**Tennyson’s Women**

*In this essay, undergraduate* Judith Jacob *looks at the representation of women in four poems: 'Mariana', 'Mariana in the South', 'The Lady of Shalott', and 'Fatima'. Her detailed readings find that even when Tennyson attributes some power to women he still denies them a real voice, and real effectuality.*

Let's take a look at Tennyson's women, a forlorn and 'aweary' group of creatures doomed to inhabit heavily constricted spaces containing stagnant water, drought and mirrors.

**Mariana**

In his early poem 'Mariana', Tennyson depicts a despairing woman in a landscape of decay. The landscape in which Mariana is presented in the poem is the non-specific 'moated grange' from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The fact that Tennyson chooses not to locate it specifically intensifies the sense of loneliness and isolation in the poem, making it seem as though the grange occupies a liminalplace outside of normal space and discourse. Descriptions such as 'thickly crusted' (line 2) and 'thickest dark' (line 18) are heavy and choking, ornamenting the poem like the layers of rust and decay that ornament Mariana's mental and physical landscapes.

Every inch of the landscape, and every minute detail expressed communicates the utter despair of the protagonist and repeatedly reiterates the idea of unrealised potential. Though the grange in the poem is both lonely and isolated we assume that it was once used as a farm and a storage place. The grange itself suggests all the possibilities of fertility and healthy growth while simultaneously asserting the reality of darkness and stagnation, and the land that Mariana lives on is bounded and obstructed by stagnant water. The grange is 'moated', and within it is a 'sluice' where the 'blackened waters slept' (line 38). Each description in 'Mariana' simultaneously confronts the reader with fertility and stagnation. The water is filthy and black, but it is sleeping and thus has the power to awake and transform. Likewise, the 'blackest moss' (line 1) and 'marish-mosses' (line 40) obscure and encrust accepted images of health and fertility. Rather than bearing flowers, the flowerpots are 'thickly crusted' (line 2), while the water engenders unhealthy and unwanted growth.

The typically feminine symbols that abound in the rich landscape of 'Mariana' are all impeded in one way or another: like the stagnant water, the moon is not able to rise to its full potential; when it appears in the poem it is 'very low' (line 53). Every element in 'Mariana' is painfully bounded and restricted. This idea is expressed most clearly in line 54, where even the 'wild winds [are] bound within their cell'. The sense of restriction and boundedness expressed in 'Mariana' has religious undertones. The word 'cell' derives from the monastic term 'cella' which designated an enclosed space such as a monastery. Similarly a 'grange' might specifically denote an 'outlying farm belonging to a religious house'.

**Mariana in the South**

The religious suggestiveness in 'Mariana' is fully realised in Tennyson's later poem, 'Mariana in the South', a poem which Arthur Hallam described as 'a kind of pendant to his former poem of Mariana'. The same sense of darkness and boundedness appears in both poems as, for example, 'Mariana in the South' opens with a description of a 'black shadow' (line 1) in a 'close-latticed' (line 3) house. The greatest similarity between the two poems is the repetitive though subtly changing refrain of womanly despair. In 'Mariana' the refrain deals with the passing of time and the absence of her lover. 'Life', 'night', and 'day' are each described as hopelessly 'dreary' in a poem where the very words 'weary' and 'dreary' repeated in each refrain are accented so as to lengthen them and make their sound seem never-ending, for example:

She only said, 'The night is dreary,  
He cometh not', she said;  
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
I would that I were dead!' (lines 21-4)

'Mariana in the South' also looks to time as a reference point as her lament is called out 'night and morn'. Both poems have a circularity to them which adds a further layer of constraint and boundedness to the lives of their protagonists. However, Mariana in the South is able to appeal to her Madonna - albeit with less frequency as the poem progresses - and rather than simply voicing her despair, she sings it. Another sense of release becomes available through the shift of tone at the end of the poem when Mariana predicts a time when she will 'cease to be all alone' (line 95).

While Mariana inhabits a bounded watery landscape, the Southern Mariana lives in a world 'Of stony drought and steaming salt' (line 40). There is no water present in the land to provide relief from the days that pass from 'heat to heat' (line 39). Everything is suggestive of overpowering heat and consuming brightness. The sand is 'glaring', the inlets are 'bright' (line 8), and the light is described as a 'furnace' (line 55). Against this vivid and overwhelming heat, the Southern Mariana persistently dreams of relief in the form of fresh and flowing water. We first see this in her dream of the 'runlets babbling down the glen' (line 44), and when she wakes, 'the babble of the stream' (line 51) is starkly juxtaposed with the 'dusty-white' (line 54) river bed. In the last stanza, when hope in the form of death beckons Mariana, the shift in tone is heralded by 'a sound as of the sea' (line 86).

However, neither Mariana nor the Southern Mariana is able to realise the full potential of her feminine self. Tennyson communicates the failure of each primarily through the landscape she inhabits. The words of the women themselves are limited to a short refrain of four lines which varies only very slightly. They are unable to see beyond their despair or outside the refrain that hammers relentlessly in their minds, tainting their entire world. Mariana is surrounded by stagnant water and requires strong motion to break her state of beautiful feminine apathy. This sort of action is enticingly suggested throughout the poem. Tennyson writes 'Unlifted was the clinking latch' (line 6) and - as the critic Christopher Ricks succinctly puts it -, 'at once crushes and raises hope'. All the motion expressed in 'Mariana' is uncomfortable and frustrated. This is communicated through verbs such as 'flitting', 'glanced', 'seemed', 'crept', 'shook', 'sway' and 'creaked'. The southern Mariana exists in a similar, though interestingly different, state of impotence. Hers is a state of dehydration, a landscape in which desire has risen to such an extreme that it has dried up every avenue of female fertility and creativity.

**The Lady of Shalott**

Enclosed spaces are constructed around almost all of Tennyson's female figures. 'The Lady of Shalott' presents us with another constricted woman who closely resembles the two Marianas.  Like Mariana, the Lady of Shalott is placed in a liminal area, isolated from the mainland of patriarchal Camelot and dwelling alone on the island of Shalott. Both Mariana and the lady are constricted by water that hems in their isolated dwelling-place. However, the water takes on a different role in the later poem: rather than being left as a stagnant and limiting presence, the water becomes representative of a process of visual dislocation. Not only is the lady unable to live in freedom in the normal world; she is also unable to look at the world directly. Thus, her visions of the world take the form of 'shadows' (line 48) that she observes through the safety of 'a mirror clear' (line 46).

The Lady of Shalott's mirror provides a reflection of reality, an inversion of the patriarchal landscape of Camelot. The Lady is forced to inhabit this reflection as if it were reality for fear of a curse despite the fact 'She knows not what the curse may be' (line 42). The patriarchal landscape only becomes fit for female eyes through an inversion, and the curse itself can be interpreted as the idea that women ought to be disconnected from reality. The mirror is initially 'clear' but later reappears in the poem as 'the mirror blue' (line 60) and then again as 'the crystal mirror' (line 106), before dramatically cracking 'from side to side' (line 115). If the shadows that dance across the mirror are the only reality available to the Lady of Shalott, then these changes in its colour and texture are significant. At the beginning of the poem the lady trusts the mirror image completely, believing it to be a direct translation of the world, a 'clear' or untainted perspective.

Her looking glass transforms and takes on colour in the following passage:

And sometimes through the mirror blue  
The knights come riding two and two:  
She hath no loyal knight and true,  
The Lady of Shalott. (Lines 60-3)

The colour change occurs at the same moment as the suggestion of love and partnership and the simultaneous assertion that the lady has no knight of her own and therefore no place within these issues. There is an absence of love, loyalty and truth in her life, and because of this her view of the world is coloured by the mirror's melancholy blue. Finally, the mirror becomes 'crystal':

From the bank and from the river  
He flashed into the crystal mirror  
'Tirra lira', by the river. (lines 105-7)

Crystal has many facets and here can be taken to represent a multiplicity and intensity of perspective. Ricks writes that this passage shows a 're-reflection'which is overwhelming to the point that it serves to cancel out the Lady of Shalott's previously calm life of reflection. He also points out the 'river/river' rhyme in this passage as 'the only time in the poem, a word rhymes with itself - a perfect reflection'. This perfection within the verse is used ironically to describe the Lady's reflected life, a life which creates an imperfect reality, and a mode of perception which is ultimately unsustainable. Interestingly, the process leading up to this perfect reflection is described through terms of heat and fire similar to those used in 'Mariana in the South'. In the description of Lancelot we read 'The helmet and the helmet-feather /  Burned like one burning flame together' (line 93-4). He is later described as 'Some bearded meteor' (line 98) and he glows 'in sunlight' (line 100). Likewise, when he appears in the mirror he does so blindingly: 'he flashed into the crystal mirror' (line 106). The burning and all-powerful language of desire follows Lancelot into the world of Shalott, and shatters the fragile life of female art and reflection.

**Fatima**

Throughout Tennyson's work, feminine spaces are portrayed as incompatible with and separate from patriarchal society. They are generally fragile frameworks that shatter with the first hint of fiery desire, or fall into apathy along with protagonists who possess no will to realise their independent female creativity. One poem which appears to provide an exception to this pattern of tragic female figures and landscapes is 'Fatima'. Though the first stanza appears to portray weakness in love, and female fragility through phrases such as 'O withering might!' (line 1) and 'Lo, parched and withered, deaf and blind' (line 6), a strong sense of Fatima's power manifests itself as the poem progresses. There is no refrain in this poem and because of this its protagonist is not bounded tightly by language and landscape in the style of the women we have so far looked at; instead the steady four beat rhythm powerfully carries the poem forwards.

Once more we encounter the language of fiery desire: the poem features a 'burning drouth' (line 13), 'a fire / Is poured upon the hills' (lines 30-1), and Tennyson describes 'a sultry sky' (line 37). However, the fire here is not immobilising. Instead, Fatima takes on a force and power entirely different to Tennyson's other women. In the third stanza she says:

Last night, when some one spoke his name,  
From my swift blood that went and came  
A thousand little shafts of flame  
Were shivered in my narrow frame.  
O love, O fire! once he drew  
With one long kiss my whole soul through  
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew. (Lines 15-21)

Not only do we see powerful motion in the 'swift blood', which contrasts the cramped and uncomfortable motion in poems such as 'Mariana', but we also perceive an assumption of masculine power in the phallic 'shafts of flame' which take over the body of the protagonist. Furthermore, though the poem explores the familiar female terrain of fire and water, it appears to find a possible synthesis. The sunlight and the dew come together in two of the most beautiful lines of the poem. In the penultimate stanza we encounter similar images, though here they are more intense. The strong and assertive 'My heart, pierced through with fierce delight, / Bursts into blossom in his sight' is overtly sexual.

At first glance it appears that this poem embraces feminine spaces and provides a powerful feminine discourse for its bold protagonist. However, when we look closely we find that this is not the case. Though powerful, Fatima's language is full of phallic imagery and male pronouns. The last few lines are the most telling. Fatima tells us determinedly: 'I *will* possess him or will die. / I will grow round him in his place' (lines 39-40). The verb 'will' gains strength by italicisation and repetition, but is ultimately undermined. Fatima has no female power or language to express herself with. Unlike the liminal female landscapes of other poems, the strong female here is forced to grow 'in his place'. Despite her will and determination, she is ultimately nothing but an appendage to a man in a male environment. To assume power Fatima assumes male discourse, but this leaves her without a voice of her own, and this is the true tragedy of Tennyson's women.

**Further Reading**

All line numbers here are to the poems in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 2007). This is an excellent student-oriented edition of Tennyson's works, and would be an obvious place to start further reading.

**Further Thinking**

Judith Jacob finds these women tragic in their lack of self-determination. Do you think this means Tennyson's poems are misogynistic? Or do they seem sympathetic to women?

Mariana, The Lady of Shalott, Fatima: these ought to be very different women in very different worlds. Do you think Judith Jacob is right to compare them so closely? Does Tennyson actually present a surprisingly consistent situation?



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