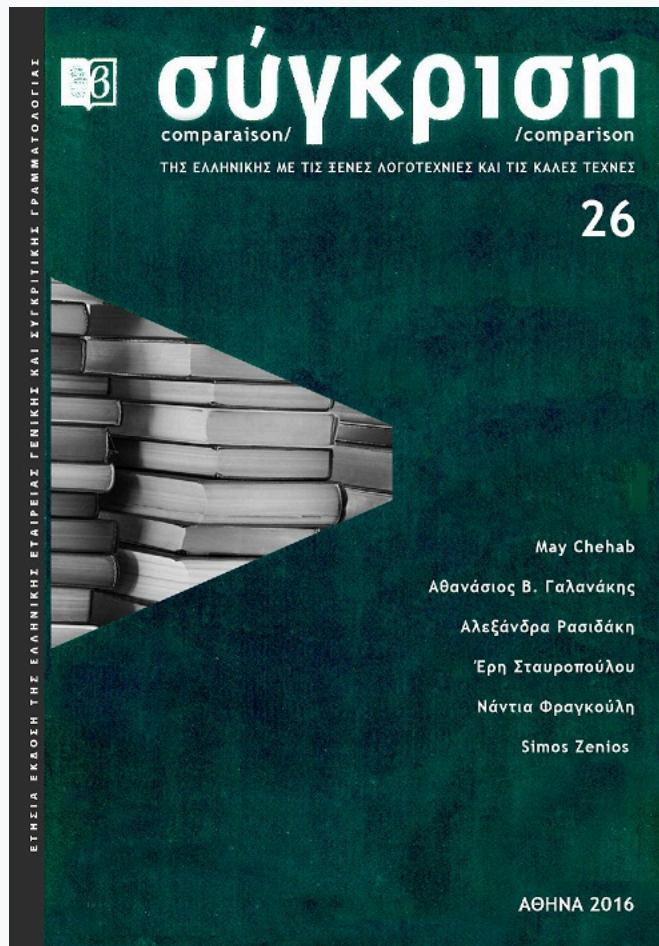


Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison

Τόμ. 26 (2016)



Leonee Ormond (ed.), *The Reception of Alfred Tennyson in Europe. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. 424.*

Sarah Ekdawi

doi: [10.12681/comparison.16008](https://doi.org/10.12681/comparison.16008)

Copyright © 2018, Sarah Ekdawi



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Ekdawi, S. (2018). Leonee Ormond (ed.), *The Reception of Alfred Tennyson in Europe. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. 424. Σύγκριση/Comparaison/Comparison, 26, 102–106.*
<https://doi.org/10.12681/comparison.16008>

Leonee Ormond (ed.), *The Reception of Alfred Tennyson in Europe*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. 424.

The present volume is a collection of studies by different authors, each focusing on the reception of Tennyson in a particular European country. The countries represented are: France (two chapters), Italy (two chapters), Spain, Portugal, Germany, Russia, Bulgaria and Greece (two chapters), in that order. Where two chapters are devoted to the same country, widely differing aspects and perspectives are on offer. A surprisingly large range of other countries, including Belgium, Hungary and Finland, have multiple entries in the extremely useful and detailed Timeline (pp.xvii-xlx) alongside the countries included in the study, which gives an excellent overview of major and minor (i.e. now long-forgotten) cultural responses to this underrated and unfashionable European bard.

The reception of Tennyson in Europe is far from straightforward, and this book addresses a major gap in Comparative/Reception studies. The lack of studies of Tennyson's reception in Europe turns out to reflect the overall paucity of the reception itself. Many convincing reasons are advanced in the various chapters for Tennyson's lack of stature outside the country of his birth, the main one being the various ways in which his poetic oeuvre, coloured by (mis)perceptions of his personality, social class and national standing, suffered by comparison to Byron's.

The volume opens with a very informative introduction, which does far more than merely summarise the contributions, and sets the tone for a seminal and wide-ranging collection of studies. Drawing together the threads of the chapters to follow, Leonee Ormond presents an opening discussion of Tennyson's European reputation and the trends, reasons and preferences behind it. Not least among these is the inherent difficulty of his poetry for translators (p. 3).

All the chapters are, without exception, meticulously researched, logically organised and original. This in itself is a rare achievement for a multi-author volume. One or two chapters by non-native contributors could have benefited from better (English language) editing, but on the whole the standard of writing ranges from acceptable to impressive. Different authors present different but equally engaging and interesting critical perspectives. One slight caveat, however, is their widely divergent understanding of translation theory. Some authors take the project of translating poetry to be a self-evident attempt at an 'accurate rendering' (which, as any translator knows, is a highly problematic position); others offer a more nuanced discussion. This does not detract from the reader's overall enjoyment and edification; indeed, it is an accurate reflection of contemporary attitudes in English and Comparative Literature Studies to translated poetry. In fact, one of the great pleasures of the volume is that it places these different viewpoints in dialogue.

Among the most unexpected findings to this reviewer was the relationship between Gustave Doré's illustrations of Tennyson's work and its reception. In one particular instance, illustrations of one text are transposed to another. Among the most entertaining revelations are the description of the Tennyson family's encounters with Russians. Given the range, depth and sheer volume of the research

represented here, this review will attempt to give an impression (rather than a comprehensive summary) of each chapter, focusing on areas that particularly caught the reviewer's interest.

The opening chapter (by Anne Kennedy Smith) is devoted to Tennyson's reception in France from 1833 (when the first review of Tennyson's poetry appeared there) to 2011 (when there were signs of a renewed interest in his work). The author surveys reviews, articles, translations and editions. Tennyson initially appears in Byron's shadow, but is regarded by his first French critic as 'the greatest English poet since Byron' (p. 22). Unfortunately, this first French critic, Philharète Chasles, later changed his tune (pp. 24-5). The 'difficulty' of Tennyson's verse, a complaint made also in England, soon becomes a refrain in his French reception (p. 23). The author traces Tennyson's influence on French poets, including Baudelaire (pp. 35-7), and Mallarmé (who experimented with translating Tennyson; p.50), and concludes with some comments on recent translations and other signs of renewed French interest in the English poet.

Gilles Soubigou's chapter, 'Gustave Doré: Interpreter of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*', opens, 'It has long been a common statement in both Great Britain and France that Doré's illustrations for Tennyson's first four poems of the *Idylls of the King*, originally published in 1859, contributed greatly to the spreading of the poet laureate's reputation around Europe.' (p. 63. I am afraid the reader will see what I mean about under-edited English). As there were no available French translations at the time, the unpublished translations from which Doré worked when selecting scenes to illustrate remain a matter of speculation (p. 66). Three of the illustrations are helpfully reproduced here (pp. 73, 75, 79), with perceptive commentary on their artistic techniques and qualities in relation to Tennyson's subject matter. Illustrated presentation copies of *Elaine*, both given and received by Queen Victoria, are discussed (p. 78), and Ruskin's hostile critical reception of Doré's illustrations of this particular idyll is cited. The use of Doré's engravings in Spain is explored in Chapter 5 (see below) and their impact in Russia is discussed in Chapter 8 (p. 254), further highlighting the overall significance of these for Tennyson's European reception.

Chapters 3 and 4 (Italy), both by Giuliana Peri, examine the Italian reception of Tennyson in relation to D'Annunzio and Italian Pre-Raphaelitism. The second of these, 'Sleeping Beauties and *Femmes Fatales*', examines Tennyson's influence on D'Annunzio, and includes some very interesting reflections on the Italian poet's appropriation of Tennysonian imagery and on the critical reception of his translation of 'The Sleeping Beauty' ('La bellezza dormente') as though it were an original poem (p. 109). Convincingly tracing echoes of Tennyson in D'Annunzio's journalism, Peri relates this to 'the fashionable *fin-de-siècle* Anglomania' of the time. Her exploration of D'Annunzio's adoption of lily imagery (including verbal echoes: 'liliale' for 'lily-like', p. 113) is a delight.

Chapter 5 (by Juan Miguel Zarandona) focuses on Tennyson's reception in Spain and offers an admirable account divided into sections that chronologically examine the reception of Tennyson by major figures in Spanish literature, translation and literary studies. An extraordinary finding reported here is how José Zorrilla, the

Castilian poet commissioned to translate the *Idylls of the King* by a publisher who had bought the rights to reproduce Doré's illustrations, goes to Barcelona, gets distracted and ends up writing a verse history of Catalonia instead. The publisher surprisingly agrees to publish this completely unrelated work, using Doré's engravings to illustrate Catalan history (pp. 126-7). The resourceful translator/historian somehow contrived to force-fit all but one of Doré's pictures to his new topic; apparently, the image for 'Merlin Paints the Young Knight's Shield' proved too much even for his creative abilities.

Zarandona concludes that despite the number and range of those involved, the reception of Tennyson in Spain has characteristically been 'minor', 'marginal' and even 'very poor', as there is not one full translation of any of his major poems into Spanish (p. 173). Similarly, the author of Chapter 6 (Portugal; Jorge Bastos da Silva) concludes that appreciation of Tennyson has come late to Portugal (p. 176) and the poet has fared slightly better in scholarship than in translation (p.179). Opening with a survey of translations of Tennyson into Portuguese and closing with a survey of Tennyson scholarship in Portugal, Jorge Bastos da Silva argues that dominant trends in Portuguese literature (Romanticism and realism) in Tennyson's own time made it more hospitable to poets like Milton and Pope (pp.175-6).

Tennyson fared rather better in Germany (Chapter 7; Torsten Caeners), where he apparently ranked eleventh of the 'seventy-six most widely read English poets' in 1937 (p. 196) . The main explanation for this was the long-lived popularity of *Enoch Arden*. Viewed in his lifetime by German critics as 'a gifted poet, although more of a versifier than a true genius', Tennyson apparently suffered by comparison with both Byron and Browning (p. 197). Negative descriptions of Tennyson's personality and even physical appearance (pp. 201-2) held sway, although Freiligarth's influential 1853 anthology, *The Rose, Thistle and Shamrock: A Selection of English Poetry, Chiefly Modern* (p.202) includes some of Tennyson's early short lyric poems (p. 204). The author compares Freiligarth's own translation of 'The Poet's Song' to the original English and to later German translations in some detail (pp.204-8). Many nineteenth- and early twentieth- century German critics found fault with Tennyson's supposed pro-establishment (and more specifically, pro-empire) politics and saw these reflected in his poetry, to its unfortunate detriment. This chapter also has interesting discussions of Tennyson's German obituaries (pp. 230-1) and a brief survey of German dissertations on Tennyson (p. 231). It concludes, rather depressingly, that 'Today, Tennyson is of interest in Germany only for [sic] a few specialists' and that this interest is, in any case, largely peripheral (p. 231). Seen as a 'woman's poet' and an establishment stooge, Tennyson's only real success in Germany was with *Enoch Arden*, and even this was limited.

In Russia (Chapter 8; Olga Sobolev), where English literature has been highly influential, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge and Keats 'have always remained firm favourites', whereas Tennyson's oeuvre has consistently failed to attract the same kind of acclaim (p. 233). Tennyson appears to have returned the compliment with interest: he is quoted as saying, 'I have hated Russia ever since I was born and I'll hate her till I die' (p. 234). In contrast to the German perception of Tennyson as a

reactionary conservative outlined in the preceding chapter, Tennyson's Russian persona is 'a convinced liberal and reformist' who loathed the tsarist regime. The passages that follow give very funny accounts of the Tennyson family's accidental encounters with Russian dignitaries (pp. 234-7), which I will not spoil here for the reader. Suffice it to say that Tennyson named his dog 'Karenina' (p. 236).

The Russia chapter includes fascinating commentary on Anglo-Russian relations in Tennyson's lifetime (p. 237, ff), before turning to the reception of British authors in Russian literary and cultural circles (p. 241, ff). By now, the reader is becoming ever less surprised to learn that Byron and Sir Walter Scott were much preferred by Europeans (p. 241), and sadly, once again, Tennyson turns out to have been a poor fit for the ambient (this time, Russian) cultural perception of a great poet (p. 242). In fact, Tennyson failed in all areas: he was not caught up in a '[struggle] against material circumstances'; never managed to 'rebel against bourgeois respectability' and compounded these failings by omitting to die young, romantically or in battle. He didn't even outrage any moral codes. Worst of all, in the absence of a scandalous lifestyle or fascinating personality, 'his work rested entirely on its own merits' (p. 242). Even so, there were instances of positive reception (e.g. p. 245), and the translator Mikhailov, who had his own agenda, rewrote 'Godiva' into Russian (a detailed comparison of part of this is given here, p. 247). Further interesting and detailed commentary on translations by other hands follows (pp. 250-264), and the last word is given to the poet himself, preceded by the transcription of its Russian version: 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'. This is easily the most entertaining chapter in the book.

Unfortunately, in contrast to the Russia chapter, the prose of the Bulgaria chapter (9; Yana Rowland) is somewhat ungainly, beginning with the observation that Bulgarian translations of Tennyson 'indicate a tendency to affirm major issues of ontological validity through the thematic importation of foreign literary material into the local Bulgarian context' on the part of the resident translators. Once again, this time via a discussion of the history of Bulgarian translations and studies, we learn that Tennyson today is confined (possibly for his own safety) to academic institutions, where at least his work remains a compulsory module for undergraduates studying Victorian literature (p.300).

The volume ends on a high, with two outstanding discussions of Tennyson in Greece by Georgia Gotsi (10) and David Ricks (11). Gotsi begins with Tennyson's absence from Greek letters and 'intermittent and tenuous presence in Greek intellectual life', as witnessed by translations, critical presentations of and references to his work (p. 303). Proceeding chronologically, she notes that Tennyson in nineteenth-century Greece was 'a known unknown' (p. 304), largely filtered through French and English sources. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced four different Greek renderings of *Enoch Arden*, which are discussed in some detail (pp. 312-5), including one in blank verse by the poet Lorentzos Maviles. Other leading Greek writers, notably Papadiamandis (p. 316-7), Kostas Ouranes (p. 319) and Napoleon Lapathiotis (p. 320) also translated small selections from Tennyson. 'Tears, Idle Tears', like *Enoch Arden*, is approached by

four different translators and even finds an echo in Cavafy's poem 'Candles' (p.318). The impact of Tennyson on Greece's most internationally celebrated literary authors, Cavafy and Kazantzakis, receives illuminating treatment in this study (pp.326-8). Gotsi argues that Tennyson's characteristic 'Englishness' of style and content was at odds with nineteenth century Greek national values (p. 329) - and, of course, Greece was enthralled by Byron, who died in the Greek War of Independence (pp. 331-2). She concludes with a perceptive account of the Greek verse forms used to translate (and sometimes distort) Tennyson (pp. 332-4).

In the final chapter, David Ricks focuses on the ways in which Cavafy's poetry engages with Tennyson's, noting that this important area has received little previous attention. Characterising Cavafy as 'Anglophone but [...] not exactly Anglophile' (p. 339), Ricks explores Cavafy's changing relationship with Tennyson, from initial antagonism to a kind of veiled homage. In particular, Tennyson's 'preoccupation with manly love and loss' (most obviously represented by *In Memoriam*) appealed to Cavafy (p. 339). Ricks traces Cavafy's greatest Tennysonian debt to the figures of Odysseus and Simeon Stylites and provides a detailed commentary on the uncollected poem 'Second Odyssey' in relation to Tennyson and Dante. Cavafy's use of Tennyson in his most celebrated published poem, 'Ithaca', is examined (pp.346-8) and his critique of Tennyson's 'St. Simeon Stylites' in an unpublished essay and the unpublished poem 'Simeon' (pp. 348-352) is discussed. Later unacknowledged Tennysonian borrowings are convincingly identified by Ricks in three of Cavafy's mature poems about love and loss: 'Melancholy of Jason Cleander', 'Myres: Alexandria AD 340' and 'By the House', all of which hold echoes of *In Memoriam* (pp. 348-356). Throughout his highly illuminating analysis, Ricks relies on his own excellent translations of Cavafy - a definite bonus for the reader.

As I have tried to demonstrate, *The Reception of Tennyson in Europe* is a rich and rewarding volume. It is difficult to imagine that any of the scholarship contained in it will become obsolete; rather, it lays the groundwork for any future approach to this fascinating and fruitful area.

Sarah Ekdawi

University of Oxford