Appropriation of Play in a Victorian Album: *Idylls of the King and Other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron*

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> . . .Gwendolen urged that instead of the mere tableau, there should be just enough acting of the scene to introduce the striking up of the music as a signal for her to step down and advance; when Leontes, instead of embracing her, was to kneel and kiss the hem of her garment, and so the curtain was to fall. . . Jarrett the village carpenter was absorbed in the preparations for an entertainment which, considering that it was an imitation of acting, was likely to be successful since we know from ancient fable that an imitation may have more chance of success than the original.[1]

George Eliot described this scene in her 1874 novel *Daniel Deronda*. In it, the characters prepare to perform a *tableau vivant*. In the same year as Eliot published her book, Julia Margaret Cameron created a series of photographs to illustrate Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. These photographs can be viewed as forms of *tableaux vivants*. Cameron presented these photographs in a volume which she titled *The Idylls of the King and Other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron*. It is this volume and its *tableau vivant* artifice which will be the focus of this paper. The book includes twelve large photographs measuring 13 3/4" x 10 1/2". Each is mounted on blue gray cardboard and signed and titled in Cameron's handwriting. The photographs are interleaved with the corresponding excerpts from Tennyson's poem, each also written in Cameron's hand.

Obvious artifice was employed by both Cameron and Tennyson in the creation of a medieval fantasy world. The dialogue between these artist's artifices enhances the *tableau vivant* play world found within the volume. The artifice as mediator which allows Cameron and her friends who viewed this volume to remain somewhat detached from the medieval scenes may be examined.

In the scene depicting the encounter of *Vivien and Merlin* (Figure 1), Cameron's husband, Charles Hay, and a woman simply known as "a lady visitor to Freshwater" were the models.[2] An alternate text page for this studio photograph contains the passage:

> For Merlin, over talk'd and overworn;
> Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept.
> Then, in one moment, she put forth the charm
> Of woven paces and of waving hands,
> And in the hollow oak he lay as dead.
> And lost to life and use and name and fame.[3]

In this idyll, the evil sorceress Vivien follows the wise magician Merlin into the woods, feigning love for the elder man. She does this in an attempt to convince Merlin to teach her an incantation. The spell which she seeks renders the object of the magic invisible to all except for the one who recited the incantation. Vivien's youthful enchantment wins out over Merlin's wisdom and he relinquishes the secret.[4] In this photograph, Vivien is frozen just as she prepares to cast a spell on Merlin which will change the course of Camelot forever.

In order to discuss this photograph, the tradition of the *tableau vivant* and its relationship to book illustrations must be explored. The *tableau vivant* was a popular Victorian parlor entertainment and Cameron herself was known to have directed such events in her own home. It entailed the use of elaborate costuming and props to recreate a theatrical setting. Each participant would be positioned in a pose illustrative of a climactic moment in a particular literary scene. The actors would then freeze in their positions for a few moments and allow the audience to admire the dramatic presentation. The players would thus become part of a living picture, or *tableau vivant.*

Generally, book illustrations could be seen as similar to *tableaux vivants* as they too are frozen visual representations of written stories. However, what sets *tableaux vivants* apart from many other Victorian book illustrations is that they are fractured from the original story. *Tableaux vivants* illustrate only

1 Georges Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 53.

2 Helmut Gernsheim, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work* (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1975) 43.

3 Julia Margaret Cameron, *Idylls of the King and Other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron* (Freshwater, 1874).

4 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (New York: MacMillan, 1935) 182-220.

one scene and are presented independently from the complete text. The *tableau vivant* was seen as an imitation of acting, rather than a conventional performance, as was described by Eliot. This artificiality did not allow for the complete fulfillment of a fantasy.

Cameron's volume more closely resembles the *tableau vivant* than other more conventional book illustrations. Although Cameron's photographs are related to the text, they are placed beside excerpts from the poem rather than inserted into the full textual model. The images are therefore isolated from the words. Cameron did not merely insert her images into Tennyson's already existing text structure. Instead, she excerpted finite portions of his text and placed it beside her images. She did not merely transcribe the writings of Tennyson, nor did she decompose them. She re-produced them. She isolated photographs from the full text written by Tennyson. However, she placed them in an album beside excerpts from the text. They are therefore divorced from their context as a part of a complete text and image cycle. As a *tableau vivant* isolates a moment in literature from the entire work or event, this volume isolates moments from Tennyson's poem. This prevents the viewer from reading the full story and further bars the viewer from full entry into the fantasy world.

The *Vivien and Merlin* scene is particularly striking in this isolation due to the nature of the photographic process. Photography freezes a moment for eternity. The moment which is frozen here is one in which action is *about* to happen. Vivien is *about* to place a spell on Merlin. The action has not yet taken place. In most myths, the villain is left behind after a confrontation with the hero is completed.[5] However, here, the reader must face Vivien's power. The story can not move on and refocus on the protagonist. This frozen action, therefore, does not merely serve to retain the reader's interest, it also reinforces the isolated character of this moment as fractured from the complete text.

This photograph does not merely mimic the *tableau vivant* in its use of isolated scenes. It also mirrors the *tableau vivant* in its creation of a stage-like presence. Vivien has her back to the camera. The lower third of the image is obscured so that the figures seem to be ungrounded. This creates a division between Spectator and Specter which emulates the stage separation of actor and audience. This separation denies the viewer full access to the scene. Like a guarded fortress, this photograph tempts the viewer to enter into it. Yet, simultaneously, with its division, it reminds the viewer of the impossibility of such an endeavor.

To enhance this staged presence, elements of the theatrical setting are overtly displayed. Cameron's studio is visible in the background. Props, such as the tree which was brought in from Cameron's yard, also reveal the artificiality of the scene. This overt inclusion of anachronistic details and elements of the contemporary world is also found in the *tableau vivant*. For instance, a character in the Eliot story suggests, "'Our dress won't signify,' Rex said laughingly, 'it will be more Shakespearian and romantic if Leontes looks like Napoleon and Paulina like a modern spinster.'"[6] Thus, modern elements insistently reveal themselves. This both enhances the artificiality of the scene and allows for an imitation rather than an original. Because of this, the fantasy is never completely fulfilled and the characters remain within a contrived playland.

The use of props in this volume is not solely the creation of Cameron. Tennyson also utilized artifice to enhance his appropriated text. In creating the *Idylls*, Tennyson placed Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century legend within the context of Victorian sensibilities.[7] In this way, he made the legend palatable for his contemporaries by highlighting sin as the ruin of all noble ideas.[8] As Tennyson himself proclaimed, "When I write an antique like this, I must put it into a frame—something modern about it."[9] Tennyson, too, denies full realization of the fantasy through the overt display of modern devices. This creates an intriguing layering of appropriation and artifice within this volume.

In order to understand Cameron's use of layered artifice, the *Vivien and Merlin* scene must be examined more explicitly. The tactile quality of the photograph is striking. Merlin's soft white hair lightly touches his thick black robe. Vivien's sumptuous jet black locks cascade down her milky-white dress.

It is not merely the tactile quality which makes the dress so enticing. Its signifying color is equally notable. Women in white have traditionally represented purity and innocence.[10] Yet, here, the white dress is worn by Vivien, the embodiment of evil. This convention of the white dress worn by a fallen woman was used by other pre-Raphaelite artists. The use of white in such images has traditionally been interpreted as a purification of the evil woman by cloaking her in virginal white.[11] However, in the Cameron photograph, the white dress may take on additional

5 Teresa deLauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 109-110.

6 Eliot 53.

7 Stephen Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* (London: Harvester Press, 1979) 97.

8 William Buckler *Victorian Imagination: Essays in Aesthetic Exploration* (New York: New York UP, 1980) 58.

9 J. M. Gray, "A Study in Idyll: Tennyson's 'The Coming of Arthur,'" *Renaissance and Medieval Studies* 14 (1970): 115.

10 Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1993) 154.

11 Griselda Pollock, *Visions and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 141-3.

meaning as it mirrors the white of Merlin's locks and beard. When worn by Merlin, this white is a conventional male symbol of wisdom. This mirroring of white could represent the transaction taking place within the story. Vivien is in the process of taking knowledge from Merlin and using it for her own purposes. She has broken a male linguistic code and taken it for her own. In accord with this newly acquired knowledge, she appropriates the masculine meaning of white. She wears the male white robe of wisdom. This robe of knowledge, by virtue of the fact that it is worn by a woman, takes on a sinister quality, appropriate for the villainess in this scene.

Vivien, then, significantly alters the connotation of the white dress.[12] It evolves into a robe of dangerous female power. Her power is a result of the knowledge which she has appropriated from Merlin.

This white dress is particularly vibrant in contrast to Vivien's mass of flowing black hair. This wild hair is appropriate to her role as a fallen woman and sorceress as can also be seen in the Rossetti painting. Such hair is often viewed as a symbol of entrapment.[13] Vivien uses her web of hair to entrap Merlin and steal his knowledge.

As the active element in the image, she further defies the conventional role allowed to women. She is not the passive female foil to the active male hero.[14] Rather, the camera is focused upon her active finger while her body is blurred. This forces the gaze to rest upon the power source, rather than on the traditionally coveted female body. Cameron's lens is focussed on the powerful finger. This charged digit punctures the space between Vivien and Merlin and calls attention to the unbridgeable gap between the two figures. Vivien is omnipotent, not only through what she does, but also through what she does not do. Her finger comes so temptingly close to Merlin's face, yet never touches it. Vivien is allowed to *not* touch. The viewer is prevented from enjoying the desired tactile quality. This yearning for touch is increased by the words "Vivien and Merlin, taken from life" which are written out in Cameron's handwriting. This leaves evidence of the touch which is allowed for the artist but denied to the viewer.[15] Vivien's strength is not in her feminine caress, but in her refusal to caress. This further places the sorceress outside of the accepted female sphere.

In consideration of this focus on a woman's power and knowledge, the overt artifice revealed by Cameron becomes important. It alters the seemingly subversive notion of the female appropriating knowledge from the male. The props and obviously staged presence reminds the viewer of the innocent playlike quality of the photograph. Cameron accomplishes this by placing the scene within the traditionally female realm of the *tableau vivant*. Cameron, like the woman in Eliot's story, remains within the acceptable space allowed to nineteenth century women of her class. Cameron is not creating a statement about Vivien, but rather playing with her as a director in a frozen *tableau vivant*. She is therefore not implicated as a reflection of the villainous Vivien. In this way, Cameron's appropriation of Tennyson's story is not threatening. Rather it is an innocuous translation of his story within the vocabulary allowed to women. It remains in a safely feminized realm.

The artifice also serves a secondary purpose. It reminds the viewer of the unreal quality of the scene. It is this same quality which is exaggerated by Tennyson's artifices. Both Cameron and Tennyson use artifice to appeal to Victorian sensibilities. Cameron's circle of friends, like many Victorians, romanticized the preindustrial past but were often unwilling to relinquish the technological advances on which they had learned to rely. They frequently viewed the middle ages through the structures of their industrialized world. As Eliot explained, an imitation may have more success than the original. Hence, the artifices present in this volume could have served a dual purpose for Cameron. They may have soothed Victorian viewers who preferred to view medievalism through an obviously artificial lens. Simultaneously, these elements could detach Cameron from affiliations with the evil Vivien. Cameron is able to offset the tangled hair, the white robes of knowledge, and the charged finger with fractured action, obvious props and *tableau vivant* artifice. Through these devices, Cameron controls the fantasy. In this way, the middle ages can be viewed from a safe distance. Simultaneously, Cameron asserts her position within the space allowed to Victorian women.

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12 Nina Auerbach, in *Woman and the Demon*, described Tennyson's Vivien as a serpentine woman who, like most of Tennyson's female characters, is non-existent in a real world and can only be placed within a spiritual realm. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982) 64.

13 Elizabeth Gitter, "The Power of a Woman's Hair in the Victorian Imagination," *PMLA* 99 (1984): 951.

14 For a discussion of these conventions, see Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: McMillan, 1989) 19.

15 This becomes all the more striking a contrast when Cameron's delight at the sensual result of pen touching paper is realized. See Lady Ritchie Thackeray, *From Friend to Friend* (London: John Murray, 1919) 7.

Figure 1. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Vivien and Merlin*, photograph, 1874, *Idylls of the King and Other Poems Illustrated by Julia Margaret Cameron*. From the copy in the Rare Book Collection, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.