young knight's anonymity frees him. This direct opposition in their approaches towards identity seems to encourage the reader to see Gareth's triumph over the knights who form "the parable of day" as one more poof of the superiority of his approach to the kind of inflexible scheme of definition adopted by his enemies.

In addition to the symbolism already implicit in this aspect of the young knight's quest, it is through his successful confrontations with the rogue knights that Gareth is able to overcome Lynette's class based assumptions. She herself explicitly makes the connection between his prowess in battle and her view of his status. After his confrontation with the first brother she tells him, "Methought…/knave, when I watch'd thee striking on the bridge/ The savor of thy kitchen came upon me a little faintlier" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 966-969). This statement directly links Gareth's victory over the knight costumed as the "morning star" with her own ability to overlook the outward signs that brand him as a "knave." Furthermore, it is only after he has also defeated both the "Noon-sun" and the "Evening-star" collapsing the entire "parable of day" that

Lynette finally abandons her attempts to place Gareth within a traditional hierarchy and the contempt of his low station that results from it altogether.

It is after this third victory that, for the first time, Lynette invites Gareth to ride beside her rather than follow behind, giving up the physical distance that she has until then insisted upon maintaining as a visible sign of her class superiority (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1128). Moreover, the speech with which she accompanies this invitation suggests that the gesture represents more than a simple elevation of her companion to a higher status within the same fixed system of classification that led to her original, erroneous judgment of him. She freely admits that the interpretive categories she is familiar with are inadequate to make sense of the young knight's actions

Sir—and, good faith, I fain had added—Knight,

But that I heard the call thyself a knave—

…For thou hast ever answer'd courteously,

And wholly bold thou art, and meek withal

As any of Arthur's best… (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1133-1140)

By conducting himself according to a code of "noble" behavior that Lynette had, until then, associated only with a strictly defined, inherited social class, without giving up the humble role he has adopted, Gareth does more than simply persuade Lynette of his own worth independent of any family title. He also forces her to question the validity of the established hierarchy that she has, until that point, taken for granted. In the new respect for this "knave" that Lynette shows by addressing him as "sir," and in her uncertainty as to whether he *is* actually "knight" or "knave," one can see the blurring of previously

unquestionable distinctions. In some ways, even her admission of the extent to which

Gareth bewilders her is, implicitly, an admission of the shortcomings in the traditional

class system. This system, with its rigid categories, gives her no adequate way to

understand Gareth. Almost as if to underline this point, she actually offers the resulting

confusion as a part of the explanation for her earlier harsh treatment of him. "Thou.... /

Hast maz'd my wit. I marvel what thou art," she says, by way of apology for her

behavior (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1140-1141). This sentiment clearly puts words to her

realization that she cannot define Gareth, and suggests that her earlier, unsuccessful

attempts to do so were at the root of the unkind attitude she has now come to regret.

Indeed, the very fact that the proud Lynette feels the need to apologize to a young man

who she still believes to be a servant is evidence that Gareth's victory has caused a

fundamental change in her thinking. The profound effect that his actions have on

Lynnette suggests that, in addition to proving his own merit,

Gareth's dedication to the concept of nobility as a quality unrelated to the standard ideas

of class also plays a crucial role in educating his companion.

It is directly in the wake of Gareth's victory and the resulting change in Lynette's

perceptions indicated by her speech that the ancient drawing in the hermit's cave, which

serves as the source of the rogue knights' allegory, comes to light. By winning his way

to shelter and discovering the origin of his opponents' scheme, Gareth reveals both the

essentially derivative nature of their "pageant" and the emptiness of their gesture in

adopting it. When she views the figures on the wall, Lynnette herself states

Yon four fools have sucked their allegory

From these damp walls, and taken but the

form… (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1169-70).

This statement implies that upon seeing the drawings she recognizes both the lack of

originality inherent in her foes' arrangement and its meaninglessness once it has been

stripped of its original context. This recognition coincides exactly with the newfound

willingness to let go of the class boundaries of knight and knave signaled not only by

her apology to Gareth but by her reference to him as "Sir Knave, my knight" (Tennyson,

Idylls II: 1166). This form of address not only shows a new respect for her companion,

but the juxtaposition of terms also implies a complete collapse of those previously

opposing categories. It is only after this dual epiphany about the emptiness of predefined

labels that Lynnette can finally learn of Gareth's "true" name and station.

Likewise, it is this series of revelations that ultimately allows Gareth to

successfully challenge his final opponent who takes the guise of death. Although at first

glance, this final figure in the "allegory" appears to be the most daunting enemy of all, a

direct confrontation reveals that the more intimidating aspects of his character are mere

external trappings. Specifically, these ominous symbolic markers are imposed by the

generic scheme in which Gareth's fourth challenger has been forced to participate. The

fact that this scheme compels the "blooming boy," who becomes an emblem of life and

hope at the end of the poem, into a state of silence and symbolic death resonates strongly

with the notion that the idyll is, at least in part, an exploration of the destructive

limitations that standard definitions can impose if they are accepted without question

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(Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1391). Moreover, there are enough parallels between Gareth and his fourth opponent to raise the possibility that this last conflict is, in fact, a struggle with a version of himself. Not only are their ages similar, the fact is drawn to our attention in a way that seems to encourage the reader to compare the two knights. We are told explicitly that the young man revealed by Gareth's blow to his costume is "not many moons his younger" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1380). Also like Gareth, this last knight is the youngest of several brothers, whose family has pressured him into a course of action that requires him to hide his actual identity. Although Gareth's masquerade is a way of escaping a hereditary label and involves relinquishing marks of status to which he would ordinarily be entitled, his opponent's disguise is the result of accepting such a label and therefore involves falsely appropriating a status which is not his own; the two situations are still close enough to imply a link between the characters. The fact that Gareth must also present himself as someone more formidable for this last battle— adopting Lancelot's shield to ensure that his challenge will be met by his acutely status conscious enemy —seems to further strengthen the parallel. Perhaps most interesting of all, particularly in light of the many indications that Gareth serves a figure for the poet, the description of the persona adopted by his final challenger distinctly echoes one of Tennyson's own early forays into the world of Camelot, "Sir Galahad." One of the best known lines from this lyric is the title character's assertion, in the first verse, that "My strength is as the strength of ten/ because my heart is pure" (Tennyson, "Galahad" 3-4). It hardly seems coincidental, therefore, that when Lynette describes the knight who costumes himself as "death" nearly the first thing she reveals is that his page "reported

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him as closing in himself the strength of ten," (Tennyson, *Idylls* II:1304-1305). This echo of Tennyson's early poem is underlined when Gareth himself reiterates the phrase word for word in his challenge to the knight. On confronting this last figure in his enemies' allegory, he begins by asking why he bothers to adopt such a fearsome disguise when he has "men say, the strength of ten" (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 1352). This deliberately repeated resonance suggests that Gareth's tale represents Tennyson's triumph, not only over the traditional labels of his predecessors such as classical epic and Spenserian allegory, but also over his own too-derivative first attempts at Arthurian verse.

This triumph does not, however, consist of simply discarding these older models. Just as Gareth retains the most essential aspects of his "noble" identity in the absence of all external markers, he does not kill his allegorical opponents when he overpowers them. Rather, he sends them back to Camelot to be incorporated into Arthur's realm. This seems to imply that, despite the failings which make it necessary to overthrow them, the knights and the "the fashion of that old knight-errantry" that they represent, have valuable qualities (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 614). These qualities are worth taking pains to preserve as long as they are not permitted to dominate. The fact that Gareth's decision to spare the first of the brothers is due, at least in part, to the intercession of the always acutely status-conscious Lynnette suggests that such distinctions, though they are a misguided and entirely inadequate way to establish one's identity, are still entitled to a certain, provisional respect. This impression is strengthened by the terms in which she couches her request, explicitly stressing the defeated knight's apparently superior rank. "Be not so hardy, scullion, as to slay/ One nobler than thyself," she admonishes Gareth,

when he places the knight's fate in her hands, agreeing to grant his opponent his life

only if Lynnette asks him to do so (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 956-57). Of course, to make the

appeal at all, Lynnette must first overcome the same excessive attention to status that

seems to motivate her concern for her fallen enemy. Her immediate reaction is a refusal

to ask anything of a mere servant: "Insolent scullion: I of thee? / I bound to thee for any

favour asked!" (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 952-53). She puts aside this scruple, at the last

moment, however when she sees that Gareth really does mean to kill the knight unless

she speaks for him. On the whole, the incident suggests a desire to balance some

measure of continued respect for the traditions embodied by the rogue knights and their

allegory, with a recognition of the need to transcend the kind of social and generic

boundaries those traditions typically impose. Even more specifically, Lynette's actions

indicate that it is only through a willingness to let go of the rigid rules which govern

such traditions, as she does when she puts aside her proud nature to ask her supposed

"scullion" for the life of his opponent, that one can preserve whatever aspects of them

remain worthwhile such as the life of the defeated knight himself. Certainly, this attitude

seems to accord perfectly with Tennyson's ambivalent gestures towards both allegory

and epic throughout this first idyll. These gestures, several of which I have discussed in

detail above, likewise seem designed both to evoke the established literary traditions on

which the poet is drawing, yet, at the same time to distance his own work from any

simple identification with those traditions.

Gareth's confrontation with his final challenger, whose description links him

both to the young knight himself and to Tennyson's earlier Arthurian verses, has a

similar, but even more profound effect. Gareth does more than simply spare this last opponent. He liberates him. By destroying the costume that turns him into death personified to reveal his true nature as a "blooming boy," the young knight symbolically revives this seeming foe (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 1391). The terms in which Tennyson describes the celebration that follows Gareth's victory, saying that Lyonors' household "made merry over Death," further strengthens the impression that the youth in question has been less defeated than resurrected (Tennyson *Idylls* II:1389). This attitude makes perfect sense in light of the way that this final adversary can be read as the poet's critique of his own previous work. Such a figure needs not so much to be put in his place as to be freed from the rigid boundaries and limitations imposed by his elder brothers. It is no surprise therefore that after overthrowing those brothers and dismantling their strictly laid out "parable,"

Gareth's next task is to release the boy with whom he turns out to have so much in common from the semblance of death which he has been forced by their influence. In many ways it is hard to imagine a more apt metaphor for a developing writer's confrontation with established literary labels and their markers.

Looking back, Tennyson may well have felt that his earliest forays into Arthurian lore were overly influenced by the established labels and categories of his predecessors. Therefore, those poems, like the youngest of the brothers Gareth must face, take on the outward appearance of death as a result of an unquestioning obedience to the models laid out by their elders. If nothing else, this image certainly resonates both with the fear of producing "lifeless" work that so consistently haunts Tennyson's early verses and

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with the terms in which his reviewers couched their harshest criticisms of those poems. In contrast, the current work like its hero attempts to show respect for those antecedents, without allowing itself to be defined by them.

In addition to all the other ways that "Gareth and Lynnette" invites such a self-reflexive interpretation, the idea that the story mirrors many of the poet's own central concerns about the composition of the *Idylls* would explain why Tennyson identified this comparatively simple narrative as one of the most difficult of all the idylls to compose (qtd. Sugimura 174). Just as this first idyll of the round table represents the ideal tale of Arthur's court, it is also an expression of Tennyson's own ideal for his poem. All the evidence suggests that in the twelve book *Idylls* Tennyson was seeking to create a work that incorporates and evokes the traditions of the past and so acknowledges its predecessors, without resorting to the kind overt labels that would freeze the poem into a lifeless relic: a goal in which he did arguably succeed. Certainly, if nothing else, many critics note the *Idylls'* propensity for interweaving various genres. For instance, Steven Dillon, in his article "Milton and Tennyson's Guinevere" notes how even the work's title implies an interweaving of the pastoral and epic traditions by linking the modest formal designation of the poem as a series of "idylls" with the grand and unifying subject of "the king" that runs throughout it (129-130). Likewise, Herbert Tucker, in his article, "Trials of Fiction: Novel and Epic in the Geraint and Enid Episodes from 'Idylls of the King,'" points out how the two books in question seem to deliberately blend the conventions of the medieval verse romance with those of both the gothic and the realist, domestic novel, even while incorporating the tale into the poem's larger "epic"

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framework (Tucker 444, 446-458). N.K. Sugimura not only notes *The Idylls'* overall

propensity for blending genres throughout her article, "Epic Sensibilities: 'Old man

Milton' and the making of the *Idylls of the King*"; she also points out that the tale of

"Gareth and Lynette," in particular, represents the most harmonious example of this

"rich generic eclecticism" (167-168, 169-171; 174). Even the idyll's closing lines, which

Adam Roberts' article "The Star Within the Mere" suggests might undercut the hopeful

tone of this first book by drawing attention to its status as fiction, further reinforce the

narrative's connection with the poet's current endeavor (189-190). As the first tale in the

cycle, "Gareth and Lynnette" not only introduces us to Arthur's court through a

depiction of its golden age; it serves as model of what Tennyson himself hopes to

achieve in his twelve-book *Idylls of the King*.

<div align="center">Merlin and Vivien: a Generic Seduction</div>

If "Gareth and Lynette" represents Tennyson's ideal for how a work of art can

thrive by successfully challenging the established boundaries of class and genre, the

alternative can be seen in the tale of "Merlin and Vivien." Indeed, the idyll's

implications about the profound risks involved in embracing a fixed identity, whether it

is imposed by fame, tradition, or both, are so clear that in places they almost seem to

verge on an allegorical warning. Certainly, Merlin's fate, eternally frozen and

imprisoned in a narrow, timeless void, is reminiscent of the images of paralysis and

confinement that so often trouble the poet and artist figures in Tennyson's earlier work

when they are faced with fixed labels and definitions. There is every reason to believe

that Merlin is another such figure. I have already discussed the numerous factors that

suggest Tennyson identified strongly with the Arthurian mage. Moreover, the way that

he introduces the wizard at the beginning of this particular idyll seems to place a special

emphasis on these parallels. Tennyson begins the story of Vivien's seduction by

reminding the reader that Merlin is also a "bard," a wise singer who used his "art" to

create the "havens, ships and halls" of Arthur's realm (Tennyson *Idylls* VI:165-167).

This description cannot help but align him with the poet who is in the process of

composing an Arthurian cycle, and thereby, in a sense, is also bringing Camelot into

being. While these parallels between the author and the magician are scattered with

some consistency throughout the *Idylls*, the fact that Tennyson chooses to highlight the

connection here seems to indicate that it is especially relevant to the tale that follows.

This implies, not only that the story of Merlin and Vivien holds particular significance

for writers and artists, but also that it is crucial to Tennyson's view of himself as an

author and to his approach toward the *Idylls* as a whole.

One of the keynotes of this idyll are its ominous implications about the

consequences of fame. Public reputation tends to impose a clear identity on its object,

exposing him to the sort of inflexible labels that Tennyson and his contemporaries so

often associated with images of imprisonment, paralysis and death for the creative

impulse. Furthermore, it places that reputation under a level of scrutiny that not only

solidifies it even further, but also attracts enemies who can take advantage of this

weakness. Perhaps most damaging of all, this kind of prominence is apt to give those

enemies another weapon; it encourages the kind of minute attention to an artist's current

identity that is likely to lay bare the precise nature and extent of their predecessors'

influence in shaping it. Therefore, in addition to trapping its object within the constraints of a present definition, fame also has the potential to fix him further within limits of previously established traditions.

At least, this is what the crucial role that fame plays in Tennyson's account of Merlin's downfall suggests. The word is used no less than twenty-five times in the tale of Vivien's seduction. In many ways, the temptress herself seems to be a direct descendent of Virgil's "Fama," with the same all pervasive eyes and ears, poisonous, far-reaching whispers, and propensity for mixing truth and lies (Haight 60-61). And while the figure in the *Aeneid* is specifically a personification of Rumor, an association that makes sense since gossip is indeed one of Vivien's most effective weapons, the name "Fama" can also be translated more broadly to mean "fame" itself. It is, in fact, the source of the modern English word, a link that it is difficult to ignore in light of how often the term occurs throughout this idyll.

Whether or not Vivien actually represents fame, she is clearly drawn to it. From the beginning, we are told repeatedly that she chooses Merlin for her target specifically because of his illustrious reputation. Tennyson introduces Vivien's plot by telling the reader that, after a brief and fruitless attempt to seduce Arthur,

She set herself to gain…

The most famous man of all those times,

Merlin…" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 163-165)

It is hard to imagine any more direct or explicit confirmation of the role that Merlin's

reputation plays in making him an object for Vivien's attacks. Tennyson further

underlines this implication a few lines later when the narrator explains that,

> Vivien ever sought to work the charm
>
> Upon the great Enchanter of the Time,
>
> As fancying that her glory would be great
>
> According to his greatness whom she quenched,
>
> (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 213-216)

This statement once again explicitly elaborates the connection between the public

perception of Merlin's identity as "the great enchanter of the time" and Vivien's

ambition to destroy him. Her cry of triumph when she does successfully ensnare him

contains yet a third reminder of the role of "fame" or "glory" in her plans to lure the

wizard to his destruction. "I have made his glory mine!" she exclaims, echoing the

earlier lines almost exactly and keeping the theme before the reader even in the last lines

of the tale (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 969).

Focusing Vivien's attention on him, however, is not the only way in which

Merlin's widespread reputation contributes to his downfall. If nothing else, the

seemingly incongruous discussion of fame that is woven throughout the course of

Vivien's seduction suggests that the concept itself, and the wizard's attitude towards it,

have an integral part to play in the process of his defeat. At first glance, this extended

dialogue about the role of reputation, which originates in Merlin's observation that he

almost feels as if he were already under the influence of the charm and felt his "name

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and fame" slipping away in consequence, seems out of proportion to its ostensible role in the story's larger arc (Tennyson *Idylls* VI:435). Yet, in some ways the apparent superfluity of the lines makes the exchange stand out all the more. If it is not strictly necessary to the progress of the narrative, why does Tennyson include it?

The length and intricacy of this discussion on "fame" becomes even more puzzling in light of the fact that, in the course of it, *both* Vivien and Merlin profess a disinterest in, if not an actual distaste for, its main subject. In Vivien's case, this statement is patently false, since we have already been told explicitly that it is Merlin's illustrious reputation and the desire to surpass it in her own right by overcoming him that draws Vivien to him. Therefore, while it is no surprise that the subject becomes an integral part of her attempt to entice the secret of the charm from Merlin, the way she approaches the theme is unexpected, even counterintuitive. She does not, as the earlier references might lead one to expect, attempt to flatter him into compliance with a direct appeal to his "fame." On the contrary, she deliberately denigrates fame, contrasting the insubstantiality and selfishness of the "dream" that she ascribes to men with the solidity and generosity of the "love" which she claims is women's greatest aspiration (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI:458-467). Even for a character to whom duplicity is second nature, one would expect such a bald deception to be motivated by some clear purpose. It is easy enough to see the reasoning behind her praise of love and women's exceptional capacity for it. This appeal pertains directly to her plea to reveal the charm on several levels. It serves to argue for her own overall worth as a confidant, as the bearer of such a noble sentiment, and to hold out the lure of physical attraction with its philosophical appeal to the "solid"

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pleasures of the immediate "present," even as she presents herself as a receptive object

for his romantic attention (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI:460). Furthermore, the contrast between

men and women implied by her statement also recalls her assertion a few lines before

that, men "never mount/As high as woman in her selfless mood," (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI:

441). Since she bases this contention on the supposed "sacrifices" that her feelings for

Merlin have led her to make in following him, reminding him of it here at once implies

that her "love" confers an obligation on him to reciprocate by complying with her

request, and appeals to his compassion by claiming that she has suffered on his account.

This clever rhetorical move, however, which the reader might expect to be the highlight

of her virtuoso performance, is almost lost in the seemingly irrelevant disparagement of

"fame" that follows it and occupies six lines to the three that she spends lauding love.

It is true that a concern for his "name and fame" figures briefly among Merlin's

reasons for not telling her the charm. If she is attempting to overcome his objections to

sharing the spell by convincing him that what he would risk in doing so is worthless,

then she is making the point so obliquely that it is unclear (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 371;

435). Moreover, she has several motives to avoid this this line of reasoning. In the first

place, it is not a persuasive argument given that the charm's threat to "name and fame"

is only one damaging result of the eternal confinement and complete loss of contact with

the outside world that it imposes on its victim. In the second, the implication that Merlin

would lose nothing important if he did come under the influence of the charm runs

directly counter to her repeated, solemn assurances that he has no need to worry about

the spell's effects since she would never use it. These factors make it seem more likely that

Vivien's argument against fame is actually an exercise in reverse psychology. I have argued that the concern that Merlin betrays for his illustrious name is a potential weakness in his character.

Vivien's insistence on the "emptiness" of all such concerns, therefore, could easily be an attempt to take advantage of this Achilles' heel by encouraging the magician to embark on a defense of the fame that might well prove his downfall.

This reading would account for the fact that it is, indeed, this part of her speech to which Merlin responds most strongly. Although he does not fall into the trap of defending fame outright, he embarks on a lengthy discussion about the merits of "use" and "fame" that seems nearly as digressive as the passage which provokes it. Like Vivien's initial contention, Merlin's response seems to have no direct bearing on either her plea to reveal the charm or his refusal to do so. As in her speech, there is a token gesture towards connecting it, in his caution that

> Love/ Should have some rest and pleasure in himself,
>
> Not ever be too curious for a boon,
>
> Too prurient for a proof against the grain
>
> Of him ye say ye love (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 481-485).

Even this response, however, which does reference the "boon" in question, seems no more than a brief aside that only leads the wizard back into a further consideration of the "fame" he is apparently rejecting.

I say "apparently" because the very length and almost repetitive insistence of his rejection call its authenticity into question. Merlin's denials of any interest in fame for its own sake seem just a shade too elaborate to ring completely true--even veering off into an anecdote with only the most tenuous link to the situation at hand to make his point. This story does center on an assertion of the superiority of "use" to "fame." But it concerns the wizard's advice to someone else—a nameless young squire--not his own actions (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 468-479). Furthermore, this advice takes form of a simple, wordless declaration. Merlin does not speak, but merely points out the symbols of and references to fame in the "fancied arms" that the young squire is designing for himself and replaces them with more practically oriented emblems and mottos. He offers no argument or explanation that would justify these actions--to the squire, to the reader, or to Vivien, whom the tale is presumably meant to educate. In fact, when examined closely, Merlin's story actually leaves the ultimate effect of his rebuke open to question. Certainly, he implies that his admonition was instrumental in shaping the young squire's character, and is at least partially responsible for the fact that "afterwards, he made a stalwart knight," (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 478-79). On the other hand, he never offers any details that confirm this implied connection, leaving the entire episode a surprisingly weak illustration of his point. Even more significantly, despite his insistence that his public eminence is more a burden, reluctantly accepted as a means of serving others than a pleasure that he willingly pursues on his own account, Merlin's entire speech ultimately ends in a defense of the very fame that he begins by depreciating. His prominence, he implies, not only justifies itself by serving in its own right to increase his

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"use" but as an inevitable consequence of his skills it is actually necessary since "he needs must work his work" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 490- 502). Altogether, these digressions and incongruities are enough to make an attentive reader wonder whether Merlin's lengthy insistence that fame means nothing to him is an instance in which "the wizard doth protest too much." Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these discrepancies in the passage are an indication of Merlin's conscious or subconscious struggles against the dangerous attractions of a widespread reputation.

This impression is strengthened by the dismay that the Merlin expresses at the premonition that he might be subject to "some vast charm …/ To make fame nothing" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 509-510). After all, if as he says twice in the space of only six lines, he "cared not for" the fame that this charm threatens, why should he find it ominous (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 500, 505)? He himself seems to sense the contradiction. Almost as soon as he connects this "charm" back to the one which first provoked the debate he immediately corrects himself:

Wherefore, if I fear,

Giving you power upon me through this

charm… I rather dread the loss of use than fame

he tells Vivien (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 510-516). Although Merlin introduces his assertion by saying "wherefore," suggesting that this thought is the logical conclusion of what went before, his use of rather implies just the opposite-- that he was aware of his contradiction, and is deliberately correcting himself.

This seems especially significant since it is a similar concern for his fame that first introduces the question of reputation into Merlin's fatal exchange with Vivien. When the charm is initially described we are told it conveys power over "life and use and name and fame," a phrase that recurs in its entirety several times throughout the idyll to describe the charm's effects (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 212). Merlin uses it, word for word, to explain to Vivien why he will not teach her this dangerously powerful spell at the start of their exchange (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 372). Likewise, when Merlin does finally succumb to the spell, Tennyson repeats his initial description in full for a third time, saying that the wizard is "lost to life and use and name and fame" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 967). Earlier in the poem, even when referring to the spell only indirectly, as in the premonition of his fate where he envisions Vivien as a "wave about to break upon" him, Merlin still speaks of being swept away from "*use* and name and fame," (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 302). At the start of this exchange however, when he tells Vivien that her song makes him feel as though he were already under the influence of the charm, he mentions only the loss of "name and fame" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 435). The fact that Merlin repeats just this part of the phrase seems to indicate that he has a particular concern for these qualities, over and above the others mentioned in description the charm's effects— including the very "use" he later claims is the only justification for fame and even life itself (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 490-491). This shift seems to belie the disinterest in fame that he so consistently professes. Moreover the apparent depth and consistency of Merlin's concern for his reputation suggests that, although his better judgment may tell him he should "rather fear the loss of use than fame," it is his first

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reaction not his hasty correction that best reflects his true feelings (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 515).

The ambivalence towards fame implied by this reading might also help to explain some of the other apparent contradictions in the passage. Perhaps the most striking of these is the changing role played by the image of the star which lies at the center of this last part of his speech. When it is introduced, this star seems like an emblem for "that other fame," the posthumous celebrity which Merlin describes as "the cackle of the unborn about the grave" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 502, 504). "I cared not for it," he says, speaking of such future fame; then after a colon that implies the simple continuation of his thoughts, launches into his first description of the "single, misty star" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 505). This construction seems to encourage the reader to conclude that the "it," which clearly referred the fame that follows death, also refers to the star, making the two one and the same. The fact that the star is "misty" also appears to link it with Merlin's description of fame after death, which he speaks of as something "vague" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 503, 505). And yet, as clear as the link appears in the beginning of the passage, by the end its meaning seems far less straightforward. By this time, the apparently metaphorical star has become a literal one, part of a specific constellation; rather than representing the "Fame which follows death" it comes to embody the very charm that threatens "to make fame nothing" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 461,510).

At first glance, this seems like an insoluble contradiction. But the idea that an excessive concern with establishing an illustrious name either now in the future is an important aspect of Vivien's temptation provides at least one way of reconciling the

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apparent incongruity. By its nature, her plot threatens to stifle the "bard's" potential for creating truly immortal works, even if the promise of an unchanging, and thus permanent, reputation is, ironically, a key part of her lure. According to this reading, the original "misty" star that Merlin, as a figure for the poet, envisions could easily represent the desire for the true "life beyond life" that great poetry confers upon its author, not by granting its creator fame per se, but simply by preserving his or her essence through its own continued vitality. This aim, however, is perilously easy to confound with the wish to establish a lasting name for oneself, a desire that actually threatens the poet's ability to produce such living work. The pursuit of this latter goal is likely to lead the poet either to adopt a clearly, even rigidly, defined identity that he hopes will resist change, or to tie his work to a particular tradition, in an attempt to partake of the longevity and continuity that such established frameworks seem to represent. Both courses of action are likely to produce works that may endure, but which can never truly live. They result in the kind of lasting but lifeless monument embodied by so many of the figures I have discussed: the frozen Titans of Keats' *Hyperion*; Tennyson's own Ulysses, a classical hero trapped almost to paralysis by the consciousness of his fame; or even the lady of Shalott, the artist cursed to stony immobility the moment she enters Camelot with its public gaze and legendary associations. Such figures seem to represent, not true immortality, but an eternal stasis that might almost be its opposite. Everything we are told about Merlin's creations before his encounter with Vivien, particularly the living gateway described in "Gareth and Lynnette," suggests that his art not only avoids but perhaps even deliberately refutes

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such deathlike stasis. Once he succumbs to her, on the other hand, he not only loses the ability to create such vital works, but is himself doomed to a similar state of changeless paralysis.

This idea would also explain why the star becomes more and more concrete as the passage proceeds. Merlin's first reference to the star, whose context makes it seem like an emblem for posthumous fame and perhaps even true immortality, presents it as something both unnamed and "misty," or insubstantial. By the final lines, however, it is not only a literal star with a specific name, but it is also revealed to be part of a larger constellation—the hunter Orion. As astronomer Frederick W. Grover pointed out, when noting how frequently this figure is referred to in poetry, it is one of the most prominent constellations in the sky (Grover 525). Orion is also notable for being visible from almost every part of the world. Both characteristics would certainly be appropriate for an emblem of fame. And yet, it is immediately after identifying the star in question as a part of that constellation that Merlin links it, not with fame, but with his premonition of a "charm … to make fame nothing" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI:461, 510). It does not seem accidental that the star's slide from an emblem of "the fame that follows death" into an image associated with the "charm to make fame nothing" coincides exactly with its identification as a literal star (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 510). This identification ties the star to a name and a predictable course of movements, defining traits extremely similar to those imposed upon the poet by a reputation that is clearly delineated enough to link his work with a particular school or style. Furthermore, it places the star within a surrounding framework of mythology that is rooted in the classical poetry of Homer and

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Hesiod. This connection lends weight to the notion that the established traditions these works represent are indeed an integral part of the fatal "charm" that threatens to stifle the artist's creativity and rob his work of true vitality. Without such vitality neither the work itself nor any reputation based upon it can have life or meaning. Therefore, while Merlin's initial vision of the star may represent a longing for genuine poetic immortality as it becomes more concrete, it degenerates into a more superficial desire for permanence. This desire is liable to tempt an aspiring artist to adopt the kind of rigid labels that will ultimately render his work lifeless and as a result is all too apt to end by "mak[ing] fame nothing" (Tennyson *Idylls* VI:510).

Everything about the charm which ultimately does cause Merlin's downfall seems to connect it even more firmly to the idea of fixed artistic definitions general, and with the established generic labels that are so often instrumental to the formation of such definitions in particular. The overall emphasis that Tennyson places on Merlin's status as a bard throughout the *Idylls* seems to indicate a link between "Merlin and Vivien's" ominous implications about the effects of fame and the author's own previously expressed concerns about poetic identity. In addition to this broad parallel, many elements of the ancient "charm" seem to connect the spell quite specifically with the classical tradition, with its strictly delineated categories and clearly established conventions. In the first place, the spell in question is emphatically derivative. Merlin does not invent it; rather he inherits it from the writings of his predecessor, writings which are themselves a commentary on an even older text. This history of powerful but dangerously confining knowledge passed down through the ages from one learned text

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to another seems like an almost perfect analogy for the conventions established by the long line of "great works" that Tennyson admired and sought to draw on even while attempting to avoid the rigidity that that he associated with them.

This reading seems all the more likely given the distinctly literary nature of the charm's provenance. Even the fact that Tennyson consistently refers to it as a "charm" (as opposed to, say, a "spell") may suggest a link with poetry. As Tennyson was well aware, the word derives from the Latin "carmen," which meant spell, song, and poem, interchangeably. In light of the constant parallels between Merlin and the poet, this root seems like one more indication that the dilemma surrounding the "charm" is one that applies especially to writers and artists.[62] More directly, the very fact that Merlin learns the charm specifically through the study of an ancient *text*, rather than being taught orally or by any other means, links the spell with the writings of the past. Any written work that plays such a prominent role in a literary text arguably invites a selfreflexive reading that makes it reasonable to connect it with the process of composition. Moreover, the particular volume that contains the fatal charm seems like an especially appropriate emblem for the grand but lifeless works of classical literature. Its age links it with the ancient writers whose works were the source of the traditions with which Tennyson was grappling. Also like these "classical" works, the book is written in a "language long gone by" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 671). To begin with, this description

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[62] Moreover, this connection has its origin in the language used by many of the classical works that were the source of the defining traditions Tennyson was struggling to negotiate. That fact, in itself, seems to point to specific nature of the dilemma the poet is exploring.

automatically associates the book with texts written in such "dead" languages as Latin and ancient Greek. Like the commentary that Merlin alone can read, because these works are composed languages that are no longer spoken, they can only be understood by a relatively small number of scholars who have devoted long study to them. Perhaps most significant of all, the language of the original text is so ancient that not even Merlin can decipher it and as a result its meaning has been lost entirely. Therefore, just like the "heroic" works of the past which at the outset of his Arthurian project Tennyson compared to "mastodons," great creatures now reduced to lifeless fossils, and although their contents are presumably of great worth and power, they can have no effect on the present because time has rendered them entirely unreadable and therefore lifeless (Tennyson, "Epic" 3536). Even great "bards" such as Merlin can only glimpse their significance indirectly by studying the "commentary" of later writers like the inventor of the fatal charm.

The description of this predecessor and his work, which eventuality proves Merlin's downfall, also associates them with the "pure" classical tradition on many levels. Even before the charm's inventor himself is introduced, the tale surrounding the spell's origin suggests more than "faint Homeric echoes" (Tennyson, "Epic" 39). It begins with "two cities in a thousand boats/ All fighting for a woman on the sea," a situation so reminiscent of the Trojan war that only the advent of the pirate and the subsequent removal of the queen into another, unnamed, kingdom suggest that it is not intended as a literal reference to the events chronicled in the *Iliad* (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 558-559). When the creator of the charm does appear, brought unwillingly before the

king to invent just such a spell, his description also suggests someone completely enmeshed with a narrowly defined system of rules and classification. He is described as an "old man" and we are told that he "lived alone in a great wild on grass; / Read but one book," which we later learn is the now indecipherable volume whose commentary contains the charm that Vivien is so eager to learn (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 645, 618-619). The hermit's age, like the age of the text he studies, associates him with the ancient world. Moreover, the rigid, repetitive, singularity of the older enchanter's pursuits, which occupy his entire life although they concern "but one book," also tie his endeavor to the strictly defined conventions and formulae that mark the world of classical literature.

The paradoxical nature of the effects produced by the hermit's devotion to his study of the book also accords perfectly with what we know about the ambivalent attitude towards such ancient works that Tennyson shared with many of his contemporaries. Just as they revered such poems as great and noble products of their ages, many aspects hermit's endeavor seem admirable and his studies grant him great power.

> Since he kept his mind on one sole aim
>
> Nor ever touched fierce wine, nor tasted flesh,
>
> Nor owned a sensual wish, to him the wall
>
> That sunders ghosts and shadow-casting men
>
> Became a crystal, and he saw them through it
>
> (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 623- 627)

The hermit's ability to "keep his mind on sole aim" for so many years implies very much the same sort of "simple and single devotedness" that Hallam Tennyson attributes to his father's description of his own poetic endeavors in "Merlin and the Gleam" (*Memoirs* I. xii). The hermit's avoidance of all things associated with worldly pleasures (meat, strong wine, "sensual wishes") further emphasizes the importance of such discipline. It also lends him a spiritual air that places him at the extreme opposite of the moral spectrum from Vivien, Mark and the other enemies of Camelot, all of whom are marked by excessive concern with earthly desires (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 624-625). Moreover, just as Hallam Tennyson claims that his father's pursuit of "a pure and high ideal" through all his writing "helped him… 'endure as seeing Him who is invisible,'" these qualities allow the Hermit access to the invisible world (*Memoirs* I. xii). This connection grants him great knowledge and power on many fronts, from the ability to control the elements to the deep understanding that allows him to create the charm around which this idyll centers.

On the other hand, the hermit's exclusive pursuit of this task and no other comes at the price of isolation (he lives alone in the wilds) and a withered and deathlike physical appearance that suggests he is unsuited to, if not entirely incompatible with, the larger living world (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 618).   We are told that he

…ever reading grew

So grated down and filed away with thought

So lean his eyes were monstrous; while the skin

Clung but to crate and basket, ribs and spine.

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The phrases "grated down" and "filed away" suggest that hermit's relentless single-mindedness diminishes him in some way, despite the wisdom and power that it grants him. Likewise, the terms in which Tennyson describes the man's resulting appearance leave no doubt that his studies have negative as well as positive effects. He speaks of the hermit's eyes, not in neutral terms such as huge or enormous, but as "monstrous," which connotes ugliness and horror as well as great size. He goes on to place such an emphasis on the hermit's prominent bones that the reader is left with the impression not so much of an emaciated man but of an animated skeleton. This impression is only increased by the other physical characteristics that we are given. Both the unnaturally large eyes suggested by the preceding lines and the utter baldness that is almost the first trait Tennyson attributes the hermit who is introduced as "glassy headed, hairless man" could easily belong to a skull (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 617). And while these details alone might not conjure up such a gruesome image, in conjunction with the "ribs and spine" only loosely covered by "clinging" skin, the effect becomes difficult to avoid. This increasing resemblance to the emblem of death suggests that the hermit's endeavors strip him not merely of flesh but of vitality, ultimately making him almost as much a fossil as the "mastodon" to which Tennyson earlier compared the epic form. His abrupt, apparently spontaneous disappearance from the world at the end of Merlin's account confirms the idea that his pursuits depend upon a system so inflexible that it requires him to cut himself off completely. This necessity renders his ancient knowledge, however

genuinely powerful, incapable of having any effect on the world outside his solitary studies.

Although Merlin begins the passage by stating explicitly that the hermit was "not like me" as the inheritor and sole living interpreter of the book that contains the charm, he has clearly maintained enough of a connection with the traditions that it represents to have at least partial access to the ancient knowledge and power contained in them (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 615). Even the means through which he has gained such knowledge, by studying the book through "the long sleepless nights/ Of my long life," bear some resemblance to the hermit's lifelong quest (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 676-77). Both the sustained devotion suggested by the repetition of the word long, and the disciplined denial of physical needs and impulses implied by the fact that his study comes at the cost of "sleepless nights" create a parallel between Merlin and his predecessor, which strengthens the impression that Arthur's mage shares both the hermit's understanding of the strict rules which govern such ancient writing, and his ability to navigate those rules. And yet, although he has this much in common with the charm's inventor, unlike the hermit, who dedicates his whole life to one great book and its wisdom, Merlin does not confine himself to the study of a single volume. Like both the poet described in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoirs* and the narrator of "Merlin and the Gleam," with whom that authorial persona is explicitly identified, the Merlin of *The Idylls* combines his "simple and single devotedness" to his ideal with a "desire to ennoble the life of the world" (*Memoirs* I.xii). This wish to improve the world around him means that, unlike his predecessor, he cannot withdraw into the wilderness and

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commit himself entirely to a solitary study of the ancient book in order to achieve a complete understanding of its original text. Instead, Merlin contents himself with the commentary. This partial understanding may not grant him wisdom equal to his predecessor's, but it does give him considerable power without requiring him to cut himself off entirely from the outside world. This balance seems, in many ways, like another manifestation of the ability to "co-twist old things and new" that allows the wizard to create the kind of truly living art seen in the gateway through which Gareth enters the city at the beginning of the cycle. In practical terms, this skill means that the Idylls' "bard" is able to use the power contained in the ancient book to shape and improve the world that surrounds him in the present (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 222).

I have already suggested that this living gate, as well as the other equally vibrant elements of the "city built to music," which also appear able to move of their own accord, parallel Tennyson's own creation of Camelot in his poetry (Tennyson *Idylls* II:272). I have also argued that the skillful blending of "new" and "old" through which Merlin accomplishes these feats corresponds, on some level, to the poet's blending of genres in his efforts to bring the legendary city to life for his contemporary readers. In light of such connections, it is no great leap to a see a similar link between poet and the wizard in this case. There seems every reason to believe that, in the twelve book *Idylls*, Tennyson was attempting to incorporate the traditions of classical epic and all the grandeur those traditions convey into his own work, without confining that work by the labels and conventions that come with those traditions. The images that his other works associated with such conventions suggest that they would threaten to render the *Idylls*

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lifeless to his current readers. It is difficult to imagine a more apt analogy for this endeavor than Merlin's attempts to shape and improve his own surroundings through the wisdom of an ancient text without becoming so enmeshed in the strict and inflexible rules that govern the understanding of that text that he, like his predecessor, must withdraw entirely from the outside world in order to adhere to them. Such a state of complete disconnection would ultimately amount to a kind of lifelessness all too like that which I have argued Keats, Tennyson, and their contemporaries associated with fixed artistic identities in general and generic definitions in particular.

This sort of deathlike paralysis is, in fact, more or less the fate which overtakes Merlin after he reveals the charm. In doing so, he not only gives Vivien access to the knowledge encoded in the ancient book's margins and all the power of established tradition that his story of the hermit associates with such knowledge; he also openly reveals that his own power is, at least partially, based this ancient, rigidly defined text. Once Vivien understands both the charm and the role that it plays in forming Merlin's own craft, she is instantly able to make use of it to trap the wizard in a state of suspended animation as lifeless and eternal as any of the images of stasis that I have argued are intended to convey the negative effects of classification.

The charm that proves Merlin's downfall is a spell that not only cuts its victim off from all contact with the outside world, but both traps and immobilizes him. In the first place we are told

The man so wrought on ever seemed to lie

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Closed in the four walls of a hollow

tower,   From which was no escape for

evermore;

(Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 206-209).

In addition to this perpetual confinement, the person charmed will also "lay as dead"

within the tower (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 211). This fate, therefore, represents a double

inability to move. In the first place, the victim is kept in place by the imprisonment

itself. In the second, the comparison of that victim's state to death suggests a complete

paralysis even within that prison. This combination seems all too reminiscent of the

other descriptions of frozen immobility that many nineteenth century authors used to

convey the effect of clear artistic labels on poets and their work. It implies the same

qualities of simultaneous lifelessness and preservation that are embedded in North's

comparison of some of Tennyson's early work to a stuffed owl, immortalized in a

museum case (North 58). Since much of North's review was framed as a caution to the

young poet against adhering to a particular school, the similarities lend credence to the

idea that the fatal charm is associated with literary classification. Likewise, the results of

the spell echo the various forms of paralysis experienced by other figures in Tennyson's

poetry, such as Ulysses or the Lady of Shalott, who, I have argued, become trapped by

inflexible traditions, rigidly defined identities, and ultimately, by genre itself.

The degree to which the scene itself is influenced by allusions to that

quintessential English epic, *Paradise Lost*, lends further weight to the idea that Merlin's

imprisonment is connected with traditional generic definitions (Harland 57, Bonney

351-352). Although there are Miltonic echoes throughout *The Idylls*, the allusions are particularly prominent in "Merlin and Vivien." The most obvious reference of this sort lies in the repeated comparisons to a serpent, implicit and explicit, that pervade Tennyson's description of Vivien (Bonney 351-352, Haight 552). As she first begins her fatal seduction, she is stretched out full length on the ground. The narrator also speaks of her as "lissome," a word that not only suggests the kind of slender, sinuous flexibility one would expect of a seductive snake, but even contains an onomatopoeic echo of hissing (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 221). The adjective is repeated later in the passage when Tennyson calls her "lissome Vivien, holding by his [Merlin's] heel," (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 236). He goes on to say that she "Writhed towards him, slided up his knee, and sat/ behind his ankle twined her hollow feet / together, curved her arm about his neck/ clung *like a snake*." (Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 236-240, emphasis mine) The elaborate care Tennyson takes with the comparison makes it clear that it is no casual one. He spends an entire strophe setting up the serpent imagery before he speaks of the snake he has so carefully conjured in the reader's mind. In addition to the repetition of "lissome," this description of Vivien as first "writhing" then "sliding" imbues her motions with a slithering quality, which is only increased by her gradual ascent up the wizard's leg into his lap. Even her feet are fused together, further strengthening the likeness to a snake. Finally, the fact that she is "holding by his [Merlin's] heel" associates her, not with any serpent, but specifically with the one from genesis, who will bruise mankind's heel. Likewise, her invitation to "tread her down" recalls the biblical passage (Bonney 351).

Of course, the comparison to Genesis is appropriate to any temptation scene. In this case, however, several factors make it seem likely that Tennyson had Milton expressly in mind. In addition to the more general imagery of seduction by a serpent, the way that Vivien tries to gain Merlin's attention with extravagant flattery, including kissing his feet, cannot help but recall how Satan caught the eye of Milton's distracted Eve. Like Vivien, with her "pretty ticks and fooleries," the serpent of *Paradise Lost* "Fawning turned to lick the ground" his quarry "trod," until Eve, like Merlin, "marks his play" (*Paradise Lost,* Milton IX: 526-528; Tennyson *Idylls* VI: 263). These parallels with Milton's seducer grow even stronger, when, not twenty lines later, Vivien is compared to "A lovely, baleful star, / veiled in gray vapor" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI:260-261). Satan, after all *was* Lucifer, a "lovely, baleful star" if ever one existed. In fact, "baleful" is almost the first adjective that Milton applies to Satan in *Paradise Lost*. In line fiftyseven of book one, the fallen angel wakes on the burning lake and "round...throws baleful eyes." Given the context, this combination of images cannot help but suggest a specifically Miltonic serpent. And as if to drive the point home, immediately before Vivien's triumph, Tennyson recalls the earlier comparison to the serpent by calling her blond hair a "snake of gold." This picture is further reinforced by Tennyson's description of the "eyes and neck" that "glittering went and came" just a little while later, which, in light of the surrounding imagery, suggests a snakelike darting motion (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 885, 957). Indeed, this final description seems to seal the link to Milton's depiction of the Serpent even more firmly. At first blush, the focus on those particular features, eyes and neck, and the fact that her neck is described as glittering, seems odd. But it falls into place quite neatly when read against the

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description of Satan-as-Serpent in *Paradise Lost*: "carbuncle his eyes; with burnisht neck of verdant gold," (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 500-501). Here is another snake (even a golden one) with darting, glittering, eyes and neck engaged in a scene of temptation and seduction.

Although the parallels between the scenes are clear, the exact nature of the implied connection is harder to interpret. As William Bonney's article, "Torpor and Tropology in Tennyson's 'Merlin and Vivien'" points out, Merlin is no Adam. Unlike Milton's paragon of prelapsian innocence, the wizard is worldly and experienced; he has full knowledge of the stars and heavens, and is, if anything, the guardian of forbidden knowledge, rather than a seeker after it (Bonney 353-354). Bonney suggests convincingly that these inconsistencies are deliberate. He argues that the distortions produced by any attempt to read this tale as a an exact parallel to Milton's story of the struggle between good and evil are designed to undermine any such linear concept of human history (Bonney 356-358). I agree that Tennyson did indeed, harbor a deep suspicion of all such absolutes. Likewise, it is true that Arthur's "pure" world of military virtue, Christian values, and sustained imagery of a linear rise from "beast to man" does seem represent a teleological view of history very much like that seen in most epics (Bonney 356-361, Sugimura 167-173, Tucker 456-458). I do not, however, see the bard who speaks most often in "riddles" and creates by "co-twisting old and new" as a particularly convincing proponent of such rigid concepts merely because he uses his power in favor of Arthur's Camelot (Tennyson, *Idylls* I: 401,411; II: 280, 222). Rather, I believe it is Merlin's ability to balance the grand vision of continual progress and

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improvement embodied by "Arthur, blameless King and stainless man" with the willingness to embrace contradictions and uncertainty that he displays elsewhere in the *Idylls* that allows him to create and sustain the magical city (Tennyson, *Idylls* VI: 776). It is only towards the end of his dialogue with Vivien that he finally succumbs to the kind of desire for certainty and definition which Bonney's argument attributes him and as a consequence loses this crucial ability (Bonney 360-362).

I suggest that these deliberate Miltonic echoes serve another, more general purpose. Perhaps they are so prevalent, not because they will encourage the reader to draw precise parallels between specific characters, such as Merlin and Adam, or even Vivien and Satan, but in order to create a broader association between the incident of Merlin's seduction and Milton's portrayal of humanity's first temptation and fall. In the first place, by tying the scene so directly to *Paradise Lost* Tennyson also implicitly ties it to the clearly defined epic tradition that Milton's poem had come to epitomize. This very association serves as yet one more link between the image of paralysis seen in the wizard's live entombment and the definitions imposed by established literary labels, rendering Vivien's seduction of the bard quite literally generic. Secondly, the implied analogy with Milton's work indicates that Tennyson views Merlin's capitulation to the charm, not only as a kind of mortal fall comparable to Satan's temptation of Eve, but as a turning point as crucial to his history of Camelot as the first taste of the apple was to his predecessor's tale of human origins.

The idea seems counterintuitive at first glance. Although Tennyson's reported description of the tale as, among other things, "'the dream of man coming to practical

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life and ruined by one sin,'" does seem to endorse a reading of the cycle as the story of a second fall, there is nothing to suggest that either the dream or the sin that he refers to has anything to do with Merlin (*Memoirs* II:127). On the contrary, all of Tennyson's few comments on the subject tend to support the obvious critical assumption that the "dream" was Arthur's and the "one sin" Lancelot and Guinevere's. But while I have no wish to contest this reading, Tennyson's own assertion that in any given passage of his work, "the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation" seems to justify the notion that there are other, equally valid possibilities (*Memoirs* II:127). In this sprit, it seems worth pointing out that an effort to bring "dreams" to "practical life" describes Merlin's activities at least as well as, if not better than, Arthur's and that the mage's work is also brought to an end by a single fatal lapse. This notion raises the intriguing possibility that one might legitimately view Merlin's capitulation to Vivien and his subsequent disappearance from the poem as the true fall that seals the city's doom.

There is, in fact, some evidence to support this view. "Merlin and Vivien's" placement, precisely halfway through the cycle--the sixth book of twelve—lends weight to the notion that it is a turning point. Moreover, Merlin's disappearance marks a distinct change in both the tone and the structure of the *Idylls*. Originally, like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Tennyson's *Idylls* promise to relate a succession of separate quests, radiating outward from a central court and only loosely tied together by their common origin. Throughout the first few books, this is just the case. With the exception of the two poems concerning Enid and Geraint, which were originally written as one longer tale,

the first five idylls are connected only by the broadest of overarching themes and narrative tropes. In the second half of the cycle from which the enchanter is so conspicuously absent, the separate "idylls" are bound together by increasingly distinct formal and thematic echoes. This ever-more-structured progression seems ominous in light of all the evidence that associates the charm responsible for Merlin's disappearance with clearly established definitions. Not only does this more and more tightly-knit structure seem to hasten the deterioration of the ideal city, but it also imbues the last six idylls with the kind of inexorable narrative rhythm typical of the epic genre.

Not that such connections alone are necessarily suggestive of epic. Spenser too, makes parallels between the quests of his various knights in the *Faerie Queene*[63]. There is, however, a distinct difference in way these parallels are deployed in the two works and consequently in the effect that they create. Like the various quests it describes, the overall structure of *The Faerie Queene* "wanders" so indefinitely that critics are not even certain whether it is finished (Parker 82)[64]. Each quest leads into and on to the next, and the next, and the next beyond that. Indeed, Parker argues that this apparent endlessness is an integral part of the romance form itself, which depends on the paradox of simultaneous motion and suspension. The logical conclusion of this, formally, is

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[63] Not that Tennyson himself was likely to see evoking this particular work as a particularly effective way of combating generic limitations, despite its apparent resistance to easy classification. As I pointed out above, Tennyson had several reasons to be wary of linking his work with *The Faerie Queene*. In the first place, Spenser's poem was one of his own sources for the *Idylls of The King*, which made it almost as likely to be used in an attempt to place the *Idylls* within a fixed tradition the as the various examples of classical epic from which he was so eager to distance himself. Moreover, Tennyson also had good reason to associate *The Faerie Queene* with his most direct predecessor, Keats, whose writing he seems to have seen less as an example of "romance" in its broadest, most liberating sense than as the representative of one particular, narrowly defined, aspect of the romance tradition.

[64] This, she implies, may be one reason why so many of the poems she discusses are unfinished fragments.

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indefinite extension that can only be brought to an end by an arbitrary act of the author. In the *Idylls of the King* however, the ending does not appear in the least arbitrary. Rather, as in the *Aeneid* or *Paradise Lost*, by the time one reaches the poem's final scene, it appears inevitable.

Tennyson creates this sense of inevitability, in part, by weaving deliberate echoes of earlier stories into the *Idyll*'s later books. I have already mentioned how the opening image of "Lancelot and Elaine" recalls the tragic finale of "Balin and Balan." Likewise, Pelleas' futile and ultimately self-destructive quest to overcome Ettarre's scorn, in the idyll which bears their names, contains numerous parallels to Gareth's more successful wooing of Lynette. By incorporating these echoes of the earlier, more hopeful tales into the increasingly dark second half of his Arthurian cycle, Tennyson succeeds in making the entire work seem less and less a series of unconnected "idylls" and more and more one long tale "of the king" as it approaches its conclusion. Perhaps even more importantly, as the narrative progresses, each apparently separate quest also begins to look forward more clearly to the next book in the cycle. Pelleas' action in leaving his sword across Ettarre and Gawain's throats when he finds them sleeping is a recognizable, if dark, variation of King Mark's response to finding Tristram and Isolt in the forest in many of the early sources for their legend. This resonance hardly seems coincidental, since Tennyson specifically addresses the story of this pair of illicit lovers in the next idyll, "The Last Tournament." Though Tennyson takes up their tale well after the forest episode, and never refers to the incident (which would present a more sympathetic view of Mark than he wishes to take anyway), a reader who knows the story

cannot help but see a link between their story and the incident in "Pelleas and Ettarre." Furthermore, the tale of Tristram and Isolt itself, which involves a knight who goes to fetch a bride for his king and instead falls in love with her leading to treason and adultery, forms a natural lead-in to the next-to-last idyll: "Guinevere." Tennyson himself makes the connection explicit through Arthur's speech about the effect of the queen's bad example, "First came your great sin with Lancelot/then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt…" (Tennyson, *Idylls* XI: 44-45). The causal link this sequence implies justifies the reader in looking at the relationship between the stories as far more than merely a contrast in the way that the two kings react to their "fallen" wives. In short, the entire sequence suggests that the latter half of the *Idylls* is structured as a continuous piece being drawn forward towards its fated end. The progression is as inexorable as that of the *Aeneid,* but culminates in the downfall rather than the founding of a city. Unlike the sense of delay and dilation that the echoes between the different cantos create in *The Faerie Queene*, the increasingly clear links between Tennyson's idylls lead not onward towards indefinite questing but downward towards "last, dim, weird battle of the west" (Tennyson, *Idylls* XII: 95). This is not the "widening gyre" of romance. It is the centripetal draw towards a single point that marks epic.

As discussed above, at the beginning of the poem the numerous epic cues, such as the twelve-book structure and the use of blank verse, are so thoroughly blended with other cues and markers that the status of poem as whole remained ambiguous and impossible to classify. Hallam Tennyson's statement in *Memoirs*, that "If epic unity is to by looked for in the 'Idylls', we find it not in the wrath of an Achilles or the wanderings

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of an Ulysses…" is typical, in its simultaneous implication that there is indeed something like "epic unity" in the poem and equal insistence that the unity to be found in the *Idylls* is somehow fundamentally different from that seen in previous epics (Memoirs II: 130). Although it never loses this sense of indefinability entirely, after Merlin's disappearance in book six, the *Idylls* begin to fall ever more recognizably into the structures and rhythms usually associated with epic. Once the wizard is gone, the tales begin to lead in an ever-tighter spiral to towards the final fall of Camelot. It does not seem at all accidental that this change appears to coincide exactly with the disappearance of the poem's bard, especially in light of the factors that tie the charm responsible for his disappearance to the limitations of established identity and tradition.

Not only does the wizard's absence seem to herald these ominous shifts in structure; it also appears to signal an equally dark change in the tone of Tennyson's narrative. "Merlin and Vivien" is followed directly by the tale of "Lancelot and Elaine." Almost everything about this story suggests that it marks the beginning of the end for Camelot. It opens with Arthur's grim discovery of the dead king with his crown if diamonds, and the double-edged prophesy that accompanies it "Lo, thou likewise shalt be King" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VII: 55). The positive aspects of this promise, which foretells Arthur's rise to the throne, are clear. The king's later statement that it was "Divine" agency which lead him to the jewels suggests that he himself chooses focus more or less exclusively on this hopeful interpretation of the "murmurs" that the crown wakes "in his heart" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VII:54). On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the ancient ruler whose remains inspire this premonition was

murdered by his brother and is now only a bleached and moldering skeleton with neither

a kingdom nor even a name to leave behind him as a legacy. These sinister details,

which Tennyson is at pains to include, make the prediction that Arthur will

"*likewise*…be king" far less comforting (emphasis mine). Viewed from this angle, the

crown becomes a sort of *memento mori*, a sign which foreshadows not only the promise

of Arthur's reign, but also the inevitable transience his achievements including the

ultimate collapse of his kingdom. The notion that the crown is at least as much an

emblem for the fall of Camelot as an omen of its founding is bolstered by the way that

diamonds taken from it later become associated with the fatal romance between

Lancelot and Guinevere.

It is true that none of these ominous associations are explicitly connected either

to Merlin or his disappearance. Nonetheless, the fact that Tennyson first mentions the

crown immediately after his account of the wizard's downfall cannot help but suggest a

link between his absence and the pending doom that seems embodied in the relic. The

timing seems all the more significant since, as an incident presented in retrospect,

Tennyson could have introduced the story at virtually any time throughout *The Idylls*.

The poet tells us clearly that Arthur found the diamonds "long before they crowned him

king," which places it well before the beginning his cycle (Tennyson *Idylls* VII: 34). Yet

the jewels are not mentioned until just over halfway through *The Idylls*, even though

Tennyson also tells us that they have been the subject of a major event in the kingdom –

"the diamond jousts" – every year. As frequently as jousts and tournaments are

mentioned in the first six books of the cycle, the fact that Tennyson never alludes to

these particular contests seems like a deliberate omission. If so, it gives all the more

credibility to the idea that the poet had some particular reason for introducing "the

diamond jousts," and the ill omened prize that seems to foreshadow Camelot's decline at

precisely this point in the poem.

In addition to the aura of doom that it creates, the unrelievedly bleak history of

the dead king and his brother with which Tennyson begins his seventh Idyll seems to

reflect a fundamental change in the poem's register in the wake Merlin's disappearance.

This impression comes, not so much from the inherently grim nature of tale, as from the

way that the story echoes the darkest aspects of "Balin and Balan," which directly

precedes "Merlin and Vivien," but incorporates of none the earlier narrative's

redemptive elements. The legend of the tarn where

Arthur finds crown, of "two brothers" who

> "…met…/And fought together…
>
> And each had slain his brother at a blow,"

might almost be a summary of Tennyson's fifth idyll as well (Tennyson, *Idylls* VII: 39-

41). It is even all too easy to imagine Balin and Balan, left "to the wolves" by Vivien

and her squire lying unburied until "their bones were bleached/ and lightened into color

with the crags" just like those of the other, nameless pair of brothers whose remains the

young king-to-be discovers (Tennyson *Idylls* V: 580; VII: 43-44). Ultimately, however,

the parallels that encourage the reader to compare the two accounts only serve to

heighten the essential contrast between them. Balin and Balan, after all, kill each other

as the result of a disastrous misunderstanding. The tone in which the story of nameless

brothers is recounted, on the other hand, implies deliberate fratricide, presumably

motivated by the only detail we are given about the pair: the fact that "one is a king"

(Tennyson *Idylls* VII:39). Furthermore, for all its tragedy, the conclusion of Balin and

Balan is by no means without hope. The idyll ends with the two brothers' mutual

recognition and reconciliation. Balin dies with an expression repentance for his flaws

and Balan with an answering promise of a reunion in the afterlife: "Good night, true

brother, here! Good morrow there!" (Tennyson *Idylls* V: 619) These details imbue the

deaths of the protagonists with a sense of nobility that lightens the gloom of the event

itself. Likewise, the poem's final description of the brothers "either lock'd in either's

arm," places the emphasis less on their death than on their love for one another in their

last moments (Tennyson *Idylls* V:623). Since this phrase is actually the idyll's

concluding sentence, it is this image that the reader is ultimately left with, when she

begins the tale of "Merlin and Vivien." The tale of the two brothers whose remains

Arthur literally stumbles on, however, which Tennyson chooses to narrate immediately

after recounting the circumstances of the wizard's disappearance, contains no such

suggestions of honor and redemption. On the contrary, their fate is dark and ignominious

enough to ensure "a horror…clave" to the site of the conflict, and that the legend of their

death "made the glen abhorred," even so long after the event that "their names were

lost" (Tennyson *Idylls* VII:42, 40) By recalling the basic plot of the fifth idyll at the

beginning of the seventh, but striping those events of the redeeming details which

accompany them in "Balin and Balan," this legend almost seems to be an illustration of

the kingdom's deterioration. And that deterioration seems to coincide exactly with Merlin's disappearance.

Nor is the introduction of the ominous crown of diamonds and its accompanying history the only indication of this decline. It is also directly after Merlin vanishes that the reader is given the first direct, irrefutable confirmation of Lancelot and Guinevere's infidelity. Of course, the shadow of their liaison is present throughout the cycle. Until this point, however, all Tennyson's references to the affair take the form of hearsay and court gossip, supported by few suggestive, but ultimately ambiguous, exchanges between the characters themselves, all of which are equally susceptible to a more innocent interpretation (Adams 428-429). In contrast, barely a hundred lines into "Lancelot and Elaine," Lancelot himself confronts Guinevere about their relationship in terms which leave no question as to its nature. Almost the moment they are alone, he challenges her, asking if "Now weary of my service and devoir," she will, "Henceforth be truer to your faultless lord?" (Tennyson *Idylls* VII: 118-119). This is the first time that we told directly, not through rumor by a character with indisputable first-hand knowledge that Guinevere has been untrue to Arthur. Her reply explicitly confirms this fact, as she states bluntly, "I am yours, / Not Arthur's, as ye know, save by the bond," (Tennyson *Idylls* VII: 134-135). After this exchange it is no longer possible to doubt that they are more to one another than queen and loyal subject.

This sort of clear, unmistakable evidence of their adultery marks another departure from the first part of the cycle. In "Balin and Balan," for instance, although Balin's doubts about the queen's purity are the catalyst which sets the idyll's tragedy in

motion, but by placing the question of her affair with Lancelot at center of a tale not otherwise concerned with either character, the justice of those doubts remains ambiguous. The initial suspicion that drives Balin out into the forest is prompted by nothing more concrete than a single exchange of looks, which he himself is later sure he misinterpreted (Tennyson *Idylls* V.272-277). He is ultimately convinced that his first misgivings were correct, not by any real proof, but by Vivien's account of an incident that confirms the illicit nature of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship (Tennyson *Idylls* V.501-512). Not only is any tale told by this "wily" informant automatically rendered suspect by its source; the narrator explicitly tells us that this particular story is a lie (Tennyson *Idylls* V.518). Therefore, even if Balin's suspicions *are* later shown to be essentially correct, at this point in the cycle neither he, nor the reader, has any reliable way of knowing this. Indeed, if we hold ourselves strictly to the confines of the text, Tennyson's first five idylls give the reader less reason than Balin himself to believe in Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery. Balin, after all, has no way of knowing that what Vivien tells him is not true. The reader, on the other hand, is made privy to that fact almost immediately. The very first words to follow her speech are "she lied" (Tennyson *Idylls* V.518). This immediate emphasis on the falsehood of Vivien's account serves to underline the fact that Tennyson has not, as yet, given us *any* irrefutable proof that Lancelot and Guinevere have been unfaithful.

This omission is easy to overlook, not only because *The Idylls'* later books confirm their guilt, but because most readers come to the text already familiar with an

array of earlier works that tell the story of the queen's affair with Lancelot.[65] In some ways, this fact seems to serve as yet another link between the established literary traditions to which such texts belong and the tools employed by that other "teller of tales," the "wily Vivien" (Tennyson *Idylls* V.537; VI.5). I have already pointed out the ways that the confining charm she uses to ensnare Merlin can, itself, be linked with such traditions. At first glance, the vague rumors and whispers that, at least until she learns the fatal charm, are Vivien's weapon of choice in Arthur's court may seem like the polar opposite of the strict conventions and rigid labels evoked by the ancient spell's classical overtones. Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that her most destructive tale is, in this case, one and the same as the tale told by Tennyson's own predecessors. Presented in this light, Vivien's scandalmongering seems like one more example of her penchant for using the writings of the past for her own destructive ends.

This is not to suggest that there is any evidence Tennyson ever intended to break from tradition so radically as to deny the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot outright. On the contrary, it is clear that he had no such intention, since the poem's later books, in which the couple's guilt is clear, were among the first that he composed. Nor am I arguing that, by delaying any proof of this adultery until over halfway through the cycle, Tennyson is seeking to mislead the reader into seriously believing that the pair is innocent. Nonetheless, even though Tennyson does not appear to have any intention of

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[65] Including Tennyson own "Guinevere," which he included in a group of four Arthurian poems titled "True and False" that he published well before completing the twelve book *Idylls*. All four poems ("Enid" "Vivien" "Elaine" and "Guinevere") were revised and included in his final twelve book project. Even in this preliminary sequence, however, the confirmation of the queen's adultery with Lancelot is still presented after Vivien's defeat of Merlin.

actually thwarting the expectations raised by earlier works, his refusal to confirm those expectations for so long seems designed, at the very least, to make his readers aware of how profoundly their assumptions and interpretations have been shaped by the models of the past. Moreover, the delay allows and even encourages the reader to question those assumptions without ever overtly suggesting that his poem will follow a different course. In leaving the possibility of such a departure from the tale that his readers know and accept as the "true" account of Camelot open throughout the first half of his cycle, Tennyson manages to evoke alternate scenarios simply by leading attentive readers to consider their existence.

This ability to evoke multiple, even contradictory, versions of a tale simultaneously is one way in which Tennyson is able to distinguish his work from that of his predecessors without actually breaking from the tradition represented by their writings. Moreover, it is an ability that both Merlin and Tennyson clearly demonstrate at the beginning of the cycle while Camelot is thriving and the *Idylls* are at their most idyllic. The wizard explicitly voices his assertion that "truth is this to me, and that to thee" in the "riddling triplets" that he uses to reconcile, or avoid reconciling, the conflicting accounts Arthur's birth (Tennyson *Idylls* I: 406, 401). Similarly, the poet himself presents the reader with two different endings of "Gareth and Lynnette" without actually saying which one he favors (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 1393-1396). The prevalence of this strategy during the most optimistic part of Tennyson's cycle suggests that he viewed a talent for maintaining this kind of multiplicity as crucial part of creating and sustaining his ideal poetic kingdom. Indeed, in many ways, it seems like the ideal solution to

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Tennyson's concerns about genre by allowing him to immerse his work completely in several traditions and identities at once. In this way, he can avoid being trapped and immobilized by any one label without the resorting to the radical irresolution and consequent collapse of any cohesive narrative that results from rejecting identity and tradition altogether.

For the ancient charm, which seems like such an apt representation of the suffocating confinement that strict labels and established forms impose upon the artist, is not the only source of danger for the "bard." The alternate tale of Merlin's disappearance related by Sir Percival in "The Holy Grail" introduces at least one other equally deadly pitfall created by Merlin himself— the "Siege perilous."

> In our great hall there stood a vacant chair,
>
> Fashioned by Merlin ere he past away…
>
> And Merlin called it 'The Siege perilous,'
>
> …'for there,' he said,
>
> 'No man could sit but he should lose himself:'
>
> And once by misadvertence Merlin sat
>
> In his own chair, and so was lost; (VIII:167-176)

This tale of a bard who disappears because he quite literally "loses himself" in his own work certainly seems like a fitting image for the total dissolution of all identity, the literal loss of selfhood, which represents the opposite extreme of the paralysis imposed by too-rigid definitions. The description of the chair itself also supports this reading. We are told that it is

> … carven with strange figures; and in and out
>
> The figures, like a serpent, ran a scroll
>
> Of letters in a tongue no man could read (VIII: 169-171).

One on hand, the unreadable text and the comparison to a "serpent" seem to link the "Siege perilous" to the ancient charm that proves the wizard's downfall in the sixth book. This seems to tell against the notion that the two things represent opposite, if equally dangerous, extremes. On the other, there enough fundamental differences between the two to suggest that the link may simply be the danger itself. Unlike the charm, which was inherited from his predecessor, the "Siege perilous" is Merlin's own original creation. Moreover, everything about the charm suggests that it springs from a static, unchanging text, governed by strict inflexible rules. In contrast, the unreadable "scroll" which adorns the chair is described as "running…in and out" of the other "strange figures" on the chair in such a way that it seems capable of independent motion (Tennyson *Idylls* VIII: 169-171). If anything, this aspect of the "Siege perilous" resembles, not the ancient charm that Vivien uses against the enchanter, but the living gateway described in "Gareth and Lynette." The gateway is also Merlin's work, and it, too, is decorated with "weird devices" or "figures" that appear to "move, seethe, twine and curl" of their own volition (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 221- 230). While the gateway uses this sense of constant change and movement to bring life to legendary figures like "the Lady of the Lake," and noble tales such as "Arthur's wars," however, the carvings on "Siege perilous" apparently incorporate no such coherent narrative elements or recognizable characters (Tennyson *Idylls* II: 221-230; VIII:169171). Sir Percival speaks

of the carvings only as "strange figures," suggesting that their ambiguity and indecipherability may be their only real identifying characteristic (Tennyson *Idylls* VIII: 169). Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that a creation, which not only avoids the confines of a particular definition, but seems to defy the very idea of definition altogether, ultimately deprives the "bard" who commits himself to it of identity completely.

All the evidence suggests that Tennyson considered such a total dissolution of selfhood almost as potentially destructive to "bards" like Merlin and their work as the lifeless stagnation and immobility that result from simply accepting established definitions. I have already argued that, early on in his career, Tennyson explored the possibilities of refusing all fixed identity in this way, much as Keats did, and ultimately rejected it as a means of avoiding the paralysis imposed by labels. Partly, I believe, this was because such total dissolution of identity would mean separating himself entirely from the classical traditions that he still valued deeply despite the suspicion which prevented him from openly adopting their conventions in his own writing. Furthermore, the trope's associations with a predecessor to whom he was often compared at the beginning of his career, and from whom therefore he was naturally anxious to distance himself precluded his adopting this solution. These factors made it as impossible for Tennyson to embrace the kind of self-dissolution required of the "chameleon poet" who aspires to be "everything and nothing" as it was for his Lady of Shalott to maintain the shadowy, liminal existence within her tower that allows her a measure of artistic success indefinitely (Keats ed. Damrosch et al 1000).

This notion is borne out by the disastrous effect that the "Siege perilous" has in the *Idylls*. Even the description of the chair itself suggests ominous differences from Merlin's earlier work. Its mysterious, apparently indescribable decorations may avoid paralysis in much the same way as the figures on the gateway that first leads to Camelot, but, unlike the figures on the gate, their vitality conveys nothing meaningful. The tale of "Arthur's wars" which Merlin's earlier creation brought to life no longer forms a part of this second work (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 221). Rather, that story has been relegated to separate project. It is divided into the twelve static images shown by the windows described less than a hundred lines after the "Siege perilous" is introduced (Tennyson, *Idylls* VIII:249-256). It seems worth noting that this apparent separation of the narrative impulse from the shifting, ineffable quality that the lends a sense of life to the mysterious carvings on the "Siege perilous" explicitly imbues the former with least one common generic marker of epic—a clear twelve part structure -- which suggests that Tennyson did connect the overt use of such formal conventions with a loss of artistic vitality. Even more importantly, the story conveyed by these twelve windows is almost as conspicuously incomplete as Keats' *Hyperion*. The final window is blank, and since Merlin is gone, quite possibly having "lost himself" in his own work, it is all too likely to remain so as Percival's unanswered question suggests "…and who shall blazon it? when and how?" (Tennyson, *Idylls* VIII: 256).

The unfinished windows and the possible connection with Merlin's disappearance are not the only indications that the "'Siege perilous'" lives up to its forbidding name. Despite the purity and nobility of his intentions, Sir Galahad's

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determination to sit in the chair and "save himself" by "losing himself" also has

disastrous consequences (VIII: 178). It leads, not only to his own mystical disappearance

into a higher realm, but also to the general depletion of the round table, as a result of the

endless, indefinite quests that his fellow knights undertake in pursuit of his vision.

Arthur himself compares them to travelers who "follow wandering fires/lost in a

quagmire," a metaphor that is repeated at least four more times in the course of the poem

(Tennyson, *Idylls* VIII: 320-1, 370, 599, 668, 888-889). The image not only conveys the

futility of the knights' search for the grail, but also hints at the loose, episodic

construction that marks this particular idyll. Both this literally wandering structure, and

the fantastic nature of the incidents it relates, aligns this particular poem with the kind of

medieval verse romance that many turn of the century poets, including Keats, had

looked to in their attempt to escape the strictures of "classical" labels and conventions

His predecessor's affinity for this type of romance may have been one reason

that, as the ultimately destructive effects of the quest for the grail make clear, Tennyson

did not see it as a liberating alternative to generic definition. Rather, when he did not

associate it with a particular, equally rigid, poetic scheme, as he seems to have done with

many of the romance elements in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, he appears to have linked it

with the total dissolution of self that he also had good reason to associate with Keats.

The "'Siege perilous'" itself seems to embody this type of radical dissolution. By

weaving the story of the chair into his account of the vision that inspires the boundless,

quintessentially romantic, search for the grail, he implicitly connects the quest, which

proves to be "erring" every sense of the word, with the loss of identity that is the

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"peril" at the heart of Merlin's creation. Including a second version of the "bard's" disappearance, particularly one that traces this calamity to the "Siege perilous," allows Tennyson to further cement the connection between the enchanter's absence and the weakening of Arthur's realm. In light of all the indications that Merlin is a figure for the poet, it also suggests that the "loss of self" this enchanted seat seems to represent can be almost as dangerous to the poetic process as the traditional strictures represented by the ancient charm.

Perhaps, in the end, the very fact that Tennyson is at pains to include this alternate story of the wizard's disappearance in "The Holy Grail" serves as an indication that he retains the crucial ability to balance multiple versions of a tale even through the conclusion of his cycle, and so, unlike the fictional bard, is able to produce work with the potential for true immortality. Certainly, all the evidence suggests that poet laureate was pleased with the final result of his career-long Arthurian project, and at least cautiously optimistic about *The Idylls'* chances of continued vitality. As Herbert Tucker points out, it was only after completing the twelve book *Idylls* that Tennyson finally accepted the peerage that he had repeatedly refused earlier in his career (Tucker, "Trials of Fiction" 457). Given the ambivalence about identity and classification that runs throughout Tennyson's work, his reluctance to tie himself to such a literal declaration of class is not surprising, particularly when the proffered title was framed as an honor for his poetic contributions. The very fact that did eventually accept the title seems to confirm the idea that, unlike Keats, by the end of his career Tennyson did not believe that an entire dissolution of selfhood was necessary to create a living work of art. On the

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contrary, Tennyson's acceptance of the barony "for the sake of art" indicates that he viewed composing a truly vital work—one that was able to maintain a coherent connection with both the traditions of the past and the readers of the present, without allowing either to define it according to a predetermined label—as the very means of forming such a poetic identity. Since it was only after publishing his last revision of the *Idylls* that Tennyson finally accepted this mark of distinction, it seems reasonable to suppose that he saw the cycle's completion as key factor in achieving this goal, and the poem itself as the kind work capable of conferring such an elevated status on its creator. But while *The Idylls of the King* may fulfill the promise of a "city is built/ To music, therefore never built at all/ And therefore built forever," it is only the poem itself that attains this kind of imaginative immortality (Tennyson, *Idylls* II: 272-274). Merlin's Camelot is doomed when the bard who created it capitulates to Vivien's desire for the ancient charm. Although Tennyson's title proclaims his *Idylls* to be "of the King," the tale of Arthur's rise and fall is inseparable from the story of how the bard, whose "riddling triplets" fostered his rise to power and whose art literally helped construct his city, succumbed to a confining, defining charm (Tennyson, *Idylls* I: 401; II: 209- 274; VIII:167-176, 225-256). Viewed this way, it seems only natural that the cycle literally culminates in Tennyson's own poetic version of a classical ruin: the very piece, which decades before he had explicitly envisioned as the surviving fragment of a traditional "Homeric" epic (Tennyson, "Epic" 39). In short, like its predecessor *Paradise Lost*, *The Idylls of the King* is the story of a fall. For Tennyson, however, the crucial fall is a fall into genre.

Conclusion

The suspicion of fixed identity in general and of genre in particular that pervades both Keats' and Tennyson's writing is interesting in and of itself as a fresh parallel between the two individual authors. More importantly, I also believe that it reflects a larger shift in the way that classification was viewed during the nineteenth century. Such a shift in attitude would coincide with many other trends that marked the period in question. It would be an understandable and even predictable reaction to the widespread questioning of established social categories in the wake of the French revolution. Moreover, it would explain several specifically literary trends that have come to be seen as hallmarks of "Romanticism." The valorization of obscurity, urgent emphasis on originality, and the rejection of long-reverenced classical "forms" such as the epic, would all be logical results of a new stigma surrounding clearly defined genres. Keats and Tennyson seemed especially sensitive to this current of thought. Throughout their careers both poets deliberately avoided placing their work within established categories, even when they clearly sought to draw on the traditions associated with specific genres.

Perhaps this similarity in their reactions is not surprising, given the frequently observed parallels between the authors. Nevertheless, even writers who approached genre and classification in ways entirely different from the sort of evasion that Keats and Tennyson turned to when the question of defining their work was raised seemed especially conscious of the issue. For instance, although Elizabeth Barrett Browning actually describes her own book-length narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh*, as a "verse novel," rather than an epic, she specifically defends the viability of nineteenth century epics within the text of her work. She urges poets to be "unscrupulously epic" in seeking out and recording the heroism of modern life (Barrett Browning 5:213). At first glance, this protest may seem like a direct rebuttal of the attitude I have been tracing in Keats and Tennyson's poetry. Indeed, the unflattering comments about Camelot which follow immediately on the heels of the statement suggest that Barrett Browning may have even had Tennyson's poem in mind as a target of her censure. Nonetheless, the very necessity of including a defense of such a formerly prestigious category, particularly combined with the fact that the author deliberately declined to speak of her own work as an epic, suggests exactly how tense and delicate the subject of this particular genre had become for Victorian writers.

Nevertheless, throughout her career, Barrett Browning did seem far more comfortable placing her work explicitly within traditional generic boundaries than most of the other writers I have touched on. *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, for instance, follows the conventions of the renaissance sonnet cycle far more closely than the collections produced by Wordsworth or Keats. Furthermore, in many of her works,

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Barrett Browning's departures from tradition are implicitly or explicitly connected to her gender. For example, the fact that *Aurora Leigh* consists of only nine books, rather than the twelve usually associated with epic poetry, seems like a deliberate reminder that, as woman, the author is operating according the nine-month cycle associated with birth, rather than the twelve-month seasonal cycle adopted by her male counterparts. In fact, I believe that this very awareness of gender is a large part of what allows Barrett Browning to take on the question of genre so directly. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrate in their ground-breaking work, *The Madwoman in The Attic*, women's writing was *already* widely perceived as something borderless and hybrid. In adopting traditional generic definitions for her work, Barrett-Browning not only avoids this stigma, she turns it to her advantage by implicitly presenting the "unruliness" of women's writing as a way to of revitalizing traditional literary categories from within, while still maintaining their identity.

This idea is borne out by the fact that another of the most prominent works in the Victorian canon to describe itself explicitly itself in terms of epic was also written by a woman George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Like Barrett Browning, Eliot is particularly interested in the question of whether it is still possible to live "an epic life" in nineteenth century England (Eliot 3).[66] Although her conclusion is more ambivalent than Barrett Browning's ringing defense of the epic form, both women foreground their engagement with the genre in a way that male writers like Keats and Tennyson -- or Dickens, for that

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[66] Furthermore, the preface, with its emphasis on the novel's contemporary setting, makes it clear that the problem is, if not unique to Eliot's time, at least of particular concern to it (Eliot 3-4).

matter-- do not. Furthermore, Eliot's suspicion of genre does not seem rooted in the kind of anxiety that her male contemporaries express about how such labels, with all their limitations and confinements, are applied to art and literature. Rather, she seems concerned about their uncritical adoption in "real life" situations.

This is more than understandable, given the gender-based restrictions of her society. Gender, after all is just deeply intertwined with the kind of labels and hierarchies associated with generic definition as the concerns about social class that were so closely linked with it in Keats' work. Perhaps even more so; the OED's etymology for genre actually refers the reader to "gender" as the root of the word. The very fact that Eliot choose to challenge these conventions by writing under a male pseudonym suggests that she was acutely troubled by these issues in her own life as an artist. Her work bears this out. In *Middlemarch*, in particular, where the introduction explicitly foregrounds questions of genre, characters tend to make poor decisions when they conceive of their lives in terms of traditional literary categories. Dorothea's fascination with tragedy leads to her disastrous marriage. Casaubon's identification with Milton fuels his obsessive desire to produce a work that reflects the kind of classical unity associated with the epic poet—a "key to all mythologies." Ladislaw's identification with the Romantic poets, and his consequent belief in "unpremeditated art," and "spontaneity" as the mark of genius, contributes greatly to his lack of direction in the first half of the novel. Rosamond's view of her relationship with Lydgate is actually described as "a kind preconceived romance" -- and her disappointment can be largely attributed the expectations raised by this preconception (Elliot 166). Examples

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can be multiplied indefinitely, but all point to the same the basic caution about genre. Such ready-made, or "preconceived" categories may or may not provide an appropriate way of discussing books or paintings, but they are woefully inadequate for addressing the complexities of "real life." Her characters can only find personal fulfillment when they are willing think and act beyond the borders of the generic patterns in which they conceive their lives —as Ladislaw does when he turns from art to politics, or Dorothea does when she refuses to martyr herself to her dead husband's will. The result is a kind of a generic compromise—the "home epic" with which the novel ends (Eliot 832). Nonetheless, the very fact that uses that phrase, drawing attention to the question of genre so openly, supports the idea that nineteenth century women, even those every bit as conscious of literary tradition and their place in it as Keats and Tennyson, were more willing to engage in direct discussion of literary classification and its application to their work than their male counterparts. Perhaps even more importantly, it suggests that concerns about labeling and classification touched prose writers as well as poets. Despite the relative newness of the tradition highlighted by the very term "novel" and the comparatively loose formal guidelines of prose as opposed to verse, novelists too were wary of generic definitions.

Naturally, not all Victorian authors took these kinds of pains to avoid being classified. If nothing else, the proliferation of "new genres" throughout the nineteenth century would make that clear.[67] But despite their popularity, generic labels, new or old, had a tendency to limit the prestige of both the works that claimed them and their

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[67]The "sensation novel" and the "detective story" are two of the most notable examples

authors. Ultimately, they became terms of dismissal. Wilkie Collins may provide the

best example of this phenomenon. Collins was Charles Dickens' protégée for much of

his career. Although each writer naturally had his own individual style, their authorial

voices were similar enough to allow them to collaborate on several projects.[68] They dealt

with related, and sometimes directly overlapping, issues.[6968] Since they were frequently

published in the same magazine, they presumably used the same formats and appealed to

more or less the same readership (Lonoff 150-170). Collins was arguably Dickens'

equal in plot construction and linguistic sophistication. His views on many social and

political issues, especially his ambivalence towards colonialism, are likely to appear

more thoughtful and sophisticated to twentieth and twenty-first century readers than

most of what Dickens left behind on the subject. And yet, though Dickens is firmly

established as a "literary classic," Collins hovered around the edges of the canon for

most of the twentieth century, and only quite recently have his works begun to receive

comparable critical attention. I believe that this is because, even while writing for a

popular audience, Dickens largely managed to avoid placing his writing within any one

particular genre. Even as early as his preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens not only lays out

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[68] "The *Frozen Deep* and "No Thoroughfare" are two of the best known.

[69] Some critics have speculated that Collins' interest in the French revolution was the inspiration for Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Dickens himself acknowledged that the idea for the novel came to him while working with his friend on *The Frozen Deep* (Lonoff 158). Likewise, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can be read as a direct response to *The Moonstone*. For a discussion of the relationship between the novels, see Michael Hollington's "To the Droodstone: or from *The Moonstone* to *Edwin Drood* via *No Thoroughfare*," in *Q/W/E/R/T/Y: arts, litt'eratures, & civilisations du monde Anglophone* and Sue Lonoff's "Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins**"** in *Nineteenth Century Fiction 35*. The latter also gives extensive biographical background on the two authors' relationship.

an argument for the moral and didactic value of his unvarnished portrayal of the criminal classes in the novel, he also goes out of his way to emphasize this aspect of his work as break with traditional literary conventions (Dickens xi-xv).

Most of Collins' work, on the other hand, fits so well into clearly defined categories that his two best known novels, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, have all but become emblems of the sensation novel and the mystery novel respectively (Connolly xiii-xviii, Cauti xv-xx). Indeed, when Collins is discussed in his own right in twentieth century criticism, it is almost always through the medium of genre, in the vein T.S. Eliot's description of him as the author of "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels..." (Qtd in Connolly xv). This praise is very much a double edged sword. Likewise, his contemporaries' discussions of his works reflect this confining effect of generic labels on his reputation. Trollope, instance, complains that Collins' writing leaves the reader "constrained by mysteries," at the same time as he praises his skill at plot construction (Trollope 222-223). Even this complement is liable to turn against the author.[70] It acknowledges Collins' talent, but the metaphor of construction paints him as a mere "craftsman" rather than as an artist. Nor was Trollope alone in this attitude; most of the contemporary reviews of Collins' novels adopted a similar stance (Connolly xiii-xviii). The slightly inferior designation implied by these descriptions, moreover, suggests that there may be something "mechanical" about the work produced. Given the similar terms in which many critics dismissed the standard

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[70] It does not seem coincidental that Dickens expresses his growing ambivalence towards *The Moonstone* in uncannily similar terms (Dickens *Letters* 12: 158-59).

literary labels of the day, it seems plausible to suppose that such subtle dismissals of

Collins' work were intimately connected with his willingness to accept the generic

classifications applied to his novels.

This weakness for literary classification on Collins' part is particularly ironic,

since a tendency to challenge traditional boundaries is a hallmark of many his best-

known and most sympathetic characters. In *The Woman in White*, for instance, Marian

Halcombe resists clearly defined Victorian gender roles, both physically, and in her

personality. Her looks combine a classically "feminine" figure with "masculine" facial

features (Collins, *Woman in White* 34-35). Her character, likewise, blends the sort

strength and resolution most nineteenth century readers would have seen as essentially

masculine traits with a respect for her society's restrictions that that prevents her from

taking any action that Collins' audience would have considered overtly "unwomanly"

(Cauti xxix). Likewise, in *The Moonstone* Ezra Jennings defies any simple or absolute

racial, class, or cultural definition. The mixed-race ancestry that he reveals to Blake

directly on their first meeting is itself a challenge to easy labels. Jennings' unusual

physical appearance has a similar effect. His "gypsy complexion" and remarkable

mingling of black and white hair continuously emphasize, not only the literal fact of his

heritage, but also just how impossible that heritage makes it to place his character

comfortably within any pre-established social category. Perhaps the answer to this

apparent contradiction lies in the fact that Collins himself saw the forms that he was

working with as innovative—as indeed they were (Cauti xvi; Connolly xv-xvi). Collins

himself was instrumental in establishing the conventions that his work was later

dismissed for embodying (Cauti xvi; Connolly xv-xvi). Nonetheless, writing novels that created new categories for themselves in this way appears to have been regarded by Collins' contemporaries as a fundamentally different, and less impressive, sort of achievement from penning a work which defied classification altogether. Ultimately the labels that Collins' works helped to define ended up defining both those works and their author and proved nearly as detrimental to his literary reputation as any blind adherence to a pre-established formula.

Unlike Collins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was acutely aware of the dangers presented by such labels. He never questioned the notion that works which submitted to clear generic boundaries were, in some way, inferior to true "literature." On the contrary, he wholeheartedly accepted and internalized the premise, at least where his own work was concerned. Despite the overwhelming success and popularity of the Sherlock Holmes series, Doyle's letters indicate that he felt trapped in his identity as a writer of detective stories. "He [Holmes] takes my mind from better things," he wrote to his mother, in November of 1891, complaining that the demand for detective stories prevented him from pursuing more serious work. He even attempted to end the series with Holmes' death in "The Final Problem," but public outcry forced him to resurrect the hero. As he feared, Conan Doyle never entirely escaped this generic trap. Though he wrote many short stories and novellas that had nothing to do with either Sherlock Holmes or the detective genre, they are rarely if ever read today, and his work hovers, at best, around the outskirts of the traditional literary canon.

But do we, as readers, need to accept this view of generic classification as a stigma? Or even leave the classification itself unquestioned? Certainly, recent scholarship has explicitly recognized the provisional and culturally mediated nature of generic classification. Owens' article presents generic labels less as a set of fixed categories than as a sort of basic vocabulary for understanding and communicating about texts, which changes in response to historical, cultural and linguistic factors. Genre, he implies, only becomes problematic when one attempts to apply one's own particular terminology and way of thinking indiscriminately to all writing, without accounting for these factors. I believe it is possible to apply this more positive, flexible view of genre even to the works of authors who did not necessarily share it. In many cases the works themselves allow for, and even subtly encourage, such an approach. For example, in *The Sign of the Four*, Conan Doyle explicitly identifies his writing, not with the detective story as pursued by Poe and Collins, but with "romance." The comparison is made by a minor character who, on hearing the details of the case, exclaims "Why it is a Romance!" (Doyle, *Sign* 164). The brief conversation which follows goes on to elaborate the parallels point by point. Specifically she lists "an injured lady, half a million in treasure, a black cannibal, and a wooden legged ruffian," who she claims "…take the place of the conventional dragon or wicked earl," (Doyle 164). Mary Morstan, Holmes' client and Watson's future wife, then chimes in by calling the detective and his sidekick "two-knight errants to the rescue," (Doyle 164). Nor is this an isolated case. Throughout the entire series, Conan Doyle deploys not only the structure,

but the language and metaphors of the romance quest.[71] This fact allows for the intriguing possibility of reading the Holmes series as something akin to older romance cycles, which also typically relate a loosely connected series of adventures surrounding one extraordinary hero. The observation of parallels between the "detective story" and the "romance tradition" is nothing new. Frye himself identifies the genre as the modern, popular manifestation of the basic form, which he claims in embedded in the subconscious of all writers (Frye 44-45). But the deliberate consciousness and specificity with which Doyle deploys these tropes has been largely overlooked. Was this repeated gesture towards "romance" Conan Doyle's way of trying to rescue his work from the strict confines of genre by associating it with a tradition that typically defies such boundaries? It seems possible, even probable, especially given exactly where in the series the connections become most prominent.

Conan Doyle initially linked his work with romance in *The Sign of the Four*--the second work in the series. Or, in other words, when the response to his first novel may well have alerted him to the dangers of generic labeling, and yet before those labels would have been firmly established -- at exactly the point when it would make the most sense for him to complicate or challenge the way his stories were being classified. The parallels with romance continue quietly throughout the series, but the next place they become especially marked is precisely at the height of Conan Doyle's dissatisfaction

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[71] To choose one clear example at random, the terms in which Holmes refers to his search for Moriarty, which he compares to grasping a "thread" which leads him through "a thousand cunning windings," cannot help but recall the story of Theseus in the minotaur's labyrinth (Doyle 645).

with the limitations of the detective genre. It occurs in "The Final Problem," the story

where he makes good his threat to "slay" the ubiquitous hero who "takes his mind from

better things." Holmes' final confrontation with his diabolical double, Moriarty, and his

subsequent disappearance into the watery chasm of Reichenbach Falls follows Frye's

description of the romance hero's "journey to the underworld" with an exactness that is

almost uncanny.[72] Given the context, it is difficult not to connect the particular

emphasis on the series' affinities with the romance in "The Final Problem" with its

creator's often repeated desire to be free of the generic boundaries imposed on him by

Holmes' character. And that desire in itself suggests that, for all the differences between

Conan-Doyle's work and that of poets such as Keats and Tennyson, their attitude

towards genre was remarkably similar. All of these writers saw clearly defined literary

labels as a trap that confined a work and stifled its artistic merit. Keats and Tennyson

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[72] The dangerous journey can be seen in the exciting railroad chase from London at the beginning of the
story. His battle to the death with Moriarty, "the napoleon of crime" the "the most dangerous and capable
criminal in all of Europe" whose absence makes "the air of London sweeter," certainly fits his description
of the hero's final confrontation with an ultimate enemy (Doyle 645; 655). And like that confrontation,
this one ends, quite literally, with both characters plunging into an abyss, resulting in the villains defeat at
the cost of the hero's apparent or symbolic death. (Frye 117-126) Not surprisingly, his return, in disguise,
after, not coincidentally, a three year absence, is equally reminiscent of the way Frye describes the hero's
ascent. Certainly Holmes dramatic revelation of his identity in Watson's parlor can be read as a
recognition scene, and the suddenness with which he removes his disguise gives it the feel of a
transformation. The fact that the disguise in question (a "elderly, deformed" bookseller, who more or less
invites himself into Watsons study) is, essentially, that of the wise old peddler seeking hospitality only
adds to the exactness of the parallel (Doyle 666). Like the romance hero, Holmes absence (his "time in the
underworld," when the society he separates himself from assumes that he is dead) is used in traveling to
remote and inaccessible places, searching for out of the way knowledge. Holmes mentions Lassa in Tibet,
and a visit to "the head llama," Persia, and Mecca, all liable to viewed as deposits of exotic, perhaps
forgotten knowledge, by his audience in Imperial Britten (Doyle 670). Finally, as if to solidify the parallel,
like many of Frye's tales of assent, the *Empty House* is resolved by the sacrifice of the hero's
doppelganger. In this case, the double takes the form of a plaster bust which Holmes uses as bait for his
would-be killer, Sebastian Moran. Moran reveals himself by shooting this silhouette, allowing him to be
captured and Holmes, now in his own persona, to resume his rightful place in Bakers' Street (Frye 115-
157).

simply spent their careers avoiding that trap, while Conan Doyle spent his

unsuccessfully attempting to escape from it.

In some ways, the very fact that it is possible to find this kind of similarity in the

way that such apparently disparate works approached the topic of classification is, in

itself, the best evidence for the widespread shift in attitude towards genre which I have

argued took place around the turn of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was this ability to

make connections between diverse and seemingly unrelated works that first drew me to

genre as a topic. Looking critically at established categories and how various authors

reacted to them not only makes it possible to see surprising links between works

operating in vastly different genres; it is also one way of preventing those boundaries

from becoming the rigid, paralyzing influence that Keats, Tennyson and their

contemporaries were so anxious to avoid.

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