

From Epic to Monologue: Tennyson and Homer

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For poets in the nineteenth century who were attempting to develop forms that might compete with the ubiquitous and popular genre of the novel, the challenge of writing epic was particularly fraught. Allusions to the classical tradition might exclude some readers, yet an increasing demand for translations proved that there was an appetite for authors such as Homer and Vergil in English. Reworkings of episodes from classical epic and tragedy are prominent in Victorian literary and popular culture (in forms such as theatrical burlesques, cartoons, and children's books as well as poems, paintings and dramatic performances). Some of the most enduring responses to Homer from this period are Tennyson's "Ulysses," "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Oenone." These poems take the epic tradition in a new direction by presenting the voices of individual characters without any narrative framework, much as the dramatic monologue resembles a Shakespearean soliloquy without a dramatic context. In "Oenone" Tennyson follows a model established by Ovid in the *Heroides*, giving a voice to a female character whose story, previously told in Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, is already an embellishment of Homer's authoritative version of the Trojan War. Having experimented with the choric song as a collective voice of resistance to the demands of society in the "The Lotos-Eaters," in "Ulysses" Tennyson creates an innovative and distinctive voice for the hero in a monologue only a fraction of the length of a single book of Homer. In these poems Tennyson encapsulates epic themes, presenting them in a form that places the reader as an auditor within the world of the poem to create a modern adaptation of the oral tradition.

The form Tennyson employs in “Ulysses” and “Oenone,” the dramatic monologue, is both modern and classical: it has been described as “the primary Victorian genre” (Armstrong 1993: 12) and “the most significant poetic innovation of the age” (Slinn 2002: 80), yet critics have also connected the dramatic monologue with the Theocritan idyll and with Ovid’s *Heroides* (Sinfield 1977; Pattison 1979; Markley 2009). Tennyson’s choice of the Homeric hero Ulysses/Odysseus as the central figure of his most celebrated classical dramatic monologue suggests that the *Odyssey* itself is a significant precursor. The *Odyssey* models the adaptation and reworking of established narratives for new audiences, supplementing the version told by the anonymous narrator with the perspectives of individual characters: Odysseus and others tell and retell the story of the Trojan War and the hero’s journey home, embellishing or concealing details to suit a particular occasion. Jeremy M. Downes identifies the poem as an exemplar of the “radical discontinuity” inherent in the epic genre: “rather than a single identifiable *Odyssey*, innumerable *Odysseys* present themselves” (1997: 1). The dramatic presentation of character makes the Homeric poems peculiarly appropriate sources for monologues, since the heroes speak out “fluently and coherently,” so that rhetorical prowess can be as significant to the hero’s story as his physical strength (Minchin 2007: 5). Such speeches are often public performances in which the hero exhorts or rebukes his followers, articulating the values of his warrior society, or offers a narrative of his adventures in response to the hospitality of others. The Victorian dramatic monologue, a performative utterance addressed to a silent or possibly absent and imagined auditor, allows for the expression of internal conflict and anxiety, rage or doubt by positioning controversial or anti-social sentiments as the words of a speaker other than the poet. There is no narrator who might direct the reader’s interpretation of a speaker, so the poet sets up contradictions and uncertainties to suggest that the speaker’s self-representation may be deceptive. By choosing a speaker who is already a familiar figure from the Homeric poems, Tennyson can subvert the

reader's expectations and introduce shades of introspection and melancholy undertones to the character. Speaking through Oenone or Ulysses also allows Tennyson to approach the prestigious genre of epic from a modern perspective of scepticism about heroism, both challenging and paying tribute to notable literary precursors such as Homer, Vergil, Ovid and Dante and implicitly placing himself as their equal.

Homer and the Victorians

Homer attained a singularly prominent status in the Victorian reception of ancient Greece. Frank M. Turner describes it as a “truism for nineteenth-century commentators” to describe the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as “the Bible of the Greeks [...] with myths, heroes and historical narratives wherein lay both a store of moral precepts and the foundation of a sense of cultural unity,” and notes that critics like Matthew Arnold found parallels between the cultural functions of the texts, based on “the reading of the Bible in British schools and the reading of Homer in ancient Greek schools” (1981: 140–1).¹ Those who read a small stock of classical texts repeatedly in their schooldays might retain a lifelong habit of readily translating the poems aloud to entertain family and friends instead of reading a novel or contemporary poem, and quoting or adapting those texts from memory (Joseph 1982: 105–15). For Arnold, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were “the most important poetical monument existing,” and he begins *On Translating Homer* (1861) by noting that he had considered writing his own translation, “as instruction spreads and the number of readers increases,” and had therefore spent one or two years reading and rereading “a poet whom I had already long studied” (1960: 97). John Talbot observes that Victorian debates about the form that translations of Homer and Vergil should take significantly increased the number of new translations and “helped to consolidate Homer’s high place in the English literary consciousness” (2015: 57).

Doubts about the authorship of the epics (the Homeric question) and the authenticity of the books of the Bible (historical criticism), originating in German historical and philological scholarship, provoked intense reactions among poets. Friedrich August Wolf, in *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), argued that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not long poems written by a single author but rather collections assembled by a later editor from short ballads composed and performed by oral poets.² Given the prominence of ballads in the Romantic aesthetic, and the emergence of experimental hybrid forms such as Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), the idea that Homer could be allied with folk poetry might seem a promising one. However, in a passage in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) (explored further in Emily Hauser's chapter in this volume), the heroine brands Wolf "a kissing Judas" and "an atheist" (5.1246, 1254) for questioning the existence of a single author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and declares the idea that the epics came into existence over a long period of time and without a guiding hand to be as unsettling as the controversy over scientific challenges to the biblical account of creation:

And if the *Iliad* fell out, as he says,
By mere fortuitous concourse of old songs,
Conclude as much, too, for the universe. (5.1255–7)

Robert Browning's "Development" (1889) articulates a similar sense of dislocation on learning that there might be "No actual Homer, no authentic text" (71). However, this is only one stage in the poem's representation of an ongoing fascination with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in various forms, beginning with childhood games based on the story of the Trojan War, Alexander Pope's translation of Homer, reading the poems in Greek and finally engaging with the question of the poems' authorship and the discoveries of archaeologists such as

Schliemann. Towards the end of the Victorian period the distance between poetry and scholarship increased, Meilee Bridges argues, with a “dialectic emerging [...] between scholarly criticism of Homeric epic and contemporary literature’s imaginative, affective, and ludic responses to and representations of reading ancient Greek poetry” (2008: 166). The American classicist Herbert Weir Smyth, in his 1887 review of *Homer* by Richard Claverhouse Jebb, claims that the “literary temperament of English scholars, the aesthetic judgment of English poets, have alike militated in favor of ‘a master-hand at the centre of the work’” (1887: 474). The closeness between English literature and classical scholarship that Smyth alludes to here insinuates itself into his own language in the first sentence of the review: “All scholars, not only the initiated, but also those who have still to penetrate more deeply into Homer’s demesne, will welcome the appearance of this volume” (474). “Homer’s demesne” evokes one of the most notable of the nineteenth-century readers who sought an initiation into Greek literature by means of translations, commentaries and classical dictionaries. In the sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816), Keats celebrates the “loud and bold” translation that empowered him to “breathe” Homeric air: “Oft of one wide expanse had I been told / That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne.”

Before the professionalization of university scholarship in the late nineteenth century, influenced by the German model, much influential criticism was written by learned amateurs such as William Ewart Gladstone, a Member of Parliament, Cabinet member and later Prime Minister. As Cornelia Pearsall has demonstrated in her monograph *Tennyson’s Rapture* (2008), Gladstone was a significant interlocutor for Tennyson on the subject of Homer, having carried on a lengthy debate by letter with their mutual friend Arthur Hallam on the qualities of Ulysses (both Gladstone and Hallam refer to the Homeric hero as “Ulysses” rather than “Odysseus”) and later debating with Tennyson on the poet’s translation of some passages from the *Iliad* (150–77). Gladstone published periodical articles and a substantial

three-volume work, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858). Turner claims that Gladstone's writings on Homer "constituted the single most extensive body of Victorian Homeric commentary" (1981: 160). Readings and criticism of the Homeric epics in the Victorian period often illuminate the extent to which classically-educated men saw themselves as the equals of the Greeks and applied their understanding of ancient Greek culture to contemporary society. While Parliament debated and passed major changes in the legislation concerning marriage and divorce (the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which made divorce a civil procedure no longer requiring an Act of Parliament to dissolve a marriage), Gladstone was contemplating the role of women in marriage in relation to the lack of any precedent for divorce in Homer:

Nor have we any instance where a wife is divorced or taken away from her husband, and then made the wife of another man during his lifetime. The forward Suitors, who urge Penelope to choose a new husband from among them, do it upon the plea that Ulysses must be dead, and that there is no hope of his return: a plea not irrational, if we presume that the real term of his absence came to even half the number of years which Homer has assigned to it. (1858: 2.481–2)

Gladstone goes on to argue that the plot of the *Odyssey* represents probably the most "stringent application of the doctrine of indissolubility" of marriage based on desertion in any period, and that Penelope's aversion to the idea of remarriage is a "comely monument" to the Heroic Age (2.489).

Gladstone's reading of the *Odyssey* makes much of the hero as a devoted husband, father and monarch, a "prisoner" of the selfish and "sensual" Calypso, who "sees him pining in wretchedness for his home and family from day to day; and well knows the distress that his

absence must cause to a virtuous wife and son, as well as the public evils, sure to arise from the prolonged absence of a wise and able sovereign” (2.338). In “Homeric Characters in and out of Homer” (1857), Gladstone claims that Odysseus is one of three Homeric characters to have been “mangled by the later tradition much more severely than any others” (235). He contends that Homer “makes Ulysses a model of the domestic affections for heroes” as a counterbalance to his calculating nature, and that Vergil and Euripides are responsible for emphasizing the worst features of the character (239). His description of Odysseus after his return to Ithaca is manifestly different from the restless and discontented figure in Tennyson’s poem: “Ulysses, after a long course of severe discipline patiently endured, has awarded to him a peaceful old age, and a calm death, in his Ithaca barren but beloved, with his people prospering around him” (1858 2.393).

The Epic Tradition

The difficulty of defining epic as a genre, given significant differences in form and theme between the texts most prominently labelled as “epic,” especially in the post-classical era, encourages the idea of a tradition in which the epic can take a variety of forms. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* establish such divergent approaches to the heroic ideal that they inspire competing traditions of “epic, with its linear teleology” and “romance, with its random or circular wandering” (Quint 1993: 9). In *The Idea of Epic* (1991), J. B. Hainsworth distinguishes epic from related genres such as tragedy, romance, “primitive song” and history in terms of form, moral purpose and content or spirit (1–2). Hainsworth emphasizes the diversity of epic, and the problems with attempting to characterize different forms of the epic by resorting to the creation of “subgenres” like “heroic epic, historical epic, romantic epic, primary epic, or literary epic,” since those subgenres often intersect (5). Such intersections

arise partly from the competitiveness of epic poets, who attempt to subsume and exceed the works of their predecessors—Vergil reworks the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from a Roman perspective while also alluding to a sophisticated Alexandrian distrust of epic; both Dante and Milton invoke Homer, Vergil and Ovid as cherished precursors, while insisting on the superiority of Christian virtues to classical models of heroism (which Milton associates with Satan). For English authors, the prospect of attempting to outdo *Paradise Lost* was as daunting as the notion of competing with Homer had been for Hellenistic poets such as Callimachus. How to write poetry that would represent a serious engagement with the tradition of epic poetry, without necessarily reproducing the form of Homeric or Vergilian epic, was a challenge that preoccupied poets. Some notable examples do not represent an attempt at twelve or twenty-four books of heroic epic but select a few identifiably epic features such as hexameter verse or extended similes, or narrative set pieces such as the visit to the underworld or a storm at sea, and rework them in parodic or unconventional forms. For example, Alexander Pope’s mock-epic poems *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) and *The Dunciad* (1728) artfully transform the set pieces of epic into social and literary conflicts. Byron’s “epic satire” *Don Juan* (1819) belittles epic themes and mannerisms, pointing out the absence of heroism in the contemporary world.

Among the long poems of the nineteenth century, several of the most celebrated belong to a continuing tradition of epic influence and also to Romantic innovativeness in the creation of hybrid genres: Wordsworth’s autobiographical *Prelude* (1850), Tennyson’s Arthurian *Idylls of the King* (1859–85), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel epic *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Robert Browning’s narrative made up of dramatic monologues, *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9). Of these poets, Tennyson came closest to writing the “Arthuriad” that Milton had planned but did not complete, but the *Idylls of the King* was not the unified and confident epic that might have been expected to crown Tennyson’s poetic career. Alfred Austin, in *The*

Poetry of the Period (1870), scornfully described the four *Idylls* published in 1859 as “exquisite cabinet pictures; but that is all,” “four charming and highly finished fragments or driblets” (6–7). In addition to the perceived fragmentariness of the *Idylls*, Tennyson’s mediaevalism could also be regarded as a weakness, since the question of whether a poet ought to write about the modern world is one that particularly troubled poets and critics in the Victorian period. In *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790–1910* (2008), Herbert F. Tucker demonstrates that numerous epics engaged with contemporary life as well as with British history and legend. The increasing popularity and seriousness of prose fiction made the novel a formidable competitor, as Clough’s review of Matthew Arnold’s 1853 *Poems* suggests:

Studies of the literature of any distant age or country; all the imitations or *quasi*-translations which help to bring together into a single focus the scattered rays of human intelligence; poems after classical models, poems from Oriental sources, and the like, have undoubtedly a great literary value. Yet there is no question, it is plain and patent enough, that people much prefer “Vanity Fair” and “Bleak House.” (Armstrong 1972: 34)

Classically-educated poets often chose to approach the epic tradition obliquely and in hybrid or fragmentary forms. There was an ambivalence about the genre amongst those whose education had been dominated by reading and translating classical epic: Colin Graham suggests that some poets believed “epic was no longer possible or desirable, even potentially embarrassing and crude” (1998: 3). Clinton Machann comments that “the long poem with overt or implied pretensions to the genre of epic” was a particularly challenging form for Victorian poets. Machann takes Matthew Arnold as an example of the “conflicted” poet, since he attempted to “recapture a classical poetry of the ‘grand style’ in dramatic and epic

narrative verse” and “rejected his own best efforts to compose long poems,” such as *Empedocles on Etna* (2010: 4). As Stephen Harrison observes in “Some Victorian Versions of Greco-Roman Epic,” poets such as Arnold, Tennyson and Clough employ “various strategies of diversification and miniaturisation” (2007: 21): in “Ulysses” (1842), *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1848) and “Sohrab and Rustum” (1853) these poets respond to Homer and Vergil through experiments in translation, mock-heroic verse and the use of formal features such as extended similes and epic formulae.

Tennyson concluded that the way for a poet to make his mark might be “by shortness, for the men before me had been so diffuse, and most of the big things [...] had been done” (H. Tennyson 1897: 1.139). There were classical precedents in the epyllion and the idyll, forms which allowed for romance, humor, a focus on unheroic figures and social observation.³ Robert Pattison notes that Tennyson was influenced by Hellenistic poets such as Theocritus, Callimachus, Bion and Moschus, whose sophisticated and erudite poems display eclectic borrowings from earlier literature. Callimachus and Theocritus engage with the question of how to emulate Homer without producing inferior imitations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In “appropriating the machinery of the Homeric epic for the study of psychological states,” poems such as Theocritus’s *Idyll XI* anticipate Tennyson’s classical poems (Pattison 1979: 19–21). Tennyson’s “English Idyls”⁴ include “The Epic” and “Morte d’Arthur” (Tennyson 1987: 2.1–19), the first of which is a frame poem explaining the survival of the second, a fragment of twelve-book Arthurian poem. The “Morte d’Arthur” is saved from the flames after the poet Hall decides to burn his epic (as Vergil is said to have wanted the *Aeneid* to be destroyed) because he thinks both form and content anachronistic:

“He thought that nothing new was said, or else
Something so said ’twas nothing—that a truth

Looks freshest in the fashion of the day:
God knows: he has a mint of reasons: ask.
It pleased *me* well enough.” “Nay, nay,” said Hall,
“Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
Nor we those times: and why should any man
Remodel models? these twelve books of mine
Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth,
Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt.” (30–40)

A crucial aspect of the epic tradition is the poet’s display of skill in the handling of inherited materials. Hainsworth distinguishes between the collaborative form of traditional heroic poetry, influenced by the demands and reactions of the audience as well as the singer’s own artistry, and the more sophisticated form of primary epic. In the *Iliad*, the poet does not simply present a story (the tale of Troy) but interprets the events in relation to a theme, the devastating anger of Achilles (1991: 8). Homer’s omniscient and omnipresent narrator may be described as objective, not subjective or ironically distanced from the author. It is in the later development of secondary or “literary epic,” that the poet begins to “add a private note to his public voice” (Hainsworth 1991:10). The notion of multiple or “further” voices undermining the narrator is particularly associated with readings of Vergil (Lyne 1987: 224). However, in *Homeric Soundings* (1992), Oliver Taplin argues that the *Iliad* is not “objective” or lacking in “ethical colouring”; rather, Homer avoids “explicit evaluation” or didactic “moralizing” by the narrator, and conveys implicit evaluation through focalization (6). The distinction Taplin identifies here is a significant one in relation to Victorian literature: the moralizing narrator who explicitly directs the reader’s response appears intermittently in

novels such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) and more frequently in less complex narratives. The dramatic monologue, however, has no narrator separate from the speaker, and so the reader must be alert to any implicit evaluation or ethical coloring in the speaker's self-presentation.

The Homeric epics lend themselves to reworkings in dramatic genres because speeches by the characters make up more than half of each poem. Jasper Griffin notes the "high proportion" of speech in the two poems (55%); in the *Odyssey* speech makes up more than two thirds of the poem (68%). Griffin alludes to Plato's insight that Homer was "the first and greatest of the tragic poets" and argues that "without the example of Homer, showing the heroes and heroines of myth conversing in dialogue in a high style, Attic tragedy would never have come into existence in the form that it did," a hypothesis that would have "grave implications" for later dramatists such as Seneca and Shakespeare (2004: 156), and thus for the dramatic monologue. While Tennyson's "Ulysses," a dignified and eloquent speech by a great figure who has been involved in significant action, might be seen as an offshoot of the tragic tradition Griffin is describing here, other dramatic monologues inspired by Homer emphasize the domestic and comic aspects of the poem. Griffin emphasizes the diversity of speech in Homer: "Not only gods and heroes speak, but also women, servants, and people not fit to be imitated by a gentleman; while even the heroes do not limit themselves to edifying and up-beat utterances, but complain, squabble, tell lies, insult one another, criticise the gods, and lament their fate" (2004: 158). The Homeric poems therefore (particularly the *Odyssey*) offer a precedent for the Romantic extension of literary representation to humble or even disreputable characters, encouraging the reader to examine domestic actions as carefully as the battles of heroes—like the reworkings of Greek tragedy in the novels of George Eliot or Thomas Hardy. Poems which respond to the *Odyssey* can take up the voices of women or the anonymous companions of the hero, or represent Odysseus himself in an unflattering light.

The dramatic monologue and its antecedents

A form which is recognized as distinctively Victorian yet manifestly connected to earlier literature, the dramatic monologue gives the poet a way to offer homage and critique to significant precursors much as poets like Milton did in their epics. It has long been recognized that Tennyson and Browning developed the dramatic monologue independently in the 1830s, with such early examples as Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites" (written in 1833 and published in 1842), and Browning's 1836 poems "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover." The genre builds on Romantic and Victorian fascination with Shakespeare's soliloquies, although the absence of any dramatic context or other speakers means that the dramatic monologue tends to focus on conveying strong emotion or abnormal psychology. The monologue represents not solitary musings spoken aloud but a speech addressed to an auditor (whose voice is not heard in the poem), which may reveal more than the speaker intends.

Critics have also noted similarities between the Romantic ode and the Victorian dramatic monologue: Robert Langbaum's notion of "the poetry of experience" breaks down the boundaries between lyrical, dramatic and narrative genres (1957: 53). While "the image of a dramatized 'I' acting in a concrete setting" connects poems such as Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Arnold's "Dover Beach" and Browning's "My Last Duchess," the speaker of the dramatic monologue is more likely to be read as separate from the poet than the speaker of a lyric poem (Rader 1976: 131). Tucker argues that Tennyson and Browning developed the dramatic monologue because they felt Romantic lyricism to be outdated (1985: 227). The dramatic monologue suits the tendency of Victorian poets towards introspection, questioning and perplexity, while the persona or mask affords them some privacy. Browning, criticized

for excessive subjectivity in his early poems, could claim objectivity by representing the subjectivity of the Duke of Ferrara or Mr Sludge, the fraudulent medium. That the poet is speaking as a character allows Browning to explore abnormal or criminal psychology and Tennyson to luxuriate in melancholy while simultaneously inviting the reader to judge the speaker. An interest in extreme mental states is characteristic of the genre, which developed simultaneously with advances in scientific theories of the mind (Faas 1988).

The separation between poet and speaker allows for dramatic irony: the poet manipulates the speech to create revelations that appear to be unintentional on the part of the speaker. Although the dramatic monologue is a pleasurable poetic form, critics emphasize that it requires work from the reader to establish an interpretation by negotiating “a range of ambiguities” (Hughes 2010: 15). Langbaum’s influential account of the dramatic monologue suggests that the reader of a poem such as “My Last Duchess” experiences a tension between “sympathy” for the speaker and “moral judgement,” and suspends judgement of Browning’s Duke (who might have caused his wife to be murdered) in order to appreciate the speaker’s power (1957: 83). Cynthia Scheinberg notes that not all readers will find the Duke’s authority as attractive as Langbaum does (1997: 177). The uncertainty of the reader’s response to the speaker’s superficially casual yet forceful assertion of absolute power over his former Duchess and his potential bride (whose father’s envoy is revealed to be the auditor within the poem) has inspired many contrasting readings of the poem. Alan Sinfield comments that the reader of a dramatic monologue is confronted with “a divided consciousness. We are impressed, with the full strength of first-person presentation, by the speaker and feel drawn into his point of view, but at the same time are aware that there are other possible, even preferable, perspectives” (1977: 32). Tucker claims that the form is so effective because “the extremity of the monologist’s authoritative assertion awakens in us with great force the counter-authority of communal norms” (1985: 228).

While much criticism of the dramatic monologue focuses on the genre as a product of the nineteenth century, some scholars have argued that a poem spoken by a character who is not the poet is anticipated in other genres or poetic forms, such as “the complaint, the epistle and the humorous colloquial monologue” (Sinfield 1977: 42). A. Dwight Culler regards the dramatic monologue as a descendant of *prosopopoeia* and monodrama (1975: 368). Ovid’s *Heroides*, epistles in elegiac couplets each attributed to a single mythical character and addressed to an absent lover, exhibit qualities similar to those of dramatic monologues. The female speakers are implicitly other than the poet, allowing for the creation of dramatic irony and a critique of each speaker’s self-representation (her language may undermine the ostensible purpose of her utterance). Duncan F. Kennedy suggests that Ovid’s “marked deviations from the Homeric account” call attention to “the subjectivity of the ‘writer’s’ viewpoint, which is a central feature of the form” (1984: 418–21). The poet can draw attention to his virtuosity in adapting traditional materials: Florence Verducci argues that Ovid’s “wit in conception, no less than in language” highlights “the poet’s creative presence in the poem,” a “dispassionate, intellectual, emotionally anaesthetizing presence” (1985: 32).

Like Tennyson’s much criticized early “lady poems,” lyrics such as “Mariana” and “Oenone” (Christ 1987: 385), the *Heroides* focus on women deserted by their lovers and in despair. The first fifteen of the twenty-one *Heroides* all have female speakers and seem to receive no response, but the last six poems enter into dialogues, pairs of letters in which the man writes the first letter and the woman responds. A. A. Markley stresses the “diversity of the women’s voices” despite the similarity of the emotional situations in the poems, a “remarkable degree of variation” achieved by reworking “a wide range of motifs and details from each character’s story” (2009: 116–17). Several of the pairings in the *Heroides* include characters from the Homeric poems, such as Penelope writing to Ulysses, Briseis to Achilles, and Helen to Paris. In poem 16, Paris seeks to persuade Helen that his love for her was

ordained by Venus, who has already promised Paris that Helen will be his wife. Helen responds in the next poem. The poet creates irony by setting the speaker's emotion against "external factors that are known to the reader but not to the speaker. We have almost a tragic sense of people caught up in situations that are beyond their knowledge and certainly their control" (Sinfield 1977: 47). Tennyson's fascination with such figures is a notable feature of his early poetry. Oenone's depiction of her suffering, "My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim, / And I am all aweary of my life" (31-2) anticipates the refrain of Mariana (a character from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*): "She said, 'I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!'"⁵

Ovid and Tennyson both represent characters and episodes in unexpected ways by articulating the emotional responses of female characters who are peripheral and largely silent in the Homeric poems. Sara Mack observes that in the *Heroides* "Ovid makes us look behind the usual version of the tale to see what is omitted—that is, what became of the people who just happened to be in the hero's way" (1988: 19). Penelope does not speak in Tennyson's "Ulysses," but the hero's contemptuous reference to his "aged wife" may suggest that Tennyson is alluding to the *Heroides* as well as the more overt reference to Dante's *Inferno* (Markley 2009: 119). Penelope in *Heroides* 1 is lonely and cynical about the likelihood of Ulysses' fidelity to her over the twenty years of his absence. Although he occupies her thoughts to such an extent that she writes a letter to him every time a stranger comes to Ithaca, she does not anticipate a happy reunion. She imagines him disparaging his "rustic" wife and tries to warn her husband that she has grown old while he was away. Her letter draws attention to the discord created by war for those left at home. Lawrence Lipking argues that "the poetry of abandoned women is highly subversive," since such poems disrupt heroic narratives, "call[ing] attention to the faithlessness of warriors and heroes, the insignificance of mere activity" (1988: 3-4).⁶

Tennyson's interest in Ovid's *Heroides* is also suggested by the poem "Oenone" (1987: 1. 419–33), about a character who is decidedly peripheral to the Trojan War (the wife whom Paris abandons for Helen). In *Heroides* 5 Oenone writes to Paris to complain of his mistreatment of her, to remind him that when they met he was an outcast and her inferior, to recapitulate the suffering that resulted from the Judgement of Paris, to warn him of Helen's fickleness and the danger to Troy, and to beg him to return to her. Laurel Fulkerson suggests that Ovid's poem is "sophisticated despite Oenone's apparent ingenuousness," while noting that other critics represent Oenone's lament as ineffective, undermined by her "inability to fashion herself" as a tragic or elegiac heroine (2009: 55–6). Tennyson's "Oenone" differs from an epistle or dramatic monologue in the first twenty-one lines, which are not spoken by Oenone but by a third-person speaker who describes the landscape and the sorrowing heroine. The rest of the poem is presented as a song in which Oenone laments Paris's treatment of her and longs to die. Linda H. Peterson, noting Christopher Ricks's identification of Tennyson's "Oenone" as an epyllion or minor epic that begins with a pastoral lament, comments that such "generic grafting" "raises the question of the relation of feminized lyric to masculine epic and, by extension, of women's role in epic action" (2009: 35). As part of her complaint, Tennyson's Oenone tells the story of the three goddesses Hera, Pallas Athena and Aphrodite, each seeking to be named the fairest and competing to offer inducements to Paris. Hera emerges from a golden cloud to offer "royal power, ample rule / Unquestion'd" (109–10), the closest a mortal can come to godlike supremacy; the cold and earnest Pallas replies with a different version of "sovereign power" based on "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control" (142–3); the lusciously beautiful Aphrodite wins by promising Paris "the fairest and most loving wife in Greece" (183). Even before Aphrodite speaks, Oenone begs Paris to award the prize to Pallas but he will not hear. Redpath observes that Tennyson "tells graphically the whole story of the Judgement of Paris (to which Ovid only alludes), and

endorses Oenone's condemnation of Paris's choice of sensuous love" over the self-knowledge and self-control that Pallas offers (1981: 117). In the last stanza of the poem, Oenone determines to go to Troy and talk to Cassandra, whose visions of impending fire and battle best match Oenone's own "fiery thoughts" (242).

Tennyson's classical poems and their relation to classical scholarship

Tennyson's poems on classical subjects include "The Hesperides" (1832), "Oenone" and "The Lotos-Eaters" (first published in 1832, and revised in 1842), "Ulysses" (written after Arthur Hallam's death in 1833 and published in 1842), "Tithonus" (1860), "Lucretius" (1868) and "Tiresias" (1885). Some of these poems, such as "Tithonus" and "Tiresias," were partly written at the same time as "Ulysses" and redrafted many times. He also wrote a "Specimen of a Translation of the Iliad in Blank Verse" and "Achilles over the Trench" (Tennyson 1987: 2. 651, 653–7). While Tennyson was fascinated by Homer, some contemporary readers stressed that his own poems were more closely aligned with a writer of literary epic such as Vergil than with what Matthew Arnold described repeatedly in *On Translating Homer* as Homer's "perfect plainness and directness" (1960: 116). Arnold describes Tennyson's poetry as "*un-Homeric*" in its "extreme subtlety and curious elaborateness of expression" and thought: "In Homer's poetry it is all natural thoughts in natural words; in Mr. Tennyson's poetry it is all distilled thoughts in distilled words." He quotes lines 16–17 of "Ulysses" as an example of verse that has been "quoted as perfectly Homeric" but argues that the "subtle sophistication of the thought" lacks the "perfect simplicity" of Homer (Arnold 1960: 204–5). The critic John Churton Collins, in *Illustrations of Tennyson* (1891) described Vergil and Tennyson as "the most conspicuous representatives" of a "school which seldom fails to make its appearance in every literature at

a certain point of its development,” poets who derive their material “not from the world of Nature, but from the world of Art. The hint, the framework, the method of their most characteristic compositions, seldom or never emanate from themselves” (1891: 6). Although Tennyson resented Collins’ laborious identification of classical parallels in his poems, Robert Pattison suggests that the source of his resentment was not the suggestion that Tennyson (like Vergil and Milton) incorporated many borrowings from earlier poets, but rather Collins’ failure to appreciate the art with which Tennyson employed his allusions to earlier texts (1979: 8).

Studies of Tennyson’s classical influences (Pattison 1979; Markley 2004; Markley 2015) demonstrate that the poet’s reading of ancient texts encompasses canonical poetry such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Vergil’s *Aeneid* and Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, as well as less familiar works like Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* and Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica*.⁷ Tennyson’s pastoral inclinations derive partly from the *Idylls* of Theocritus and the *Eclogues* of Vergil; echoes of pastoral elegy and Greek and Latin lyrics are pervasive in Tennyson’s long elegiac poem *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850), in which the poet mourns the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. The ambivalence about epic that Graham finds in the Victorian period is anticipated and skilfully articulated by Greek and Latin poets; Tennyson’s epic ambitions are tempered by his partiality for Sappho, Catullus and Propertius, who use elegiac conventions to provide a “cogent, if unsystematic criticism of the epic genre” (Sullivan 1993: 145). Ovid’s irreverent innovations as epic poet and elegist, to name only two of the genres he reinvents (Harrison 2002), contribute to a generic hybridity anticipating that of Romantics such as Byron, who was a potent influence for Tennyson’s generation (Elfenbein 1995).

Andrew Lang observes that Tennyson was assisted in the preparation of his 1842 volumes by his brother-in-law, Edmund Lushington, who was Professor of Greek at Glasgow

from 1838 (1901: 37). That Tennyson envisioned his classical poems in the context of contemporary scholarship is suggested by the dedication of two such poems to the classicists R. C. Jebb and Benjamin Jowett: he paired “To Professor Jebb” with “Demeter and Persephone” (1889) and “To the Master of Balliol” (Jowett) with “The Death of Oenone” (1892). Jebb had suggested the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as a text Tennyson might find congenial, and for Jowett the poet returned to the theme of the nymph deserted by Paris in a poem he considered “even more strictly classical in form and language” than “Oenone” (H. Tennyson 1897: 2. 386). He drew on Book 10 of Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica*, selecting an episode often read as an epyllion within the epic. These eminent classical scholars were closely connected with the literary world, friends with Tennyson and Browning as well as many other writers, and they were also engaged in disseminating classical literature to a wider audience. They published translations and commentaries such as Jowett’s *The Dialogues of Plato translated into English with Analyses and Introductions* (1871) and Jebb’s edition of the tragedies of Sophocles with text, critical notes, commentary and translation (1883–96). “To the Master of Balliol” (Tennyson 1987: 3. 219–20) offers Jowett a brief respite from his labours on revisions to the third edition of his *Plato*, asking him to read “a Grecian tale re-told,” a story that “Quintus Calaber / Somewhat lazily handled of old” (5–8).⁸ Jebb had showed his appreciation of Tennyson’s classicism by translating “Tithonus” into Latin verse (Jebb 1873). The poem was written in 1833 as a “pendant” to “Ulysses” and later revised for publication in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860. In a letter to the Duke of Argyll, Tennyson described the incongruity of placing the poem “at the tail of a flashy modern novel,” a questionable assessment of Anthony Trollope’s *Framley Parsonage* (Tennyson 1981: 252). “Tithonus” is spoken by an isolated and alienated figure who longs for oblivion, matched not with an “aged wife,” but rather with an ageless goddess whose eternal radiance cruelly accentuates his own extended physical decline.

The potent temptation of mental and physical inertia is prominent in “The Lotos-Eaters.” Odysseus (not named in the poem) speaks only briefly at the beginning, telling his crew to have courage as they approach an unknown island. The sense of alienation from home and family aligns the lotos-eating mariners with the disaffected Ulysses of the monologue (written in 1833 and also published in the 1842 volume). The Choric Song reveals that escapist lotos-eating and the pleasurable sensations afforded by the island do not free them from fear and pain: despite fond memories of home, they shrink from encountering the adult sons who will have displaced them in their absence. Tennyson examines a similar fear in a modern context in “Enoch Arden” (1864), in which a shipwrecked sailor returns home after over a decade to find that his wife has remarried and had another child. Enoch does not reveal his identity until he is near death, and refuses to let his family be informed until he is dead (Tennyson 1987 2. 625–51). Tennyson thwarts the narrative of *nostos* and reunion for this Victorian Odysseus, and “The Lotos-Eaters” extends indefinitely one of the delays and digressions that characterize the first half of the *Odyssey*. The lotos-eaters perceive themselves as “horrendously posthumous to their social world, already part of history and art, somebody else’s fictions” (Armstrong 1993: 89):

Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
And dear the last embraces of our wives
And their warm tears: but all hath suffer’d change:
For surely now our household hearths are cold,
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy. (114–19)

These lines appear in the 1842 version of the poem, but were not in the original poem (Redpath 1981: 118). The choric song, with alternating celebration of the island's beauty and intense frustration about the cruelty of the world and the indifference of the gods, follows the tragic form of strophe and antistrophe, allowing for conflicting emotions with no easy resolution. Christopher Decker remarks that Tennyson's episodic poems are "self-contained and fragmentary": despite endings marked by overt "closural gestures," the poems withhold the ending of their narratives (2009: 58). According to Homer, Odysseus forces his men to leave the island and journey back to Ithaca, but Tennyson's poem resists closure, as the lotos-eaters sing "O rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more" (173).

Tennyson's "Ulysses" is obliquely connected with Homer's *Odyssey* by an allusion to Tiresias's prophecy, which forms part of Odysseus's visit to the Underworld. Tiresias tells Odysseus that he may not be able to evade the anger of Poseidon, and even if he does return to Ithaca he will have lost his ship and companions, and will have to kill Penelope's suitors. Then, Tiresias continues, he must set out again until he finds men who know nothing of the sea and do not eat salt. He will die in old age, far from Ithaca. Tennyson's poem represents the aged hero at home long after the action of the *Odyssey* is concluded, and not yet fully prepared to embark on the new voyage that Tiresias prophesied. Ulysses himself seems to have forgotten the visit to the Underworld, since he talks of finding "the great Achilles, whom we knew" in the "Happy Isles" of Elysium (63–4).⁹ The poem questions the ideal of *kleos* and the heroic code which promotes a glorious life and an early death, a notion that Achilles bitterly condemns in the *Odyssey*. Such a death is supposed to be compensated by survival in the songs of the poets, yet the line "I am become a name" suggests that Ulysses has achieved renown without sacrificing long life or family (11). Like the *Odyssey*, Tennyson's poem seeks alternative models of heroism, and the hero's facility with language, his ability to enhance his own reputation, is a considerable part of his power:

Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy. (13–17)

These lines allude to and embellish the description of Odysseus at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, the man of many ways, and his knowledge of many countries and men; the epithet “windy” for Troy is another Homeric reference, showing the speaker’s mastery of the stories that have been told about him (Tennyson 1987: 1.616).

Tennyson complicates the characterisation of the speaker by drawing on sources other than the *Odyssey* in his version of the hero as an older, dissatisfied king who finds his home remote and uncivilized and his family dull. That the Homeric echoes are interwoven with other allusions to the epic tradition is well established: Tennyson himself listed *Odyssey* 11.100–37 and the 26th canto of Dante’s *Inferno* as sources for the poem (Tennyson 1987: 1.613–20). In addition, Cornelia Pearsall cites Edward FitzGerald’s anecdote that Tennyson wept when he read about Sinon and the wooden horse that caused Troy’s fall in Book II of Vergil’s *Aeneid* (2008: 164). Tennyson’s admiration for Vergil is undoubted: his poem “To Vergil: Written at the Request of the Mantuans for the Nineteenth Centenary of Vergil’s Death” begins with praise to Vergil as the Roman Homer and concludes with a declaration of Tennyson’s longstanding love for the poet. In his notes, the poet indicates that the line “I am a part of all that I have met” (18) is an allusion to Aeneas’s *quaeque ipse miserrimus vidi / et quorum pars magna fui* (*Aeneid* 2.5–6) (“terrible things I saw myself, and in which I played a great part”). Yet Tennyson chooses as his speaker not the noble Trojan who would go on to

found the Roman Empire but the tricky and selfish Odysseus. There is little regard for *pietas* in “Ulysses” except in the muted praise of Telemachus as a suitable leader for Ithaca. Ulysses cruelly condemns his own people as a “savage race” (4) and disparages the “barren crags” (2) they inhabit. His disdain for his home suggests that the journey home that dominates the first half of the *Odyssey* was a mistake and that he feels no responsibility towards his people. Matthew Rowlinson notes that he “seems to be imagining between himself and his subjects not just differences of class, but bizarrely, cultural and even racial differences” (1992: 267). When Ulysses highlights Telemachus’s praiseworthy qualities he does so only to stress the distance between the tediously reliable son and his aspiring and discontented father:

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine. (39–43)

Ulysses’ readiness to abandon his responsibilities to his son has been explained by the poet’s son Hallam Tennyson as an allusion to one of the poems of the Epic Cycle, the *Telegony* by Eugammon of Cyrene. Both poems show the hero staying at home for many years before he feels “the craving for fresh travel” and sets off with new companions who are “of the same heroic mould as the old comrades”—as Christopher Ricks notes, this last detail is intended to meet the objection that Ulysses could not have been addressing his original companions, who are all dead (Tennyson 1987: 1. 613–4). In the *Telegony* Odysseus not only leaves his kingdom to Telemachus, he then does the same to his youngest son before going back to Ithaca.¹⁰ Tennyson would not have expected every reader to know the surviving

fragments and summaries of the Epic Cycle as well as they might know Homer, and a knowledge of plot of the *Telegony* is not necessary to understand Ulysses' dismissive attitude towards his son and kingdom. Nevertheless, classicists might pride themselves on recognizing the obscure parallel while others picked up the more obvious allusion to Dante.

In the *Inferno*, Ulysses (Odysseus) is an anti-hero who appears in a flame, joined forever to his co-conspirator Diomedes, in the eighth pit of the eighth circle of hell, disturbingly close to the central point where Lucifer is enclosed in ice. The Greek heroes are among those being punished for fraudulent counsel and the ruse of the wooden horse is their principal offence.¹¹ Despite the implications of Ulysses' position, however, Dante allows him an eloquent speech about his restless desire to explore the world. Tennyson's version of Ulysses is mediated by Dante's portrayal of dangerous yet appealing intellectual aspiration and contempt for domesticity. This Ulysses set off on his final voyage after winning his freedom from Circe, and did not return to Ithaca at all, because family affection could not rival his desire to "explore the world, and search the ways of life / Man's evil and his virtue" (*Inferno* XXVI, 97–8, trans. H. F. Cary). Ulysses sailed out in a small boat with a few companions, going past the Pillars of Hercules on a course forbidden to man; having passed Mount Purgatory, the ship was caught up in a whirlwind and all the sailors drowned. Before they embark on this final and disastrous boundary-crossing expedition, Ulysses persuasively exhorts his men to spend the rest of their lives exploring unknown territories and pursuing virtue and knowledge.

In Tennyson's poem, the hero's desire for exploration is similarly motivated by an awareness of the end of life approaching, a feeling that heroes must strive continually to maintain their status by seeing as much of the world as they can, or simply a compulsion to move forward. Like Dante, he allows Ulysses to reveal his dangerous arrogance and recklessness in a speech which invites the reader's sympathy while leaving the speaker's credibility open to question:

“Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
 Death closes all: but something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
 [...] Come, my friends,
 ’Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
 Push off, and sitting well in order smite
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
 Of all the western stars, until I die.” (51–4, 56–61)

The stirring rhetoric is undercut both by the allusions to other texts and by uncertainty about whether the aged speaker is in any position to resume his heroic exploits. The whole speech may be a fantasy addressed to an imagined audience (the dead mariners) whom the speaker has no power to command. The forward movement that the speech so eloquently recommends is counterpointed by a feeling of weariness and inertia. Tennyson wrote that “Ulysses” “was written soon after Arthur Hallam’s death, and gave my feeling about the need for going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in ‘In Memoriam’” (H. Tennyson 1897: 1. 196). The supremely quotable lines about exploration, discovery and the desire to keep moving forward become questionable in context. Even if the mariners who were all lost in the Homeric story are still alive and able to accompany the hero, the final voyage leads only to death. The *Odyssey* acts as a precedent to suggest that the hero’s boastfulness and refusal to accept his limitations ends in disaster for his companions more often than for himself. Allowing Ulysses to speak in supremely persuasive language

about the glorious endeavor he is planning, while ironically undercutting his rhetoric by suggesting the disaster that lies ahead, reveals the ethos of heroic individualism to be selfish and destructive.

The dramatic monologue as a form of classical reception

Once Tennyson and Browning had established the dramatic monologue, it became a potent form for giving a voice to those whose voices were unheard in literature or history, allowing poets to articulate ideas that they could not otherwise express with such force. Poets such as Swinburne employed the monologue form to shock readers and to unsettle their ideas about gender and sexuality. Women writers found Greek tragedy and epic fruitful sources for dramatic monologues with female speakers, allowing them to express rage about their frustrated ambitions, the continuance of a sexual double standard and the injustices of a patriarchal society, by appropriating characters such as Medea, Clytemnestra and Cassandra. Glennis Byron maintains that women poets played “a primary role in establishing and defining that line of development which has proven most enduring: the use of the monologue for purposes of social critique” (2003: 84). Such poems include Augusta Webster’s “Medea in Athens” and “Circe” (1870), Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s “Alcestis to Admetus” (1908) and Amy Levy’s “Xantippe” (1881). The shift from epic to monologue does not end with the Victorian period but still has a significant influence on contemporary responses to the classical tradition. Following Tennyson’s example, modern poets have favored the dramatic monologue as a form which allows them to enter into dialogue with an canonical text, often in a subversive spirit. Reworking an episode from the *Odyssey* or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* allows for a creative and critical response to ancient texts, attentive to modern concerns and bringing peripheral characters to the fore. Giving a voice to Penelope, Telemachus, Circe or

even the dog Argos, as Linda Pastan does in “Re-Reading the *Odyssey* in Middle Age” (1988) continues to be a useful strategy for engaging with classical texts and scholarship and extending their appeal in a concise and pleasurable poetic form.

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¹ On the relationship between Homeric and biblical scholarship, see further [Hauser chapter, pages].

² On Wolf, see also the chapters by Canevaro and Hauser.

³ For a discussion of the epyllion, see the chapter by Bär in this volume.

⁴ Tennyson used the term “English Idyls” for a series of poems written between 1832 and 1842, and later used the spelling “Idylls” for the *Idylls of the King* (O’Donnell 1988: 125).

⁵ This refrain is repeated at lines 11–12, 24–5, 35–6, 47–8, 59–60 and 71–2 before the conclusion of the poem with a despairing couplet at lines 83–4: “She wept, ‘I am weary, weary, / Oh God, that I were dead!’” (Tennyson 1987: 1. 205–9).

⁶ There are precedents for this disruption in Dido’s lament in Book 4 of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the tragic culmination of an episode that threatened to obstruct Aeneas’ destiny and the future of Rome, and in Andromache’s poignant commentary on the cost of the heroic code for the women who are on the losing side in a war (*Iliad* 6).

⁷ See Baumbach and Bär (2010).

⁸ Quintus of Smyrna, often referred to as Quintus Calaber until around 1800.

⁹ In Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica*, Achilles dwells on the Island of the Blessed.

¹⁰ In the *Telegony* Odysseus travels to Thesprotia, where he marries and has another son before fighting a war in which his wife is killed and leaving the kingdom to his son Polypoetes. He returns to Ithaca, where Telegonus, the son of Circe and Odysseus, is looking for his father. Telegonus kills Odysseus with a spear made by Hephaestus and tipped with poison from a stingray (thus fulfilling Tiresias’ prophecy that death would come to Odysseus out of the sea).

¹¹ Dante could not have read Homer’s poem, and the prominence of Vergil as his source for the story of the Trojan War is underlined by the figure of Vergil, Dante’s guide to the underworld, being the one to speak to Ulysses.