

5-2017

Alfred Lord Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron, and the Arthurian  
Legends: Re-writing and Re-envisioning Women's Roles in 19th  
Century England

Lisa Wagenhurst  
*Dominican University of California*

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2017.hum.03>

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

**Recommended Citation**

Wagenhurst, Lisa, "Alfred Lord Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron, and the Arthurian  
Legends: Re-writing and Re-envisioning Women's Roles in 19th Century England" (2017).  
*Graduate Master's Theses, Capstones, and Culminating Projects*. 273.  
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2017.hum.03>

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at  
Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Master's Theses, Capstones, and  
Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information,  
please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON, JULIA MARGARET CAMERON, AND THE ARTHURIAN  
LEGENDS: RE-WRITING AND RE-ENVISIONING WOMEN'S ROLES IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
ENGLAND

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Humanities

by

Lisa Diane Wagenhurst  
San Rafael, California  
May 2017

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Lisa Diane Wagenhurst, Candidate

Date 5/8/2017

Dr. Joan Baranow, Chair

Date 5/8/2017

Dr. Leslie Ross, Primary Thesis Advisor

Date 5/8/2017

Professor Thomas Burke, Secondary Thesis Advisor

Date 5/8/2017

Copyright 2017—Lisa Diane Wagenhurst  
All rights reserved

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Arthurian Background: The Enduring Appeal.....	5
Chapter Two: Social Background of Victorian England.....	11
Chapter Three: Tennyson's Idylls as Mirrors of Victorian Ideals.....	16
Chapter Four: Cameron's Series as Mirror's of Tennyson's Ideals.....	23
Conclusion.....	38
List of Illustrations.....	43
Selected Bibliography.....	53

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Queen Guinevere.....	44
Figure 2: The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere.....	45
Figure 3:Merlin and Vivien.....	46
Figure 4:Merlin and Vivien, The Enchantment.....	47
Figure 5:King Arthur.....	48
Figure 6: The Novice and the Queen.....	49
Figure 7: Alfred Lord Tennyson.....	50
Figure 8: Julia Margaret Cameron.....	51
Figure 9: Enid.....	52

## ABSTRACT

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) the poet and Julia Margaret Cameron the photographer (1813-1879) worked collaboratively on the Idylls of the King; a work of epic poetry that Tennyson wrote about the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. His re-envisioned tales were cautionary and provided guidelines as to how women should behave or face the consequences of causing the downfall of society. Victorian society was in a precarious situation as women were expected to behave in certain ways, but at the same time they were finding their voices and beginning to speak out about patriarchal society and their own displeasure at how they had been treated. At the same time that Tennyson was writing about how women should behave and remain in their expected social roles, he chose a woman to photograph and illustrate his work. Although there is a certain irony in this collaboration given the times they lived in, things were changing and women were beginning to gain a voice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my first reader Leslie Ross who encouraged me to continue with this topic which initially was so big I couldn't work on it. Without her help and guidance to reinvision this project I would not have been able to complete it.

I would like to thank my initial second reader Judy Halebsky for her literary expertise and help with this project.

Thank you Thomas Burke for stepping in for my original second reader who had to go on sabbatical.

I would also like to thank my family who sacrificed many home cooked dinners and Sundays at the park and my absences at home in support of this project.

Most of all I would like to thank my mother, she has always believed that I could do this no matter what.

I dedicate this Master's degree to my grandmother who was unable to continue in school that she loved so much.



***“I hate to be tied down to say ‘this means that,’ because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation.” Alfred Lord Tennyson***

## INTRODUCTION

The medieval tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table have intrigued audiences for many centuries. These complex stories, presumably with origins in ancient oral traditions in the British Isles, have been added to, enhanced and updated through the ages. In each instance the re-telling, re-visioning, and re-interpretation of these ancient stories can be seen to reflect the social/political/historical eras in which they have been newly re-created. From medieval text traditions to modern film versions to feminist re-writings, the Arthurian legends have had an enduring appeal with their motifs of heroic “knights in shining armor” and “damsels in distress.” This study concentrates on the 19<sup>th</sup> century period in England, focusing upon two major figures: the male writer Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) and the female photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1813-1879). Their literary and artistic works can be seen to represent a specifically Victorian era updating of the medieval tales which reflect the perception and the roles of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

During the nineteenth century, England experienced a medieval revival.

Medievalism is the system of belief and practice characteristic of the Middle Ages, or devotion to elements of that period which has been expressed in areas such as architecture, literature, music, art, philosophy, scholarship and various vehicles of popular culture,” (Roberts 38)

This revival was shown in many ways through literature, art, dramatic plays and masquerade balls. The interpretation which the Victorians in England experienced this revival was through their own cultural lens and as we explore their ideals we will see how this came about. Each era over time has contributed its own works of art, architecture, literature, music, philosophy and scholarship to contribute to the medievalism movement through the ages and the Victorians were no different. They left photographic evidence of the revival which was based on their socio-political and cultural viewpoints.

The Arthurian legends also experienced a revival of popularity during the nineteenth century. The primary motivation of this movement was to reassert traditional social and political values as an antidote to the evils of the new industrialism. Victorians were enamored of the ideals of chivalry and many men wished to engage in platonic male friendships as knights of King Arthur's Round Table did. As often as Victorians have been depicted as boring, staid and prudish; they loved to have parties and most often these were fancy dress or costume balls. The theme was often medieval; since they loved to dress up and play act as characters out of the legends of King Arthur. Once photography made its debut, we can see the evidence of the dress up sessions from photographs that were taken at masquerade balls of the time. We also see evidence of this in Julia Margaret Cameron's work as she often had the subjects of her photographs dress up in medieval costumes before they posed for her.

Cameron was interested in theatrical plays before becoming interested in photography and spent a lot of time making costumes and casting friends and family in her productions. She was inspired by nature, art, poetry and the bible as well as allegory and history; her theatrical performances were well attended and planned to the last detail. Because she had so much experience in the visual arts of the theatre, I believe that she transferred her own brand to her photographs and she often portrayed her characters in medieval dress.

Literary works of the time include retellings of the Arthurian legends. These tales of King Arthur and his famous Knights of the Round Table captured the imagination of many young men who dreamed of becoming knights. Many young men adopted the knights that they read about in these tales --Percival, Galahad and Lancelot-- as their ideal role models and strove to be chaste, good, true and valiant as they grew into manhood. Tennyson was occupied with writing his *Idylls of the King* during this time which was also in keeping with this medieval revival theme. However, his writings also bore a strong

resemblance to the moral conduct manuals written for women of the time; aside from being a guide for young men to follow.

Many Victorians increasingly viewed art and literature as more than mere luxuries in life, but as a crucial part of social policy. In addition, the professionalization of the arts in the nineteenth century made it possible for the first time in English history for artists and authors to make a great deal of money solely from their artistic production. (Olsen 385)

As we will see, this revival had not only social, political and cultural significance it also became known as a time when women were struggling to find their voices, but they were also still being constrained by societal boundaries about what constitutes the correct behavior for a woman. Women of social standing were particularly aware of their prescribed roles as they were very constrained in their roles as wives and mothers.

Only men could own property, conduct business, work in industry and make decisions. Women were essentially the property of their fathers and then their husbands. If they were unmarried and had no father then it was a brother, uncle or cousin who took charge. Women were rarely alone and they always had a man to “look” after them. Women were treated as if they were too frail or feeble minded to make decisions of importance. This is why women always had a male guardian; if they were single they were married off to a husband as soon as possible. Most women were complacent and accepting of their fate, however, occasionally there was a woman who flouted tradition and made her own way in the world. Even in the Victorian era, which has always been portrayed as a staunch and unforgiving era, there are those who made a name for themselves in unconventional ways.

“What seems to be emerging from the work of social historians is the assertion that Victorian society may be characterized as being divided into two

clearly identifiable and opposing sexual ideologies, and that these ideologies run roughly along class lines. The familiar pattern of conduct, if not as an exact description of reality—while less constrained forms of sexual expression characterized the new working class.” (Fee 632)

Apparently, some historians are now saying that the Victorians were not as prudish and uptight as we have been led to believe. Just as we have been led to believe that this era was fraught with sexual repression and a lack of humor, I have found that this is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the Victorian era. Victorians were very curious people and they had interesting ideas about a lot of things. They liked parties and making merry. They were interested in the occult and attended séances; they took photographs with their dead posed with them. Sometimes it was the only photo of the deceased. In all of the literature and research that I have read, despite the queen being in mourning for so long and being terribly sad and lonely, the people of nineteenth century England managed to find new outlets for entertainment and fun.

## CHAPTER ONE: ARTHURIAN BACKGROUND THE ENDURING APPEAL

The story of Arthur, England's foundational myth, has attracted artists, sculptors, playwrights, poets, and novelists for over fourteen hundred years. King Arthur was a legendary British king who has held the attention of audiences worldwide for centuries. The charm and appeal of the stories and legends surrounding this most popular King has captivated adults and children of all ages throughout its history: and they continue to do so today. "Versions of the folk tradition of King Arthur's survival proliferated in the nineteenth-century publications; these legends offer the most literal rendition of Arthur's 'recall to life' in Victorian culture." (Morris 7)

The character of Arthur was continually re-written to echo the needs and ideals of the era. He changed shape with each century to accommodate its prevailing styles and values. In the twelfth century, the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere was added to the basic legends, as was the Grail quest. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stories of additional heroes and lovers of Arthur's court were added. His fame designated him as one of the world's great leaders, on a par with Alexander and Charlemagne. He was eventually anointed one of the world's Nine Worthies, primarily through Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative of his life. New material, such as the story of Tristan and Iseult, was carefully incorporated in ways that made it seem an original part of Camelot's history.

The first of the two most influential versions of the Arthurian in English was written by Sir Thomas Malory while in prison, under the title *Le Morte d'Arthur*, given by its publisher William Caxton. The book is believed to have been published in 1485 and considered by many – notably Virginia Woolf – to be the first book printed in English. The disapproval of critics and other authors squelched Arthur's growing popularity, which had begun to distract the public's attention from the story of Christ and his church. What is important here is to observe that when Arthur returned to the public eye in the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century, he did so in full force, through "Tennyson's

exquisite production of the *Idylls of the King*. The poet worked on the epic poem throughout his career, publishing it in segments and revisions from 1856 to 1885. There are several other Victorian accounts of the legends, but Tennyson's poetic version made Arthur a household presence in England." (Melville 5)

Many adaptations through the centuries have been re-envisioned, retold, and enhanced to add characters and take them away to suit the needs of the author. Between 1500 and 1800 there were many versions written but for 200 years the Middle Ages became an unfashionable time for England. "In 1634 Malory wrote *Le Morte D'Arthur*. In 1691 Henry Purcell's composition of King Arthur was first performed. It was partly derived of medieval King Arthur legend but also used Germanic mythology." (Staines 58) Today there continues to be a love of these legends and many revivals continue to take place. There are movies, theatrical productions and historical reproductions on television that are watched by millions of people. Countless websites abound for the Arthurian research enthusiast.

Although the themes, events and characters of the Arthurian legend varied widely from text to text, and there is no one canonical version, Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of events often served as the starting point for later stories. Geoffrey of Monmouth (1095-c. 1155) was a British cleric and one of the major figures in the development of British historiography and the popularity of the tale of King Arthur.

When I was ten years old I was a voracious reader and I read one of my mother's books The Crystal Cave by Mary Stewart, just one version of Arthurian legend; I was immediately hooked. I begged for a public library card because my school library didn't carry enough books for me to read about King Arthur. I remember being told by a boy in my class that books about King Arthur were only for boys. It didn't matter to me that he thought that way. I read everything I could get my hands on when I was a kid including the Hardy Boys Mysteries. I was completely immersed in the magical world of Camelot and I lived the stories in my head and believed in the mysticism and magic the tales brought

to my life. Merlin the magician has always been my favorite character and once other characters were introduced by different authors and I learned of the different relationships between them, I was even more impressed to do research about the legendary king and his court. As a literary legend Arthur continues to entertain adults, children and scholars alike today.

There is still an argument in the scholarly community today about whether or not this legendary king really existed. There are claims that his legend may have been modeled after King Mark from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and there are claims that they may have found his gravesite, however, it is not proven yet. Legends are always partly true, and then built upon over and over again. As more is added and taken away the revisions are told differently to suit the audience and the storyteller. There is a reported dark time in history around the 6<sup>th</sup> century and this is where Arthurian legend is reported to have disappeared. No one is clear about what exactly happened, but there is a definite history after this time period.

Depending upon the reader and what they have read, the scene they see in their mind can either be a romantic depiction or a graphic battle scene. These pictures that we see depend on what we have read, seen, and heard in art and literary depictions. Fair maidens and handsome knights ride atop horseback readying for battle. Some see the mysterious cave where Merlin the magician resides, advising Arthur about what he should do and when he should make his moves. Depending upon the characters scenes or ideals that the reader has picked up from these tales, they are sure to have fond memories of these tales.

What interests me most about these legends is the romance that appears around them, despite the fact that the Middle Ages were such a difficult time for people to survive. The environment was harsh during winter, people didn't live long and food was scarce. Hygiene was a rarity so illness was rampant

and so were vermin. Yet, here stands Camelot, King Arthur's castle stands in sunshine and flowers and everyone lives happy and carefree. It is the stuff of legends.

Children and adults have been fascinated by these stories for ages. Victorians were no different than any other people before their time or since, in that they were fascinated with the romanticism that this period invoked. Not only were there literary, artistic and theatrical advancements at this time, there were also the beginnings of historical values being assigned to these legends as well. People were beginning to understand that legends are sometimes grounded in partial truths and scholars began to look at the historicity of Arthur and his famed court.

The origins of the Arthurian Legends; the stories of King Arthur came to be written by clerics in the medieval Era or the Middle Ages. These stories have been found in many Welsh and Celtic legends and myths and as such King Arthur has often been referred to as 'the one, true King of the Britons'. "Geoffrey of Monmouth a Welsh Cleric wrote a fictional book called *Historia Regum Britanniae*- The History of the King's of Britain in 1136." (Alchin 223)

This is the earliest known account of King Arthur. From these beginnings the legends have been re-told and re-envisioned according to the times in which the storytellers have lived. Basic characters of the initial legends have remained the same, however, in recent re-imaginings such as with the *Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley where there is a distinctly feminist slant; authors have taken the liberty to shape and re-shape these legends to meet the needs of their proposed audience. A romantic spell has been cast over these legends over time and people have been captivated by the tales that continue to be shared worldwide.



As troubadours and minstrels traveled from court to court they regaled each audience with tales of the mystical kingdom of Camelot and the brave King Arthur and his Knights the fair maidens, the feasts and jousts and battles won. Songs and stories abound about the virtues displayed by Arthur's Knights as part of the ancient code of chivalry: "religion," "courtesy," "generosity," "hospitality," "mercy," "fidelity," and "courage." Word spread about the king and his lady Guinevere and his famous Knight Lancelot. His other important court dwellers were his mentor Merlin the magician and Vivien the woman who beguiled Merlin and stole his power for her own.

Camelot was Arthur's kingdom and he ruled it well and there was peace throughout his kingdom. However, this was not something that would last for the King, as Camelot comes to its eventual decline and fall. The blame for this fall is placed upon the feet of Queen Guinevere and she is sent to a nunnery for her supposed adultery with Lancelot. So as the woman is blamed for the fall of society, she is blamed for the fall of man as well. This is a theme that has and will be replayed throughout history repeatedly. This is one of the ways in which men have tried to exact control over women through time. While Guinevere is at fault for the fall of Camelot, no one realizes that Vivien has gotten away with the ultimate prize she has stolen Merlin's powers; the great Magician has fallen. With his kingdom in ruin Arthur has no one to turn to and has no idea what he should do. Camelot cannot be rebuilt. It is a sad ending for a once truly magical place and time.

In the nineteenth century, a time of great upheaval, when the stable self was under attack from many quarters, it was reassuring to Victorians to find leadership in the lives of heroes whom they knew they could rely upon to provide a sense of continuity and inspiration. Through their life stories the British public could approach the future with hope and security, discovering and developing similarly heroic qualities within themselves. The oldest of these heroes was Arthur, understood as an historical person who embodied the highest ideals of chivalry – a shining example of what British character could be. Challenges to the belief in absolutes brought on by industrialization and its attendant ills, the contraction of the Empire, conflicts abroad, and scientific discoveries overturning received ideas at

home, all jarred British confidence, security, and peace of mind,  
motivating the desire for heroic inspiration. (Melville 139)

## CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND

The Victorian Age was characterized by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere- from advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location. Over time, this rapid transformation deeply affected the country's mood: an age that began with a confidence and optimism leading to economic boom and prosperity eventually gave way to uncertainty and doubt regarding Britain's place in the world. Today we associate the Victorian era with the Protestant work ethic, family values, religious observation and institutional faith. "The Victorian period lasted roughly sixty three years, which is longer than any other British monarch's reign. Although characterized as hypocritical, prudish, stuffy and narrow-minded, this may not be an accurate portrayal of the period." (Murfin 496)

The Victorian era was the reign of Queen Victoria: she ruled England from June 20, 1837 to January 22, 1901. Because the queen was in mourning for her husband from a very early age, the Victorian era has the reputation as one of a straight-laced and rigidly controlled society, when in reality Victoria was heartbroken and in mourning for her prince all of her remaining years. Because of this the queen wore black for the rest of her life and earned the reputation of being overly serious and possessing little or no sense of humor.

Although Victorian society could be repressive at times, there were great advances during this era and technological progress was one such area as evidenced with the Great Exhibition of 1851 that was held in London. This exhibition was organized and put on by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria attended several times. Among the many inventions that came into being during this era include the telephone, radio, sewing machine, vacuum, stamp, train, the steam engine and finally the camera. Other advances at the time saw reforms in

nursing care with Florence Nightingale; novelists began highlighting social issues with the plots in their stories.

During this time the Victorians became intrigued with the Middle Ages and the Arthurian revival. At the time artists were painting scenes from the Arthurian legends and the legends were being rewritten in poetry and literature and the chivalry of the medieval times made its way into Victorian society as an ideal for men to live. In order to understand how Victorians used the revival of Medievalism as a mirror for proper behavior one must understand their cultural and social norms. The goal for all middle class women was to marry and have a family. Girls were educated to a certain degree and taught the ways becoming of a lady. They were trained in how to run a household early in order to be married off and prepared to run their husband's home to do him credit. Women were expected to make their home a refuge for their husbands to return home from a hard day out in the so-called 'real' world. In Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood, Joan N. Burstyn writes, "The ideal woman was to be responsible for organizing a home to which men returned as to a haven of peace from a turbulent world outside." (235)

The middle-class during this era was growing and changing; both increasing in number and power and they wished to join the noble ranks. However, in order for them to do so there were general rules and behaviors necessary for them to learn and follow. A person was expected to act properly according to the day's conventions and values. Social historians have been known to assert that Victorian society had a clear division, depending on the social class of a woman belonged to; she was expected to behave in a socially dictated way. It was common for a woman of a higher class to be held to higher morals and standards; while her sisters who were of lower class were almost expected to live a less moral life. "If a woman acts out against these laws

imposed upon her, she disrupts both society and the natural order of things.” (Langlinais 76)

Women are brought up from an early age knowing their differences from men. They are the opposite of men and are taught to make sacrifices for others for their husbands and families. These women are expected to maintain the perfect home and the perfect appearance. Not only were these women to be the greatest help mate for their husbands but they were also to be the greatest treasure of their homes. Conduct manuals of the time directed these women to be an asset by being beautiful in appearance and delicate in their behavior.

Times were beginning to change during this period as well, and roles of women were also changing as the suffrage movement began in the United States. Literature of the Victorian era began to mirror social constructs and the drive that the middle-class had for social advancement. Some literary works touched upon the plight of the poor and the financial reward of the middle-class and marrying above station and some were meant as models for proper behavior. Mainly these literary works were directed toward the middle and noble classes.

Families were very important to Victorians and could be considered large compared to today’s standards; often with five or six children and the father at the head of the home. Victorians had a strict work ethic and encouraged hard work for all. Everyone was expected to know their place in the family and each child should know right from wrong in order to become a good moral adult. Raising children to become successful, respectable and social adults was considered the most important job of a parent.

Victorians were concerned with presenting a picture of the perfect family which included the social graces such as religious practice, family unity and class status; while at the center if this was the father, the patriarchal figure who resided at the head of the family. He was the breadwinner, the decision maker, the final say in all matters. The mother, however, had the final say in all household

manners and anything concerning the children, except of course, marriage. Sons were able to make their own choices about marriage with input from their fathers, but daughters had no say whatsoever in whom they married. According to Yildirim,

The Victorian era was a complex and paradoxical age which witnessed on the one hand a great expansion of wealth, power and culture and on the other, poverty and conflict. 'The Woman Question' was a hotly debated topic that predominated the period. Victorian Britain, with its rigid gender roles, was a strictly patriarchal society where discrimination against women was a dogmatic practice. As John Tosh describes, "it was a society characterized by increasingly sharp category distinctions of gender and sexuality." Victorian ideology of gender rested on the belief that women were both physically and intellectually inferior sex." (46)

The population of Great Britain doubled during Queen Victoria's time. Despite these advancements, women were still looked upon as property and the men still had a say in what women could and could not do. Women were not allowed to work outside the home as the men were the proud breadwinners and the woman was considered the home keeper. Women could not yet vote, hold an interest in politics or anything else that was intended for men only. Any women showing an interest in any of these things were ostracized by society and the community in which she lived. Women were constantly observed and scolded for any transgression however minor whether it was as small as speaking without being spoken to or showing too much of one's ankle.

The ideal woman during the Victorian era was compared to an angel, perfect both physically and morally, and Victorian art and fiction perpetuate this ideal. Society should ask nothing else of her than to be the perfect wife and mother and to take care of her husband's and the household's needs. She should be comforting and compassionate and provide a safe haven from a turbulent outside world. If the woman failed in these duties, she posed a threat to society, because she would

inevitably disrupt the order society had established. Any other behavior from a woman was considered unnatural.

“Women 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).” (Swanson 3) Views of male superiority rose from the conviction that by evolutionary advancements, there was a biological basis for the suppression of women.

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 own womanhood. (Burstyn 20)

Logically it could have been argued that men are bigger than women in general and it would make sense that a man’s skull would measure bigger than a woman’s and in modern times, we actually know this to be the truth. What is hard to understand is that in a time where science and technology were burgeoning forward, men did not understand that more investigation should have been done regardless of who had made this statement.

“Despite all of its seemingly irreversible codes of conduct and deeply rooted traditions, Victorian society was under strong influence of the age of reform and progress. The 19<sup>th</sup> century gradually brought about radical changes not only in scientific and economic terms but also in the rights of women.” (Yildirim 47) The societal criticism directed towards the injustices against women fostered the awareness of the Victorian female on the path to liberation. Women were beginning to awaken and even though it would take years for them to make progress they were tired of being treated like chattel and wanted more autonomy.

### CHAPTER THREE: TENNYSON'S IDYLLS AS MIRRORS OF VICTORIAN IDEALS

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was poet laureate of England during this era and had written poetry for most of his life. He was the fourth child of twelve and lived in a rectory in Somersby with his father Reverend George Clayton Tennyson and his mother Elizabeth Fytche. Tennyson began writing prose and verse at a young age and he was sent away to school for five years and then returned to be schooled by his father in the rectory library where he learned his love of literature and poetry. "By the time he was twelve he had written an epic of 6,000 lines, a drama in blank verse at fourteen and from there his career continued to grow." (Peterson 45)

In 1827, Tennyson and his brothers Frederick and Charles published an anonymous collection of poetry. In the summer of 1830 Tennyson volunteered in the army of the Spanish insurgent Torrijos and he marched around a little in the Pyrenees. He never met an enemy and returned home safe. A year later in 1831 Tennyson learned that his father was ill and left Cambridge to return to Somersby; a few days later his father was dead. The new rector allowed the Tennyson family to remain in the rectory for another six years and by 1837 the family had split apart and moved away and Alfred's siblings were all making their own homes. By this time Tennyson was able to become betrothed to Emily Sarah Sellwood (1813-1896), but it would be at least ten years before they could afford to be married.

It wasn't until 1842 that Tennyson's popularity became universal, once he published several of his works he became less of an enigma and more immediate to the public. He was beginning to take his place among friends and society as the leading poet of England. Among these friends and colleagues were Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Rogers, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Somehow during this period Tennyson was preyed upon by a con man who claimed to be with a "Patent Decorative Carving Company." Tennyson was talked into investing all of his money plus that of his siblings. The scheme fell apart and Tennyson became penniless. Soon



after he fell into an overwhelming hypochondria that he was placed under the care of a hypochondric physician. Under the physician's care he was put under complete rest and isolation and he was brought back to health. This episode would not be the last in his life. After this episode, Tennyson was able to receive £200 a year pension through public funds. Again in 1847, he had to undergo treatment for an episode of nervous prostration. (Peterson 45)

Finally, in 1850 he married his betrothed and was also made Poet Laureate by Queen Victoria. The position of poet laureate had a very small income attached to it, but the value of this position was the publicity for his books. Tennyson and his wife had a stillborn son in 1851 and their son Hallam was born alive in 1852. In 1853 they purchased a farm on the Isle of Wight called Farringford near a place named Freshwater. It was during this period on the island that he began putting his all into his work on the Arthurian tales that would make up his *Idylls*.

Early in his career he took up re-writing of the famous Arthurian legends and wrote his epic poetry *The Idylls of the King*. He continued working on this popular epic until nearly the end of his life into 1891. Some scholars have suggested that he wrote and re-wrote these tales as models of morality so that they could both entertain and teach at once. Initially the title poems were named for the women he wrote about; however, later publications of the poems changed the names of the poems to give priority to the male characters. According to Lupack, "The 1859 volume with its emphasis on the female characters had a tremendous impact on the development of the Arthurian legends and on the popular reaction to them." (90)

Since Tennyson was living in a time where women had prescribed roles, he may have been re-envisioning these tales to fall in line with the current Victorian culture and the literary world where comportment books were used as models for behavior. It's possible that he felt pressure as Poet Laureate to fall in line with contemporary ideals. Women during this era were expected to act a certain way, especially those of a noble class. Women had no legal independent status; they belonged to their father's

first and then to their husband. They could own no property; had no money of their own either earned or inherited. They could not make a will and they had no legal claim to their children. They were literally at the mercy of their husband and if they wanted to live a comfortable life, they followed the roles set forth for them by society.

Tennyson used these tales to create women in his poetry as a warning to Victorian women. He re-wrote the characters of the women in the Arthurian legends as the antithesis of expected Victorian females behaviors and roles. These characters are a direct response to Victorian society and morals (Setecka 160)

As poet laureate and cultural sage Tennyson may have written about these things thinking that it was expected of him given the times and how women were expected to behave. However, we must remember that he was influenced by his culture as was everyone else. “Despite its medieval setting, the *Idylls* undoubtedly promote Victorian domestic values.” (Ranum 40) He certainly seemed preoccupied with the role of women in Victorian England as it reflects itself in his poetry at this time. Linda Peterson states, “Tennyson’s lady poems reflect the poet’s interest in the ‘characteristics of women,’ including his recognition of what a masculine perspective might offer to questions about women’s nature, roles, influence and mission.” (26)

When Tennyson set out to write the *Idylls of the King*, he inadvertently created something that not only exemplified one of the most complex romance stories in English literature, but he also called the woman’s motives behind the story into question. Through the women in the *Idylls*, Tennyson revises his medieval sources to make adultery the central unifying element. This is especially true when it comes to the society. Just as men emulated the code of chivalry, women were expected to heed the warnings that were implicitly written into these legends.

Many Victorians increasingly viewed art and literature as more than mere luxuries of life, but as a crucial part of social policy. In addition, the professionalization of the arts in the nineteenth century made it possible for the first time in English history for artists and authors to make a great deal of money solely from their artistic production.(Olsen 385)

More and more authors were beginning to highlight the plight of the working class in their works and the line between social classes was becoming more defined. For the first time there was a written record of these differences and they became more public so that everyone was aware of the disparities between the social classes. This has left us a record of what happened historically and it was inevitable that women and their rights would infiltrate literature and the arts as well. Although it is not well known, Tennyson was actually very interested in the suffrage movement and even though the right to vote was not granted to women until years after his death, I am sure he would have highly approved.

“Tennyson was working on his first four *Idylls of the King* ‘Enid,’ ‘Vivien,’ ‘Elaine,’ and ‘Guinevere,’ (published in 1859) soon after he had become involved with the feminist controversy.” (Simpson 348)” Despite living in a society that told women and young girls exactly how to behave at all times, Tennyson was a man before his time. His *Idylls* dealt with complex societal and cultural issues that resonated with the times that he was living. Women were beginning to awaken and decided that they wanted more autonomy. Although according to Simpson,

Eggers suggests that the first four *Idylls* deal seriously with “the question of woman’s role in private and public life” and can be “appropriately classed as novelistic portrayals of nineteenth-century women. From this perspective, “Lancelot and Elaine” becomes a presentation not only of a negative artist but also of the humanly destructive effects of acting in accord with conventional beliefs about behavior by and treatment of young women.” (348)

Women are multidimensional and as such should be treated that way, but over time men decided that women were to be treated as fragile beings with small brains and that because of their hormones they were in danger of getting brain fevers if they were educated beyond a certain

degree. This is damaging to society and to everyone because it takes one half of the community and marks them as damaged and inadequate. If women dared to show one bit of intellect it would so threaten the men in their company that they could not stand it. Why it is so threatening to men for a woman to be able to have an intelligent and open ended conversation is something that has not been uncovered in this study.

I have also in mind the more general elements of a Victorian myth of maidenhood/womanhood which would include ideas of woman as the repository of moral values, of women as moral guides and exempla who purify and inspire the family, of women as self-sacrificing beings of angelic purity who make the home a temple of virtue and a refuge from a hostile combative world, of love of woman as a purifying passion, and of women as fragile creatures, prone to swooning, blushing, and delicate health. Finally, I also refer to the male attempt at a kind of sanctification of women, making maidens and wives the object of a kind of secular worship. (Simpson 348)

Tennyson worked on the Idylls of the King for a significant period of his life; this project consisted of a series of twelve connected poems that broadly cover the legends of King Arthur. They begin with Arthur falling in love with Guinevere to the ultimate downfall and ruin of his perfect kingdom Camelot. The poems focus on how evil is introduced to Camelot in the form of adulterous love between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. Once this love is found out it causes a dying out of hope among the Knights of the Round Table and breaks up the fellowship.

Idylls of the King had an immediate success, and Tennyson, who loathed publicity, had now acquired a sometimes embarrassing public fame. The *Enoch Arden* volume of 1864 perhaps represents the peak of his popularity. “New Arthurian Idylls were published in *The Holy Grail*, and other Poems in 1869 (dated 1870). These were again well received, though some readers were

beginning to show discomfort at the Victorian moral atmosphere that Tennyson had introduced into his source material from Sir Thomas Mallory.” (Ahern 57)

In 1879, Tennyson had already sought illustrations for his Idylls from some pre-Raphaelite painters, but he was unhappy with the liberties that they took with the illustrations. He wanted something different and couldn't work with the colorful painters who depicted medieval times in a way that he did not envision. Finally he approached Julia Margaret Cameron to ask if she would collaborate with him. She was his neighbor and friend. She lived on the Isle of Wight at Freshwater. She was reportedly delighted and felt that their mutual work would benefit them both greatly.

Victorians were interested in maintaining a connection with the past and this sparked the Arthurian revival for artists and poets alike. Victoria Olsen in “*Idylls of Real Life*,” makes the argument, “that Cameron’s photography reflects and transforms essentialized Victorian gender and class identities; she constructs paradoxical “idylls of life” that blur categories and distinctions.” (371) By looking at the photographs you can clearly see the image, but it is blurry and shadowy. It is distinct but meant to be non distinct at the same time, Cameron uses her lighting and the way she manages her camera equipment to get her images to come out this way. It gives viewers the idea of another world when they see it. Cameron and Tennyson set out to depict ancient heroes and heroines in a new light and they succeeded in doing just that.

Cameron and Tennyson were both concerned with gender and past as present in their work: each of them complementing the core work of the other. By then Tennyson had been friends with many of the artists that lived on the Isle of Wight, and he had even sat for several of Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs, but he had not thought of photography as his outlet for the vision in his mind as the illustrations for his *Idylls*. As he came to work more with his epic, he realized that Cameron’s photographs could be the only illustrations for this work. Her otherworldly, shadowy

forms and effects with lighting were the perfect complement to his poetry and he set out on an ironic collaboration which although at the time was an unheard of combination, came to be a wonderful piece of history and art.

Her photographs aimed to capture the qualities of innocence, virtue, wisdom, piety and passion that made them modern embodiments of classical, religious, and literary figures. Her artistic goals for photography, informed by the outward appearance and spiritual content of fifteenth-century Italian painting, were original in the medium of photography. (Sothorn 55)

It was unheard of that a woman and man would collaborate on a literary and artistic creation as this one; especially one that would be sold to the public for consumption. After all women held a certain place in society and they were expected to stay in that place. While men controlled what women did, there has been no mention of what Cameron's husband felt about her photographic endeavors or her collaboration with Tennyson. It is difficult in this time for us to understand how a woman of her time would have to ask for permission to do what she wanted to do; however, we must remember that this was a different time and women did not have the same freedoms that they enjoy today.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CAMERON'S SERIES AS MIRRORS OF TENNYSON'S IDEALS

### (THE IRONY)

“Julia Margaret Cameron was born Julia Margaret Pattle in Calcutta India to Adeline de l’Etang and James Pattle, a British official of the East India Company. Adeline de l’Etang was the daughter of Chevalier Antoine de l’Etang who had been a page of Marie Antoinette as well as an officer in the Garde de Corps of King Louis XVI.” (Cox 22) Cameron was educated in France but returned to India and married Charles Hay Cameron a jurist and member of the Law Commission stationed in Calcutta, he was twenty years her senior. They raised six of their own children and took in five young relations as well as a young Irish girl Cameron found begging on the streets of London.

When her husband retired in 1848 she moved with him to London, England. It was after a visit to the estate of Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1860 that the Cameron family moved to the Isle of Wight. Cameron was so taken with the beauty and tranquility of the island that she convinced her husband to purchase property and move the family there. The family decided to name their new home Dimbola Lodge after their home in Ceylon. Cameron enjoyed taking care of her family and playing the social hostess for her husband. (Cox 66)

It was a good time for the family on the island and Julia had many friends among the inhabitants there. She was busy taking care of her family and socializing with these friends of hers on the island. She first became aware of photography from a friend who lived in London and was tinkering with photography.

Cameron was first introduced to photography by her friend Sir John Herschel the astronomer, around 1841 as he was beginning his own foray into photography began to share some of his Talbotype images with her. A Talbotype, also known as Calotype image is an early photographic process introduced in 1841 by William Henry Fox Talbot, using paper coated with silver iodide. The term calotype

comes from the Greek (kalos) “beautiful” and (tupos) “impression.”  
(Cox 89)

In December 1863 Julia Margaret Cameron received her first camera as a gift from her daughter and son-in-law. Written on the card attached were the words ‘it may amuse you, Mother, to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater’ (her home on the Isle Wight). Cameron was forty-eight and a mother of six, deeply religious, well read, somewhat eccentric and friend to many of Victorian England’s greatest minds such as the painter G. F. Watts (1817-1904), the poets Robert Browning (1812-1889) Henry Taylor (1800-1886) and Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) Poet Laureate of England; the scientists Charles Darwin (1809-1892) and Sir John Herschel (1792-1871) and the historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881).

In the decade that followed the gift, the camera became far more than an amusement to her: “from the first moment I handled my lens with a tender ardor, “she wrote, “and it has become to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigor.” Her mesmerizing portraits and figure studies in literary and biblical themes were unprecedented in her time and remain among the most highly admired Victorian photographs.” (Wynne-Davies 153)

A woman ahead of her time, she was ambitious and free thinking when most Victorian women were passive and demure. She took the challenges of handling large cameras and dangerous chemicals at a time when photography was known as ‘The Black Art’. Ignoring conventions, she experimented with composition and focus. Many Victorians believed that a photograph could steal their souls and were quite superstitious of having their photographs taken. Often the only photograph a person had taken in their life was a photo taken upon their death.

From its inception, photography was considered by many to be a black art partaking of the occult. The photographic image was a substitute



for, or even a part of, the person appearing in the image – a layer of the surface appearance, the “skin,” or, perhaps the spirit - stolen by the camera. Photography is so deeply imbricated in modern life in the twenty-first century that it is difficult to imagine the initial impact on Victorian culture of this new medium, which could cut an instant from the constant flow of time, preserve the image of a person, and freeze it forever. Photography seemed a way to transcend death. The portrait produced, though always already part of the past, was accepted as a trace of actual reality, proof that a scene had existed. Seeing an image gradually appear on a piece of white paper in the likeness of an observed scene, without the touch of a human hand or any other apparent authoring agency, convinced many people of photography’s supernatural power and magical origins. (Melville 220)

Today she is credited with creating the first photographic close-up portraits and influencing the subsequent Pictorialist movement with her use of diffused focus.

The Pictorialist movement is the name given to an international style and aesthetic movement that dominated photography during the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is no standard definition of the term, but in general it refers to a style in which the photographer has somehow manipulated what would otherwise be a straightforward photograph as a means of ‘creating’ an image rather than simply recording it. (Ronner)

Her portraits of “famous men and fair women” reflect her time within the Freshwater circle, the birth of celebrity and her ambitions to be recognized as a significant artist of her time. Her photographs are widely displayed worldwide in museums worldwide.” (Hill 448) Cameron used her lack of experience to create images that were thought provoking and emotion evoking. I can’t look at one of her photographs without seeing some strong

When Cameron began her exploration into photography, I don’t believe that she realized how much of an impact it would have on herself or her family. She is one of the most recognized

photographers today. Her new passion was meant as a diversion from boredom and it had become a profession almost an obsession before she knew it.

She lived with her camera turning her chicken coop into a photography studio and using her coal shed as a dark room. She was most interested in photographing beautiful women, whom she often had dressed in costumes and portrayed as allegorical or historical figures. “Within eighteen months she had sold eighty prints to the Victoria and Albert Museum, had established a studio in two of its rooms, and made arrangements with the West End print sellers Colnaghi to publish and sell her photographs.” (Wynne-Davies 151)

Julia Margaret Cameron made many contributions to the field of photography. She was the first woman in the nineteenth century to take up photography professionally and to make a name in the field. Any search in a library database will call up many images and texts dedicated to Cameron. She was an amateur and considered herself that throughout her photographic career. She would never consider herself a professional as it contained certain connotations with it in the public eye and it would never do for her social standing to be considered a professional photographer.

Cameron was proud of her amateur status: being a professional photographer in the nineteenth century carried a stigma. It designated one as belonging to a class of workers, many of them itinerant, who supported themselves by earning money through targeting their subjects, often opportunistically – equivalent to today’s “commercial photographer” – the taker of special occasion photographs and portraits. Cameron considered herself an artist who pursued photography as high art; her wares were not available by requisition or retainer. Oil portraits were out of reach for most of the population; photographic portraits were promoted as an adequate substitute, offering a realistic, if not always flattering likeness for a reasonable price. An amateur was accepted in society as genteel and artistic; the professional photographer was too often seen as a hack who pandered to the public for a living. (Melville 40)

Her photographs may be found all over the internet in catalogs all over the world. In fact, as I began my research her photographs were some of the first I found for Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Her photographs haunted me and as I write this paper I can clearly see the images in my head and they spur me on to complete my project. Her work is truly remarkable and brings with it a spell of the romanticism that was cast upon the legends of King Arthur. They are ethereal and eerie and breathtaking yet sad and eloquent. I believe that this was the effect that Tennyson had in mind when he was writing his *Idylls*. As such, Cameron's illustrations are appropriate, to the *Idylls* precisely because they resist both pure realism and romanticism, and in so doing, like the *Idylls* themselves, they engage the shadowy area that links in between." (M. Hill 455)

In the beginning when she was first starting out she had no real knowledge of what she was doing. She was new to the past time of photography and she was just learning. In her memoir of 1874 Annals of My Glass House, Cameron writes, "I began with no knowledge of the art," "I did not know where to place my dark box, how to focus my sitter, and my first picture I effaced to my consternation by rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass." (23)

Once she was highly criticized for her shadowy, hazy prints, but now she is heralded for her different style. Her technique with shadows and focus has created photographs that appear as if from a dream sequence. Her other-worldly style is what attracts some people to her work. No wonder Alfred Lord Tennyson decided to collaborate with her in illustrating his poetic works of the King Arthur Legends. The pairing of their works would have been more successful had the printing of books not been such an expensive endeavor at the time. Only those with wealth were able to afford the volume.

"Now famed as a leading pioneer in nineteenth Century photography, Julia Margaret Cameron was an unlikely candidate to change the face of photography." (Hill 445)

From the moment she handled a camera, her soul was stirred by this art; that stirring created a longing within her to create a record, something pushed her to share a reality of what is seen specifically with her new found gift. Her vision of the world changed as she looked through the lens of her camera. Victorians, most of which were not familiar with photography regarded it with suspicion and they were reluctant to trust this new technology. A superstitious fear of losing one's soul was a common belief among Victorians and the fear that if they posed for a photograph that their soul would then be contained in that print kept many away from photography. During this period, photographs were not available to all classes, because of the expense, often photographs were taken of deceased loved ones. Victorian death photos were once popular and often the only photographs taken of people; only if the family could afford to have them taken of their loved ones.

No evidence suggests that Cameron had aspirations in the visual arts until photography captured her imagination. When she made her first successful image in 1864, photography was little over twenty-five years old. It was one of the most popular innovations of the nineteenth century, and yet the medium was practiced by few mostly because the making of photographic negatives and prints required time, money and a high degree of skill in working with toxic chemical solutions. In spite of the challenges, Cameron took to the new medium, and with little more than a lesson or two from other photographers, she created a style that was distinctly her own. (Wolf 9).

One to break from tradition, Cameron used changes in light, size of photographs and candid shots to create a style that can only be attributed to her. "She often filled the frame with the head of her subject to produce images of startling immediacy. She also used selective focus and dramatic lighting to make penetrating portraits unlike any seen before." (Wolf 9) Her work showed her particular way of seeing the world and her images have a way of stirring intense emotion. Although Cameron photographed some of the most well known men of her time, most of her photographs

were of women. Cameron's inspiration reportedly came from poetry, mythology, art history and the Bible. Her photos of women are her pictures of femininity and these photos display the complex nature of emotions that women experience.

Cameron went on to photograph scenes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Tennyson who disliked the liberty that current Raphaelite painters took with interpreting his characters, sat for Cameron; after seeing her work he decided that they should collaborate with his writings of the Idylls of the King and her illustrating them with photography. Critics of the day were harsh with their reviews of Cameron's work.

The photographic journal reviewing her submissions to the annual exhibition of the Photographic Society of Scotland in 1865, reported photograph their soul with condescension that infuriated her: "Mrs. Cameron exhibits her series of out-of-focus portraits of celebrities. We must give this lady credit for daring originality, but at the expense of all other photographic qualities. A true artist would employ all the resources at her disposal, in whatever branch of art he might practice. In these pictures, all that is good in photography has been neglected and the short comings of the art are prominently exhibited. (Wynne-Davies 161)

Despite the negative review Cameron remained true to her ideal of what her photography portrayed, and how it should be portrayed. She remained steadfast and is now well known for innovative style. From the start she set out to do something unique. Art like any other discipline repeats its style throughout time. Cameron was a woman who decided what she liked and made her mark on the world with it. She was still in the process of learning her craft. Her art portrays the poetic sense of life and evokes an emotion that transports the viewer into the dream world of her art. "The sense of poetic truth, rather than photographic truthfulness, is largely due to Cameron's lighting, to the sense of breath and spirit instilled by her model's slight movement during the long exposure and

to the softness of the focus.” (Wynne-Davies 153) She managed to capture an ethereal quality with rich emotional depth the way she felt those emotions herself. She may have refined her style through lack of education or even by accidental means; however, she continued to be true to herself in practicing her art.

Cameron states, “My first successes in my out-of-focus pictures were a fluke. That is to say, that when focusing and coming to something which to my eye, was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all photographers insist on. In so doing, she gave the feeling of flesh without—an exaggerated idea of the bark of skin. (Wynne-Davis 150)

Her images have the ability to evoke powerful emotions in the viewer. Because she was influenced by myth, poetry, her style took on those qualities and she was able to portray her subjects in her own vision. Her photos cause a dreamlike experience for the viewer that gives a momentary pause, as the viewer cannot help but reach out to the subjects in the photograph as if they are right before them. As is seen with Merlin and Vivien (Figure 1) the dreamlike sequence causes the viewer to feel as if they are there and can momentarily reach out and touch them. This strongly evoked feeling is what led me to choose Cameron as the artist for this project. She evokes this realness with her otherworldliness, which brings the image and text of the poetry alive at once. Her portrayal of women in photos was not excluded only to female roles, Cameron used women to portray any character she needed at the time and was not above using a woman to portray a man’s role if so needed.

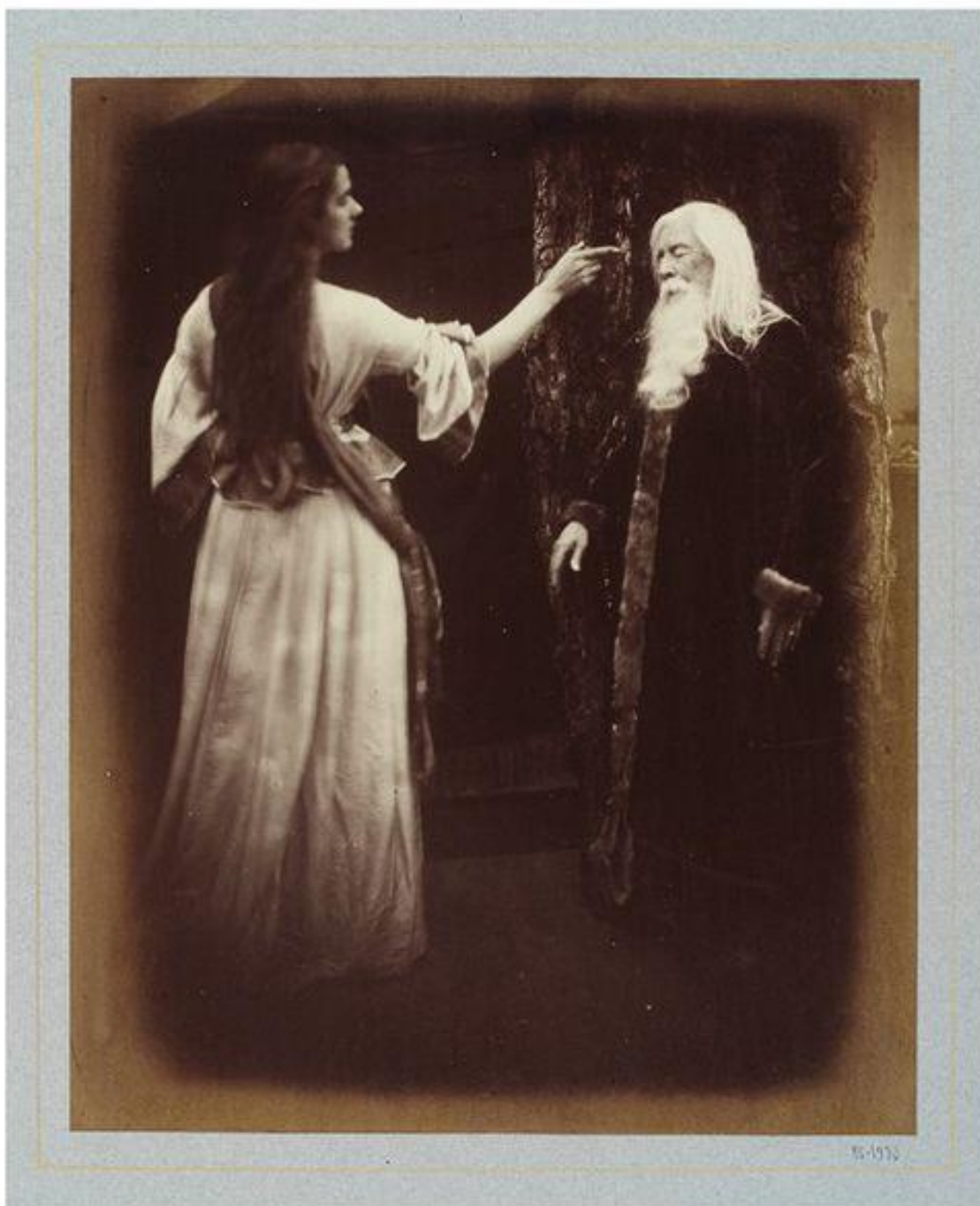


Figure 1. *Merlin and Vivien* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

“On the one hand, Cameron’s images of women suggest the ideals against which women of the day were measured. On the other hand, they offered Victorian viewers many possible models of feminine behavior.” (Wynne-Davies 160) Like Tennyson’s models for behavior Cameron’s models could be thought of as models for good and bad behavior where Vivien is a temptress and Guinevere is an adulteress, Elaine and Enid are the perfect ideal for the Victorian lady. However, there is no such thing as perfection and to continue to hold women to this standard set them up for eventual failure.

“Julia Margaret Cameron’s illustrated edition of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1874-1875) provides an extended example of the contradictory gender, class and aesthetic ideologies visible in photography especially within the context of the Victorian market for art and literature.” (Olsen 371) Her photographic illustrations portrayed the title women of these *Idylls* as either the unrequited love or the wanton woman who corrupted the man. These photos as well as the poetic lines of the *Idylls* gave differing ideas of what a woman should be, contrary to the beliefs of the time. She was able to show with her photos the emotion behind the poetry that Tennyson had written. She was so able to show pure emotion in her photography that her illustrations were the perfect match. “In presenting her work as both reflecting and transforming essentialized Victorian gender and class identities, she constructs paradoxical “idylls of real life” that blur categories and distinctions.” (Olsen 371) The women in particular are able to show their emotions in the photos in a way that paintings are unable to capture. By looking at the photograph of Enid (Figure 2) we see that she is heartbroken because Geraint has accused her of being unfaithful and is treating her badly. In truth she has done nothing to betray him and tries to understand what she has done, in this photograph you see her confusion and heartbreak in the way that she holds herself and looks.





Figure 2. *Enid* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

Her photographic illustrations often took on the quality of oil paintings of the same period, including rich details, historical costumes, and intricate props and draperies. It is clear that Cameron saw these photographs as art, comparable to the paintings they imitated. *Elaine ‘the Lily maid of Astolat’* (Figure 3) recalls the emotion and detail of William Holman Hunt’s painting, *The Lady of Shalott*. Yet Cameron chose instead not to illustrate Tennyson’s popular earlier poem but his later,

more refined and finished *Lancelot and Elaine*. According to legend, Elaine dies for love of Lancelot, after he champions her and wears her scarf at the tournament only to return to his beloved Guinevere. Here she is seen gazing at the shield she guards for him, while he uses her brother's plain white shield to disguise his identity. After the heartbroken Elaine dies, her body floats down the river in a boat to Camelot, where Lancelot, Arthur, and even Guinevere come together to recognize the sacrifice she has made for love and to pray for her soul.

“In Cameron's depiction Elaine does not look out towards the viewer. Rather, she turns her gaze sideways, toward the shield of Lancelot and the cover that she has woven for it, on which her hand so lovingly grazes. It is that shield with its various emblems which symbolize Lancelot's chivalric excellence, explaining Elaine's infatuation with Arthur's best knight. Her dreamy stare confirms her romantic hopes.” (Sothorn 54)



Figure 3. *Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolot* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

In a time when a dramatic shift in gender roles and ideals was taking place due to the advances in technology, Cameron was a pioneer in reconfiguring the images of what the ideal woman should be. Women were supposed to be the ‘Angel’ that the man of the house returned to after a long day in the world, she was supposed to uphold all those qualities of a virtuous and obedient wife. In Cameron’s photos you can see the angel; however, you can also see the other emotions that women experience.

On occasion Cameron would create photographic “illustrations” of contemporary poetry by such figures as Charles Kingsley and her beloved Tennyson. These portraits usually required a cast of characters, and to fill these roles she would enlist family, friends, household servants, and guests. For Tennyson’s epic “*Idylls of the King*,” Cameron planned to create a series of vignettes representing dramatic moments in the poem. Costumes were sewn and fitted to sitters, sets were assembled. Like amateur theater productions, these works were not always successful, especially when Cameron’s husband, dressed in a hooded robe with his white beard flowing, could not help laughing during a shoot. Yet the results pleased Tennyson and, when the second volume of “*Idylls*” was published in 1875, Cameron’s photographs accompanied the verses. “It is immortality for me to be bound up with you, Alfred,” wrote Cameron in one of her many letters to the poet (Cox 32)

It was obvious that the friendship between Cameron and Tennyson was a warm one. She was very fond of him and wrote to him often. She wrote of him in her memoirs and remembers him fondly. She felt that her affiliation with him gave her certain immortality and that their joint work on the Idylls of the King would forever join them. Reportedly there was competition in the relationship as well, as they each vied for the dominant place in their friendship and working relationship and Cameron was known for her assertiveness and control over everything.

Competition was an inevitable element in the complex friendship between Tennyson and Cameron, most likely intensified by her knowledge that his *Idylls* had earned enough for him to buy his large home Farringford with its surrounding land, while her photographic *Idylls* could not even bring in sufficient returns to allow her family to remain in England. Cameron refused to be

intimidated by Tennyson, and constantly strove to achieve an equal, if not more powerful position in their relationship. (Melville 53)

Healthy competition is always good in any relationship as it makes each party strive to be the best that they can. It helps everyone bring out the best in themselves, surely this is what made Tennyson continue to make changes to his *Idylls* until late in his life and it is most likely why Cameron made over 200 shots before deciding upon the twelve photographs she would put forward for illustration of the Idylls of the King.

## CONCLUSION

Of all the things that happened in the growth during the nineteenth century, the growth of industrialism and technological advancements were among the most exciting. The invention of the camera was a happy one for Alfred Lord Tennyson and Julia Margaret Cameron. A time when women were ruled by the patriarchy in their homes and in society, it was highly unusual to see collaboration between a man and a woman. As I stated before women were basically property themselves, they could not own property, have their own money, and had no rights to their children. So how is it that a woman was able to break into a field only known to men; but not only that, actually make money and a name for herself doing so. She did something that other women couldn't do. She was ahead of her time.

Tennyson lived in the same time and apparently was more on the feminist side than maybe he even knew. From all of the research that I have done with this paper, I have seen that he never even second guessed himself when he asked Cameron to illustrate his poems. He was enthusiastic and very happy with the results. Although he has been accused of using this poetry as a means to reinforce moral Victorian behavior, some scholars argue that he was actually portraying women in a three dimensional way instead. He allowed the women in his poems to have emotions, and intellectual ideas as well as free will to make mistakes. As you see with Queen Guinevere and The Little Novice (Figure 4) Guinevere joined a nunnery when Camelot fell and the blame was placed at her feet. She had an adulterous affair with Lancelot and ultimately caused the loss of her husband's kingdom and her husband. Now she has no love and is forever relegated to another place to live out her life. She is sad and contemplative.



Figure 4. *Queen Guinevere and The Little Novice* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

When Tennyson and Cameron got together to work on the *Idylls* the balance of his tales with her otherworldly photographs created an illusion and myth about them that no one else could have created together. “Cameron’s images capture a specific feeling and sentiment, and are full of symbolism and connotations. Her approach was more to the psychological portrayal of her subject, the ‘inner’ as well as ‘outer’ aspects. (Sothorn 55)

However, since Tennyson’s *Idylls* have been purported to coincide with the common Victorian era Comportment Manuals for women, it is somewhat ironic that Tennyson would choose to work hand in hand with a woman. This was certainly not a common occurrence in Victorian times. However, times were changing, even if they were not changing as quickly in England as they were in the United States, women were beginning to speak out about how they were being treated and seen by men. Tennyson and Cameron were friends and colleagues who were comfortable working together, it is doubtful that they thought of their collaboration as a social statement at the time. Those in their social circle may not have thought anything about it either, considering that Cameron’s children were grown and her duties at home were not as time consuming as they had been when she was younger. Perhaps it was because their peers were intellectuals and were more liberal than others or it could have been the isolation of their lives on the island.

All of the photos of the Illustrations, save the portraits of Tennyson and Arthur, show women in non-traditional roles: Vivien, Alice, Ida and Guinevere break conventional boundaries, defying normative expectations for women’s behavior, while Elaine, Maud, and Mariana, pioneer as solitary figures, women on their own. Even the obedient Enid shines for a while as a competent, clever, and spirited pioneer, as she manages to protect Geraint and silently navigate the challenges of a trip through harsh wilderness. There is no scarcity of traditional



women's roles to be found in the Laureate's large poetic oeuvre. Cameron might have chosen to illustrate the lives of domestic female protagonists like Annie Lee of "Enoch Arden" or the eponymous "Dora," for example. Through photography's assumed indexical correlation with reality, the Illustrations' images of unconventional women possess a persuasive, almost forensic, power to influence the viewer. They suggest historical truth by embodying the imagined characters in actual actors' bodies, all the more convincing in 1875, for the newness of photographic technology. The photographs contain visual traces of the actors' presence in the world – seemingly proof of their literary roles having existed. (Melville 289)

A male/female collaboration of this time that had been changed to favor the male characters, suddenly under Cameron's guidance had once again become about women. Yet, these women did not behave as traditional women of their time and it could be because of the nature of Cameron's desires for other women. It could also be just the sign of the times for all women. Regardless of what it was, Cameron and Tennyson seemed to work well together on their joint project and when they were no longer working together it has been reported that Tennyson missed her assertiveness and guidance for his own work.

"The liberties that Cameron took in presenting the Laureate's poetry turned the verse excerpts into a new text, one populated mostly by women. The Illustrations, intentionally or not, critiques the ideology of chivalry which permeated the roots of Victorian society." (Melville 60) Chivalry was one of the last ideals of nineteenth century men. The Victorians, were at the same time progressive and forward-looking, and nostalgic – they looked to past societies for inspiration on how to improve their own. From the medieval period, they drew from the ideals of chivalry or at least the folklore of chivalry that had been passed down through the ages. These ideals captured their imagination and let them practice the things that they thought men should strive to be.

Because of this forward thinking and fast changing time in history Tennyson and Cameron were allowed to collaborate on a project that would never have come to fruition in the past. A man and woman working together (especially not married to one another) was unheard of, but no one in their circle questioned it. When Cameron first picked up her camera, photography was little more than 20 years old. “As a woman perhaps, she was not expected to have an impact much further than her glasshouse studio, a converted chicken coop. Yet, Cameron would go on to create images that remain some of the most evocative and powerful in the history of photography. She took up this new medium with enthusiasm and strove to capture beauty in her work.” (Sothorn 54) While Tennyson was always a poet from a young age he was also someone who held a deep love of history and it shows in his works. “From the outset of his career, Tennyson’s imagination was drawn to the past and to visual images. He remarked that “it is the distance that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move.” (Melville 7). Both Tennyson and Cameron had skills that complemented each other and their collaboration was successful in its own right because of this.

## List of Illustrations



Figure 1: *Queen Guinevere* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874



Figure 2: *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

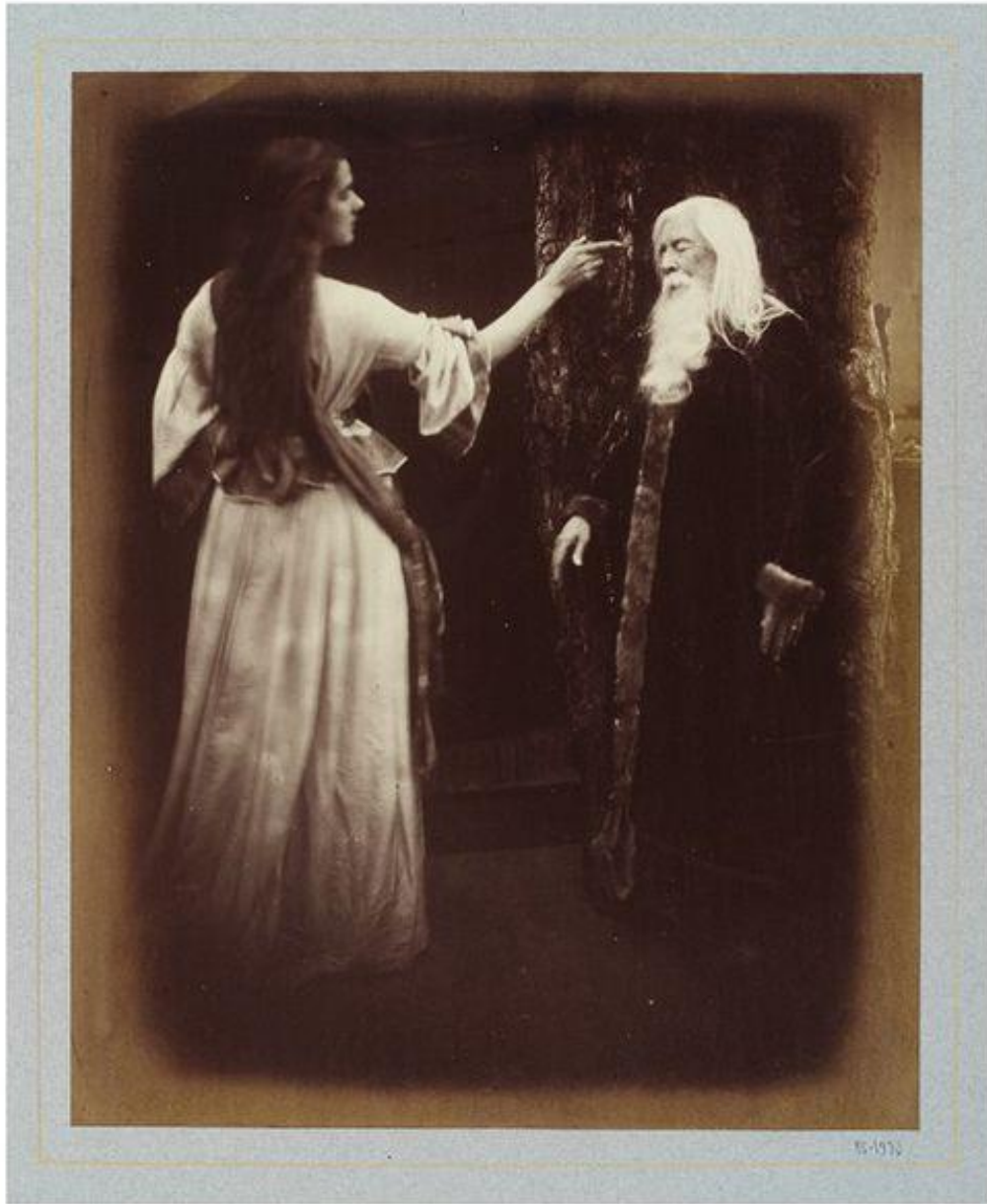


Figure 3: *Merlin and Vivien* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874



Figure 4: *Merlin and Viven: The Enchantment* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874





Figure 5: *King Arthur* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874





Figure 6: *The Queen and the Little Novice* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874

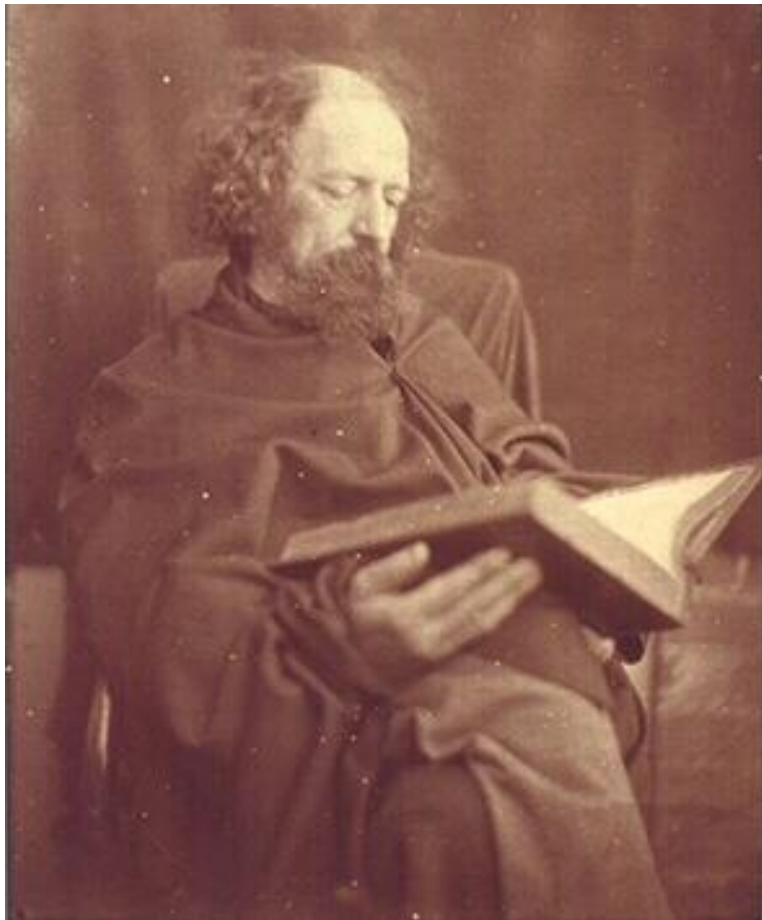


Figure 7: *Alfred Lord Tennyson* Julia Margaret Cameron 1874



Figure 8: *Julia Margaret Cameron* Henry Herschel Hay Cameron 1874



Figure 9: *Enid Julia Margaret Cameron* 1874

## Bibliography

- Adams, James Eli. Harlots and Base Interpreters: Scandal and Slander in “Idylls of the King”.  
Victorian Poetry. Vol 30, No. ¾, Centennial of Alfred, Lord Tennyson: 1809-1892  
(Autumn-Winter, 1992), pp.421-439
- Ahern, Stephen. “Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in  
Tennyson’s Idylls.” *Studies in Philology*, Vol 101, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp 88-112
- Alchin, Linda. "Medieval Life and Times." *Medieval Life and Times*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Sept.  
2016.
- Burstyn, Joan N. Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood
- Cameron, Julia Margaret, and Violet Hamilton. *Annals of My Glass House: an Autobiography*.  
Carterton, UK, Badger Prints, 2011.
- Cox, Julian and Ford, Colin. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs. Getty  
Publications. 2003.
- Fee, Elizabeth. “Psychology, Sexuality, and Social Control in Victorian England.” *Social  
Science Quarterly*, Vol 58, No. 4, March 1978. University of Texas Press.
- Hill, Marylu. “Shadowing Sense at war with Soul: Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic  
Illustrations of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King. *Victorian Poetry*, Vol 40, No4 (Winter  
2002), pp 445-462
- Hill, Rebecca. “Tennyson’s Fallen Women: The Dynamic of the Mad, the Depraved and the  
Unfatihful.”

Joseph, Gerhard. Tennyson's Three Women: The Thought within the image. *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 1-18.

Langlinais, Chantel. Framing the Victorian Heroine: Representations of the Ideal Woman in Art and Fiction. *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. Fall 2005, Vol. 22 Issue 2, pp. 73-93.

Lupack, Alan. "Popular Images Derived from Tennyson's Arthurian Poems." *Arthuriana*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue on the Arthurian Revival in Nineteenth Century (Summer 2011), pp. 90-118

Melville, Joan Virginia. "The Theatre of Anon: Julia Margaret Cameron, Virginia Woolf, and the Performance of Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King." *Columbia*, 2013.

Morris, Megan L. "Recalled to Life: King Arthur's Return and the Body of the Past in Nineteenth-Century England." *Arthuriana*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Special Issue on the Arthurian Revival in Nineteenth Century (Summer 2011), pp. 5-27

Murfin, Ross and Supriya M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical Literary Terms*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. Print

Olsen, Victoria. *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography*. Palgrave MacMillan. New York 2003

Olsen, Victoria. "Idylls of Real Life." *Victorian Poetry*, Aut/Win 95, Vol. 33 Issue ¾. 19 pp.

Peterson, Linda H. Tennyson and the Ladies. *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 47, No. 1 Tennyson at Two Hundred (Spring 2009), pp. 25-43

Ranum, Ingrid. "Tennyson's False Women: Vivien, Guinevere the Challenge to Victorian Domesticity."

Roberts, Helene E. Victorian Medievalism: Revival or Masquerade? *Browning Institute Studies*, Vol. 8 (1980), pp 11-44

Ronner, Abby. "Pictorialism: The Movement That Birthed Modern Photography." *Creators*, 11 Aug. 2015, [creators.vice.com/en\\_us/article/pictorialism-the-movement-that-birthed-modern-photography](http://creators.vice.com/en_us/article/pictorialism-the-movement-that-birthed-modern-photography). Accessed 8 May 2017.

Simpson, Arthur L. Elaine the Unfair, Elaine the Unloveable: The Socially Destructive Artist/Woman in Idylls of the King. *Modern Philology*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (Feb 1992), pp. 341-362

Sothorn, Hannah. "A New Form of Expression: Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographic Illustrations of Alfred Lord Tennyson's Poetry."

Staines, David. Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and Its Medieval Sources. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1982. Print.

Swanson, Kelsey. "Guinevere: Victorian Gender, Sexuality and Nature." *Literature* 330: Romancing Arthur. April

Wolf, Sylvia. "Modern Medium/Modern Artist Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographs of Women. *MoMA*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb, 1999). Pp. 8-11

Wynne-Davies, Marion. "Thro the Brilliant Eye: Julia Margaret Cameron's Illustrations to Tennyson's Idylls." *Women and Arthurian Literature* (1996): 150-61. Web.

Yildirim, Aşkın Haluk. "The Woman Question and the Victorian Literature on Gender." ["Kadın Sorunsalı ve Viktoryen Dönem Toplumsal Cinsiyet Edebiyatı"]. *Ekev Academic Review*, vol. 16, no. 52, June 2012, pp. 45-54. EBSCOhost,