

# “A Voice as of the Waters”: Women’s Watery Narrative and Julia Margaret Cameron’s “Fluid” Photography in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*

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## ABSTRACT

Gender issues in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* are a focus of critical interest. Some claim that the *Idylls* propagates established patriarchal Victorian values, while others explore the complicated gender roles that the *Idylls* intends to explicate. This paper explores the female narrative voices in the *Idylls* via discussions of the water imagery. Water imagery abounds throughout, and the main female characters are often associated with this imagery. It is this author’s contention that Tennyson uses water—or fluid in general—to underscore the female narrative voice, and lend it narrative power beyond the patriarchal discourse that the Arthurian legends purport to uphold. Furthermore, this paper also explores Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographic illustrations of the *Idylls*. As a female photographer, Cameron does not simply visually reproduce Tennyson’s texts; a feminine voice speaks through artistic choices and techniques. Cameron’s photographs and working process are characterized by a sense of fluidity, reflecting the way that the women’s narrative voices in the *Idylls* are characterized by water.

**KEYWORDS:** Lord Alfred Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron, water imagery, female narrative, photography, Arthurian legends

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The gender issues involved in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* have been the subject to extensive literary criticism,<sup>1</sup> much of which indicates that Tennyson propagated the patriarchal ideology of his time.<sup>2</sup> However, in the past few decades, it has been contended that, while the *Idylls* reflects the gender anxiety in the nineteenth century, it does more than merely reiterate the patriarchal narrative, either of Arthurian legend from which it is derived or of its own time. Elliot L. Gilbert, for example, contends that, though inspired by a seemingly long gone past, the *Idylls* is contemporary in that Tennyson, by endowing Arthur with the roles "usually assigned by culture to woman," problematizes and contemplates the prevailing subject of "sexual role reversal" (865). Indeed, with a Queen who seemed to represent the domestic ideal, Victorians experienced a sense of gender anxiety as a result of the strange interrelationship between a patriarchal order and a female sovereign. Linda M. Shires also argues that Tennyson "simultaneously collapses and retains a patriarchal order," for, although the *Idylls* apparently allows for a homosocial society, an underlying gender oscillation is intimated by the "castrated, immobile, or dead men" that Tennyson ardently depicts throughout the *Idylls* ("Patriarchy" 401, 408). This in turn illustrates the inevitable doom of a purely patrilineal society, and thus his texts "subvert gender ideology" (Shires, "Rereading" 49). With the *Idylls*' interrogation of gender ideology in mind, Stephen Ahern also argues that Tennyson's Guinevere has such a "narrative freedom" that her story "provides an ambivalent representation of the expectations of patriarchal culture" (91). With the intention of participating in this conversation of the intricate gender issues in Tennyson's *Idylls*, this paper examines female narrative power, embodied by the imagery of water, to explore the complicated gender roles of Tennyson's times.

Though the significance of water imagery per se has not been emphasized in the studies of the *Idylls*, nature and its association with feminine power is not neglected in the literature. In "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse," Gilbert points out that in the *Idylls* "nature does replace history as the sponsor of the new king," for the "phallic incident of the sword in the stone" is replaced by a narrative in which Excalibur is given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake (868). Thus, Arthur represents a "decisive break" from history; he is in a sense "ahistorical" (868, 869). In the same vein, John D.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as the *Idylls*. Citations of the poem include line numbers.

<sup>2</sup> See Felluga 783-803; Mancoff 256-80; Sinfield 175-95; Adams 7-27.

Rosenberg also argues in "Tennyson and the Passing of Arthur" that Tennyson's idea of Arthur carries with it a "strong supposition of nonbeing," for he is "the once and future king," a phrase that intimates a "total elision of an Arthurian present" (142). Arthur's ahistorical characteristics and the fact that he comes "from the great deep" and returns to the great deep (A. Tennyson, "Coming," line 410) further strengthens the replacement of history by nature, and of patrilineal time by feminine space.

Taking such precedence of feminine space over patrilineal time further, this paper brings into discussion Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic illustrations of *Idylls of the King*—Cameron's visual representation of Tennyson's texts. Striving to prove both herself as an artist and photography as an art form, Cameron created photographs that were apparently dictated by Tennyson's texts and yet were still specifically feminine. While the voices of the female characters she portrays are textually conveyed through watery images, her own narrative voice is manifested through her photographs. This collaboration was proposed by Tennyson in 1874, for at the time he was dissatisfied with "the liberties that several Pre-Raphaelite artists had taken" in illustrating his poems, as Victoria Olsen points out in "Idylls of Real Life" (375), and he wanted a more faithful visual representation of his poems (Martin 415). At the time, for the general readership, the most popular illustrations were those by French illustrator Gustave Doré in 1867 and 1868, with which Tennyson was less than satisfied.<sup>3</sup> His collaboration with Cameron was later published as *Illustrations to Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Other Poems*, in two volumes (1874, 1875). Besides helping to choose the models, Tennyson's involvement in Cameron's working process seemed minimal, yet he seemed to be satisfied with the results (Olsen, "Idylls" 375). This collaboration gave Cameron the liberty to choose the moments she wished to represent and how such moments were to be illustrated; and her choices manifest her identity as a female artist, for her illustrations capture the female characters at the moment when their narrative voices are strongest.

Furthermore, the imagery of water not only runs through the texts but is also represented in Cameron's photographs, as illustrated by both the fluidity—the soft focus and dramatic lighting—that characterizes her work and the water used throughout the process of developing the photographs. She adopted the

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Palgrave on the 23 of March, 1867, he wrote, "I like the first four I saw very much, tho' they were not quite true to the text, but the rest not so well" (H. Tennyson, *Alfred* 2: 43).

“wet collodion” process popular at the time, in which layers of chemical liquids were applied to the negatives and final prints. The manual application of these liquids differs from photographer to photographer, and, while other photographers strived to mitigate imprecision as a result of the fluids, Cameron utilized liquidity to create a photographic style very much her own. While water is used metaphorically by Tennyson in the texts to highlight the feminine voices, in Cameron’s photographs water serves as both a symbolic form of performance and an actual medium in the creative process. This water imagery is inseparable from the narrative power of women; these two elements analogize each other, and together they create a text exterior to the patriarchal ideology that Tennyson is thought to uphold. Throughout the *Idylls*, water and all types of liquids become either the metaphor for female verbal power or the medium through which female narrative is carried. On several occasions water is used to delineate the woman. Furthermore, the origins of several characters, including Arthur, are associated with water—specifically with the Lady of the Lake, who represents the ultimate female verbal power. In both Tennyson’s texts and the illustrations he approved, the female narrative voices of the characters and Cameron are accentuated through water.

### **I. The Watery Voices**

Tennyson’s four early idylls published in 1859 were originally entitled “The False and the True,” in which wily Vivien is contrasted with Enid, the self-negating wife, and unfaithful Guinevere is juxtaposed with innocent Elaine. Obedient and pure, “sweet and serviceable” (A. Tennyson, “Marriage” 393), Enid is the very representative of the stereotypical Victorian “angel in the house.” However, as a contrivance of the Victorian period Enid inevitably reflects the innate gender conflicts of her contemporary epoch. Her refusal to keep silent, though a feature in the Middle Welsh tale from which the *Idylls* originated, is nonetheless perspicuous, though subtle, resistance to Geraint’s dominance over her. According to Marion Wynne-Davies, Geraint’s acquiescence in the end represents a final reconciliation of “mutual responsibility in marriage,” a “new form of reciprocal wedlock” (“Women” 130). Enid is eventually rewarded with Geraint’s love and respect for her insistence in a voice. As a matter of fact, Enid’s debut in the *Idylls* is as a singing voice that makes Geraint “like a man abroad at morn / When first the *liquid*

note beloved of men / Comes flying over many a windy wave / To Britain . . ." (A. Tennyson, "Marriage" 335-38; emphasis added). The enchantment in her voice, which precedes the entry of her person into the story, is depicted in terms of liquid. Like liquid, Enid's voice is as powerful as it is pliable, for later on it is this very voice that saves Geraint. Her singing voice rings through the open windows (A. Tennyson, "Marriage" 327-28), and later on, against Geraint's orders, she verbalizes the danger lying ahead three times ("Geraint" 72-75, 142-45, 390-91). The liquidity therein highlights both the pervasiveness and the resilience in her voice. Throughout the *Idylls*, different types of liquids are used as metaphors for female verbal power, especially narrative power.

One other occasion of water in Enid's story warrants further exploration. Water is the conduit to express the deviation of this supposedly "true" heroine from the self-denying "angel in the house"; here a watery dream exposes her susceptibility to vanity, a much apostrophized female defect. After Geraint's marriage proposal, Enid thinks of the precedent glory of her house and how such glory has long ceased to be. She "wish'd / The Prince had found her in her ancient home" (A. Tennyson, "Marriage" 643-44) in her previous dress "[a]ll branch'd and flower'd with gold" (631). She lies in bed, conjuring up the memory of a pool of golden carp she used to behold near their lustrous house—in the pool there was one "patch'd and blurr'd and lusterless / Among his burnish'd brethren of the pool" (649-50); she instantaneously falls into a slumber and dreams that she has become a faded fish in the golden pool of Arthur's resplendent garden. Everything around her is of gold and silver, and her dim appearance makes her the object of derision; finally, upon hearing the command that she is to be cast on the mixen to die, Enid wakes in astonishment. This dream reflects how regretful she feels about her own "faded silk" (A. Tennyson, "Marriage" 134) and how she yearns, like every woman, for superficial beauty. This dream itself is like a pool, through the reflection of which Enid sees herself in the form of a faded fish. The danger in such a "longing for a dress" (630), reflected in water, undermines the selfless feminine ideal that Enid seems to represent.

The liquidity in Enid's voice echoes the voice "as of the waters" in "The Coming of Arthur" (290),<sup>4</sup> the voice of the Lady of the Lake. While the Lady's liquid voice consolidates Arthur's authority as King and foreshadows his final disappearance into the void, Enid's liquid voice both resists and persists,

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as "Coming."

upholding the social order albeit ambiguously. Her vocalization and her vanity, however, show that such social order is far from impervious, for even the strongest advocate of female obedience and humility can show its cracks. Throughout the *Idylls*, the female voices narrate the rise and fall of Camelot, both strengthening its foundations and facilitating its destruction. Thus the voice of Vivien, a woman also associated with the Lady of the Lake, permeates and dissolves the social foundation like water. In the idyll “Merlin and Vivien,”<sup>5</sup> in conspiracy with King Mark, Vivien infiltrates Camelot with vile rumors about the Queen, Lancelot, and many other noble knights. After her shameful failure to seduce Arthur, Vivien preys on Merlin and finally imprisons him with his own spells. The similarity between Vivien’s exchange of her sexuality for advantage and the act of prostitution has been pointed out in the literature.<sup>6</sup> The corruption she brings to Camelot, much like the social price that prostitution exacted from Victorian England, is unmistakable. Such corruption, manifested in the form of derogatory rumors she spreads about the Queen, is delineated in terms of her being “an enemy that has left / Death in the living waters” (A. Tennyson, “Vivien” 145-46). Here her verbal interference and the imagery of water converge: her verbal ability is highlighted through the metaphor of water.

“Vivien” is Tennyson’s retelling of part of the legend associated with the Lady of the Lake. Throughout the vicissitudes of Arthurian legends, Vivien, like her forerunners, is called by a variety of names in different versions, such as Nineve, Nimue, or Niniane. However, these variegated Viviens share similar features. As one of the Ladies of the Lake, Vivien is known as the one who enchants Merlin and imprisons him. In Malory’s story, upon which most of the *Idylls* is modeled, she is depicted as a benign figure who, though incarcerating Merlin after failing to rid herself of his endless amorous advances, replaces Merlin as the magical adviser and upholder of Arthur’s power. She is also one of the three magical queens who escort Arthur’s body to Avalon. If Malory’s Nymue is depicted in a benign light, ardently preserving her virginity until she becomes Sir Pelleas’ obedient wife and Arthur’s proponent, in Tennyson’s story, Vivien is delineated in the vilest light possible. However, though separated entirely from the fairy Lady of the Lake and depicted as a mere mortal

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to as “Vivien.”

<sup>6</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, for example, wrote of Vivien, “she is such a sordid creature as plucks men passing by the sleeve. . . . [S]he is simply a subject for the police court” (59-60). Rebecca Umland also points out that the word “harlot” is used profusely by Tennyson to refer to Vivien (280), and that an “analogy to prostitution” is established by “the ‘exchange’ between Merlin and Vivien” (278).

sent by King Mark to create chaos in Camelot, Tennyson's Vivien is still enveloped by the imagery of water. In Vivien's seduction of Merlin, water imagery is less a direct metaphor of her verbal power than a medium through which her narration is carried into effect.

The water imagery gradually intensifies as Merlin, filled with a dark foresight that "roll'd about his brain" like "an Ocean cave" with "[t]he blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall / In silence" (A. Tennyson, "Vivien" 228-31), sails through the sea in a little boat, accompanied by the unsolicited Vivien. Such a gloomy premonition of water, reflecting the influence of Vivien over Merlin, enshrouds the better part of the idyll. While Merlin takes the sail, it is Vivien who takes the helm (198) and steers the boat to its destination. Once ashore, Vivien attempts to seduce Merlin by adopting the conventional Victorian role of the female caretaker. She entreats him by articulating her womanly service when she "made a pretty cup of both [her] hands" (273) to serve Merlin a sip from the spring; she then goes on to complain about Merlin's aloofness: "[d]id you know that Vivien bathed your feet before her own?" she laments (282). Her watery acts of servitude seem to have permeated Merlin's heart, for he says to her in a grave tone, "[y]ou seemed that wave about to break upon me / and sweep me from my hold upon the world, / my use and name and fame" (300-02). This imagery of the wave, echoing the "blind wave" that probes into his "long sea-hall / In silence" (230-31), highlights the sense of touch involved in Vivien's persuasion, a sense of touch also illustrated by her watery services. As a seductress, the tactility of her narrative works in her favor. When Merlin still hesitates, Vivien appositely turns on the waterworks: with her tearful eyes shining "[l]ike sunlight on the plain behind a *shower*" (401; emphasis added), Vivien sings a song entitled "trust me not at all or all in all" (387). This song not only urges Merlin to trust her wholly, but also hints at the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere; the song, supposedly once sung by Lancelot (383), emphasizes the alternate dominance of "[f]aith and unfaith" (386), while "faith" is associated with both "trust" and "loyalty." While the affair inherent in this song is gradually disintegrating the kingdom, the very pillar of this kingdom is also gradually falling prey to the song's present singing voice. Merlin well knows Vivien's fearful verbal power of gradually influencing him, and already he starts to feel his "name and fame" "slowly ebbing" away (435). Towards the end of the idyll, after all petitions fail, Vivien, in an attempt to show her innocence with a feigned vexation at Merlin's words,

leaves his side and exposes herself to the imminent storm (888). Later on, she again uses the storm as an excuse to tightly clasp Merlin and beg for his rescue. Such feminine helplessness, demonstrated via the medium of bolts of lightning and “river-rain” (956), finally persuades Merlin and precipitates his doom. Throughout the idyll, images of water abound to supplement Vivien’s verbal persuasion.

While Vivien’s vocal power is borne out through water imagery, Elaine of Astolat finds her voice as she is literally carried by the water. Repeatedly described as “wilful” (A. Tennyson, “Lancelot and Elaine” 745, 772), this seemingly conventional victim is far from passive. Towards the end of “Lancelot and Elaine,”<sup>7</sup> Elaine falls ill because of her unrequited love for Lancelot. As she pines away, she sings what she calls “The Song of Love and Death” (998). While Enid appears first as a singing voice, and Vivien sings a song to persuade Merlin, Elaine tells her own story, as she lies dying, with a song. As she realizes that she is to eventually expire, she sees a vision of her childhood when her brother took her in a boat up the river; yet he never went beyond the cape, despite her solicitations to go “far up the shining flood / Until [they] f[ind] the palace of the King” (1036-37). In her subsequent dream, however, she is alone on the boat, exclaiming “[n]ow shall I have my will” (1040) when she wakes up. Upon waking, she tells her brothers her dream and her will—the watery dream is narrated in her own voice. It is the “will” of this “wilful” maiden to go upstream, an adventurous endeavor, and enter the Arthurian court, a masculine realm. Thus she recounts to her family the fashion in which she intends to go “up the shining flood”: after death, her body shall be put upon a small boat, and in her hand a letter shall be held, chronicling her love for Lancelot. The meticulousness with which she plans her watery funeral illustrates her willfulness. Her intention here is to chronicle her own story in front of Arthur’s court, especially in front of Lancelot and the Queen. She emphasizes, “[t]here surely I shall speak for mine own self, / And none of you can speak for me so well” (1118-19). According to Wynne-Davies, her death guarantees her voice will be heard, for such a dramatic scene astonishes the whole court (“Am” 73).<sup>8</sup> Although here Wynne-Davies is referring to Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, the same situation applies to Tennyson’s Elaine. Floating upon

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<sup>7</sup> Hereafter referred to as “Elaine.”

<sup>8</sup> Although Wynne-Davies’ discussions focus on Malory’s depiction of Elaine instead of that of Tennyson’s, Elaine’s death and her own arrangements of the watery funeral stay true for both texts.



the water, she writes her own narrative with both the letter and her own body; the water cuts into the grounds of Arthur's court as much as Elaine's story cuts into the heart of Arthur's people. This idyll marks the turning point of Arthur's reign, for it is through Elaine's story that the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is truly exposed; it is in Elaine's own narrative that the pernicious repercussions of such a relationship are illuminated. Again water serves as a medium of her narrative voice, this time physically carrying her body and her message to Camelot.

The water imagery in Elaine's story has an even deeper root. The backdrop of Elaine and Lancelot's encounter is the ninth annual diamond joust, which has a watery origin: an origin that, like the watery voice in "The Coming of Arthur" and the oceanic harbingers before baby Arthur is first discovered on the shore in "Guinevere," fortifies Arthur's authority as the King. Arthur saw the crown of a dead king falling into a tarn, and, plunging into the water, he caught the crown and put it on his own head; immediately he heard a whisper, "lo, thou likewise shalt be King" (A. Tennyson, "Elaine" 55). The nine diamonds on this aqueous crown thus became the prizes of the diamond jousts, again heightening Arthur's authority by galvanizing his knights into self-amelioration. The last and largest diamond, the prize of this very last joust, sees an ending that is as watery as its origin. For the ninth time, the diamond is won by Lancelot, and he offers all nine diamonds to Guinevere. Infuriated by Lancelot's choice to wear Elaine's favour at the joust, the jealous Queen refuses to accept them and instead flings them into the stream. These diamonds come into Arthur's possession from water, and to water they return. As Arthur is said to go "[f]rom the great deep to the great deep" (A. Tennyson, "Coming" 410), these diamonds, exchanged between Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, epitomize the fate of both Arthur and his kingdom. It is also these very diamonds that time and again pinpoint the narrative of this trio's victim. Even before Elaine meets Lancelot, she has already dreamt of the prize of this last joust: she dreamt that "some one put this diamond in her hand, / And that it was too slippery to be held, / And slipt and fell into some pool or stream, / The castle-well, belike . . ." (A. Tennyson, "Elaine" 211-14). The sense of disappointment and bereavement inherent in Elaine's tragedy is foreshadowed through the imagery of water. This dream, like the dream before her death, is narrated by her to her brother. Her narrative voice, her death, and water cannot be separated. In the same light, just as the diamonds are devoured by the stream

outside of Guinevere's window, the little boat "[w]hereon the lily maid of Astolat / Lay smiling" (1234-35) happens to pass by.

While water often helps to facilitate the female narrative voice throughout the *Idylls*, at times the woman herself is compared to water. Guinevere is an apt example. Towards the end of "Guinevere," Arthur departs after his majestic speech, and the Queen out of a sudden burst of passion calls Arthur her "own true lord" (612). "[A]s a stream that spouting from a cliff / Fails in mid air, but gathering at the base / Re-makes itself, and flashes down the vale" (604-06), Guinevere recounts her regrets after gathering herself up from an emotional breakdown, like a stream. The Queen's prostrate position at the King's feet not only illustrates her shame but highlights her resemblance to the stream. Her remorseful exclamation, "Is there none / Will tell the King I love him tho so late?" (645-46) echoes the song that the novice sings, "Late, so late!" Although, unlike Enid, Vivien, and Elaine, Guinevere's verbal potency is not expressed through a song she herself sings, her vocal existence is nonetheless strengthened as, passing her years in the nunnery, she keeps wondering "is it yet too late?" (685). In the same vein, when she dies, she is "past / To where beyond these voices there is peace" (691-92; emphasis added).

In "Elaine" Guinevere is at once the conscience-stricken wife who endeavors to conceal her sin and the dignified Queen who throws the diamonds into water, rendering Lancelot's efforts and Elaine's death nugatory; in "Guinevere," however, she is depicted as a pitiable figure, a fallible woman who has sinned and now repents. Guinevere's voice is inseparable from her refusal to fulfill the role the Arthurian legends have bestowed upon her. As Ahern points out, unlike the previous Guineveres in the Arthurian tradition, Tennyson's Guinevere is a "strong character who struggles against a society that typecasts her within narrowly defined boundaries," and such struggles are presented by her "narrative freedom" to articulate her version of the story (91). Thus before discussing her narrative voice, it is essential to point out her versatility—as adulterous wife and devoted lover, venerated Queen and ignominious sinner—as epitomized in an incident that pinpoints the "cause" of her "flight" from the court, Sir Mordred's clandestine observation (A. Tennyson, "Guinevere" 9-10). One day, intending to disrupt the court in some way, Sir Mordred climbs the garden-wall of the palace to "spy some secret scandal if he might" (26). He sees Guinevere sitting "betwixt her best / Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court / The wiliest and the worst" (27-29). This *mise-*

*en-scène* perfectly illustrates the duality of Guinevere; with Enid on one end of the spectrum and Vivien on the other, Guinevere is endowed with both the qualities of the faithful and the treacherous. Sir Mordred is soon discovered and driven away. It is after this incident that Guinevere starts to find her guilt growing unbearable, and she eventually escapes to the nunnery out of shame, for she realizes that her adultery is no longer a secret. Although, between the novice's tittle-tattle of a legendary coming of Arthur and the King's own fervent monologue, Guinevere seems to be relatively muted, it is her influence that causes the doom of the kingdom, an influence wrapped up by the ubiquitous images of water.

An analogy between Guinevere and water is long established within the tradition of Arthurian legends. In the Welsh tradition, "Arthur was married to three Queens, each named 'Gwenhwyfar,'" a word meaning "[l]ady on the summit of the water" (Joseph 65). These three queens not only connect Guinevere to the water imagery indissoluble within the female voices throughout the *Idylls*, but also recall the three fairy Queens who "stood in silence near [Arthur's] throne" (A. Tennyson, "Coming" 276) upon his coronation and later escort the moribund King in "The Passing of Arthur." These mother/sister figures of Arthur's, accompanying him in the two most crucial occasions in his life, mark the ebb and flow of both Arthur and Camelot. On the other hand, Vivien, with her watery origin, is also compared to water. With strong verbal power, she herself is compared to the tide (A. Tennyson, "Vivien" 300), an ebbing power that gradually corrupts, imbues, and pollutes the social order established by Merlin and King Arthur.

Besides Guinevere and Vivien, the other person whose origin in the Arthurian legends is associated with the Lady of the Lake is Lancelot, a figure important in the fate of the kingdom. Towards the end of "Elaine," Lancelot "watch'd / The high reed wave, and lifted up his eyes / And saw the barge that brought her moving down . . ." (A. Tennyson, "Elaine" 1378-80). Through Elaine's innocent death he now sees the calamitous consequences that his liaison with the Queen would inevitably bring about: the boat now looks like a "blot upon the stream" (1381), embodying the adulterous sin committed by Lancelot and Guinevere. Lancelot remembers his own name with shame:

Mine own name shames me, seeming a reproach,  
Lancelot, whom the Lady of the Lake

Caught from his mother's arms . . .  
 She chanted snatches of mysterious hymns  
 Heard on the winding waters, eve and morn  
 She kissed me saying, "Thou art fair, my child,  
 As a king's son," and often in her arms  
 She bare me, pacing on the dusky mere.  
 Would she had drowned me in it, where'er it be! (1392-1401)

Lancelot's name, which is "Lancelot du lac" (Lancelot of the lake) in both Chrétien de Troyes and Malory's texts, is intrinsically associated with the lake—or the Lady of the Lake. In this passage the fairy foster mother's watery voice validates his social stature—his "name"—and, as his affair with Guinevere culminates in Elaine's death, Lancelot is no longer able to suffer the shame that his disloyalty brought to his name; he wishes for a premature demise in water, which would have rendered him anonymous. As the fame of "Lancelot" as Arthur's greatest knight grows, so his shame as an unfaithful knight is augmented. Lancelot's resolution to salvage his watery name and "die a holy man" (1418) is both inspired by Elaine's watery death and illustrated through an expression of his own watery death. It is noteworthy that while Elaine's death is a visual realization of her verbal requests, in both Lancelot's origin and his imagined early demise, it is a female voice—the voice of the Lady of the Lake—that rings in the air.

Elaine's watery death is later on echoed by Arthur's "passing." Again it is the Lady of the Lake's voice that marks both his coming and his passing. In "The Coming of Arthur" and "Guinevere," Arthur's origin is explained. In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur's legitimacy as the heir to Uther's throne is based on the episode in which Arthur draws the magic sword from the stone. However, in the *Idylls*, this episode is obliterated. Instead, Arthur's legitimacy is verified through the natural / supernatural powers accompanying his coming. As the legend goes, after a great tempest "[t]here came a day as still as heaven, and then / They found a naked child upon the sands / Of dark Tintagil by the Cornish sea; / And that was Arthur . . ." (A. Tennyson, "Guinevere" 290-93). Such replacement is significant, for, according to Gilbert, this revision signifies Arthur's break from the patrilineal history. Instead of seizing the sword from stone, Arthur is corroborated by unknown power from "the deep," and, Merlin utters mysteriously "[f]rom the great deep to the great deep he goes" (A.

Tennyson, "Coming" 410) when the authenticity of Arthur's legendary coming is questioned. This sentence is echoed in the ears of Sir Bedivere after he witnesses the departure of Arthur into the unknown (A. Tennyson, "Passing" 445). Thus, a patrilineal history is replaced by a natural/supernatural power. Here Richard Wagner's renowned statement in *Parsifal* "Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit" (Time changes here to space; qtd. in Gilbert 867) can be applied as an appropriate manifesto for such a reallocation of the *fons et origo* of Arthur's legitimacy:<sup>9</sup> a switch from the temporal bloodline to the spatial Nature. Furthermore, such shift of power is gendered, for time, represented by patrilineal history, is rendered masculine, whereas the "great deep" is indubitably a feminine symbol. Due to the mystery surrounding Arthur's parentage, his power and legitimacy as the King is here dependent upon a feminine supernatural power; this is again evident in Excalibur, the sword given by the Lady of the Lake to Arthur. Furthermore, the entire incident of Arthur's coronation is narrated by a female voice, the voice of Bellicent, in order to guarantee Arthur's legitimacy as King. Again, in "Guinevere" it is the novice's voice that reiterates the discovery of the baby Arthur on the beach. Such female narratives verify Arthur's kingship by chronicling both the "three fair queens, / Who stood in silence near his throne, the friends / Of Arthur . . . who will help him at his need" (A. Tennyson, "Coming" 275-78) and the Lady of the Lake, who can "walk the waters like our Lord" (293), and from whom comes "[a] voice as of the waters" (290). The layered female voices and the recounted feminine supernatural power of water repeatedly enshrine Arthur, both in his birth and his "passing."

Not only are Arthur's origin and ending associated with both water and female voices, the main support of Arthur's sovereignty, Merlin's magic power, also originated from a woman associated with water. Merlin acquired his spells because of a "woman on the sea" whom "two cities in a thousand ships" fight over (A. Tennyson, "Vivien" 560, 559). Her beauty and "isle-nurtured eyes" (568) that "waged such unwilling though successful war / On all the youth" (569-70) make her husband, the King "in the most Eastern East" (553), so jealous that he decides to put an end to it. He does this by finding the wizard whose spell can so charm the Queen that "no man could see her more, / Nor saw she save the King, who wrought the charm, / Coming and going, and she

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<sup>9</sup> Wagner's statement originally denotes the "spatial" brotherhood between round table knights as opposed to, and in place of, the "temporal" relationship between father and son.

lay as dead, / And lost all use of life” (640–43). The magic book of this wizard then comes into Merlin’s possession, constituting a major part of his magic power. The purely masculine lineage of this magic spell is underscored by its application for the purpose of turning the woman into a possession, a woman whose uncontrollability is intertwined with the image of the sea. This taming of the wild in the end backfires, for Merlin, along with the patriarchal order he inherits and upholds, is subjugated by a woman who verbally utilizes this very same spell—a woman equally inseparable from water. As Merlin’s “name and fame” disappear, the “law of the father,” represented by the purely male lineage of his magic book, is metaphorically smeared and blurred by water. The written patriarchal history is again replaced by a female voice, that of Vivien. Throughout the *Idylls*, water imagery serves as not only a metaphor for female verbal power but also a physical (as in “Elaine”) or rhetorical (as in “Vivien”) medium through which such female narrative is conveyed. At times water imagery is used to delineate the woman herself, as in the cases of Guinevere and Vivien. Finally, several female characters are the counterparts of the Lady of the Lake, while both Arthur and Lancelot’s infancy are marked by her watery voice. Such watery origins serve as the backdrop of the entire Arthurian world, while the watery female voices, heard at every crucial point throughout the *Idylls*, punctuate the rise and fall of Camelot.

## II. The Fluid Photographs

Tennyson was not subtle about expressing his aversion to the pre-Raphaelite illustrations accompanying the 1857 illustrated edition of his poems, which is commonly known as the “Moxon Tennyson.” Robert Bernard Martin points out that Tennyson had been “less than co-operative” with Rossetti, Millais, Arthur Hughes, and Holman Hunt, “taking them sternly to task if any of their illustrations contained a single detail that could not be plainly justified by the words of the poems” (414). In the 1860 illustrated edition of *The Princess* in Tennyson’s own possession, he even wrote “Wrong!” next to Daniel Maclise’s illustration (Kooistra 61).<sup>10</sup> He was unhappy about the prospect of an illustrated edition in the first place, for he disliked his words being interpreted

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<sup>10</sup> For a digitalized version of Tennyson’s annotated page, see the reproduction in Kooistra 65. For the original copy, see the Author’s copy of the first illustrated edition of *The Princess*, with twenty-six designs on wood by Daniel Maclise, located in the Tennyson Research Centre.

by painters. In "A Statement of Facts Respecting the Illustrated Edition of My Poems," Tennyson voices his reluctance by emphatically claiming that the illustrated editions, both of his poems in 1857 and *The Princess* in 1860, were "entirely" the products of "the late Mr. Moxon's own proposal," which he "objected at first" (A. Tennyson, *Letters* 2: 210). Tennyson, according to Olsen, "had wanted an exact literal correspondence between the scene described in the poem and the accompanying illustration" ("Idylls" 375). Thus Tennyson's willing collaboration with Julia Margaret Cameron in 1874 and 1875 is quite unusual. This collaboration seems to have been satisfactory on both sides, as Cameron emphatically suggests in a letter, "our great Laureate Alfred Tennyson himself is very much pleased with this ideal representation of his *Idylls*" (qtd. in Gernsheim 48). Indeed Tennyson not only helped choosing the models but provided some props for the backdrops of the photographs (Olsen, "Idylls" 375),<sup>11</sup> proving his ready participation in the process.

Tennyson's consent to the photographic illustrations enabled Cameron to use a "voice" specifically her own, a photographic narrative also associated with water, or rather liquid in general. First and foremost, Cameron adopted the "wet collodion" process developed by Frederic Scott Archer in 1851, which had "completely replaced Talbot's paper negatives by the late 1850s" ("Men" 34). This process is quite cumbersome; the negatives are "coated with an even layer of collodion," "placed in the camera," "exposed," and then "developed in the darkroom," all while the collodion is still wet (34). For the development of the film, silver nitrate is poured over the negative. The negatives are then washed with water and coated again with sodium thiosulfate to fix the image. Then they are coated with varnish and dried (Arribas 88). The negatives are repeatedly treated with layers of liquids, and washed profusely with water. Then the glass plates are placed upon "pre-coated albumen paper" (88) and exposed under the sun for printing. The positives thus created are toned with gold chloride or gold thiocyanate before it is finally fixed (88). As each photographer applies the layers of liquids in his/her unique way, and as the fluids flow and diffuse upon the surfaces of the glass plates and printing paper, each photograph is unique and a material display of the working process of each individual photographer. During such a complicated process, Cameron, like many photographers at her

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<sup>11</sup> For example, as recalled by Wilfrid Ward in "Tennyson and W. G. Ward and other Farringford friends," *Tennyson and His Friends*, edited by Hallam Lord Tennyson, Macmillan, 1911, when Cameron met Cardinal Vaughan, she turned around and exclaimed to Tennyson, "Alfred, I have found Sir Lancelot," to which he replied, "I want a face well worn with evil passion" (231-32).

time, had to deal with the failures that the wetness might bring to the negatives, the images, or the final print. In “Annals of My Glass House” she wrote, “my first picture I effaced to my consternation by rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass” (48). However, unlike most professional photographers at the time, who pursued precision and clarity in their commercially equipped studios, she embraced such technological imperfections. According to Shires, by the time Cameron started her photographic career, commercial photography had already become the norm, and “the photographic idioms and standards” were established by professional photographers, who considered it a necessity that the photographs be “clean, complete, and precisely detailed” (“Glass House Visionary” 111). Anne Thackeray Ritchie also points out that “[p]eople like clear, hard outlines, and have a fancy to see themselves and their friends as if through opera-glasses, all complete, with the buttons, &c., nicely defined,” to which statement she adds, “[t]hese things Mrs. Cameron’s public may not always find . . .” (10). Indeed, contrarily, Cameron’s works were renowned for their soft focus, hazy ambiance, and, at times, scratches and smudges, some of which were made on purpose. Though many critics were not shy in denouncing the “slovenliness” in her photographs (qtd. in Weiss and Cameron 31),<sup>12</sup> some found these deficiencies “special beauties of her workmanship” (qtd. in Weiss and Cameron 35).<sup>13</sup> The imperfections created during the process—many of which were due to the wetness of the negatives—give her photographic narrative voice a definite uniqueness.

When Tennyson criticized Holman Hunt’s illustrations in the 1857 “Moxon Tennyson” as not adhering to the words of the poet, Hunt retorted that he “had but half a page to do what it took Tennyson fifteen to express” (Martin 415).<sup>14</sup> The time frame in Cameron’s photographs differs so greatly from that in other illustrations that she is able to present, within one page, what it indeed took Tennyson dozens of pages to express. One example is *Enid* (see Fig. 1). In this photograph, Enid is wearing a white dress and leaning against a closet, and the text accompanying this photograph reads,

“And thou, put on thy worst and meanest dress  
And ride with me.” And Enid asked, amazed,

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<sup>12</sup> See “The Photographic Society’s Exhibition,” *The British Journal of Photography*, 19 May 1865, p. 267.

<sup>13</sup> See “Mrs. Cameron’s Photographs,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, Jan. 29, 1868, p. 394.

<sup>14</sup> See also W. Holman Hunt, vol.2, 123-25.



"If Enid errs, let Enid learn her fault."  
But he, "I charge thee, ask not, but obey."  
Then she bethought her of a faded silk,  
A faded mantle and a faded veil,  
*And moving toward a cedarn cabinet,*  
Wherein she kept them folded reverently  
With sprigs of summer laid between the folds,  
*She took them, and arrayed herself therein,*  
Remembering when first he came on her  
Drest in that dress, and how he loved her in it,  
And all her foolish fears about the dress,  
And all his journey to her, as himself  
Had told her, and their coming to the court.  
(A. Tennyson, "Marriage" 130-44; Cameron's emphasis)

This photograph supposedly portrays this moment when Enid obeys Geraint's request and "mov[es] toward" the cedarn cabinet. However, as Maria Bellido Arribas observes in her research on this photograph, Tennyson's text is at the same time "referring to a moment in the past," when Enid wore this "faded silk" to marry Geraint (142). Arribas appropriately states that in this photograph Cameron has "encapsulated both moments in this same portrait . . . by representing Enid wearing that dress . . . and at the same time obeying Geraint's orders and looking in the cabinet" (143). Cameron's intention to capture both moments at the same time can be seen in the two emphasized sentences, which were underlined by Cameron herself. While a photograph reproduces a frozen moment in time, here it at once refers to the past and the present. The specificity of Cameron's temporal manipulation is clear when compared with the time span in other contemporary illustrations. For example, in the illustrations by Doré, the characters are usually depicted as on the move—Enid and Geraint on horseback, Vivien seducing Merlin, Elaine's boat on the river, Guinevere's farewell with Arthur, and so on. The illustrations capture one single moment as the characters are in action, yet temporally speaking they never refer to any other moment but the present.

It is Cameron's decision to represent Enid in this very moment, a moment both narrating the past and foreshadowing the events that are to come, and a moment that epitomizes Enid's obedience and affection for Geraint.

Furthermore, in this publication Tennyson's words were reproduced in the form of hand-written lines in Cameron's handwriting. She wrote down "the text of the excerpted poems, the occasional captions for her photographs, the dedication to the Princess Royal, and the prefatory poem by Charles Tennyson Turner," and then these hand-written words were "lithographed for multiple reproduction," so that in this publication these texts are reproduced as "a facsimile of Cameron's handwriting" (Olsen, "Idylls" 374). Tennyson's narrative voice is here presented by Cameron's visual rendition of both the moment narrated in the text and the actual text itself. While patrilineal history is superseded by feminine Nature in Tennyson's text—temporal importance is replaced by spatial significance—here the photograph, a spatial representation, *re-presents* the text, which creates an essentially temporal experience for readers because reading word by word can only be achieved in time.

In this light, not only are the photographs created by a feminine hand, but the excerpted poems are literally written in a woman's "hand." It is thus noteworthy to see how the female characters and their narrative voices are represented by Cameron. What sets Cameron apart from other illustrators is her almost exclusive focus on the female characters, especially on the moments when their narrative voices are manifested. In the other photographic representation of Enid, *And Enid Sang* (see Fig. 2), Cameron chooses the moment when Enid is singing with the "liquid note" that so enchants Geraint.



Fig. 1. *Enid*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282119](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282119).



Fig. 2. *And Enid Sang*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282120](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282120).

The accompanying text reads, “So fared it with Geraint, who thought and said, / ‘Here, by God’s grace, is the one voice for me.’ / It chanced the song that Enid sang was one / Of Fortune and her wheel, and Enid sang . . .” (A. Tennyson, “Marriage” 343-46). The singing Enid, merely heard as a voice in Tennyson’s original text, is here represented in close-up, instrument in hand. This first appearance of Enid and her narrative voice, invisible in Tennyson’s text, is here substantiated through a visual representation. Furthermore, although this moment is recounted in Tennyson’s narrative voice, it is preceded by Enid’s reminiscing of her marriage with Geraint. In other words, these past incidents are framed by Enid’s memory, suggesting her own narrative voice.

For the idyll “Merlin and Vivien,” Cameron has produced two photographs; the first captures Vivien sitting on Merlin’s lap (see Fig. 3), and the accompanying text begins,

. . . he was mute:

So dark a forethought rolled about his brain,  
 As on a dull day in an Ocean cave  
 The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall  
 In silence: *wherefore, when she lifted up  
 A face of sad appeal, and spake and said,*  
 “O Merlin, do ye love me?” and again,  
 “O Merlin, do ye love me?” and once more,  
 “Great Master, do ye love me?” he was mute . . .  
 (A. Tennyson, “Vivien” 227-35; Cameron’s emphasis)

The juxtaposition of Vivien's repeated articulate appeal and Merlin's silence is clear. Vivien's voice is foregrounded in the photograph, for it is Cameron's intention to photograph the exact moment of the underlined lines. The other photograph depicts the moment when Vivien is casting the spell on Merlin (see Fig. 4). Here Vivien appears taller than Merlin, who already seems to be in a trance. Vivien has appropriated Merlin's spell, and, utilizing this spell acquired through the power of speech and realized in the form of speech, she successfully overpowers Merlin. Furthermore, while Tennyson's idyll was at the time



Fig. 3. *Vivien and Merlin*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282121](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282121).



Fig. 4. *Vivien and Merlin*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282118](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282118).

entitled "Merlin and Vivien"<sup>15</sup>—as was Gustave Doré's illustration, and Edward Burne-James's painting is simply entitled "The Beguiling of Merlin," entirely leaving Vivien out as the agent of the action—Cameron's two photographs were both entitled *Vivien and Merlin*, prioritizing Vivien over Merlin. This design is reminiscent of Tennyson's original title, for the *Idylls* was published in 1859 as a volume containing four idylls: "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere."<sup>16</sup> It is quite obvious that in these idylls the real protagonists were women.

Cameron's representation of Elaine also emphasizes her voice. Cameron created four photographs for the poem "Lancelot and Elaine," all featuring Elaine. The first two appear in volume one of *Illustrations* (1874), while the two that follow were published in volume two (1875)—and they are meant to be read as two sets of photographs that represent Elaine's love for Lancelot and her death, respectively. Elaine's narrative voice is clearly represented throughout. The first photograph portrays Elaine admiring Lancelot's shield (see Fig. 5), and the accompanying text, also written in Cameron's hand, is an excerpt from the very first passage of "Lancelot and Elaine," delineating how Elaine is embroidering a silk case for the shield, and "braided thereupon / All the devices blazoned on the shield / In their own tinct, and added, of her wit, / A border fantasy of branch and flower, / And yellow-throated nestling in the nest" (A. Tennyson, "Elaine" 8-12). Covering the shield with a case she has created, she retells the story delineated on the shield, yet with her own added narrative. The blazoned patterns are thus replaced by embroidery—the patrilineal history created on the battlefield is interpreted through a feminine medium and a feminine narrative. This interpretation is echoed in Elaine's daily routine to "read" the naked shield (16) and "made a pretty history to herself" (18) by guessing how each dint and scratch was created on the battlefield. The second photograph shows Elaine brooding over the silk case (see Fig. 6), for Lancelot has returned to Camelot.

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<sup>15</sup> According to Fred Kaplan, in 1856 the title of this idyll was "Merlin and Nimue," and yet in the 1857 trial edition it was entitled "Nimue, or the True and the False." In 1859 "Nimue" became "Vivien," and in 1870 it became "Merlin and Vivien," which was the conclusive title of the idyll (286). Although Tennyson changed his title several times, his first and final editions both listed Merlin before Vivien, and Cameron's illustrations were made for this last edition.

<sup>16</sup> Before the 1859 edition there was an 1857 trial edition, *Enid and Nimuë: The True and the False*, which was recalled by Tennyson.



Fig. 5. *Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282122](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282122).



Fig. 6. *Elaine*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282129](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282129).

The sense of loss, represented by the now empty case and the empty space on the upper-left corner, where the shield should be, is conspicuous. The similar positions of Elaine in the two photographs—slightly on the left side, looking to the right—clearly suggest a juxtaposed reading between the two, and thus the “there-was” of the first photograph and the “there-was-not” of the second are rendered clear (Arribas 153). In her reading of Cameron’s photographs Carol M. Armstrong calls this device her “cinematic sequence” (397), in which the lapse of time and the events taking place during that time are clearly implied. Furthermore, this second photograph is accompanied by the passage where

Elaine sings “The Song of Love and Death.” Again Elaine is captured in a moment where she creates her own narrative.

The third and fourth photographs depict the deceased Elaine on the boat and in Arthur’s court. The third photograph is accompanied by the passage where Elaine demands her watery funeral, as well as the passage where such arrangement is carried out after her death (see Fig. 7). Again the photograph delineates the realization of her demand as the effect of her vocalization. Between the two excerpted passages, connected by ellipses, Cameron has left out the sections about Lancelot and Guinevere. Arribas observes that such omission not only makes Elaine the center of focus, but also creates a continuity between the two sets of photographs, for the first two photographs also focus solely on Elaine (159). Indeed, although the idyll is entitled “Lancelot and Elaine,” Cameron chooses to exclude Lancelot entirely from her first three photographic illustrations; in the last photograph, Lancelot stands among the other by-standers, serving solely as background. Cameron’s choice again echoes Tennyson’s original title, “Elaine.” Lancelot’s presence is only referred to with respect to his absence, from the perspective of Elaine. Elaine is the only female character throughout the *Idylls* to actually narrate her own story in her letter, which is the center of focus in the fourth photograph. In this last photograph (see Fig. 8), as in the third, Elaine’s lifeless, recumbent body is situated in the center, with her hand, and the letter, being the focal point of the entire photograph. In the background, reading the letter, are King Arthur and Guinevere; and Lancelot is standing at the upper right corner, the spot Elaine stares at in the first two photographs. It is worthy of note that the “old dumb servitor” in photograph three is also photographed here, standing on the left side. While the relationship between King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot is



Fig. 7. *Elaine*. The J. Paul Getty Museum, [www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/58948/julia-margaret-cameron-elaine-british-1875/](http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/58948/julia-margaret-cameron-elaine-british-1875/).



Fig. 8. *Elaine before the King*. University of St Andrews Library, [collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/item/elaine-before-the-king/635446](https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/item/elaine-before-the-king/635446).

the backdrop and cause of Elaine's death, it is at first puzzling as to why the old servant is also here. However, if we consider how Elaine's death initiates the disintegration among the trio, and how this crisis brings forth the final downfall of Camelot, such a *mise-en-scène* becomes understandable. The old servant is played by Charles Hay Cameron, Julia Margaret's husband, who also posed as Merlin. His long, white beard makes his image memorable, and it is by no means a coincidence that here the old servant who resembles Merlin is standing among the other crucial characters. Symbolically speaking Arthur, Guinevere, Merlin, and Lancelot mark the rise and fall of the Kingdom, and at this crucial moment in the story, it is only apposite that they are photographed together. This visual arrangement of symbolically smuggling Merlin into the picture can only be achieved through a photograph, and Cameron, in this author's opinion, has certainly taken advantage of it, proving that as an artist she has done more than simply recreate Tennyson's text. Cameron's choice of situating all the crucial characters near Elaine's letter—the embodiment of her narrative voice—highlights the thematic significance of her death.

All the three heroines delineated above are captured at moments of verbal prowess, yet in Cameron's photographic illustrations of Guinevere, such moments are not shown. This choice is apposite, for throughout the *Idylls* Guinevere's story is told and retold by everyone but herself. Even in the idyll of her namesake, she merely listens while the novice tells the story of the "wicked Queen" (A. Tennyson, "Guinevere" 207). Her narrative voice, as Ahern points out, makes her "the most balanced and fully human figure" throughout the *Idylls* (97), for she will neither conform to the idealistic expectations of femininity nor rebel against social expectations like Vivien. She



has a strong voice, yet such a voice is heard only in the conversations between herself and Lancelot, the only one who already sees and accepts the Queen as she really is.<sup>17</sup> In other words, her narrative voice elicits few consequences in the storyline. While Lancelot and the readers hear her, the rest of the world in Tennyson’s text cannot. Thus in the last photograph where Guinevere appears, she is depicted as passively listening to the novice singing “Late, so late!” (see Fig. 9). This is also the moment where she learns, in silence, how the people throughout the kingdom narrate her adultery. Cameron’s Guinevere, especially in *The Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* and *The Little Novice with the Queen Guinevere in the Holy House at Almesbury*, is vulnerable and reticent. Both depict the Queen after she realizes that her adultery has dire consequences, and that she has become the subject of everyone’s narrative. Thematically speaking, Guinevere’s lack of verbal power as delineated by Cameron’s photographs is just as significant as the other heroines’ possession of such power. The dramatic irony created by the Queen’s speeches to Lancelot/the readers and her silence towards everyone else is here rendered conspicuous.



Fig. 9. *The Little Novice with the Queen Guinevere in the Holy House at Almesbury*. V&A Museum, [collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1425491/the-little-novice-with-the-photograph- Cameron-julia-margaret/](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1425491/the-little-novice-with-the-photograph- Cameron-julia-margaret/).

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed discussion of Guinevere’s words and how her voice provides the text with a sense of disillusionment against the Camelot created under Arthur’s self-righteous idealization, see Ahern 88-112.

It is worthy of note that besides the “fair women” in the *Idylls*, Cameron has also illustrated King Arthur’s “passing.” In volume 2 of *Illustrations* Cameron depicts “The Passing of King Arthur,” in which the three Queens and the “stately forms” behind them are in the back, while King Arthur lies at the front center (see Fig. 10; A. Tennyson, “Passing” 364). The position of Arthur’s body on the barge and the waves underneath, created by Cameron through tampering with the negative, are both reminiscent of Elaine’s watery death. Here, water as imagery again becomes prominent. Furthermore, Cameron has scratched the negative so as to create a crescent moon on the upper left corner. Together the moon and the water illustrate Cameron’s female hand in the working process, an externalization of her specific mark as a female artist.



Fig. 10. “So like a shatter’d Column lay the King.” V&A Museum, [collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1098303/so-like-a-shatterd-column-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1098303/so-like-a-shatterd-column-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/).

While throughout Tennyson’s text the female characters’ narrative power is often associated with water imagery, within Cameron’s photographic world, where the female voices are at their strongest, liquidity also plays a significant role. Unlike other photographers of her time, Cameron seldom used head clamp apparatuses to maintain the sitter’s gesture. Particularly in *Illustrations*, where she intends to showcase a dramatic moment within the storyline, the dynamic tension is achieved by the slight movements of the sitters while they struggle to maintain a theatrical pose, movements creating a blurring effect that many

critics considered a technical error. Some critics, however, embrace such an effect as much as Cameron herself. Jonathan R. Fardy, for example, points out that "the traces of movement in Cameron's photographs lend her subjects a sense of fluidity," and that Cameron "figures movement as flow" (152). For the "mover," movement "is not a discontinuous atomized itinerary of gestures. It is fluid. Focus is her technique for rendering visible this fluidity" (152). Within the space of a photograph Cameron intends to also delineate the movements in time. Luce Irigaray's "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids" *This Sex Which is Not One* is here adopted by Fardy to explain the fluidity in Cameron's photographs. Fardy points out that, like other women in the nineteenth century, Cameron struggled with different roles (mother, wife, matron of the house, photographer, etc.) and to play all these roles, fluidity becomes essential (153). On the other hand, for Irigaray, the feminine is characterized by a "'fluid' character," a character that makes feasible the male semantics which creates it, a character which "has deprived her of a possibility of identity with herself within such a logic (109). Fardy thus states that Cameron's works embody precisely such a fluid character. By creating a stark contrast between their fluidity and the clear, solid, and sometimes rigid composition in the works of other, almost exclusively male, contemporary photographers, Cameron's works "visually [propose] an answer" to Irigaray's question: "how are we to prevent . . . the unconscious (of the) 'subject' from being . . . diminished in its interpretation, by a systematics that re-marks a historical 'inattention' to fluids'?" (Irigaray 107; Fardy 153). Thus I contend that the very fluidity of her photographs creates an opportunity for her to proclaim her specifically feminine creativity—her specific way of story-telling, of narrative *sans* words. The supposed imperfection of Cameron's works thus renders visible the fluidity ignored among the majority of her contemporary photographers.

However, for Cameron the connection between creativity and "fluid" does not stop here. When Cameron recounts her creative process, the delight she felt in her creation is chronicled in terms of the fluids she used. She wrote in "Annals of My Glass House,"

Personal sympathy has helped me on very much. My husband from first to last has watched every picture with delight, and it is my daily habit to run to him with every glass upon which a fresh glory is newly stamped, and to listen to his enthusiastic applause.

This habit of running into the dining room with my wet pictures has stained an immense quantity of table linen with nitrate of silver, indelible stains, that I should have been banished from any less indulgent household. (55)

It is Cameron's habit to use other people's opinions, especially those of men, as excuses for her creative activities. This is what Olsen would call a "permission slip" (*From* 147): instead of her proclaiming pride and complacency for her own creativity, here she uses her husband's support as the reason for her excitement. The fluids that forever stain the table cloth serve as inefaceable records of her creative process, a visible mark that seeps from her working space into her domestic domain. It is this very fluidity that helps her to strike a balance between the roles of an artist and a home-maker.

From the beginning stage of her creative career, water played an important role. When she first learned about the invention of photography from Sir John Herschel, she wrote that such a scientific discovery was to her "water to the parched lips of the starved" (Cameron, "Annals" 64). Her thirst for a means to channel her creativity is illustrated through water imagery. Furthermore, every stage of her creative process is underscored by water. Cameron states that for each photograph "nine cans of water fresh from the well" were used to wash the negatives (qtd. in Ford 39), and Colin Ford also points out in his biography of Cameron that "water was liberally used at every stage" of the development of photographs (39); so much so that in a photograph by Oscar Gustav Rejlander, taken near Cameron's glass house and later her studio, two housemaids are shown drawing water from the well. This photograph is generally thought to be a collaboration between Rejlander and Cameron, as curator Marta Weiss points out (Weiss and Cameron 37). Besides being taken near Cameron's house with her maids as the sitters, Cameron's participation can be further verified by the fact that the photograph is found among the belongings of Cameron's dear friend and mentor George Frederic Watts, and that "[t]he Idylls of the Village / or The Idols of the Village / The Marys at the Well. [sic] / of Fresh Water / A Pastoral Gem / for the Signor" is written on the back of this copy, indicating that this is a keepsake from Cameron to Watts. "The Idylls of the Village" clearly refers to *Idylls of the King*, which again refers to Cameron as a photographer. Furthermore, considering how long the sitters had to maintain their positions, this photograph is definitely more symbolic than

documentary. The fact that this moment of drawing water is taken in front of Cameron's glass house/studio indicates how significant a role water played in her working process.

By concentrating on images of water, or liquid in general, this paper has explored the representation of female narrative voices in *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's texts do not merely recount the Arthurian legends and the gender roles established therein, but they epitomize the gender complexities within Victorian society via the "voices as of the waters" exhibited by female characters. Cameron's photographic illustrations also reflect such complexity with feminine perspectives and narrative choices, as well as their fluidity. The fact that Tennyson was satisfied with Cameron's works, including the arrangement of his texts being reproduced in her handwriting, indicates a sense of mutual respect and equal creative authority in the collaboration between the male poet and the female photographer. Cameron's "voice" is thus also figuratively heard throughout. Water, accompanying the female narratives, saturates the entire text; it is, for Pamela J. Mittlefehldt, the Muse from whom poetry is germinated, for "[t]he lexicon of water itself invites clear connections between water and creativity: fluidity, reflectivity, mutability" (139). Such is the case for *Idylls of the King*. Thus by exploring both the female voices in the texts and the female hand behind the illustrations, via the imagery of water, this paper provides a fresh perspective for subsequent studies of female narratives in *Idylls of the King*, in order to further tease out Tennyson's representation of gender issues in the latter half of the Victorian period.

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