“Singing of Death, and of Honour that cannot die”:
The Echoes of War-Cries in Tennyson’s *Maud*

Abstract

Victorian war poets have long been disparaged as arm-chair jingoists singing the glory of war and celebrating soldiers’ sacrifices. This paper seeks to reread the role of civilian poets and the function of home-front poetry during the Crimean war (1854-56). It will look at the challenges facing mid-century Victorians poets and examine the poetic strategies they deployed to engage with the politics of the war. As Queen Victoria’s Poet Laureate, Alfred Tennyson was expected by his contemporaries to compose war poems in a time of national crisis and he was conscious of his public role as the nation’s official spokesman. The Crimean crisis, however, presented special challenges to civilian poets. Unlike soldier-poets of the First World War (1914-18), few Victorian poets witnessed the overseas conflict or had first-hand experience of fighting; they were civilians who learned of the war through newspaper reports on the home-front. Following England’s declaration of war in March 1854, civilian poets tended to assume the role of the classical warrior poet Tyrtaeus, writing lyrics intended to arouse readers’ patriotic sentiment and advocate the government’s military campaign. However, contemporary reviewers often expressed skepticism regarding civilian poets’ experience and representation of the war. This study will explore the ways in which Tennyson, as Poet Laureate, rose to the poetic challenges of addressing the question of peace or war, a political debate on England’s military intervention, placing a particular emphasis on his treatment of Maud’s war song and its intertextuality with classical and contemporary war poems. It will demonstrate that the war poet in *Maud* (1855) is in fact a female one and that Tennyson’s deployment of the echoes of war-cries in the poem—not only outright political allusions to the military conflict but subtle poetic echoes—constitute the most distinctive quality of *Maud* as a Crimean war poem.

**Keywords:** The Crimean War (1854-56), Civilian poets, Alfred Tennyson, *Maud* (1855), Tyrtaeus, and Echo.