INTRODUCTION

Tennyson occupies a unique position in the history of English Literature in its transition from the Romantic Age to the Victorian period. Grierson calls him "the heir of the Romantic Revival" by virtue of the age he was born in and because of his own sensibility and imagination. He had "outgrown Byron, he found Shelley thin, but he had learned something from Coleridge and Keats, and tried to learn something from Wordsworth; and he had a solider backing of classical scholarship than any of them." His interest in the classics, however, was not confined to mere scholarship. Its mythology had a special significance for him and he wrote a number of poems with myths as his subjects. One can guess the importance myths had for him from a verse in his prize-winning juvenile poem "Timbuctoo." He affirms that a "fable" is a repository of "men's hope and fears":

All the intricate and labyrinthine veins
Of the great vine of Fable, which, outspread
With growth of shadowing leaf and clusters rare,
Reacheth to every corner under Heaven,
Deep-rooted in the living soil of truth;
So that men's hopes and fears take refuge in
The fragrance of its complicated glooms,
And cool impleached twilights.

(11. 217–224)  


2. Ibid.

3. The Poems of Tennyson, p. 180. All subsequent citations from Tennyson's poems are from this book. Hereafter only line numbers will be given below the quoted verses.
What Tennyson says of fables is true of his own poems on Greek mythology. They embody the innermost secrets of his soul. They are a veiled expression of his own experiences, tensions and attitude towards art and life. An imaginative restructuring of situations that possibly triggered off the inspiration which blended the childhood haven of legend and lore with the immediate problems that confronted him reveals that, though bunched together in his early years, and sparsely and unevenly distributed from his middle years onwards, these poems invariably reflect the crises that beset him from time to time. They also have a metaphoric and symbolic unity. Poetic composition on the subject of Greek myths was not an academic exercise or recreation for him as it may have sometimes been for some erudite Victorian poets. It can be said that there was a very strong personal bond between the poet and these myths from his early childhood. He was initiated in Greek

4. "Swinburne was not interested in Atlanta, and still less in Erechtheus (whoever he was). Arnold admired Empedocles, as Tennyson admired Lucretius; but he cared nothing for Merope. He had to write a long preface explaining the story, and its previous treatments, and his reasons for choosing it; but its very style, so dull and dutiful... shows that the whole thing was a boring task for him."

classic by his father and was so fascinated by its mythology that he often lost himself in reverie, seeing in his mind's eye the image of the Trojan women "floating along the streets of Troy with their long dresses flying out behind them -- windy Troy." In a fragmentary poem, "Lines," he reminisces his day-dreams about Ilion on the shore of Kablethorpe:

Here often, when a child, I lay reclined,  
I took delight in this locality,  
Here stood the infant Ilion of the mind,  
And here the Grecian ships did seem to be.

(11. 1-4).

Such ruminative absorption transcended within him all sense of space and time and brought about an identification of the poet's self with mythical personages. This emotive involvement is a distinctively significant and unique feature of his treatment of Greek myths. It can be said that in later life, too, they were for him a refuge from the harsh realities of the world, a potion that invigorated his supped energy and provided for him a region of calm

5. Hallam Tennyson writes about Rev. Dr. Tennyson's contribution to his sons' education:

No doubt the children profited by the dominating force of their father's intellect. A Hebrew and Syriac scholar, he perfected himself in Greek, in order that he might teach his sons.

A Memoir, I, p. 16.

contemplation on matters of serious import. These poems are therefore crucial to an understanding of the poet.

Tennyson wrote thirteen poems on Greek mythical subjects. They are — "Hero to Leander"; "The Sea-Fairies"; "Ilion, Ilion"; "The Hesperides"; "The Lotos-Eaters"; "Oenone"; "Ulysses"; "Tithonus"; "Tiresias"; "Semele"; "Parnassus"; "Demeter and Persephone"; and "The Death of Oenone." A striking aspect of Tennyson criticism with regard to these poems is that though few in number they have not yet been studied together exclusively. Their numerical paucity seems to account for the scant attention paid to them as a group. Two out of even the thirteen poems listed above, "Ilion, Ilion" and "Semele," are incomplete pieces. This reduces the number of the complete ones to just eleven. They have, till now, received inadequate critical attention because their group identity has remained camouflaged by Tennyson's classicism.

7. It is noteworthy that Sir Charles Tennyson, in his preface to Six Tennyson Essays (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1954), p. vii, writes that in this work he tries to deal with aspects of Tennyson's poetry "which seem hitherto to have received inadequate consideration." But even he does not include Tennyson's Greek mythological poems amongst them.
There are articles on Tennyson's classical poems but since the critics have in view the wider canvas of Tennyson's classical tradition, their scope is not limited to the poet's treatment of Greek mythology. They take within their purview a broader frame inclusive of Tennyson's poems on classical writers like Lucretius and Virgil, his adaptation of classical prosody to English verse, and reflections of his classical scholarship in different ways in his non-mythical poems. This diffuseness of outlook detracts from a fuller attention to the group of poems on Greek myths. There are random studies of individual poems, singly, or in combination with other mythical or non-mythical ones. Apart from this, they have, at times, been studied together


All these critics have missed the cohesiveness, the metaphoric unity, and the note of sustained personal allegory in these poems.

9. "Ulysses" can be said to have received the greatest critical attention.
as part of a larger whole, as a link in the chain of a historical study of an era, or as an aspect of literature with Greek mythology or classicism as its main theme. Some of these studies are: Mythology and the Romantic Tradition by Douglas Bush, The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature by Gilbert Highet, and The Victorians and Ancient Greece by Richard Jenkyns. In Classical Echoes in Tennyson, W.T. Hadland shows the influence of the classics on the whole corpus of Tennyson's poetry.

Besides, critics like Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Harold Nicolson, P.F. Baum, J.H. Buckley, Philip Henderson and Christopher Ricks have merely touched upon certain aspects of these poems in passing in their assessment of Tennyson as a poet. However, the excellence and aesthetic quality of these poems have, by and large, been accepted by the twentieth-century critics. Clyde De Vane, in his introduction to Selections from Tennyson, says that whenever Tennyson treats the same

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10. Tennyson's poems on Greek mythology were criticised rather vehemently in the nineteenth century. This was mainly due to the rapid spread of education which resulted in an evergrowing reading public which wanted its leading poet to become their prophet and their guide. Tennyson was pressurized by the Apostles, the reviewers and the general public to shoulder the social responsibility of improving their morals. E.F. Shannon in Tennyson and the Reviewers (Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp.36,37,38, writes that Tennyson's predilection for antiquity and the classics brought forth complaints that he was merely "the poet of scholars, and not, as might have been ... the poet of the people." Critics accused him of frittering away the rare gift of genius "given to a man for a high and holy purpose..." and charged him for forgetting his "mission" as a poet and complained that he hardly alluded to the era.

It can be said that distance in time has made the perspective clearer and enabled the twentieth-century critics to gauge the true worth of these poems.
mood or subject in a modern form and again through a classical myth, his classical poem is almost invariably better. It is, therefore, surprising that a comprehensive study of poems under reference has not yet been attempted. Poems such as "Hero to Leander," "The Sea-Fairies," "Tir na nÓg," and "The Death of Oenone" have often been considered as his minor poems, while "Ilion, Ilion," "Parnassus," and "Semele" have not been commented upon though "Semele" shares the allegoric and symbolic features of his mythical poems on personages. The absence of any study on these poems as a cohesive group has motivated this investigation. The image of Tennyson as a poet of Greek myths has till now been an image in a silhouette against the background of the glowing tributes paid to "In Memoriam" and his other lyrical pieces. This study is an attempt to illumine the shaded mythic vision of the poet to discover his deep insight into the nature of Greek myths and his deftness in handling them.

These poems have been divided into two broad categories for the purpose of this study, viz., poems on mythical personages and poems on mythical places. They have been further regrouped into four cohesive thematic groups or sets. Each group has been given a heading which is based on a

common formal and thematic feature of the poems of the group or set. These sets are - (1) The Choric Songs: "The Sea-Fairies," "The Hesperides," and "The Lotos-Eaters." These poems comprise songs sung by a group of mythical characters. (2) Poems with Greek Mythical Heroines as Protagonists: "Hero to Leander," "Oenone," "Semelé," "Demeter and Persephone," and "The Death of Oenone." The dominant characteristic of these poems is a kind of lament by some heroines from the classics. (3) Poems with Greek Mythical Heroes as Protagonists: "Ulysses," "Tithonus," and "Tiresias." These poems are reflections on life by some heroes from the classics. (4) Poems on Greek Mythical Places: "Ilion, Ilion" and "Parnassus." This pair is seemingly related to mythical places instead of mythical personages and hence is distinct from the foregoing sets on personages.

Besides using Greek myths as subjects for his poems, Tennyson used them for ornamentation in his non-mythical poems. He also tried his hand at translating some passages from Greek epics.

This study is an endeavour to evaluate Tennyson's poems on Greek myths and show how the poet vitalizes these hoary tales of the past with a new life. These poems have
been analysed in the context of his other works and major contemporary issues. He makes them reflect some of the salient controversies of his age, viz., (a) social responsibility of the artist, (b) the problem of love and marriage, especially with relation to women, within the Victorian framework of society, (c) the growing vista of knowledge, the theory of evolution and its impact on society, and (d) the age-old conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism as envisaged in the Victorian era. While (b) and (c) are discussed at length in the second and third chapters of the thesis, (a) is the theme of the first chapter. Both (a) and (d) are, however, subterraneously present in nearly all his poems on personages. Since the conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism has been given sporadic attention in the main body of the present study it needs some elaboration at this stage.

Jenkyns says that some of the greatest Victorians experienced, not always consciously, a conflict between their passion for ancient Greece and their Christianity. He illustrates this with the following lines from a sonnet by Newman:

Why, wedded to the Lord, still yearns my heart
Towards these scenes of ancient heathen fame? 12

This conflict was not new, for the two currents of Hebraism and Hellenism flowed side by side, though in varying degrees, from Renaissance onwards. Schiller had initiated the controversy again with "The Gods of Greece" (1788). Hellenism, with its mythology, came in for a great deal of criticism in the Victorian era. The depictions of the pagan world as enchanting visions of "heaven on earth were false in fact and morally dangerous.\(^\text{13}\) Novels, like The Last Days of Pompeii (1834), Hypatia (1853), Ben Hur (1880), and Quo Vadis (1896), show the immorality of the pagans and try to establish that Rome fell because it was an immoral pagan empire.\(^\text{14}\) Tennyson did not join the fray. But his mythical poems reflect his attitude towards paganism and Christianity. As stated earlier, these poems mirror the poet's innermost tensions and aspirations. It can be said that Tennyson's treatment of Greek mythology brings forth his creative genius at its best.

The present study is divided into six chapters. The first three chapters are devoted to a detailed discussion of the first three sets of poems mentioned earlier and are

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entitled: "The Choric Songs," "Poems with Greek Mythical Heroines as Protagonists," and "Poems with Greek Mythical Heroes as Protagonists." The fourth chapter, "Poems on Mythical Places and Miscellaneous Uses of Greek Mythology," deals with the fourth set of poems as well as Tennyson's dabbling in translation of passages from Greek epics into English and his use of Greek mythology for ornamentation in his mythical and non-mythical poems. The fifth chapter consists of an analysis of the form, style, technique and Tennyson's experiments in it, in those highly symbolical mythological poems and is entitled "Form and Style." The sixth chapter, "Conclusion," sums up the analysis and deductions arrived at from the investigation.

Relevant excerpts from translations of the source myths have been given in the Appendix followed by a select bibliography.

15. I have taken the liberty to club the poems on mythical places with Tennyson's other uses of myths as I thought this set as rather insufficient for a full chapter.