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Research Article:

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## The Ideals of the King: Positioning the Poetic Philosophies of Alfred Lord Tennyson and William Morris' Arthurian Poetry

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Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King* and William Morris' "The Defence of Guenevere" occupy diametrically opposed positions within the context of nineteenth-century aesthetic and philosophical debates on the purpose and moral role of art. Morris' poem presents poetic and physical beauty as containing inherent moral worth, while Tennyson's *Idylls* reflects a more moralistic attitude towards art—that it should be subordinate to and in the service of moral ideals. This article expands on discussions of both Tennyson and Morris' use of philosophy and position both poets' works within the context of Victorian aesthetic debates. I examine Morris' "The Defence of Guenevere" and two poems from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*: "The Coming of Arthur," and "Guinevere." After an exploration of Tennyson's portrayal of King Arthur as an embodiment of stoic ideals, I compare Tennyson and Morris' characterizations of Guinevere. Both poets present moral reasoning as a process of reading and interpretation, but Tennyson's epic reflects a stoic attitude towards the evaluation of appearances while Morris argues for a more instinctive moral assessment of the natural world and personal pleasure.

While critics have examined Tennyson's engagement with the poets of ancient Rome and Greece, his use of classical philosophy has been largely overlooked by critics. C.M. Bowra's work on Aeneas as a stoic figure mentions in passing Tennyson's King Arthur as another literary figure whose "appeal is not to the imagination, but to the conscience" and that because of the morality of his characterization, he is often criticized as "lifeless [...] So far as he has any personality, he is a prig and bore" (8). Tennyson's moral ideals appear closely connected to stoicism, a philosophy that was widespread in the ancient world and continued to be influential throughout the nineteenth-century. One of the few recent studies to investigate Tennyson's use of stoic philosophy is Melanie Pavao's work on *In*

*Memoriam*. Pavao unpacks the stoic underpinnings of Tennyson's meditation, and identifies Cicero's *De Amicitia* and the *Consolatio* as sources for Tennyson's knowledge of stoicism (19).

While stoicism originated in ancient Greece, it was transmitted to Rome and became one of the most prevalent philosophies of Imperial Rome (Gill 33). Stoics share two related goals: virtue and contentment. Stoic philosophers believed that happiness and fulfillment in life were only possible through virtuous conduct (which for the Stoics was a life lived in accordance with nature) and an appropriate understanding of what is within one's control and what is not (Irwin 346). Very few aspects of life are actually within a person's control—namely, their conduct and their reactions to external stimuli. Stoics believed that only actions and thoughts within one's control could be truly good or bad. Events and occurrences outside of an individual's control—such as the opinions of others, one's physical wellbeing, and one's station in life—are merely indifferent and should be considered accordingly. The stoic must always be reading and interpreting the world around them, and moral flaws are attributed to failed analysis of external events or occurrences. Because for stoics even painful occurrences did not prevent a person from behaving virtuously, a correct interpretation of these externals often required an acceptance of some of stoicism's more paradoxical doctrines, such as that a virtuous slave could be freer than an immoral master, and that the degradations of discipline could be ultimately uplifting (Gill 53).

While stoics did not reject the pleasures of the natural world, arguing that one should enjoy life's luxuries when they were readily available without descending into overindulgence, they did cultivate a mistrust of pleasure, because in their view, hedonistic enjoyment—especially of an erotic nature—could distract an individual from the performance of their duty and lead them to commit actions deleterious to their soul or spirit (Gill 58). For stoics, their relationships with others and position in society defined their duties. While everyone's primary duty is to the guardian spirit within himself, which is served by keeping the inner-self calm and worthy of self-respect, other duties can vary depending on one's livelihood and family circumstance. For example, a ruler's duty—according to the stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius—is to create and enforce fair laws that applied to all citizens equally, regardless of social power and station (211). King Arthur's articulation of his goals as king and ruler reveal his stoic practices:

I was the first of all the knights who drew

The knighthood-errant of this realm and all

The realms together under me, their Head,  
In that fair Order of my Table Round [...]  
I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the King, as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King [...]  
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs [...]  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her (Guinevere 457-460, 464-466, 468, 471-472).

King Arthur's virtuous conduct functions as a model for the behavior of his knights, who promote justice throughout Arthur's kingdom and "serve as model for the mighty world" (281). The behaviors Arthur encourages in his knights are clearly stoic—they are to value their conscience as equal to the highest authority, they are expected to enforce laws and protect the interests of the common people, and they are exhorted to live pure lives free of sexual excess. Tennyson deliberately strips Arthur of the sexual indiscretions of the source materials. In King Arthur's declaration to Guinevere that "I was ever virgin save for thee" aligns his conduct with stoic sexual standards, rendering him an idealized stoic ruler (Guinevere 554).

From the beginning of the poem, King Arthur is an embodiment of Roman stoic ideals and, as a king, his primary role is that of dutiful, disciplinary figure. Stoics regarded external discipline as an inevitability of fate that could, if one endured its restrictions and rigors patiently, lead to personal improvement and elevation. There is a sense in the *Idylls* that King Arthur is more Roman than the Romans, and that while Roman rule was oppressive, its strictures allowed Britain to become civilized, and eventually to become a powerful Empire in its own right. Tennyson's description of Britain after the departure of the Romans underscores the violence of uncivilized Britain and recalls the legends of Rome's founding:

And ever and anon the wolf would steal  
The children and devour, but now and then,  
Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat  
To human sucklings; and the children, housed

In her foul den, there at their meat would growl,  
and mock their foster-mother on four feet,  
Till, straighten'd, they grew up to wolf-like men,  
Worse than the wolves. (The Coming of Arthur 26-33)

These wolf-men of uncivilized Britain evoke Rome's legendary founders Romulus and Remus, who were raised by wolves before establishing the parameters of the city of Rome. The evocation of this wolf imagery also underscores the feudal violence of Britain at this time—Romulus murdered Remus to consolidate power, and Tennyson depicts post-Roman Britain as similarly ravaged by animalistic and power-hungry men. The conflict between King Leodogran and Urien is also a war between brothers, further underscoring the poem's symbolic connection between early Rome and pre-Arthurian Britain. Linking the imagery of early Britain and Rome sets up the idea that Britain is the inheritor of Rome's power and stoic virtue. However, in order to fulfill this promise of an imperial destiny, the petty kings of Britain must accept the discipline and moral strictures of a higher authority, an authority embodied in the stoic King Arthur. The acceptance of such external discipline is temporarily painful but ultimately redemptive. When King Leodogran's land is besieged, he "Groaned for the Roman legions here again/ and Caesar's eagle" (Dedication and Coming of Arthur 34-35). Leodogran's groan can be interpreted as an expression of desire or one of pain. The ambiguity of his utterance encapsulates the paradox of discipline—that it necessary and beneficial, while simultaneously painful and possibly degrading. For Leodogran, a return of imperial authority would result in a loss of his kingly autonomy. He would no longer be a king ruling as the ultimate authority in his land, but would function as a client king to a superior lord. However, acceptance of this relationship is necessary for him to preserve any sort of authority, as his brother Urien violently encroaches on his land, attacking and murdering his people.

Almost immediately after Leodogran expresses his reluctant desire for the return of Roman military authority, Arthur appears, representing the return of Roman-like discipline and control. Even Arthur's war-cry is described in disciplinary terms: "Then, before a voice / As dreadful as the shout of one who sees / To one who sins, and deems himself alone" (Dedication 121-124). Like the Romans whose martial discipline during their occupation protected the land from being inhabited by dangerous men and creatures, Arthur's disciplinary ethics are portrayed as positive

and elevating. This is most evident in Guinevere's spiritual transformation after Arthur's visitation, but this motif is also frequently underscored during other moments of the text as well, such as when Arthur initiates his knights of the round table:

Then the King in low deep tones

And simple words of great authority

Bound them by so strait

vows to his own self,

That when they rose, knighted from kneeling, some

Were pale as at the passing of a ghost, Some flushed, and others dazed, as one who wakes

Half-blinded at the coming of a light (The Coming of the King 275-281).

Disorienting, but ultimately elevating, the men's experience of the knighting ceremony is paradoxical. They are "knighted from kneeling"—elevated in status through their willingness to submit to a worthy external authority (Dedication 278).

While Tennyson and Morris drew on classical and medieval sources for their poetry, an examination of their Arthuriana reveals their differing poetic philosophies. Tennyson's poetry reflects a stoic ideal, but in contrast, Morris' poem is deeply intertwined with nineteenth-century aestheticism. Comparing the two poems' judgment of Guinevere's infidelity reveals the stark philosophical differences that ideologically separate these texts, and provides a point of access for understanding and contextualizing the aesthetic debates of the nineteenth century. Mitsuharu Matsuoka traces Victorian aestheticism to its classical origins: "Stringent discrimination among pleasures may distinguish aestheticism from hedonism, but the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement in art and literature [...] might be seen as [...] modern Epicureanism" (77). Matsuoka writes that nineteenth-century "aesthetes sought to subvert [...] the notion that a work of art should serve some higher moral purpose. To the aesthetic movement, art should be education, but should aspire to provide sensuous fulfillment for the individual" (79). While Tennyson's stoical King Arthur is civic-minded, concerns about country and duty do not enter into Morris' text. Morris does not discuss the political and social consequences of Guenevere's infidelity; instead, her defense is grounded in her individual experience of visual and sensual pleasures.

Because visual interpretation is crucial for the practice of both stoicism and aestheticism, both the "Defence of Guenevere" and the *Idylls of the King* explore the moral struggles of King Arthur's unfaithful bride in terms of reading and misreading. While Tennyson's Guinevere is condemned for her misreading of her husband and must acknowledge her shame and abase herself in order to achieve spiritual redemption, Morris' queen dramatically differs. She defiantly denies her guilt, repeatedly shifting the accusation of sinfulness back onto her accusers. Morris' Guenevere defends herself by presenting poetic and aesthetic beauty as inherently good, and insists that her reading of both King Arthur and Lancelot was the correct interpretation. Morris' Guenevere is innocent in a prelapsarian sense, and she presents her instinctive sensual indulgence as less sinful than her accusers' obsessive sexual policing. Guenevere's repeated declarations that "God knows I speak the truth, saying that you lie" (48) is self-justification by her own standards, and also a condemnation of her accusers, whose own morality is compromised by their obsession with sexual sin and their voyeuristic impulse to lie in wait and spy on the queen whose honor they should protect

Tennyson characterizes his Arthurian queen as a failed reader whose moral flaws are a direct consequence of her misinterpretations. Guinevere's memories of her lover are linked to descriptions of the natural, beautiful world. Lancelot and Guinevere "Rode under groves that looked a paradise / Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth / That seemed the heavens upbreking through the earth" (386-388). However, the word "seemed" signals that her interpretation of their pleasure as coming from heaven is suspect, as does the imagery of heaven rising from below the earth, a location associated more with hell than heaven. The queen's emotional attachment to Lancelot and the beauty of the world is described as a "trance," which prevents her from properly interpreting her husband's high virtues and restrained passion (398). Guinevere "thought him cold, / High, self-contained, and passionless, not like him, / 'Not like my Lancelot'" (402-404). It is Guinevere's too literal reading of her husband's conduct and mien that results in her moral error and subsequent shame (404). The queen's adultery is not only a moral failure but an aesthetic one as well. In his marriage to Guinevere, Arthur attempts to enact the role of a courtly lover, seeking to "love one maiden only, cleave to her, / And worship her by years of noble deeds" (472-473). Guinevere fails to read King Arthur's value as a lover and later comes to understand and acknowledge her error, proclaiming that her husband was both "the highest and most human too" (645).

While Guinevere initially misreads her husband as passionless, their final meeting at the Abbey reveals his true character and details Guinevere's repentance. Their final parting is tinged with the sexuality that Guinevere initially failed to recognize. Guinevere throws herself at her husband's feet, and the emphasis on Arthur's breath underscores the physical intimacy of their interaction: "And while she grovelled at his feet, / She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck" (577-578). This moment demonstrates the erotic potential of dutiful submission. Only by accepting the moral authority of her husband is Guinevere to experience non-destructive physical desire. Indeed, just as Arthur's men are "knighted from kneeling," Guinevere's repentance leads to spiritual and moral transformation. The end of the poem makes clear that Guinevere successfully atones for her infidelity. After a period of repentance, Guinevere is "chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived / For three brief years, and there, an Abbess, past / To where beyond these voices there is peace" (Guinevere 690-692). Guinevere's service purifies her, and her ending is not one of death, but of apotheosis. Guinevere has learned to interpret external signs and to harness sensual desire to the service of moral duty, bringing desire in line with stoic doctrine.

Morris, however, challenges the idea of Queen Guinevere as a failed reader of moral signs, and as an adherent to aestheticism, and does not require his Guenevere to sublimate or alter her erotic desires. Morris' Guenevere reveals her moral testing as a stacked and unfair game. She demands that her accusers consider a scenario in which an angel forces her to choose between two pieces of cloth, telling her that the fate of her immortal soul depends on her decision: "one of these strange choosing cloths was blue, / Wavy and long, and one cut short and red; / No man could tell the better of the two" (34-36). Guenevere chooses the blue cloth, motivated by the belief that blue is "heaven's colour" (38). She is informed, however, that her choice signifies "hell" (38). Based on the lack of information Guenevere was given in this allegorical scenario, her misinterpretation of the morality of her conduct is excusable, not condemnable. She exposes the impossibility of navigating the often paradoxical moral system laid out in Tennyson's *Idylls*.

Guenevere repeatedly insists on her accuracy as a moral judge and reader of external signifiers. The Arthur of Morris' poem does not merely appear cold. Based on Guenevere's assessment, he is cold. Guenevere was not wooed and courted, but purchased: "I was bought / By Arthur's great name and his little love" (82-83). By describing her marriage in terms of a financial transaction, she questions both the validity of their union and whether she should be legally and spiritual bound by



her marital assent, which is "a little word, / Scarce ever meant at all" (86-87). Nor were there signs of attention and kindness that Guenevere could consider in her interpretation of her husband's character: "no man cares now to know why I sigh; / And no man comes to sing me pleasant songs, / Nor any brings me the sweet flowers that lie / So thick in the gardens" (256-259). Tennyson's King Arthur is described more as an ideal courtly lover, both chaste in his marital fidelity and sensual in his enjoyment of his wife's physicality, while Morris' Guenevere, insists that her King Arthur betrayed no loving softness beneath his stony countenance and that her initial reading of his character was correct.

Guenevere also treats her body as a readable text that justifies her sensual response to Lancelot, arguing for a more embodied understanding of morality. Her passionless marriage and desire for Lancelot results in a weakened bodily state—her pulse is "unhappy" (76). She also presents her emotional response to her questioning as evidence of her innocence: "Being such a lady could I weep these tears / If this were true?" (145-146). Even her religious pleas evoke bodily suffering: "All I have said is truth, by Christ's dear tears" (286). By reading her suffering body as evidence, Guenevere emphasizes the necessity for beauty and passion in order to live a complete and fulfilled life.

Both poets create queens who struggle to understand the moral meaning of the physical and sensual beauty that surrounds them. In Tennyson's stoic *Idylls*, moral truth can only be determined by searching beyond physical appearances. Morris' aesthetic poem, however, does not echo Tennyson's solemn mistrust of the natural world. His queen does not oppose the very notion of morality, but challenges the belief that morality can only be achieved by sacrificing both aesthetic and physical enjoyment. While King Arthur is the central figure of Tennyson's *Idylls*, and is portrayed as an idealized ruler who is a moral model to his people, Morris' Arthur is notable primarily for his absence. His elision of Arthur is a deliberate reminder that in Morris' philosophy, aesthetic beauty, rather than king or duty, is the highest moral authority.

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