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2025 Volume 3, Issue 3
Lecture Notes in Education, Arts, Management and Social Science
ISSN(Online): 2705-053X

Maud and the Dismembered Body

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Abstract: This paper argues that Tennyson's poem *Maud*, despite its title, presents the heroine not as a realistic character but as a fragmented, silenced figure subjected to violence through the speaker's language. Johnson's observation highlights Maud's significant silence throughout most of the poem and the paradox of her only gaining direct speech after death, conflating life and death as a form of "falsehood" linked to violence. The essay expands on this, asserting that Maud endures a deeper violence beyond mere silence. She is deprived of meaningful speech and simultaneously fragmented, both metaphorically and physically, into disparate body parts by the male speaker. This dissection is enacted through the very language the speaker uses to construct the poem itself. Furthermore, the analysis contends that this violence inherent in speech is not solely directed at Maud; it also impacts the speaker. Ultimately, the argument posits that speech within the poem transcends being a simple act of individual agency. Instead, it functions as a potent, tentative form of violence that actively dismantles and erases any possibility of certainty, affecting both the depicted characters and the poem's meaning. The speaker's words become the instrument of fragmentation and erasure.

Keywords: Linguistic violence; Female representation; Agency

Online publication: April 26, 2025

Although Tennyson's *Maud* bears its heroine's name in its very title, the character does not appear as a realistic, living figure. This idea is exemplified by Johnson's observation of the literary persona referred to as Maud, whose lips are 'clearly not meant for speech, and her silence is one of the most striking features of the poem' (Johnson 36). Therefore, it is no surprise that it is not until the final section, by which time Maud is dead, that she is paradoxically granted the power of direct speech (Johnson 36). Johnson's comment captures a central conflation in the poem—between death and life. He refers to this conflation as a sense of 'falsehood' and, by framing this paradox in such terms, connects it to the concept of violence. This essay expands on this idea by examining how the heroine is subjected to a deeper form of violence: she is not only deprived of clear, meaningful speech but is also fragmented into body parts—both metaphorically and physically—by the speaker, whose speech enacts this dissection as it constructs the very poem. This paper will also explore how this violence is directed not only toward Maud but also toward the speaker himself. This analysis aims to demonstrate that speech is not merely an action affirming an individual's agency but a tentative form of violence that erases every possible sense of certainty [1].

The poem is suffused with a sense of ambiguity. The myth surrounding Maud resembles layers of haze, mirroring the speaker's proclaimed madness, each instance of which intensifies the sense of delusion. It gradually erodes the sobriety that underpins personal agency, stretching it ever thinner. It becomes increasingly difficult for the speaker to perceive Maud as a cohesive, intact physical being, even though she is subjected to the forces of his imagination [2], as if she were

clay continuously molded by the invisible hands of his subjective, self-absorbed projections. For example, in XVI.i, he remarks:

O beautiful creature, what am I That I dare to look her way;
Think I may hold dominion sweet
Lord of the pulse that is lord of her breast,
And dream of her beauty with tender dread. (XVI.i. 10-14).

By isolating 'the pulse' and 'her breast,' the speaker reduces Maud to fragmented bodily elements, stripping her of the coherence and autonomy of a unified individual. The imagery of 'the pulse' evokes vitality and life but simultaneously suggests that her existence is confined, dominated, or controlled by a singular, imposed rhythm. The amalgamation of 'the pulse' and 'her breast' further suggests possession, with Maud's emotions and physical being seemingly commandeered by an intangible, overpowering influence—one that is not necessarily her own, as the speaker refers to 'the pulse' rather than 'her pulse.' This dynamic replaces her sense of wholeness with fragmented impressions, shaped and controlled by the speaker's gaze. The speaker's wistful desire to master Maud's splintered, anatomized parts is framed as an attempt to blazon her while simultaneously surrendering his sense of self to her overwhelming beauty—a beauty so formidable that he cannot confront it directly but can only 'dream' of it with apprehension. Dreaming serves a dual purpose: it is both an act of visualizing his impulse for conquest within a context that is at once romantic and violent, and a tacit confession of his own perilous proximity to submission. His own existence becomes dehumanized—'what am I'—a state he consciously embraces by choosing to dream rather than to see ('That I dare to look her way'). The lover's body, depicted as a site of intense and aggressive dismemberment, transforms the anatomizing of Maud into an extension—or, more radically, a manifestation—of the speaker's own disorientation. The blazon is so powerful that it blurs the distinction between the speaker's internally conceived image of Maud and the externally formed vision, as suggested by the precarious proximity of the actions 'look' and 'think.' Transitioning from looking to thinking and ultimately to dreaming, he detaches himself from reality, rendering Maud less of a tangible figure and more of a creation shaped by his desires. Her wholeness becomes increasingly vulnerable, not only to his consuming gaze but also to the fragmentation of his own psyche [3].

Although such images of dismemberment and subjugation are reiterated in the same section of the poem, where the speaker reflects on Maud being 'fastened' to this fool lord' and implores his organs or emotions to refrain from betraying him ('Catch not my breath, O clamorous heart'), the idea of disintegration and Maud's being subjected to the dominance of someone else becomes more radical in part XVII:

Go not, happy day,
From the shining fields, Go not, happy day,
Till the maiden yields. Rosy is the West,
Rosy is the South,
Roses are her cheeks,
And a rose her mouth (XVII.1–8)

The first two lines reveal a troubling dynamic of coercion. The 'happy day' becomes an agent of the speaker's desires, refusing to depart from the 'shining fields' until the maiden 'yields.' The verb 'yields' evokes connotations of surrender and submission, implying an underlying struggle of power or resistance. Though the language is subtly veiled, cloaking its intent in a tone of tender entreaty rather than overt control, the framing of time as contingent on the maiden's (likely Maud's) submission reflects a psychological or emotional dynamic where compliance or harmony is extracted through a subtle erosion of her volition. The 'shining fields' seem imbued with the speaker's longing, and the maiden's embodied self dissolves as she is fused with the external environment. This reflects a disturbing transformation: she is no longer concrete and autonomous in a bodily sense but instead becomes part of the speaker's idealized vision of nature and beauty, losing her individuality on an alarmingly physical level. Maud is subsumed into the very fabric of the day and the fields. The descriptions in the last four lines—'Rosy is the West, / Rosy is the South, / Roses are her cheeks, / And a rose her mouth'—intensify the process of fragmentation, pushing it to the extreme of absolute obliteration. Once anatomized as a

collection of body parts by the speaker's desire, Maud is now rendered unidentifiable as a human figure capable of even serving as the object of dismemberment: her cheeks and mouth are likened to roses, which blend indistinguishably into the surrounding landscape. The vastness spanning from 'West' to 'South,' juxtaposes with her physical features, evokes a sense of overwhelming diffusion as her body stretches across the landscape, rendering her indistinguishable from it—a scenario which suggests burial, decay, and, ultimately, death [4].

Such references to the macabre cast doubt not only on whether the speaker's infatuation with Maud harbors the potential for violence, but also on whether he is fully aware of the impossibility of his love, as his romantic worship emerges as its own perversion—an embodiment of death and decay. However, there is no explicit indication that the speaker actually murders Maud. Throughout part XVII of *Maud*, he does not directly implicate himself in the implied obliteration of her body. Instead, he envisions himself partaking in and enjoying a soothing effect eerily aligned with the untimely 'happ[iness]' that 'falters' from Maud's lips, conveyed through what seems like coerced consent. The phrase 'a rose her mouth' is particularly striking for its ambiguity. Unlike a more conventional construction ('a rose is her mouth'), this phrasing invites multiple interpretations: her mouth might *be* a rose, suggesting complete transformation; her mouth might *resemble* a rose, implying assimilation; or her mouth might be *stuffed with* a rose, evoking a violent, silencing image often associated with scenarios of rape.

This ambiguity intensifies the difficulty of defining her mouth's physical essence within language, rendering it something undefinable that oscillates between metaphor and literalness, beauty and violence [5]. Even the most intimate and defining part of Maud—her mouth, traditionally associated with speech and agency—is rendered unspeakable and ungraspable. This serves as further evidence of her speechlessness and disintegration affecting not only the speaker but also his language in the poem—the very instrument he uses to conquer her. The speaker seems preoccupied with enacting a violent act to the point of eschewing clarity and distinctions. The persistent imagery of 'rose,' 'blush,' and 'red' in later lines of part XVII presses so heavily on the speaker's consciousness that he feels compelled to repeat similar phrases:

Till the red man dance By his red cedar tree,
And the red man's babe Leap, beyond the sea.
Blush from West to East,
Blush from East to West, Till the West is East,
Blush it thro' the West. Rosy is the West,
Rosy is the South,
Roses are her cheeks.
And a rose her mouth. (XVII. 17-28)

Here, 'rose,' 'red,' and 'blush' are intertwined in a continuous, fluid imagery of redness that obliterates their individual distinctions. The 'blush' spreads relentlessly across directions, encompassing the land and people, allowing the 'red' to take on a dynamic through its action as it consumes the 'rosy.' This unification into a singular flux of redness creates an overwhelming, homogenizing force that subsumes meaning into the same dominating hue. The span of the 'field' is portrayed as a victim of the 'blush,' left passive and subdued, its vastness abruptly nullified by the undifferentiated redness ('West is East'), much like the maiden, whose mouth is ambiguously associated with a rose in a way that hints at an underlying violent intent on the part of the speaker, if not evokes the impression of death.

This association recalls a much earlier line in the opening stanza of the poem, which runs: 'And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers "Death"' (I.i. 4). Here, the speaker addresses Echo, a presence capable of responding to his questions, even if only by repeating them. Although the speaker had once addressed his lover as 'Oread' (XVI.i. 8) not long ago, in part XVII, the speaker is no longer addressing any specific individual. He appears to be speaking into a void, not even to himself. Death, once only heard as an echo, is now enacted through Maud's dismemberment. The plea to the 'happy day' is quickly interrupted by the speaker's comment on the rose, which might initially seem like a digression, but these two ideas are intrinsically connected: The repeated reference to 'rosy' in the West and South mirrors the warm hues of a setting sun, implying the fleeting nature of both the day's light and the opportunity for the speaker's plea to succeed. The

imagery of blushing news spreading 'thro' the West' and across the seas connects the act of blushing with both passion and the fading light. Everything seems to reinforce the sense of a hopeless ending, as the blush metaphorically transitions from vibrant hope to the dusk of unfulfilled desire. Even in her dismemberment and the speaker's disorientation in part XVII, Maud's presence echoes 'death' alongside the speaker's speech of romantic infatuation in a manner reminiscent of Echo (the 'Oread'). This dynamic exemplifies what Johnson describes as a state in which 'our sense of the relationship between internal and external becomes irreparably confused' (Johnson 42). However, Tennyson extends this notion further by introducing a third entity into the interplay between the speaker (internal) and nature (external)—Maud herself. Maud occupies a liminal space, existing simultaneously as internal and external. Her dismemberment mirrors the speaker's internal chaos while also embodying the finality of the day through death imagery—a duality that makes her both real and unreal: she is at once an object of coercion and an object of diffusion, her physical presence is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in manners that are equally urgent. Furthermore, as Maud's existence becomes violently and intimately fused with the speaker's interiority and the surrounding landscape, the confusion between the internal and external is not merely presented but subjected to doubt. Considering that the landscape itself does not operate as a concrete natural image but a site that is as vulnerable to the consuming power of redness as the speaker himself and Maud, the lyric suggests that the very conception of the internal and external is fundamentally uncertain. In other words, Tennyson's work destabilizes not only the boundaries between the speaker, Maud, and the environment but also the assumptions underlying those boundaries.

The speechlessness and disintegration of Maud also explode into the erasure of spatial distinction. The 'field' is not so much a preexisting landscape serving as a backdrop to the speaker's actions or Maud's transformation and bodily decay as it is a fragile construct, created specifically for its ultimate erasure by the 'blushs' relentless presence—a scenic dramatization of violence that operates in two directions, deforming first Maud's body and then the speaker's poetic language. This effect is evocative of Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, a conception that hinges on the projection of subjective emotions onto the natural world, where objects or landscapes appear to take on qualities that reflect the inner life of the observer. For Ruskin, the pathetic fallacy involves the attribution of a 'true appearance' to these projections—an illusion of natural harmony with human feelings. But Tennyson's lyric seems to undermine this premise. The verisimilitude between Maud and the 'field' now emerges as the product of human interiority on two distinct planes: bodily, through the dehumanization of Maud, and mentally, through the speaker's disorientation—both shaping and dissolving the landscape. The plea made to the 'happy day' initially appears to convey the speaker's fervor to the 'shining field,' but the phrase ('Go not, happy day') is not an example of pathetic fallacy. Instead, the 'field' subverts this technique; constructed from the potentially grotesque, bodily interiority of a human, it lacks any true appearance upon which human emotions can be projected and detached. Under the shadow of violence, everything in Part XVII exists in a state of uncertainty.

Indeed, the bodily and spatial obliteration can also be attributed to the speaker's degree of madness as he grapples with what Ricks describes as a kind of romantic affection that has not yet turned into a 'more mature phase of love' (Ricks 238), behaving like someone whose central fear is 'not that he cannot be loved but that he cannot love' (239). This observation partly explains why the speaker's desire and affection toward the persona of Maud are eerily marked by both beauty and violence: his primary desire is not to love but to impose love. Consequently, love becomes subjugated and incorporated into the mechanisms of violence—a violence that flows in both directions, dismembering both Maud (the object of the speaker's love) and the speaker himself (the one who conceives this affection), though in slightly different ways.

But love is not the only vehicle for the flux of violence, and moreover, the enactment of violence does not necessarily lead to ultimate chaos, as Part XVII exemplifies with its imagery of blush and rose. The speaker, in a moment of earlier sobriety, seems to acknowledge that violence can arise from his accusatory and condemnatory tone, which extends to the eradication of potentially destructive passions. Even if this violence is metaphorical—intended to expose moral failings rather than assert dominance:

This broad-brim'd hawker of holy things,

Whose ear is cramm'd with his cotton, and rings Even in dreams to the chink of his pence,
This huckster put down war! can he tell
Whether war be a cause or a consequence? Put down the passions that make earth Hell!
Down with ambition, avarice, pride, Jealousy, down! cut off from the mind The bitter springs of anger and fear;
Down too, down at your own fireside, With the evil tongue and the evil ear, For each is at war with mankind.
(X. iii. 5-15)

The speaker conflates external events with internal experiences through the concept of 'war.' On the surface, he critiques a preacher's simplistic call to 'put down war,' as though war were merely a discrete, external phenomenon that could be easily resolved. However, his invocation of 'war' soon shifts inward, transforming it into a metaphor for internal human passions and vices. The 'passions that make earth Hell'—ambition, jealousy, anger, and fear—are portrayed as bitter internal springs that feed and sustain external conflict. The final lines of the passage dramatize this internal war by fragmenting the self. The 'evil tongue' and the 'evil ear' symbolize parts of the speaker's own body waging war against humanity, functioning almost autonomously from his conscious self. Human agency is no longer unified but fractured, distributed across body parts that become agents of 'war' against the speaker's moral and social belonging. This fragmentation echoes the Shakespearean trope of the body politic in *Coriolanus*, where Menenius observes: 'There was a time when all the body's members / Rebell'd against the belly.' But Tennyson's case is far more radical than Shakespeare's, rejecting any possibility of reconciliation or interdependence within the body. Here, rebellion is not a dialogue between body parts but an authoritarian denunciation by the speaker, framed as a purge where individual and collective vices are personified and metaphorically 'cut off.' The speaker's aggression—even violence— stands in contrast to that in Part XVII, where integration is at least implied. Instead, this rejection of integration results in a loss of volition and heightened ambiguity as the speaker vilifies and externalizes the 'evil tongue' and the 'evil ear.' This externalization blurs boundaries to such an extent that it becomes unclear whether he is estranging these parts from his physical being, relegating them to an external force of 'war,' or peeling himself away from his own body—a body capable of waging war 'with mankind.' The only certainty in both cases is that the tongue and ear—tools of communication and perception—mercilessly betray the speaker's will and internal values, as suggested by the rhyming of 'tell' and 'Hell.' Even though the tone at this point in *Maud* is notably more rational than in Part XVII, the accusatory speech-violence aimed at destructive passion ultimately deflects inward. The only conceivable way to break this vicious cycle is, perhaps, through silence, discouraging the huckster's fantasy of 'put[ting] down war.' Yet, even silence fails to purge the evil that contaminates the tongue and ear as it leaves the war unresolved. Just as the external world is marred by conflict, the interior realm remains fractured by warring impulses and passions, undermining any attempt to quell violence through speech.

In a perpetual state of war, it is unsurprising that the speaker's reflections on his body parts ultimately lead him to an extremity of violence: death. However, this is not necessarily death as total obliteration but as an inevitable fate, prefigured by the condition of being human with a body, as though death is the only possible outcome of being alive:

Ah God, for a man with heart, head, hand, Like some of the simple great ones gone For ever and ever by,
One still strong man in a blatant land, Whatever they call him, what care I, Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat—one Who can rule and dare not lie (X.v.1–4).

The presence of an individual ('a man') evokes a profound yearning for unity and purpose is sharply contrasted with the fragmentation and alienation inflicted by war. The focus on 'heart, head, hand' isolates essential parts of the human body, implying that the individual is being reduced to components and stripped of volition, even while maintaining an acknowledgment of his physical integrity. The reference to Maud's 'chivalrous battle-song' (X.iv.2) situates this moment in a world ravaged by violence yet imbued with an austere grandeur that the present struggles to replicate. But the speaker's wistful call can only remain unanswered, as the 'strong man' he longs for has 'gone / For ever and ever.' The double meaning of 'lie,' however, suggests that he is not completely oblivious to the impossibility of his desire. What renders his call even more futile is the fact that the hero (whether 'Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat') from the past is also dehumanized by war.

Tennyson uses synecdoche and metonymy in tandem to underline the destructive effects of time and the reduction of individuals to mere functional roles. He is reduced to functional or symbolic elements through a series of synecdoche—a soldier's hand for killing, a head for strategizing, a heart for courage—forever confined to chivalric legends in the past, unable to retain his full humanity. Similarly, political labels in the metonymies of 'aristocrat, democrat, autocrat' simplify individuals to the ideologies or roles they represent within the social hierarchy. The speaker dismisses these labels ('what care I'), suggesting that no matter the system or ideology, individuals are subjected to the same utilitarian demands. Their personal identities are subsumed under their societal functions and affiliations, similar to how soldiers are dissected into body parts in the synecdoche only a few lines earlier. Whether fragmented into functional parts or unified into collective societal roles, individuals are subjected to the relentless violence of time and utility through temporal and functional reduction. The past and the present seem indistinguishable, as soldiers ('strong man') on battlefields share the same fate. But this implied similarity does not erase the contrast between the absent hero and the superficiality of the contemporary world, where no one embodies their greatness. This dynamic convolutes death and life: the dead are idealized as more vibrant and meaningful than the living, creating a paradox in which death preserves an elevated existence while life becomes diminished and hollow.

Following the thread of inward shifting that runs through *Maud*, the speaker moves from this convolution to express a desire for self-transformation that verges on self-destruction:

And ah for a man to arise in me,

That the man I am may cease to be! (X.vi.1–2).

The plea represents a yearning to annihilate the current self in favor of a new, stronger identity, constituting a form of invited death—both literal and figurative—as the speaker seeks the complete effacement of his inadequate self. In the context of other parts of the poem, this self is portrayed as both morally flawed and physically fractured to the point of being unsustainable.

The longing for self-destruction can also be interpreted as an embrace of annihilation, a desperate attempt to escape the disillusionment of living in a 'blatant land' devoid of meaning. But since the man who might survive, if not salvage, the 'blatant land' is already depicted in the previous stanza of Part V as an anatomized specter, the speaker's call for obliteration cannot lead to renewal but only to nonexistence. The fact that this couplet forms its own individual stanza and concludes Part V can also be interpreted as a final abandonment of truth, retreating into an ambivalence toward existence: an admiration for life's potential greatness tempered by an acknowledgment of its corruption and a desire to escape it through the transformative power of death. The speaker's yearning for unity and purpose does not rescue him from the violent imagery of dismemberment or his own disbelief; instead, it renders him even more vulnerable to the state of being dead.

Eventually, the speaker reaches a point where he dramatizes a profound loss of control over his own body, as his physical and emotional states are overtaken by intense internal conflict—a war between his alienated body parts:

Catch not my breath, O clamorous heart, Let not my tongue be a thrall to my eye, For I must tell her before we part,

I must tell her, or die (XIV.iii.1–4).

The speaker's heart is personified as a separate, 'clamorous' and unruly entity, threatening to overwhelm his ability to remain composed. The term 'thrall' in the next line implies enslavement, as though his ability to articulate might be dictated entirely by the sensory and emotional impact of seeing the woman he loves—who also functions as a romanticized signifier of war—reducing him to a passive participant in his own experience. In the final line, the urgency of the speaker's declaration emphasizes the high stakes of his predicament. The speaker's identification of his life with the ability to speak suggests that speech is his last vestige of agency in a moment when his body is otherwise consumed by violence. By 'telling her,' the speaker attempts to impose order on his chaotic inner world, to wrest control from the overpowering forces of desire and despair that have rendered his heart and tongue unmanageable. This again conjures the image of a dismembered body, with each body part pulling in different directions against the speaker's volition. But rather than being merely a

grotesque spectacle of disunity, the dismembered body transforms into an event—a site of urgency. The extreme pressure placed on speech ('I must tell her, or die') elevates it beyond simple communication. Speaking becomes performative, a decisive act that determines the speaker's fate, turning the confession ('I must tell her') into an embodied struggle. The body itself enacts the drama of impending separation. In this context, speech takes on existential weight—it is no longer a tool for conveying falsehoods or trivialities but a desperate attempt to assert truth and meaning in the face of overwhelming inner violence.

But with a disjointed body incapable of fulfilling its purpose, the speaker's chance for success is slim. Death once again spreads its wings over this moment of tension. The wish to 'tell her' is as pressing as the desire to avoid death, yet the two are inextricably linked: failure to confess love would render life unbearable, making death a preferable alternative. This equivalence collapses the binary opposition between life and death, as both states become contingent on the same act. The act of confession is both a life-affirming necessity and a potential gateway to the end of suffering. The speaker's crisis of selfhood, most vividly embodied in the depiction of a dismembered body, blurs the boundary between existence and nonexistence, presenting them as interconnected dimensions of the same emotional experience [6]. Ultimately, this frames the act of speech and the speaker's poetic language as a mimesis of violence—a destructive force leading to erasure of distinctions and hence absolute obliteration.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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