

Spring 4-26-2016

"She Left the Web, She Left the Loom": The Extent of Agency in "The Lady of Shalott"

Christina M. Cox

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cox, Christina M., "She Left the Web, She Left the Loom": The Extent of Agency in "The Lady of Shalott" (2016). *Student Research Submissions*. 54.

https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/54

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

**"SHE LEFT THE WEB, SHE LEFT THE LOOM": THE EXTENT OF AGENCY IN
"THE LADY OF SHALOTT"**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Christina M. Cox

April 2016

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Christina M. Cox
(digital signature)

04/26/16

Christina Cox
Arthurian and Fantasy Literature
Dr. Rochelle & Dr. Parke
17 July 2015

“She Left the Web, She Left the Loom”: The Extent of Agency in “The Lady of Shalott”

Alfred, Lord Tennyson began writing “The Lady of Shalott” in a time of tremendous social and political change for England. The movement from rural to urban emphasized the lack of importance given to agrarian society (and the folk stories that went with it) in the face of industrialization. Dr. Andrew Lynch stated in his July 9 presentation at Bangor University in Bangor, Wales that Tennyson was essentially battling against the culture of his own period as he was writing both “The Lady of Shalott” and *Idylls of the King*. He said, “England was losing its Englishness... its ties to the past.” Therefore, Arthurian literature “stood for... ideal values, an idea of order” (Lynch). Tennyson originally wrote “The Lady of Shalott” in 1832, and it was then published in 1833. Tennyson, however, was not through with the poem. Erik Gray writes in his essay “Getting It Wrong in ‘The Lady of Shalott’” that, “It has been generally been understood that Tennyson's hyper-sensitivity to criticism led him first to delay publication of his early poems and then to revise them extensively in response to negative comments from reviewers” (Gray 47). Therefore, ten years after it was written, in 1842, a new, heavily-revised version of the poem was published. Throughout the new version of the poem, Tennyson’s edits vary between single words and entire stanzas. The Lady’s agency (or lack of it) within the two versions of the poem fluctuates; in parts of the 1842 poem, she gains more control over herself, only to lose some of the agency she had originally shown in the 1832 poem. Even after his major editing, Tennyson’s depiction of the Lady, while exhibiting some signs of power, perpetuates the lack of agency she possessed in the original poem; this idea is exhibited in the elements that

Tennyson added to the original myth (the curse, the images of the mirror and the loom, the change in the Lady's family, and the Lady's use of song), as well as the figure of Lancelot.

Interestingly, Tennyson chose to focus on a relatively unknown woman from the country, rather than the more popular figures of knights and princes. His poem investigates unpolluted deeper faith and spirituality; as Lynch states, "The Lady of Shalott is all soul" (Lynch). The poem takes the form of a lyric ballad, rather than an epic, and it is almost unconnected to the larger construct of Arthurian literature, other than the tenuous link with Lancelot. In the poem, Tennyson deals mainly with "pressing Victorian concern with the social roles and contributions of women," especially the freedoms and constrictions within those roles (Peterson 25). Two such freedoms are power and agency; while the Lady in the poem has moments where she gains power over situation, she never fully gains agency.

According to Gray, "Tennyson claimed to have been unaware of the full version of the Elaine legend when he composed the earlier poem" (Gray 53). Therefore, the story of Elaine as told by Sir Thomas Malory is not much of an influence; rather, Tennyson based the poem off of French and Italian stories from the 1220s and early 1800s, respectively (Lynch). After using those stories as a foundation, Tennyson added specific elements to flesh out his story: the curse, the images of the mirror and the loom, the change in the Lady's family, and the Lady's use of song, all of which play an interesting role in the Lady's possession of power and agency.

Beginning with one of the more basic changes, Tennyson's Lady is seemingly alone in the poem. While the French story that influenced him, *La Mort le roi Artu*, involved a father and two brothers, and the Italian story, *Cente novella antiche*, involved at least a father, the Lady of Shalott interacts with no one. Although the reapers in the fields hear her singing and know of her existence, to them she is more of an enigma rather than a person. They refer to her as a "fairy," a

possibly-magical person with whom they have no significant relationship (1832, 1842). Rather than portraying her with a family (even one that would not play a large part in the story), she is by herself, a situation that becomes both empowering and disempowering. While she can make her own choices within the boundaries of the curse without anyone holding her back, she lacks a support system, or at the very least, companionship. Without other people with whom she can interact, she becomes one step removed from reality. In a way, her family is replaced with the curse: while she has some reign of agency in her life for minor decisions, her major life decisions are dictated for her by the curse, in the way that her father and/or brothers would have dictated them had they existed.

The curse itself is interesting in that its origins and limits remain a mystery, even by the end of the poem. Some power—with unknown roots—holds sway over the Lady. Even the Lady herself does not know who has casted the spell, giving her a sense of powerlessness over her own life. Without knowing the origins of the curse, there is no way for her to combat it, or even to test its limits. Howard Pyle writes in the afterword to his novel *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* that in most cases of Arthurian literature, “Women and female fairies marry when and whom they choose,” (Pyle 201). Unlike those characters, however, the Lady cannot even leave her tower, let alone consider the option of marrying.

The poem hints that there was a time in which the Lady thought about stopping her weaving, but a mysterious whisperer that holds power over her forced her to go on: “She has heard a whisper say,/A curse is on her if she stay/To look down to Camelot./She knows not what the curse may be,/And so she weaveth steadily...” (1842). The first version of the poem does not mention the whisper; even by adding this “answer” to the possible origin of the curse, Tennyson makes the curse’s origins more mysterious. Additionally, he gives a voice to the force that is

taking power from the Lady. Had the whisper belonged to a male sorcerer, it would bring its own set of issues, such as the dominance of men over women. However, it could also be possible that this whisper belongs to a female sorceress—most of the female sorcerers in Arthurian tales use their powers to subjugate others. As Pyle says, “Female magic is powerful,” and Arthurian women like Morgan le Fay and Vivien often use those powers against others. However, it remains a mystery throughout the poem as to whether or not the whisper is gendered, and to whom (or what) it belongs. Regardless, the whisper—and its curse—keep the Lady from fully gaining agency in the poem.

Interestingly, the final two lines of the stanza describing the curse differ between the versions of the poem. Gray observes that “Its most significant alteration, as a number of critics have noted, regards the phrasing of the curse,” (Gray 51). In the 1832 version, after describing the curse, the line reads, “Therefore no other care hath she,” while the 1842 version says, “And little other care hath she.” While the wording in these lines is similar, the meaning changes considerably. In the first version, the Lady has no other worries or goals due to the threat of the curse hanging over her, whereas in the second version, the “little care” she has for anything else is simply in addition to her worries about the curse. This change is significant, as the second version gives her a little more agency; it is her choice to have fewer cares outside of weaving her tapestry, rather than having no choice at all due to the curse’s mysterious origins and constant threat.

Additionally, Gray points out that her agency is compromised because whether or not she stays, she is still cursed. The 1832 version of the poem reads: “A curse is on her, if she stay/Her weaving, either night or day,/To look down to Camelot” (1832). Those lines change in the 1842 version: “A curse is on her if she stay/To look down to Camelot” (1842). Gray explains the

significance of this change, saying that, “The Lady seems to be cursed whether she goes or stays, whether she stops to look or delays her look” (Gray 52). The ambiguity of the revised lines further weakens the Lady; even if she makes the conscious decision to set off the curse and live her life freely in the time allotted, it matters less, because either way she is destined to die.

Additionally, once the curse is broken and the Lady makes the choice to go in the boat towards Camelot, she is likened to a man, which significantly reduces the impact of the Lady making the decision herself. Rather than that moment being an empowering one for a female character, she is instead masculinized: “Like some bold seer in a trance,/Seeing all his own mischance—/With a glassy countenance/Did she look to Camelot” (1842). Here, Tennyson is comparing her to a figure of prestige and power: he would later use the lines describing the Lady in that stanza to describe Merlin in “Merlin and Vivien” (Gray 48). While that suggests that the Lady may possess some of Merlin’s power (or, at least, that in that moment she perhaps has as much free will as he does), the figure to which she is compared must be male, insinuating that as a young female (even with the precedence of female sorceresses) she could not be as powerful as someone like Merlin (Lynch). Furthermore, in the original version of the poem, she is described in that stanza as “Mute, with a glassy countenance” (1832). Deleting that adjective from the second version gave the Lady more of a voice, literally. It could have also been possible to show the Lady herself with the “physical courage” Pyle discusses in his essay. As the poem is, Tennyson shows the Lady’s courage through her singing, both before and after the curse is broken.

Since the Lady must “weave by night and day,” she sings in order to pass the time (1832, 1842). Her songs are not lonely or sad; in fact, they are cheerful: “like an angel,” (1832) she sings a “song that echoes cheerly” (1842). This voice that she has in the beginning of the poem is

the only way the reapers know of her existence. It is her way of forming her own identity, as singing is the one thing she is described as doing other than weaving. Once the spell is broken and she begins her journey to Camelot, the Lady sings again; this time, her “last” song, or “deathsong,” is sorrowful, a “longdrawn carol, mournful, holy” (1832, 1842). The Lady is, in effect, orchestrating her own funeral. Doing so gives her power over her final moments, but the melancholy aspect of the song shows how little power she employs over the overall situation. It is not stated in the poem whether or not the Lady could have fought the curse, but her eventual death in the boat serves as evidence that her destiny is most likely predetermined.

Two other images that Tennyson adds to the story are the mirror and the loom. While mirrors are often used by weavers, it is in order to see the front of the tapestries, as they work from the back (Lynch). The Lady, however, uses the mirror in order to catch a glimpse of the “real” world outside, since she cannot look out of the window. Because of this, the world she sees is a flipped image and therefore not the “real” world at all. Furthermore, when she first spies Lancelot, it is through a reflection in the water, removing her several times from actually interacting (or even really seeing) the real world. Like the issue of the erasure of her family, by removing her so many times from the “real” world, Tennyson is denying her an authentic living experience. Additionally, just as Lancelot does not know the “real her,” as is evidenced by his eulogy for her at the end of the poem, she does not actually know him; she dies for a man about whom she knows nothing.

As weaving and needlework are traditionally feminine jobs, it is significant that this is the work keeping the Lady trapped in her tower. Lynch argues that the Lady changes her own social status by leaving the loom behind—in other words, by refusing to adhere to traditional femininity, and by making the conscious decision to stop her weaving, she is showing control

over her destiny (Lynch). She is “is aware of the curse that hangs over her, and she brings it upon herself with a series of decisive actions” (Gray 45). However, it should be noted that the reason for her departure is not for herself, but for Lancelot. Rather than making the choice for herself, to stop living under the curse’s control, her story becomes dependent on a male figure, especially by the end of the 1842 version. Additionally, she is punished for her show of agency; instead of being able to live as she pleases, she is cursed to die, and therefore the initial amount of control she had over her destiny becomes inconsequential in the long run. Gray states, “The very moment when the Lady at last acts with whole-hearted determination is also the moment when she knowingly gives herself up to an outside force” (Gray 46). Furthermore, “She is abandoning the repetitious, perfectible craft of weaving and instead willfully entering a state in which she cannot assert her will—in which, crucially, she sees all her own mistakes and yet commits them anyway” (Gray 47). The act of breaking the curse is one of the more nebulous shows of agency in the poem; while she is able to “assert her will,” she is also subject to the “outside force,” the consequences of which she is unable to combat.

Throughout the majority of the poem, the names “Camelot” and “Shalott” are used in order to end stanzas. The two lines in each stanza with those words make up their own constant rhyme scheme throughout the poem. The only word in the poem that Tennyson rhymes with them is “Lancelot,” emphasizing his important role in the Lady’s story. Both versions of the poem use the same introduction to Lancelot’s character: “A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,/He rode between the barley-sheaves,/The sun came dazzling thro’ the leaves,/And flamed upon the brazen greaves/Of bold Sir Lancelot” (1832, 1842). The sudden change in wording, as well as the use of “bold” in the line, emphasizes Lancelot’s importance in the plot of the poem. It also

points to the idea that Camelot and Shalott are settings that become characters within the poem and serve significant purposes to the Lady, as their names are compared with Lancelot's.

Lancelot's role in setting off the curse points to the inequality of opportunity that is evident in the poem—inequality of both class and gender (Lynch). While the Lady *does* exist within a higher class—as is evidenced by her tower and the fact that she is weaving rather than working in the fields—she is not of a class high enough to be living within Camelot. While “some women are rulers with extensive property” who “exercise considerable authority,” the Lady does not seem to exercise much control over the people of Shalott (Pyle). Other than her tower, she does not have much in the way of finery; while in the 1832 version she owns a “pearl garland” and “velvet bed,” those belongings are edited out of the 1842 version. She is, essentially, an “impoverished and unknown country woman” (Lynch). Lancelot, on the other hand, is one of Arthur's famous knights; he exists in a high position in Camelot and has the power of mobility, whereas the Lady cannot leave her tower.

One of the most significant changes between the 1832 and 1842 versions of the poem is the final scene, when the people of Camelot gather around the Lady's boat. In the initial 1832 version, the Lady writes a letter detailing her life and the events leading to her death: “The web was woven curiously,/The charm is broken utterly,/Draw near and fear not, —this is I,/The Lady of Shalott” (1832). In this version, the Lady is claiming her identity. While she does not have any answers to the origins of her curse—“The web was woven curiously”—she is able to bring some closure to the people who regarded her as a fairy, or someone who could be heard but never seen: “Draw near and fear not.” Both in the letter and on the boat, the Lady claims her title and even in death gains power and control over her story, and performs acts she was unable to do in life (like interact with her people).

However, in the later version of the poem, there is no letter. Instead, the Lady simply writes her name on the prow of her boat, and it is Lancelot who makes the final speech: “But Lancelot mused a little space;/He said, ‘She has a lovely face;/God in his mercy lend her grace,/The Lady of Shalott’” (1842). Here, Lancelot is the character who shapes the Lady’s identity. One of Tennyson’s purposes in writing the poem was to explore “what a masculine perspective might offer to questions about women's nature, roles, influence, and mission” (Peterson 25-26). This idea is not only evident in Lancelot, but in the poem itself, written in Tennyson’s male perspective. In addition, the Lady’s story is not about the loom and curse as it is in the 1832 letter; instead, her identity is reduced to “She has a lovely face.” Gray states that, “Critical opinion concerning Lancelot's response is divided. A slight majority of critics considers his words to be culpably superficial and reductive, while a dissenting minority defends his speech as being, under the circumstances, as sensitively reflective as could be expected” (Gray 56). While that may be true, the elimination of the Lady’s letter takes away the little power she had after her death.

While the new edits to “The Lady of Shalott” may have given her more agency in some respects, overall the poem in both versions makes her weaker when there was room to give her more power. This treatment of the Lady is indicative of the overall treatment of women in the legend of King Arthur. The new elements in the 1842 version of the poem—the curse, the images of the mirror and the loom, the change in the Lady’s family, the Lady’s use of song, and the figure of Lancelot—are evidence that even after Tennyson’s major editing, his depiction of the Lady shows few moments of power while still perpetuating her overall lack of agency.

Works Cited

- Gray, Erik. "Getting It Wrong in 'The Lady of Shalott.'" *Victorian Poetry* 47.1 (2009): 45-59. Web.
- Lynch, Andrew. "The Lady of Shalott." Bangor University. Welsh Conference Room, Bangor, Wales. 9 July 2015. Lecture.
- Peterson, Linda H.. "Tennyson and the Ladies." *Victorian Poetry* 47.1 (2009): 25-43. Web.
- Pyle, Howard. "About the Book." *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*. New York: Signet Classics, 2006. 198-202. E-book.
- Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. "The Lady of Shalott (1832)." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, 2015. Web. 9 July 2015.
- Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. "The Lady of Shalott (1842)." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, 2015. Web. 9 July 2015.