Modernizing the Arthurian Legend: Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations of Idylls of the King

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Modernizing the Arthurian Legend:
Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations of *Idylls of the King*

by

Hannah Rozenblat

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

Julia Margaret Cameron’s brief photographic career from the 1860s through the 1870s received a lot of critical and scholarly attention, both during her lifetime and in the nearly century and a half since her death. Her innovative portraits and allegorical subjects changed the way historians and audiences viewed art photography, particularly within the context of its development in the nineteenth century. One of the highlights of her late career, her series of illustrations of Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, received its fair share of attention as well. This series, published by Cameron in two volumes as *Illustrations to the Idylls of the King and Other Poems* in 1874-75, will be the focus of this study.

This thesis argues that Cameron’s *Idylls of the King* series was created in dialogue with the Arthurian Revival of the nineteenth century, which involved a proliferation of both literary and artistic works on Arthurian themes, including a considerable number of images created by the Pre-Raphaelites. By considering Cameron’s illustrations within the context of the Arthurian Revival, this thesis identifies her unique contribution not only to the context of photography and book illustration, but also to the larger cultural forces that propelled her particular publication.

Cameron, who was born as Julia Margaret Pattle in 1815 to a distinguished family stationed in Calcutta, India, received her education in France before returning to India in 1834.¹ In 1836, on a trip to Cape Town, South Africa, Cameron made the acquaintance of Sir John Herschel and his family, a connection that blossomed into a lifelong friendship and proved a

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considerable professional advantage for her. Herschel, who was a preeminent British scientist, astronomer, and mathematician, became involved in photography during its early days, experimenting and making significant contributions to the field in the 1830s and 1840s. Records of letters sent by Herschel and his wife to Cameron from 1839 to 1846 indicate that the Herschels kept Cameron informed of developments in the field of photography and shared experimental processes that were not yet public. Herschel was knowledgeable about all the latest breakthroughs in photography and, in turn, remained in conversation with Cameron, informing her also about the collodion process that she would later use.

Upon Cameron’s husband Charles Hay Cameron’s retirement in 1848, the family moved to London, England. There they became part of a prominent British artistic and literary circle that included George Frederic Watts, Edward Burne-Jones, William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lewis Carroll, and George Eliot. Cameron kept company with some of the most distinguished Victorian figures at the Little Holland House salon, organized by her sister, Sara Pattle Prinsep.

In 1850 or 1851, Sir Henry Taylor introduced the Camerons to Lord Alfred Tennyson and his wife, Emily, and the two families quickly became close friends. In the late 1850s, before she ever became professionally involved with Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, Cameron and her

2 Ibid., 152.
3 Ibid., 152-153. In 1846, Herschel sent Cameron two specimens of chemical innovations that had been sent to him by the German-Swiss chemist Christian Friedrich Schönbein, innovations that would later be the basis for the wet collodion process that Cameron employed in her photography. These letters are part of the Cameron Papers in The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Archives of the History of Art, Los Angeles.
sisters had the opportunity to hear him read drafts of two of the installments of the series, “Guinevere” and “Merlin and Vivien.” We know, therefore, that Cameron was familiar with Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* for more than a decade before she illustrated it. After an 1860 visit to Tennyson’s new estate in Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight, the Camerons purchased their own property in the area and moved there, giving the Camerons and Tennysons the opportunity of cultivating their own social circle of writers and artists. It was there that Cameron began experimenting with photography and launched her career.

In 1874, Tennyson approached Cameron and requested that she illustrate *Idylls of the King* for a new cabinet edition. Aside from their personal friendship, they had worked together in the past, with Cameron taking the poet’s portrait at least twenty times over the course of the 1860s. In response to his request, she enthusiastically agreed and reportedly said, “Now you know, Alfred that I know that it is immortality to me to be bound up with you.”8 Tennyson intended to include wood engravings based on her photographs in the new edition of his work, but in the end, only three of her photographs were reproduced as wood engravings and included in the volume: *Maud, Elaine*, and *King Arthur*.9 After working on the project, Cameron, who was dissatisfied with the small scale of her works in his edition and the fact that only a few had been included, decided to publish all her illustrations on a larger scale in a separate volume.10 The result of this project was *Illustrations to the Idylls of the King and Other Poems*, which was

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10 Ibid., 249.
published in two large-format albums in 1874-75, as well as a miniature edition that was issued in 1875-79. The two volumes included a total of fifteen photographic illustrations of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, alongside inscribed titles and excerpts from Tennyson’s text in Cameron’s handwriting. The first volume focused exclusively on subjects from *Idylls of the King*, with twelve illustrations and a frontispiece portrait of Tennyson (Figure 15), while the second album contained only three images based on *Idylls*, with the rest of the photographs illustrating subjects from Tennyson’s other poems. For the purpose of this study, only the fifteen photographs illustrating *Idylls of the King* will be considered.

The majority of art historians consider Cameron’s photographic output as a whole, situating her *Idylls of the King* series within the rest of her work. This is certainly the case among Cameron’s primary biographers, such as Mike Weaver, Joanne Lukitsh, Julian Cox, and Colin Ford. While their works are useful for situating Cameron within the context of nineteenth-century photography and identifying her contributions to the medium, their full-length books generally do not devote much detailed attention to Cameron’s Arthurian images. For example, in Mike Weaver’s 1984 biography, *Julia Margaret Cameron, 1815-1879*, which describes both Cameron’s life and the development of her photographic career, Weaver addresses her Arthurian illustrations within the context of her allegorical images. Although Weaver describes the creation and publication process of the *Idylls* and Cameron’s general inspirations, he does not address the individual images from the series or their significance to Arthurian imagery as a whole.

Likewise, Joanne Lukitsh’s exhibition catalogue of 1986, *Cameron: Her Work and Career*, only

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12 Lukitsh, “Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations to Alfred Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King*,” 250.
briefly mentions the existence of Cameron’s *Idylls of the King* illustrations but does not discuss them at all.

In 2003, a significant contribution appeared in the form of two volumes: Colin Ford’s *Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography*, which was published to accompany the exhibition *Julia Margaret Cameron: 19th Century Photographer of Genius*, and Colin Ford and Julian Cox’s collaboration on a *catalogue raisonné*, *Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs*. In Colin Ford’s biography, he divides Cameron’s photographic output by categories, addressing her allegorical photographs in the chapter titled “Madonnas, May queens and virgins.” As the title implies, the six-page chapter deals equally with all of Cameron’s allegorical subjects, whether Biblical, classical, or literary. Ford describes the various sources and interests that led Cameron to her allegorical subjects and acknowledges the role of *tableaux vivants* in influencing this section of her work. Within this larger category, Ford devotes only a few paragraphs to explicitly discussing her *Idylls of the King* series, situating it within the Victorian taste for amateur theatricals. While this is helpful for understanding the perspective from which Cameron’s Victorian audiences would have seen the series, it only presents a small portion of the context in which Cameron created these photographs. Meanwhile, the *catalogue raisonné* on which Colin Ford and Julian Cox collaborated, with essays from Philippa Wright and Joanne Lukitsh, is useful for establishing the chronology of Cameron’s life and career and understanding her style and inspirations, but does not elaborate on her *Idylls of the King* series in any of the primary essays. In the catalogue section of the book, which is categorized by subject matter, the *Idylls* series is prefaced by a brief description of the project that explains how Cameron became involved in it, how the images were produced and published, and the critical

and commercial response. The final paragraph of this preface contains the only analysis in the

catalogue raisonné of the Idylls project’s relevance or significance:

The outcome of her increasingly complex dramatizations of literary and biblical narratives, these illustrations represent a pioneering attempt to bring to life the allusive poetry of Arthurian legend through photography. They preserve the aura of tableaux vivants and amateur theatricals, which characterizes all her illustrative work (note, for instance, the cotton wool extension to her husband's beard in *Vivien and Merlin*). Cameron made the most of this opportunity to demonstrate that photography was the equal of any other form of book illustration. The results provide a convincingly human and contemporary interpretation of the dense mythic world of Arthurian legend.¹⁶

These considerations go a step beyond other scholarship by implying that theatricality is what enabled Cameron to use photography to “bring to life” the Arthurian legend and adequately illustrate a literary work. The assertion here that Cameron’s illustrations successfully created a human and contemporary interpretation of an old legend is relevant to our analysis of the series. However, what this description lacks is an analysis of the way Cameron’s photographs interacted with Tennyson’s text and the poet’s own goal of creating a human and contemporary account. Cameron’s work necessarily relies on Tennyson’s own intentions, his role in the Arthurian Revival, and other interpretations of the legend in the nineteenth century.

Other scholars have examined this relationship between Cameron’s illustrations and Tennyson’s text. For instance, Carol Armstrong’s *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875* provides a useful overview of Cameron’s illustrations for *Idylls of the King* according to a broader discussion of the images’ relationship to textuality. *Scenes in a Library*, which examines the general topic of photographic book illustration in the mid-nineteenth century through notable examples, devotes a chapter to Cameron and Tennyson. Armstrong takes note of Cameron’s dependence on Tennyson’s text, writing that as a result of “her manner of excerpting from Tennyson’s text,” ultimately “the text illustrates the image rather

than the other way around.”\(^\text{17}\) This critical point will be explored in our later analysis of Cameron’s images. Armstrong also emphasizes Cameron’s differences as a photographic illustrator, noting that unlike other photographers who illustrated poems with “place photographs” that “located poetic ideas in the visible here and now of existent place,” Cameron focused on capturing “the interior essence of her make-believe characters,” thus creating images of abstract ideas instead of depictions of concrete places and facts.\(^\text{18}\) However, Armstrong approaches the subject from a modern perspective, taking into account the way films depicted the same sort of imaginary topics through the realistic portrayal of human models. While this is interesting for the consideration of Cameron’s relevance to later twentieth-century audiences, it overlooks the historical context in which Cameron’s works were actually created and introduced. Nor does Armstrong’s study situate Cameron’s work specifically within the Arthurian Revival, despite the fact that Cameron’s illustrations necessarily depended on the themes of the revival because of Tennyson’s literary context.

While many publications address Cameron’s personal and aesthetic connections with the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as the general relationship between Pre-Raphaelitism and photography, this is rather a broad topic as well. Studies generally focus on the stylistic similarities between Cameron and the Pre-Raphaelites, such as the collection of essays in *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*, edited by Diane Waggoner, which explores the search for visual truth shared by the Pre-Raphaelites and photographers. This connection is important and will be referred to throughout this thesis, but in the case of this particular subject this general comparison is limiting since it does not address the Pre-Raphaelites’ and Cameron’s


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 361.
involvement in the Arthurian Revival. It is specifically within the context of the Arthurian Revival that all of these relationships should be examined.

There is a great deal of scholarly literature on the Arthurian Revival, which provides a useful starting point for understanding its relevance to nineteenth-century England. In particular, Debra Mancoff’s *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes* and Inga Bryden’s more recent *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* discuss the factors that led to the Arthurian Revival during a specific social and historical context. Both of these works examine the ways in which Victorian society expressed contemporary national themes through a medievalized lens, connecting their Golden Age to that of King Arthur’s. Mancoff focuses on the ways Victorian writers, artists, and audiences “sought a window on the past in a desire to learn from their heroic and noble ancestors” and created as a result “a mirror of the present, projecting their own ideals and ambitions, dreams and fears, onto legendary characters and events.”


20 Ibid., 52.
Tennyson’s various illustrators, she does not delve into individual works of art unless they represent a specific theme of the Arthurian Revival, such as Arthur’s death and promised return.

Similarly, Inga Bryden analyzes the social context and British cultural identity that made the Arthurian Revival possible in *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture*. Analyzing the Victorian appropriation of the legend through the lens of social and class ideologies, Bryden goes through the various aspects of the legend that reflected Victorian concerns and interests. These include “nineteenth-century attitudes towards heroism,” which allowed writers to explore “the dynamics of heroism within contemporary social codes of chivalry and service” through the Arthurian legend, and which also reflected “Victorian notions of chivalric love” in nineteenth-century literature focusing on the love stories of the legend.21 Bryden also traces the way nineteenth-century representations of Arthurian women “highlighted contradictory attitudes towards purity and adultery,” more so than any earlier versions of the legend.22 In her brief discussion of Pre-Raphaelite art, Bryden focuses on this aspect of the legend and situates their images within “discourses relating to courtly love.”23 However, in her view of the revival as a broader cultural phenomenon across various genres, Bryden does not engage with the actual details of the Arthurian art of this period.

Unlike these two books, Debra Mancoff’s *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* specifically focuses on the artistic production of the Arthurian Revival. By tracing this back to the Medieval Revival and Gothic Revival of the eighteenth century, Mancoff establishes a chronology that contextualizes the Arthurian Revival within the concerns of the eighteenth-century movements, both in ideology and aesthetics. *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* is

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22 Ibid., 5.
23 Ibid., 99.
useful for establishing the historical processes behind all three revivals, and how their main themes and characters were expressed in art. Mancoff turns her attention to specific works of Arthurian art of the nineteenth century and their contributions to the revival, including the few Arthurian illustrations in the 1842 anthology *The Book of British Ballads*, William Dyce’s Robing Room murals at Westminster in the 1840s-1850s, and the Pre-Raphaelites’ treatment of the subject. She records the connection between artists and writers such as Tennyson, devoting a section to the images in the 1857 illustrated edition of Tennyson’s *Poems*. Similarly, she describes Gustave Doré’s illustration of sections of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Tennyson’s criticism of those illustrations. Mancoff’s discussion of Cameron’s photographic illustrations is limited to only three paragraphs, mostly with anecdotes about Cameron’s search for models. Although Mancoff concludes the paragraphs on Cameron by stating, “Anecdotes aside, her collection provided a remarkable interpretation of Tennyson’s poetry, both in its experimental medium and its feminist vision,” she fails to specify how precisely Cameron interpreted Tennyson’s text or what her feminist vision entailed. The *Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* contains no real engagement with Cameron’s individual photographs or their significance for the visual representation of the Arthurian legend.

In the analysis of Arthurian art, Muriel Whitaker devotes a chapter of her book, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, specifically to the discussion of Tennyson’s illustrators. In her analysis of *Idylls of the King* illustrations, she extends her discussion on Doré to a brief analysis of Cameron’s photographs. However, like Mancoff, she devotes a significant amount of that section to the story of Cameron’s search for models, describing only a few details of the characters represented. Whitaker only mentions one illustration by name, *The Parting of

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Lancelot and Guinevere, and even then only to refer to a review from 1875 in The Morning Post. There is no detailed analysis of these illustrations or their relevance for the Arthurian Revival. Likewise, in her essay “The Illustration of Arthurian Romance” in King Arthur Through the Ages: Volume 2 (edited by Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day), Whitaker traces the rise and fall of Arthurian imagery over the course of the centuries and acknowledges the Pre-Raphaelites’ contribution, mentioning Cameron only briefly on one page. Whitaker writes, “The limitations of her photographic technique, the soft focus which blurred outlines and deepened shadows, produced a romantic atmosphere appropriate to her approach which was emotional rather than narrative.” Aside from this, she provides no analysis of Cameron’s photographs and reinterpretation of the legend or reflection on the relevance of Cameron’s photographs for the Arthurian Revival.

To compensate for the lack of thorough contextualization in existing full-length scholarly works, this study will interconnect the various factors that contributed to Cameron’s photographic illustrations of Idylls of the King, including but not limited to: the rise of the Arthurian Revival in the nineteenth century and Tennyson’s position within it; the role revivalist chivalry played in Victorian society; the development of photography, particularly in narrative and pictorial forms; the depiction of Arthurian subject matter in nineteenth-century art and book illustration; theatricality and its connection to both photography and Victorian society; normative gender roles in Victorian society and the ways these were reflected in literature and art; and the relationship between text and image, considering that Cameron’s illustrations were more heavily based on the original text than those of other illustrators. Cameron’s Arthurian series was created

within the intersection of all these factors, and it is only by taking them all into account that we can truly situate this collection of photographs within its time and culture. In doing so, we can also identify Cameron’s unique contribution to the Arthurian Revival through photography. The goal of this study is perhaps best expressed in Mancoff’s explanation of her approach to the art of the Arthurian Revival. She writes in her introduction to *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*:

> Seen outside their Victorian context, the monuments of the Arthurian Revival in art are no more than romantic visions, illustrated narratives implying an absent text. Without the framework of original interpretive intention the metaphor remains mute. To release the message and to read the works as intended for their original audience it is necessary to explore the extrinsic factors that were significant to their conception, those habits of mind and communication that constituted the genesis of the metaphor and gave form to it, in art and in the course of the Revival itself.²⁷

Mancoff’s emphasis on the historical framework of nineteenth-century Arthurian imagery and its importance for understanding the message of those works mirrors the approach of this study of Cameron’s Arthurian illustrations. This study, then, will pick up where Mancoff left off by using her approach to the Arthurian Revival and applying it specifically to Cameron’s photographic illustrations.

Each of the chapters in this study will explore another aspect of the context in which Cameron operated, presenting a thorough account of her social, historical, literary, and artistic influences. The first chapter, “A Victorian Arthur: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson’s Reinvention of the Arthurian Legend in *Idylls of the King*,” will begin by exploring the development of the Arthurian Revival and the social and historical background leading to its formation, in order to understand the context and intentions of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Cameron’s photographic illustrations of it. This chapter will build the foundation for the analysis of nineteenth-century Arthurian imagery in the second chapter. “The Return of King Arthur in

Art: The Arthurian Legend in Victorian Art and Illustration” will trace the creation of a new nineteenth-century Arthurian iconography in both public and private works, as well as address the mid-century illustration of Tennyson’s works and situate Cameron within that history. The third chapter, “Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Context and Career” will then focus on nineteenth-century photography in particular and Cameron’s role within it. All of these factors and contexts will be incorporated into the analysis of the individual photographs in Cameron’s *Illustrations to the Idylls of the King and Other Poems* in the final chapter, “Bringing *Idylls of the King* to Life: Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations.” Finally, the conclusion will reflect on the contemporary relevance of Cameron’s series, its suitability in bringing to light Tennyson’s intentions, and its overall contribution to the Arthurian Revival.
CHAPTER 1

A Victorian Arthur: The Arthurian Revival

and Tennyson’s Reinvention of the Arthurian Legend in *Idylls of the King*

The nineteenth century experienced a major Arthurian Revival among the Victorians, both in literature and art. Numerous scholars, including Debra N. Mancoff, Christine Poulson, and Inga Bryden, have examined this period, providing a useful framework for Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and the representation of Arthurian subject matter. Tennyson and Cameron both undertook their projects within the framework of the Arthurian Revival, which shaped the way their audiences perceived the poems and the illustrations.

In order to understand the significance of the Arthurian Revival for the Victorians, a study of its historical and social context is necessary. Mancoff traces its roots to the eighteenth century’s Medieval Revival during the Enlightenment, which coincided with an increased European interest in ancient history and archaeology as a means of reconciling medieval legends with the rationalism of the age. Largely “inspired by archaeological investigations of the classical world,” scholars in various European countries were drawn to “ scrutinize their own cultural inheritance.”28 Mancoff connects England’s interest in the past with the rising globalism and colonialism in the eighteenth century, marked by the “influence in continental politics, vast colonial territories, and gunboat diplomacy and trade” that made England a major modern world power.29 Between the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, England expanded its influence internationally through global exploration and the establishment of colonies and trade networks, ultimately emerging as a major imperial power by the nineteenth century. The expansion of the

British Empire called for a reexamination and celebration of England’s national identity, looking into its past. For England, this centered around the medieval world. The survival of monuments and relics from the Middle Ages in England was seen as “a potent symbol for the tenacity of indigenous British spirit.”\(^{30}\) Mancoff notes that England used the revival of its medieval heritage for “the confirmation of a glorious present through association with a glorious past” in order to validate their nationalism and imperialistic endeavors.\(^ {31}\) As a result, the period between 1750 and 1830 saw the birth of “a new historicism: the Medieval Revival, which embodied both an historical and a mythical Middle Ages.”\(^ {32}\)

The nation’s association of their age with England’s glorious past created increased interest in medievalism throughout the arts as well. In architecture, this medievalism expressed itself through the Gothic Revival in the mid-eighteenth century. The evolution of the Gothic Revival ended up encompassing all aspects of British culture, extending its influence to literature, painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts. In examining the intentions behind this movement separately from style, Mancoff categorizes four major intentional phases of the Gothic Revival as the “Escapist,” the “Archaeological,” the “Ethical,” and the “Political.”\(^ {33}\)

Defining these four phases, Mancoff writes,

> The Escapist phase was instrumental in the cultivation of a sympathetic temper and an enthusiasm for symbols of the medieval world. The simultaneous Archaeological phase provided the symbols themselves, and transformed alien relics of the ancient world into familiar objects with an increasingly accessible context. Out of these first explorations, after the turn of the eighteenth century, emerged Ethical medievalism, characterized by the desire to read the symbols of the past as lessons in morals and virtue for the present. This was followed by the Political phase, the last, and most synthetic, mode of interpretation, wherein the medieval past was the metaphor used to celebrate the present.

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The Political phase gave the early Victorian era an eloquent language for the expression of national sentiment. These four intentional phases interacted with one another, so that all of them impacted the subsequent movements emerging from the Gothic Revival, including the Arthurian Revival.

Familiarizing the public with a certain iconography and sensibility, the eighteenth-century Gothic Revival created an appreciative audience for medievalism and paved the way for a new understanding and appreciation of the Arthurian legend in the nineteenth century. Mancoff, who sees the Arthurian Revival as “a late manifestation of the Gothic Revival,” pointed out how these factors created a cultural climate in which the Arthurian legend could make a triumphant return. When the Arthurian Revival occurred in the nineteenth century, it “inherited its iconographical lexicon and its fluent and predisposed audience from the Gothic Revival.” As Mancoff writes, “The ideational legacy of the Gothic Revival, through revitalization, interpretation, and habituation, renewed the relevance of the Arthurian tradition,” and had “transformed medieval references into intelligible signs and had taught the general audience to read them.”

Although all the phases of the Gothic Revival have their expressions in Arthurianism, Mancoff sees the Arthurian Revival as primarily a monument of the political phase of the Gothic Revival due to its use of the conventions of expressing “national sentiment in the medieval metaphor.” The very representation of King Arthur’s establishment of an orderly, civilized kingdom in the wake of his military victories was used metaphorically by the Arthurian Revival as a justification of the British Empire’s imperialistic expansion. As Bryden notes, “The dark

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34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 4.
37 Ibid., 11.
38 Ibid.
period between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D., when Arthur is held to have lived at some point, was itself a time of shifting social structures and alliances.”\(^{39}\) At least in legend, Arthur, as though reacting to the instability of his age, set about conquering and establishing an orderly kingdom. Like Arthur, England justified its imperialistic ventures by claiming that it was bringing civilization to the nations it conquered. Describing the imperialistic underpinnings of the Arthurian legend in relation to modern England, Victor Kiernan writes, “Arthur’s expanding kingdom is itself a small empire, subjugating or overawing less civilized areas and bringing them within the pale of Christian manners. In the same style modern Britain was carrying fire and sword, light and sweetness, into the dark places of Asia and Africa.”\(^{40}\) Thus, the Arthurian legend became a reflection of the “robust self-confidence and rigorous self-promotion that fueled British economic expansion and political domination,” as well as an affirmation of British greatness in response to public “fear of the uncertainties of the future.”\(^{41}\) The need for this type of affirmation was further propelled by the cultural and political anxieties caused by the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, when the destruction of the social order in France led England to fear that “the traditional social, economic, and political foundations of the nation were in jeopardy.”\(^{42}\) During this period of instability, the adoption of King Arthur as a British national hero could be used to represent social stability and moral order. The parallels between King Arthur’s court and Victorian England made it a fitting candidate for a revival, with


nineteenth-century historians stressing Arthur’s “importance as the founder of a civilized and just social order.”

The early nineteenth century also saw the effects of England’s Industrial Revolution transforming all aspects of society, with the increasing use of technology changing the pace and quality of life and the rise of urban labor creating rifts in the traditional social order. England’s increasingly materialistic and industrialized society caused many to question the nature of the country’s progress and the values that were being lost in the transition, creating a split between tradition and progress. Interest in the Middle Ages, when viewed in the context of anxieties about the industrial age and the changes it brought to society, can be seen as a yearning for supposedly simpler times. The rise of medievalism indicated a desire to return both to the social structure of the Middle Ages as well as the pre-industrial rural landscape. However, it is not only medievalism as a whole that can be interpreted as a response to England’s expanding industrial landscape, but Arthurianism specifically that reflects this conflict between rural and urban society. In the Arthurian legends, King Arthur goes to Avalon upon his death, a location that Bryden points out “is predominantly figured as rural” and reflects “nostalgia for a past England” for contemporary readers. For these readers, the landscape of the Arthurian legend represents an escape from their own industrialized landscape and the social changes accompanying it.

Elucidating the chronology of the Arthurian legend’s rise in Britain, Mancoff divides the nineteenth century into four generations, each representing approximately a quarter of the nineteenth century. Mancoff describes the first of these generations as one for whom “tales of chivalry inspired a romantic association,” so that they “revered the relics of older times, celebrated their ancestors in fact and fiction, and tried to revive the courtly world of the Middle

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44 Ibid., 141.
Ages in their homes and in their actions.”
Towards the close of the eighteenth century, “chivalry was not seen through historical reconstruction but against the backdrop of revived medieval romance.”
This revivalist chivalry, which redefined the concept for nineteenth-century audiences, associated the modern English gentleman with the medieval knight based “on virtues thought to be inherent in the British character irrespective of historical context,” such as “bravery, loyalty, faith, and courtesy.” The perceived chivalry of medieval knights became a role model for British gentlemen to aspire to. Nineteenth-century England’s appropriation of chivalry for the promotion of contemporary values can be seen in the 1822 publication of Kenelm Henry Digby’s Broadstrone of Honour, or Rules for the Gentlemen of England, in which he “defined the emulation of the chivalric knight as a moral obligation of every Englishman.”
His book, which was expanded into a four-volume work later that decade, was also released in new editions in 1844-1848 and 1876-1877, and it was widely read by the Victorians. Mancoff describes the individuals of this generation as “nostalgic knights,” and this is a description that could also be applied to the next generation as well, as evidenced by their interest in medieval costuming, chivalric events, and mock tournaments. This was the case of the Eglinton Tournament of 1839 in Scotland, which featured a medieval joust and re-enacted the fictional tournament of Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 novel, Ivanhoe.
But while the second generation was also preoccupied with chivalry, “collecting weaponry and armor, jousting in the Eglinton

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47 Ibid., 41.
48 Ibid., 44.
Tournament, and sitting to artists in medieval costume," they differed from the first generation by approaching chivalry as something with practical applications.50

In response to the shifting social and economic landscape of Britain, the second generation associated chivalry with neo-feudalism in an attempt to “secure the old paternalism” amid the changes occurring around them.51 As a solution for the instability of their age, they idealized the model of social order that the Middle Ages provided. They believed that “the feudal system ensured social integration. Everyone, at every station, knew his or her place and the privileges and responsibilities it entailed. The source of stability was in the patriarchy: in the individual family, the father, in the community, the feudal lord, and in the nation, the king.”52 These notions of chivalric ideals also helped British society define its relationship to a new female monarch when Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837. The cult of chivalry, which had proliferated in the years before her reign, allowed male British subjects to establish their relationship to her as one of “knightly obligation.”53 Hence medieval models provided the framework for the social structure of Victorian England.

When the Arthurian Revival was in full swing by mid-century, the third generation reaped the benefits of “a new, yet venerable, identity,” while artists were inspired by its “noble and patriotic iconography.”54 It was during this period that Tennyson published the bulk of Idylls of the King, presenting them to a society that was already prepared to accept and appropriate its themes. Finally, the fourth generation, which represented the last quarter of the century, witnessed the decline of the Arthurian legend with the shift in ideology surrounding paternalism,

51 Ibid.
52 Mancoff, The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art, 30.
54 Ibid.
women, class structure, and monarchy. Tennyson, who had been gradually releasing the *Idylls of the King* over the decades, reflected this shift in the later poems, acknowledging the Victorian conflict between the old and the new in the story of Arthur’s knights challenging his authority.

As a leading figure of the Arthurian Revival in literature, Tennyson’s work fit into the larger scheme of what Bryden has termed “a literary and cultural phenomenon,” inspired in part by “the literary establishment’s concern to express nationalist sentiment in an appropriately epic form” in the nineteenth century. However, in order to understand how Tennyson fit into the greater tradition of Arthurian literature, it is necessary to consider how it differed from earlier versions of the legend and how Tennyson imbued the legend with a sense of innovation that reflected his social context.

Although King Arthur had appeared in a few poems by Thomas Warton in the 1770s that were primarily inspired by relics with Arthurian associations, such as King Arthur’s grave, a true revival of the Arthurian tradition did not occur until the nineteenth century. In the field of literature, it can be traced back to the 1816 and 1817 printings of new editions of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. Originally printed in a single first edition volume by Caxton in 1485, Malory’s legend had been out of print since 1634. Its reappearance in print through three different editions in 1816-17 thrust the spotlight on the Arthurian legends and allowed the tale to spread to a wider audience, with the new editions sold at low prices to allow the masses access. But while the Gothic Revival had groomed the public to be able to comprehend and appreciate Malory’s Arthuriad, the republication and popularity of *Le Morte d’Arthur* on its own would not have been enough to qualify as a true Arthurian Revival. However interesting it was, *Le Morte*

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was still seen as a literary artifact. As Mancoff writes, “To revitalize the true spirit of the tradition the modern world would have to write its own legend, respectful of the canon, but alive with meaning for contemporary society. The legend would have to be in the voice of its current audience.” Only when the legend was refashioned for a contemporary society and imbued with a more immediate relevance could a true Arthurian Revival occur.

In addition to making the work accessible to the greater reading public, the new editions of Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur were instrumental in inspiring a new wave of Arthurian works by nineteenth-century writers. Although a select number of nineteenth-century writers had chosen the subject matter of King Arthur and his Round Table in relation to revivalist chivalry prior to the reissue of Malory’s book, including Sir Walter Scott (1804, 1808, and 1813) and George Ellis (1805), a greater number began to focus on the topic after 1816-17, including William Wordsworth (1835), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1846), William Morris (1858), and many more.

The 1816 editions of Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur subsequently influenced and inspired Tennyson, who owned both editions. According to biographies, Tennyson became familiar with Malory’s work when he was a young boy, and his son later attested that the poet used the 1816 Walker and Edwards edition of Malory’s publication when writing Idylls of the King. Although the first installment of Idylls of the King did not appear until 1859, Tennyson published his first Arthurian poem, “The Lady of Shalott,” as early as 1832. A revised version of it was reprinted in the 1842 two-volume collection, Poems, alongside a few other of his early Arthurian poems. “The Lady of Shalott” was never included in Idylls of the King but it remained one of his most

58 Ibid., 25.
60 Ibid., 219.
popular works, inspiring countless artistic illustrations over the course of the nineteenth century, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Shortly after Tennyson was appointed the national Poet Laureate in 1850, upon the death of William Wordsworth, he began releasing installments of *Idylls of the King*, a cycle of narrative poems about the legend of King Arthur and his court at Camelot. In his analysis of *Idylls of the King*, Kiernan writes about Tennyson, “Committed to poetry’s social responsibility, he set out to be his country’s Public Orator; more than that, to be the voice of the people.” As the Poet Laureate, Tennyson was certainly in a position to be the voice of the people in poetry, with his writing sanctioned by the crown. Reflecting Victorian reality, with its concerns, interests, and ideals, this writing also provided a commentary on it, infusing his account of Camelot with modern relevance.

Understanding the plot and key themes of *Idylls of the King* is necessary for interpreting how it was received by Victorian society and the way contemporary readers of the poems and viewers of Cameron’s later photographic illustrations perceived the characters. The first installment of poems for *Idylls of the King* was published in 1859, with additional poems from the cycle appearing in 1869, 1871, 1872, and 1885. In total, the *Idylls* is comprised of twelve poems: “The Coming of Arthur,” “Gareth and Lynette,” “The Marriage of Geraint,” “Geraint and Enid,” “Balin and Balan,” “Merlin and Viven,” “Lancelot and Elaine,” “The Holy Grail,” “Pelleas and Ettarre,” “The Last Tournament,” “Guinevere,” and “The Passing of Arthur.”

The completed collection of *Idylls of the King* was framed by a dedication to Prince Albert, which had been written in 1861 in commemoration of the Prince Consort’s death, and an epilogue written in 1872, “To the Queen.” In the dedication, Tennyson praises Prince-Consort

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Albert’s greatness, metaphorically referencing King Arthur to him and paying homage to what he had done for his people by describing him as “scarce other than my king’s ideal knight.”63 By identifying Prince Albert as the epitome of knightly perfection, Tennyson sets the political context for his work and establishes its relevance for a contemporary audience. The poems of *Idylls of the King* are then concluded with an epilogue in tribute to Queen Victoria, referencing her husband’s death and glory. In “To the Queen,” Tennyson addresses the Queen, asking her to “accept this old imperfect tale,/ New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,/ Ideal manhood closed in real man.”64 His juxtaposition of “new” and “old” bridges the gap between the medieval legend and his Victorian audience. Closing the Arthurian legends with a reference to the present day and England’s monarchy is a way of reminding his readers of the tale’s significance for present times.

Tennyson sought to both reflect Victorian realities and expose the social ills of his own time through the fictional device of Arthurian England. The poet’s son, Hallam Tennyson, noted in his biography of his father that Tennyson intended to recreate the Arthurian legend for the modern world, a project that he began in the 1830s when he was a young Cambridge graduate interested in grappling with broad human issues.65 Tennyson’s interest in human and political issues, combined with his sense of social responsibility and desire for social change, was reflected in his writing.

*Idylls of the King* begins with an England that is full of dispute and war, where the wilderness, beasts, and barbarians are threatening to overtake the kingdom. King Arthur’s arrival and crowning paves the path for a reunification of the kingdom and the defeat of England’s

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64 Ibid., 302.
enemies. During this time, Arthur establishes the Round Table in Camelot, gathering a group of faithful knights, and he marries Guinevere. Arthur is depicted as a fair and wise king, who is restoring order to England; however, over the course of the story, Arthur’s glorious kingdom steadily unravels. His knights prove unable to live up to Arthur’s idealistic vision of society, and even his wife, Queen Guinevere, contributes to the downfall of Camelot through her adulterous affair with Arthur’s most prominent knight, Sir Lancelot. Immediately before the final battle that would lead to King Arthur’s death, the king mourns in his tent over his failed attempt to make the world a better place. “For I, being simple, thought to work His will,” Arthur reflects, referring to the will of God, “And have but stricken with the sword in vain;/ And all whereon I lean’d in wife and friend/ Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm/ Reels back into the beast, and is no more.” Arthur’s idealism and his efforts are ultimately in vain, and he sees his kingdom return to the chaos from which he thought he had saved it.

In his retelling of the Arthurian legend, Tennyson focused on the relationship between the industrial and economic progress of the nation and its social transformation, turning a critical eye on the changes he was observing in his country. In Hallam Tennyson’s biography, he described how his father sought to combat the “cynical indifference, the intellectual selfishness, the sloth of will, the utilitarian materialism of a transition age,” the Victorian period in which he lived.67

Tennyson viewed progress as a primary cause of many of nineteenth-century Britain’s problems and social ills. Connecting Victorian England’s striving for progress in their supposed Golden Age to King Arthur’s attempts to transform his society into a utopia, Tennyson exposes the fallibility of such endeavors. By contextualizing his age using a medieval lens, Tennyson “sees the British empire of the nineteenth century in the light of centuries and millennia, with

66 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 288.
their fallen empires and ghostly dreams, and not merely against the background of recent progress."\textsuperscript{68} Disenchanted by the social ills of Victorian society and believing that the utopian conception of the Victorian Golden Age is a fallacy, Tennyson attempts to point out his age’s mistakes through the downfall of Camelot. He depicts the precariousness of Victorian society and the ease with which it can slide into ruin, since “even the Round Table fell, Tennyson reminds us, although it was part of a far more glorious Golden Age than modern society; far less chance has Victorian society, threatened by the same temptations that destroyed the Round Table, to maintain or even achieve the perfection that it would like to claim for itself.”\textsuperscript{69} Thus, in depicting the failure of King Arthur’s utopia, Tennyson implies that Victorian England’s enterprise is doomed to fail as well. The symbolism serves “to broaden the meaning rather than to restrict it, to place the new Golden Age, with its smugness and dogmatisms, within the context of universals” in order to “lend a sense of recurrence to the social errors he depicts,” thereby locating Victorian England within greater historical processes.\textsuperscript{70}

Contemporary literary reviews of \textit{Idylls of the King} recognized the parallels between Tennyson’s work and nineteenth-century Victorian England. In tracing these critical responses, Eggers notes that a common factor among them was the agreement that “Tennyson was intending his masterpiece to mirror the new Golden Age” of Victorian England.\textsuperscript{71} Although this connection between Camelot and Victorian England was the generally accepted interpretation, reviewers differed on how they applied this relationship, with many focusing on the shared ideas and values of the two societies but failing to recognize Tennyson’s work as “a warning against

\textsuperscript{68} Eggers, \textit{King Arthur’s Laureate: A Study of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King}, 62.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 56.
the dangerous tendencies of the age.” Within the context of the Arthurian Revival, this is unsurprising, considering that the Arthurian legend was a symbol of Britain’s national heritage and glory.

The human values concerning Tennyson were relevant not only on the larger national scale of Britain’s policies and imperialistic endeavors, but also on the more personal scale of social ethics and interactions. Although revivalist chivalry had already allowed Victorian audiences to associate themselves with medieval society, Tennyson went beyond that basic identification. By modernizing the legend and pointedly associating Camelot and its society with specifically Victorian qualities and by focusing on the domestic and private lives of his characters in addition to their adventures, Tennyson presented a story his readers could relate to on a personal level.

Although the poems of *Idylls of the King* were not originally published according to the timeline of the legend and were only compiled chronologically into their present order by Tennyson in 1886, the publishing history and thematic associations between poems that were published simultaneously is significant. The most notable instance of this occurs in the first set of poems from 1859, which first introduced Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* to his Victorian audience. That year, he released four poems, “Enid,” “Vivien,” “Elaine,” and “Guinevere,” where, notably, the female characters of the legend were presented as the focus. In the completed final version of *Idylls of the King*, “Enid” was split into “The Marriage of Geraint” and “Geraint and Enid,” and “Vivien” and “Elaine” were retitled as “Merlin and Vivien” and “Lancelot and Elaine.” This first installment and its significance is essential for understanding Cameron’s photographic illustrations as well, since her selection of scenes and characters is indicative of her focal

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72 Ibid., 57.
concerns in bringing Tennyson’s characters to life. Analyzing Tennyson’s representation of women is therefore necessary for Cameron’s interpretation. Since Tennyson incorporated Victorian concepts of manhood and womanhood, an understanding of Victorian philosophy surrounding gender roles and the places of men and women in both society and the private sphere of the home is necessary for an analysis of *Idylls of the King*, and later, for the exploration of the Arthurian legend in nineteenth-century art, leading up to and including Cameron.

The concept of ideal womanhood, which Tennyson explores throughout the legend, is an important aspect of Arthur’s society and a useful starting point for the exploration of womanhood in Victorian society. Defining the roles that men and women were expected to play in Victorian society, Mancoff notes that, “Endowed with physical strength and intelligent reason, man reigned as the active force in society. Blessed with a tender heart, vast compassion, and an innate sense of morality, woman remained passive, available for comfort and counsel when man found the need.”\(^{73}\) Tennyson’s personal beliefs echoed this outlook, as we know from his son’s biography of him, in which he wrote, “Upon the sacredness of home life he would maintain that the stability and greatness of a nation largely depend.”\(^{74}\) In King Arthur’s mission to create an ideal society, women play an important role in influencing the knights of the Round Table, and their actions determine the results of Arthur’s endeavors. The number of female characters whose flaws have treacherous results for Arthur’s society serve as a literary warning of the dangers inherent in the misuse of female influence.

Many scholars have pointed out the significance of Tennyson’s original installment of poems in relation to the role he assigned women in his work. Literary scholar John F. Genung interpreted the original publication of these four poems as an insinuation on Tennyson’s part that

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\(^{74}\) Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, vol. 1, 189.
“womanly lives were the vital centres and determinators of the whole fate of things.”\textsuperscript{75} In Genung’s analysis, the grouping of these four poems—which he considers “the heart of the epic”—in the first installment of \textit{Idylls of the King} was an intentional act, foreshadowing the development of events in Camelot “as determined by the vital influence of woman-love.”\textsuperscript{76} In Tennyson’s presentation of four different examples of womanly love, Genung sees “the four cardinal points of the spiritual compass,” with Enid and Vivien representing “the polar opposites, the zenith and nadir, of woman’s love, as hallowing the conjugal state and as poisoning the insolence of illicit passion,” and Elaine and Guinevere representing combinations of these qualities.\textsuperscript{77} These four women, who shape the events unfolding in \textit{Idylls of the King}, also reflect Victorian thinking about women and morality. By presenting these four stories as the first volume, Tennyson gives weight to the question of women’s roles in private and public life.

In nineteenth-century England, the legal position of women was firmly connected to their male family members, with their legal identity subsumed under the jurisdiction of their closest male relatives. For a young woman, this generally meant her father, until she married and all rights to her property transferred to her husband. Both as adolescents and as adults, women had no independent legal rights during most of the Victorian period. Even in the case of failed marriages, women had fewer options than men. While a man could divorce his wife based on a charge of adultery, a woman could not do the same. Even after the Divorce Act of 1857, a woman would have to prove additional charges beyond infidelity, such as physical cruelty or incest, in order to obtain a divorce.\textsuperscript{78} However, even if she succeeded in proving those additional

\textsuperscript{75} John F. Genung, \textit{The Idylls and The Ages: A Valuation of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King} (New York: Thomas Y. Crowe, and Company, 1907), 69.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{78} Mancoff, \textit{The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes}, 74.
charges and obtaining a divorce, she risked losing her property and custody of her children. This question of the legal inequality of women was a topic that was being highly debated when Tennyson was writing his epic. But even beyond the legal debates, social realities dictated that a Victorian women’s position generally depended on her male connections, whether through family or marriage. Women’s roles were intrinsically bound up in their familial and marital relationships. As Mancoff succinctly delineates: “Every stage of a woman’s life marked her subsidiary position, to a father, to a husband, to a son. The dutiful daughter became the patient fiancée, who, in turn, served as submissive wife, loving mother, and, ultimately, dignified widow.”

Each of these stages, firmly rooted in the home and family, left little room for independent existence. These roles as domestic nurturers of male ambitions were seen as the fulfillment of a Victorian woman’s destiny.

The four women highlighted in the first installment of *Idylls of the King* all represented contemporary female types, which Victorians would have recognized. Elaine, a young girl living at home with her father and brothers, is portrayed as an ideal, dutiful daughter ensconced in domestic life and waiting for marriage—an experience many young Victorian women would have related to. However, her peaceful existence is shattered when she becomes infatuated with Lancelot and attempts to pursue him, defying the expectations placed on women to be passive and obedient. Elaine fills the role of “foolish girl who becomes a victim of her own dreams.”

Enid, “the faithful wife who mutely serves,” fulfills her womanly duty by exhibiting perfect devotion to her husband even in the face of trials. Guinevere, the unfaithful wife, loses everything she has through her infidelity. She typifies “the woman ruled by passion who only

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79 Ibid., 75.
81 Ibid.
wins pain.”⁸² And Vivien, the seductress, uses her power and sensuality for destructive purposes. She is “the aggressive woman who attempts to achieve domination over men,” representing the trope of the *femme fatale.*⁸³ While the women in *Idylls of the King* are also presented in connection to the various men they are involved with, Tennyson grants them agency, presenting them as individuals with their own motivations and desires.

When Tennyson was originally working on the first installment of his epic, he printed a few copies of a trial book titled *Enid and Nimuë, or The True and the False* in 1857. Shared with a select, private audience, this book contained what later became the stories of Enid and Vivien (whose name he changed in *Idylls of the King*).⁸⁴ After receiving positive feedback on these two stories, he expanded the installment and added the stories of Guinevere and Elaine, with these four pieces representing the first public installment of *Idylls of the King* in 1859. However, his original conception of Enid and Vivien as representatives of two opposite sides of the spectrum, the true and the false, is useful in understanding the poet’s categorization of female characters. Literary scholar Marion Wynne-Davies observes that “the dialectic is the common one of virgin and whore: a policing of female identity through unrealistic expectations of behaviour and through a stereotyping into impossibly narrow conventions.”⁸⁵ This stark demarcation—good and bad, true and false, virgin and whore—leaves little room for the complexity and contradictions inherent to human experience and character.

While Tennyson’s female characters do generally fall into one category or the other, his depiction of them is slightly more nuanced. Enid, who remains true to her husband despite all

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⁸² Ibid.
⁸³ Ibid.
obstacles, represents the ideal standard by which all the other women are measured and provides a foil for Vivien, who deceives Merlin by falsely professing her love for him in order to betray him. While only Enid and Vivien were explicitly categorized as the true and the false, this identification can similarly be applied to Elaine, whose faithful devotion to Lancelot led to her death, and Guinevere, whose affair with Lancelot proved her false to her husband and king.

Mancoff points out that while each of these stories focuses on a woman’s experience, “that experience was shaped by men, proving the woman in each case true or false. In Tennyson’s world, there were good women and there were bad women, and the power of judgment lay in the hands of men.”86 For Tennyson’s Victorian readers, the theme of the true and the false mirrored their own moral standards, which required women to be unconditionally faithful and submissive. Enid takes these qualities to their extreme, as she unquestioningly follows her husband’s commands in order to prove her faithfulness, even at the risk of death. In Enid, Tennyson “found an ancient role model for the ideal Victorian wife.”87 In the context of mid-century debates about the role of women, this depiction of Enid would have appealed to those who held more conservative views on women and feared for the continued stability of domestic life.88 By contrast, Guinevere—the only other wife among these four women—places her own interests and desires above her obligations to her husband, and by following her passions, she brings about the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom. Instead of supporting his endeavors, she set in motion a chain of events that led to societal collapse, “returning his realm

87 Ibid., 82.
to the broken, bestial state in which he found it and from which he thought he had saved it.”

This would have been perceived by Tennyson’s contemporary audience as an unforgivable offense. From the perspective of Victorian morality, “a proper wife did not experience desire beyond the wants and needs of her husband,” a test that Guinevere failed with tragic results. It is for this reason that Victorian readers generally failed to sympathize with Guinevere.

Tennyson’s reimagining of Vivien’s character is perhaps one of his most interesting deviations from the traditional legend, particularly for its implications about nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood. Vivien has a long history in Arthurian literature, appearing over the centuries under various names such as Morgan-le-Fay and Nimuë. In earlier versions of the Arthurian legend—such as Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur, which was one of Tennyson’s primary sources—she is portrayed as an innocent maiden who is pursued by the lecherous Merlin. In Malory’s account, she traps Merlin with an enchantment in order to escape from his attempts on her virtue. While this is only a minor episode with no real significance in Malory’s legend, Tennyson completely transforms the narrative by making this episode a central event and casting Vivien in the role of seductress and villain. Vivien arrives in Camelot during what could be considered its Golden Age, a time of relative peace and prosperity following the wars. Intent on destroying Arthur’s kingdom but unable to attack him directly, Vivien targets Merlin, on whose wisdom and magic Arthur had relied. Seducing him into teaching her the charm that would allow her to imprison him, Vivien triumphs over Merlin. By using her sensuality to deceive, attain power, and destroy, Vivien became a perversion of Victorian womanhood and female virtue. Using serpent imagery to describe her, Tennyson clearly presents her as a repulsive,

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90 Ibid., 88.
irredeemable character. While Guinevere ultimately repented of her falseness and learned to be true at the end of the narrative, Vivien had no regrets about the destruction she caused.

Victorian readers were horrified by Vivien’s ruthless ambition and subversion of feminine ideals. Contemporary reviews alternated between outrage at Vivien’s very existence and acknowledgment of her relevance to modernity and its moral ills. For Victorians who saw *Idylls of the King* as “a mirror of their own polite, moral, middle-class milieu,” Vivien presented a challenge.91 Reviewers attempted to distance Vivien from their own polite society by comparing her either to the Biblical figure of Delilah or Milton’s Satan.92 Even within the group of reviewers who acknowledged Vivien’s contemporary relevance, the tendency to condemn her as ‘the other’ and ostracize her was a common theme. *Blackwood’s* review claimed that Vivien’s “vulgarity” was just another sign of the corruption of society, condemning Tennyson for having “pollute[d] the pages which tell, further on, of the manly—, ay, the *Christian*—purity of Arthur.”93 Likewise, poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne criticized Tennyson for depicting “the erotic fluctuations and vacillations of a dotard under the moral and physical manipulation of a prostitute,” considering the depiction vulgar and crude.94 Another reviewer, meanwhile, acknowledged Vivien’s relevance to nineteenth-century society by writing in 1869 that she was a woman “of flesh and blood—alive at this hour in Paris,” thereby distancing her from Victorian society.95 In fact, the horror surrounding Vivien was indicative of a larger trend in nineteenth-century discourse—the *femme fatale* archetype, in which powerful, sexualized women were cast as threats to a male society. Although the actual term *femme fatale* did not

91 Eggers, *King Arthur’s Laureate: A Study of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King*, 84.
92 Ibid., 85.
94 Ibid.
95 Quoted in Eggers, *King Arthur’s Laureate: A Study of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King*, 85.
come into use in England until the twentieth century, the concept of it was already very much embedded in Victorian consciousness. Mancoff, in describing the archetype, pinpoints the fears that this character instilled in a male-dominated society:

In the character of the femme fatale—literally, fatal woman—the nineteenth-century fear of and fascination with female sexuality converged. Her irresistible beauty captivated men and drew them to her side, and under her power. Her motives were rarely explained, but her dangerous potential was fully comprehended. Enemy to all men and to the male order, she incarnated the deeply rooted misogyny of the period. A woman who scorned family, responsibility, her proper place, and male superiority endangered all who came in contact with her. She was in every sense a deadly force. But unlike the tragic heroine who suffered for the consequences of her flawed soul, the femme fatale had no conscience, and others paid dearly when victimized by her perversity.96

Vivien represented the very worst qualities of the femme fatale, capitalizing on male fears of the independent, sexualized woman. Tennyson certainly made the most of these fears in creating a character that would horrify his Victorian audience. However, even in his critical portrayal of her, Tennyson added an element of complexity to her character by providing the story of her youth. Vivien, who had been raised as an orphan in King Mark’s court, had a reason to hate King Arthur: her father had died in the war against Arthur, and her mother died of grief by his side as Vivien was born. This tragic beginning, which contributed to the person she became later in the story, humanizes Vivien to some extent and complicates her character.

The humanity of Tennyson’s characters was certainly recognized in the critical response to *Idylls of the King*. Situating the events of the Arthurian legend within the narrative of individual characters’ lives, Tennyson added an element of human interest to the story by incorporating the personal within the mythical. This element of human interest was widely praised in contemporary reviews, with an 1859 review in the *Athenaeum* declaring that “the

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human figures are still the chief attraction” of Tennyson’s narrative.97 Even decades later, the humanity of Tennyson’s characters remained a focal point for critics, with the Edinburgh Review maintaining as late as 1886 that Tennyson “teaches living lessons by the universality of the humanity he portrays.”98 This quality of universal humanity granted Idylls of the King a timeless quality, allowing it to appeal to audiences long after the national issues became irrelevant.

Idylls of the King represents the achievement of a lifetime for Tennyson, spanning decades of his career, and it became the most significant work of Arthurian literature in nineteenth-century England. Although other nineteenth-century British poets and writers had written works on the topic of the Arthurian legend, their works were either very narrow in scope, focusing only on select portions of the legend, or heavily dependent on medieval literature. It was Tennyson’s Idylls of the King that truly revitalized the Arthurian legend. As the first poet since Malory to completely reimagine the Arthurian legend and relate it to contemporary life, Tennyson created the defining literary work of the Arthurian Revival for the Victorian era. This played a significant role in the revival of Arthurianism in the visual arts, as will be explored in the following chapter.

98 Ibid., 58.
CHAPTER 2

The Return of King Arthur in Art:

The Arthurian Legend in Victorian Art and Illustration

The Creation of a New Arthurian Iconography, 1842-1864

The depiction of the Arthurian legend and its characters in art and manuscript illustration has a long and significant history dating back to the Middle Ages. As Muriel Whitaker has remarked, “romance is, by definition, an unrealistic genre,” which would account for illustrators of the Arthurian legend often attempting to evoke “the fairy tale atmosphere of an artificial world consisting largely of castles and perilous forests inhabited by kings and queens, knights and ladies.”99 However, in each century, the illustrator’s “perception is influenced by the values of his society, his medium, the intended audience, and his personal attitude to the material,” variables which are responsible for the multiplicity of representation.100 Many illustrators would depict the characters in contemporary clothing, such as Thomas East’s 1585 illustrations of Malory’s text, in which ladies appeared in Tudor court dresses that would have been quite out of place during the actual time period of the Arthurian legend. After the Tudor period, however, the Arthurian legends fell out of fashion for a while due to the Puritanism and rationalism that ruled that age.

Interest in the tale enjoyed a revival only in the nineteenth century, when the Arthurian Revival led to both a proliferation of writings on the subject as well as more visual art and illustrated versions of the story. However, even then, Arthurianism had a slower start in the visual arts than in literature due to a number of factors. In her study of the Arthurian Revival in

99 Whitaker, “The Illustration of Arthurian Romance,” 123.
100 Ibid.
Victorian art, Mancoff points out that the revivalist chivalry the new interpretation of the Arthurian legend was based on was “essentially a literary development with a consequential influence on popular culture, as opposed to the high arts,” and therefore Arthurian subject matter in art did not frequently appear until closer to mid-century.\textsuperscript{101} Even Arthurian publications did not yet contain illustrations, other than some basic frontispieces and generalized decorative illustrations that did not actually interpret the text, such as in the case of the republications of Malory’s \textit{Le Morte Darthur}, which contained “medievalizing motifs like dragons and weapons” and a frontispiece image of an armed knight “in the style of a fifteenth-century woodcut.”\textsuperscript{102} These images did not reflect the storyline of the Arthurian legend, and therefore did not exert “any influence on the development of an Arthurian iconography” for the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{103}

Examining the conditions that might have contributed to this shaky start in Arthurian imagery in the 1810s through the 1830s, Mancoff suggests that the primary obstacle can be attributed to the “prevailing conventions of art,” since at the time, “medieval subjects in British painting were presented in a literal, archaeologically correct mode” and “historical accuracy was a significant concern for the painter of medieval themes.”\textsuperscript{104} This method of representation complicated the illustration of Arthurian themes, since the focus on detail and accuracy and the “recreation of the material world” could not be applied in the same way to the Arthurian world, which belonged to the realm of legend instead of history.\textsuperscript{105} As Mancoff observes, “the imposition of a time period on the legend would diminish its expressional scope,” but on the other hand, the legend’s “appeal for artists fascinated with the trappings of the medieval world

\textsuperscript{101} Mancoff, \textit{The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art}, 62.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
was limited,” since “their usual mode of interpretation, based on scholarly investigation, provided no insight to the legend.”\textsuperscript{106} It is most likely due to these limitations that artists who otherwise depicted medieval themes did not turn their attention to the Arthurian legends until mid-century, when a number of other factors made the subject more appealing for visual artists.

A spotlight was thrown on the visual representation of the Arthurian legends during the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, with the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster. The old palace, which had been ravaged by a fire in 1834, only three years before Queen Victoria’s ascension to the throne, was home to the British Parliament and a vital symbol of the British monarchy and government. The design chosen for the new palace, created by architects Charles Barry and A. W. N. Pugin, was primarily Gothic in style, making it “the primary monument of the Political phase of the Gothic Revival,” in which “the medieval metaphor provided the iconographic core of the whole project.”\textsuperscript{107} Evaluating the ideological implications of this design, Mancoff notes that, “as the first civic structure in the medieval mode the new Palace inextricably wedded the idealized view of the Middle Ages with national ideology,” thus providing “a physical form to embody the growing spirit of nationalism” in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{108} The fact that the palace was a governmental structure under the patronage of the government and the monarchy endowed this nationalistic message with official sanction. Likewise, the interior was decorated with a program of wall painting “featuring national subject matter and allegorical representations of British government,” which had been proposed in 1841.\textsuperscript{109} The Fine Arts Commission, which was convened by the government to oversee the Westminster project, had the power of both the government and the monarchy backing it when Prime Minister Robert Peel

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 65-66.
nominated Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, as President of the Commission. This move solidified the monarchy and government’s roles as official patrons of the arts after a century and a half of neglect under the Hanover dynasty. The end of the House of Stuart in 1688 had signaled the end of the British monarchy’s active participation in art patronage, and the Hanover dynasty was largely neglectful of the arts. Under Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, however, the tide began to shift, signaling a new era in the British monarchy’s art patronage.

With Prince Albert’s support, the Fine Arts Commission decided on a program for Westminster’s interior, consisting of history paintings with subjects that were national and “derived from British history and literature.” It was through the Fine Arts Commission’s guidelines for the approach to these historical and literary subjects that the Arthurian legend eventually found its voice in Victorian art. The F.A.C. deemed the traditional form of historical painting inappropriate for the Westminster project, both because its traditional attention to detail would detract from the iconographical content and because its dependency on text would undermine the contextualization of the work within a grand scheme. The F.A.C.’s objections to traditional historical painting interestingly coincide with the impediments medievalizing artists faced in representing Arthurian subjects, since their focus on historical detail and accuracy was in conflict with the representation of a legend that lacked those two qualities and whose expressional scope would be diminished by the imposition of those qualities. It is perhaps for this reason that the F.A.C.’s creation of a new school of British history painting with different forms allowed Arthurian subject matter to once again see the light of day in prominent British art.

Describing the significance of these decisions for the direction of British art, Mancoff writes:

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110 Ibid., 66.
111 Ibid., 67.
To comply with the demands of the Commission the British artists were forced to abandon their literary approach to historical subjects and cultivate an expression in painting that was shaped by the traditional forms of high art: allegory, personification, idealization. By adopting the style used for the depiction of classical history and mythology to native subjects a new universalized aesthetic emerged. British historical subjects were purged of their specificity, their illustrative quality, their tone of reportage. National subject matter was equated with classical history and mythology. British heroes took their place beside those of ancient Greece and Rome as exemplars of virtue, attaining in the arts the position granted them in revived chivalric literature.  

As a result of the F.A.C.’s guidelines for the Westminster project, a new approach to national and mythological subject matter in art was created. British artists began looking towards classical models of high art for inspiration in depicting national subjects and England’s own medieval past. Excessive illustrative detail, which was seen by the F.A.C. as detracting from the iconographical content, was replaced by the idealization typical of high art, this time in support of revivalist chivalry.

In order to select artists for the creation of the Westminster’s interior frescoes, an open competition was announced in 1842. The rules stipulated that the subjects “were to be chosen only from British history, or the writings of Shakespeare, Spenser, or Milton” and were to contain life-sized figures. A year later, all one hundred and forty-one submitted entries were exhibited to the public in Westminster Hall on June 7, 1843, after which a number of artists were chosen to participate. The significance of the Westminster competition and exhibition in establishing a new iconography for British national painting had reverberating effects on medievalism in the arts. Although the competition rules allowed artists to depict scenes from any period in British history, an overwhelming number of artists chose medieval subjects for their entries. The styles they chose also played a significant role in shifting the methods of representing medieval subjects, since instead of focusing on historically accurate medieval

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 91.
114 Ibid., 92.
details or using the visual language of the Gothic Revival, they employed a classical style with large figures in theatrical poses and medievalized outfits. The medieval outfits served as a code to denote that, despite their classical style, the images reflected the concepts popularized during the Gothic Revival, “summoning up the associative language of the medieval ideal.”

Describing the aesthetic of these Westminster images, Mancoff says that it “employed a medievalizing reference rather than a medieval prototype,” with the costuming serving as a “medievalizing veneer on a classical body” to create a hybrid. As a result of the Westminster project, medievalism in painting no longer depended on other disciplines, such as archaeology, history, and literature, as it had done previously. Freed from these constraints, medievalism could be expressed through the conventions of history painting, which had formerly been reserved for classical and biblical subjects. Through the application of these conventions, “the focus shifted from artifact to ideal, from object to idea” in medievalizing paintings, ultimately combining, as Mancoff notes, “two languages of idealism—national idealism, defined as medieval by the Gothic Revival, and aesthetic idealism, defined as classical by high-art tradition” to create a new national iconography.

This shift in approach to medieval subjects would later define artists’ interpretations of the Arthurian legend.

Although Arthurian subject matter did not play any explicit role in the first stages of artistic creation at Westminster, by 1848 William Dyce was commissioned to create a cycle of frescoes for the Queen’s Robing Room in the palace. For this project, he chose the Arthurian legend as his subject matter. The Robing Room, which was part of the monarch’s processional route on the way to the opening of a Parliamentary session, was the location where the monarch

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115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., 99.
would don the ceremonial garb that represented their role as “the incarnation of the sovereign rule of Britain.”118 The Fine Arts Commission planned an iconographical program specifically for Queen Victoria, in which “the works of art located at each stage of the processional route narrated the transformation of the monarch and prepared her for this symbolic incarnation.”119 Imagery along the route preceding the Robing Room included representations of the patrons and protectors of Britain, the personifications of Mercy and Justice, busts of the queen’s predecessors, and sculptures of Norman sovereigns. The iconographical program represented the history and power of England, which is why it was significant that William Dyce chose to decorate the Robing Room with frescoes of scenes from the Arthurian legend, giving it political significance. Although the F.A.C. had specified that the room should contain an allegorical scheme “that illuminated the time-honored responsibilities of the sovereign to her country” and provided an “ennobling account of the ideal virtues in monarchy,” the specific subject matter had not been defined by the F.A.C.120 William Dyce and Prince Albert were the ones to first acknowledge the suitability of the Arthurian legend for an iconographical program involving a national epic. In an 1847 conversation between the artist and Prince Albert, Dyce suggested using Arthurian iconography for the Robing Room, an idea that Prince Albert enthusiastically supported and likely advocated for, which resulted in the 1848 commission.

Several factors colluded to make Dyce’s choice of subject matter and method of depiction possible: the Arthurian Revival in literature following the reprinting of Malory’s text; the establishment of a new iconography for British national painting; and the medieval subject matter that ensued the Westminster competition. Ultimately, the Westminster project’s “quest for

118 Ibid., 101.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., 103.
a national subjects helped to make the Arthurian legend the national epic,” granting it a place of honor in British national art.\textsuperscript{121}

In creating the imagery for the Robing Room, Dyce sought to interpret the legend anew for contemporary audiences, much like Tennyson’s approach in literature the following decade. In choosing his subject matter, Dyce arranged a selection of chivalric virtues that would have been recognizable to his Victorian audience. Like Tennyson, Dyce focused on the timelessness of the tale and “established an approachable humanity for the legendary figures, so that they favorably mirrored their Victorian descendants.”\textsuperscript{122} Dyce, too, used Caxton’s reprinting of Malory’s \textit{Le Morte D’Arthur} as a source from which he drew his interpretation.\textsuperscript{123} After deliberating on the approach and selection of scenes for the project, Dyce began the Robing Room’s Arthurian cycle in 1849 with the first fresco, \textit{Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company} (Figure 1), which he finished by 1851. Illustrating an incident from the quest for the Holy Grail, the fresco shows Galahad experiencing a vision of the incarnation of Christ, the earthly realm and spiritual realm combined in one composition to convey a mystical experience.

Over the next year, this fresco was followed by two others on the same wall, \textit{Generosity: King Arthur Unhorsed Spared by Launcelot} (Figure 2) and \textit{Courtesy: Sir Tristram Harping to La Beale Isoud} (Figure 3), each representing another virtue of revivalist chivalry through scenes from the Arthurian legend, with the latter presenting an image that is typical of Victorian courtship. By 1854, the fourth fresco in the cycle, \textit{Mercy: Sir Gawaine Swearing to Be Merciful and Never Be against Ladies} (Figure 4), was completed. All four frescoes were executed in a consistent style, with grand, sculptural figures and balanced compositions. In style, Dyce’s

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 118.
frescoes more closely resembled Italian Renaissance models than medieval ones. Finally, after a delay of five years, Dyce undertook the fifth and final fresco in 1859, *Hospitality: The Admission of Sir Tristram to the Fellowship of the Round Table* (Figure 5), which was meant to depict the idea of a chivalric society. However, this work was left incomplete at the time of Dyce’s death in 1864. While another artist, C. W. Cope, stepped in to complete it, the remainder of the cycle that Dyce had planned was abandoned. Nevertheless, as the first Victorian Arthurriad in art, the legacy of Dyce’s plans and completed works influenced the revival of Arthurianism in the visual arts by providing a nineteenth-century prototype.

Apart from the Westminster project, another important progression in Arthurian imagery occurred with the 1842 publication of *The Book of British Ballads*. Edited by Samuel Carter Hall, this illustrated anthology was the first of its type during this period to explicitly combine Arthurian text and imagery. Although the anthology itself was not devoted specifically to Arthurian subjects, it contained a number of Arthurian poems and set a precedent for Victorian-era illustrated books. It included black and white illustrations of Arthurian subject matter by artists such as William Bell Scott, John Franklin, and Edward Corbould, set alongside the corresponding poems on the same page. As can be seen in John Franklin’s illustration of “King Arthur’s Death” (Figure 6), the integration of image and text in *The Book of British Ballads* ascribes equal importance to both, fusing the experience of reading and viewing. While book illustrations are by necessity done on a smaller and less significant scale than history paintings or frescoes, the illustrations in *The Book of British Ballads* “have a grandeur that defies their small scale,” as Mancoff writes. This was undoubtedly due to Hall’s instructions to his illustrators to

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124 Ibid., 132.
125 Ibid., 108.
126 Ibid., 109.
“emulate the new German model of book illustration, adopting high-art conventions to the reduced scale of the printed page,” instead of following more traditional approaches to book illustration.\textsuperscript{127} The images feature powerful figures derived from classical and Renaissance sources and maintain a physical presence that is “in clear contradiction to the lightness and agility typical in medieval manuscript illumination.”\textsuperscript{128} Although the images are not accorded the same importance as full-scale painting, their significance lies in demonstrating the difference in representations of the Arthurian legend between the medieval period and the Victorian era. Nineteenth-century humanism meant that artists had greater agency in how they interpreted the original texts. Innovations in artistic technical processes, including the recently invented photographic processes, contributed to the variety of these representations. However, the primary significance of The Book of British Ballads is that it was the first work during the Victorian era to combine Arthurian text and illustration in printed form.

\textbf{The Arthurian Legend in Pre-Raphaelite Art}

The Pre-Raphaelites, whose work was essential for a new visualization of the Arthurian legend in the nineteenth century, produced drawings, paintings, and large-scale murals. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, along with Thomas Woolner, James Collinson, Frederick G. Stephens, and William Michael Rossetti, sought to reject the aesthetic standards of the Academy and create a new aesthetic based on realism, intense coloring, and attention to detail, particularly in the imitation of nature. Influenced by John Ruskin’s philosophies on art, the Pre-Raphaelites committed themselves to a new form of naturalism that followed the group throughout its various

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 109.
iterations. Commenting on the group’s approach to subject matter, Bryden states, “From the outset Pre-Raphaelitism was entangled in debates about historical realism and the efficacy of historical revivalism – and this implicated the reinvention of Arthur.”

The Pre-Raphaelites were aware of earlier nineteenth-century Arthurian works, such as Dyce’s Robing Room, and in fact, Millais and Hunt had studied life drawing with Dyce at the Royal Academy. Hunt maintained his relationship with Dyce, and even received commissions through him. While Dyce was busy working on the first of the Robing Room frescoes in 1850, he delegated another commission to Hunt and encouraged him to hire an assistant, resulting in Hunt and Stephens working together under Dyce’s supervision. In their visits to the Robing Room to discuss their work with Dyce, they saw the Arthurian frescoes he was creating, which undoubtedly influenced their later contemplation of the subject.

It is worth noting that Stephens and Hunt ended up being the first of the Pre-Raphaelites to address the Arthurian legend in their works, with Stephens creating an unfinished oil on canvas painting of Mort D’Arthur (Figure 7) as early as 1849. Although this was before Dyce had finished any of his frescoes, the Pre-Raphaelites had already found their inspiration in the early works of Tennyson, whose poetry they read aloud in meetings during that time. Although this was still a full decade before the first of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King were to be published, the Pre-Raphaelites were already familiar with and enamored of Tennyson’s earlier Arthurian poetry from 1842, which “fired their imaginations with vivid imagery of a more noble time, now lost to the indifference of modern society.”

Thus, when Stephens first addressed the legend in his art, the image was a direct reference to Tennyson’s early poetry, corresponding with lines

131 Ibid., 142.
from the 1842 text describing Sir Bedivere holding his dying king. Although Stephens left the painting unfinished, his creation of it was influential in the development of nineteenth-century Arthurian imagery. Mancoff expertly sums up the significance of Stephens’s first Arthurian work for the future of Arthurian art in the nineteenth century:

Closely illustrating a text, yet standing independent from it, Stephens’ *Mort D’Arthur* introduced Arthurian imagery into the genre of pictorial narrative. More modest in scale than history painting, more private and less didactic in expression, his *Mort D’Arthur* bridged the gap between monumental art and book illustration, adding a personal voice to the interpretation of public iconography.  

Stephens’s *Mort D’Arthur* ended up being the bridge between monumental works such as history paintings or Dyce’s Robing Room frescoes and smaller Arthurian book illustrations, such as those in the *The Book of British Ballads* from 1842. His work was followed by Hunt’s 1850 pen and chalk drawing, *The Lady of Shalott* (Figure 8), based on Tennyson’s poem of the same name, which was originally published in 1832, with a revised version appearing in his 1842 collection of poems. This drawing shows the Lady of Shalott struggling against the web that has entangled her as a result of a curse that was activated when she took a forbidden look out of her window to gaze upon Lancelot. Hunt was working on this drawing at the same time as he and Stephens were involved with Dyce’s commission, making it clear that he was in communication with Dyce at the time and was familiar with Dyce’s work on the Robing Room frescoes.  

Both Stephens’s and Hunt’s Arthurian images during these early years paved the way for other artists to depict Arthurian imagery in smaller-scale paintings, creating a new category of Arthurian art for the mid-nineteenth century.

While the rest of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was slowly dissolving over the following years of the early and mid-1850s, Dante Gabriel Rossetti kept the Arthurian legend

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132 Ibid., 143.
133 Ibid., 145.
alive in Pre-Raphaelite art. Rossetti, who had always been interested in the romantic idea of chivalry, finally turned to explicitly Arthurian themes with his first Arthurian work in 1854-55, the watercolor King Arthur’s Tomb (Figure 9). Unlike Stephens and Hunt, Rossetti did not use Tennyson as his source, preferring to invent an original scene that was loosely based on Malory, depicting Guinevere and Lancelot’s last meeting at Arthur’s tomb. Rossetti’s primary contribution to the nineteenth-century development of Arthurian imagery was the shift of focus from chivalry and public virtue to individual emotion and private tragedy. As the first artist to explicitly address the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, Rossetti “shifted the message of the Arthurian world from public virtue to private tragedy,” so that “love and human passion took precedence over chivalry.”

This was a significant development in artistic approach to the subject matter, whose echoes can later be observed in Cameron’s photographs.

However, the concentrated focus on Arthurian subject matter did not gain dominance until the second set of Pre-Raphaelites in the second half of the 1850s, primarily inspired by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Initiated by artists such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, this later medievalizing strain of Pre-Raphaelitism reinvigorated the group after its original members had split. The form of romantic medievalism championed by the second wave of Pre-Raphaelites partially found its expression in Arthurian themes. In their depictions of medievalized and Arthurian subject matter, the Pre-Raphaelites followed a vision that involved the idealization and romanticization of chivalry and courtly love, both within and outside the confines of marriage.

Perhaps the most ambitious Arthurian project undertaken by this second set of Pre-Raphaelites was Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones’s collaboration on mural decorations for the new Oxford Union building’s Debating Hall in 1857-58. Rossetti, who had secured the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{134}}\] Ibid., 147.
commission, had done so on the condition that the architect of the Oxford Union would grant him full control over the project and its subject matter. He used this liberty to select the artists who would be assisting him and he announced that the iconography would be based on Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Rossetti’s use of Arthurian subject matter in this series of murals offered “an alternative to the governmental Arthuriad painted by William Dyce,” on a similarly large scale. However, unlike Dyce’s heroic vision of the legend, Rossetti “selected themes that brought to life the private and human dimension of the Arthurian story: themes of infidelity, desire, and passionate spirituality.” The majority of the subjects depicted in the series, both by Rossetti and the other artists, “addressed the wages of love, the retribution for carnal desire, and the reward for the chaste in spirit,” ignoring the more adventure-oriented themes of the legend.

Rossetti’s meticulous pen and ink drawing *Sir Launcelot in the Queen’s Chamber* (Figure 10), meant as a preparatory design for the Debating Hall murals, fit into this Pre-Raphaelite tendency to focus on love and passion. In the scene, Launcelot stands guard at the window of Guinevere’s chamber, defending them against an attack from Mordred. Although there are figures visible through the window on the left side and Guinevere’s maids are seen cowering on the right side of the chamber, Launcelot and Guinevere’s passion is the focal point of the image.

The collaboration of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table has also been noted by scholars as a fitting parallel for the Pre-Raphaelite community’s collaboration on the Oxford Union project. However, despite the ambitious goals of the project, the artists failed to complete the cycle and, one by one, they dropped out. Overall the project was a failure, but it

136 Ibid., 157.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
initiated a new “nonpolitical, nondidactic interpretation of the Arthurian legend,” which
“emphasized the humanity of Arthurian characters enacting a human drama charged with
emotion.”

As a result, Mancoff notes that by the end of the 1850s “two forms of the legend
existed, the public and didactic saga of Dyce and the private and romantic vision of Dante
Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris.”

This private, human aspect of the legend would become essential in the works of Julia Margaret Cameron.

The Pre-Raphaelites’ engagement with Arthurian subject matter continued throughout the
century, with artists creating a number of paintings and pen and ink drawings of Arthurian
subjects. Notable examples in the two decades following the Oxford Union project included
William Morris’s *Queen Guenevere* (1858), Edward Burne-Jones’s *Merlin and Nimuë* (1861)
and *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874-76), and Arthur Hughes’s *The Lady of Shalott* (1873).

Outside the Pre-Raphaelite circle, academic painters also contributed a significant number of
works to the Arthurian Revival. Notably, James Archer, following Dyce’s classicized vision,
painted a number of Arthurian subjects, including *Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere* (1864) and
*The Parting of Arthur and Guinevere* (1865).

**Tennyson and the Artists: Illustration of Poems and Idylls of the King**

Tennyson played a key role in this nineteenth-century revival of Arthurian art, both
among the Pre-Raphaelites and other artists. As Whitaker notes, nearly sixty Arthurian-themed
paintings were exhibited in the years between 1860 and 1869, following the publication of the
first installment of *Idylls of the King*, and while some of those paintings were based on Malory’s

141 Ibid., xx.
text, an increasing number of artists began turning to Tennyson for inspiration. Depictions of the Lady of Shalott, based on Tennyson’s poem from his 1842 collection, gained particular popularity, and after the publication of “Elaine” in the first installment of *Idylls of the King*, even more representations of the character appeared, with numerous paintings every year at the Royal Academy, the Royal Scottish Academy, and the Royal Society of British Artists. Between 1860 and 1871, Poulson identifies that a total of twenty-five paintings of Elaine were exhibited between those three groups. She ascribes the popularity of this subject to the character’s being “exactly that of the innocent child-woman that many Victorian men found so appealing,” as a “modest and demure” young woman that Tennyson based on “a Victorian ideal of femininity.” In this case, Elaine’s appeal was intrinsically connected to Tennyson’s version of the character, pointing to the influence of Tennyson’s work on nineteenth-century Arthurian art and its relevance to Victorian society.

Before *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson’s *Poems* were published by Edward Moxon in 1842, which included four Arthurian poems: “The Lady of Shalott,” “Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” “Sir Galahad,” and “Morte d’Arthur.” For future editions of *Poems*, Moxon enlisted a number of artists selected by Tennyson to create wood-engraved illustrations. Of the fifty-five illustrations in the 1857 *Moxon Tennyson*, the only six illustrations featuring explicitly Arthurian imagery were executed by Daniel Maclise, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Holman Hunt. Maclise, the only non-Pre-Raphaelite of the three artists, provided two illustrations for the poem “Morte d’Arthur”: *Arthur Obtains Excalibur* (Figure 11) and *Arthur in the Death Barge* (Figure 12). Rossetti provided illustrations for the poems “The Palace of Art”

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143 Poulson, “‘The True and the False’: Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and the Visual Arts,” 102.
144 Whitaker, “The Illustration of Arthurian Romance,” 132.
and “Sir Galahad,” and both he and Hunt illustrated “The Lady of Shalott.” In Hunt’s *The Lady of Shalott* (Figure 13), she is shown struggling against the web of a curse, suffering the destructive consequences of her love as Lancelot is seen riding away. Rossetti’s *The Lady of Shalott* (Figure 14), meanwhile, illustrates the scene in which the court of Camelot sees the lady’s dead body in the barge. In the illustrations of these three artists, we see a variety of approaches to Arthurian subject matter, reflecting the evolution of its imagery in nineteenth-century art. Mancoff sums up their modes of interpretation: “Maclise in accord with the public ideal, first conceived by Dyce, Rossetti with his private musings, deliberately romanticizing and evocative, and Hunt with a popular compromise, pressing the Westminster aesthetic into service to Tennyson’s text.”

Maclise, Rossetti, and Hunt’s illustrations joined the dialogue surrounding the depiction of Arthurian themes, and served as models for future illustrators of Arthurian works, not only in painting and drawing but in photography as well. In examining the later photographic illustrations by Cameron, these images will be useful in identifying how her work departs from the traditional imagery and contributes to the Arthurian tradition.

For *Idylls of the King*, Gustave Doré, a notable illustrator, provided thirty-six drawings which were reproduced as steel engravings for the folio editions of four of the idylls published by Edward Moxon: *Elaine* (1866), *Vivien* (1866), *Guinevere* (1866) and *Enid* (1867). In Doré’s images, characters were situated within detailed landscapes, among daunting Romanesque architecture and shadowy forests. However, despite Doré’s reputation as one of the most successful book illustrators of the late nineteenth century, Tennyson was reportedly disappointed with these interpretations. As Whitaker notes, “The four idylls failed to provide opportunities for the caricature, grotesquerie and sublimity that were Doré’s forte. Moreover, they presented moral

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146 Ibid., 155.
situations with which the artist could not or would not deal.”

Contemporary critical responses also picked up on Doré’s unsuitability to illustrate Tennyson’s work, with a review in the *Athenaeum* noting that it seemed as though “M. Doré has never read Tennyson.” Whitaker notes that this suspicion would have been correct, considering that Doré, who was French, did not read English. She concludes that “the fact that Doré did not understand English sufficiently well to make a close study of the text, along with his inability to depict credible women or to appreciate moral implications, made him an unsatisfactory illustrator of *The Idylls*.” For Tennyson, who was very particular about artists remaining faithful to the text, this would have been an unpardonable offense.

As a result, in 1874, Tennyson approached Cameron, who was his neighbor in the Isle of Wight and a personal friend, and requested that she illustrate *Idylls of the King* for a new cabinet edition. The result of this project was Cameron’s two-volume *Illustrations to the Idylls of the King and Other Poems*.

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147 Whitaker, “The Illustration of Arthurian Romance,” 135.
149 Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, 223.
CHAPTER 3

Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Context and Career

Julia Margaret Cameron’s photography career began at a unique moment in the history of the medium and its relationship to other forms of art. Photography had just been invented in 1839 and made rapid progress through the work of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, William Fox Talbot, and John Herschel, among others. Although Cameron was interested in the study of photography for many years and followed its latest developments, as evidenced by her correspondence with Herschel, she only became involved in photography in 1863 at the age of forty-eight, when her daughter and son-in-law, Julia and Charles Norman, gifted her a camera and wet collodion kit. She began experimenting with photography at that point, asking family, friends, and house staff to pose as the models of her images. When she wrote her 1874 autobiography, *Annals of My Glass House*, Cameron recollected about this early experimentation from 1864: “I began with no knowledge of the art. I did not know where to place my dark box, how to focus my sitter, and my first picture I effaced to my consternation by rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass.” However, in her longing “to arrest all beauty that came before me,” Cameron continued improving her craft until she was satisfied with the results.

Soon after starting her photographic experiments, Cameron moved up the ladder in the art world, with her works receiving much critical attention. In 1864, the same year that she began her experimentation, Cameron became a member of the Photographic Societies of London and

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153 Ibid.
Scotland and entered into an arrangement with art dealers to print and sell her photographs.\textsuperscript{154} Soon after, her photographs were exhibited at the South Kensington Museum in 1865.\textsuperscript{155} Her work also began winning awards, including an 1865 Bronze Medal and an 1866 Gold Medal, both in Berlin.\textsuperscript{156} By 1866 she acquired a new camera for larger prints, going on to create a sizeable portfolio of portraits and fictional characters.\textsuperscript{157} Cameron’s late start in photography and her lack of technical training, combined with the story of the coincidental gift of the camera, leads many art historians to portray her as an amateur photographer. Nonetheless, Cameron’s early interest in photographic processes and innovations as well as her professional involvement in the world of photography and the lasting legacy and significance of her body of work point to a more intentional approach on her part.

She quickly became known for her unconventional photographic technique, including the soft focus that became her trademark. Her manipulation of focus was a common theme in all her photographs, including her early portraits of the 1860s. A prime example of this is her 1865 portrait of Tennyson, commonly titled The Dirty Monk (Figure 15). This close-up image, in which Tennyson’s bust takes up the majority of the space, depicts the poet holding a book, his torso facing the viewer and his head in profile. In addition to the overall soft focus of the photograph, the edges are further blurred, which is particularly apparent in the lower right corner, where Tennyson’s hand holds the book. This effectively draws the eye to the compositional center, Tennyson’s face, which by comparison looks in focus.

\textsuperscript{154} Weaver, Julia Margaret Cameron, 1815-1879, 11.
\textsuperscript{156} Weaver, Julia Margaret Cameron, 1815-1879, 11.
\textsuperscript{157} Ford, Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography, 48.
Cameron’s use of this technique is particularly relevant in the context of the debates surrounding photography at the time and its status as a fine art. It was only in the 1860s when photography began to acquire the status of art, shortly before Cameron acquired her first camera. Understanding the historical and social context in which she began her work is therefore crucial for an examination of her images and artistic goals.

In *The Making of English Photography*, Steve Edwards notes that 1861 was a decisive year in English photography, since “it was at this point that professional photographers decided to call themselves artists.”\(^{158}\) Previously, photography was seen as a mechanical process, a tool used for documenting reality, in which the photographer’s role in operating the camera seemed invisible. Images were to involve “no cropping; no retouching; no posing, staging, or introducing extraneous objects; no dramatic light effects; no funny angles; and so on.”\(^{159}\) The images produced were therefore seen as documents instead of creative works, and according to Edwards, the complexity of nineteenth-century photography stemmed from the “fraught relation between the elevated art picture and the base document.”\(^{160}\)

In photography’s early days in the 1840s and 1850s, discussions around the medium focused on its use for scientific experiments. Photography was found useful “as a supplement to the vision of the man of science,” since it “worked as an extension of the sensory apparatus.”\(^{161}\) Scientists, civil engineers, architects, and others could make use of it for their professions. Artists, too, could use photography as studies for their paintings. In 1859-1860, English photographic production underwent a transformation with the emergence of a group of

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{160}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{161}\) Ibid., 59.
professional photographers who began creating inexpensive portraits for middle class customers, causing “the vogue for the carte-de-visite portrait.”\textsuperscript{162} This “cartomania” hit its peak in the years between 1860 and 1864, when people had their portrait taken and produced in mass quantities, giving their image to their friends. The mass portrait industry commodified photography, with many studios opening up to accommodate the enthusiasm for carte-de-visite portraits.

The foundation of the Photographic Society (later known as The Royal Photographic Society) in 1853 was a step towards the elevation of photography to the level of art. In 1856, five years after photography was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in the Machinery Court, the Photographic Society’s council stated their goal to “make the camera a rival to the painter’s pencil in expressing the higher concepts of artistic imagination.”\textsuperscript{163} However, to their disappointment, their aspirations for photography to be defined as fine art were struck down again in 1861, with the announcement of the taxonomy for the International Exhibition of 1862. Photography was classified as Class XIV (Photography and Photographic Apparatus) in Section II (Machinery), as opposed to being included in Section IV (Fine Art). Although this decision was a step up for photography, because it received a class of its own within the section, this caused a controversy among professional photographers who were still attempting to redefine their work as fine art. Over the next four years, approximately two hundred articles appeared in photographic periodicals, addressing this question. In an attempt to placate the society, the commissioners of the exhibition offered a separate room for photographs to be hung, while still reiterating their connection to the actual mechanical apparatus of the camera. It was not until the

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 166.
International Exhibition of 1872 in London that photography was finally admitted into the Fine Art section, categorized as “Photography as a Fine Art” under Class III.164

Writers and critics during the 1860s increasingly focused on the differences between mechanical photography and artistic photography, discussing the techniques artists should use and the qualities the images should have in order to be categorized as such. In 1865, British photographer James Mudd wrote about two paths that photography could take: on one hand, photographic copies based on scientific and technological improvements that could be seen as mechanical documents; on the other hand, photographs that sought the “picturesque.”165 The second category implies a degree of creative effort separate from the technical skills and manual work required for photography. Photographers thus realized that in order to establish this sort of status, they needed to “demonstrate the intellectual nature of the practice,” requiring “thoughtful selection, completion, artistic arrangement.”166 Instead of merely reproducing the scene in front of them, photographers needed to show conscious creative choices in the production of their images.

Multiple photographers, critics, and writers presented various (often contradictory) criteria or suggestions for creating artistic photography and showing the role of intellectual labor in these images. William Lake Price, a British artist who was involved in both painting and photography, situated the difference between mechanical reproduction and creative activity in the use of focus in photography. Ascribing optical sharpness to mere copying, Lake Price implied that slightly out-of-focus photographs are preferable in terms of fine art.167 He believed that a conscious manipulation of focus in favor of softness could be used to indicate an ideal

164 Ibid., 172.
165 Ibid., 134.
166 Ibid., 147.
167 Ibid., 154.
conception of a subject by de-emphasizing the representation of details that was so important for the technical strains of photography.

Lake Price’s equation of out-of-focus images and artfulness was echoed by others, including Sir William J. Newton, who presented a paper on this topic at the inaugural meeting of the Photographic Society in 1853. In “Upon Photography in an Artistic View, and in its Relations to the Arts,” Newton, a painter who also played a role in founding the Photographic Society and was its vice president, stated that “the attainment of every minute detail” was unnecessary in artistic photography and that photographers should instead “endeavour at producing a broad and general effect.” Expounding on this, he stated:

I do not consider it necessary that the whole of the subject should be what is called in focus; on the contrary, I have found in many instances that the object is better obtained by the whole subject being a little out of focus, thereby giving a greater breadth of effect, and consequently more suggestive of the true character of nature.

For Newton, the effect achieved through out of focus photography was both more faithful to human experience of the world than a crisp image and more indicative of artistic presence and agency. This was a view that many shared in the nineteenth century. In an essay published in The Quarterly Review in 1857, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, an art critic who played a significant role in the British art world, echoes Newton’s assertion that photographs are more “artistically beautiful” when “taken slightly out of focus” and that artistic feeling is lost in the search for technical perfection.

Other theorists avoided clear-cut pronouncements about the overall value of sharpness versus out-of-focus images, presenting more nuanced arguments about the ways photographers can use focus to achieve artistic images. The most prominent voices on this topic were Alfred H.

168 Quoted in ibid., 156.
169 Quoted in ibid., 156-157.
170 Quoted in ibid., 160.
Wall of the *Photographic Journal* and George Wharton Simpson, the editor of *The Photographic News*. Unlike other critics who equated sharpness with perfect focus, Wall claimed that sharpness was a result of imperfect focus, while perfect focus avoided sharp outlines in favor of gradation and a sense of modeling, in which certain parts of the image attract more attention than others. Wall explained:

> For the architect an equality of sharpness distributed over the whole picture will, of course, be most suitable. But the artist will always desire that every attractive quality of a picture should find its focus where the interest of his performance centres. In a portrait, the head, and those features especially which require the most prominence given to them, will be most illuminated, and most carefully wrought out in their details.\(^{171}\)

According to Wall’s definition of focus, technically sharp images in which all parts commanded equal attention lacked artistic focus due to their absence of a compositional center. Similarly, Simpson argued that photographs needed a gradation of focus that included a sharp foreground and a blurred background, in order to highlight the focal point of the image. He also acknowledged that the accepted theory among photographers at the time was that photographic art required a softer focus, with portions of the image out of focus. Simpson’s writing on the subject shows the extent to which theorists of photography, particularly in the Photographic Society, promoted soft focus and argued against sharpness in the 1860s, just as Cameron was beginning her career.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement’s reciprocal relationship with Victorian photography also played a significant role in the development of artistic photography. This connection, which is discussed in depth in Michael Bartram’s 1985 study, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Aspects of Victorian Photography*, necessitates the consideration of Pre-Raphaelite art in the study of Victorian photography, including the work of Cameron. Bartram notes the convergence of the second wave of Pre-Raphaelitism and the growing artistic aspirations of photography in the

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 216-217.
1860s. Around the same time that the later strain of Pre-Raphaelitism was gaining popularity for its approach to historical and medieval subject matter and the form of romantic medievalism it championed, photography was evolving from a scientific and mechanical endeavor to an artistic one. During this critical shift, photographers began looking to painting for inspiration. From that point, Bartram writes that photography’s connection with Pre-Raphaelitism “was less a matter of unconscious similarity of aim as of deliberate emulation,” with photographers such as Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson creating photographs of “soulful women and Tennysonian tableaux.”

Bartram notes that the photographic and Pre-Raphaelite worlds began merging socially as well at this point, so that “Julia Margaret Cameron, Lewis Carroll, Rejlander, the Rossettis, Arthur Hughes (to name a few) were part of a large social network permeated equally with a photographic and a Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm.”

Although the relationship between photography and Pre-Raphaelitism generally received little scholarly attention in the century and a half since that period, the National Gallery of Art’s 2010 exhibition, *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens: British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*, highlighted the way these two groups of artists inspired one another. In her introduction to the catalog, Diane Waggoner points out that the development of photography, which emphasized the accurate depiction of details, impacted all the visual arts in the mid-nineteenth century, influencing the growth of realism as a dominant style. Photography’s influence on British visual culture was on the rise when William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, and its impact can be felt in the Pre-

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173 Ibid., 10.
Raphaelite focus on detail, realistic elements, and record of visual facts. Apart from the general inspiration that photography provided, artists frequently used photographs as studies for their paintings, as was the case with Rossetti’s collaboration with the photographer John Robert Parsons in 1865, about which Waggoner notes, “the artist’s use of photographs as visual source material and inspiration for his painted likenesses reiterates the inescapable link between the two media.”

In turn, Pre-Raphaelite painting exerted its influence on photography, with photographers making use of Pre-Raphaelite visual modes and themes in an attempt to secure photography’s status as a fine art. Photographers looked to painting particularly in the realm of portraiture; Waggoner elaborates on this in her essay, “From the Life: Portraiture in the 1860s,” writing, “The distinction between human sight and the mechanical recording of the camera was at the core of artistic debates about the merits of the new movement in painting and the still-nascent medium of photography, especially as it concerned the issue of likeness in portraiture.” She notes that both photographers and the Pre-Raphaelites struggled with similar issues—namely, capturing “the more subtle qualities of ocular vision,” instead of merely copying “the literal facts of nature.”

Cameron’s personal and professional connections with prominent Pre-Raphaelites undoubtedly influenced her photography. Her personal style developed between her connection to the Pre-Raphaelites and her interactions with other photographers of the period such as

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176 Waggoner, “From the Life: Portraiture in the 1860s,” 94.
177 Ibid., 95.
Rejlander and David Wilkie Wynfield, whom she credited as one of her mentors.\textsuperscript{178} In his photographic career, Wynfield was known for the soft focus that would later become a staple of her career. His self-portrait from the 1860s (Figure 16), which has many visual similarities to Cameron’s \textit{The Dirty Monk}, is typical of the kind of overall soft focus and blurred edges that she used, with the face being the least blurry part of the image and activating the compositional center. In describing the similarities between Wynfield and Cameron’s photography, Julian Cox identifies the shared traits of “the close-up position of the camera, shallow depth of field and selective use of focus, and interest in the psychological dimension of the subject.”\textsuperscript{179}

In addition to all her portraits, Cameron created multiple series of narrative images during that period. These included Biblical scenes, with numerous Madonna-and-child compositions, as well as images based on history, literature, and mythology. In her literary scenes of the 1860s and early 1870s, she heavily drew on the works of William Shakespeare for inspiration, representing various scenes from his plays. Some notable examples of these images include \textit{Prospero and Miranda} from 1865 (Figure 17), \textit{Romeo and Juliet} from 1867 (Figure 18), and \textit{King Lear allotting his kingdom to his three daughters} from 1872 (Figure 19). All of these photographs involve models dressed in costumes, reenacting literary scenes. While her use of theatricality and fiction may seem innovative considering the accepted narrative of photography’s focus on realism and documentation in the nineteenth century, in fact, photographers had already been using the medium to create narratives for more than two decades before Cameron began experimenting, and at least three decades before her \textit{Idylls} project.

\textsuperscript{178} Ford, \textit{Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography}, 36.
\textsuperscript{179} Julian Cox, “‘To…startle the eye with wonder & delight’: The Photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron,” in \textit{Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs}, 46.
This tradition of staged photography, which was examined in the National Gallery of Canada’s 2006 exhibition *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre; A History of the Staged Photograph*, curated by Lori Pauli, dates back to 1840, when French photographer and innovator Hippolyte Bayard created the staged photograph, *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (Figure 20). This self-portrait depicted the photographer as having committed suicide by drowning, his bare torso reclining and his hands crossed on his lap, with a straw hat hanging on the wall behind him. Lori Pauli notes that this early image, “with its theatrical props and implied narrative, reminds us that the creation of fictitious images or ‘staged’ photographs has been a part of photographic practice from the very beginning.” Pauli identifies “theatricality” (performance) and “narrative” (content) as the defining features of all the works included in the exhibition, which takes into account nineteenth-century photographers such as Bayard, Oscar Gustave Rejlander, Warren Thompson, Roger Fenton, David Octavius Hill, Robert Adamson, William Lake Price, Henry Peach Robinson, and Julia Margaret Cameron, among many others.

It is clear from this list that Cameron’s images fit into a larger pattern of Victorian photographers employing theatricality for their work. Cameron’s work includes many of the elements already incorporated into photography by others, such as Rejlander, who frequently used role-playing for his photographs, and Robinson, whose famous 1858 photograph, *Fading Away* (Figure 21), depicts a room with a fictional scene of a dying young woman surrounded by her mourning family. Cameron was not only familiar with these works, but she also studied under Rejlander, who had visited Freshwater and photographed her in 1863. By that time,

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181 Ibid., 13.
182 Cox, “‘To…startle the eye with wonder & delight’: The Photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron,” 45.
Rejlander was known for the kind of narrative photographs that she would later create throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Notably, his 1857 photograph, *The First Negative* (Figure 22), made use of Pliny’s story of the origin of art, a subject that had frequently been depicted in paintings.¹⁸³ His image depicts a model dressed as the Corinthian maid, her back to the viewer as she creates a sketch on the wall of her lover, who sits beside her. Rejlander’s approach to theatrical photography and his use of costume and narrative undoubtedly influenced Cameron.

Narrative photography also drew its inspiration from Pre-Raphaelitism. As Jennifer Green-Lewis writes in her study of Victorian photography within the culture of realism, “Beyond the widespread accompaniment of photographs with explanatory oral narratives, nineteenth-century pictorial photography reworked Pre-Raphaelite models of storytelling. Pictorial photographers, as Henry Peach Robinson wrote, demanded for their images ‘poetry, sentiment, story, the literary part of a picture….‘”¹⁸⁴ Pictorial photography, which employed a sense of narrative and sentiment, was a topic of much debate among those who believed that realism and truth should be photography’s primary feature. Photographers who focused on artifice over fact drew much criticism for subverting the supposed realism of their medium. Describing the sort of narrative photography that created this controversy, Green-Lewis writes, “Pictorial or, as it was sometimes termed, Pre-Raphaelite photography, was pursued most famously during the late 1850s and 1860s by gentlemen photographers who used models, both professional and ‘aboriginal,’ as Robinson put it, and who invented dramatic tableaux or played on theatrical or literary themes.”¹⁸⁵ This use of literary, historical, and mythological themes echoed subject matter used by the Pre-Raphaelites. Waggoner explicitly connects photography and Pre-

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¹⁸³ Pauli, “Setting the Scene,” 27.
¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 54.
Raphaelite painting, noting that “photographers looked to Pre-Raphaelite subject matter and visual strategies as a means of legitimizing their medium’s status as fine art.”

Furthermore, narrative photography can be seen not only within the context of the medium’s progression, but also within the context of Victorian society. As Bartram notes, “Narrative photography, as practiced in country houses, emerged out of the tradition of the *tableau vivant,*” a popular form of entertainment among the Victorians in which families and their guests dressed up in costumes and posed based on scenes from literature, history, or art. Victoria Olsen further describes the role that this kind of theatricality played in the lives of the Victorians:

Theatricality entailed self consciously playing roles of all kinds, including femininity, maternity, class affiliations, and ‘character’ parts like those of artist and eccentric. In a society where public roles were relatively fixed and inflexible, the world of theater and fantasy allowed room to explore other selves and identities. Playing roles helped make the relatively rigid boundaries of Victorian identities more bearable.

Theatricality, which was seen as a safe way to play out various roles otherwise inaccessible to Victorians in their daily lives, encouraged them to use their imaginations within the comfort of their homes through *tableaux vivants* and amateur theatricals. Colin Ford records Julia Margaret Cameron’s own interest and involvement in theatricality, writing that, “most Victorian families of all classes enjoyed playing games, including charades, and producing amateur theatrical shows. Cameron went so far as to build her own Thatched House Theatre in the gardens of Dimbola,” where the Camerons and Tennysons often arranged performances. Cameron’s personal involvement in this Victorian pastime undoubtedly influenced her vision in narrative photography.

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188 Olsen, *From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron & Victorian Photography,* 161.
photographs, both during her series of the 1860s and her Arthurian series of the 1870s, and this would have also shaped her Victorian audience’s perception of her photographs.

By the time Tennyson requested that she create illustrations for *Idylls of the King*, Cameron already had experience representing literary scenes through photography and was well aware of other photographers’ works of this genre. Her past work in narrative photography and her creative inspirations, namely the Pre-Raphaelites and other pictorial photographers, would become a vital aspect of the vision she brought to her *Idylls of the King* series.
CHAPTER 4

Bringing *Idylls of the King* to Life:

Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations

The first volume of Cameron’s *Illustrations to the Idylls of the King and Other Poems* includes the images: *Gareth and Lynette; Enid; And Enid Sang; Vivien and Merlin; Vivien and Merlin (2); Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat; Elaine; Sir Galahad and the Nun; The Parting of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere; The Little Novice and the Queen; King Arthur; and The Passing of Arthur*. The second volume includes: *Elaine; The Corpse of Elaine in the Palace of King Arthur; and King Arthur wounded lying in the barge.*

In organizing the fifteen illustrations by theme and character, it becomes clear that Cameron focused on some characters and their narratives more than others. Elaine is depicted more often than any of the other characters; of the fifteen photographs, she is featured in four. The most frequently featured character after Elaine is Arthur, who is the subject of three photographs. Two photographs are then dedicated to Vivien and Merlin, and another two to Enid, leaving a total of four photographs for other characters: one for Gareth and Lynette, one for Sir Galahad, one for Lancelot and Guinevere together, and one for Guinevere with the novice in the convent. Keeping in mind the publication history of *Idylls of the King*, it becomes clear that eleven of the fifteen photographs are based on the first four poems that Tennyson published: those focusing on Elaine, Enid, Guinevere, and Vivien. The predominance of subject matter from the first four idylls, all of which revolved around women, sets the tone for Cameron’s interpretation of the story. She primarily focuses on the relationships between characters, and

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especially the ways in which these relationships affect the women of *Idylls of the King*, largely ignoring the more adventure-oriented scenes.

In examining her illustrations, then, the most logical approach is to group them based on the five primary characters that she depicts, starting with the three images of King Arthur: *King Arthur* (Figure 23), *The Passing of Arthur* (Figure 24), and *King Arthur wounded lying in the barge* (Figure 25). Following an analysis of these three images of the king, we will turn to Cameron’s representation of the four women the first idylls were based on, as the focal point of her collection of illustrations.

Cameron’s three photographs of Arthur depict the king during three crucial moments from the end of the story. In *Idylls of the King*, Guinevere leaves court to seek refuge in an abbey after being caught with Lancelot. There she finds out that Arthur has gone to fight against Lancelot and that in his absence Modred has usurped the realm. Guinevere realizes the role she played in this situation, her grief increased by a young nun, who, not knowing the Guinevere’s true identity, says that the queen’s “disloyal life/ Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round.”\(^{191}\) Guinevere orders the nun out and then reflects on her life with Arthur and Lancelot, her memory “slipping back upon the golden days.”\(^{192}\) She is interrupted in her reverie by Arthur’s sudden appearance. Arthur, who has found out about her infidelity, rebukes Guinevere in a lengthy speech, reminding her that their marriage was supposed to bring morality and nobility to the kingdom and that instead she had ended the golden days through her sin. After rebuking her for her contribution to the destruction of the Round Table, Arthur forgives her and hints that they may reunite “hereafter in that world where all are pure,” but that in this world he would see her

\(^{191}\) Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 274.

\(^{192}\) Ibid., 279.
Realizing the full extent of the consequences of her actions after Arthur leaves, Guinevere mourns what transpired and reflects on Arthur’s goodness and her belated love for him. In penance, she becomes a nun and spends the rest of her days at the abbey.

Arthur’s confrontation of Guinevere has been interpreted by scholars as part of the parabolic connection between Arthur and Christ, with Tennyson “patterning him upon the paradoxical nature of Christ, the stern Judge and forgiving Son.” In his speech to Guinevere, Arthur switches between these two roles. In the first half of the speech, “the King figures as Christ in Judgment, in the second part, as Christ heard alongside that of the Christ-figure, first in injured rage, then in compassion.” Accordingly, Arthur is presented as a Christ-like figure throughout *Idylls of the King*. This analogy is developed gradually, beginning from the title of the very first idyll, “The Coming of Arthur,” where Tennyson’s choice of wording recalls the coming of Jesus. Eggers points out that “King Arthur is thought to have arrived suddenly as the coming of a light, surrounded by supernatural personages and transported in a magic ship,” when he “brings a spiritual force into the land and gains his right to rule through his supernatural inspiration.” Similarly, literary scholar John D. Rosenberg describes Arthur as “a Christ figure in origins, mission, and promise of his return.” King Arthur’s parabolic connection to Christ is amplified through his depiction as a solar deity as well, as Rosenberg points out. In a conversation with Lancelot, Guinevere refers to Arthur as “the Sun in Heaven,” which Rosenberg reads as “an apparent tautology that nicely capitalizes on the homonymic Son and sun,” with Arthur “so closely linked to the sun throughout the *Idylls* that his character never

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193 Ibid., 283.
194 Eggers, *King Arthur’s Laureate: A Study of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King*, 128.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid., 205-206.
197 Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King,”* 42.
wholly detaches itself from the symbol.\textsuperscript{198} The symbolic representation of Arthur as Christ and as the sun is instructive in viewing Cameron’s illustrations of the character and understanding the Christian framework in which Victorian audiences would have perceived the images.

Cameron’s first image, \textit{King Arthur} (Figure 23), is accompanied by an excerpt from Tennyson’s text that describes Guinevere’s impression of Arthur as she watches him about to leave the abbey after his speech. In the text, Arthur is described as being surrounded by mist and with his helm lowered, preventing Guinevere from seeing his face through the window. However, in Cameron’s photograph, his face is visible and is the focal point of the image, while the soft focus and the blurriness of Arthur’s face, likely caused by the model’s movement, contribute to the sense of mist described in the text. This scene, which is generally known as the Parting of Arthur and Guinevere, was frequently depicted in art, although quite differently from Cameron’s representation of it. Cameron chooses to portray Arthur solely, omitting the narrative of the parting scene.

Traditionally, artists who illustrated this scene chose the moment right before Arthur’s departure – when Guinevere is groveling at his feet as he forgives her and says farewell. A prime example of this is James Archer’s 1865 painting, \textit{The Parting of Arthur and Guinevere} (Figure 26), in which the Queen is shown prostrate on the floor at Arthur’s feet, her face hidden, while Arthur stands upright, towering over her as he looks at her. In Archer’s painting, the two characters are situated in a dark chamber in the abbey, where only the floorboards are illuminated to call attention to the sprawling figure. Arthur, whose face and surcoat are the lightest parts of the painting, is presented as the focus of Archer’s image. He is portrayed as a

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
strong and heroic king, his nobility demonstrated by his forgiveness of Guinevere after her betrayal.

Similarly, in Gustave Doré’s *The King’s Farewell* (Figure 27), which was made as an illustration for Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, Guinevere is shown prostrate at the king’s feet within a dark setting of Romanesque architecture and shrubbery. Doré maintains the traditional composition of the queen at the king’s feet as seen in Archer’s image, but his characters are presented on a smaller scale within the composition, overwhelmed by the surrounding architecture. This scene of the parting of Arthur and Guinevere, Mancoff explains, received particular attention because “to Tennyson’s readers, this was Arthur’s finest moment.” In contrast to Archer and Doré, Cameron gave the scene a starkly different treatment by choosing to portray King Arthur alone once he has already parted from Guinevere. His greatness is underscored by the close cropping of the portrait, in which only his helmeted head and chain-mail-clad torso are visible, taking up the majority of the picture plane. His face is shown mostly in profile as he gazes out into the distance, alert and prepared. In the out-of-focus portion at the bottom of the composition, his right hand grasps the hilt of his sword, hinting toward his upcoming confrontation with Mordred. Here, he is the epitome of the heroic figure that nineteenth-century revivalist chivalry so adored.

Significantly, *King Arthur* and Cameron’s next image of the king, *The Passing of Arthur*, are the only two photographs of her *Idylls of the King* illustrations to show a male figure alone, unaccompanied by any women. *The Passing of Arthur* (Figure 24), which visually is strikingly similar to *King Arthur* in its close-up view of the king holding his sword and gazing out into the distance, depicts the king during his fatal battle with Mordred, who had tried to usurp his

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kingdom in the chaos following Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair. This image, however, is darker than *King Arthur*, possibly symbolizing the setting of the sun that was associated with Arthur’s death in Tennyson’s text.

This rise and downfall of King Arthur can be seen in Tennyson’s symbolic reference to him as the sun, as well as the use of light imagery throughout the progression of the *Idylls* as the story moves from season to season, where “the opening idylls are as bathed in light as the later idylls are shrouded in darkness.”\(^{200}\) The story starts in the spring, with the middle idylls turning to the glory of summer, while “the autumnal ‘Last Tournament’ marks the transition to the winter’s night of ‘Guinevere’ and ‘The Passing of Arthur.’”\(^{201}\) The darkness of winter is an appropriate setting for the later idylls depicting Camelot’s decline and the death of Arthur and his dreams. The imagery and symbolism is reflected in Tennyson’s wording. Analyzing the recurrence of the word “sun” within the idylls, Rosenberg writes, “With the waning of Arthur’s power, the sun itself is eclipsed from the poem. The word *sun* occurs more than five times as frequently in the first three idylls as in the last three. And all but one of the later references are to the setting sun or contrast the young king at the height of his power with the older king in his decline.”\(^{202}\) Cameron follows this imagery in the progression between her two solo portraits of King Arthur, with the second one significantly darker than the first, implying the setting of the sun and the darkness that has spread over the kingdom.

Arthur’s death can also be seen as a parallel of the crucifixion and Christ’s sacrifice of himself for the salvation of mankind. Linda K. Hughes interprets this through the lens of Tennyson’s Victorian audiences and their “active Christian framework,” in which “the Arthur

\(^{200}\) Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King,”* 44.
\(^{201}\) Ibid.
\(^{202}\) Ibid.
who submitted to death as part of his attempt to elevate humanity, who forgave the spouse who had brought him great pain, and who was prophesied to return again was readily absorbed into the Christ who offered the hope of individual rather than political salvation.”

Although no woman is seen in either of these photographs, Cameron’s textual framing of King Arthur highlights the female perspective. By accompanying King Arthur with a quote from Idylls of the King describing how Guinevere saw him in this moment, Cameron firmly situates the image within a woman’s perspective, highlighting that this image is not merely a representation of King Arthur, but specifically a representation of him as seen through Guinevere’s eyes. In this case, Cameron’s dependence on the original textual source provides a different perspective on what could otherwise simply be seen as a portrait of Arthur. Likewise, the Idylls excerpt Cameron uses for The Passing of Arthur opens with the king stating “My house hath been my doom,” referring to Guinevere’s betrayal and how it had led to the destruction of his kingdom and his own death. Cameron’s focus on women is thus sustained even in these two solo portraits of King Arthur, the only solo images of men in the entire series.

Cameron’s final image of the king, King Arthur wounded lying in the barge (Figure 25), depicts Arthur as he is dying. In Tennyson’s story, after Arthur is mortally wounded in his battle with Modred, Sir Bedivere brings the king to the lake, where a funeral barge awaits him with three queens dressed in black. They pull him onto the barge and wash his wounds and cry over him. Arthur explains to Sir Bedivere that he is going to the island-valley of Avalon, and the barge sets sail, taking the king along with it, never to be seen again. Cameron’s image depicts the three mythical queens mourning over the dying king in the barge as they depart for Avalon. Unlike the previous two images of Arthur, the subjects are farther from the camera, providing a

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full view of the figures and the barge in which the king rests. The wooden planks of the barge separate the figures in the scene from the viewer, with the three queens positioned behind Arthur’s prone body. Two of them hold onto Arthur, their faces turned inward towards each other, while the third queen stands upright beside them, looking away. Their crowned, white-clad figures and Arthur’s chain mail are illuminated, making the four characters the focal point of the image, with Arthur’s head resting on the lap of one of the queens, his face turned towards the viewer. Behind them lurk shadowy figures dressed in black, which almost seem to blend into the dark background.

The text that Cameron quotes references the appearance of the three “black-stoled, black-hooded” queens “with crowns of gold,” who seemed “like a dream” as they took Arthur onto the barge and mourned over him. In the photograph, the soft focus and blurred edges contribute to the dreamy, mist-like quality of the scene, and the queens’ eyes are downcast and their faces solemn as they tend to their king. However, it is Cameron’s deviation from Tennyson’s text that is significant. While Tennyson described the queens as clad in black and with golden crowns, Cameron substituted the black clothing with elaborate, light-colored dresses that catch and reflect the lighting. The two queens who are holding onto Arthur have loose, flowing hair, while the third queen wears a white veil that flows out behind her. In changing the garments of the queens and presenting them as spectral beauties, Cameron creates compelling figures that end up calling more attention than the king himself. While Arthur was the sole focus in the previous two portraits, in this group composition the queens become the dominating figures.

Among the images by other nineteenth-century illustrators and artists discussed previously who depicted this subject, the closest equivalent is Daniel Maclise’s *Arthur in the Death Barge* (Figure 12), which was created as a wood engraving for the 1857 illustrated edition
of Tennyson’s *Poems* and also initiated the use of the death barge image in Victorian art. Maclise, who was the only non-Pre-Raphaelite artist to illustrate Arthurian subject matter for this edition, brought the simplicity and grandeur of the Westminster aesthetic to his depiction. The barge is shown afloat, creating a separation between its inhabitants and the viewer. While there are many shadowy figures blending into each other towards the back of the barge and stretching into the distance to create a sense of monumentality, the foreground is dominated by only two illuminated figures: King Arthur and one of the queens, whose arm is draped around him as she takes care of him. The clear distinction between the dark portions of the image and the illuminated foreground unambiguously highlights the true focus of the image. Unlike Cameron’s representation, in which the queens ultimately overshadow the king, Maclise highlights the king, depicting his body and armor in painstaking detail. According to Mancoff, “No other image so richly consolidated the message of the legend for the Victorians. Proof of Arthur’s heroism, the mystery of his destiny, and the promise of his return converged in a single dramatic moment.”

In particular, the promise of his return made the image significant, serving “as an emblem of belief—belief in the power of the legend and belief in a culture that could make Arthur come again.” While Arthur’s heroism and the significance of his journey is a key aspect of Maclise’s image, Cameron, who was familiar with the Maclise illustration, shifts the focus to the three beautiful queens instead, presenting a female-oriented vision of the scene.

Cameron’s treatment of Arthur’s individual portraits resembles her versions of Enid, *Enid* (Figure 28) and *And Enid Sang* (Figure 29), where she focuses on a single character and does not follow other artists’ example in depicting Enid alongside her husband, Geraint. In *Idylls of the King*, Geraint is one of Arthur’s knights and Enid is a close friend of Guinevere’s. As a result of

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205 Ibid.
Guinevere’s reputation and the rumors surrounding her relationship with Lancelot, Geraint fears that his faithful wife might also be keeping a secret. He decides to test his wife’s character through a series of travels before finally reconciling. In Tennyson’s text, Enid and Geraint’s story is so tightly interwoven, between their marriage and Geraint’s trials to prove her fidelity, that it made sense for artists to portray the two characters together. However, Cameron singles out Enid for representation, highlighting her personal experience of the narrative.

*Enid* (Figure 28), which portrays the character after Geraint told her to put on her worst dress and follow him, shows a somber, thoughtful woman in profile view, looking into her wardrobe with her eyes downcast. Wearing a white dress and veil that evoke the memory of her wedding to Geraint, Enid sadly reflects on her husband’s current suspicions of her. The juxtaposition of their present state of marital discord and the bright hope and purity signified by the wedding dress present a compelling representation of Enid’s emotional process, torn between love for Geraint and sadness at his distrust as she obeys his command. Cameron’s photograph takes a moment to reflect on Enid’s own emotions as she prepares for the journey.

*And Enid Sang* (Figure 29), which refers to the moment in which Geraint first saw the lovely Enid singing and decided that she would be his bride, shows her in close-up view, her face turned to the side as she holds a stringed instrument. Set against a dark background, Enid glows, her long hair flowing behind her and her necklace glinting in the light. Unlike *Enid*, in which Cameron established a sense of setting with the wooden wardrobe, *And Enid Sang* leaves no room for setting or background, allowing Enid’s face and her hand on the instrument to dominate the image. Cameron’s use of lighting and shadow to highlight the features of Enid’s face and her neck infuses the figure with presence as she opens her lips to sing.
As Marion Wynne-Davis has noted, both the title of the photograph and the image itself give Enid “an active and creative role” and denote an “active female voice.” Tennyson’s portrayal of Enid as the model of domesticity and the ideal of wifely virtue and fidelity left little room for Enid’s own agency or ability for self-determination. Her obedience to Geraint, a central aspect of the story, tied her actions to his agency in the textual source. By contrast, Cameron’s artistic choices shift the focus onto Enid’s individualism. As Carol Armstrong writes about these two images, “by excising Geraint altogether and honing in progressively on Enid, they work further and further to exclude the masculine and increasingly to feminize their field of vision,” thus moving the focus “from the parts of the text that relate Geraint’s subjectivity to those that foreground Enid’s.” In choosing to portray Enid alone in both portraits, and in one holding an instrument and singing, Cameron gives Enid a voice.

As in the case of the King Arthur images, it is useful to compare Cameron’s illustrations to those of other artists who had depicted the same subjects. In particular, Gustave Doré’s images provide a crucial comparison because they had been created specifically as illustrations for the first installment of *Idylls of the King*, which Cameron primarily focused on as well. Since Doré and Cameron provided illustrations of many of the same scenes from Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, a comparative analysis of their differing approaches to the same subject matter is an appropriate starting point for illuminating the respective relevance and suitability of their illustrations to Tennyson’s text. The fact that Doré and Cameron knew each other and were aware of the other’s work particularly encourages a comparison. Cameron had met Doré and

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taken his portrait in 1872.  

She herself saw her Arthurian photographs as a contrast to Doré’s illustrations, as she made clear in a November 1874 letter to her friend Sir Edward Ryan, writing, “Doré got a fortune for his drawn fancy Illustrations for these Idylls—Now one of my large photographs, take one for instance illustrating Elaine who is May Prinsep (now Hitchens) at her very best would excite more sensation and interest than all the drawings of Doré.” Cameron was certainly aware of and familiar with Doré’s images as she was creating her own illustrations, and although her visual approach to the subjects was different, art historians such as Joanne Lukitsh note that Doré’s work likely “influenced Cameron’s selection of subjects.” In particular, images of Guinevere, Vivien, and Elaine—three of the four women highlighted in the first installment of *Idylls of the King*—allow a comparison between Doré and Cameron’s approach to their subject, with Enid being the one exception because none of Doré’s illustrations of this character in any way resembled Cameron’s.

Both Doré and Cameron illustrated one of the most significant events in *Idylls of the King*, the parting scene of Lancelot and Guinevere. Lancelot, who is the most prominent knight of the Arthurian legend, is torn in Tennyson’s story between his loyalty towards Arthur and his adulterous romance with Queen Guinevere. Worried about the rumors surrounding them and the possibility of being caught, the two lovers reluctantly bid each other farewell in order to not cause a scandal with their affair. In Doré’s 1868 drawing “There kiss’d, and parted weeping” or *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (Figure 30), he situates the two lovers within a dark forest, seated on their horses on a sloped bank along the reed-strewn river. The meticulously rendered forest trees tower over the figures on both sides of the image, and in a small clearing in

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208 Lukitsh, “Julia Margaret Cameron’s Photographic Illustrations to Alfred Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King*,” 261.
209 Ibid., 249.
210 Ibid., 254.
the center of the background, the towers of Camelot rise up in the distance. The figures, however, are isolated in the forest, overshadowed by their surroundings. Guinevere, whose back is to the viewer, leans from her horse to embrace Lancelot, whose figure faces the viewer but whose face is turned sideways towards Guinevere. Although Guinevere and Lancelot are supposed to be equally significant figures in this scene, Guinevere is barely distinguishable as she melts into Lancelot’s embrace. With her face hidden, only the long braids streaming down her back indicate her identity. The two figures are in shadow, while the sky above them and in the clearing behind them provides a misty glow, almost drawing the eye away from the darkened figures.

Meanwhile, Cameron’s photograph, *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (Figure 31), focuses on the complex relationship between two lovers at the time of their parting. Its sepia tone, softly blurred along the edges with the corners darkened, evokes a nostalgic feeling for a time long gone. The photograph’s large scale (13 1/6 x 11 5/16 inches) adds to the striking quality of the image. The lovers are in a close embrace, Lancelot’s beard covering the top of Guinevere’s head and melting into her hair, emphasizing their closeness. Guinevere’s face is the center of composition, and her eyes are either downcast or closed. While Lancelot’s head is slightly blurred, as if he was shifting it slightly, Guinevere is immobile and more precisely outlined. The dark shadow under her lower lip implies a sad pout, setting the emotional tone for the photograph. The downward tilt of her face leads our gaze down at her and Lancelot’s clasped hands, which emphasize their emotional bond. Lancelot’s costume is one of the more striking elements of the photo, as he is wearing an almost full set of chain mail that glints in the light, and a sort of beret with what looks like a feather, although it is blurred almost beyond recognition. Guinevere’s costume is less theatrical; she wears a light-colored dignified dress that leaves
almost everything to the imagination besides her collarbone and tensed neck. Her left hand grasps Lancelot’s gauntlet, which rests in her lap to evoke a sense of intimacy and domesticity, of a knight and his wife, even though Lancelot and Guinevere are only lovers and she is married to another man, a fact that is implied by the wedding band on her ring finger. While this detail is not obvious in reproductions of the photograph, it is quite noticeable in the large-scale original print, effectively reminding the viewer of King Arthur and implicating him as an unseen character in the events of the photograph, as if his shadow is hovering over the two lovers. Their gazes, averted and unaware of the viewer, envelop them in their own private world, which the viewer seems to be looking in on as if through a keyhole. This impression is reinforced by the way the photograph fades out and darkens in the corners, focusing our vision on the two lovers in the middle while the setting remains vague and insignificant. The viewer regards the couple from a close distance and is allowed a glimpse at a moment in Lancelot and Guinevere’s personal life, instead of merely seeing the scandal that their affair caused. Instead of merely being characters in a legend, Guinevere and Lancelot become living, breathing human beings whose emotions are recognizable, allowing the viewer to relate to them.

Vivien and Merlin’s narrative was another part of the story that received significant attention from readers and artists alike. As discussed before, the Victorian fascination with the archetype that Vivien represented translated into the subject’s popularity in nineteenth-century art. In Tennyson’s text, Vivien is a devotee of the old pagan religion and the lover of Mark of Cornwall, enemy of King Arthur. She arrives at King Arthur’s court during a time of peace and prosperity in the kingdom in the hopes of creating trouble. Presenting herself as a young orphan, Vivien obtains a position as one of Guinevere’s ladies in waiting and ingratiates herself with Merlin, the great magician who also functioned as an advisor for Arthur. Although Merlin is
wary of her, her attentions to him begin to wear down his defenses. Eventually, she prevails. Merlin teaches her a magic charm that allows the user to imprison someone. He does so at a time when he is fully aware of the falseness of her pretended affection for him and her cunning nature, and she uses the charm against him.

Both Doré and Cameron illustrated the progression of Vivien and Merlin’s relationship that culminated with Vivien’s enchantment of the wizard. The first version of Cameron’s Vivien and Merlin (Figure 32) most closely corresponds to Doré’s Vivien and Merlin Repose (Figure 33), both of which illustrate the scene of Vivien’s seduction. Both of these images show the two characters in an intimate pose, the young Vivien gazing appealingly at an aged Merlin, played by Cameron’s husband, Charles Hay Cameron, with a long, attached white beard. However, that is where the similarities end.

In Doré’s Vivien and Merlin Repose, the characters are situated within a dense forest, resting at the foot of a towering oak tree. As in his image of Lancelot and Guinevere, the enormity of the detailed setting overshadows the figures, who are relegated to a portion of the lower half of the image. Merlin sits against the oak tree, looking down at Vivien, who is sprawled on the ground at his feet with her torso resting on his lap. Her face, dramatically angled upward to look at him, gives her a sense of subservience and dependence on the staid wizard. The curves and twists of her body as she seduces Merlin echo Tennyson’s description of “the lissome Vivien” in this scene as she asks Merlin if he loves her. In the text, she “Writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat” and then “clung like a snake.”

Tennyson’s consistent representation of Vivien as snakelike, both explicitly and implicitly in words such as “writhed,” is replicated in Doré’s supple figure.

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211 Tennyson, Idylls of the King, 148.
Although Cameron quoted the same lines alongside her first *Vivien and Merlin* photograph, her representation of Vivien is dramatically different from Doré’s. While Vivien and Merlin are intimately posed, they are presented as equals; instead of sprawling on the ground at Merlin’s feet, Vivien is positioned sitting beside him, her fingers splayed out against his voluminous beard. While Cameron ignored Tennyson’s description of Vivien writhing or clinging to Merlin, she did faithfully follow one of the lines in the section that described Vivien combing Merlin’s white beard. Both characters are portrayed in profile, gazing steadily at each other, the whiteness of Vivien’s dress corresponding to the luminous whiteness of Merlin’s beard and hair and contrasting with his dark clothing. Instead of the submissive Vivien of Doré’s image, who is looking up at Merlin, this Vivien has her face almost on level with Merlin’s, and their mutual gaze is the focal point of the image. Her slightly raised eyebrows imply a certain childlike innocence that contrasts with aged appearance of the wizard. Set against a dark, indistinct background, the characters and the intensity of their gazes are the only things that seem to exist in this photograph. With no setting to distract the viewer, our eyes are forced to confront this electric gaze between the two characters. Cameron’s soft focus, which contrasts with Doré’s sharply etched lines, creates a further dreamlike quality in which the pair is ensconced as though in a trance. Notably, the Vivien of Cameron’s first photograph does not exhibit any of the snakelike qualities described in Tennyson’s text and reproduced in Doré’s illustration. While Cameron’s Vivien plays an active role, her hand reaching out to comb Merlin’s beard, she is not yet the wily seductress of the legend.

Cameron’s second version of *Vivien and Merlin* (Figure 34) corresponds with Doré’s *Vivien Encloses Merlin in the Tree* (Figure 35). This second set of images illustrates the climactic end of Vivien’s story, in which she finally succeeds in extracting the entrapment charm.
from Merlin and triumphantly uses it against him. Once again, Doré situates the scene within an overbearing forest, with tree branches undulating威胁ingly in the wind to highlight the drama and danger of the scene. Merlin sits on a fallen tree trunk in a clearing, slumping forward in defeat as Vivien runs away after having successfully entrapped him. Although the rest of her body faces the viewer as she flees the scene, her head is turned back for one last glance at Merlin over her shoulder. In this scene, Doré portrays Merlin and Vivien on an even smaller scale than in *Vivien and Merlin Repose*; the figures are overwhelmed by the forest scenery. Vivien, who is flanked on either side by fallen tree branches as she runs away, is about the same size as those branches, and her dimly lit figure blends into her surroundings.

Unlike Doré, Cameron uses closer framing and contrasts lights and darks in order to emphasize certain aspects of the scene. In her second *Vivien and Merlin* (Figure 34), the two characters are farther from the camera than in the first photograph, but their full-length bodies still take up the entirety of the image, allowing for no distractions. However, a dramatic shift has occurred between the first and second photograph. Both characters are now standing, with Merlin leaning against a propped up oak tree. Instead of the intimate gestures of the first photograph, the two characters are now on opposite sides of the composition, brought together only by Vivien’s outstretched arm as she points directly in Merlin’s face and enchants him. Gone is the unassuming, gentle Vivien of the first image, replaced by a hardened and determined figure whose upright posture and defiantly uplifted head denote her power. While Vivien’s head was an inch or so below Merlin’s in the first photograph, in the second she seems to tower above him, possibly as a result of Cameron’s positioning of the models. Like in the first image, Vivien’s white dress stands out starkly against the dark background, as does Merlin’s beard and hair. Her white arm, reaching across the distance to point accusingly at him, consolidates the
image. The scene derives most of its emotional intensity from Vivien. While Merlin merely stands in place looking defeated, her pose is charged with electricity, the current flowing through her suspended arm.

Armstrong notes that this photograph was an unusual one in Cameron’s œuvre, since her photographs were generally “close-ups of absorptive moments, with vaguely historical costuming, blank, draped backgrounds” and only rarely “so much gestural action.”

Although Cameron’s *King Arthur wounded lying in the barge* is similar in the obviously staged nature of the image, it does not contain the same dramatic gestures of *Vivien and Merlin*. In that sense, this image more closely resembles the theatricality of the *tableaux vivants* that were popular in the Victorian era than any of Cameron’s other portraits. But in keeping with a consistent theme in Cameron’s works, the image focuses on Vivien’s agency and strength through the dramatic gesture, contrasting it with Merlin’s passivity. Abandoning Tennyson’s snakelike imagery, Cameron presents a Vivien that is upright and proud, her actions direct instead of sly. Unlike Tennyson’s positioning of women in relation to the men in their lives, Cameron presents Vivien as a fully-realized individual, proudly following her own will.

Finally, the last of Tennyson’s principal women and one of the most popular in nineteenth-century art, Elaine appears in four of Cameron’s illustrations. The two images in the first volume, *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat* (Figure 36) and *Elaine* (Figure 37), are single portraits that depict the maiden sitting and contemplating her love for Lancelot, while the two images of the second volume, *Elaine* (Figure 38) and *The Corpse of Elaine in the Palace of King Arthur* (Figure 39), show her death.

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In *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson introduces the readers to the innocent Elaine, known as the lily maid of Astolat, as sits alone in a tower, watching over Lancelot’s shield. Lancelot had given it to her care when he had left for one of King Arthur’s tournaments. Guinevere, who is recovering from an illness, remains behind instead of going to the tournament, and Lancelot originally decides to stay with her. However, Guinevere rebukes him for it because it gives the public reason to slander him further and gives weight to the rumors about them, causing their reputations to suffer. She encourages Lancelot to go to the tournament to avoid gossip, and they devise for him to compete in disguise. On the way to the tournament, Lancelot stops by Astolat, which is when he meets Elaine. She immediately falls in love with him “with that love which was her doom.”

Lancelot leaves his shield with her and takes an old one in order to avoid recognition in the tournament. Lancelot wins the tournament but is wounded and flees to recuperate at a hermit’s home. Elaine locates Lancelot and nurses him back to health, but when he is well, Lancelot gently explains that he cannot marry or return her love. When Lancelot returns to Camelot, Elaine falls ill, losing all will to live, and dies soon after. Looking out the window at Camelot, Lancelot notices a barge floating past with Elaine’s body, which is pulled into the palace by Arthur’s knights. A letter in her hands declares that her body has come to take her last farewell of Lancelot, explaining, “I loved you, and my love had no return./ And therefore my true love has been my death.”

While the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with Elaine was primarily connected to her death and the scene of her death barge floating down the river and arriving at Camelot, Cameron pays equal attention to Elaine in her lifetime. In both *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat* (Figure 36) and *Elaine* (Figure 37), which are visually quite similar, the character is depicted in an indistinct

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213 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 175.
214 Ibid., 201.
although presumably domestic setting, holding the silk case she had embroidered for Lancelot’s shield. The composition of these portraits is nearly identical: in both, Elaine sits sideways, her face in profile and her long hair flowing down on the left side of the image. The significant difference between the two portraits is in Lancelot’s shield, which is hanging on the wall beside Elaine in *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat* but disappears in *Elaine*. This key difference hints toward the emotional change that occurs in the character.

*Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat*, which incorporates the shield on the wall, is accompanied by an excerpt from the very beginning of “Lancelot and Elaine” that describes her guarding Lancelot’s shield while he is away and “Then fearing rust or soiture fashion’d for it/ A case of silk, and braided thereupon/ All the devices blazon’d 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.” 215 The text accompanying the second portrait, *Elaine*, occurs towards the end of the story, after Lancelot has returned to recover his shield and rejected Elaine’s love. The first three lines of the excerpt describe: “So in her tower alone the maiden sat:/ His very shield was gone; only the case,/ Her own poor work, her empty labour, left.” 216 While mourning this loss, Elaine composes a song about unrequited love and death as a release from pain, ending it with the lines, “I fain would follow love, if that could be;/ I needs must follow death, who calls for me; Call and I follow, I follow! let me die.” 217 These lines, indicating her approaching death of a broken heart, set the tone for the portrait. Cameron’s incorporation of the original text adds a further emotional dimension to the illustrations, guiding the viewer’s perception of them. In *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat*, she looks up at Lancelot’s shield, admiring it while she holds the case she made for it.

215 Ibid., 168.
216 Ibid., 193.
217 Ibid., 194.
The portrait is suffused with light, and her face and dress are luminous, indicating the hope that is still present. Meanwhile, in *Elaine*, the disappearance of the shield leaves a dark gap in its place. The portrait, darker in tone and more subdued, hints at the shadows that have fallen over Elaine with the loss of her love. Left with only the empty case for the shield, she holds it in her lap and looks down at it, her face reflective and somber. Seen in succession alongside their respective excerpts, these images provide the viewer with an acute understanding of Elaine’s despair, leading logically into the illustrations of her death. These solo portraits are significant in their establishment of Elaine’s interiority and thought process. Instead of merely portraying Elaine as another dead young woman with the implication of the events that led to her death, Cameron specifically portrays Elaine during two poignant moments of her life. Cameron brings the living Elaine’s emotions to the forefront, allowing viewers to empathize with her humanity, which intensifies the tragedy of her death later on.

Cameron’s last two images of the character, *Elaine* (Figure 38) and *The Corpse of Elaine in the Palace of King Arthur* (Figure 39), depict the culmination of this tragedy. In their illustrations of Elaine’s death following Lancelot’s rejection of her, Doré and Cameron both present the moment when the barge with Elaine’s body is being rowed to Camelot by the oarsman. In Tennyson’s text, Lancelot is in the middle of a conversation with Guinevere when he happens to look out the window and notice “the barge/ Whereon the lily maid of Astolat/ Lay smiling, like a star in blackest night.”218 The barge, manned by an oarsman, paused at the doorway to the palace, where two knights lifted her up and brought her into the palace hall.219 There, Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and other knights gathered to read the letter in her hand that was addressed to Lancelot, in which she explained, “I, sometime call’d the maid of Astolat,/  

218 Ibid., 200.  
219 Ibid., 201.
Come, for you left me taking no farewell./ Hither, to take my last farewell of you./ I loved you, and my love had no return./ And therefore my true love has been my death.”

Doré’s 1868 drawing, “And the dead, Oar’d by the dumb,” sometimes titled The Body of Elaine on Its Way to King Arthur’s Palace (Figure 40), illustrates the barge holding Elaine’s body floating down the river under the guidance of the oarsman. Elaine’s body is stiffly arranged on the barge, her arms folded on her chest and her face turned upward toward the open sky. The figures are centered in the lower half of the composition and are small, separated from the viewer by the expanse of river in the foreground. Doré situates the barge within a greater setting, representing the figures in the barge as part of the landscape. The towers of Camelot’s palace rise up on a cliff in the background against a cloudy sky and a bright moon, with the mist surrounding Camelot. The detailed rendering of the palace and the rocks and mossy vegetation, which dominates the scene, reminds the viewer of the barge’s destination, so that there is a sense of narrative and chronological action. Instead of focusing merely on Elaine’s still body, the image foreshadows its presentation in court. The inclusion of the palatial destination in the background implies the presence of those who are in the palace, including Lancelot, who at any moment will look out of one of the windows and see the barge almost as the viewer is seeing it.

Cameron’s albumen print, Elaine (Figure 38), depicts the same scene with Elaine in the barge carrying her body to Camelot, guarded by the oarsman. Along with the image, Cameron quotes a lengthy passage from Tennyson, describing Elaine’s wish to be brought to Camelot after her death with a letter to Lancelot and the process of her dead body being placed on the boat with

220 Ibid.
the letter, a lily, and Lancelot’s shield case. In this photograph, the barge, Elaine’s body, and the oarsman holding his oar take up the entire lower half of the image, with Elaine’s head against the left edge of the image and the oarsman leaning against the right edge, so that their bodies fill the space. Unlike Doré’s image, the figures are the focal point of the image and are in isolation from the greater setting or landscape. The top half of the photograph consists of the background – an ambiguous doorway that frames the foreground, with a triangular overhang that effectively focuses the viewer’s attention on the scene in the foreground. The doorway and overhang are bare and shadowed, the only relief from their monotony provided by a square piece of cloth hanging down from the overhang, hovering over Elaine’s head. This ornately embroidered cloth is recognizable as the cover or casing that she had created for Lancelot’s shield, a symbol of her love for him, which had been featured in Cameron’s previous illustrations of Elaine. While most of the photograph is dim and in shadow, Elaine’s face and dress are startlingly white against her dark surroundings, with a glow emanating from the fabric of her dress. Her face is dramatically turned toward the viewer so that it becomes the focal point of the image. Along with the implications of innocence accompanying the whiteness, the contrast of lights and darks places the focus directly on Elaine, to emphasize and “ensure an interpretation of Elaine as the ideal typification of innocent womanly devotion and unrequited love and martyrdom.” Once again, in Cameron’s photograph of Elaine, the image is focused on the human element of the story: the figures of the characters and the expressions on their faces. Unlike Doré’s image, there is very little sense of setting or landscape, and the characters’ figures dominate the image.

222 Ibid., 123.
Likewise, in Cameron’s final image of Elaine, *The Corpse of Elaine in the Palace of King Arthur* (Figure 39), the human figures dominate the image, filling the space of most of the photograph. Like in the previous photograph, Elaine’s face is turned toward the viewer, ensuring that we see her as not merely another corpse but as the same individual we had seen alive in the first two portraits. A number of figures arranged behind her, including Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, solemnly look down at her dead body, reading the letter she had written about the reason behind her death. The letter, which is in the center of the composition, allows Elaine to speak for herself even after her death. The eyes of the characters behind Elaine, which are focused on this letter and on her body, likewise encourage the viewer to gaze at the woman and her letter. Thus, Cameron retains Elaine’s personal voice and agency even in her death.

This comparison of Doré and Cameron’s illustrations highlights a key difference in their approaches. “Doré’s strength,” Whitaker observes, “was his ability to create a landscape imbued with the wildness and strangeness appropriate to romance,” which “evokes an emotional relationship between character and setting.”\(^{223}\) Doré’s depiction of the landscape also betrays his roots and his unfamiliarity with the English landscape, since “while Tennyson’s idea of wilderness came from Cornwall and Wales, Doré derived his from the more rugged scenery of the Vosges and Savoy where he found the castle-topped crags that became his signature.”\(^{224}\) In this sense, Doré’s landscape-focused images fail to represent the idea of the medieval England that was so important for the Arthurian Revival. Furthermore, the very concept of creating a medieval landscape or any sort of specific setting for Arthurian subjects was an issue in itself, since it would limit the images to a particular time and place. Mancoff explains why applying

\(^{223}\) Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, 223.
\(^{224}\) Ibid.
this sort of historical accuracy for the medieval subject of the Arthurian legends was problematic:

The Arthurian world, however, was of legend, not history. Its specific time could not be ascertained without truncating the tradition of the legend. An excess of accurate detail would take the legend from the realm of national mythology and confine it to a pseudohistory. Its appeal for artists fascinated with the trappings of the medieval world was limited. Their usual mode of interpretation, based on scholarly investigation, provided no insight to the legend. Conversely, the imposition of a time period on the legend would diminish its expressional scope.225

Since the Arthurian tale belongs primarily to legend, regardless of its historical inspirations or foundations, situating it within a medievalized landscape in the visual arts, whether historically accurate or not, limits the mythology to a set time and place, negating its timeless appeal and relevance. Furthermore, in Doré’s focus on landscape and Romanesque architecture, the characters themselves are relegated to the background, and “the towering cliffs, dark forests, and ruined castles dwarf the humans, making them seem inconsequential.”226 It is perhaps for this reason that Tennyson, who emphasized the human element of the Arthurian legends and the emotional significance of its characters, was dissatisfied with Doré’s illustrations of the Idylls. Whitaker notes, “Tennyson’s central interest, the personalities of the women who represent ‘The True and the False,’ is of little concern to Doré.”227 Women, who are the focus of the four particular idylls that Doré illustrated and also the namesakes of the poem titles (“Elaine,” “Vivien,” “Guinevere,” and “Enid”), are of particular interest to Tennyson in the ways they shaped the Arthurian world, but in Doré’s images, this hardly comes across. As Whitaker writes, their “languid attitudes and vapid expressions are quite at variance with their strong-minded literary prototypes” and “moreover, they presented moral situations with which the artist could

227 Ibid.
not or would not deal.”\textsuperscript{228} This would have been a significant failure on Doré’s part, considering the attention that Tennyson gave to issues of morality and emotion in the Arthurian legends, as they related to his Victorian audience.

Inga Bryden, in her study of the reinvention of the Arthurian legend in Victorian culture, notes that Tennyson’s “remodeling of Arthurian love stories can also be interpreted as ‘psychological,’” especially in light of “the wider social, scientific and medical context of the developing nineteenth-century interest in psychology.”\textsuperscript{229} In particular, Tennyson’s focus on the representation of the women inhabiting Camelot “highlighted contradictory attitudes towards purity and adultery.”\textsuperscript{230} As noted at the beginning of this thesis, Tennyson’s linking of the past and the present through the emotional experiences of the characters was a crucial aspect of Idylls of the King. As Tennyson himself wrote, Camelot was a city “built/ To music, therefore never built at all,/ And therefore built for ever.”\textsuperscript{231} Tennyson’s focus on the timelessness of Camelot and its inhabitants was what allowed Victorians to connect to the characters of Idylls of the King, recognizing in them their own experiences.

In this sense, Cameron’s illustrations were more faithful to the intent of Tennyson’s text than Doré’s. Her focus on the characters and their emotions through close-up, poignant portraits gives a sense of interiority and timelessness. Furthermore, as Armstrong writes, Cameron “committed herself to the somatic life of inner character hypnotically revealed, rather than outward events narrated through gesture and action.”\textsuperscript{232} By negating the medieval landscape and outward events in favor of the human element and interiority, this photographer created images

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{231} Tennyson, \textit{Idylls of the King}, 43.
\textsuperscript{232} Armstrong, \textit{Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book}, 1843-1875, 418.
that were more appropriate for illustrating Tennyson’s human-driven text. Doré’s vivid, detailed landscapes served to distract from the figures and their interiority, while Cameron ensured that Victorian audiences would be able to relate to the medieval mythology by highlighting the realities of the characters within it and situating them in the present time. Furthermore, she shifted Tennyson’s human-driven vision to her own personal woman-driven vision, highlighting the experiences of the women in *Idylls of the King* and permeating them with a sense of agency and presence.
Conclusion

The Arthurian Revival was specifically meant to reinvigorate the legend for contemporary times and make it relevant for a new generation of British audiences. This study, in exploring Cameron’s strategy for bringing Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* to life and situating her illustrations within the context of the Arthurian Revival, has made it clear that in this sense, Cameron’s contribution to the revival in art mirrored Tennyson’s contribution in literature. Tennyson’s poems were popular among the Victorians for the personal and intimate connections that they encouraged between character and reader, allowing Victorians to relate to these human characters, and Cameron’s photographs effectively reflected this aspect of *Idylls of the King*. As Mancoff states, “If Tennyson instilled his Arthurian characters with modern sentiment, Cameron gave hers modern form.” Instead of the characters occupying a mythical realm, they were brought into the present.

The Medieval Revival and Arthurian Revival, which reflected British nationalism and the country’s attempt to confirm a glorious present through association with a glorious past, sought to celebrate the nation’s medieval heritage. While the country’s heritage is very much tied to the physical land and could therefore be represented through portrayals of its landscape, Cameron’s close-up depictions of the characters who symbolize Britain’s national character were ultimately more effective in conveying the connection between the past and the present through the eternal human spirit. In Tennyson’s focus on the humanity of his Arthurian characters, their flawed human natures and the mistakes they made reflected his perception of his own flawed Victorian society. Cameron’s representation of modern people and their psychological states effectively

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mirrors Tennyson’s intentions more accurately than heroic or idealized representations of the characters. By not limiting her scenes to a specific time or place, Cameron creates the implication of timelessness, particularly as it relates to the human experience. Her characters are not limited to the medieval setting of the Arthurian legend and are instead able to function as symbols of the general human spirit. As Whitaker has noted, “Too many of the paintings which the Idylls inspired have a greeting-card prettiness and sentimentality that rarely approaches Cameron’s psychological realism.”234 Her focus on interiority brings the characters to life, more so than the art of the Pre-Raphaelites or Gustave Doré, whose quest for artistic beauty and aesthetic detail left little room for emotional relevance.

Amidst the debates about the role of photography and its use for narrative images, Cameron’s work captured attention specifically because it employed a medium that, by nature, depicted what was in front of the photographer, and therefore implied the representation of reality and truth. Through photography, Cameron’s illustrations were able to rise beyond other artists’ Arthurian illustrations in bringing the legend to life by allowing her Victorian viewers to see images of people not unlike themselves. Cameron’s representation of nineteenth-century models as Arthurian characters would have encouraged her contemporary audiences to see themselves in the characters, more so than with classicized figures. The immediacy of her images, which was related to the Victorian interest in tableaux vivants and theatricality, translated the legend into a language that contemporary audiences could understand.

While Cameron’s incorporation of costumes and the theatrical bent of her photographs was by no means unique in the world of photography, her approach to her subject matter in this series of photographs reflected themes that aligned with the interests of her contemporary

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234 Whitaker, The Legends of King Arthur in Art, 230-231.
Victorian audience. Throughout this project, Cameron succeeded in highlighting the women of *Idylls in the King* by focusing chiefly on the roles that they played in the world of King Arthur and celebrating their agency and individuality. Both the predominance of subject matter involving the women of the story and the emotionally charged way in which Cameron depicted them gave them more weight than Tennyson’s writing. While Tennyson explored Victorian notions of masculinity and femininity—and particularly the concept of ideal womanhood and female influence—throughout the legend, it was Cameron who created truly sympathetic female characters. Unlike Tennyson’s contrast of the true and the false women, Cameron’s women reflected the complexity inherent to human nature. If Tennyson created a Victorian Arthuriad, Cameron went a step further and created a feminist Victorian Arthuriad in art.

By broadening the context in which Cameron’s photographic illustrations to *Idylls of the King* are regarded and reconstructing the period in which the original audience would have seen the images, this study has identified the many different factors that shaped Cameron’s approach and made the images relevant for their time.
Bibliography


Figure 1. William Dyce. *Religion: The Vision of Sir Galahad and his Company* (1851). Fresco. 11’ 2½” x 14’ 6”. Queen’s Robing Room, Palace at Westminster, London.
FIGURE 10. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Sir Launcelot in the Queen’s Chamber* (1857). Pen and ink. 10¼” x 13¾”. 
FIGURE 15. Julia Margaret Cameron. *Alfred Tennyson/The Dirty Monk* (1865). Albumen print. 9 7/8” x 7 7/8”.
FIGURE 17. Julia Margaret Cameron. *Prospero and Miranda* (1865). Albumen print. 13” x 10 11/16”.
FIGURE 19. Julia Margaret Cameron. *King Lear allotting his kingdom to his three daughters* (1872). Albumen print. 10” x 8½”.