

Guinevere: Victorian Gender, Sexuality and Nature

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Guinevere is one of the most well-known female characters in literary history. Since first mention of her name in the Latin chronicles of Giraldus Cambrensis in the late 12th century, the development of her character and her role in King Arthur's court has flourished over the years (Wilhelm). She has been labeled as one of the most beautiful women in history, as well as one of the most destructive. She is Britain's Helen of Troy. Her infidelity and relationship with Lancelot (and sometimes Modred) has been portrayed from many angles, but most accounts, including Robert Bresson's film *Lancelot du Lac*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and Layamon's *Brut* blame Guinevere in part, if not wholly for the disintegration of King Arthur's rule and eventually his death. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Guinevere remains the primary factor in Arthur's fall. However, Tennyson's representation of her character is much more complex than early accounts.

Guinevere appears in several scenes throughout the *Idylls*, but her primary function as a character revolves around her one dominating action—adultery. This act is her shame, her sin, and Guinevere becomes a fallen woman. Even as she falls, however, Guinevere represents a complex set of Victorian ideals. She is an agent of nature, the center of an erotic and sexual instinct that instills her with a degree of power over her own world, pushing her to act against conformity. This rebellion leads to the collapse of her society and is characteristic of the cycle of many generations. Yet, at the same time, Guinevere's inevitable fall provides a spiritual freedom that transcends her world and leaves her free to if perhaps not erase her shame, at least achieve individual redemption by choosing service to her new sense of the eternal.

To completely understand Guinevere's character, the social and contextual setting of the Victorian gender ideology must be considered. Tennyson wrote the *Idylls* in a cycle from 1859-1885 during the developing Victorian Era when historically, the world had a distinctly male bias (Gilbert 865). In the early Victorian patriarchal society, men held the resources of the world. Legally and socially, they were in control. Women had little or no independence and were the property of their fathers and

husbands. Marriage vows included a verbal agreement of obedience to the husband, demanding the woman give up all possessions or inheritance and even the rights to her own body (Wojtczak). Women were seen under law as one person under their husband. They were treated as children and did not even have the right to file for divorce until the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, but even this severely limited their rights and adultery was an insufficient reason for a woman to file for divorce (although not a man). Women did not gain full rights to their children and property after divorce until after a series of legislations reaching into the 20th century. It was not until 1918 (after Tennyson's death) that women's suffrage was granted to women over 30 years and only in 1928 could women 21 or older vote, the same age that had been established for males in 1884 (Snow). The reason for the slow development in this gender movement, however, was founded in an ancient concept that man was biologically supreme.

Views of male superiority rose from the conviction that by evolutionary advancements, there was biological basis for the suppression of women. In Victorian Britain, men were seen as active agents that expended energy and had a greater capacity for reason and intelligence while women were sedentary, conserving energy and more inclined to give into intuitive emotions. Charles Darwin even argued that women had been arrested at a lower stage of evolutionary development, claiming that women could not be equal intellectually or rationally to men because there was evidence that men's skulls were larger. The idea rose that since women were biologically closer to children than men, they needed to be protected even from their own womanhood (Snow). Other arguments went further and claimed that since men only needed to occupy their thoughts with conceiving a child, not carrying or raising it, they were free to pursue other cognitive and physical demands beyond reproduction. Women, on the other hand, physically and mentally had such heavy roles in reproduction and child-rearing that their energy sources were exhausted, leaving them incapable of more advanced thought and activity than what it took to be a dependent and domestic wife (Lee). It is no coincidence that Vivien claims to Merlin "were I not woman, I could tell a tale," referring to her credibility and ability to understand a

situation based on her standing as a woman in society (Merlin and Vivien ll. 694). Women were the weaker sex, innocent and sympathized. In sexual matters, especially in the early 19th century, man exploited the fragility of women and it was man that “represented the fallen, sinful, and lustful creatures” (Lee). However, with the rising popularity of literature, Coventry Patmore conceived the concept of the ‘angel in the house’ in 1854 and was able to circulate her view, greatly influencing Victorian ideas of sexuality and emphasizing the power a woman had within the sphere of her own home. However, this myth was exploited by writers and artists and towards the end of the century this ‘angel’ twisted into an adulteress, temptress and whore (Snow). So as Tennyson was writing the *Idylls*, the Victorian gender view had begun to reverse. Modern gender theory reversed to biologically explain the male sexual appetite as katabolic slavery, blaming women for their ‘insatiable’ desires. Approaches to gender roles morphed and suddenly women were viewed as sexual threats and it was women who took advantage of man’s natural frailty as they allowed their passions to rule their actions (Priestly 246). Women, biologically inferior to men and incapable of controlling their own impulses, characteristically came to represent the negative aspects of natural instinct.

Victorians were famous for attempting to suppress female sexuality in order to restrain their impulsive natures (Gilbert 875). The abstract male rationalistic view of the time, rather than acknowledging women as possessing an equal capacity for logic and desire, instead placed the female on a shelf, creating an idol out of the male-constructed vision of a female. Women of the upper social classes and of Guinevere’s status in particular were supposed to be “as radiant as an angel, as dainty as a fairy ... a picture on the wall, a statue in a temple, a being whose physical processes were an inscrutable mystery” (Cruikshank). Women were not seen for their internal qualities, but nonetheless provided a foundation for society as a whole. There were specific, subservient roles the women were expected to maintain and in the *Idylls* Guinevere functions as Arthur’s foundation and inspiration.

. . . this worship of the Queen,
 That honour too wherein she holds him—this,
 This was the sunshine that hath given the man
 A growth, a name that branches o'er the rest,
 And strength against all odds, and what the King
 So prizes. . . (Balin and Balan II. 175-180)

Arthur places Guinevere in a position where she is his strength, his light that helped him to rise as a King above all others. Even as he first beholds Guinevere's beauty and before Arthur actually meets her, Guinevere is revered and charged with being the base of all of the King's victories or failures. He inexplicably ties his will to her, worshiping her as his idol of faith.

To her that is the fairest under heaven,
 I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
 And cannot will my will, nor work my work
 Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
 Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
 Then might we live together as one life,
 And reigning with one will in everything
 Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
 And power on this dead world to make it live.

(The Coming of Arthur II. 85-93)

Arthur's utter faith in Guinevere to be not just his right-hand but his other half is misplaced from the beginning. He asks too much of the falsely idealized woman he is determined to marry rather than know. This image entwining man's success with that of his wife is a construction of identity that reflects a gender-obsessed society (Ahern 90). Later, it leads to Arthur blaming Guinevere for his failure to maintain his kingdom.

It is this identity, however falsely constructed, that is both a wonder and a fear for Victorian society and the men of King Arthur's court. The male image of women creates a vision of fragility, yet the natural female attributes transcend a certain level of understanding (Christ 391). There is apprehension bordering on horrified veneration of the control that women can gain over men.

Particularly, female sexuality is both repressed and a figure of fascination (Auerbach 31). The female subject becomes a powerful exposing figure for the artist and Tennyson manipulates this poetic tradition through the “act of seeing” (Christ 386). This act borders on a public voyeurism primarily connected to the moments where Guinevere and the women of the court are spied on or their image recalled in fantasy by their beloved. There are further idealizations while the male’s thoughts are dominated by the female, as in the case of Pelleas where he is so entranced that

Then when he came before Ettarre, the sight
Of her rich beauty made him at one glance
More bondsman in his heart than in his bonds.
Yet with good cheer he spake, ‘Behold me, Lady,
A prisoner, and the vassal of thy will
And if thou keep me in thy donjon here,
Content am I so that I see thy face
But once a day. . .

(Pelleas and Ettarre II. 229-236)

Pelleas, despite Ettarre’s loathing for him is utterly besotted at this point and he is taken by the sight of her. She has a captivating power over him, even though she does not wish to acknowledge her own allure. Rather, she goes so far as to mock his weakness and inability to look elsewhere, remarking:

. . . there he watches yet,
There like a dog before his master’s door!

(Pelleas and Ettarre II. 254-255)

This unrequited devotion seen in Pelleas is similar to that of the other knights for their loves—even when that love is returned as in the case of Guinevere and Lancelot—but Pelleas demonstrates the particular power of the female temptation and the evil that her body instills within the watcher.

Pelleas’s musings often consider the same sexuality that is openly feared. He reflects the forbidden thoughts that are usually only half-heartedly suppressed in every knight, envisioned but rarely spoken of, while the erotic nature of the female in general becomes increasingly more apparent in Tennyson’s descriptions and comparisons of her to the nature of the world.

In the *Idylls*, women are consistently described in the context of nature. In their beauty, character and influence, they are nature's agents (Ahern 94). Maintaining the Victorian vision of the ideal woman, they are expected to be fertile and pure, supportive and true. When Vivien presents herself to the Queen, she begs:

Save, save me thou—Woman of women—thine
 The wreath of beauty, thine the crown of power,
 Be thine the balm of pity, O Heaven's own white
 Earth-angel, stainless bride of stainless King—
 (Merlin and Vivien ll. 77-80)

But this plea is a mocking lie. Guinevere is undoubtedly of the earth, but she is no angel or stainless bride. Vivien is already convinced of the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot and her words only highlight the expected gender-imposed characteristics the Queen is failing to uphold. Rather, Guinevere is the rose of the world:

A rose, one rose, and this was wondrous fair,
 One rose, a rose that gladdened earth and sky,
 One rose, my rose, that sweeten'd all mine air
 I cared not for the thorns; the thorns were there.
 (Pelleas and Ettarre ll. 392-395)

Her nature is such that she will not be just admired; she may bite back if a man is not careful where he places his hand and faith. There is, however, something in addition to the thorns settling within the rose that is perceived as impure and destructive. Nature—the passion and instinct of Guinevere—further defiles the rose with almost parasitic connotations. The lay of the rose ends with “he dies who loves it,—if the worm be there,” describing the worm as the underlying affair (Pelleas and Ettarre ll. 400). Again, the affair is blamed as the cause of Arthur's failures and eventual death. The sweetness of the rose is thus sullied by the nature of Guinevere and her actions.

Even as Guinevere is a rose, so the earth as a whole continues to be a metaphor for the female. Women remain subordinate to man, since he might work the land and change the landscape, but women also provide direction for his hand based on socially-determined conditions. In Camelot's courts, the chivalric and courtly concept of men winning glory for a favored woman is almost brutal (Sparer 122). Females are the very foundation of Arthur's court and they are expected to serve a role as the fertile earth that encourages and eventually yields to man, while the knight is to follow a code that will eventually accumulate his rewards of labor through the pursuit of his beloved:

To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
 To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
 And worship her by years of noble deeds,
 Until they won her; for indeed I knew
 Of no more subtle master under heaven
 Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
 Not only to keep down the base in man,
 But teach high thought, and amiable words
 And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
 And love of truth, and all that makes a man.

(Guinevere ll. 471-480)

The women are perceived to be flawless, a goal to strive for and maintain above all else, whatever the cost. But the knight who strives for a maiden's love is bound hopelessly to this passionate earth, for the female serves as a master tool to shape and teach him how to be a man. This shaping, however, is rarely found through positive reinforcement. Instead, women are critical, perceiving, mocking and often exploiting the weakness in each man. In the instance of Arthur, Guinevere scorns the king when speaking to Lancelot as the King leaves them alone with little hesitation.

'Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King,
 That passionate perfection, my good lord—
 But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?
 He never spake word of reproach to me,
 He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,

He cares not for me: only here to-day
 There gleam'd a vague suspicion in his eyes. . .
 He is all fault who hath no fault at all:
 For who loves me must have a touch of earth. . .

(Lancelot and Elaine ll. 121-127, 132-133)

Guinevere is critical of her husband, bothered by his 'passionate perfection' that she really sees as a lack of passion. Her words are disdainful and she sees in Arthur a blind and foolish man, too absorbed in his idealized perception of the people around him to see the faults in others. She points out that Arthur's ultimate fault is that he is perceived by others as having no fault at all, placing him on a level above normal mortals. In this, Guinevere notes that he needs to be brought back down to equal level with others if he wishes to truly have her love, since she is a worldly being and can only love someone that is touched by the earth, touched by nature. In this, "Lancelot, the flower of bravery" succeeds where Arthur "who honours his own word, / as if it were his God's" does not (Lancelot and Elaine ll. 113, 143-144). Lancelot clearly is bound to Guinevere as the flower is bound to the soil that holds its roots, he is touched by earth. Arthur, on the other hand, asks the impossible from the people "to make them like himself" without understanding the limits and the desires of most mortals (ll. 131). This exchange that happens before the final diamond tournament, the only lengthy meeting of Guinevere, Lancelot and Arthur, is the first time that the King even appears to suspect any relationship between his wife and prized knight and still it is seen only as a faint shadow. Guinevere and Lancelot, however, know that the rumor of their relationship has spread throughout the court for some time, but until this moment Arthur has remained willfully oblivious to the affair (and he continues to deny it until it is thrown at his feet by Modred later). This love triangle, then, is only possible because of Arthur's misplaced trust. Using Arthur's good faith against him, Guinevere is able to spitefully manipulate him into leaving her alone with Lancelot, of whom she is also brutally critical. Even with her beloved, Guinevere is constantly shaping him with the unyielding nature of a master and goddess. Despite his following her wishes to remain behind after Arthur has gone, Guinevere still ridicules Lancelot for behaving as their enemies

would expect and taking advantage of the King's trust (which she constantly does), making Lancelot feel as if he has lied for her in vain. Even so, Guinevere seeks his company and admits she belongs to him in all but marriage, showing a clever and deliberate exploitation of both of the men in her life, demonstrating the very power the Victorians feared to tempt and control men through their weaknesses.

Critical almost to an extreme, Guinevere nonetheless continues to reflect the idolized maiden in the minds of Arthur, Lancelot and many of the other knights. She retains the power to shape the men around her according to her will, while the men willingly follow her desires according to the code that is the foundation of their society. However noble this idea may be, when a knight places all his hopes on his idolized maiden, he often partakes in adventures or challenges that involve the useless destruction of life. These acts questionably *encourage* rather than suppress the base in man as they seek reward for their efforts. For example, Lancelot's constant pursuit of Guinevere involves taking part in all of her tournaments over nine years with the goal:

. . . to give at last
 The price of half a realm, his costly gift,
 Hard-won and hardly won with bruise and blow,
 With deaths of others, and almost his own,
 The nine-year-fought-for diamonds. . .

(Lancelot and Elaine II. 1156-1160)

In our society today, it is questionable whether this concept of 'courtliness'—the savage battle and even slaughter of men for fame and a lady— can be dually associated with 'high thought,' even though the courtly and knightly ideals may support this amorous pursuit. Lancelot fights to win the diamond prizes for Guinevere, as is expected of him as her knight. However, he often needs not only to bleed, but to kill other men, simply for the hope of creating a necklace that will profess his love for Guinevere. There is no doubt that Lancelot's gift and efforts follow the courtly ideal expected of a knight, but the eventual rejection of the diamonds is a harsh and brutal response that provides no positive stimulation for the

labors he undertook in order to demonstrate his devotion. Guinevere may be his foundation, his earth, but as she casts his gift out her window, she yields nothing to reward his efforts to cultivate their relationship.

Effort and hard work, of course, are essential to Arthur's society. Arthur depends on each knight to recognize their responsibilities toward a principle of order, whether they personally benefit or not. This order centers on establishing harmony through spiritual values and a general belief in the prevalence of good, faith being the primary foundation (Priestly 242). Societies are founded on faith and the faith between its people, yet in Tennyson faith takes a purely nonrational form (Landow). Arthur places all his faith in Guinevere as his foundation, but because she has proven to be instinctively and sexually driven towards another man, there is natural opposition within her toward Arthur's demands. "Obedience is the bond of rule," according to Arthur, yet Guinevere has begun to change the social order (Passing of Arthur II. 262). Just as the Victorians were experiencing a gradual social shift towards acknowledging more power in the female, Guinevere chooses to rebel against the demands placed on her by her society and her husband (Ahern 97). In her one action, her one personal decision, she becomes ridiculed because in public she attempts to maintain her faithfulness and fails. Everyone knows of the affair except Arthur who remains blind out of his belief in the good of all people.

The goodness Arthur convinces himself is there remains a hopeful idealization. To him, everything is perfect on the surface, but like the rose in the lay, he must look further. Tennyson returns to the metaphor of the flower, taking a step beyond the worm and connecting Guinevere's and Lancelot's affair with the disintegration of purity and knightly honor.

So strange, of such a kind, that all of pure,
Noble, and knightly in me twined and clung
Round that one sin, until the wholesome flower
And poisonous grew together, each as each,
Not to be pluck'd asunder. . .

(Holy Grail II. 770-774)

Lancelot speaks as if his sin was involuntary in the beginning, as if Guinevere in her natural malice took advantage of his weakness. His words indicate bewilderment that Guinevere managed to gain power over him as he acknowledges that once he was enthralled by her, he could not live without her. It was as if he became infected by her poison and it spread to consume his thoughts and desires. The blame is placed on Guinevere for Lancelot's failure to find the Holy Grail, further enforcing that Guinevere has become an infection to her society. Sexually manipulative and the ultimate temptation to lead a man astray, she is equated with harlotry and prostitution, eventually bringing everyone down with her rapidly spreading disease (Ahern 108). The result of her actions reflects the Victorians fears of public sexual displays.

She like a new disease, unknown to men,
 Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,
 Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps
 The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse
 With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.

(Guinevere II. 515-519)

She has spread among the people, unchecked for her wickedness. As a prostitute would seduce a man, so Guinevere draws the people in while stealing their good sense and values. Here, she is not the goddess they once praised her as, but the devil in disguise working to destroy the world.

Through this display of perceived enticement—all the fault of the female—Guinevere becomes the Eve of her society. Her one action brings down the opinion of all women while it destroys the world Arthur has created (Ahern 102). She has rejected the spiritual values that were placed on her as a foundation for her society and everything falls apart. The knights begin calling Arthur a great fool for his faith and reject his ideals as impossible and not applicable to life, turning away from the very vows they wholeheartedly honored before (Priestly 247). Suddenly, “the vow that binds too strictly snaps itself” and Guinevere's unfaithfulness demonstrates that the Queen does not take her King seriously (Last Tournament II. 652). The knights abruptly display the same ideals of liberty and personal freedom that

the mid-19th century Victorian middle and lower classes gradually began calling for (Wojtczak). Just as it became clear in Victorian society that a king and Parliament were no longer the only source of power, so the knights of Arthur's court realize that a man who holds himself to such high ideals and is then fool enough to not see the adultery of his wife is no longer fit to be worshiped with such reverence. The time for such blind loyalty is over:

They served their use, their time; for every knight
Believed himself a greater than himself,
And every follower eyed him as a God;
Till he, being lifted up beyond himself,
Did mightier deeds than otherwise he had done
And so the realm was made. . .

(Last Tournament ll. 671-676)

There is acknowledgement that some good has been done, but the knights are ready for reform. Arthur had become a God-figure and then fell when his goddess Guinevere fell. In this failure, the *Idylls* become an allegory for the collapse of all society and individuals (Priestly 242). It is characteristic of the cycle of generations that power over the conditions of the world can only be maintained for so long before the people and their opinions begin to change.

This change, however, is a consistent renewal over time. Guinevere epitomizes the fallen woman, a concept of Victorian society usually only allowing the female to be redeemed through death (Lee). Like a cycle, it is nature that reclaims even the most putrid body and transforms it into something the earth can absorb (Auerbach 41). Yet in Tennyson's work, Guinevere is absorbed by her society *before* death, once she professes to be sinner and adulteress. Her first real step towards renewal is her acknowledgement that she must say farewell to Lancelot. She recognizes that their relationship is at its end and even when Lancelot offers to protect her in his castle, Guinevere makes the choice to deny this desire they both share and commit herself to a convent, realizing even so she cannot hide from her actions.

Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself!
 Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou
 Unwedded: yet rise now, and let us fly,
 For I will draw me into sanctuary,
 And bide my doom.

(Guinevere ll. 117-121)

Guinevere parts with Lancelot, seeking shelter in the nunnery of Almesbury where the full guilt of her shame finally becomes tangible. She is gradually preyed on by her grief for being caught by Modred and causing the war between Arthur and Lancelot, constantly weeping for the pains of her heart. Her novice companion during this time is essential in pushing Guinevere even farther towards earthly redemption as she harshly highlights the Queen's faults and fears, singing:

'Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!
 Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
 Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

'No light had we: for that we do repent;
 And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
 Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

'No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
 O let us in, that we may find the light!
 Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.

Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
 O let us in, though late, to kiss his feet!
 No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now.

(Guinevere ll. 166-177)

This song marks the conclusion of Guinevere's previous life and no matter how much she may wish things to return to the way they were, the door to that time has been closed to her. Guinevere has sought shelter in the convent from the wickedness of her actions, hoping for sanctuary, torn by the understanding that it is too late to undo what has already been done. Without a doubt, she feels the full weight of the implications of this song and she cannot bear the words of the novice who in her

ignorance continues to speak harshly about the Queen's and Lancelot's famous sin. As the novice speaks against Guinevere without knowing she is addressing her, the girl continues to point out the Queen's faults and ridicule Lancelot, unintentionally goading Guinevere into anger. However, after casting the novice from her sight, Guinevere is still bothered by the girl's words and reflects:

. . . my own too-fearful guilt,
 Simpler than any child, betrays itself.
 But help me, heaven, for surely I repent.
 For what is true repentance but in thought—
 Not ev'n in inmost thought to think again
 The sins that made the past so pleasant to us:
 And I have sworn never to see him more,
 To see him more.

(Guinevere II. 368-375)

This repentance, however, makes clear that Guinevere is deeply troubled by the outcome of her actions. Disturbed by her uneasiness, Guinevere tries to convince herself that she is sorry for the affair and will not dwell on it anymore, even as she undoubtedly continues to love Lancelot. She was so caught up in the joy her beloved could offer (which apparently Arthur could not) that the magnitude of her actions has only just set in with the innocent prattling of the novice. Beyond doubt, this is the moment when Guinevere realized that she *wants* to be forgiven (even if she hasn't quite truly sought repentance), so when Arthur finds her in the nunnery, she grovels at his feet ('to kiss his feet!'), seeking forgiveness as if he were indeed the God who might grant it. Arthur accepts this position, even if his knights no longer acknowledge this power within him, and the King proclaims to Guinevere:

. . . I forgive thee, as Eternal God
 Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest

(Guinevere II. 541-542)

Arthur grants the forgiveness Guinevere seeks, but he calls on her to do whatever else she needs to save her soul from the smut of her actions. Still, it is not until Arthur ends his speech and he leaves her that Guinevere finally breaks down completely and proclaims her true regret crying:

. . . Gone—my lord!
 Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain!
 And he forgave me, and I could not speak.
 Farewell? I should have answer'd his farewell.
 His mercy choked me. Gone, my lord the King,
 My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?
 The shadow of another cleaves to me,
 And makes me one pollution: he, the King,
 Call'd me polluted: shall I kill myself?
 What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,
 If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;
 No, nor by living can I live it down.

(Guinevere ll. 607-618)

At this point, the fallen woman has utterly accepted that she will remain shamed in the eyes of the world forever. She acknowledges her regret and the status of Arthur over her, admitting that she greatly wronged and virtually destroyed him and his society because of her actions. Yet, in this moment she is transfigured by this confession of her own nature and she finds a new freedom (Auerbach 39). Now that Guinevere has recognized her sin and sought forgiveness, she can commit to working to save and preserve her damaged soul (Priestly 249). With help from the novice and the absolution of Arthur, Guinevere finally has the strength to confront the temptress and manipulator that resided within.

And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven
 My wickedness to him, and left me hope
 That in mine own heart I can live down sin
 And be his mate hereafter in the heavens
 Before high God. (Guinevere ll. 629- 633)

Arthur, in retaining his faith in Guinevere, has offered her hope for her future. In a sort of rebirth, the fallen Queen begins to redirect her impulsive emotions and energies towards what would be viewed by Victorians as a more positive and respectable lifestyle. Alone, repentant, she transcends to become the God of her own world and her own spirituality within the convent. No longer bound by the nature of her sexuality or the pressure of standing as an idol, Guinevere is suddenly freed from society's expectations and able to commit herself wholeheartedly to an ideal of faith with no ties to the pursuit of earthly pleasure. Where before she worked against the world, Guinevere now fits into the nunnery as just another devoted servant "wear[ing] out in almsdeed and in prayer," some years later being elevated to Abbess "for her good deeds and her pure life" (Guinevere ll. 681, 687). Against Victorian convention, the absolution Guinevere needed to be redeemed before death is found in this transformation from sinner to Abbess. Just as Victorian society experienced a number of reforms and new possibilities, so in this idyll the cycle of the fallen woman was broken.

With the transformation of the fallen women and another cycle resolved, Tennyson's *Idylls of a King* becomes an allegorical narrative of Victorian times (Priestly 240). The status of women and the perceptions of gender were gradually changing as the world continued to develop. Guinevere remains a symbol of this shift and the collapse of old ideals. Her character is basely instinctual, as the Victorians believed of all women, while her nature is one of complicated layers. She is the beautiful rose, a goddess and idolized model of her species, yet she is infected with disease. As she acts against Arthur's established order of faith, the knights her worshipers follow Guinevere's rebellion and the world collapses into chaos. Still, there is hope to be found in the persistence of faith, the search for redemption and the rejection of base instinct. So although Guinevere is marred by the shame of her sin, society flexes to accept her transformed person as the earth absorbs both the godly and the fallen.

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