WOMAN AS THE OTHER

A Study of the Orientalization of Woman in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s Idylls of the King

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1. INTRODUCTION

In history, both women and non-Westerners have repeatedly been viewed as the Other, different from and inferior to the Western man. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s Arthurian cycle of poems, *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), illustrates the preoccupation with woman’s role in society typical for Victorian literature. Whether she represents the Victorian female ideal or an unrestrained element of destruction, woman plays a central role in the text. This study, accordingly, will explore the portrayals of women in Tennyson’s *Idylls*. All of the main female characters – Elaine, Enid, Ettarre, Guinevere, Isolt, Lynette and Vivien – will be included in the study. Through close readings of the text as well as analysis of the structural alterations Tennyson makes from his main source, the study aims to display how all of the female characters are portrayed as the Other.

Specifically, this essay will argue that Tennyson’s women are Orientalized. They are provided with personality traits which, according to Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), stereotypically have been associated with the Oriental Other. Further, the study seeks to demonstrate that whereas the male characters seem to represent peace, order and the divine, woman symbolizes sin, destruction and unrestrained passion. The Orientalization of woman thus sets her apart from and constructs the male ideal, embodied by King Arthur and his knights of the Table Round.

The analysis of this essay is arranged into four sections. The initial one investigates the chivalric code in the *Idylls* in order to display how Tennyson’s idea of chivalry seems to reflect Western assumptions about the Occidental man. Then follows the main part of the essay, which demonstrates and argues for the Orientalization of woman in Tennyson’s text. A section discussing the portrayals of the male characters is also included in the analysis, where Tennyson’s knights are compared to those of his chief source of inspiration, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. This comparison, as the section discussing chivalry, functions as to display how Tennyson’s knights appear the women’s binary opposites. The final part of the analysis demonstrates how the text makes clear that woman bears the blame for the sin and destruction of the various poems, and even for the fall of King Arthur and his Order of Knighthood.
2. BACKGROUND

The background of the essay will provide an overview of the Arthurian legend, followed by a short introduction to Victorian England and Tennyson’s *Idylls*. Next, early feminist theories and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) will be briefly summarized in order to shed light on the fact that women and non-Westerners traditionally have been assigned the same stereotypic qualities in history.

The Arthurian Legend

Plot

There are many different versions of the Arthurian story, which is far too complex to detail here. However, the overall plot has remained practically the same in various sources. The wizard and prophet Merlin uses magic to help Uther Pendragon to win Igraine/Ygraine. They have a son, Arthur, whom at the age of fifteen is crowned King of Britain. Some of Arthur’s vassal kings do not accept Arthur’s claim to the throne and turn against him. With his sword Excalibur/Caliburn, given to him by the mysterious Lady of the Lake, Arthur defeats the rebellion and conquers Ireland, Scotland, Orkney and Iceland, and establishes a period of unity and peace within the realm (Clute & Grant 58; Drabble 43).

King Arthur’s half-sister Morgaine/Morgan le Fay is in many versions of the tale his bitter enemy. In more recent works she is occasionally portrayed as the mother of Arthur’s illegitimate son, Modred/Mordred. Merlin informs King Arthur of a prophecy which states that Modred will be his downfall. On the king’s orders, all boys of noble birth born on Mayday are thus cast adrift in a ship. Many of the infants die, but Modred survives. Unaware of the boy’s rescue, Arthur marries the beautiful Guinevere/Guenever and acquires the Round Table. The table symbolizes unity, purity and equality and Arthur gathers his most noble knights of the realm and establishes the Order of Knighthood (Clute & Grant 58; Norris 16).

Much Arthurian literature is more concerned with the adventures of Arthur’s knights than with King Arthur himself. Sir Percivale and Sir Galahad are the two main heroes in the search for the Holy Grail. Gawain, Gareth, Pelleas, Balin and Balan are other important characters, all having individual story cycles where they play the central role. In the Middle Ages, tales about Arthur’s two bravest and noblest knights, Sir Lancelot/Launcelot and Sir Tristan/Tristram increased in popularity. Tristram is the tragic hero of the love story about himself and the beautiful Isolt/Isolde. Lancelot, too, is involved in a tragic romance as he is having an affair with Arthur’s queen (Clute & Grant 58; Norris 16, 464-65).
When the love affair between Guinevere and Lancelot is exposed, the entire kingdom starts to fall apart. Famine and plague break out and Arthur declares war against Lancelot. The Order of the Round Table is scattered and the knights take sides in the war. Lancelot, still loyal to his king, flees to France. Arthur follows him, and in the king’s absence Modred seizes the throne. The king returns to Britain and encounters Modred in a final battle. Mortally wounded, he begs the knight Bedivere to return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake. After having refused two times, Bedivere throws the sword into the water. A hand emerges from the lake, seizes Excalibur and withdraws. A boat carrying Morgaine bears Arthur’s body to the holy Isle of Avalon where he is to heal his wounds. According to the legend, Britain still awaits his return (Clute & Grant 58; Norris 16).

**Chronological Overview of Arthurian Literature**

Whether or not King Arthur has existed for real remains unclear, but many researchers do believe that a man named Arthur lived around 500 AD, and that he was a Celtic military leader in Britain. The name Arthur transliterates to the Roman name Arthurius, however, so one possibility is that he was a Roman general who helped defending the Celts against the Anglo-Saxons (Knight 1-2; Lambdin & Lambdin 20-21). Arthur’s name is first mentioned in a Welsh chronicle from the ninth century, *Historia Brittonum*, where he is a great warlord. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1136) offers the first coherent narrative of Arthur’s life (Faletra 8; Lambdin & Lambdin 20-21). Although Geoffrey of Monmouth claims to have translated a “certain very ancient book”, provided by the Archdeacon of Oxford (Geoffrey of Monmouth 41), *The History of the Kings of Britain* is probably more fiction than fact; it appears to be a composite of a great number of sources of varies degrees of historic value (Faletra 8; Knight 1; Lambdin & Lambdin 22).

King Arthur and his knights also appear in a number of French romances and Welsh stories. *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle* (1220-1240), written in Old French, is a five volume collection of romances focusing on Queen Guinevere’s and Sir Lancelot’s affair (Kibler 1). *The Mabinogion* (1382-1410) is a medieval collection of eleven Welsh stories. Celtic mythology plays a central role in the text, and in this fantastic setting, Arthur is king of “the noblest court in the world” and experiences a great many adventures of various kinds together with his followers (Davies ix; Lambdin & Lambdin 22).

Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* is the first coherent version which includes all of the famous characters and plot details. The work was finished around 1470, and William Caxton published his edition in 1485. It is based on a variety of different sources, and Malory
frequently refers to them, using phrases like “as the book saith”, and “as the book of French rehearseth”, but never specifies them further (Lambdin & Lambdin 23-8). Like The Mabinogion, Le Morte Darthur is a chivalric romance; “a story detaining the adventures and loves of a single knight or a group of knights” (Moore vii). The setting is commonly fantastic or foreign and magic is usually an important element. Women typically play a central role as love usually is a significant theme of chivalric romances (ibid).

With the Gothic revival in the Romantic period, a renewed interest for medieval romances occurred, which resulted in a number of publications on the Arthurian legend. Sir Walter Scott published the poem The Bridal of Triermain in 1813, followed by William Wordsworth’s The Egyptian Maid (1835). However, none of the publications of this time received the same amount of attention as Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), when he published his first Arthurian poem in 1832 (Lambdin & Lambdin 27-8).

A summary of the Arthurian legend in literature has been provided, from its first appearance in literature to the middle of the 19th century. Next, a short introduction to the Victorian Age and Tennyson’s Idylls of the King will follow. Before moving on, it is worth to note that King Arthur and his knights have continued to inspire writers throughout the 20th century. Howard Pyle’s The Story of King Arthur and his Knights (1903) is the first of a four part volume published between 1903 and 1910. Roger Lancelyn Green’s King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table (1953), Terence Hanbury White’s The Once and Future King (1958) and John Steinbeck’s The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights (1975) are other examples of 20th century classics written on the topic. Marion Zimmer Bradley’s The Mists of Avalon (1983) offers a different angle on the story, narrating it from the perspective of women. In order maintain a reasonable scope for this essay, however, later publications on the topic will not be presented further.

**Victorian England**

Various writers have struggled to define Victorian literature. England was a completely different place in the beginning of the 19th century as compared to the ending, which makes the Victorian Age (1830-1901) as a whole difficult to label (Kirkpatrick 77). First and foremost, this time is signified by dramatic changes which led to England becoming a world power. The center of Western civilization shifted from Paris to London, and London expanded in population from two to six millions. A Reform Bill passed in 1832, which radically changed the entire structure of the class system. As a result, the right to vote was extended to great parts of the lower middle classes. The Victorian era was one of
industrialization, technology, modernization and colonization. Even so, this time and especially the final decades of the 19th century were marked by anxiety.

People worried about new technology replacing manpower at the labor marker. Further, an overall skepticism towards religion occurred as new scientific findings challenged Christianity. Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), in particular, conflicted with the Bible as the theory of evolution reduced the importance of mankind almost into “nothingness” by placing humankind on the level of the animals. Towards the end of the century, several wars broke out in the colonies and England suffered from a severe economic depression. A vast number of emigrants left England as the sun set on The Age of Improvement (Abrams & Greenblatt 1043-54).

**Introduction to Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King***

The medieval revival of the Victorian Age has been viewed as a type of escapism, offering the reader a way to escape the modern world into an idyllic fantasy. Victorian poetry is a product of high romanticism; experiences and emotions of the individual, such as love, sorrow and death, are emphasized. Writers found inspiration in mythology and folk tales from the Middle Ages. It is not surprising then, that the legend of Arthur influenced various poets, novelists and artists of this time (Kirkpatrick 81).

Tennyson’s first Arthurian poem, *The Lady of Shalott* (1832) includes a number of elements typical for Victorian prose as it treats the themes of death, love, melancholy and medievalism (ibid). This is the story of a lovely maiden entrapped in a tower by a magic spell, experiencing the outside world only through a magic mirror. When the brave Sir Lancelot appears in the mirror, the maiden falls in love and decides to defy the magic and leave the castle. She starts her journey to Camelot, but slowly dies from the curse on the way there (Tennyson [1832]1986).

*Idylls of the King*, like *The Lady of Shalott*, is a product of its age: “a poetic examination of love, betrayal, and the intricacies of the moral order, the chivalric code, and various human foibles” (Tennyson iii). The work is a cycle of twelve poems published between 1859 and 1885. Each *Idyll* involves tragic or romantic themes and takes place in a fantastic setting colored by the supernatural. The work is framed by the poems *The Coming of Arthur* and *The Passing of Arthur*, and constructs a vision illustrating “the rise and fall of civilization” (Abrams & Greenblatt 1054). Women play an important role, reflecting the Victorian concern with woman’s role in modern society (Tennyson iii-iv). The analysis of this essay will further explore how in Tennyson’s *Idylls*, the actions of women contribute to the fall of the Order of
Knighthood. The next section, however, will look into woman’s position in Victorian England.

**The Victorian Woman**

Political reforms were taking place rapidly in the 19th century, yet women remained in a socially subordinate position. An increasing demand for change arose and resulted in the Woman Question, a debate regarding woman’s role in society. Consequently, the latter part of the century witnessed dramatic changes: *The Custody Act* (1839) granted mothers custody of children under the age of seven, *The Divorce and Matrimonial Act* (1857) provided protection for divorced women, and *Married Women’s Property Act* (1870-1908) enabled married women to hold property. Furthermore, the first women’s colleges were founded, making it possible for a great number of women to get an education. In addition, industrialization resulted in an increasing number of women gaining employment outside of the home, which challenged the traditional gender roles (Abrams & Greenblatt 1055-56).

Despite the changes, however, British women were not allowed to vote until 1918. Working conditions for women were generally poor and their wages were considerably lower than men’s (ibid). French feminist Simone de Beauvoir points out that women were increasingly viewed as dangerous competitors on the labor market (23), hence it is not surprising that woman’s liberation met intense resistance. Anti-feminists and various enlightenment philosophers argued for woman’s inferiority. Whereas men are active, rational, capable and strong, they argued, women are passive, weak and incapable of reasoning. They also declared the female nature to be inconsistent; a blend of temperaments, or an unstable compromise (Crampe-Casnabet 319-29).

Evidently, old values remained deeply rooted in society. In the 18th century, the ideal Western female was basically defined by the same qualities as in the 15th, essentially viewed as a mother and wife. Women were supposed to be soft, delicate and tender, and it was men’s job to protect them from their innate weakness by guiding them with a firm, yet gentle hand (Crampe-Casnabet 331; Matthews Grieco 57). This idea was still central in the Victorian Age, as illustrated by Coventry Patmore’s famous poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62). The poem describes the traditional female ideal during this period of time, depicting women as innocent, pure, obedient, moral and selfless (Abrams & Greenblatt 1056). With stereotypic portrayals like this in mind, it is not surprising that a great number of Victorian women began to challenge the gender roles.
Early Feminism

Feminism was not established as a word in the English language until in the 1890’s, but women’s struggle for equality goes much further back in time. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) announced that women simply lack “certain qualities”, and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was convinced that women were imperfect men. Early European and American theories from before 1960 are traditionally referred to as first-wave theories. Generally, the main difference between first and second-wave criticism is that the former focuses more on the political and social disadvantages of women, whereas the latter to a greater extent deals with social, linguistic and psychoanalytic theories concerning gender construction (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 115-18).

In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women have the same intellectual capacity as men. They thus deserve to be treated as full citizens, she explains, and should be offered an equivalent education (Davis 183). Virginia Woolf also reflects over the social disadvantages of women in her influential work A Room of One’s Own (1929). She comes to the conclusion that whereas sex is innate, gender is a social construct which can be challenged (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 118). This idea is further explored de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949).

The Second Sex naturally marks the beginning of second-wave feminism as it deals with the materialism characteristic for first-wave criticism, but also challenges the biological and psychological discriminations of women (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 118-19). A central idea of the work is the notion of the Other. Otherness, de Beauvoir explains, is a primary category of human thought, whether it be a distinction based on sex, race, class or caste (20, 23). De Beauvoir points out that even the basic terms man and woman demonstrate the asymmetric relationship between the sexes. Man, unlike woman, can be used to indicate human beings in general, she clarifies. She further argues that the term woman has a negative connotation: “man represents both the positive and the neutral ... whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (15). The imbalanced relationship between the sexes is also demonstrated in the Genesis as Eve is created from a bone of Adam. Woman is thus a relative of man and not an independent being: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (de Beauvoir 16). Like de Beauvoir, Edward Said calls attention to the concept of otherness in his Orientalism. Next, a basic outline of Said’s theory is given.
In his seminal *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said describes a Eurocentric Universalism which takes for granted the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the East. In other words, Orientalism can be defined as Western knowledge about the Orient, highly based on assumptions and prejudices (McLeod 49-50; Said 197). The theory has received a vast amount of attention and criticism. Said points out that even the term *Orientalism* has been criticized; it is vague and reflects the attitude of European colonialism, the critics have argued (2). Nevertheless, Said’s terms will be used in this essay for the sake of clarity.

In the Victorian Age, Great Britain was an imperial world power. By the end of the 19th century, London ruled a territory comprising more than one quarter of the world’s area, extending from the Mediterranean Sea to India (Abrams & Greenblatt 1044; Said 169). Colonization was not the beginning of Orientalism, however, as trade and war had established earlier contacts with the East. Nevertheless, because of the colonial encounter a clearer distinction was made between the Orient and the Occident, and the Orient became even more subordinate than before. By setting itself off from the Orient, Europe gained both in identity and strength. According to Said, the relationship between East and West is thus one of power and domination (2-6).

Central to the concept of Orientalism is the notion of binary opposites. In his outline of Said’s theory, John McLeod points out that the Orient is traditionally perceived as completely different from the Occident; it stands for "everything that the Occident is not", and thus becomes the Other (49). Especially the Middle East, or what Said refers to as the Near Orient, has become a foil or a contrasting image to Europe over time. Literature written about particular events in history, like for example the crusades in the Middle Ages, judged Islam to be a false or misguided version of Christianity. Mohammed is somewhat like Jesus, it was observed, but essentially not like him. This Christian view of Islam was intensified throughout the Middle Ages (Said 58-72): “Islam came to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians” (Said 59). Hence it is not surprising that the East has frequently been portrayed in a negative manner in Western literature.

In the 19th century, the Orient and particularly the Middle East was a popular traveling destination for Europeans and became a source of inspiration for Victorian writers and artists. In European representations, the Orient was usually perceived as primitive; to travel there was to travel back in time, to a world isolated from Western enlightenment. Easterners were depicted as ignorant, irrational, unpredictable, child-like and fallen, whereas Europeans were portrayed as rational, virtuous, civilized and mature. If the Occident was associated with
knowledge and learning, the Orient was linked to delinquents and insanity. Literature based on assumptions of this type has served to justify colonization and to legitimize Western power and supremacy over the Oriental Other (Said 40, 157, 207; McLeod 51-5).

Interestingly, it appears that the Oriental Other has constantly been assigned the same qualities as women; females, too, have been argued to be unreasonable, passionate and ignorant (Crampe-Casnabet 319-29). On the other hand, Victorian ladies were in many aspects viewed as completely different from the Oriental woman. Whereas the ideal Western woman was passive, pure and innocent, the Oriental female was considered immoral, active and highly passionate. She was frequently depicted as an exotic object of sexual desire, illustrated in revealing clothes in European literature (McLeod 53-4).

Even the Orient as a whole was feminized. Long before the Victorian era, foreign territory had been eroticized by Europeans. Feminist scholar Anne McClintock suggests that European imagination has turned foreign continents into what she refers to as a "porno-tropics" or "a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (22). The unexplored terrain, referred to as “virgin territory”, was described in terms of a woman by the European, male traveler – the male explorer so became possessor of the secret, female nature. The foreign world was feminized in a range of different ways; as evil seducer, licentious aberration, life-giver and mother (McClintock 23-24, 124). The familiar Europe, on the other hand, was connected to masculinity: active, controlled, dominant, rational and heroic (McLeod 54-5).

After decolonization, stereotypic Western assumptions about the Orient did not simply disappear. Many of these values are still rooted in present-day society and Said even remarks that a reinforcement of stereotypes concerning the Orient has occurred in the postmodern world (26). However, as this essay seeks to demonstrate the Orientalization of Tennyson’s women, a summary of Said’s theory will suffice in order to meet this aim. Present-day Orientalism will thus not be discussed further.
3. ANALYSIS

_Chivalry as a Code of Values defining the Western Male Ideal_

According to Maurice Keen, chivalry cannot easily be defined. The idea of it has changed over time, and the concept has different meanings in different contexts: "sometimes it is spoken of as an order ... sometimes as an estate, a social class ... Sometimes it is used to encapsulate a code of values apposite to this order or estate" (Keen 2). In Sir Walter Scott’s celebrated novel _Ivanhoe_ (1819), chivalry was for the first time composed as a code of values serving as a model for young men of Scott’s time (Phillips n.pag.).

With his _Idylls of the King_, Tennyson, too, sought to inspire the young men of his time, stating: “I tried in my 'Idylls’ to teach men the need of the ideal” (Kirkpatrick 83). This introductory section of the analysis will briefly explore what male ideal Tennyson advocates by investigating the chivalric code as a set of values in his text and in his chief source of inspiration, Sir Thomas Malory’s _Le Morte Darthur_. To clarify, this is not a basic outline of chivalry, but exclusively an interpretation based on Tennyson’s and Malory’s works. This part of the analysis will seek to demonstrate that Tennyson’s depiction of the ideal knight reflects assumptions about the Western man. Like the stereotypic Occidental as defined by Said’s _Orientalism_, Tennyson’s knights are all portrayed as reasonable, civilized, virtuous and controlled. They thus serve as binary opposites or foils to the Oriental _Other_, represented by the female characters.

In Malory’s work, the vows of knighthood give a general idea of what the chivalric code implies.

[T]he king ... charged them never to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain and forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore ... Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world’s goods. (Malory 86-7)

The vows make clear that knights are required to be merciful and not commit any cruel actions; they must behave like gentlemen. The ethics enclosed in the vows influence the knights’ everyday reasoning as they constantly make utterances like, “Fie for the shame! strike never a knight when he is at the earth” (Malory 457), and “it were shame for me to see three knights on one” (Malory 167).
In *Idylls of the King*, chivalry is not simply a set of values or guidelines; it is a glorified lifestyle and a mission. The ideal knight, embodied in the godlike King Arthur, is the personification of morality, and “redressing human wrong” (Tennyson 1) is his duty in order to make the world a supreme place. Tennyson’s Arthur sums up the vows of knighthood as follows: “my knights are sworn to vows / Of utter hardihood, utter gentleness, / And, loving, utter faithfulness in love, / And uttermost obedience to the King” (30). The vows reveal that the code of chivalry encloses practically the same values in the different texts.

Another idea central to the concept of chivalry is the act of rescuing ladies. In *Le Morte Darthur*, knights are expected “always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succor, upon pain of death” (Malory 87). This is a present theme throughout the work and comes to surface in Book six, for example, where Sir Lancelot meets with the rouge knight Sir Peris de Forest Savage, who either “robbeth [ladies] or lieth by them” (Malory 164). Chocked by the knight’s shameful behavior, Lancelot fiercely exclaims: “O thou false knight and traitor unto knighthood, who did learn thee to distress ladies and gentlewomen?” (Malory 165). There are several other instances where the knights protect and aid ladies in various ways (for example Malory 126, 165, 206, 733, 755), and this is a central notion in Tennyson’s text as well. Gareth is on the quest to save Lynette’s sister (Tennyson 17-52), for instance, and Geraint immediately slays the Earl who strikes the fair Enid (Tennyson 91). It appears that in both works, it is a knight’s duty to protect and aid women.

Tennyson further stresses the order of chivalry as a brotherhood of companionship. The friendship between the king and his knights is just as important as the bond between a husband and wife, perhaps even more sacred. The love between King Arthur and Sir Lancelot is valued the highest:

> And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord. / He laugh’d upon his warrior whom he loved / And honor’d most. ’Thou dost not doubt me King, / So well thine arm hath wrought for me to-day’/ ”Sir and my liege,” he cried, ’the fire of God / Descends upon thee in the battle-field. / I know thee for my King!’ Whereat the two, / For each had warded either in the fight, / Sware on the field of death a deathless love. / And Arthur said, ’Man’s word is God in man; / Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death. (Tennyson 5-6)

Indeed, the friendship between the knights is constantly stressed. This “glorious company, the flower of men” (Tennyson 240), is what holds together the entire kingdom. Together, the
knights can accomplish any task, they even succeed in uniting the scattered realm: “thro’ the puissance of his Table Round, / Drew all their petty princedoms under him, / Their king and head, and made a realm and reign’d” (Tennyson 3). Evidently, the deeds of the sacred Order of Knighthood bring order, peace and unity to civilization.

To sum up, the chivalric code seems to include practically the same ethics in the two works. Knights are required to worship, obey and forever remain true to their King. Second, they must act rationally in order not to commit any impulsive actions or murders. Knights shall battle with honor and, as good Christians, show mercy and forgiveness. Indeed, Tennyson’s knights are the contrasting image to Said’s definition of the Oriental Other, who in Western representations have been depicted as irrational, unpredictable, depraved and fallen.

**Woman as the Oriental Other**

This section will seek to demonstrate that every main female character of *Idylls of the King* is to a certain extent Orientalized. Tennyson’s women all have personality traits which, according to Said’s theory, reflect assumptions about the Oriental Other. With the exception of Lynette and Isolt, all of them are further perceived as tempting and sexually mysterious. The section is arranged into four subsections where the female characters are analyzed in pairs based on their personalities and the roles they have in the text. Only Lynette is difficult to categorize; she belongs neither with the women representing the Victorian female ideal, nor with the ones symbolizing sin, destruction and Satan. For that reason, Lynette is given her own subsection.

**Elaine and Enid**

There are two obvious representations of Patmore’s *Angel in the House* in Tennyson’s work: Elaine and Enid. Elaine is the main character of the idyll *Lancelot and Elaine* (137-72). She is the lovely maiden of Astolat who falls in love with Sir Lancelot. Enid is the fair wife of Prince Geraint, and appears in the idylls *The Marriage of Geraint* (52-73) and *Geraint and Enid* (73-97). These two women have much in common, both perceived as soft, tender and submissive. On the other hand, they have personality traits which mirror Western assumptions about the Oriental Other. This section will shed light on the fact that Elaine and Enid are not only embodiments of the Victorian female ideal, but also, like the Oriental Other, portrayed as active and passionate and as exotic objects of sexual desire.

The initial introduction of Elaine speaks for itself. She is presented as “Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable, / Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat” (137). Further described as “Delicately
pure and marvellously fair” (171), there is no doubt that Elaine is both beautiful and gentle. Not only the narrator stresses Elaine’s virtue, various other characters consider Elaine to be the perfect woman. Lancelot, for example, recognizes her good nature: “true you are and sweet / Beyond mine old belief in womanhood” (160). Obedient and nurturing, she certainly is a “mother of the house” (176). When Lancelot is injured from a tournament, Elaine cares for him and treats his wounds: “the meek maid / Sweetly forbore him ever, being to him / Meeker than any child to a rouge nurse / Milder than any mother to a sick child, / And never woman yet, since man’s first fall, / Did kindlier unto man, but her deep love” (158). Undoubtedly, Elaine possesses the finest virtues of womanhood, according to Victorian standards.

Enid, like Elaine, is described in terms like “Enid the Fair” (97) and “Enid the Good” (97). As a perfect Victorian wife, she takes care always to look her best for her husband, Geraint: “Enid, but to please her husband’s eye ... daily fronted him / In some fresh splendor” (53). Gentle and caring, she constantly puts her husband first. When, because of a misunderstanding, Geraint believes that Enid has betrayed him for another man, he orders her to put on her “worst and meanest dress” (55-6). Enid then begs her husband, “If Enid errs, let Enid learn her fault” (56). Geraint discharges her wish, however, stating, “I charge thee, ask not, but obey” (ibid). Geraint further commands her to ride ahead of him and orders: “I charge thee, on thy duty as a wife, / Whatever happens not to speak to me, / Not a word!” (73).

Despite Geraint’s cruel treatment, Enid tries her best to obey. However, riding ahead of him, she becomes aware of various dangers which Geraint is unable to perceive. Every time a threat occurs, she decides to warn her husband, thinking: “I needs must disobey him for his good; / How should I dare obey him to his harm? / Needs must I speak, and tho’ he kill me for it, / I save a life dearer to me than mine” (76). The fact that Enid constantly risks her own life in order to protect her husband indeed proves her loving nature. She explains to Geraint why she cannot bring herself to act otherwise: “I hear the violent threats you do not hear, / I see the danger which you cannot see. / Then not to give you warning, that seems hard, / Almost beyond me” (82-3). It could be argued that Enid does not behave in accordance with the Victorian ideal as she makes the active choice of disobeying her husband. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Enid acts in this manner only in order to save Geraint’s life. Otherwise, like a dutiful Victorian wife, she is obedient at all times.

Enid never disobeys her husband in order to protect herself, for example. Geraint wrongly accuses her of being unfaithful, yet she does not defend herself because Geraint has ordered her not to speak (85). Further, she devotedly stands by her husband’s side throughout
various difficulties, even when Sir Limours, one of Enid’s suitors, points out to Enid that Geraint cannot possibly love her any longer: "your wretched dress, / a wretched insult on you, dumbly speaks / Your story, that this man loves you no more" (81). She remains faithful to Geraint even when she believes that he is dead: “by Heaven, I will not drink / Till my dear lord arise and bid me do it, / And drink with me; and if he rise no more, / I will not look at wine until I die” (90). Evidently, Enid is the very image of The Angel in the House, caring and selflessly devoted to her husband. Nevertheless, she has certain personality traits which mirror Western prejudices about the Oriental Other in accordance to Said’s theory.

The Oriental female was assumed to be active and passionate. Enid makes active choices in order to protect Geraint, and she is indeed passionate. In fact, her inability to cope with her emotions causes the dispute between her and Geraint in the first place, for “the strong passion in her made her weep” (55). On the verge of desperation, Enid cries out “O me, I fear that I am no true wife!” (ibid), a statement which Geraint perceives and misinterprets. Enid then struggles to win back her husband’s trust. When she finally succeeds, she is content at last: “and never yet, since high in Paradise ... Came purer pleasure unto mortal kind / Than lived thro’ her who in that perilous hour / Put hand to hand beneath her husband’s heart, / And felt him hers again” (92). Apparently, a woman can only achieve happiness and fulfillment in life if she manages to please her husband in every aspect. As Enid succeeds, it is not surprising that this Idyll has a happy ending.

Elaine, too, is in many ways perceived as the Oriental Other. Said points out that people from the Orient have traditionally been considered to be child-like and ignorant (40). The portrayal of Elaine indeed corresponds to these assumptions, she is even described as a “little helpless innocent bird” (159). Even though she does not exactly behave like a child, the male characters certainly treat her as one. Lancelot addresses Elaine as “my child” (146) and her brother orders her, “get you hence to bed” (147). Of course, women, too, were considered ignorant to a certain degree in the Victorian Age (Crampe-Casnabet 319-29), thus it could be argued that the portrayal of Elaine as a child only mirrors the female ideal of this time. However, Elaine also features a number of other Oriental characteristics, which do not reflect Victorian assumptions about Western women.

Like Enid, Elaine is both active and passionate. She also has an irrational and destructive nature, which comes to surface when she is struck by the fact that Lancelot does not return her love. Completely taken over by grief, “the sorrow dimm’d her sight” (159). Elaine is consumed by sorrow to the extent that she deems death the only escape. Heartbroken, she informs Lancelot: “I have gone mad. I love you; Let me die” (160). Unable
to return Elaine’s love, Lancelot offers her “broad land and territory”, but not his heart (161). Devastated by the refusal, Elaine stays up all night, repeating to herself: “Must I die? ... Him or death ... death or him” (159). Without a husband to protect and guide her through her emotional crisis, Elaine is left alone in her struggle and consequently dies. When a woman does not receive the guidance she needs from a capable man, her unstable nature will take over and the outcome is devastating, seems to be the message of this poem.

It is clear that both Enid and Elaine are depicted as active and passionate. Further, Elaine is also perceived as being child-like, irrational and destructive. In addition, both of them appear sexually mysterious and tempting, corresponding to Western assumptions about the Oriental female. Elaine’s exquisite figure repeatedly noted: “her shape / from forehead down to foot, perfect” (153). Because of her beauty, she is even referred to as “the Fairy Queen” (168).

All her bright hair streaming down – / And all the coverlid was cloth of gold / Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white / All but her face, and that clear-featured face / Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead, / But fast asleep, and lay as tho’ she smiled. (165)

More than once, Elaine’s beautiful blond hair is described (for instance 147, 165). Helena Michie suggests that in Mid-Victorian literature, free-flowing hair symbolizes a woman’s lack of self-control and her unrestrained sexual impulses. She explains: “the hair of a whole series of Victorian heroines ... represent[s] their wantonness, their unnamable body parts (99-100). Thus Elaine, whose long hair is frequently stressed, is perceived as a sexually active being and an object of desire.

Enid, too, is depicted as sexually tempting. The impact her sexuality has on her husband is, in fact, striking. When Geraint catches sight of Enid for the first time, he “had longing in him evermore” (62). As a married man, Geraint’s love for Enid turns into obsession and he becomes a completely different man.

He compassed her with sweet observances / And worship, never leaving her, and grew / forgetful to his promise to the King, / Forgetful of the falcon and the hunt, / Forgetful of the tilt and tournament, / Forgetful of his glory and his name, /Forgetful of his princedom and its cares. (54)
Geraint is absorbed with his wife to the extent that he forgets his duties, and he becomes “a prince whose manhood was all gone” (54). His obsession also leads to jealousy, which comes to threaten not only the marriage, but eventually the very lives of Geraint and Enid as he sets his mind to “prove her to the uttermost” (88). Geraint thus needs to overcome both the sexual distraction and his jealousy in order to protect his marriage, carry out his duties and function as a human being.

It has been established that Elaine and Enid have certain characteristics which mirror Western assumptions of the Oriental Other, and that they are both depicted as sexually tempting. Enid’s sexuality, in particular, becomes a massive obstruction which affects Geraint negatively. Next section will continue to investigate the Orientalization of Tennyson’s women, with specific focus on two of the work’s most wily seductresses: Vivien and Ettarre.

**Vivien and Ettarre**

The sly and deceitful Vivien causes disorder in several of the poems. She plays a particularly central role in *Merlin and Vivien* (113-37), which describes Vivien’s seduction of Merlin. Ettarre appears in *Pelleas and Ettarre* (195-210), where she, too, uses her sexuality in order to bend a man to her will. Immoral, hateful and manipulating, Vivien and Ettarre seem to represent sin, evil and ruin. They thus serve as contrasting images not only to the noble knights, but to Patmore’s *Angels* as well. It might seem like these two women have nothing in common with Elaine and Enid, but that is not the case. Just like Elaine and Enid, they both feature qualities which reflect assumptions about the Oriental Other. In fact, it could be argued that Vivien and Ettarre are the very embodiments of the stereotypic Oriental female.

In Western literature, Oriental women have been portrayed as immoral, active and highly passionate (McLeod 53-4). Vivien displays all of these characteristics, instantly presented as the villain of the poem. Merlin indicates that Vivien is both “Face-flatterer and backbiter” (133), and she certainly is manipulative. Her appearance at the court causes only trouble as she spreads rumors about Lancelot’s and Guinevere’s affair: “Thro’ the peaceful court she crept / and whisper’d ... sowing one ill hint from ear to ear” (116).

Vivien does not only start the rumors that circulate at the court, it also comes to surface that she “hate[s] all the knights” (117). Soon the reason for her hatred is revealed: “They ride abroad redressing human wrongs! / They sit with knife in meat and wine in horn. / They bound to holy vows of chastity! / Were I not a woman, I could tell a tale” (130). Vivienne’s frustration is evident; as a woman she is excluded from Arthur’s Order of Knighthood, which welcomes only men. It is thus not surprising that she insults every knight in Arthur’s court:
“Vivien ... let her tongue / Rage like a fire among the noblest names, / Polluting and imputing her whole self, / Defaming and defacing, till she left / Not even Lancelot brave nor Galahad clean” (133). Like the stereotypic Oriental female, Vivien is definitely perceived as immoral, passionate and driven.

Ettarre features the same personality traits as Vivien. She is further depicted as an immoral seductress, always acting in accordance with her own interests. Ettarre desires to have her beauty acknowledged at a tournament; “her mind was bent / On hearing, after trumpet blown, her name / And title, ’Queen of Beauty,’ in the lists” (198). In order to achieve her goal, she tricks Sir Pelleas. Ettarre takes Pelleas for a fool, but she recognizes his strength and wants him to fight for her sake. Without any consideration for his feelings, she pretends to care for him: “Wilt thou fight for me, / And win me this fine circlet, Pelleas, / That I may love thee?” (198). Overwhelmed with joy, Pelleas responds: “wilt thou if I win?”, and Ettarre makes him a promise which she has no intention to keep: “Ay, that will I,” (ibid).

It could be argued that Pelleas only has himself to blame as he is not able to see Ettarre for who she is. However, already from their first meeting, Pelleas becomes Ettarre’s “prisoner” and a “vassal of [her] will” (201), for her sexuality works like a charm:

Pelleas gazing thought, / ’Is Guinevere herself so beautiful?’ / For large [Ettarre’s] violet eyes look’d, and her bloom / A rosy dawn kindled in stainless heavens, / And round her limbs, mature in womanhood; / And slender was her hand and small her shape; / And but for those large eyes, the haunts of scorn, / She might have seem’d a toy to trifle with, / And pass and care no more. But while he gazed / The beauty of her flesh abash’d the boy, As tho’ it were the beauty of her soul ... so did Pelleas lend / All the young beauty of his own soul to hers, / Believing her, and when she spake to him, / Stammer’d, and could not make her a reply. (197)

The description of Ettarre focuses only on her appearance, highlighting her sexuality and womanhood. Ettarre becomes merely a body, and Pelleas loses his soul to her immediately, just like Geraint loses himself to Enid. Pelleas is distracted to the extent that he cannot even collect himself to make an utterance.

If the Orient has been depicted as evil seducer in the past (McClintock 124), Vivien is the Orient personified. Vivien, too, needs to bend a man to her will in order to achieve her goal. She initially attempts to seduce King Arthur, but as Arthur does not fall for her tricks,
she turns her attention to Merlin. Merlin has once told Vivien of a charm so powerful that it works to trap a person in a tower for eternity (118). Vivien wants to learn the spell and use it against Merlin himself. Her motive is simple, she desires power above anything: “Vivien ever sought to work the charm / Upon the great enchanter of the time, / As fancying that her glory would be great” (118). In order to persuade Merlin to share his knowledge, she sets her mind on winning his love, and there is no doubt that Vivien is skilled in the art of seduction:

Began to break her sports with graver fits / Turn red or pale, would often when they met / sigh fully, or all-silent gaze upon him / With such fixed devotion that the old man / Tho’ doubtful, felt the flattery, and at times / Would flatter his own wish in age for love, / And half-believe her true. (117-18)

Even though suspicious of Vivien’s intentions, Merlin cannot resist her charm. Before long, “[t]he meanest [is] having power upon the highest” (118), for Merlin simply wants to believe her true. As with Ettarre, Vivien’s sexuality plays an important role as it interferes with Merlin’s ability to reason clearly.

Catherine Phillis points out that in the original illustrations to Idylls of the King, Vivien’s features are strikingly non-Western: “Gustave Dore, in illustrations to the poem in 1868, pictures Vivien as an exotic swarthy gypsy – middle-eastern in dress and appearance” (n.pag.). Tennyson’s text points out that Vivien, like the Oriental female in Western representations, is wearing an outfit highlighting her sexuality: “A twist of gold was round her hair; a robe / Of samite without a prize, that more exprest / Than hid her, clung about her lissome limbs” (118). In her revealing dress, Vivien appears inviting and sexually alluring. The story further takes on Biblical images as Vivien is likened to Satan in the shape of the tempting serpent: “lissome Vivien, holding by his heal, / Writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat, / Behind his ankle, wined her hollow feet / Together, curved an arm about his neck, / Clung like a snake” (119). Kneeling at Merlin’s feet, Vivien is physically intrusive yet subordinate, and like the serpent deceiving Eve in the Genesis, she soon bends Merlin to her will.

Vivien attempts different strategies in order to win Merlin’s trust. One method is to threaten to leave him: “Oh, if you think this wickedness in me ... That makes me passing wrathful; then our bond / Had best be loosed for ever” (121). She further explains that sharing his power is the ultimate way to prove his love for her (122). When Merlin does not yield, she tries to win his compassion and sobs: “Nay, Master, be not wrathful with your maid; ... I think
ye hardly know the tender rhyme / Of ’trust me not at all or all in all’” (122). Merlin remains suspicious, and Vivien’s final strategy is to act vulnerable, desperately in need of protection: ”O Merlin, tho’ you do not love me, save, / Save me” (136). Here, the serpent reappears in connection to Vivien as the “snake of gold” (135) has slipped from her braid. In his famous painting The Beguiling of Merlin (1874), Edward Burne-Jones actually depicts Vivien with living snakes in her hair, resembling of the hideous Medusa in Greek mythology. Once again, the snake imagery makes clear that Vivien is a representation of evil and ruin.

Vivien’s hair is streaming down freely, and Merlin yields and tells her how to work the charm. It appears that in Idylls of the King, a woman’s hair is her weapon, reflecting Michie’s observations about Victorian women’s free-flowing hair as a sign of their unrestrained sexuality (see my previous discussion on page 15 of this essay). Vivien uses the spell against Merlin the very same night, and has so accomplished her goal. Thus when a woman is trusted with knowledge and power the outcome is devastating, seems to be the overall message of this idyll.

Like Vivien, Ettarre reveals her true nature directly after having accomplished her goal. When Pelleas has won her the circlet, Ettarre starts to treat him horribly. Pelleas cannot accept that Ettarre is not the lovable woman he fell in love with but decides to wait outside her home. Before long, Ettarre’s ”wrath be[omes] a hate”, and she exclaims: ”He haunts me – I cannot breathe - besieges me! / Down! strike him! put my hate into your strokes, / And drive him from my walls” (201). Obviously, the selfish Ettarre only pretended to care for Pelleas in order to achieve her ambition.

When Pelleas comes to realize that he has been fooled, he finally leaves Ettarre alone, stating: “tho’ you kill my hope, not yet my love” (203). So stong is Ettarre’s sexual power, that even after Pelleas has observed her malice, he still loves her. Sir Gawain is another knight who falls victim of Ettarre. Gawain swears to Pelleas ”by the honor of the Table Round” (204) to help him win Ettarre’s love. Gawain betrays Pelleas, however, who finds him and Ettarre naked asleep together. Pelleas comes to realize that he has been blinded by physical attraction for Ettarre the whole time, crying out: “I never loved her, I but lusted for her” (207). Ettarre’s actions have devastating consequences; the bond between two knights is forever broken and Pelleas loses he will to live and his hope for mankind.

There is no doubt that both Ettarre and Vivien, like Enid and Elaine, are Orientalized. Immoral, active and passionate, they correspond to the depiction of the Orient as an evil and corrupt seducer; they are the very image of sin and unrestrained passion. Primarily Vivien serves as a foil to the godly knights as she is likened both to Satan and Medusa. Lynette is a
woman in many aspects resembling of Vivien. Next, the portrayal of Lynette will be explored further.

**Lynette**

In Tennyson’s version of the story, Lynette is a somewhat naive young maiden who eventually marries Sir Gareth. She is a central character of the poem *Gareth and Lynette* (16-52), where she and Gareth are on the quest to rescue her sister, Lyonors. Ignorant, irrational, and passionate, Lynette features a number of personality traits which, according to Said, have been associated with people from the Orient.

Whereas Vivien and Ettarre are both eroticized, Lynette’s sexuality is not emphasized at all. Not even her appearance is given much attention, only the initial description of her focuses on her beauty: “A damsel of high lineage, and a brow / May blossom, and a cheek of apple-blossom, / Hawk-eyes; and lightly was her slender nose / Tip-tilted like the petal of a flower” (31). On the other hand, Lynette has a fierce temper and just like Vivien, she actively questions men’s capability. Lynette begs King Arthur to provide her with a knight in order to save her sister. When Arthur offers Gareth the job, Lynette is horrified.

Gareth is actually a prince, but his identity is hidden and he works in the castle kitchen. As Lynette believes that she is provided with a simple kitchen-knave, she passionately opposes Arthur’s decision: “Wherefore did the King / Scorn me? for, were Sir Lancelot lackt, at least / He might have yielded to me one of those / Who tilt for lady’s love and glory here, / Rather than − O sweet heaven! O, fie upon him! − / his kitchen-knave” (34-5). Arthur is not the only target of Lynette’s anger, Gareth constantly has to endure insults and spiteful comments on their journey. She addresses him merely as “knave” or “scullion” and repeatedly declares to him that he ”smellest all of kitchen-grease” (35-6). Lynette certainly appears pride and overly concerned with social status.

Similar to Elaine, Lynette is further portrayed as ignorant and naive. She is, for instance, not able to work out Gareth’s background, even though she notices that he talks “like a noble knight” (36). Despite her sharp observation, she concludes that “The listening rouge hath caught the manner of it” (ibid). Sir Lancelot, on the other hand, is clever enough to fathom that Gareth has not revealed his true identity. He can tell that “the boy / Is noble-natured” and encourages others to treat him with respect (28). Apparently, only a man can figure out that Gareth is hiding something.

Gareth proves himself constantly as he is both courageous and skilled in battle. He never loses a combat, yet Lynette continues to disrespect him. A Baron whom Gareth saves
on his quest exclaims: “I well believe / You be of Arthur’s Table” (37). The scornful Lynette then immediately speaks her mind as she informs the Baron: “Ay, truly of a truth, / And in a sort, being Arthur’s kitchen-knave!” (ibid). Gareth tries to make Lynette understand that background is sometimes insignificant and that even a simple man can possess noble traits. He explains to her: ”The knave that doth thee service as full knight / Is all as good, meseems, as any knight” (42). Lynette stubbornly refuses to listen to reason: “Ay, knave, because thou strikest as a knight, / Being but a knave, I hate thee all the more” (ibid).

Eventually, Gareth’s attempts to make Lynette see beyond her prejudice finally have an impact on her. As they are getting closer to accomplishing the quest, Lynette suddenly changes her opinion about him and starts to praise his skills: “Well done, knave-knight, well-stricken. O good knight-knave – / O knave, as noble as any of all the knights ... thou art worthy of the Table Round” (45). At last, she admits to Gareth that he is ”the kingliest of all kitchen-knaves” (ibid), and even apologizes for her behavior: ”Shamed am I that I so rebuked, reviled, / Missaid thee ... and now thy pardon, friend, / For thou hast ever answer’d courteously” (46).

Lynette’s passionate nature comes to surface once again when she learns about Gareth’s true identity. Nevertheless, the transformation she undergoes is striking. Towards the end of the poem, the irrational, passionate and hot-tempered Lynette has turned into a gentle and submissive woman – she has become yet another representation of Patmore’s Angel. It seems that Lynette simply needed a man to direct her in life. As she, unlike Elaine, is fortunate to receive the guidance she needs, she finds her place in the world and the poem thus has a happy ending.

**Guinevere and Isolt**

Another character who changes significantly is Arthur’s queen Guinevere; the transformation she goes through is prominent especially in Guinevere (229-46). Her adulterous affair with Sir Lancelot affects the plot in several of the poems and eventually results in the fall of Arthur, Camelot and the Order of Knighthood. Queen Isolt, the wife of King Mark of Cornwall, is not dedicated her own Idyll and appears only in the second half of The Last Tournament (210-29). Even so, some conclusions can be drawn regarding her character. Like Guinevere, Isolt is having an affair with a knight of Arthur’s court; her relationship with Sir Tristram is a tragic repetition of the sin of Guinevere and Lancelot. Thus like Vivien and Ettarre, Guinevere and Isolt represent unleashed evil, sin and destruction.
If *The Angel in the House* was moral, pure and selflessly devoted to her husband, Guinevere certainly fails to live up to this ideal. Unlike Enid and Elaine, Guinevere is neither caring nor nurturing. When Arthur takes pity on an abandoned baby, Guinevere’s reaction is not warm: “The Queen, / But coldly acquiescing, in her white arms / received, and after loved it tenderly” (211). Despite the fact that Guinevere eventually comes to care for the girl, her initial reaction confirms that she is not fond of children. As a Victorian wife was mainly a wife and a mother, the queen’s reaction reveals her failure as a woman. Further evidence of her failure as a Victorian wife is the fact that she appears to be barren. After the love affair with Lancelot has been exposed, Arthur tells her: “The children born of thee are sword and fire, / Red ruin, and breaking up of laws” (240). Arthur’s statement gives away his frustration over the fact that instead of providing him with an heir, Guinevere has only caused him trouble.

Like the other female characters, Guinevere serves as a foil to the chivalric knights; she appears to be King Arthur’s binary opposite. If Arthur is good, rational, contained and honest, Guinevere is cruel, irrational, passionate and deceptive. The love affair with Sir Lancelot is her greatest sin as she not only betrays her husband and king, but also corrupts his noblest and truest knight, “the flower of bravery” (140). Guinevere is also unpredictable and impulsive, and her mood shifts drastically. Tristram remarks that the queen is “haughty” even to Lancelot, whom she loves: “I have seen him wan enow / To make one doubt if ever the great Queen / Have yielded him her love” (224). Indeed, Lancelot experiences Guinevere’s rage a number of times.

In *Lancelot and Elaine*, Lancelot agrees to carry Elaine’s token on his helmet at a tournament in order to conceal his identity. When the news that “Lancelot is no more a lonely heart” (152), reaches the queen, her passionate nature comes to surface as she is infuriated with jealousy:

[S]he choked, / And sharply turn’d 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 clench’d her fingers till they bit the palm, / And shriek’d out ‘Traitor!’ to the unhearing wall, / And flash’d into wild tears. (152)

When Lancelot later offers her the tournament prize, “the wild Queen” (167) angrily flings it through the window and storms off in tears (ibid). Evidently, Guinevere is not only immoral,
irrational and passionate, but like the stereotypic Oriental also unable to control her instinctive urges.

Isolt’s character is in many ways reminiscent of Guinevere’s. On the one hand, she is described as “soft, gracious and kind” (224), on the other, she appears to be Guinevere’s double: immoral, passionate and irrational. In her conversation with Tristram, she likens her life with King Mark to hell and passionately voices her intense emotions: “My God, the measure of my hate for Mark/ Is as the measure of my love for thee!” (ibid). Isolt is furious with Tristram for having married Isolt of Brittany and constantly taunts him about it. ”O Sir Knight, / What dame or damsel have you kneel’d to last?” (224), she scornfully inquires, and later describes to Tristram her miserable pain: “in utter dark I swoon’d away, / And woke again in utter dark, and cried, ’I will flee hence and give myself to God’ – / And thou wert lying in thy new leman’s arms” (226). It appears that Isolt, like Guinevere, is “haughty” even to the man that she loves.

Despite the fact that Isolt is depicted as cruel and jealous, it is clear that she loves Tristram. The one moment she furiously scolds him, the next she is loving and in desperate need of approval, pleading: “Swear to me thou wilt love me even when old, / Gray-hair’d, and past desire, and in despair” (227). This absurd behavior only strengthens the impression of her as an irrational and passionate representation of the Oriental Other. However, unlike the stereotypic Oriental female, Isolt is not perceived as an object of lust and desire. Her beauty is repeatedly stressed, but not her sexuality.

Guinevere’s sexuality, on the other hand, is stressed in the various poems. Like Vivien and Ettarre, she is portrayed as exotic and sexually alluring. Guinevere is “the pearl of beauty” (140), and her magnificent splendor works like a charm on the people around her. Already at first sight of her, Arthur is lost to her powers. “Desiring to be joined with Guinevere” (4), he is determined to make her his wife.

Even after the love affair has been revealed and Guinevere has fled Camelot, her hold on Arthur remains. When Arthur visits her at the sanctuary of Amesbury, Guinevere appears literally a fallen woman:

[F]rom off her seat she fell, / And grovell’d with her face against the floor. / There with her milk-white arms and shadowy hair / She made her face a darkness from the King ... He paused, and in the pause she crept an inch / Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet ... And while she grovell’d at his feet / She felt the King’s breath wander o’er her
neck, / And in the darkness o’er her fallen head / Perceived the waving
of his hands that blest. (240-44)

Here, Guinevere’s regret is sincere and she probably does not actively attempt to manipulate
Arthur. Nevertheless, her sexuality has a prominent effect on the king. Guinevere is likened to
a snake creeping up towards Arthur. The scenario is almost identical to that of Merlin and
Vivien, when Vivien, also snakelike, clings to Merlin at his feet. Guinevere thus seems to be a
representation of Satan just like Vivien. Unable to shield himself from Guinevere’s seductive
powers, Arthur observes: “I love thee still” (243). Filled with compassion and agony, he
states: “think not that I have come to urge thy crimes; / I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere, / I, whose vast pity almost makes me die / To see thee, laying there thy golden
head, / My pride in happier summers, at my feet” (242). Again, attention is drawn to
Guinevere’s hair, evidence of her wantonness and unrestrained sexuality. “I forgive thee, as
Eternal God / Forgives!” (243), the gentle king proclaims, before he heads off to meet his
doom.

So far, the analysis has demonstrated that all of the women in Tennyson’s Idylls are
perceived as the Oriental Other. Even the characters representing of the Victorian female
ideal are irrational, passionate and active. Vivien, Guinevere and Ettarre further embody
stereotypic assumptions about Orientals as they are perceived as immoral, manipulating and
selfish. Additionally, every female character, with the exception of Lynette and Isolt, is
portrayed more or less as an exotic object of sexual desire.

**The Occidentalization of Tennyson’s Knights: a Comparison to Malory**

This essay has called attention to the fact in Tennyson’s Idylls, the depictions of ladies and
knights differ from each other significantly. Whereas the women are Orientalized, the
portrayals of the knights seem to reflect Western assumptions about the Occidental man (see
my previous discussion on page 10-12 of this essay). Interestingly, Tennyson’s chief source of
inspiration, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, offers a completely different view of the
knights’ characters. Erratic, impulsive and murderous, Malory’s knights certainly have more
qualities in common with the Oriental Other than with the Occidental One. This section will
further explore the depictions of the knights in the two texts in order to display that by altering
his sources, Tennyson has consequently Occidentalized his knights.

In both texts, the knights constantly struggle to live up to the ethics enclosed in the
chivalric code. *Le Morte Darthur* is full of contradictions, however, as Malory’s knights
verbally promote chivalric values yet continually perform “unknightly” actions. King Arthur,
in particular, carries out a number of dishonest deeds which violate not only the code of chivalry, but Christian ethics as well. He commits the Biblical sin of incest when he sleeps with his sister and conceives Modred (Malory 30-2). Arthur is further responsible for the death of a number babies, eliminated in order to prevent a prophesy from coming true: “King Arthur let send for all the children born on May-day, begotten of lords and born of ladies; for Merlin told King Arthur that he that should destroy him should be born on May-day, wherefore he sent them all, upon pain of death” (Malory 41). Immoral deeds of this kind do not concur with the image of King Arthur as a model of the ideal knight. Accordingly, Tennyson’s Arthur does not commit any of these crimes.

In Idylls of the King, Arthur specifically declares that Modred is “no kin of [his]” (Tennyson 243), and the part of the story were Arthur eliminates the infants is not included in the text. Additionally, Arthur’s reaction when he finds out about Guinevere’s infidelity differs significantly between the two works. In Idyls of the King, Arthur is merciful and forgiving (see my previous discussion on page 23-4 of this essay), whereas in Malory’s work, he makes the decision that “the queen must suffer the death” (752). It appears that Tennyson’s alterations have transformed Arthur into a different man; reasonable, civilized and compassionate. King Arthur has so become the personification of the Western and Christian ideal.

The portrayals of Arthur’s knights, too, differ greatly between the two texts. Malory’s knights, unlike Tennyson’s, are extremely passionate and impulsive. This includes even the greatest and noblest ones, Sir Tristram and Sir Lancelot, who are both driven insane because of love. When Guinevere at one point rebukes Lancelot, he is devastated with sorrow: “he took his sword in his hand, naked save the shirt, and leapt out at a window with the grisliest groan” (Malory 535). Lancelot’s grief turns into madness, and for two years he “r[uns] wild wood from place to place, and live[s] by fruit and such as he might get” (Malory 544). Likewise, Tristram cannot cope with his emotions when he believes that Isolt has betrayed him: “Tristram endured ... half year naked, and would never come in town nor village” (Malory 329). According to Said, Westerners have frequently linked the Orient to insanity (207), and it is thus not surprising that both of these scenarios, displaying the knights’ madness, are absent in Idylls of the King.

Malory’s knights are not only portrayed as tragic lovers driven insane by love. Like King Arthur, they also carry out a number of immoral and brutally ruthless deeds. Tristram, “the gentlest knight in this world” (Malory 352) does not live up to his reputation when he slays an innocent woman. He and Isolt come across a castle where it is custom to compare the
beauty of a visiting lady to that of the lady of the fortress, and to behead the foulest one. Tristram remarks that “this is a foul custom and a shameful” (Malory 275), yet without any further objection, he beheads the lady of the castle (Malory 276). This is not the only time a knight murders a defenseless lady, several knights commit the same crime (for instance Malory 45, 76, 275, 411).

Lancelot and Tristram further demonstrate their unpredictable natures when they attack each other, both unaware of the identity of their opponent. When Tristram finds out that Lancelot is the man that he has wounded, he remorsefully exclaims: “what have I done! for ye are the man in the world that I love best” (Malory 381). This is a common scenario in Malory’s work. Gawain and Gareth, for example, also fight each other unintentionally (Malory 232), and the two brothers Balin and Balan accidentally wound each other to death (Malory 64-5). Neither the fight between Lancelot and Tristram nor that of Gawain and Gareth is present in Tennyson’s work. The stereotypic Oriental traits have so been omitted from the knights’ personalities, and they have been turned into ideal Western men; controlled, civilized and reasonable. Balin and Balan, however, are dedicated their own poem in Tennyson’s text, in which their tragic faith is described. Interestingly, this poem makes clear that Balin’s insanity is a product of Guinevere’s adultery.

Balin “the Savage” is traditionally portrayed as a violent character unable to control his temper. In Tennyson’s text he appears a sensitive and sympathetic figure, aware of his shortcomings and determined to resist his impulses. When he becomes witness of the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot he is seriously affected: “Queen? subject? but I see not what I see. / Damsel and lover? hear not what I hear” (Tennyson 104). As Balin realizes that the queen, whom he has so admired, is neither pure nor virtuous, he is very upset. Unable to control his grief, he rushes away, “mad for strange adventure” (Tennyson 104-5). It appears Guinevere’s actions are the cause of Balin’s madness, and consequently for the fratricide.

Tennyson has not only altered the personalities of the knights, but of the female characters too. It has been observed that in both Le Morte Darthur and Idylls of the King, the chivalric code requires knights to protect and aid ladies (see my previous discussion on page 10-12 of this essay). Interestingly, Malory’s text contains not only a great number of instances where knights rescue ladies, various women take on the active role of rescuing knights as well (for instance Malory 101, 105, 107, 108, 156, 232, 251, 324, 731). In Tennyson’s poems, on the other hand, merely two female characters rescue knights: the two representations of Patmore’s Angel. When Elaine treats Lancelot’s wounds, it is later revealed that “her fine care had saved his life” (Tennyson 158). Enid, too, rescues a man when she warns Geraint of
various dangers (Tennyson 75-6). Elaine and Enid thus both perform the knightly act of saving a life, but they do so without violating the gender codes; as women, they are allowed to be nurturing and caring. Indeed, Enid actively disobeys Geraint’s orders when she enlightens him of the threats lurking ahead of them, but Geraint is nevertheless the one who actually eliminates them. It appears knightly actions which require courage, capability and strength are restricted to men only.

The final part of this section will explore Tennyson’s alterations of Vivien’s character. As the heroic and reasonable traits have been omitted from her personality, the Occidental traits of the knights become even more prominent. It should be noted that Tennyson has also made changes to other female characters which are not mentioned here — this essay does not have the room to discuss the topic in detail. The changes made to Vivien’s character will thus serve as an example of how the alterations of the women’s personalities contribute to the Occidentalization of the knights.

Vivien, or Nimue as she is called in Le Morte Darthur, is one of the greatest heroines in Malory’s work. Nimue was Tennyson’s source of inspiration for the character Vivien. In fact, Tennyson’s Vivien was originally named Nimue, but later renamed. In Malory’s work Vivien/Nimue is not the depraved woman described in Tennyson’s Idylls, but a gracious enchantress who does “great goodness unto King Arthur and to all his knights through her sorcery and enchantments” (Malory 686). She saves Arthur’s life three times (Malory 101, 108, 324), but she also lures Merlin under a stone and traps him there for eternity (Malory 89).

In both texts, Vivien/Nimue is thus to blame for the tragic faith of Merlin. Unlike in Tennyson’s Idylls, however, the original text makes clear that Merlin is partly responsible for his doom: “always Merlin lay about [Nimue] to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him” (Malory 89). Here, Merlin obviously plays the role of the seducer rather than the seduced. As a result, Vivien’s/Nimue’s decision to eliminate him does not appear as wicked as in Tennyson’s poem. In Idylls of the King, Vivien is clearly not the honest heroine that Malory presents. Here, Vivien is irrational, immoral and wicked, and she does not save lives but destroys them (see my previous discussion on page 16-20 of this essay). As the heroic traits have been omitted from her character, it is made clear that the knights are the true and only heroes of the work.
This essay has argued that in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, knights and ladies appear to be each other’s binary opposites. The final part of the analysis will seek to display that the female characters are not only Orientalized, but also blamed for the sin and destruction occurring in the various poems. Whereas the deeds of the knights bring order and peace to the court, the women’s actions result in death and downfall.

All of the female main characters, even the representations of Patmore’s *Angel*, cause some type of disorder. Four of them actually take actions which result in death, whether the death of others, or as in Elaine’s case, her own death. Lynette is in fact the only woman whose actions do not have devastating consequences. For that reason, her part in Tennyson’s text will not be discussed further here.

The story of Enid and Geraint has a happy ending. Even so, the poem makes clear that Enid causes Geraint a great deal of trouble. In the section *Elaine and Enid* (on page 12-16 of this essay), it was revealed that Enid’s sexuality affects Geraint negatively as he is so captivated by her that he forsakes his duties. Further, Enid’s passionate nature initially leads to the dispute between them, as she is unable to control her emotions. Despite the fact that Geraint treats his wife horribly, Enid is the cause of his irrational behavior, for her tears makes him suspect that she is unfaithful: “She is not faithful to me, and I see her / Weeping for some gay knight in Arthur’s hall” (55). Enid is thus to blame both for Geraint’s neglect of his principedom and for his oppressive behavior.

In Elaine’s case, a dialogue reveals that Lancelot never encourages her love. In both Malory’s and Tennyson’s texts, Lancelot agrees to wear Elaine’s token on his helmet at a tournament. In *Le Morte Darthur*, however, Lancelot does not clarify that he accepts the token only in order to disguise himself, but encourages her affection: ”Never did I erst so much for no damosel” (Malory 689). In *Idylls of the King*, on the other hand, Elaine eagerly persuades Lancelot to wear her token, for “[s]uddenly flash’d on her a wild desire / That he should wear her favor at the tilt” (146). Lancelot refuses her offer at first, but Elaine points out that “in wearing mine / Needs must be lesser likelihood” (ibid). It appears that Tennyson’s Elaine has become the persuader rather that the deceived, hence Elaine only has herself to blame for her unrequited love, and consequently for her unfortunate death.

Another character who causes her own misery is Ettarre. Her cruel behavior eventually brings Pelleas to withdraw his love for her (see my previous discussion on page 16-20 of this essay). Too late, Ettarre realizes that she loves him: “her ever-veering fancy fancy turn’d / To Pelleas ... and thro’ her love her life / Wasted and Pined, desiring him in vain” (Tennyson
207-8). Apparently, not only Pelleas’ life is destroyed because of Ettarre’s selfish game, Ettarre is affected too. Her actions further result in that the bond between two noble knights, Pelleas and Gawain, is forever broken. Interestingly, there are a few lines displaying Ettarre’s regret, which shed new light on her character.

Just before Ettarre orders Pelleas away from her walls for the last time, her thoughts come to surface: “Why have I push’d him from me? this man loves, / If love there be; yet him I love not. Why?” (203). Here, Ettarre’s guilt is prominent as she even blames herself for her inability to love Pelleas. For the first time, she shows some sign of remorse. Ettarre further reasons: “in him / A something - was it nobler than myself? ... He could not love me, did he know me well” (203). These lines provide more information about Ettarre’s actions as it becomes clear that she rejects Pelleas partly because she deems his character nobler than her own. Further, a vulnerable side of Ettarre, until now hidden, is exposed – she is afraid of disappointing Pelleas and getting hurt as a result. Indeed, Ettarre’s reflection provides a different perspective on the matter. Nevertheless, it is made clear that she has only herself to blame for the consequences of her cruel actions.

In the case of Vivien, Merlin appears a victim already from the start of the poem. It could be argued that Merlin is responsible for his own downfall as he is deluded by a woman so obviously eager to obtain power. As Merlin several times questions Vivien’s intentions, however, it is made clear that he does not trust her. Merlin is thus not perceived as foolish and naive, but as reasonable and cautious. Throughout Merlin and Vivien, the narration stresses both Vivien’s manipulative skills and her sexuality. As a result, there is no doubt that Merlin never stands a chance, and that Vivien alone bears the blame for Merlin’s faith.

It should also be noted that Vivien bears some responsibility for Balin’s death as well. After having witnessed the queen’s adultery, Balin tries to collect himself and conquer his madness, but Vivien then upsets him more. She feeds him with lies and explains to him that despite his emotional outburst, he has nothing to be ashamed of as the entire court of Camelot is infected with corruption: “Talk not of shame! thou canst not, an thou wouldst, / Do these more shame than these have done themselves” (110). Balin is devastated to hear this, thus his madness is partly a consequence of Vivien’s manipulation. Apparently, the fratricide is not solely a consequence of Guinevere’s infidelity.

Vivien also plays an active part in the exposal of Guinevere’s and Lancelot’s affair. She overhears the couple as they decide to meet on a night, and immediately informs Modred about their plans (232). On the night of their secret meeting, Guinevere and Lancelot are
caught together in the queen’s chamber. Hence Vivien is partly to blame for the dispute between Arthur and Lancelot that occurs as a result of the love affair.

Lambdin and Lambdin point out that “Malory blames neither Guinevere and Lancelot nor the affair between Tristram and Isolt for the fall of Arthur and his order of knighthood” (26). In Tennyson’s *Idylls*, on the other hand, Arthur makes clear that the affairs cause other great knights to follow their example: “Then came [Guinevere’s] shameful sin with Lancelot; / Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt; / Then others, following these my mightiest knights, / And drawing foul ensample from fair names” (241). Tristram’s love for Isolt contributes not only to the fall of the Table Round, it also causes his own death. When he bows down to kiss Isolt, he does not notice King Mark sneaking up behind him: “Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek − / ’Mark’s way,’ said Mark, and clove him thro’ the brain” (229). In this case, however, the blame is not entirely woman’s as Tristram is somewhat presented as a sinner as well. Tristram shows neither shame nor regret for his actions, instead he openly admits his disgraceful relationship with Isolt. When he wins Guinevere’s rubies at the Tournament of Dead Innocence, he bluntly declares that his Queen of Beauty is not present. Chocked by the discourtesy, the spectators whisper that “All courtesy is dead”, and “The glory of our Round Table is no more” (216). Indeed, Tristram’s disdainful behavior contributes to the portrayal of him as a sinner.

It is also worth to mention that in *Le Morte Darthur*, Tristram and Isolt accidently drink a love potion, and thus has no choice but to love each other:

[B]y that their drink was in their bodies, they loved either other so well that never their love departed for weal neither for vow. And thus it happed the love first bewixt Sir Tristram and La Beale Isoud, the which love never departed the days of their life (Malory 274).

In *Idylls of the King*, on the other hand, the love potion is never mentioned. They both have a choice in the matter, it seems, and they choose sin before duty. For that reason, they are to blame for the outcomes of their actions.

**Guinevere**

Every main female character in *Idylls of the King* causes some kind of disorder. Nonetheless, Guinevere is portrayed as the true villain of the work. Her love affair with Sir Lancelot destroys the friendship between the king and his greatest knight, resulting in war between them. Before long the entire kingdom is falling apart.
It could be argued that Guinevere and Lancelot both share the blame for the consequences of their affair. However, the text makes clear that Guinevere is the sinner, for she tells Lancelot: “mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou / Unwedded” (232). Further, Lancelot’s sense of guilt and his mental struggle to break free from sin is repeatedly stressed, but not Guinevere’s. For example in *Lancelot and Elaine*, Lancelot’s grief comes to surface: “So groan’d Sir Lancelot in remorseful pain, / Not knowing he should die a holy man” (172). In addition, Lancelot’s heroic character is frequently stressed, he is “knightliest of all knights” (228). Guinevere even likens his nobility to Arthur’s:

Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight, / Was gracious to all ladies, and the same / In open battle or the tilting-field / Forbore his own advantage, and the King / In open battle or the tilting-field / Forbore his own advantage, and these two / Were the most nobly-manner’d men of all. (237-38)

When making his appearance at Amesbury, King Arthur informs the queen that her sin has brought with it chaos and ruin. Arthur is not the only one who blames the queen, a little novice voices others’ opinions: “this all is woman’s grief, / That she is woman, whose disloyal life / Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round” (235). Apparently Guinevere’s sin has scattered Arthur’s Order of Knighthood. This is yet another example of how Tennyson’s work differs from Malory’s.

In *Le Morte Darthur*, Merlin informs Arthur: “God is displeased with you, for ye have lain by your sister, and on her ye have gotten a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm” (Malory 32). Merlin further explains that “it is God’s will your body to be punished for your foul deeds” (ibid). Malory’s text declares that Arthur’s sin is the cause his own death and of the fall of the Round Table. As Arthur’s crimes are not even mentioned in Tennyson’s poems, the blame falls entirely on Guinevere.

In defense of Guinevere, the situation is sometimes viewed from a different perspective, and as in the case of Ettarre, this sheds new light on the circumstances. Merlin points out that when Sir Lancelot went in Arthur’s place to bring back the future queen, Guinevere initially took Lancelot for Arthur, and so “fixt her fancy on him” (Tennyson 132). Further, the queen reveals that when she met the King for the first time, she “thought him cold, / High, self-contain’d, and passionless” (239). Guinevere even expresses that she doubts whether her husband really loves her, stating “He cares not for me ... He is all fault who hath no fault at all” (140). Indeed, these details explain why the queen was tempted to initiate a secret
relationship with Lancelot in the first place. Nevertheless, Guinevere’s deeds bring destruction and misery to the Order of Knighthood, to the realm and even to Guinevere herself.

Like Ettarre, the queen comes to realize that she loves the man she has pushed away: “I yearn’d for warmth and color which I found / In Lancelot – now I see thee what thou art, / Thou art the highest and most human too, / Not Lancelot, nor another” (245). Her actions cannot be undone, however, and even though she is grateful that Arthur has forgiven her “wickedness”, she is left to her grief. “Shall I kill myself?” she asks herself, but then concludes, “What help in that? I cannot kill my sin, / If soul be soul, not can I kill my shame” (246). Guinevere thus spends the rest of her life in misery, seeking forgiveness for her sins.

The turmoil caused by Guinevere’s unfaithfulness leads to civil war. Mortally wounded, Arthur exclaims: “My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death! / Nay – God my Christ – I pass but shall not die” (247). Once more, the story takes on Biblical images as Arthur is likened to Christ; Merlin has prophesied that Arthur, like Messiah, shall return and rule once more (251). Interestingly, Arthur’s decision to declare war, spilling the lives of thousands of men, simply because of his wife’s adultery is never questioned. Instead, Arthur remains “the blameless King” (97), godlike, virtuous and supreme.
4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This essay has argued that the women in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* are Orientalized as they are provided with characteristics which, in the Western world, have stereotypically been considered to be Oriental. Irrational, depraved and sexually tempting, they represent evil forces like sin, destruction and unrestrained passion.

Various enlightenment philosophers argued that women by nature are passive, weak, irrational and unstable. Tennyson’s women are indeed portrayed as unstable and irrational, but not at all as passive and weak. On the contrary, all of the female characters are both capable and driven as they take action immediately in order to accomplish various tasks. The representations of woman thus correspond better to Western assumptions about the Oriental *Other*, as defined in Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Tennyson’s women, like the stereotypic Oriental in Western representations, are irrational, child-like, passionate and depraved. With the exception of Lynette and Isolt, they are further perceived as exotic and sexually tempting. Of course, every main female character does not display all of the Oriental traits listed above. Nonetheless, all of them do have a certain number of characteristics which, in Western literature, traditionally have been associated with the Oriental *Other*.

Enid and Elaine, the obvious representations of the Victorian female ideal, are both depicted as passionate, active and sexually tempting. Elaine is further portrayed as child-like and irrational, and she lacks the capability to handle her destructive nature. Lynette initially appears ignorant, erratic and unreasonable, but eventually turns into a gentle and obedient woman. All of the remaining female characters, Ettarre, Guinevere, Vivien and to a certain extent Isolt, are portrayed as immoral seductresses. This is particularly apparent in the cases of Guinevere and Vivien. They seem to represent sin and downfall, and both of them are repeatedly likened to Satan. Hence the difference between them and the godlike Arthur and his Christian followers is prominent.

Tennyson’s women are not only Orientalized, they are also the cause of disorder and destruction. In fact, all of them function as disruptive elements which the knights need to master and overcome. Sir Gareth must succeed in taming the scornful Lynette, and Enid and Ettarre both serve as massive obstructions as their sexuality interferes with men’s ability reason clearly. Several female characters even take actions which result in death. Elaine is to blame for her own death, Vivien is responsible for Merlin’s disappearance and Isolt plays a part in King Mark’s slaughter of Sir Tristram. Even so, Guinevere is the true villain of the
work as her adulterous affair with Sir Lancelot results not only in the fall of King Arthur, but of the entire Order of Knighthood.

King Arthur and his knights are portrayed as completely different from the female characters, for Tennyson’s idea of chivalry seems to reflect assumptions about the Western man. Tennyson’s knights, like stereotypic Occidental men, are depicted as reasonable, controlled, civil and virtuous. Arthur, in particular, seems to embody this ideal. His forgiving nature and deep religious sense make clear that he is a model of Christianity and the Western ideal. Interestingly, Tennyson’s portrayal of the knights differs greatly from Malory’s Le Morte Darthur. The Knights of Malory’s work are impulsive, irrational, unpredictable and violent; their personalities seem to reflect assumptions about of the Oriental Other rather than the Occidental One. Tennyson’s knights have been Occidentalized, it seems, as the stereotypic Oriental characteristics have been omitted from their personalities.

The Occidentalization of the knights contributes to the segregation between knights and ladies in Tennyson’s Idylls and strengthens the otherness of woman. Woman has to be Orientalized, it appears, in order to serve as a sufficient foil to the heroic men and highlight their Occidental qualities. Hence woman constructs the male ideal, and the Orientalization of her ensures that Arthur and his knights appear the true and only heroes of the text.
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