

Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron: Challenges to Gender Roles and Tradition in the Formation of Victorian Artistic and Literary Legacies

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Can a picture truly speak a thousand words? How does a female artistic gaze translate a male poetic voice? What overlooked yet transformative influences on visual and literary culture can be found in a photographically illustrated book of poetry? Such questions guided my research project on the collaboration between the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and the British Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson on the 1875 edition of the *Idylls of the King and Other Poems*. The project sought to investigate how the book itself, as well as Cameron's integration into a male-dominated artistic and literary culture, challenged Victorian perceptions of gender roles, and impacted the development of Pictorialism and Modernism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

METHODS

What does art historical and literary research look like?

Visiting Special Collections

The Special Collections of the University of St Andrews contain extensive materials on Cameron, Tennyson, and nineteenth-century photopoetry. Showcasing these materials was a key aspect of my research project.

Materials discussed in the paper included:

- Volume II of *The Idylls of the King and Other Poems* (1875) [Photo TR652.C2E75 Vol. 2]
- A letter from Julia Margaret Cameron to an unknown correspondent (11 June 1867) [ms38345]
- *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men & Fair Women*, introductions by Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry (1926) [Photo N7598.C25]
- *Idylls of the King*, illustrated by Gustave Doré (1868) [rf PR5558.A2D7]

More information on the purpose of working with primary sources can be found in the spotlight on 'To Mrs. Cameron'.

Secondary Readings

Reading a variety of scholarly texts and articles is necessary to understand:

- Historical and cultural contexts
- Existing theories and opinions
- Where your ideas fit in with the above

Visual Analysis and Close Reading

The interdisciplinary nature of my research required combining analytical methods in art history and literary studies. Observing small aesthetic details of a photograph or the choice of words in a line of verse enriches the quality of the analysis while supporting arguments made in the paper.

PRIMARY SOURCE CASE STUDY Charles Turner's 'To Mrs. Cameron'

Closely working with primary sources over a period of four weeks at the Special Collections of the University of St Andrews ultimately led me to generate new insights about the dedicatory poem of the 1875 *Idylls*, an aspect of my topic that I found to be underrepresented in scholarly texts.

Here are some key conclusions:

- The poem legitimizes Cameron's role as an artist and photographic interpreter
- It characterises the volume as joining a modern art form with poetic tradition
- The poem's central imagery of hands associated with female creative power is thematically echoed in the photographs and corresponding extracts

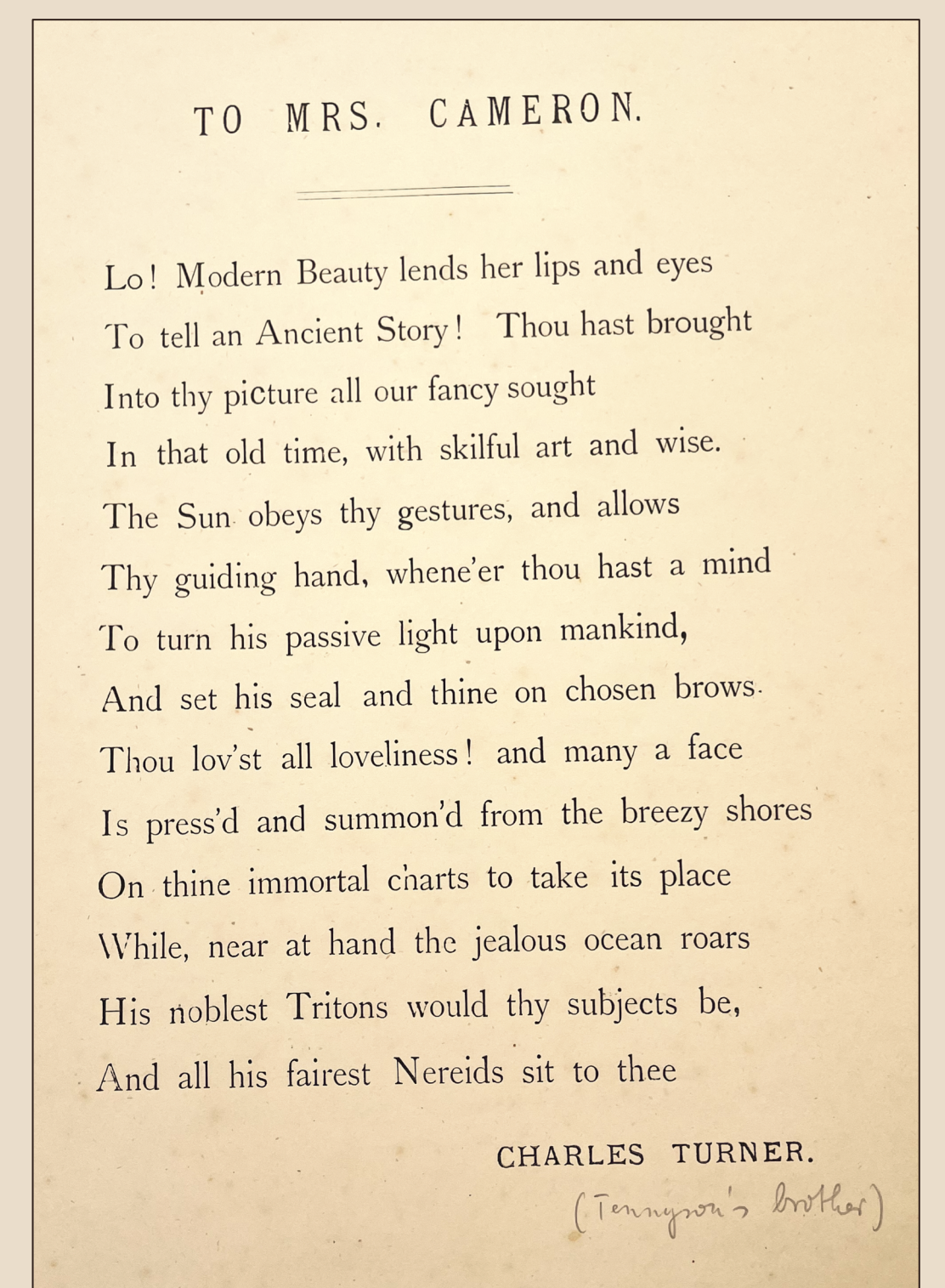


Figure 1: 'To Mrs. Cameron', by Charles Turner

CONCLUSIONS

Cameron and Tennyson's *Idylls* was not only significant in its challenging of gender roles and tradition in the Victorian period, but it surpassed its contemporary age to create a long-standing influence in terms of the new relationship it presented between poetry and photography.

My research paper examined this concept through an overarching theme of artistic, contextual, and social transformations embodied in the 1875 *Idylls* and the creative practices of Cameron and Tennyson. The paper largely focused on three photographs and accompanying extracts of verse, each relating to a facet of the research topic and each embodying different kinds of influential transformations.

CHALLENGES TO GENDER ROLES AND TRADITION

Key image and *Idyll* extract: *Vivien and Merlin* (from 'Merlin and Vivien') [Figure 3]

- Challenging of gender roles and male authorial power
- Redeems female creativity and creative interpretation through parallel with Vivien's enchantment of Merlin
- Recentres legends in context of women's craft
- Feminizes symbolism of the hand as a marker of artistic or creative genius

INFLUENCE ON PICTORIALISM

Key image and *Idyll* extract: *So like a shatter'd column lay the King* (from 'The Passing of Arthur') [Figure 4]

- Cameron's techniques and aesthetics influenced the development of Pictorialist photography
 - Soft-focus shots and manipulation of negatives
- Common importance of the 'pictorial' in the structure of Tennyson's *Idylls*¹ and Cameron's legitimization of photography as fine art by imitating engravings

INFLUENCE ON MODERNISM

Key image and *Idyll* extract: *Enid* (from 'The Marriage of Geraint') [Figure 5]

- Modernist concept of 'making it new' in relation to reinterpretation of Arthurian legends
- Themes of temporality and perspective common to Modernism and the *Idylls*
- Memory and the rupture of linear time as represented through material objects
- Objects that allegorise memories paralleled with the photographic representation of a narrative



Figure 3: *Vivien and Merlin*



Figure 5: *Enid*

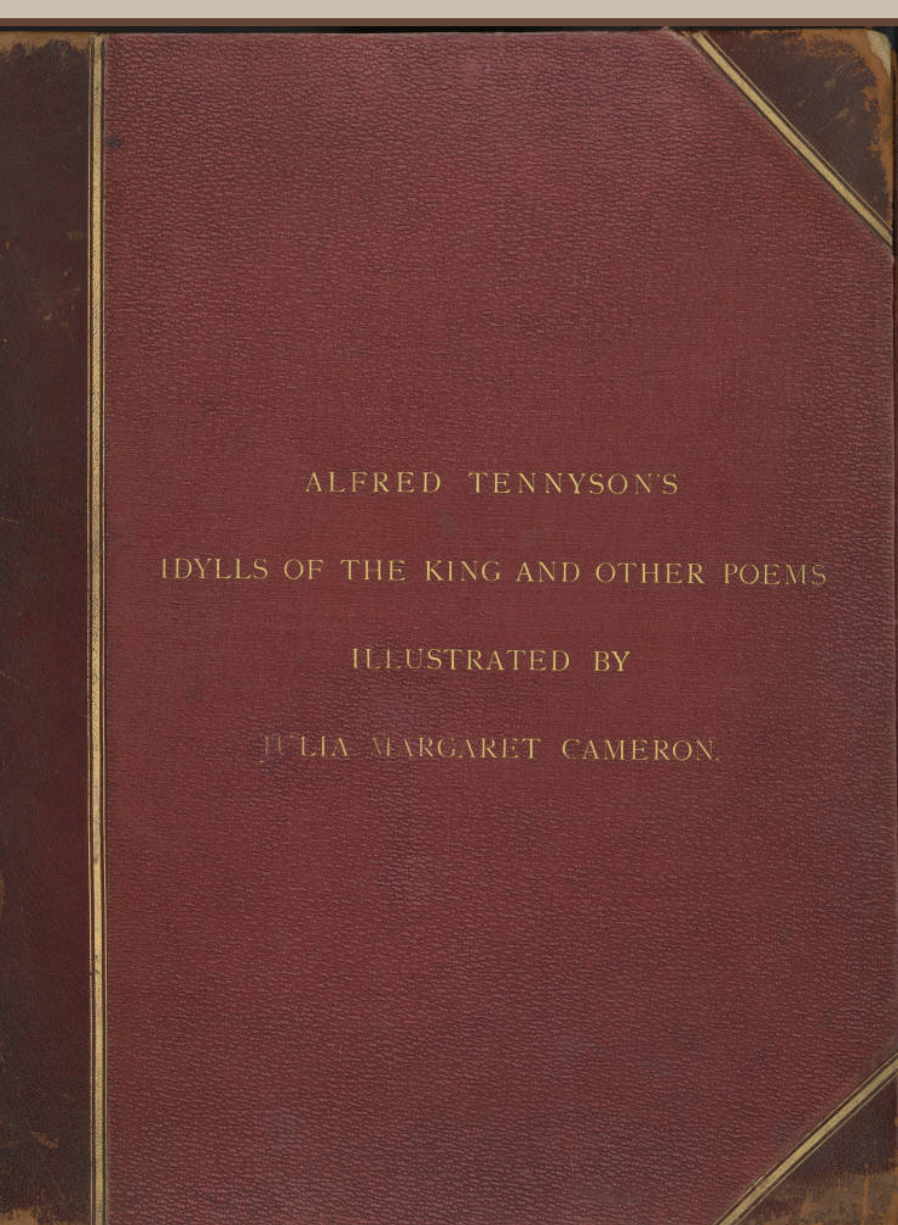


Figure 2: Cover of the 1875 *Idylls*

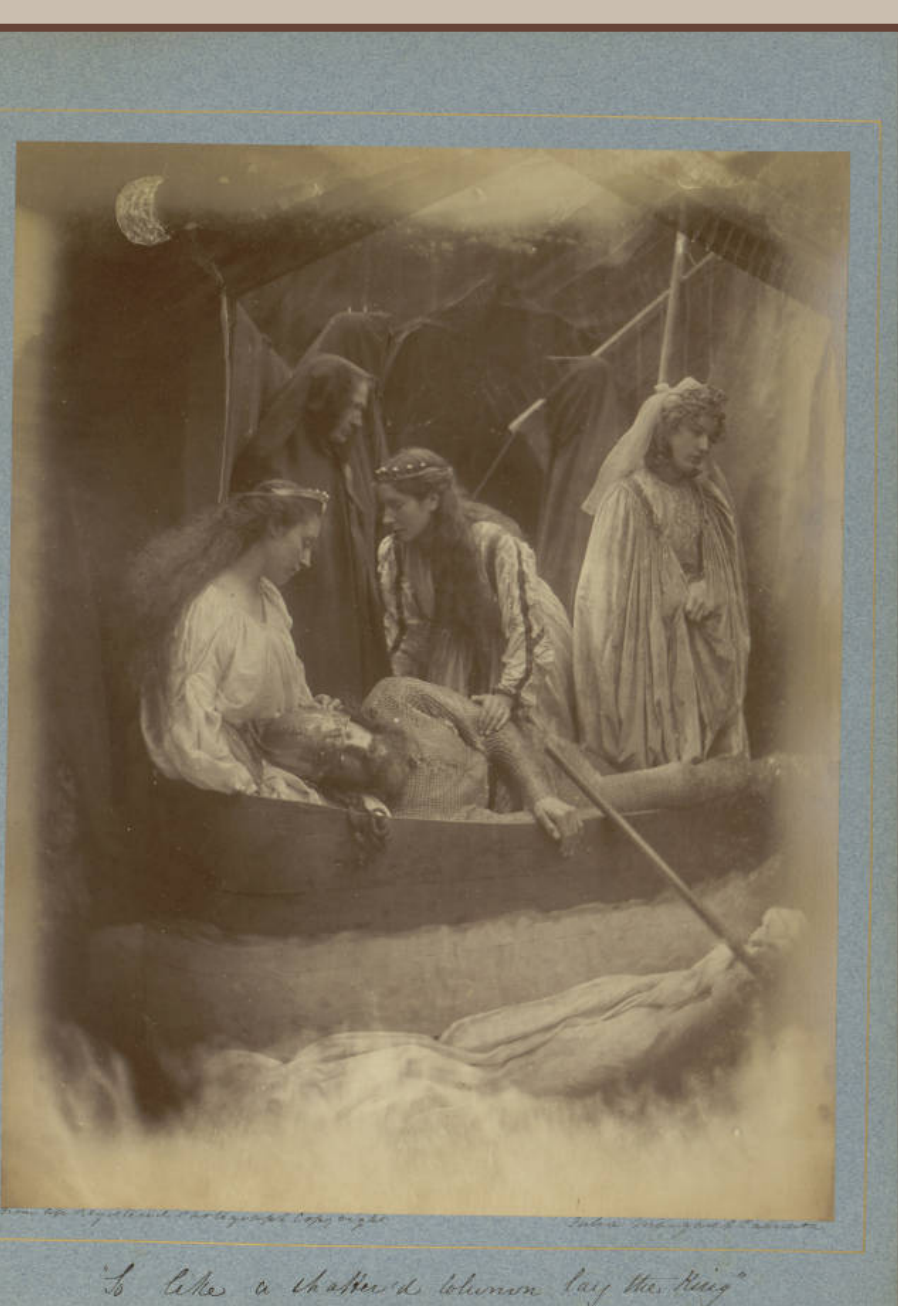


Figure 4: *So like a shatter'd column lay the King*

IMPACT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Why is this topic important?

- Discovering new meanings and interpretations within one of the defining poems of the Victorian era and nineteenth-century Arthurian Revival
- Understanding the underrepresented contributions of women to artistic and literary cultures typically viewed as male-dominated
- Encouraging the interdisciplinary analysis of hybrid works of art and literature, and analysing their impact outside of their contemporary age
- Making the outputs of Victorian culture accessible and relatable to contemporary audiences

What is the future of this research project?

Expanding research parameters: while the focus of the paper was narrowed in order to effectively discuss the topic, there are many possible approaches to researching Tennyson's poems and Cameron's photographs, ranging from an in-depth study of their symbolism to a discussion of the works through postcolonial.

Contemporary reflections: having demonstrated the influence of Tennyson and Cameron's collaboration on literary and artistic movements including Pictorialism and Modernism, can their legacy be traced to the present day?

Leadership in Action: just as Cameron transformed the textual medium of Tennyson's *Idylls* into photographic illustrations, can this research paper have a concrete application in workshops, talks, or collaborations with research centres?

REFERENCES

- ¹ Gerhard Joseph, 'Tennyson's Optics: The Eagle's Gaze', *PMLA* 92, no. 3 (1977): 423.
- [Figure 1] Charles Turner, 'To Mrs. Cameron', in *The Idylls of the King and Other Poems*, 9. Image courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums [Photo TR652.C2E75, Vol. 2]
- [Figure 2] *The Idylls of the King and Other Poems*. London: Henry S. King and Co., 1875. Image courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums [Photo TR652.C2E75, Vol. 2]
- [Figure 3] Julia Margaret Cameron, *Vivien and Merlin*, albumen print, 32 x 25.9 cm, Harry Ransom Centre, Austin.
- [Figure 4] Julia Margaret Cameron, *So like a shatter'd column lay the King*, albumen print, 35 x 28 cm. Image courtesy of the University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums [Photo TR652.C2E75, Vol. 2]
- [Figure 5] Julia Margaret Cameron, *Enid*, albumen print, 36.6 x 26.6 cm, Harry Ransom Centre, Austin.

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