

Alternate Reality of the Lady of Shalott

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The Lady of Shalott is considered to be one of Alfred Lord Tennyson's masterpieces. The poem conversely demonstrates art and life, the aesthetic and the political, are fully interwoven: the involvement in the social world which is symbolically the destination of the Lady in the poem. The Lady who is the emblem of such an artwork can be ascribed qualities, for instance, self-containment, objectified otherness, removal from the fluidity of life, and participation in a higher order of existence, for which it is autonomy. Kermode points out that "the Romantic artwork often identifies itself with an emblematic image of autonomy and femininity", inextricably interlinked. Her mirror shows her only "Shadows of the world". The Lady's web flies "Out" and floats "wide" when she "turns round" with "that desire of making an impression upon another mind", when she seeks to address Lancelot. The mirror reconnects the Lady's art to the real world beyond her window. Though the artist is unable to see it during the process of production, her artistic web, once out in a wider space than the tower and freed from the loom, is a true representation of outward things, the actions, and events of Camelot. This paper examines that the traditional referentiality of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' can be better understood by supplementing the poet's medieval sources, of little more than tangential relevance to the poem, with Homeric influences. The poem is similar to a fairytale, however, I have given an alternate reality of the Lady of Shallot in my version of a fairytale, where the characters remain the same but the fairytale takes a happy ending rather than a tragic death. My version is different from Tennyson's since I believe the lady deserves to be jovial. Sir Lancelot was unaware of her fascination and feelings for him, as she could hardly express her feelings due to her imprisonment. She is so taken by him that she stops her work and looks at Camelot, though she risks the mysterious curse. The mirror breaks and her web magically floats out of the window on its own. She realizes that she is cursed.

Keywords: medieval, young maiden, imprisoned, Island of Shalott, Sir Lancelot, Camelot, mirror, web, mysterious curse, wicked witch, alternate reality

Introduction

In Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous poem "The Lady of Shalott", the setting is medieval, during the days of King Arthur. It is during the period 500 and 550AD, that Arthur is thought to have existed. This paper argues that in both the versions of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', the 1832 version with Victorian influence and the 1842 version of Homeric influence in both versions the lady transcends the traditional boundaries but had the same destiny death. The poem suggests that the Lady is an amalgamation of Homeric women, primarily Andromache

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and Helen but also Penelope, Circe, and Calypso, who fulfill their domestic roles by weaving but who also cross gender boundaries: who express themselves through objects and engage in memorialization. It shows that Tennyson used layers of resonance to create a character through which he could reflect on issues of poetics, aesthetics, memory, and vision, utilizing those elements of tradition that were simultaneously timeless and allowed him to comment on his art. Further, it posits that in rewriting 'The Lady of Shalott' in 1842, Tennyson took yet another step away from his medieval sources, and towards Homer. As a point, this paper posits that it is this perpetual chain of resonance stretching back from Victorian England through medieval legend to the archaic Greek world that inspired the Pre-Raphaelites (any group of English artists formed in 1848) to adopt 'The Lady of Shalott' as a favored subject. Tennyson's medievalism seems inextricably intertwined with Homeric resonance.

Critiquing Both Versions of the Poem

Some critics of the 1950s wrote of "The Lady of Shalott" as a comment on the problematic nature of the isolated artistic life. Even those more recent and highly theoretical aesthetic readings do not consider the nature and place of the Lady's artistic product beyond the context of her immediate relation to it. As defined by M. H. Abrams, "That a poem is an object itself, a self-contained universe of discourse, of which we cannot demand that it be true to nature, but only, that it be true to itself". In part four, the beautiful young maiden, the Lady of Shalott, who is imprisoned on the island of Shalott near Camelot freezes to death, on her way to marry Sir Lancelot before she reaches the first house in Camelot.

However, 'The Lady of Shalott' (arguably Tennyson's most well-known and widely critiqued poem) has largely escaped the notice of Classicists, Homerists, and scholars of classical reception alike. Plasa 1992 spots allusions to Shelley and Wordsworth; Turner (1976, p. 62) and Chadwick (1986, pp. 24-25) posit exploitation of Platonic doctrine; Cannon 1970 even strays eastward and compares 'The Lady of Shalott' with 'The Arabian Nights' Tales'. 'The Lady of Shalott' is bound up not only with Victorian Medievalism but also with Classicism. There is, of course, a link between the two: the fact that, by Tennyson's time, Homer was already being medievalised and romanticized.

Binaries of Both Versions of Tennyson

Weaving in Homeric epic is an essentially female activity. In the first version, of 1832, the Lady's adornment is emphasized, both in her tower (pp. 24-26): In the 1832 poem, the Lady carries a parchment which explains how she met her end (pp. 165-171). By 1842, however, the parchment had been expunged and only the inscription remained. It is the boat which carries her and which bears her name. In this 1842 version of the poem, the Lady 'found a boat', emphasizing the Lady's agency through her control over objects, in the Homeric model.

She commanded that her body be laid on this bed, dressed in her most regal
clothes, and with a beautiful crown on her head rich with much gold and with
many rich precious stones, and with a rich girdle and purse.

In 'The Lady of Shalott', the maiden's movement is emphasized. She not only ceases weaving but steps away from the activity altogether. Nor does she stop there: her movement continues until she has left the tower and taken a boat to Camelot. She breaks away from her female role and breaks out of the female space. Lancelot's helmet acts as the catalyst for the Lady's transgression, the token that draws her eye to the prohibited male space,

operates as a liminal object in gendered space. The symbolic importance of objects is common to both Homeric epic and 'The Lady of Shalott' also in terms of the objects' destruction. In Tennyson's poem, the curse is represented by the breaking of an object: 'The mirror cracked from side to side'.

The Plot of the Poems' Both Versions

When she started for Camelot, the weather was extremely bad and it was sunset, she might have chosen a different time to start, she simply risked her life for a person whom she did not know and exacerbated the situation. The things that attracted her were his physical appearance, the way he dressed up, and his voice (as he sang 'Tirra Lirra'). He catches the eye and heart of the Lady of Shalott as he rides by the banks of the river. The poem seems like a fairytale where a beautiful girl with long golden hair is imprisoned and cursed. Had it been a fairy tale instead of a poem, the Lady of Shalott could have had an alternate reality. Here goes the fairytale of *The Lady of Shalott and Prince Lancelot*.

My Version of the Poem in a Fairytale Form

Once upon a time, there lived a king and a beautiful queen at Shalott near Camelot who was longing for a baby. One day a wicked witch came in disguise of an Oracle in the castle and gave the queen a beautiful red fruit to eat. She said after eating it, she would conceive a beautiful baby. She conceived a baby and the baby was born on time, but soon after she gave birth, she fell ill. The wicked witch visited the castle again in disguise as the Oracle and gave the queen some magical herbs as medicine to get cured, but after taking them, the queen died. The king banished the wicked witch from Shalott. The wicked witch promised to take revenge.

Over the years, the baby grew up into a beautiful girl, with long golden hair. The king named her Lady of Shalott. The king realized that her beautiful daughter needed a mother to look after her, so he married again. But alas! Has he realized whom he married?! It was the wicked witch who disguised as a beauty queen. She had a magic mirror. After two years the stepmother gave birth to twin daughters. The stepmother and the stepsisters were very unkind towards the Lady of Shalott. They made her clean and cook for them.

One morning, an invitation arrived for the King of Camelot's grand ball. The stepsisters were excited and started preparing their gowns for the ball. "I too want to go," said Lady of Shalott in her gentle voice. The stepsisters laughed and said, "But you don't have proper clothes to wear!" Soon the stepsisters left for the ball with their mother.

Lady of Shalott sat alone by a lake crying. "How I wish I could have gone to the ball!" Her mother, the deceased queen heard her daughter from heaven. She said to her beloved daughter "I will make your wish come true." Suddenly a beautiful boat appeared right before Lady of Shalott where her name was engraved. Her mother waved a magic wand which she brought from heaven and the Lady of Shalott was wearing the lovely white wedding gown of her mother and a pair of magical dancing slippers! Before the Lady of Shalott leaves for the palace of Camelot, her mother warns her, "You must carry this magical web with you, it will attract Prince Lancelot to you and he will be willing to dance with you."

At the palace of Camelot, Prince Lancelot was charmed by the Lady of Shalott's beauty as she walked in through the grand door. She got fascinated by Prince Lancelot who was astonishingly handsome, with

“coal-black curls”. The Prince went up to her and asked her for a dance. With all eyes on them, they danced late into the night. It made the stepmother and her daughters very jealous.

The next morning the Lady of Shallot was playing in the garden of their palace with the magical web which she had received from her mother the previous night. She has woven her name into it. While playing, the web fell into the river of Camelot. The stepmother who got very jealous of her seeing her dancing with the prince at the palace last night locked her up in a high tower. The only thing her stepmother gave her was her magical mirror, which was the Lady of Shallot’s only link to the outside world. Her stepmother said to her if she looked at the palace of Camelot of Prince Lancelot, she would be cursed. Surprisingly the magical web that flowed into the river of Camelot reached Prince Lancelot as he was walking by the river. He understood that she might be in danger. In the meantime, the stepmother spelled magic on Prince Lancelot and turned him into an ugly beast so that the Lady of Shallot could not recognize him.

She would see a glass coffin and an ugly beast, but she asked the magical mirror to show her something beautiful and a way out of this tower. One day, she saw a beautiful bird in the mirror singing “Tirra Lirra”. She became eager to see the bird in front of her so that she could hear it singing. Surprisingly, one day it appeared in front of her but it seemed to be dying of cold. She thought that the bird was beautiful, and was sad seeing the bird lay there dead. That night she wove a warm blanket out of hay and spread it over the bird. She was thrilled to find out that the bird was just numbed from cold and that it was still alive.

She seated herself on the bird’s back and flew up in the air and over the forest and high above the mountains. She caught a cold and died of pneumonia when she came to a blue lake near a white marble palace at Camelot. She was rescued by the knights and they put her in a glass coffin on a hillside. She looked as if she was sleeping.

One day, Prince Lancelot who turned into an ugly beast through magic, came by and saw the Lady of Shalott lying in the coffin. He opened the glass coffin and kissed her. The kiss woke her and also turned the ugly beast into Prince Lancelot again. The prince told her that her stepmother had cursed him and changed him into an ugly beast. “Will you marry me?” asked Prince Lancelot. “I will,” said the Lady of Shallot. The lady of Shallot took him to her father. The King of Shallot was happy to allow her daughter to marry the Prince Lancelot of Camelot. They had a grand wedding two days later. The wicked stepmother was there, too. When she saw the Lady of Shalott as the Princess of Camelot, she was so angry, that she left the wedding out of jealousy. The Lady of Shalott and Prince Lancelot lived happily ever after in the castle of Camelot.

Conclusion

By fulfilling her prescribed gender roles, somehow The Lady manages to transcend them. In the first version, the Lady wrote her name on the stern, in the second she wrote it on the prow. The self-memorialising element is brought to the fore. In writing her name, to be read by others, the Lady effectively creates an epigram, something which Svenbro (1993, p. 164) describes as ‘a machine for producing *kleos*’ (glory in Greek). Inscribed epigrams ‘constitute a kind of literary “site of memory”’. The Lady turns the boat into her own *lieu de mémoire* (container of memory)”. The Lady of Shalott is alone and independent. The Lady dies more from her curiosity and leaves her story a mystery. She is no weak dejected maiden and has more in common with proactive Homeric women who push the boundaries of their gender roles and seek agency in materiality. However, in my version of the poem, in

the fairytale, the Lady does not die but rather marries Prince Lancelot, for whom she took the eloquent journey to Camelot.

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