

Laureateship under the Reign of Queen Victoria

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Abstract

Many foreign learners of English in our Middle Eastern universities encounter terms such as poet laureate or laureateship without troubling themselves to search for the origin of these terms, or even taking enough time to specify their true meanings or identify the poets honoured with the title of poet laureate, and how the candidates are selected in Victorian times. This paper is designed to give answers to the above speculations. Upon reviewing many sources in this regard, we become sure that the title of Laureateship is often offered by the authority to a man of letters not necessary very well-known poet, but to a man who could serve the Queen by writing poems or articles celebrating her royal occasions and sharing her the same political taste.

Keywords: laureateship, Victorian poets, Queen Victoria, Victorian times

1. The Main Discussion

We believe that shedding light upon this topic is a useful and interesting undertaking in the present. This paper mainly focuses on the poets laureate of the Victorian period. It is especially designed to identify the poets laureate and explore how understanding their world may help answer some questions related to the criteria applied in selecting the candidates. We define laureateship as an honorary position granted by an authority to certain skilled poets of social importance to serve the royal court and commemorate royal occasions or celebrate the queen's victories and leadership. However, in the case of Queen Victoria, the criteria employed in selecting candidates changed slightly from the original approach used by previous leaders, emphasising politics over the candidate's literary merit. Laureateship became a political position offered by the Queen to poets loyal to authority more than to poets who excelled in the field of literature.

1.1 Definition and History

Dictionaries define 'laureate' as a figure worthy of great honour or distinction; "crowned or decked with laurels as a mark of honour"; something made of laurel springs, such as a wreath or crown; or one honoured or awarded a prize for greater achievement, especially in the arts or science. A laurel is an "aromatic evergreen tree or large shrubs with green, glossy leaves", known to the people of the Mediterranean region. In ancient Greece, the laurel was sacred to the god Apollo and used to craft crowns or wreaths of honour for poets and heroes (laureateship, Collins English Dictionary). The origins of the laureateship date back to "the ancient Greeks and Romans who, in their public games and ceremonies, crowned their favourite bards with laurel". History reveals that in the Capitaline Games, the annual Roman multi-sport events, the Roman emperor Domitian "placed a wreath of laurels upon the head of the successful" Statius, the famous Roman poet of the 1st century CE. "Statius was thrice crowned in this manner". History shows that the same custom was observed in Rome until about 393 A.D., when Theodosius suppressed it, decrying it as a heathen practice (Hamilton, 1879, p. 3).

In 1341, during the Middle Ages, the title laureate was conferred upon Francis Petrarch and "certain particulars of the ceremonies observed then have been preserved". At that time, the crown seems to have been made of laurel leaves, but it has since come to be composed of laurel along with vine leaves and cabbage, which, according to an old superstition, was an antidote to drunkenness (Hamilton, 1879, p. 2).

It was not easy in the Middle Ages for a poet to hold the title of laureate. He would already have to be a famous poet, and, in addition to that, he would have to undergo a special exam. Petrarch was the first scholar of his time and a first-class sonneteer. It is said that he had been chosen as "candidate for laureate because of his sonnets devoted to one of his beloveds, Laura. It is also said that he excelled at writing lyrics that were the subject of

admiration and imitation by many others in later eras. Petrarch, at the request of King Robert, passed an exam in literature and philosophy, and, as a result, he was granted the title of poet laureate” (Hamilton, 1879, p. 2).

In Britain, the title of poet laureate dates back to the appointment of Geoffrey Chaucer in the late fourteenth century. It is said that Chaucer was the first in England to receive the title and was later followed by Ben Jonson in 1616, during the reign of James I, and by John Dryden in 1668 (Holman & Snyder, 2013). Since that time, a long line of poets has held the title, and the awarding of the honour to poets continued without interruption until the Victorian period.

In England, the poet laureate was an official post usually conferred by an authority, mainly meant to serve the monarch by writing poems to “celebrate birthdays, marriages, coronations, military victories, and New Years’ events, where the poet who held the post would be attached to the royal household” (‘What is a Poet Laureate?’, 2013).

Lord Alfred Tennyson and William Wordsworth are considered two of the finest poets of their time. Wordsworth served as a bridge between the Victorian and the Romantic eras. Tennyson was a Victorian poet, though he had some Romantic characteristics. Both men eventually achieved the honour of being appointed poets laureate of England during the Victorian period.

2. Laureateship and the Victorian Poets

In the following discussion, we focus on the poets who were offered the laureateship by Queen Victoria, and those others who were not lucky enough to receive the title. It may be of interest to approach this discussion chronologically.

2.1 Robert Southey

In 1843, Robert Southey (1774-1843), a well-known “Romantic poet, who was one of the group called the Lake Poets, died and was buried at Keswick. Southey had been poet laureate for 30 years, from 1813 to his death in 1843. With his death, the Queen pressed for a new poet laureate for the monarchy” (Landry, 2011). It was said that William Wordsworth was the one best fit for the position at that time, for in addition to his fame as a leading poet in the Romantic period, he was considered a bridge between the Romantic and Victorian eras. Moreover, Wordsworth became very famous among educated people of his time and secured a high literary position in the Victorian era. Many Victorian poets imitated either his style of writing verse or his Romantic thoughts. Wordsworth “received many honorary degrees from many universities during his time. He received an honorary Doctorate of Civil Law in 1838 from Durham University and the same honour from Oxford University the next year. In 1842, the government awarded him a civil list pension amounting to 300 pounds a year” (Hood, p. 484).

2.2 William Wordsworth

At first, Wordsworth refused the offer, giving reasonable excuses. Indeed, when he was informed that he would hold the position of laureate in 1843, Wordsworth seemed unprepared for it, and “decided to refuse it on personal grounds. He nearly did not accept the position, declining it because he thought himself too old for the duties of the laureateship” (Gill, 1989, p. 409). He was in his early seventies when he was offered the post. However, the queen insisted that he accept and “sent a group from the royal court to make him change his mind and agree to the offer. Lord Chamberlain as well as Sir Robert Peel urged him to accept, ‘but when the Lord Chamberlain assured him that these were now “merely nominal” and Sir Robert Peel went further, insisting that the Queen wanted Wordsworth to accept on the understanding that “you shall have nothing required of you,” he could no longer refuse (Gill, p. 409). Under the demand of royal authority, Wordsworth accepted the post after his terms had been recognized. Lord Chamberlain felt that Wordsworth was ideal for the Laureateship. He wrote that ‘it gave him “very peculiar gratification to propose this mark of distinction on an Individual whose acceptance of it would shed additional luster upon an office in itself highly honourable” (Gill, 1989, p. 409).

Wordsworth accepted the offer with the understanding that he would not be able to contribute anything new to the field of poetry due to his old age. He was the laureate from the time of his appointment in 1843 to his death in 1850. At the time of his appointment, he was already past his prime as a poet. His greatest works had been written years before, so it was a title he held despite doing little more writing. According to Gill, “Honors were bestowed on him, but the crown, the Laureate’s wreath, did not come until he had fallen almost silent” (1989, p. 373). For Wordsworth, the Laureateship was more similar to a “lifetime achievement award’ than an active title,’ and there were more plaudits as he was honored, after originally refusing the title, ...although he brought no great commitment to that post” (Mahoney, 1997, p. 264).

Wordsworth told Queen Victoria that he would not write on demand but only when he was inspired, and the Queen agreed to his terms, urging him to write only for special royal events. Unfortunately, during his seven years in the position, no special royal events occurred (Plowman, www.Wordsworth.org/history/index)

2.3 Samuel Rogers

The death of William Wordsworth left the laureateship vacant. In spite of his great poetic achievements, Tennyson was not the authority's first choice for the laureateship, for, even at age fort-one, he was considered too young to hold the position, which was to last for life (Walters, 1893, p. 75). "There had been some speculation in the press as to the most likely candidates, and it was in fact Samuel Rogers (1763-1855)—a poet, banker, aesthete, author of the popular *Pleasures of Memory*, leading literary figure of the time, and friend of Wordsworth and Byron—who was first asked to succeed Wordsworth. Rogers received a letter from Prince Albert offering him the title".

The letter read as follows: "Prince Albert to Rogers. 'My dear Mr. Rogers, —The death of the lamented Mr. Wordsworth has vacated the office of Poet Laureate. Although the spirit of the times has put an end to the practice (at all times objectionable) of exacting laudatory Odes from the holder of that office, the Queen attaches importance to its maintenance from its historical antiquity and the means it affords to the Sovereign of a more personal connection with the Poets of the country through one of their chiefs. I am authorised, accordingly, to offer to you this honorary post, and can tell you that it will give Her Majesty great pleasure if it were accepted by one whom she has known so long, and who would so much adorn it; but that she would not have thought of offering it to you at your advanced age if any duties or trouble were attached to it. 'Believe me always, my dear Mr. Rogers,'"

'Yours truly, Albert.' (Clayden, 1889, p. 351)

"The tentative approach the Prince took to offering Rogers the laureateship suggests the potential candidate's reluctance to be restricted in his writing, either by the difficulties of working on commission or by the increased public interest which could prevent them from airing any unorthodox views. Like Wordsworth, Rogers' Romantic tendencies may have played a part in his unwillingness to become laureate. Unlike Wordsworth, however, Rogers actually refused the title, giving his old age as the reason (he was eighty-seven), and recommending Tennyson for the post".

Rogers' answer to Prince Albert's letter gives his old age as his reason for declining the offer:

Samuel Rogers. Prince Albert To

"How can you forgive me, Sir, for having so long delayed to answer a letter which I have had the honour to receive from your Royal Highness, but I was so affected by it as to be utterly unable to do justice to my feelings. Coming whence it came—in such words as were not soon to be forgotten—and under the sanction of one whose mind and whose countenance were from her earliest childhood no less heavenly than her voice—I felt as if it left me no alternative; but when I came to myself and reflected that nothing remained of me but my shadow—a shadow so soon to depart—my heart gave way, and after long deliberation and many conflicts within me, I am come, but with great reluctance, to the resolution that I must decline the offer,¹ but subscribing myself, with a gratitude that will not go but with the last beat of my heart",

'Yours ever most affectionately,

Samuel Rogers

(Clayden, 1889, p. 351)

2.4 Alfred Tennyson

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) suddenly received an order to accept the role of poet laureate at a time when he also was ill-prepared to hold it. He hesitated for some time before making his final decision.

He was unsure of whether or not to accept the offer. He recalled, "at last I wrote two letters, one accepting and one declining, and threw them on the table, and settled to decide which I should send after my dinner and bottle of port" (Martin, 1980, p. 352). He finally decided to accept. In 1850, when he was offered the laureateship, Tennyson was arguably at the height of his artistic success. His *Poems* (1842) and *The Princess* (1847) had both received favourable reviews, and earlier works of his, such as 'Ulysses' (1833), remained popular. Tennyson had completed 'In Memoriam' in 1849, and it was published just before his appointment as laureate. He was also popular among his fellow poets. In public support of Tennyson's claim to the position, the poet, essayist, and journalist, Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), who had a turbulent friendship with Keats and Shelley, wrote in the *London Journal* that Tennyson was "entitled to it above any other man in the kingdom, since of all living poets he is the

most gifted with the sovereign poetical faculty—imagination” (Walters, 1893, p. 76). However, it is said that Tennyson also had qualities which did not immediately recommend him as a public figure. He “subscribed to a type of pantheistic religious view which was incompatible with the standard Anglican Christianity, and he interested himself in what new evolutionary theorists were describing as the divide between God and Nature. Nevertheless, he was a genuine patriot who respected the royal family and felt great loyalty towards his country and the Empire. Furthermore, it is said that even before his appointment, the Queen expressed admiration for his poetry” (‘Tennyson as Poet Laureate’, 2013). It is clear that politics were more important to the Queen than religion when it came to the laureateship. Tennyson’s political loyalty to the Queen overshadowed his inconvenient religious ideas.

It is said that, in addition to its national effect, the publication of ‘In Memoriam’ helped Tennyson win the respect and admiration of the royal household; “Queen Victoria found comfort in the poem herself after the death of Prince Albert” (‘In Memoriam A.H.H.’, 2013).

Tennyson was named poet laureate on 19 November 1850 and presented at court on 6 March 1851. His first act in the role was to compose a dedicatory poem titled ‘To the Queen’:

“Revered, beloved—O you that hold A nobler office upon earth Than arms, or power of brain, or birth Could give the warrior kings of old,

Victoria,—since your Royal grace To one of less desert allows This laurel greener from the brows Of him that utter’d nothing base;

And leave us rulers of your blood As noble till the latest day! May children of our children say, ‘She wrought her people lasting good;

‘Her court was pure; her life serene; God gave her peace; her land reposed; A thousand claims to reverence closed In her as Mother, Wife, and Queen.”

(source: <http://home.att.net/%7ETennysonPoetry/ttq.htm>)

Throughout this poem, comprised of nine quatrains, Tennyson praises Queen Victoria and describes her as beloved, equipped with intelligence, and the product of noble birth: ‘Revered, beloved—O you that hold.’ By saying, ‘A nobler office upon earth’, he implies that she is the most important woman of the era. She is like spring, bringing good to the nation. He finally wishes her rule to continue and her dynasty to reign for ever. He looks at her as the ideal mother, wife, and queen who comes from the best blood: ‘And leave us rulers of your blood’. Then he again praises the English empire along with the English people. Tennyson does not forget to thank the Queen deeply for choosing him for this post of laureate.

In addition, the poem reveals hidden terms set forth by the authority for the poet laureate to fulfil. The poet the queen chooses to be the poet of the court must serve the court, celebrate royal occasions, work as a propagandist for the royal household, and serve as the queen’s literary representative in both educated circles and for the public of the country, praising the queen and supporting her in all decisions she makes and all actions she intends to carry out.

“Though Tennyson enjoyed the post, which came with a small annual allowance, his poetic output throughout the laureateship was patchy, and frequently divided the critics. Thoroughly fulfilling the public side of his role, he published some thirty patriotic and commemorative poems in addition to some of his most famous and ambitious works, such as *Maud* and *Idylls*. Modern critics, such as Christopher Ricks and Robert Hill, single out his ‘Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington’ as an example of his best commemorative writing. Hill calls it ‘one of the very few first-rate pieces of occasional verse in the language’, but notes that it was ‘almost universally condemned’ by critics at the time. Despite this criticism, it remained a favourite piece of Tennyson’s, and his son Hallam quoted the last line, ‘God accept him, Christ receive him!’, at the poet’s deathbed. Here, I quote from this great poem”:

BURY the Great Duke

With an empire’s lamentation,

Let us bury the Great Duke

To the noise of the mourning of a mighty nation,

Mourning when their leaders fall,

Warriors carry the warrior’s pall,

And sorrow darkens hamlet and hall.

Lawrence Binyon considers this poem “a fine example of the Horacian ode in English”, while Sir Harold Nicholson refers to it as ‘magnificent’. There is no doubt that nationality, as well as temperament and training, affect a reader’s response to this poem, which shows Tennyson’s faith in country, man, and God (Shannon, 1960, pp. 149-177).

Tennyson also published several poems to accompany royal events, such as ‘Ode to Alexandra of Demark’, upon Alexandra’s arrival in the country and her marriage to King Edward VII. For social occasions, he published works such as ‘Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition’, from which the following lines come:

O silent father of our Kings to be
Mourn’d in this golden hour of jubilee
For this, for all, we weep our thanks to thee!
The world-compelling plan was thine,
And, lo! The long laborious miles
Of palace. (quoted by Ledbetter, 2007)

The poem lists items on display, including tools, engines, fabrics, and inventions, ending with all items ‘mixt, as life is mixt with pain / The work of peace with works of war’ (Ledbetter, 2007, p. 157).

Of all the occasional pieces written by Tennyson, the most famous is ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, which achieved universal acclaim both upon its publication and over the course of Tennyson’s life. The story of its composition is told in Hallam Tennyson’s *Memoirs*, and proceeds as follows: “On 2 December, he wrote ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ in only a few minutes, after reading an article in the *Times* that included the phrase ‘someone had blundered’, and from there, the metre of the poem originated. Tennyson also wrote that the distinctive dactylic metre used throughout the poem, one of its most defining features and certainly a reason for its success and longevity, was influenced by the phrase, which appears in the poem verbatim”:

1.

Half a league, half a league, Half a league onward, All in the valley of Death Rode the six hundred. ‘Forward, the Light Brigade! ‘Charge for the guns!’ he said: Into the valley of Death Rode the six hundred.

2.

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!’ Was there a man dismay’d? Not tho’ the soldier knew Someone had blunder’d: Their’s not to make reply, Their’s not to reason why, Their’s but to do and die: Into the valley of Death Rode the six hundred.

However, despite Tennyson’s anecdote, many modern critics have found similarities between ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ and Michael Drayton’s ‘Agincourt’, published in 1605. “It is interesting to note that, in his 1855 revision of the poem, the line ‘Someone had blundered’ was removed, although Tennyson did later restore it under the encouragement of John Ruskin, who called it ‘precisely the most tragic line in the poem’. The battle at Balaklava captured the imagination of the British public and made a strong impression on Tennyson. Speaking of his poetic tribute to the Light Brigade, he said that ‘No writing of mine can add to the glory they have acquired in the Crimea’. After the poem’s publication in *The Examiner* in December 1854, copies were sent to buoy the spirits of troops still fighting in Crimea”.

“Queen Victoria’s admiration of Tennyson’s work only increased over the course of his laureateship, and, in 1884, he was made Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Freshwater. He accepted a peerage from Prime Minister William Gladstone in 1883, a decision which most likely stemmed from a desire to secure the future prosperity of his son rather than from any real interest in politics. He avoided party allegiance, adhered to a moderately liberal political ideology, and shared many views with Queen Victoria herself. Despite his political reticence, he remained a public figure and continued to write on many subjects until his death on 6 October 1892. The Queen wrote a personal note of condolence to his son, and the Prince of Wales requested that the Union flag be draped over the coffin. His funeral at Westminster Abbey was a national event, and there was a feeling that no suitable successor could be found amongst his contemporaries; indeed, the position fell vacant for four years before Alfred Austin was appointed. Many newspaper reports of the funeral emphasised the laureate’s devotion to his crown and country”.

“Strikingly, the funeral was for a figure whom the whole educated nation—rich and poor noble and simple—loved and honoured. Tennyson gained that level of supreme excellence which could belong only to one who reaches all people who can understand that he does not want merely to amuse them, give them an earthly

paradise of words, or lead them into an enchanted garden, but endeavours to take his part in civil life and serve the nation, if not with war-cries or acts of Parliament, then with a gift of song that teaches the duty of the citizen to his state” (Hallam Tennyson, pp. 467-468). Tennyson held the post from the time was forty-one until his death in 1903. During his tenure, he remained politically loyal to the Queen, and grateful for the position. He was also able to serve his country by publishing some patriotic poems to encourage soldiers in the battlefield and help secure victory for his country. In fact, during his term in the laureateship, Tennyson was able to serve not only the Queen and his country but himself. “As we have seen above, he published many poems to sustain the post and continue to distinguish himself in the literary circles of his time.” Ultimately, he achieved great success during his time as laureate and turned himself into an ideal poet and an example for all poets who would come to hold the laureateship in subsequent years.

2.5 Laureateship after Tennyson

In 1892, when Tennyson died, the position of laureate fell vacant, and it became necessary to look for someone else for the post. Peterson reviewed the possible candidates who assumed to be candidates for post:

“Even before Tennyson died in October 1892, speculation had begun about the next poet laureate and the future of the office. As early as May 1890 the *Fortnightly Review* published an anonymous assessment, “Tennyson: And After?,” which praised the high achievement of the nineteenth-century laureates, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Alfred Tennyson, and wondered whether any modern poet had comparable merit. The *Fortnightly* named the obvious candidates, as well as many less likely: Algernon Swinburne and William Morris, the most worthy poetically; George Meredith, Lord Lytton (“Owen Meredith”), Coventry Patmore, Edwin Arnold, Andrew Lang, and Austin Dobson, capable but less distinguished; Augusta Webster, Christina Rossetti, and F. Mary Robinson, chief among the women poets; and Lewis Morris and Alfred Austin, acknowledged contenders but dismissed by the *Fortnightly* as imaginatively and technically inferior. In this assessment, repeated in the *Review of Reviews* and debated for the next five years in the periodical press, Swinburne emerges as the first choice”. (Peterson, 2013)

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909) was “found to be the one who could potentially fill the positions at that time. Swinburne was a poet, playwright, novelist, and critic who had been born in London. He invented a special form of English verse called ‘the Roundel’. A form with three stanzas, each with three lines with the same number of syllables, a refrain after the first stanza and another after the last stanza, the Roundel had in total nine lines and two refrains. Swinburne wrote a book, titled *A Century Book*, to commemorate his invention. He achieved acclaim in circles of the educated and was nominated for the Noble Prize in literature many times between 1903 and again in 1909. It is said he was the most celebrated living poet of his time” (Roberts, 2005).

“His works and inventions in the field of English literature attracted the attention of Queen Victoria and informed her decide to offer him the laureateship. She told Gladstone, her Prime minister, ‘I am told that Mr Swinburne is the best poet in my dominions’. Unfortunately, however, Swinburne’s politics did not align with those of the queen and the ruling authority. He was a republican, and by reputation opposed certain views of the current royal household. Consequently, his name was cancelled from the list of candidates, and the prime minister had to look for someone else. Roberts writes that what the queen had not been told was that Swinburne was a passionate republican; Gladstone then judged him inappropriate for the post” (Roberts, 2005).

There was more speculation that the post of laureate might go to William Morris. “With the publication of ‘*Earthly Paradise*’ in 1870, William Morris had become an acclaimed poet throughout England. After the death of Lord Alfred Tennyson in 1892, Morris was reportedly a contender for the post of poet laureate of the United Kingdom. The works of poets laureate are officially recognized as nationally significant, an honour the monarch bestows at the recommendation of the prime minister. There was just one problem with Morris’s candidacy. By the 1890s, he had become an avid and well-known socialist and political agitator. He was particularly critical of British imperialism and the violent suppression of free speech by government authorities, and he was not shy about expressing his opinions. In 1887, he was arrested for his participation in the Bloody Sunday protests in Trafalgar Square, and he reportedly declined to even be considered as a candidate for poet laureate.

In fact, claims of Morris’s poet laureate candidacy remain questionable. Morris made no mention of an official offer, but alludes to the laureateship in several letters. In an 1892 letter to James Bryce, he remarks, ‘I could not accept a post which would give me even the appearance of serving a court for compliance sake’. However, rumours continued to spread that Morris was a viable contender, much to Morris’s agitation. In 1892, the poet wrote to the *Daily Chronicle*, ‘Will you kindly contradict the report that I have been offered the Laureateship, as it is not true’”.

An excerpt from Morris’s ‘*Earthly Paradise*’ follows:

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing, I cannot ease the burden of your fears, Or make quick-coming death a little thing, Or bring again the pleasure of past years, Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears, Or hope again for aught that I can say, The idle singer of an empty day

But rather, when aweary of your mirth, From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh, And, feeling kindly unto all the earth, Grudge every minute as it passes by, Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—Remember me a little then I pray, The idle singer of an empty day. ('William Morris as Poet Laureate?', 2012).

2.6 Alfred Austin and the Laureateship

In 1896, it was agreed that another poet, Alfred Austin (1835-1913), might be the right candidate for the laureateship. Austin was a poet, critic, novelist, and political journalist. He published many poems, including a book called 'The Poetry of Period' in 1870, and became a public figure after his publication of a book titled 'The Garden That I Love' (1894). He had graduated from London University in 1853, published the poem 'Randolph' in 1855, and later, in 1858, published a novel called 'Five Years of It'. Austin founded *The National Review* in 1883 and remained its joint editor until 1896.

Broadus writes that "the choice of Austin for poet laureate had much to do with Austin's friendship with Lord Salisbury, a conservative statesman and a Prime Minister, his position as an editor, leader, and writer, and his willingness to use his poetry to support the government. For example, shortly before his appointment was announced, Austin published a sonnet titled *A Vindication of England*, written in response to a series of sonnets by William Watson, published in the *Westminster Gazette*, which had accused Salisbury's government of betraying Armenia and abandoning its people to massacre at the hands of the Turkish. In his poetic reply and defence, Austin (Wikipedia) assured readers that anyone who attacks his country for anything done or undone brings shame upon himself" (Broadus, p. 203).

"Austin's surprising ascension to the status of poet laureate in 1896, following Tennyson, was probably more due to his stature as a journalist for the conservative party than his skill as a poet. A writer in *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* mentions that Austin was 'appointed over the heads of abler men because of sins he had not committed'. Apparently, the logical candidacies of Swinburne and Kipling were deemed unacceptable to Queen Victoria". His appointment was made at the recommendation of Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, and was seen as a decision concerning conservative party patronage, as Austin had served that party well in his journalistic writings. Writing for *The Nation*, Stuart P. Sherman declares of Austin, "his self-complacency appears in the record of his influence with political leaders", and claims that he possessed 'a divine satisfaction with his own position, and a bland unconsciousness of contemporary feeling and opinion' (*The Biography of Alfred Austin*, PoemHunter.com). Austin's appointment negatively affected the prestige of the laureateship. He became a "standard target of ridicule in the journal *Punch*, appearing in a cartoon as 'Alfred the Little', an appellation referring to Austin's 1896 play *England's Darling*, about Alfred the Great". Sherman goes on to say that Austin was "the last minstrel of Toryism. As he writes, he feels himself soothed, sustained, and magnified by the support of the landed gentlemen of England. He is not, he fancies, dipping his pen into the shallow well of egotism, but into the inexhaustible springs of English sentiment". 'Door of Humility', a poem of fifty-seven cantos published in 1906, concerns the young poet's questioning of his religion and his travels across the globe in search for truth. A critic for the *Athenaeum* reviewed it, writing, "the philosophy and its sentimental setting are patiently planned on the Tennysonian model, but unhappily it is not enough to succeed a poet in order to be successful in imitating him" ('*The Biography of Alfred Austin*' PoemHunter.com).

In addition, in 1896, *The Spectator* published the following, saying that Austin had been appointed,

"As everyone had known for the last few weeks that he would be. It is in the main, we take it, a political appointment, though we are by no means disposed to speak so lightly of Mr. Austin's lyrical verse as many of our contemporaries, who are making a rather unjust set at his merits as a poet. There have been many poets greatly inferior to him in former times who have held the office, though his immediate predecessors, Tennyson, Wordsworth, and Southey, will, of course, stand on a very different plane. But if we put aside Mr. Austin's more ambitious efforts, "Prince Lucifer", "The Human Tragedy", and the rest, of which we never could form any very high estimate, and look mainly to his lyrics on flowers and birds and gardens and such modest rural themes, it cannot be denied that he has written much beautiful and some even lovely verse. We happen to know that Matthew Arnold greatly admired one of his poems, published shortly before Matthew Arnold's death, and Mr. Watson, who has much more poetical claim to the Laureateship than any other living poet, has estimated Mr. Austin's verse very justly and favorably in that selection from Mr. Austin's poems, which he edited in 1890. Here Mr. Watson said that Nature is to Mr. Austin "a presence that interpenetrates his work, a power in secret league with his own faculties." And that, we think, is strictly true. We cannot appreciate a great portion of his

verse, and do not admire him at all when he strikes a melancholy attitude by Lord Beaconsfield's grave. But when he sings to us of the primroses and thrushes, he is delightful, and we may say of him as he has said of one of these "March minstrels," "Thy voice is greener than the leaves, and fresher than the flowers." (The Spectator, 1896, p. 10)

3. Conclusion.

As our research has demonstrated, laureateship had been a post granted by Queen Victoria mainly on political bases. Linda Peterson remarks, "Poets and periodical writers recognized, however, that a laureate was chosen not simply for high literary merit. The office represented an intersection of poetry and politics; it was a royal appointment as "Poet Laureate to Her Majesty" and had traditionally required odes celebrating the monarch and English nation" (Peterson, 2013)

The Queen, according to the requirements of her special policy, tried through her appointments to, as the proverb goes, hit or kill two birds with one stone, or to secure someone with high poetical reputation acceptable to the general public and who, at the same time, would be politically loyal to her and her party. She intended to weigh politics higher than poetic merits, and it seems that political loyalty has indeed been deemed more important than poetical quality throughout history. Wordsworth recognized the Queen's intention when he was called to the post, and he would have declined the offer had the Queen not relieved his worries by telling him that no one would ask him to write anything on demand but only to commemorate royal events. In this case, the queen place only indirect political responsibility on Wordsworth's shoulders by making him her ally. In Tennyson's case, the Queen more fully satisfied her ambitions; she found in Tennyson what she had been longing for: a renowned poet and politician loyal to her and her authority. Robert Bridges has noted that "Tennyson held the office of poet laureate particularly well because his 'whole method of thought was in harmony with existing institutions; he represented the best and most liberal side of English Conservatism" (Bridges, 2012).

However, with Tennyson's successor, Alfred Austin, the Queen could not achieve her two goals, and so she favoured the political side over literary merit. Austin was not a well-known poet in comparison to other poets of his time; in fact, he was inferior but won the competition for the laureateship nonetheless. "The choice of Austin clearly depended on his friendship with Lord Salisbury, his past work as a conservative journalist, and his willingness to use poetry to support the government" (Broadus, 1921, p. 203). "The deeply political nature of his appointment produced a chorus of complaints about his literary mediocrity and the fact that he had written disrespectfully of Tennyson, calling his predecessor a 'namby-pamby'" (Austin, 1870, p. 9). The Speaker called Austin, "a poet who lacked manly power and failed to present models of grandeur and greatness to his readership; and, perhaps worst of all, that the nation would now be subjected to endless political versifying" ('A Mere Outsider', 1896, p. 63)

In this case, the intervention of the royal authority is clear. As Yeats wrote at the time, "it was assumed that the prime minister would exercise greater control in recommending a candidate to his sovereign" (Yeats et al., 1892, p. 54). Peterson explains that Austin's contemporaries believed,

"that some rumours are being circulated, through the Press, that Lord Salisbury has expressed his intention of "complimenting journalism" by selecting the Laureate from its ranks. It seems that there is one writer only in whose person the double compliment could be united. Obviously, Lord Salisbury thought otherwise because, in November 1895, the Bookman opened its "News Notes" column with this tidbit: "We are informed, on what appears to be reliable authority, that Mr. Alfred Austin has been appointed Poet Laureate, and that the formal announcement may be expected about the middle of this month." (2013)

Austin, known as a poet for his idyllic English Lyrics, was more established because of his journalistic work as a lead writer for *The National Review* and pro-conservative editor of *The Standard* (Broadus, 1921, p. 203). Swinburne's works attracted the Queen's and the ruling authority's attention, but later he was denied the post because he was republican, a political affiliation that did not correspond with the Queen's own political track.

Moreover, William Morris was dropped from the list of laureateship candidates for political reasons alone: he was a socialist, critical of British imperialism, and a supporter of free speech. Peterson notes this discrimination when she writes, "Indeed, for both Liberals and Conservatives, the best poets might be disqualified" (Peterson, 2013); in the Victorian period, the laureateship had never been free from the intervention of those in authority and had never been awarded to any poets who failed to meet the authority's standards satisfactorily. The Queen was the principal authority who could decide to whom the laureateship should be given. All the poets' attempts to change this rule and secure the right to choose the candidates they wanted were ultimately fruitless.

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