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‘MOTHER, WIFE, AND QUEEN’:
TENNYSON’S (VARYING) DEDICATION TO VICTORIA

Patrick Scott

Tennyson’s laureate poems are still often quoted as if they were more or less transparent text. This essay focuses on the first of Tennyson’s poems as laureate, his dedication ‘To the Queen’ (Poems, 1987, II:462-464), which he inserted in the seventh edition of his collected shorter poems, published in March 1851, and suggests that the 1851 dedication was at once more personal, more conflicted, and more interesting than has usually been thought.

Despite their familiarity, the nine stanzas of 1851 have till recently attracted only the briefest critical discussion. There has, of course, been discussion of Tennyson’s role as laureate, notably in Valerie Pitt’s study in 1962, and his personal interaction with Queen Victoria was narrated in the influential volume, Dear and Honoured Lady (1969), by Hope Dyson and Sir Charles Tennyson. But many of the general critical books on Tennyson, by both men and women scholars, from Harold Nicolson to Anna Barton, say little or nothing about this poem, and Sir Charles’s essay on ‘Tennyson as Poet Laureate’ avoids quoting it at all. Some of the most original critical comments pick on the bits that are least integral to the poem’s purpose. Paul Turner, for instance, quoted only the stanza about the Crystal Palace that Tennyson deleted once the Great Exhibition was over (Turner, 1976, p. 10), while Peter Levi, dismissing the dedication as ‘some formal and today unreadable stanzas’, redeemed their nothingness by quoting the four-line excursus on London in springtime that Tennyson had added in 1853 (Levi, 1993, p. 202). Even Alan Sinfield (1986) left untouched what might have seemed an obvious target, with its explicit linkage of political sycophancy with overdetermined gender stereotypes.

Such neglect seems unwarranted. The dedication stanzas—formal though they are, derivative though they are—are not nearly as transparent as they might appear. Moreover, behind the marmoreal stability of the too-familiar published text lie an awkward dialogue with earlier laureate verse and a thorny complex of undated textual variance. When Tennyson first spoke in the role of Laureate, it involved some of his deepest social, sexual and aesthetic insecurities, insecurities as poet, citizen, and husband. The inexorability of the poem springs not from an orotund smugness, but from the floodtide of
personal issues that this quite odd public poem necessarily carried with it.

It has been the dedication's concluding prayer for the Queen that commonly has attracted quotation:

May children of our children say,  
'She wrought her people lasting good;

Her court was pure; her life serene;  
God gave her peace; her land reposed;
A thousand claims to reverence closed  
In her, as Mother, Wife, and Queen


That last striking phrase neatly encapsulates the intersections of gender, domesticity, and power that have been worked over by Adrienne Munich in Queen Victoria's Secrets (1996) and John Plunkett in Queen Victoria, First Media Monarch (2003). But the intersections themselves had a pedigree in laureate verse long preceding Tennyson. From the seventeenth century, the image of the monarch as parent had been a staple of Stuart and Tory-Jacobite poetry, and by the late Georgian period it was conventional enough to be recycled even by Whig laureates lauding Hanoverian kings. In 1807, the most humdrum of Tennyson's predecessors, and the only previous laureate from Louth, Henry James Pye, who attributed George III's long rule, not to divine right, but to popular consent and personal morality, nonetheless still utilized the old Jacobite topos: George was acclaimed by Pye as 'the monarch of her [Britannia's] choice,' because

Virtue's sacred shield is spread  
O'er George's heav'n-protected head  
The Parent and the King (Pye, 1807, p. 556).

The transposition of this imagery to a female monarch had also long antecedced Victoria. The heir presumptive to King George IV had been the Princess Charlotte of Wales. On her marriage in 1816, Pye's successor as laureate, Robert Southey, had prayed that Charlotte might find in 'domestic joys' 'all a wife's and all a mother's happiness', yet also become a progressive sovereign, under whose
... auspicious reign
All may be added which is left undone
To make the realm, its polity compleat,
In all things happy (Southey, 1816, pp. 65-66).

The very same intersections of imagery, and a yet more exact anticipation
of Tennyson's phrasing, had been transferred to Victoria by Southey's
successor, William Wordsworth, in 1846, in his only genuine laureate poem:

Queen, Wife and Mother! May all judging Heaven
Shower with a bounteous hand on Thee and Thine
Felicity that only can be given
On Earth to goodness ... (Wordsworth, 1846 I, VI).1

Conventional and derivative as such words and imagery are, Tennyson
spins them with a difference. As he presents them, the words ‘Mother, Wife,
and Queen’ are not his words, but the words he hopes will be uttered by his
contemporaries’ grandchildren, ‘children of our children’, a phrasing with its
own ironies for the forty-one-year-old poet. What in Tennyson's predecessors
had been eulogy is by Tennyson bracketed out and becomes instead a kind of
prospective elegy.2

When Tennyson ends the section about Victoria herself, he turns to
political effects, still within quotation marks, to articulate what future
generations will praise, the progressive gradualism of the male politicians who
really run the country, ‘statesmen

Who knew the seasons when to take
Occasion by the hand, and make

1 Wordsworth's laureate poem had been written, as Tennyson's verses would be, to accompany a
presentation copy of the laureate's collected poems, but it remained unpublished till it was used by royal
permission in the dedication to Grosart's edition of the Prose Works in 1876 (Wordsworth, 1846, I, p. vi).
The separate '1850' Kendal edition described by T.J. Wise was a forgery (Wise, 1912, 164-167; Carter and
Pollard, 1934, pp. 355-356). Though Tennyson is therefore unlikely in 1851 to have known Wordsworth's
poem, Wordsworth, as Tennyson would do, had distanced his poem from the formal odes of his precursors;
it was, he wrote, 'No Laureate offering of elaborate art', and he asked Victoria to look on his poems with
'woman's gentleness' and 'a benign indulgence'.

2 TRB's anonymous reviewer suggests that Tennyson adopted elsewhere a similar strategy of looking
forward to someone looking back; in Lyric 101 of In Memoriam, for instance, he imagines the landscape of
his own childhood becoming in future familiar to someone else's child.
The bounds of freedom wider yet
By shaping some August decree
Which kept her throne unshaken still
Broad-based upon her people's will... (lines 30-35).

The phrase about the ‘seasons’ in line 30 telegraphs a scarcely-submerged
pun three lines later, with the young Victoria linked to carefree and thoughtless
springtime, while the statesmen's August decrees presage the inexorability of
time and change. The two sections, the grandchildren’s elegy on Victoria and
Tennyson’s hope for her statesmen as ventriloquized through the
grandchildren, are linked at the level of imagery, for in the statesmen both
sexualize and protect the mother-monarch, taking her by the hand and
encompassing her with a sea that must remain inviolate.

What lies behind Tennyson's strange revamping of second-hand ideas?
1850 had been a turning-point in Tennyson's own life. This was the year
when, on the brink of turning forty, he published In Memoriam; the year he at
last married Emily Sellwood, who had first fixed her eye on him at Somersby
a full twenty years before; and the year he was offered the laureateship. He had
married in June. By March 1851, Emily was seven months pregnant, yet the
couple was still rootless and homeless; they moved at least five times in the
first months of the year. ‘I am on the move,’ Tennyson wrote in early March
1851, to one ex-landlord who was dunning him over a broken lease, ‘and [I]
shall not be settled down in one locality for some days’ (Letters, 1981 [1987],
II:9). The pregnancy was anxious and difficult. At Reigate in February, Emily
had tripped and fallen on a step in their hotel, and their child would eventually
be still-born (Charles Tennyson, 1949, pp. 260-262; Thwaite, 1996, pp. 223-
226). In 1851, domesticity was new to Tennyson, and posterity was not
something he could take for granted.

The very act of imagining his most personal shorter poems being scanned
casually in the palace drawing-room; the much-advertised domestic happiness
of Victoria and Albert, both still young, surrounded by a growing family of
princes and princesses; his own fragmentary achievements; his belated
marriage; and his inability to find a home—all these oppressive contrasts seem
to have tapped in Tennyson a longstanding vein of deep melancholy, well-
polished self-deprecation, and creative resentment. Here lies the originality
of the poem. While modesty or even mock-humility was conventional enough
in laureate verse, Tennyson's stanzas go well beyond the conventional. So
much of the poem is taken up with Tennyson's protestations of inadequacy
that the central subject seems not so much Victoria as Tennyson. As in so much of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson's prospective elegy in the dedication is less an elegy for its ostensible subject than for Tennyson's own not-quite-dead selves.

The dedication opens with a very formal first stanza, contrasting Victoria's claim to monarchy with the cruder claims of warrior-kings in the past, who ruled simply by 'Arms, or power of brain, or birth' (line 3). Victoria's claim rests not on her qualities, but on other people's attitudes—reverence, love. Unpack this contrast, and one finds, not so much a loyal tribute, but an only partially-accepted historicization, a submerged sketch map of the feminization of power and the psychological ambivalences of ethical progress, parallel to that which Elliot Gilbert traced in Tennyson's treatment of King Arthur.

But the opening stanza is just ground-clearing. In its published version, the dedication really starts in its second stanza, when Tennyson himself enters. He contrasts his own reputation as 'one of less desert' with the reputation of his predecessor Wordsworth, who had left the 'laurel greener' because he 'uttered nothing base' (lines 7-8)—on the surface a tribute, but also a barbed reminder that Wordsworth uttered nothing base as laureate (that is, wrote no hack political odes) mainly because as laureate Wordsworth uttered almost nothing at all. One remembers also that Tennyson's official offer of the Laureateship had been held up by Robert Peel while his private life was vetted for potential embarrassments (Charles Tennyson, 1949, p. 254; Martin, 1980, p. 351). Tennyson imagines Victoria as too lofty, too busy, and too happy in the springtime of palace life to 'make demand of modern rhyme' (line 11). He offers his poems, 'this poor book of song' (line 17), simply as a polite gesture, requiring or expecting only the kindness of a polite response, and makes vivid this self-deprecation in an image drawing on his own recent experience of unpalatial house-hunting for his sick and pregnant bride:

... though the faults were thick as dust
In vacant chambers, I could trust
Your kindness ... (lines 18-20)

Revealingly, this 'kindness', is presented in the first published text as 'your sweetness', and in one early draft as explicitly female: 'I could trust/ Your woman's nature kind and true' (*Poems*, 1987, II: 463 note; Hallam Tennyson, *Memoir*, 1897, I, p. v). By the midpoint of even the published version, Victoria is less Victoria than Emily, while Tennyson is speaking less as laureate and more as a newly-married husband, marginalized by pregnancy, and hoping
that in the end things will work out.

These lines also resonate with one of Tennyson's earlier poems of female alienation. That dust and vacant chamber echo another empty house, from a poem reprinted just a few pages further into the volume that Tennyson was now ostensibly presenting to Victoria. The echoed poem is, of course, 'Mariana', in her lonely moated grange, where 'the thick-moted sunbeam lay/Athwart the chambers' (Poems, seventh edition, 1851, p.12; Poems, 1987, I: 209, lines 78-79). If the 1851 dedication and the earlier poem do inter-echo in this way, then here again is the familiar Tennysonian overlay, where the felt social, political and aesthetic marginality of the poet is refigured as feminine vulnerability, and the now-feminized husband-poet seeks from the pregnant wife-mother-queen not so much marriage as sympathy, forgiveness, sisterhood.

So far, primarily from Tennyson’s published text. This reading of the poem as personal rather than public is reinforced and also complicated if one looks at Tennyson's various drafts, manuscripts and revisions. The material Tennyson deleted reveals not only further self-doubt but a repressed aggressiveness, as ill-suited to a new laureate as the ill-fitting borrowed court dress into which Tennyson crammed himself to attend his first court levee that same month (Charles Tennyson, 1949, pp. 260-261).

One of the minor pleasures of Tennyson scholarship is savouring Christopher Ricks's footnote style. For this particular item, Ricks comments with disarming mildness that the many extant manuscripts 'show that the poem cost T. much difficulty' (Poems, 1987, II: 462-463, headnote). The sheer oddness of the manuscripts is worth further exploration. The manuscripts are a mess, their dating is conjectural, and their sequencing is still far from clear, even after Ricks's magisterial second edition and the thirty-plus volumes of photographic reproductions in the great Garland Tennyson Archive. The Tennyson Archive reproduces seven distinct manuscript sources or corrected proof versions from the major collections, and at least two further manuscripts are known. One partial manuscript of a variant passage, collated by Ricks in Poems but not available for reproduction in the Archive, had been published in 1952 as an entirely separate poem, before being recognized as a draft for the dedication (Evans, 1952; Elliott, 1958). The most distinctive of the manuscript versions, Huntington Library FI 4110, sometimes called the 'Drexel draft,' is an undated transcript, not in Tennyson's own hand, and no one knows whose hand it is in (Jones, 1895, pp. 152-155; American Book Prices Current, 1945, p.
600; Poems, 1987, III: 599-600; Tennyson Archive, 1991, 27:2-5); only three of the thirteen stanzas in the Huntington transcript relate closely to any among the nine stanzas in the 1851 published text. Moreover, an additional autograph manuscript, not available to Ricks and appearing to be a relatively late copy that Tennyson sent to his publisher Edward Moxon, had disappeared from scholarly view after the Whitney estate auction in New York in 1999, and only resurfaced this past spring when it was auctioned again in London from the Roy Davids collection (Sotheby’s, 22 April 22 1999, lot 521; Bonham’s, 8 May 2013, lot 467).

What is, however, clear behind all the textual difficulty is that Tennyson first envisioned his laureate poem as asserting the claims of poetry and the poet, rather than the goodness of the monarch. The Huntington Library transcript opens with a near-parodic version of Victoria's geographic sway that renders monarchy less as mythical than as unreal:

Your name is blown on every wind,
Your flag thro’ Austral’s ice is borne
And glimmers to the Northern morn
And floats in either golden Ind
(Huntington FL 4110; Tennyson Archive, 1991, p. 3).

Tennyson reworked this first stanza several times, and in one intermediate version (the ‘Charterhouse’ manuscript discussed by Evans and Elliott) recast Victoria’s power as resting on racial heritage (the ‘Saxo-Norman race’) and economic globalization (as materialized in the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace). In the Huntington transcript, however, Tennyson segues from Victoria’s sovereignty to his own. Poets, Tennyson writes, are not court lackeys producing ‘taskwork odes’ to order, but ‘a kind of kings’, who alone can determine a mere monarch's lasting influence:

The Poets they that often seem
So wretched, touching mournful string[s],
They likewise are a kind of kings
Nor is their empire all a dream.

—Since this article was written and accepted by the Tennyson Research Bulletin, the ‘Drexel draft’/Huntington transcript, as excerpted in Ricks’s Tennyson: A Selected Edition (1989), pp. 986-987, has been discussed by Marion Sherwood, in her new book, Tennyson and the Fabrication of Englishness (2013), pp. 80-85, which was published in April and available in the U.S. in late May. While our readings overlap, the biographical reading offered here complements, I hope, the more public emphasis in Dr. Sherwood’s analysis.
Their words fly over land and main
Their warblings make the distance glad
Their voices heard hereafter add
A glory to a glorious reign. . . .

The taskwork ode has ever failed
Not less the king in time to come
Will seem the greater under whom
The Sacred Poets have prevailed
(Huntington FI 4110; Tennyson Archive, 1991, pp. 3-4).

There is some element of self-doubt in these drafts, reflected perhaps in the awkwardness of the opening of the first stanza above, but the nature of the poet's ambition and the increasing mellifluousness of its expression through successive stanzas subvert Tennyson's self-deprecation:

I would I were as those of old
A mel[I]ow mouth of song to fill
Your reign with music which may still
Be music, when my lips are cold,

That after men might turn the page
And light on fancies true and sweet
And kindle with a loyal heat
To fair Victoria's golden age
(Huntington FI 4110; Tennyson Archive, 1991, pp. 4-5).

And then Tennyson moves back into the third person and self-disparagement:

But he your Laureate who succeeds
A master such as all men quote
Must feel as one of slender note
And piping low among the reeds
(Huntington FI 4110; Tennyson Archive, 1991, p. 5).

The Huntington transcript is problematic: collation makes clear that the transcriber was not especially accurate, with misspellings and even words omitted, and that Jones cleaned the text up a little for publication in 1895. Nonetheless, the transcript takes us closer to Tennyson's raw insecurities about the poetic succession, and his own poetic status, than anything left explicit in the published text. Where Wordsworth would be publicly hymned as 'he who
uttered nothing base' (1851, line 8), what was getting to Tennyson in 1851 was Wordsworth as ‘a master such as all men quote.’ The graceful punning slide from the ‘slender note’ taken of Tennyson’s poetry by his early critics to the ‘slender note’ of the elegist’s oaten reed in the poem that had recently made his reputation marks just how conflicted he felt about receiving the kingly poet’s laureate crown.

There were good reasons for Tennyson to abandon so much of the version we now know only through the Huntington Library transcript. William Cleaver Wilkinson commented in 1908, just a few years after Jones first published it, that the transcript was technically awkward (‘distinctly amateurish’), but recognized also that it was his personal investment in the draft that had caused Tennyson’s technical difficulties: ‘the poet finds himself floundering in meshes of obstruction from which he struggles to be free’ (Wilkinson, 1908, 238). Tennyson, I believe, deleted so much of this material, not only as being poorly written, or because such self-absorption and self-assertion might seem socially maladroit in an address to the Queen, but because the complexity of addressing Victoria was also the complexity of the turning-point year in his own life. Laureateship, domesticity, matrimony, parenthood alike seemed incompatible with the self he had been. The deletions of the poetic drafts were a repression of himself, or perhaps second thoughts on the wisdom of publishing what in hindsight might appear self-indulgent, self-pitying rant.

The final irony, of course, is that Tennyson’s deleted draft was right. While Victoria herself was hardly voiceless, Tennyson’s poetic construction of her as Queen does indeed add a glory or halo to how she has since been perceived. In some sense, it has been through the poetry and literature of the Victorian period, rather than through economic or political history, that ‘after-men’ have, rightly or deludedly, been kindled ‘with a loyal heat / To fair Victoria’s golden age’ (Poems, 1987, III: 600). Perhaps Tennyson wrote best, most effectively, not when he was comfortable in his public role, but when he was uncomfortable, and struggled to hide the discomfort, as in this first laureate poem. The strangeness, the distractedness, the discontinuities of tone and structure, were, I would argue, biographical in origin. But they embodied, as in so many ways Tennyson’s early life embodied, the wider social and psychological strains of early Victorian culture as it transitioned from its youthful openness to the willed stabilities of the Age of Equipoise.
The significance of Tennyson's varying dedication 'To the Queen' can be traced not only in what he chose to say to a Victoria with whom, at that point, he had had no direct personal interaction, but in what he thought of saying but chose not to say, and in the very fact of his not saying it. In facing Victoria as mother, wife, and queen, in facing his own new role as husband, laureate and potential parent, Tennyson found also that he must face and repress very deep cultural and psychological conflicts. Brief though it is, and critically neglected, Tennyson's 'To the Queen' is one of his most revealing poems.

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