Come into the Garden, Maud 1

A NIGHT-SONG OF LOVE is how the poem is prefaced in the original collection.

The language of the poem looks very interesting and I want, for a while, to look at it separately.  If I try to do so by just reading the poem normally, my mind keeps trying to unravel the poem’s ‘meaning’ and is constantly distracted - so I've collapsed the text into alphabetical order – see Come into the Garden, Maud 2.

I would ask students to mark the text in different ways, e.g. words that seem slightly out of place in a ‘love poem’; words that strike them as interesting; words which they wish to look up and so on. When they have marked the whole text, discuss their findings before turning to the original poem.

There are many fascinating aspects to investigate - the extreme sensuousness of nature; the lover's repetition of 'faint' and the impression that he is, like Keats, 'half in love with easeful death'; plants that cry, weep and whisper...  All these contribute to an impression of dreamlike intoxication.

The poem is a dramatic monologue and thus brings Browning to mind. One of Browning's monologues would make a good comparison activity - perhaps even the famous Duchess?  It seems to me that Browning is more obvious in his sympathies; for example, irony, where it exists, is more obvious. Tennyson, I feel, does not deal in irony. That does not mean that we have to take the lover's plaint (I couldn't resist that word) at face value. Is he deluding himself? Is he, even, slightly mad?

Because the poem is telling a story, one cannot help asking what has happened, what is happening and what might happen next. These imaginings may have some bearing on the poem - but, as I am very well aware, they can take one far off course and leave one marooned on a shore many leagues adrift from one's original purpose.  
However, some interrogation of the text at this level is in order, and the poem with comments/questions inserted might be useful here. (See ‘Come into the garden, Maud + queries’)

We do not always associate Victorians with voluptuousness and yet their writing (like their architecture, design, visual arts etc etc) is the very opposite of minimal. Here is one famous critic of the day, describing 'Maud' - "Surely the voice of love never sang with a more passionate sweetness than in this night-song.  What ethereal luxury and flower-like tenderness it has, and yet with what a pulse and fire of passion it beats and glows!—" Would any critic today dare to use such language? I doubt it: too frightened of ridicule.

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