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Emilia Di Rocco, Sublime and Tragic Fall: When Tiresias Met Athena,
thersites 3 (2016) 49-62.

Sublime and Tragic Fall: When Tiresias Met Athena

Emilia Di Rocco (Roma)

The Western cultural tradition has always been fascinated by the myth of Tiresias ever since the prophet first appeared in Homer's *Odyssey*,¹ where his meeting with Odysseus in Hades marks the beginning of his career in both literature and the arts. A quick look at the entry in *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* gives the reader an idea of the richness and fertility of this myth, and books such as the one by Gherardo Ugolini confirm the vitality of the Tiresias' story ever since antiquity². The mysteries surrounding the life of the most famous prophet of Antiquity are at the root of what Frank Kermode has called "the genesis of secrecy"³ and thus explain the survival of his myth up to the present day. The strong "necessity of upspringing",⁴ which has characterized Tiresias' story ever since classical times, has made readers and interpreters investigate the genesis of secrecy in search for a hidden meaning behind the mystery. This eventually resulted in new versions or rewritings of the original myth as a consequence of an attempt at fulfilling the narrative promises of the tale either according to expectations or in a totally unexpected way.

Callimachus: *Fifth Hymn. For the Bath of Pallas*

Among the many versions handed over by Antiquity to modernity, the one recorded by Callimachus in the *Fifth Hymn. For the Bath of Pallas* deserves

1 Tiresias is first described by Circe in Hom. Od. 10,490–495 and later appears in Hades (11,90ff.). I treated the myth of Tiresias in Di Rocco (2007).

2 *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* (1993); Ugolini (1995).

3 Kermode (1979). The discussion which follows is based on this book.

4 The expression comes from the title of the fourth chapter in Kermode's book where the author applies it to Gospel narrative and assumes that the character is a "source of opacity, of complex, various, and never definitive interpretation" (75). Starting from this assumption, Frank Kermodes argues that the pressure of narrative interpretation is the key to the literary development of new narrative that by itself "generates narrative beyond any immediate need, though the new narrative again takes its form from [...] more ancient texts" (99).

special attention because it touches upon one of the most enigmatic questions in human life, the relationship between man and the gods, one of the most inexhaustible sources of secrecy.⁵ The encounter between man and the gods – between Tiresias and Athena – hides that obscure sense which is at the root of the genesis of secrecy and results in the most tragic and at the same time most sublime of events. Callimachus tells the story as an *exemplum* to warn the Pelasgian men that they should not see Athena naked unwittingly, otherwise they will lose their eyesight (vv. 51–54):

[...] Pelasgian men.
beware lest unwitting you see the queen.
Whoever should see Pallas, the city's guardian, naked
shall look on this city of Argos the very last time.⁶

These lines shadow forth Tiresias' tragic destiny. According to this version of the myth, one day the Theban boy goes hunting with his dogs and while he is wandering on Helicon at midday, thirsting quite unspeakably, he comes to the Hippocrene fountain where Athena and his mother Chariclo are bathing. As soon as he sees the forbidden vision – naked Athena – the young hunter is struck blind and, desperate and in anguish, he is unable to speak. When the mother attacks the goddess, lamenting the too cruel punishment inflicted on her son, Athena explains that the act is irrevocable because according to Cronos' laws "whosoever discerns an immortal, when the god himself does not choose, / this man sees the god at a great price" (101–102). Tiresias, however, will receive a compensation for the loss of eyesight. Pallas acknowledges the role of the Fates in the boy's life, and promises his mother that she shall "make him a prophet renowned in posterity" (121), shall give him a staff to guide his feet, longevity, and shall make him conscious among the dead in the afterlife.

The fortuitous meeting between Tiresias and Pallas enacts the encounter between the human and the divine, which eventually will end up in tragedy.⁷

5 For other versions of the myth of Tiresias in Antiquity see Ugolini (1995). Besides the Odyssey, Pseudo-Hesiod's in the *Melampodia* and Ovid's in the *Metamorphoses* are among the most famous ones. For a detailed analysis of the myth see Brisson (1976).

6 All references and quotations from the Hymn are from Bulloch (1985).

7 Here and in the rest of the text I use the concepts of "tragedy" and "tragic" as explained by Calvo (2004).

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In this regard it is important to note that Tiresias meets naked Athena unwittingly, a circumstance anticipated in the warning to the Pelasgian men, together with the other two key points of the story, the nakedness of the goddess and the terrible punishment. Tragedy follows instantly upon seeing the goddess naked (78–82):

He unwittingly saw what god's law forbids.
Although angered Athena addressed him nonetheless:
'You shall never more take back your eyes. [...]'
She spoke, and night removed the boy's eyes.

At the goddess' word, the Theban immediately becomes blind and is struck dumb. He seems to have offended the goddess who traditionally is a friend to men, although she's unwilling to show them her body. Read through the lenses of Burke's "sublime" (a point on which I shall come back later), this is a magnificent event, since the poet shortens time to such an extent that the meeting between Tiresias and Athena coincides with blindness. There's no time to actually "see" the goddess' body: supreme light corresponds to extreme darkness. A tragic event is thus turned sublime, darkness being "more productive of sublime ideas than light".⁸

This is where secrecy is generated: Athena says that fate brought Everes' child that hard way, but what was that really took Tiresias to the well? And why should he be punished, if his was an involuntary gesture? The answer to all this hinges on a more fundamental dilemma which lies at the bottom of Tiresias' tragic fate: "What did Tiresias see?"

To seek an answer to these questions means to acknowledge the tale's "necessity of upspringing" and to penetrate the surface of the text in order to show and explain what it conceals. The search for the obscure sense behind Tiresias' destiny has to start from the place and the time of the day of the events. Wells and woods – the Hippocrene fountain on the Helicon in Callimachus' poem⁹ – are usually the domain of virgins and the setting of tragedies for men. As a symbolic place, the wood is the space of uncertainty, a boundless labyrinth full of dangers and populated by supernatural beings,

8 Burke (1998 [1757]) 121.

9 Both places are traditionally associated with poetry ever since Hesiod's *Theogony* (11, 1–34 for the Hippocrene and the Muses).

where man can only expect suffering.¹⁰ Here Tiresias as a hunter is an intruder and a threat because of the violence associated to his activity on the Helicon. As Forbes Irving writes, “the blinding of Tiresias after blundering in on the goddess Athena bathing is seen as Helicon’s revenge for his hunting”.¹¹ Moreover, the meeting with the goddess takes place at midday, the religious hour par excellence, when the gods appear to mankind.¹² Being an occasion for seduction and spell as well as dissolution and decay, this time of the day can have tragic consequences for man. All these elements contribute to create the uncanny atmosphere that permeates the events and forebodes the tragedy.

The question at the heart of the tragedy – “What did Tiresias see?” – has to do with the true nature of the goddess’ body.¹³ In Greek mythology Athena doesn’t seem to have a body, at least in the meaning we attach to the word. The gods decide the shape in which to reveal themselves to mankind as well as the proper degree of brightness or magnificence necessary to astonish but not to blind human beings, since to see them face to face is an experience which goes beyond human powers.¹⁴ The body of the gods defies being seen for what it really is; it is obscure to man and for this reason, as Saint Girons maintains, it is also sublime.¹⁵ The vision of the godhead is ephemeral but dangerous as the story of Tiresias shows:¹⁶ Everes’ son literally yields to the risk of darkness deriving from the midday aura.¹⁷ To see

10 On the woods see Forbes Irving (1990).

11 Forbes Irving (1990) 86.

12 For the midday quiet see Cailliois (1991).

13 In the framework hymn Callimachus emphasises the ambiguous nature of the goddess, pointing out both her masculine and her feminine traits: she is a goddess of war, but is also linked to fertility and sexuality; moreover *parthenos*, one of the epithets used to refer to her, draws our attention on the special meaning virginity has for her. On this see Loraux (1995).

14 On the body of the gods see Vernant (1992) 27–49 (chapter 1: “Mortals and Immortals: The Body of Divine”).

15 Saint Girons (2003 [1993]) 146.

16 The Tiresias story as told by Callimachus recalls the more famous parallel myth of Actaeon, that is actually mentioned in the Hymn (11, 107–118), and a fuller version of which appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Callimachus compares the destiny of Tiresias to that of Actaeon, emphasising the desperation of his parents to console Chariclo. See Bulloch (1985) 218–229 *ad* 107–118 for the use of Actaeon as a mythological *exemplum*.

17 Saint Girons (2003 [1993]) 146.

the goddess naked, albeit unwittingly, means to overstep the boundaries between the human and the divine: the Theban boy trespasses a limit, he meets divine wisdom – Pallas – and consequently deserves punishment. After having seen the “forbidden vision” in the full meridian light, Tiresias is wrapped up in darkness forever, since he has seen what he should not have seen, perhaps he has discovered the secret of the goddess, maybe the one about her body and that of the gods in general. The effects of Pallas’ apparition on the young Theban are immediate: it is the astonishment, the revelation of a force which turns man to stone, makes a thing of him while he still lives.¹⁸ This new condition can mean death: as Anthony W. Bulloch writes, “metaphorically applied ‘night’ [v.82] is something more extensive and more final than vague ‘darkness’, it is the night of death or near death”.¹⁹

Tiresias, however, is the victim of a tragic error since the Fates and an unspeakable thirst brought him to the Hippocrene. The meeting with Pallas is the fatal accomplishment of life, as the goddess remarks to Chariclo: the punishment is irrevocable “for so spun the threads of the Fates/ right at the time when you bore him” (104–105). Seen under this light, that of Tiresias is a “tragic experience”, it is that moment in life when “the unspeakable bursts open”, and everything “plunges into silence”.²⁰ The story of the Theban prophet’s fall draws our attention to the “sense of the tragic” since it enacts the fragility of the human condition. The boy is not responsible for what happens, his fall is caused by *hamartia* (“some great error”)²¹ which according to Aristotle brings about a reversal of events as the inevitable consequence of what happened before in the plot, that is a change from prosperity to misery.²² Callimachus’ version of the myth shows that the possibility of *hamartia* is immanent to human life, that “the tragic is part of the essence of human action as an alternative looming over the determination to act in

18 Weil (1987).

19 Bulloch (1985) 190.

20 In this regard see the fundamental study by Calvo (2004) esp. 103. Translations from the Italian are mine.

21 Aristot. Poet. 13,4,a16. For the English translation see Aristotle, Horace, Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated with and Introduction by T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth 1965) 48.

22 Ibid., 45, 48.

view of the good and happiness”.²³ The tragedy of Tiresias arouses pity in the “audience” (first of all through Chariclo’s reaction) thus producing a tragic effect, since there emerges a common ground because of which the audience participates in the tragedy acknowledging that they all are part of the “circle of that same unfathomableness of evil”, as Aristotle writes in his *Poetics*.²⁴ Tiresias’ tragic fate emphasises that “sense of human misery [...] which is the stamp of Greek genius”.²⁵ Through Tiresias’ fall the readers/audience acknowledge that the tragic is a constituent element of human life that for this reason rests on quite precarious foundations.

As one of the most fundamental concerns of humankind, coupled with the problem of man’s relationship to the godhead, this makes the Fifth Hymn an excellent rewriting of the story of Tiresias to bridge the gap between ancient and modern audiences.²⁶

Lord Alfred Tennyson: Tiresias

The myth of Tiresias casts many shadows on our cultural tradition. One of these reaches Victorian England where the laureate poet Alfred Lord Tennyson rewrites the story of the Theban prophet exploiting a significant aspect of Callimachus’ Hymn and conflating it with the myth of Moenecus in the *Phoenician Women*. In the Greek poem Athena is a voice and, since she embodies wisdom, to meet her means to meet divine wisdom.²⁷ To a Christian interpreter these aspects evoke a parallel with the God of the Old Testament who is also associated with Wisdom and reveals himself through his voice but, above all, cannot be seen face to face (Ex. 3 and 33).

This becomes even more important for Tennyson’s version of the story for the poet recalls Scripture right at the beginning. The opening of *Tiresias* (1885) – “I wish I were as in the years of old”²⁸ – echoes a line from the

23 Calvo (2004) 132.

24 Calvo (2004) 145.

25 Weil (1987) 52.

26 Callimachus’ version is based on a fragment by Pherecydes. For the Ancient sources of the myth see Ugolini (1995).

27 Moreover Athena has some of the attributes of biblical Wisdom. In this regard see 2 Sam 14,2 and Pr 1; 5; 11; 14.

28 A. Tennyson’s “Tiresias”, in: *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols., ed. by C. Ricks (Harlow 1987) 622–630. All quotations are from this edition.

“Song of Moses” in the Deuteronomy – “Remember the days of old, consider the year of many generations”,²⁹ thereby establishing a parallel between the Theban prophet and Moses. This hinges not only on prophecy or on the prophets’ function as mediators between their people and God, but – and this is far more important – on their almost ‘direct’ relationship with the godhead. Like Moses who ‘sees’ God on the Horeb,³⁰ Tiresias meets Athena on the Helicon, but instead of being the elect (like his biblical counterpart) he is punished because man can’t see the god’s face (as God tells Moses).³¹ Tiresias’ experience is similar to that of Moses: at the Hippocrene fountain Athena gives him the power to prophesy, thus making him a mediator between mankind and the gods. Likewise God chooses Moses as the leader who will guide his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. In Tennyson’s version of the Tiresias’ myth, however, prophecy is not a gift of the goddess; it is a punishment instead. Moreover, as we shall see, Athena is not a voice anymore but has a body.

In *Tiresias* echoes from Scripture merge with the Greek tradition, as the poet makes clear from the beginning. If on the one hand the first line refers the reader to the Bible, on the other hand in the first version of the opening stanza there is an explicit reference to Tennyson’s *Ulysses* (1842):

I wish I were as in the days of old,
Ere my smooth cheek darkened with youthful down,
While yet the blessed daylight made itself
Ruddy within the eaves of sight, before
I looked upon divinity unveiled
And wisdom naked – when my mind was set
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.³²

The last two lines, that eventually will be deleted from the poem and will be used in *Ulysses*, show that for Tennyson Ulysses and Tiresias share that same

29 Deut 32,7. All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version.

30 The reference is to the episode of the “burning bush” in Ex. 3.

31 In *Exodus* Moses hides his face when God speaks from the burning bush (3,6) and later the Lord tells the prophet that no man shall see Him and live (33,20).

32 A. Tennyson, *The Manuscripts at Trinity College Cambridge*, ed. by A. Day/C. Ricks (New York/London 1988) notebook 15.

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thirst for knowledge that guides their life. “To follow knowledge like a sinking star” summarizes Tiresias’ experience in the final version of the poem where the image significantly disappears. The line just quoted might be a symbol of the curve of the prophet’s life, when we remember that in the poem with the same title to follow knowledge, for Ulysses, means to go west, towards sunset and darkness. For Tiresias this results in a movement towards death and blindness.

The prophet is characterized by a strong desire to go beyond the limits set to human knowledge, to penetrate the hidden meanings of things and the secrets of the gods, as it becomes clear in the final version of the opening lines of the poem (1–8):

I wish I were as in the years of old,
While yet the blessed daylight made itself
Ruddy thro’ both the roofs of sight, and woke
These eyes, now dull, but then so keen to seek
The meanings ambush’d under all they saw,
The flight of birds, the flame of sacrifice,
What omens may foreshadow fate to man
And woman, and the secret of the Gods.

Curiositas is the key word for the experience of Tennyson’s Tiresias, and eventually it will lead to tragedy. Compared to the first version, here the poet removes any hint to the tragic experience of his character while drawing the attention of the reader to his most famous features, such as ornitomancy and pyromancy. The “secrecy” implicit in this passage drives us to ask ourselves the reason for Tiresias’ blindness and for his desire to discover the secrets of the gods, to seek an explanation to his yearn for higher knowledge, almost a sort of mystical knowledge coming directly from the gods. From this point on, Tiresias starts to tell the story of his life (17–23):

A tale, that told to me,
When but thine age, by age as winter-white
As mine is now, amazed, but made me yearn
For larger glimpses of that more than man
Which rolls the heavens, and lifts, and lays the deep,
Yet loves and hates with mortal hates and loves,
And moves unseen among the ways of men.

Undoubtedly here emerges a strong desire to see God, the God of the Old Testament, as the distant echo from Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the last line suggests.³³ The use of the capital letter at line 28 seems to confirm all this, when Tiresias says that as a wanderer on Helicon his wont "was more to scale the highest of heights/ With some strange hope to see the nearer God" (27–28). In less than thirty lines we have a full scale portrait of Tiresias who is characterized by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. The Theban here does not meet Athena "unwittingly", he "wants to see" God, and both the setting – Helicon – and his "strange hope" prepare us for something extraordinary to happen. This is how "*das Unheimliche*"³⁴ – the uncanny – enters the poem and Tiresias' life: sick for shadow in the "noonday crag", he follows "a torrent till its myriad falls/Found silence in the hollows underneath" (36–37), and meets his tragic destiny. This is the main change to Callimachus' version: here man's footsteps are guided by his thirst for knowledge, by his yearn "to see the nearer God". This is human *hybris*, the will to go beyond the limits set to man, and this is what takes Tiresias vis-à-vis Athena. The event will forever wrap up the future prophet with that shadow he has been seeking on Helicon at midday, and that means eternal blindness and darkness.

The description of the meeting between Tiresias and Pallas emphasises the contrast between the dazzling light of the goddess' body and the darkness that descends on man's eyes (38–47):

There in a secret olive-glade I saw
Pallas Athene climbing from the bath
In anger; yet one glittering foot disturbed
The lucid well; one snowy knee was prest
Against the margin flowers; a dreadful light
Came from her golden hair, her golden helm
And all her golden armour on the grass,
And from her virgin breast, and virgin eyes
Remaining fixt on mine, till mine grew dark
For ever, ...

33 Line 23 is clearly reminiscent of Milton's "And justify the ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost*, Bk. 1 l. 25).

34 I refer her to Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919).

When we read these lines keeping in mind Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, we realize that the dazzling light emanating from Athena's body transforms a tragic event into a sublime one. Writing about the use of light for the purpose of the sublime, Burke observes that

[...] such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea. [...] A quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect. But darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light.³⁵

In this regard, what Burke says later about the contrast between light and darkness in Milton is also important, since the poet of *Paradise Lost* never loses sight of it, not even

when he describes the light and glory which flows from the divine presence; a light which by its very excess is converted into a species of darkness. [...] Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness.³⁶

When read from this point of view, Tennyson's version of the story of Tiresias becomes a magnificent event thanks to the profusion of light coming from the body of the goddess, a dazzling and overwhelming light like that of the sun which blinds man and makes the event sublime. Unlike Callimachus however, where light and darkness almost coincide, Tennyson implies that the action takes some time when he has Tiresias say "till mine grew dark" (46) with reference to his eyes, and actually the prophet has time to see the body of the goddess.

Athena here is not only a voice anymore, and now that he is blind the prophet still remembers the glittering foot and the snowy knee, the golden hair, the virgin breast, and "the virgin eyes/Remaining fixt on mine, till mine grew dark / For ever" (45–47): dazzling light is thus actually turned into "some species of darkness". The consequences of the vision are quite different compared to those in the Greek Hymn: Athena has no great

35 Burke (1998 [1757]) 120–121.

36 Burke (1998 [1757]) 121.

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reward to give to the Theban, she inflicts punishment instead. Prophecy does not mean greater power at all, since although Tiresias becomes a prophet nobody will believe him (48–49):

‘Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much,
And speak the truth that no man may believe.’

All he is left with, after the “forbidden” vision, is the memory of the goddess’ body, of her beauty which surpasses works of art (50–53):

[...] in the hidden world of sight, that lives
Behind this darkness, I behold her still,
Beyond all work of those who carve the stone,
Beyond all dreams of Godlike womanhood

There is no compensation for Tiresias, as he immediately makes clear (56–59):

Ineffable beauty, out of whom, at a glance,
And as it were, perforce, upon me flashed
the power of prophesying – but to me
No power – so chained and coupled with the curse
Of blindness and their unbelief, who heard
And heard not [...].³⁷

In front of Athena Tiresias is like one of those fools who in the Old Testament cannot stand in God’s sight and therefore fall into darkness.³⁸ Although he becomes blind, however, the Theban acquires a sort of inner eye that reveals to him “a hidden world of sight” (50) where he can still behold the goddess.

37 Athena is dazzling light, like the God of the Old Testament who is associated with light and in Ps 104 appears clothed “with honour and majesty”, and covered “with light as with a garment” (1–2).

38 See for instance Ps 5,5: “The foolish shall not stand in thy sight”.

Conclusion: Man and the Gods

The gods never show their face to human beings, because this would mean to gaze at each other and be on the same level with them. Tennyson makes this point explicit when he has the Theban say that Pallas' virgin eyes remained "fixt" on his (46), thus implying that they are gazing at each other. The tragic events in *Tiresias* show what the consequences are when this happens. In this regard an epigraph to a statue of Pallas' at Sais, in Egypt, mentioned by Plutarch might be useful: "I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle".³⁹ Particularly significant for Tennyson's version is the sentence Proclus adds when in his commentary to Plato's *Timaeus* he quotes this same inscription:

I am the present, the future, and the past. Nobody has removed the covering of my cloak. The fruit that I have brought forth the Sun has generated.⁴⁰

According to this last passage, Athena is the source of light. For this reason no one can lift the goddess garment or, even worse, behold her naked: to do this means to break a divine law and face dire consequences.

The Greek goddess, like the God of the Old Testament, does not reveal her identity. We already pointed out a similarity between the Greek goddess and the Christian God, and the two passages quoted above have been equated with the Lord's words in Exodus 3,14.⁴¹ Although he does not agree with Reinhold's equation of the epigraph referred to by Plutarch with the formula for God's name in Exodus,⁴² Assmann subscribes to his interpretation of the two passages as a revelation of anonymity:

The essence of the deities is all too-encompassing to be referred to by name, and this kind of anonymity forms the common denominator of both formulas.⁴³

39 Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 354c. In this regard see also Assmann (1998) in particular 91–143 (chapter 4, "The Moses Discourse in the Eighteenth Century").

40 Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, ed. and transl. by H. Tarrant (Cambridge 2006) Vol. 1, Bk. 1, "Proclus on the Socratic State and Atlantis", 192.

41 Reinhold (1787) quoted in Assmann (1998) 116.

42 Ex. 3,14.

43 Assmann (1998) 120.

Any resemblance between Athena and the God of the Old Testament, however, seems to end here. Consequently Tiresias' path diverges from that of Moses: whereas the latter, who complies with the Law, is God's chosen and will lead His people to the Promised Land, the former does not comply with the law of the gods and is therefore punished. Not only is he condemned to eternal darkness, but he is also destined to speak in vain to his people. His power of prophecy is no power at all to him: his mediating function with the gods is doomed to failure, and men will have to look for some other means to obtain salvation from the gods. Thebes and the Thebans shall be saved by the virtue of Moeneceus, as Tiresias remarks in the poem: "only in thy virtue lies / The saving of our Thebes" (106–107). The prophet, aware that he has no real power among men in modern times, can only hope to spend the rest of his life in the islands of the blessed, in the realm of poetry, amid "the famous kings of old" (163), hunters and warrior kings who strive for glory while the golden lyre sounds heroic hymns.⁴⁴ Tennyson's Tiresias is not a victim of a tragic error, he is willing to see and to know, but his strong desire results in knowledge which is useless to man, and therefore at the end of the poem we might ask a question even more fundamental than that at the heart of Callimachus' hymn: "Why prophets in a desolate time?"

44 For an extensive discussion of the second part of Tennyson's poem and other issues raised in it see Di Rocco (2007) 295–300.

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