

“HIS WAY IS THRO’ CHAOS AND THE BOTTOMLESS
AND PATHLESS”: THE GENDER OF MADNESS IN
ALFRED TENNYSON’S POETRY¹

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Abstract

This article deals with the theme of madness in Lord Alfred Tennyson’s poetry. It is well-known that several of Tennyson’s relatives suffered from bouts of insanity. Indeed, Tennyson himself at one time feared he would succumb to one or other mental disease. The subject has already drawn the attention of several Tennysonian specialists and Ann Colley devoted an entire book to it in 1985, but this essay focuses on the hitherto unnoticed importance of gender to the madness issue. It contends that Tennyson’s early poems, featuring melancholy, medieval young women as protagonists, gave him the opportunity of describing the disease in people who were far removed from his own situation and person. Only when he was happily married and the father of two sons did he create a male character who might be said to mirror some of his own experiences.

Throughout his career Tennyson turned to history and especially the Middle Ages when looking for characters and situations which might feed his poetry. Women, medieval women, were often the central characters of his most famous, most popular poems. No one can forget the wistful melody of “The Lady of Shalott” or the sad repetitiveness of “Mariana”. It is their music, undoubtedly, which first captures the audience’s ear. But the messages conveyed by these poems are no less intriguing. In these early poems, Tennyson, it has been argued, ponders over issues such as order and disorder, the position of the poet in society, the relationship between poetry and society. After 1850, when he had been appointed Poet Laureate, he believed his poetry, especially his narrative poetry, had a function to fulfil, had to have a bearing on society, even had to restore order in a society which on the face of it had lost control. Yet it is Tennyson’s interest in the control over one’s self and the potential loss of that control which I shall be concerned with here. That dimension too is manifestly present in those early poems named for romantic young women.

Thomas Carlyle, in a letter of 1844 to Ralph Waldo Emerson, describes the young Tennyson as “a man solitary and sad, as certain men are, dwelling in an element of gloom, – carrying a bit of Chaos about him, in short, which he is manufacturing into Cosmos!”² Certainly, in the early



decades of his life, Tennyson felt he might succumb to madness, as had his father and one of his brothers. In order to avoid this, Ann Colley observes, he faced this threat head on by observing the disease in others and by writing about it. “To study madness was to prevent enclosure”, she writes.³ Colley convincingly argues that madness shaped Tennyson’s “poetic posture” but she never touches upon the question of gender. The object of this essay, then, is to find out why Tennyson chose so many female characters in his portrayal of insanity.

In a little-known poem written in the late 1850s Alfred Tennyson describes one of Britain’s most formidable early heroines, the warrior-queen Boadicea:

Far in the East Boädicéa, standing loftily charioted,
Mad and maddening all that heard her in her fierce volubility,
Girt by half the tribes of Britain, near the colony Camulodine,
Yell’d and shriek’d between her daughters o’er a wild confederacy.⁴

The poem may have been prompted by a visit to his friend, the artist Thomas Thornycroft who, around that time, had sculpted a statue of Boadicea standing on a chariot, and flanked by her daughters. Many years later, that statue was moved to Victoria Bank in London and it can still be admired there (see Figure 1).

Boudicca or Boadicea, was the Celtic word for Victory, and the name given to a ferocious queen and priestess who lived in Southeastern Britain in about 61 A.D. We do not have her real name but we know she had been married to King Prasutagos of the Iceni (a Celtic tribe) and had born him two daughters. Prasutagos died in or around the year 60 and the Romans saw this as the sign to attack his people and appropriate all



Figure 1.

his goods and lands and to torture and rape his wife and daughters. The result was a rebellion of the Iceni people. Under the command of Boudicca they fought the Romans and won many victories. Their captives were sacrificed to the Goddess Andraste. Women especially were tortured, their breasts were cut off and stuffed in their mouths and they were impaled. In the end, however, Boudicca and her army were vanquished with terrible losses and she committed suicide.⁵

Tennyson's description of this belligerent queen betrays his fascination for her character but it also reveals his revulsion at her deeds. This woman is violent, too violent. She yells and shrieks, and therefore she is "mad and maddening". She merely wants revenge for what has been done to her ("Me they seized and me they tortured, me they lash'd and humiliated") and she will get it at whatever price even if that means sacrificing her own people. Towards the end of the poem Boudicca, her "evil tyrannies", and "her pitiless avarice" are blamed for the fate of the British people, the heavy losses her army suffered, because "out of evil evil flourishes" and "out of tyranny tyranny buds". The woman simply could not win. Tennyson was describing one of Britain's chief historical heroines as a hysterical character: the behaviour of this woman, it is clear, needs no emulation. From the outset she is labelled as "mad and maddening".

The issue of deviant behaviour, gender and Victorian literature has been addressed in countless books and articles. Sandra Gilbert and her colleague Susan Gubar named their seminal work on women writers of the nineteenth century after Bertha Mason, the madwoman in Charlotte Brontë's celebrated novel. Like Boudicca, Bertha Mason took violent action, in her case against the man who had enslaved her and against herself (since she committed suicide too). Again, like her she falls into the category of violent and empowering madwomen which Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* distinguishes from two other types, that of the delicate, sweet young lady whose insanity, like that of Shakespeare's Ophelia, invites pity and that of the desolate harmless Crazy Jane who spends her life craving for a lost lover.⁶ Yet Boudicca is really an exception in Tennyson's oeuvre. His poetry is far better known for its depiction of the singing Ophelias and the Crazy Janes which, it seems to me, mainly featured in his early poetry (that published in the 1830s and 1840s).

However, I should like to look, first, at *The Princess*, the long poem first published in 1847, dealing with the then controversial issue of the woman question, which seems to provide a link between the quite harmless melancholic women of the early period and the more violent portrayals of hysterical women in "Boudicca" and some of the Idylls. The poem starts with a walk in the grounds of Sir Walter Vivian a rich man with a house full of historical artefacts. The narrator stumbles on

a tale relating the story of a warrior-woman which, in many ways, reminds us of the story of Boudicca.

I dived in a hoard of tales that dealt with knights,
 Half-legend, half-historic, counts and kings
 Who laid about them at their wills and died;
 And mixt with these, a lady, one that arm'd
 Her own fair head, and sallying thro' the gate,
 Had beat her foes with slaughter from her walls.

"O miracle of women," said the book,
 "O noble heart who, being strait-besieged
 By this wild king to force her to his wish,
 Nor bent, nor broke, nor shunn'd a soldier's death,
 But now when all was lost or seem'd as lost –
 Her stature more than mortal in the burst
 Of sunrise, her arm lifted, eyes on fire –
 Brake with a blast of trumpets from the gate,
 And, falling on them like a thunderbolt,
 She trampled some beneath her horses' heels,
 And some were whelm'd with missiles of the wall,
 And some were push'd with lances from the rock,
 And part were drown'd within the whirling brook:
 O miracle of noble womanhood!"

It is this woman, this warrior who will act as the model for the protagonist of the story: Princess Ida. The princess refuses to marry Prince Hilarion because she wants to dedicate her life to the education of other women.⁷ To that end she has set up her own university, a place which no man is allowed to enter "on the pain of death". The prince, in love with this princess whom he has never met, sets out to find her with two of his friends hoping (against hope?) to make her change her mind. Yet, in order to be able to approach her, he and his friends decide to wear women's clothes. Interestingly, neither the hero nor the heroine are presented as being in their right minds and both are transgressing against their gender roles. He, it is said, has fits, "weird seizures" he calls them, when reality is blurred, and he moves among a world of shadows and all things "are and are not".⁸ This prince, dressed as a woman in most of the poem, is described at the beginning as "blue-eyed", "fair in face", "of temper amorous", "with lengths of yellow ringlets, like a girl". He is, in other words, a feminine kind of man with some of the "typical" feminine flaws. She, on the other hand, is a formidable presence, a good poet too and a woman with a vision. But none of the male characters believe it impossible to make her change her mind in the matter of men and marriage. King Gama, Hilarion's father, puts this rather crudely when arguing that the prince should "take her" and "brake her". Besides, he adds, "a lusty brace of twins may weed her of her folly".⁹

Folly then it is to want to change the roles assigned to the sexes. Although expressed rather crudely by one of the less likeable characters, it is, not surprisingly, that traditional role (marriage and family life) which the princess will opt for in the end. Both she and the prince will have to adapt themselves to a world, a symbolic order in Lacanian terms, which was there before them and which they will be unable to change. First, however, they have to realise how mistaken they were and are when wanting to subvert the traditional gender roles. Their behaviour has branded them as irrational to say the least, out of their minds certainly.

The turning point comes when the prince is wounded, nearly on the point of dying, and Prince Arac (the Princess’s brother) and both kings accuse Ida of unwomanly behaviour and, of being insane.¹⁰ It is then that she descends from her metaphorical pedestal to join “the soft and milky rabble of womankind”. In the end the prince recovers and both he and the princess acknowledge that it was wrong for her to want this “university for their own”. Eventually, therefore, she realises that she will find happiness and a “normal” life only if she marries the prince thus helping the prince accomplish his manhood.

The gender fluidity of Tennyson’s main characters in *The Princess* has already been touched upon by some scholars.¹¹ Less has been said, it seems to me, about the ways in which the prince’s feminine traits and the princess’s aspiration of male power and knowledge are consistently articulated in terms of, or related to, irrationality, madness and folly – a deviant behaviour which destabilises the existing order. The princess meets all prerequisites of a Tennysonian heroine doomed to die because of her unconventional behaviour. Yet her change of opinion and the Prince’s love for her save her from such a fate. Indeed, she is literally saved by the prince from drowning when her impetuous behaviour has caused her horse to stumble into the water. And, of course, there is the fact that the poem is called “mock-heroic” by its narrator. Death is an unlikely ending.

The ultimate example of a Tennysonian character whose deviant behaviour causes harm – if only to herself – is the Lady of Shalott, one of his earliest creations. This singing lady, confined to her tower, away from and above the world is condemned to weaving a web reflecting the world as she watches it, passing by her, in the mirror. The Lady of Shalott transgresses against “unwritten” laws after having seen Lancelot in all his glory. She looks down at Camelot and at Lancelot and the world around her breaks up, falls down, is shattered to pieces. She then realises that “The curse is on her” and she goes down to the river to orchestrate her own death. There have been many interpretations of the “Lady of Shalott” but it is the one given in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that is most interesting to my purpose here. Gilbert and Gubar point to this

poem amongst other things because of its relevance in a discussion on the colour white in Victorian iconography. They look at the empowering function of the colour for a real poet like Emily Dickinson or a fictional one like Aurora Leigh, and they observe the consistency with which mad women characters typically wear white. Dickens's Miss Havisham, for instance, and yes, the Lady of Shalott. The link between whiteness, madness and unrequited love seems more than obvious for these and other characters. Nearly all of Tennyson's women in white, who cross gender (and I should add perhaps class boundaries), and who transgress against social laws, suffer a narrative death in the end. Princess Ida is the exception. Her clothes are not described in any detail in the poem, but for one occasion, when she falls into the water, there is a reference to her "white robe".¹² She, therefore, is the perfect example of the empowered woman-poet whose unfeminine aspirations nearly turn her into a mad, unloved Miss Havisham. She can correct her ways just in time. The Lady of Burleigh, the central character in another Tennyson poem, is less fortunate. She was originally an ordinary village maiden who unknowingly falls in love with and marries a lord and then pines away when she realises that she has married above her own class. She too is buried, predictably, in her white wedding dress.

Some years later then, Tennyson wrote the poem "Lancelot and Elaine" for which, it is generally acknowledged, "The Lady of Shalott" functioned as some kind of draft copy. "Lancelot and Elaine" is entirely set in the context of Arthurian legend. Lancelot has given his shield to the young Elaine for her to take care of it while he takes part in a joust to win the diamond with which he wants to surprise the love of his life, Queen Guinevere. Elaine falls hopelessly in love with Lancelot and when she hears that he has been seriously wounded she decides to go and nurse him back to health. Her father only reluctantly allows her to go: "so then, get you gone, Being so very wilful you must go". Elaine is very wilful – in the sense of far too "stubborn" – for a young woman. The phrase continues to ring in her ears and changes into a warning of what will happen to her.

"Being so very wilful you must go,"
And changed itself and echoed in her heart,
"Being so very wilful you must die."

She becomes fixated on the choice between death and love, even turning this into some kind of ditty: "death or him", "him or death". When Sir Lancelot has finally recovered, she asks him to marry her, a favour he has to refuse because he has already committed himself to Guinevere. For a young maiden to propose to a knight of the Round Table seems totally out of order. His refusal signs her death warrant.

"I have gone mad. I love you: let me die." This is how she summarises

her situation. Lancelot offers her wealth and protection, but she only wants his company (read love). Lancelot thereupon leaves and she goes back home. When she has died she is, like the Lady of Shalott, dressed in white, placed in a barge and flown on the river to the palace.

Whereas the behaviour of the earlier Tennysonian heroines is presented and labelled as irrational, out of order, near to madness, by observers or narrators, it is Elaine herself who identifies her own behaviour as “madness” in this poem. In the scientific jargon of Tennyson’s own age, Elaine would definitely have been labelled as “hysterical”, an excellent example of that woman’s disease which seemed to affect so many Victorian women, leading to an identification of women and madness, and a re-naming even of madness as “the female malady”.¹³ Michel Foucault has convincingly demonstrated to what extent the female body was “hysterized” in the nineteenth century. He describes it as a

triple processus par lequel le corps de la femme a été analysé – qualifié et disqualifié – comme corps intégralement saturé de sexualité; par lequel ce corps a été intégré, sous l’effet d’une pathologie qui lui serait intrinsèque, au champ des pratiques médicales; par lequel enfin il a été mis en communication organique avec le corps social . . . : la Mère, avec son image négatif qui est la «femme nerveuse», constitue la forme la plus visible de cette hystérisation.¹⁴

Woman had become entirely defined by her sex. And hysteria was “a metaphor for everything unmanageable in the female sex”.¹⁵ Interesting too is Foucault’s reference to the work of Sir Thomas Sydenham, a scientist of the seventeenth century who posited that hysteria is a disease mainly affecting women of the middle and upper classes, less hardened to life’s experiences. And they, Sydenham claims, are even more vulnerable when sad:

peu de femmes soient hystériques lorsqu’elles sont accoutumées à une vie dure et laborieuse, mais qu’elles inclinent si fort à le devenir quand elles mènent une existence molle, oisive, luxueuse et relâchée; ou si quelque chagrin vient abattre leur courage.¹⁶

Tennyson’s young women follow this prescriptive pattern. They belong to the higher class and pine away as a result of unrequited love. Their unsuitable conduct, out of control, leads to deviant, hysterical behaviour and death. Mariana, Tennyson’s earliest victim chants her sad song at the end of each stanza:

She only said, “My life is dreary,
He cometh not,” she said;
She said, “I am weary, weary,
I would that I were dead!”

The Lady of Shalott actually sings until she dies, “chanted loudly, chanted lowly,/till her blood was frozen slowly”. And Fatima, living in

an unspecified dry and warm country, craves for death in spite of her "swift blood" if, that is, she cannot have the man she loves: "I *will* possess him or will die".¹⁷

The melancholy ladies of these early poems, however, turn into shrieking creatures in "Lancelot and Elaine" where the lovely (and still pure) Elaine is turned into a pitiable wretch in order to accentuate the totally unacceptable behaviour of the adulterous Queen. Guinevere is the very picture of the hysterical woman:

she choked,
 And sharply turned about to hide her face,
 Past to her chamber, and there flung herself
 Down on the great King's couch, and writhed upon it,
 And clenched her fingers till they bit the palm,
 And shrieked out "Traitor" to the unhearing wall,
 Then flashed into wild tears, and rose again,
 And moved about her palace, proud and pale.

Does all this show us Tennyson as one who subscribes to the general (Victorian) view that women ought not to express sexual desire, that they are feeble creatures prone to hysterical fits when they do not get what they want, that these beautiful (often in essence idle) young women who have set their hearts on the wrong men are better off in a death which allows them to preserve and perpetuate their virginity (Guinevere is an exception here) and their beauty? Does it show that Tennyson's texts are typical products of a patriarchal society, "sites which reflect a dominant ideology", with women who deviate from the rules set by this society being marginalised, indeed stigmatised as mad? Are these poems mere illustrations of his stark statement on "One Who Affected An Effeminate Manner" that "man-woman is not woman-man"? Stereotypical denunciation is certainly part of the process at work in the portrayal of Boudicca and Guinevere but I believe that Tennyson's early creations are not to be set on a par with those.

It is, as I indicated at the beginning of this article, quite impossible to see the melancholy female characters as entirely separate from Tennyson the man. We know that the poet was himself haunted by the 'black blood' which was said to run in the veins of the Tennyson family. To be sure, like several members of the Tennyson family, Alfred Tennyson suffered frequent bouts of depression and melancholia so he knew that neurosis was not necessarily of the female gender. Now if this personal experience inspired and informed his poetry, as Ann Colley tells us it did, then why did he subscribe to the prevalent image? Why did he perpetuate the cliché of the female malady in the form of these young women, invariably set in a medieval context? Was it his conscious or unconscious contribution to the heated controversy over the woman question, his attempt to maintain the male domination over the female

sex? Maybe. There are a few more hypotheses with which we move onto slightly more dangerous ground though. One could, for instance, propose that it may have been more comfortable for him, when introducing the subject of deviant behaviour, to opt for heroines removed from his personal situation in time, in sex, in age even. This may have helped him to objectify, observe and perhaps forestall his own spells of depression.¹⁸ And there is the more down to earth explanation which draws a link between Tennyson’s poetry and the contemporary literary market. Tennyson, during most of his career, wanted to achieve just that: a career. He needed the money, he needed the fame to survive as a poet and as a human being. He postponed his marriage because he could not afford a wife (his letters contain several references to his financial worries). His poetry, in order to help him achieve these goals, had – on a superficial level at least – to subscribe to the prevalent views concerning deviant behaviour and gender so as to help restore the order which at times society seemed to have lost. Finally, there is the line of thought which thinks of Tennyson as the new male poet, among a host of very popular female poets, who assumed a series of female personae in a bid to attract a considerable female readership.¹⁹

One might even argue that all these aspects (therapeutic quality of the writing, underwriting of the dominant ideas, the marketability of certain themes, etc) combined, made Tennyson focus on those sad, melancholy women in the first decades of his career. But to be fair, and although Tennyson certainly had a penchant for female protagonists, he did have some male protagonists as well. And those who know his oeuvre were surely waiting for this, my last illustration of the theme of madness. Most relevant for this paper’s theme is the main character of his monodrama *Maud*, first published in 1855. “Maud or the Madness” (its first subtitle) was described by himself as: “a little *Hamlet*, the history of the morbid, poetic soul, under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age. He is the heir of madness”. Tennyson wrote *Maud* in 1854–1855 (the name, which as a reviewer shrewdly remarked, can easily be turned into “mad” by just dropping one letter), after he was happily married, after the birth of two sons. If my earlier claim is correct, that is that Tennyson opted to burden his young medieval aristocratic women with the yoke of madness, perhaps in an effort to keep the disease at bay or to distance himself personally from the taint, then one might assume that this need diminished with the poet’s settling down into a quietly happy marriage and a successful career. This appears to be corroborated to some extent when one reads *Maud* since its male protagonist, often closely associated with the author himself, is a member of a family with latent insanity and he realises he may succumb to the disease any moment. But, after having fallen in love with Maud he ponders: “If I be dear to some one else,/ Then I should be to myself more dear”

(531–532). He might, in other words, not be such a melancholic wreck anymore if someone loved him. The love story is not a happy one though. The narrator accidentally kills Maud's brother in a fight and in this way inadvertently brings about her early death. He then falls ill and has to spend some time even in an asylum. Eventually, however, he recovers and converts his passion for Maud into an ardent craving to serve his country in the impending Crimean war.

To Tennyson's surprise (but not to ours) *Maud* was slashed by most critics and it made some of his admirers turn away in disgust (one of them wrote him an anonymous letter signed "yours with aversion").²⁰ This seems to indicate that Tennyson did not realise he was himself deviating from the acceptable representations of madness when opting for a *male* melancholic madman. He was happy to find that some doctors were "on his side".²¹ One of them vouched for the accuracy of the mental pathology of the protagonist. So, this convinced Tennyson that he had reached at least some kind of a truth, the truth as to the nature of the hero's madness.²² And he also stressed the fact that the hero had method in his madness, that he *spoke* some truths as well. This madman then should be believed. Again, in his definition of the poem, Tennyson referred to the influence of a "recklessly speculative age" on this morbid soul. Thus, although the poet consistently distanced himself from the narrator of the poem, it was this nameless *male* "madman" who was given the privilege to voice some of Tennyson's own, then most pressing ethical concerns: "is not the true war that of evil and good".²³ It was in *Maud* that he articulated the controversial conviction that a just war, for him a new and noble purpose, was going to save his country from an over-exposure to commerce and liberate it from a peace which in reality is "full of wrongs and shame". In a letter to A.T. Gurney he commented indignantly:

I do not see how from the poem I could be pronounced with certainty either peace or war man. I wonder that you and others did not find out that all along the man was intended to have an hereditary vein of insanity, and that falls foul on the swindling, on the times . . . I took a man constitutionally diseased and dipt him into the circumstances of the time and took him out on fire.²⁴

Maud was Tennyson's daring coming out. It was his public avowal that he had witnessed insanity from close by, indeed had been able to observe mental decline to such an extent that he would invariably sympathise with the mad person. But presenting madness in a poetic male protagonist to some extent modelled on himself was, paradoxically, also the sign that he thought he had warded off the threat which had loomed over his own life: he had found the order and the path in his life which Thomas Carlyle had thought he would never find.

Notes

1. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (eds), *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, vol. 1, p. 228.
2. Ibid.
3. Ann C. Colley, *Tennyson and Madness*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985, p. 4.
4. Herbert Warren (ed.), *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, London: Oxford UP, 1971, p. 224.
5. Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain. Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, London: Cardinal, 1974, p. 300.
6. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*, New York and London: Virago, 1986, pp. 3–4.
7. There are echoes of Christine de Pisan’s *La Cité des dames* here.
8. *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, p. 181.
9. *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, p. 188.
10. *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, p. 194.
11. See for instance Marion Shaw, *Alfred Tennyson*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988 or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London: Yale UP, vol. 1, pp. 6–11.
12. *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, p. 175.
13. Showalter, *Female Malady*, p. 3.
14. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité. I. La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p. 137
15. Jane M. Ussher, *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991, p. 75.
16. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p. 308.
17. ‘Fatima’, *Tennyson. Poems and Plays*, p. 37.
18. This would be in line with Ann Colley’s thesis that to ‘study madness was to prevent enclosure’.
19. Leonée Ormond, *Alfred Tennyson. A Literary Life*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993, p. 25.
20. Cecil Y. Land and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (eds.), *The Letters of Alfred Tennyson*, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 119, 137.
21. Lang and Shannon (eds.), *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 132.
22. Ibid., p. 132.
23. An earlier portrayal of a male melancholy love in ‘A Lover’s Tale’ was not published at the time of composition, the period 1827–1829, but in 1879. Its male protagonist faces the lot of Tennyson’s doomed heroines.
24. Lang and Shannon (eds.), *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 138.