The story of the composition and publication of *The Lover’s Tale* is, unfortunately, rather complicated. My critical discussion of the poem demands, however, a preliminary outline of the main episodes in the story (for further details, see Ricks 1987: I.325–28; Wise 1908: I.25–76; Paden 1965: 111–45).

I

*The Lover’s Tale* was first published by Tennyson in May 1879. This 1879 version in four parts is the authorised text. But Tennyson had begun composition of the work many years before and had originally intended to include early versions of Parts I and II of 1879 in his 1832 *Poems*. These two parts even went to proof, for inclusion in the 1832 volume, but at the last minute Tennyson withdrew them. ‘You must be point blank mad’ wrote Arthur Hallam when he heard of his friend’s decision (Kolb 1981: 688). Tennyson did not change his mind. But he did cause several copies of his incomplete two-part poem to be made up separately and privately printed (hereafter referred to as the 1832 text of the poem).

After 1832 Tennyson continued to work, intermittently, on the poem. In 1835, for example, he entered revisions in a copy of 1832 which is now in the British Library (Ashley 2075; Ricks and Day 1987–93: XXV.58–88; Wise 1908: I.28–29). But it seems that it was not until 1868 that he resumed seriously intensive work on the poem. In that year he had it privately printed in three parts (hereafter 1868), with the first two parts corresponding to Parts I and II in 1832 and 1879, and the third part constituting a version of what was to become Parts III and IV in 1879 (Lincoln P110 and P111 in Ricks and Day 1987–93: XVIII.43–178). Once again, Tennyson decided against publication. In 1869, however, he
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had the entire poem (without any division into parts) printed up in early sets of proofs for his volume The Holy Grail and Other Poems (Lincoln P200† in Ricks and Day 1987–93: XX.123–56). On this occasion Tennyson decided against publishing what were to form Parts I, II and III of 1879, but did manage to include in the Holy Grail volume – under the title ‘The Golden Supper’ – the section which was to form Part IV of 1879. Finally, spurred by the bibliographer R.H. Shepherd’s pirated printing in 1875 of the 1832 state of The Lover’s Tale, Tennyson published the whole work in 1879.

Part III of 1879 presents particular problems. In his headnote to 1879 Tennyson noted, with reference to the 1832 text, that ‘Two only of the three parts then written were printed, when, feeling the imperfection of the poem, I withdrew it from the press.’ For a long time it was thought that Part III of 1879 was not to be identified with the early third part of the poem mentioned by Tennyson. But in an article published in 1967 Clarice Short observed that a complete autograph draft – datable to the early 1830s – of what was to become Part III in 1879 is extant in a manuscript notebook in the Houghton Library, Harvard University (Harvard Notebook 12; Ricks and Day 1987–93: II.215–16; Short 1967).

My discussion of The Lover’s Tale assumes, then, that the 1832 state of the poem comprises Parts I and II of the 1832 printed text, and the material which now forms Part III of 1879. Though it was in three parts, the 1832 Lover’s Tale was not a complete work and there is no evidence to suggest that Tennyson had written a conclusion at that date. The concluding Part IV of 1879 – ‘The Golden Supper’ – was composed in the period immediately prior to the 1868 printing. It constituted, as Tennyson observed in his 1879 headnote, a work of his ‘mature life’.

Even when measured by the long gestation periods of many of Tennyson’s poems (In Memoriam, for example), the more than thirty-five years between the 1832 state of The Lover’s Tale and the writing up of a conclusion is a remarkably long gap. Part IV, ‘The Golden Supper’, has long been felt to be an awkwardly contrived sequel which does not blend convincingly with the first three parts of the poem. Clarice Short, for example, remarked that it was written ‘in a different emotional country… It requires such a warping of the setting, such alteration of the social position of the characters that it seems like an excrescence upon the body of the rest of the poem’ (Short 1967: 79–80).

Since I am interested in The Lover’s Tale primarily in its relation to In Memoriam and Maud (both published, of course, well before the concoction of ‘The Golden Supper’) I shall speak principally of The Lover’s Tale as it stood in 1832; in its earliest coherent, albeit incomplete, form.