
TENNYSON'S PRINCESS:
IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS WOMAN?

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In the background of patriarchal texts are women trying to escape into readability.¹

“You — tell us what we are” is young Lilia’s appeal to her “maiden Aunt” in the conclusion of Tennyson’s 1847 medley *The Princess*.² Lilia remains, at the closing of this tale about the battle of the sexes, as puzzled and intrigued by what Freud would call the “riddle of the nature of femininity”³ as she had been at its inception. “A rosebud set with little wilful thorns” (Prologue, 153), as the narrator describes her, Lilia is neither convinced nor amused by the ideal of “like in difference” which her male companions offer as a happy ending to the story of a once-rebellious princess who was taught to embrace her “distinctive womanhood” (VII, 262, 258). Indeed, Lilia’s momentous questioning at this late point in the poem constitutes a hardly veiled judgement on the foregoing narrative. As a frame character Lilia is a reader of the embedded Romance narrative, and her impassioned appeal to her aunt clearly testifies to her dissatisfaction with a story that has failed to shed light on her principal concern: the nature and character of woman. The poem, in turn, conspicuously and quite violently, aborts her quest for self-knowledge by silencing the aunt, who is prevented from speaking by means of a temporal *deus ex machina* (the crowds are asked to leave the park at sunset), and who is further rendered mute by means of irony — as the narrator intervenes to observe that she “might have told / For she was crammed with theories out of books” (Conclusion, 34-35).

What if we were, however, to take up Lilia’s challenge and return to the scene of the crime for more clues, armed with the conviction that “to varying degrees, texts convey a subversive knowledge of the gendered arena of their production”?⁴ What if we were to turn around and ask of *The Princess* and of its Princess Ida: “Is there a text in this woman?”⁵ It is my working hypothesis in this essay that Tennyson’s *The Princess* is particularly well served by the kind of criticism that allows for the articulation of such questions, that is, by

a discursive criticism that grasps the text as a site of conflicting discourses and seeks to unravel the constant interaction of these discourses, "to show (but not necessarily undo) the apparently necessary and simultaneous accession to dominance of one discourse and occultation of another."⁶ My reading of *The Princess* is grounded in an understanding of the literary text as dialogic in character — in the Bakhtinian sense, as capable of accommodating a plurality of contesting voices — and as a potentially effective vehicle for the motivated (or interested) resolution of such conflictual forces. With Fredric Jameson I further understand this conflictual dynamics — which characterizes all historical horizons — to be brought about by the coexistence (in a given text, at a given historical moment) of several discourses, including vestiges and survivals of older discourses "now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own."⁷ In coming to Lilia's and Ida's rescue, then, we will find ourselves irrevocably implicated in the historicist project proper, a project, to use a recent reformulation, that seeks to articulate the ways in which poems "locate a dialectical encounter between the past and the present," as they "represent, through processes of reflection, a particular instance of dialectical exchange which is taken in the present as given from and through the past."⁸ The dialectical exchange in which this essay seeks to engage is one initiated by Tennyson's multi-voiced and polyphonic poem, a poem that is "a 'medley' of social, political, and sexual differentials . . . held together in an equally heterogeneous poetical form";⁹ it is an exchange that is further enhanced by the encounter between a Victorian past and a resisting feminist present. As this encounter between past and present is, in turn, (always) mediated by the history of the text's reception — "once it is in circulation, the text is also continuously reproduced"¹⁰ — we will also be called upon to scrutinize that interpretive history which has shaped the poem-object as we know it in the present.

A brief overview of the poem might help set the stage for the discussion to follow. Formally, *The Princess* consists of a Romance narrative framed by a contemporary narrative. The contemporary narrative is set in Sir Walter Vivian's "broad lawns," which "all a summer's day" he gives "up to the people," "until the set of sun." The first-person narrator of the frame-story introduces a cast of characters, among whom are six university undergraduates who, together with the narrator, take turns in telling the Romance story. The Romance narrative, although allegedly told by seven different frame-narrators, all male, is in effect unified through the single voice of a first-person narrator, as each frame character in turn assumes the character of the Prince, who is the Romance's first-person narrator. The female characters of the frame-narrative, which includes Lilia and her "maiden aunt," are said to

provide the six intercalary songs. These lyrics, although formally extraneous to both the Romance and the frame-narrative, bear a very close thematic affinity to both.

Thematically, the Romance tells of a militant Princess who, resisting a pre-arranged marriage to the Prince, goes away to establish an Institute for women into which no man is allowed. The Prince, however, does manage to enter the Institute together with his two friends Cyril and Florian, all disguised as women. The Princess, who still refuses the Prince's advances after his identity is exposed, finally submits, being overtaken by compassion for the injured Prince, who has risked his life in battle to win her. In the conclusion of the Romance narrative the Prince expresses what has always been taken to be Tennyson's vision of the ideal relationship between the sexes. The Prince tells Ida:

Let her [woman] make herself her own
To give or keep, to live and learn and be
All that not harms distinctive womanhood.
For woman is not undevelop't man,
But diverse: could we make her as the man,
Sweet Love were slain: his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference. (VII, 256-62)

Taking their cue from Tennyson's generic label for *The Princess* — a “medley” — and from the poem's animated exposition of opposing views on love, marriage, and the education of women, scholars have been generally concerned with tracing the “contrarious forces” embraced by the poem.¹¹ In conformity with Tennyson's own resolution of these conflicts in the Prince's apocalyptic vision of a “statelier Eden” come back to men, however, most studies of the poem have described it as “tracing the complementary movements of the Princess toward true femininity and the Prince toward true masculinity.”¹² The poem's crowning vision has been celebrated as affirming “equality in diversity, fulfilment in union, and the couple become the race.”¹³ More recently, a growing interest in the poem's engagement with the feminist controversy of the 1840s has given rise to a heightened awareness of the poem's ambivalence towards those Victorian anxieties over gender identity that it sets to explore.¹⁴ While this has led to an investigation of one aspect of Tennyson's “dash for safe closure” — his attempt to “limit his critique of the ‘masculine’ to a negotiation within rather than a repudiation of the dominant ideology”¹⁵ — it has had almost no effect on critical readings of the ‘feminine’ in the poem. Differences in ideological predisposition and critical method notwithstanding, Princess Ida's story as retold by generations of critics has been basically the same. Ida's character has been seen as moving from the pole of denial — a denial of her natural “distinctive womanhood” — to the pole of

acceptance — acceptance of the Prince's view that woman is "not undeveloped man" but "diverse." Writing in 1850, Charles Kingsley offered one of the earliest versions of this story:

The idea . . . of *The Princess* is an essentially modern one. In every age women have been tempted, by the possession of superior beauty, intellect, or strength of will, to *deny their own womanhood*, and attempt to stand alone as men. . . . Cleopatra and St. Hedwiga, Madame de Stael and the Princess, are merely different manifestations of the same self-willed and proud longing of woman to *unsex herself*, and realize, single and self-sustained, some *distorted* and partial notion of her own as to what the 'angelic life' should be.¹⁶

For Kingsley, the dénouement of such a plot is already given in the terms of its exposition; the woman who "takes her stand on the false masculine ground of intellect" will inevitably work out "her own moral punishment," all her acts being "built up not on the womanhood which God has given her but on her own self-will."¹⁷ An advocate himself of the gender ideology expounded by the Prince, Kingsley all too readily — that is, uncritically — dismisses Ida's challenge to that ideology as he celebrates her final submission to it.

Kingsley's complacency, which has been, by and large, that of the critical tradition, is unacceptable, for it relies on an appeal to a stable and transparent 'order of things,' an hermeneutic position which is contested by key elements in the poem itself. We will not hear that contestation, however, as long as we remain deaf to the woman's voice and ignorant of the woman's text. Hence the failure of a number of recent studies ostensibly concerned with exploring "the Princess's ordeal," the "struggle within Ida herself" seen as an "heroic struggle between love and duty."¹⁸ A fairly representative recent reformulation of Ida's story reads thus: "in simple terms, Princess Ida represents an ideal of duty; the prince's father, an 'ideal' of desire; and the prince himself, a principle of harmony, or the ideal marriage that unites duty with desire."¹⁹ What has been glaringly absent from such readings of the poem is, of course, any consideration of *Ida's desire*. The suppression of the woman's text — borne of a fear of her knowledge, and the power in that knowledge — is exemplified in a recent contribution by Christopher Ricks to the special Golden Jubilee issue of *Victorian Poetry*. Ricks recognizes in Ida a "will of her own," only to qualify that will as "dangerous," denounce its manifestations — Ida's "capriciousness, her having to come to see instead of immediately recognizing, her inability to value love at first sight" — and heave a collective sigh of relief (on behalf of the Victorians) that the real-life Princess (to become the Queen) was not possessed by such a "fiery will."²⁰

To adequately account for Ida's desire, to critically appreciate that "fiery will" without collapsing it into the very discourse it seeks to unsettle, we will

have to go 'against the grain' of the poem's resolution as epitomized in the Conclusion. We will have to resist that closure by which Tennyson ultimately reduces his polyphonic text to a univocal utterance in defence of an "aesthetic of reconciliations."²¹ One might start a reflection on the presence of a woman's text in *The Princess* with a word about context. *The Princess*, as John Killham has amply demonstrated, is a highly topical poem engaging with ideas that came into a particularly sharp focus in the 1840s, ideas vital to the debate over the Woman Question. Underlying the more visible social and legalistic issues at stake in the controversy, issues such as women's right to vote, to enter institutions of higher education, and to dispose of their own property after marriage, the debate was fuelled by more fundamental disagreements regarding the nature of "woman."²² Broadly sketched, the controversy could be seen as occupying a discursive spectrum ranging from an unequivocal affirmation of essential *difference* between the sexes to an assertion of a deep and broad basis of *likeness* between men and women. Sufficient evidence exists to support a view of the former as the dominant (or hegemonic) position — a position generally held and consistently argued in both fictional and non-fictional works of the period — and of the latter as a direct challenge to the dominant perception of woman as "other" (or different).

In *The Princess*, as in Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-56) and Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) — the two mid-century narrative poems that complement Tennyson's in occupying the extreme ends of the above-mentioned discursive spectrum — the story, in a nutshell, consists of the transformation of a prearranged marriage into a desired marriage of love. It is already highly indicative of the way in which *The Angel in the House* differs from the other two narratives that, unlike them, Patmore's poem presents the more traditional patriarchal pattern of prearranged marriage — with its attendant valorization of a fixed hierarchy (old over young, male over female, paternal and community edicts over individual freedom, pragmatic considerations over sentimental attachments) — as reinforcing, rather than being at odds with, the more progressive, democratic and individualistic ideal of a marriage of love.²³ While woman-in-herself is absent from Patmore's narrative — her markers being only negative: self-oblivion, total ignorance — it is this very absence which gives rise to the highest value in the poem, that of love as "difference."²⁴ In *The Princess* the single voice which dominates Patmore's poem gives place to a "medley" of voices, while the panegyric to love as difference is replaced by an exploration of the problematics of similarity. As in *The Angel in the House*, however, a traditionalist view of woman constitutes a central element in the presuppositional framework of *The Princess*. The most articulate agent of this hegemonic traditionalist discourse in Tennyson's poem is a character in the Romance narrative, the Prince's father. Having arranged the marriage of the Prince to Princess Ida "by proxy" when both

were infants, the King incites the Prince to claim her by force when the Princess's father informs them of her resolution: "certain, would not wed" (I, 49). In the King's bold articulation of the differences between the sexes we discover the foundation of a debilitating double bind: women, according to the hegemony, not only *are* — by coercion or duty — what this discourse decrees, but are also destined to *desire* this condition of subordination:

Man is the hunter; woman is his game:
The sleek and shining creatures of the chase,
We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;
They love us for it, and we ride them down. (V, 147-50)

The King concludes:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (V, 437-41)

This traditionalist discourse is reinforced by the lyrics, which serve in the poem as repositories of dominant representations of the female. Thus while the man in the lyrics is a mover and an initiator — "like fire he meets the foe / And strikes him dead" — the woman in these lyrics is passive and dependent for her very spirit of life on another. She either waits for the man — "Father will come to thee soon" — or, in his absence, lives only for the child — "Sweet, my child, I live for thee." In the absence of both, as in the last lyric, she is herself annihilated:

Ask me no more! . . .
Let the great river take me to the main:
No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield.

Not surprisingly, traditionalist critics have been quick to endorse this utter dejection, hailing it as the mark of a true femininity: "thus, in her apparent defeat does she rise to the supreme height of her womanhood."²⁵

The enthusiastic reception which the lyrics have enjoyed notwithstanding, Tennyson's narrative seems to derive its particular force and vitality from that very state of "confusion" which the Prince's father denounces, a confusion affecting more specifically the gendered universe. Gender inversion forms the generative matrix of *The Princess*, as the poem is principally concerned with exploring the consequences attendant upon a violation of the code of sexual differentiation.²⁶ In the first instance, both the frame-narrative and the Romance are precipitated by women who challenge the accepted views of femininity. The chronicle which attracts the narrator's attention in the Prologue,

and which inspires the “sevenfold story,” tells of a woman who, resisting the king’s advances, “Had beat her foes with slaughter from her walls” (Prologue, 34). In the second narrative level — that of the Romance — the figure of the militant/masculine woman materializes in the character of Princess Ida. In the same way that Ida, however, proves to be a slightly faded reproduction of the original (of the woman in the chronicle) — a harmless militant — Lilia, in the frame-narrative, is an even paler Ida. While the chronicle character *possesses power* (physically killing men), the Princess only *feigns power*, as her inscription on the Institute gates, “LET NO MAN ENTER IN ON PAIN OF DEATH” (II, 178), proves totally inconsequential. At a third remove both textually and ideologically, Lilia is left with only a frustrated *longing for power*: “Ah, were I something great!” (Prologue, 131). This pattern, in which degree of subversion (gender reversal) stands in direct ratio to degree of narrative embeddedness, is exemplary of the poem’s overall project. The correspondence between ideological content and narrative form becomes particularly suggestive as we realize that the more embedded the event, the ‘lower’ the narrative level to which it belongs.²⁷ Thus, while *The Princess* does admit a subversive discourse into the narrative — in the form of a three-fold challenge posed by Lilia’s questioning of “womanhood,” Ida’s militancy (of which more presently), and the chronicle’s glorification of female power — the poem mitigates this subversive force through a structural device. A formal ‘enfeebling,’ achieved through narrative embedding, makes the subversive subservient to a higher narrative level which ultimately cancels it out. A similar effect is achieved in the poem through a strategic use of formal closure, to which I will return.

From the outset, the blurring of gender-linked characteristics is seen to affect male as well as female characters in the poem. An important link between the frame-narrative and the Romance is established through suggestions of sexual ambiguity attached to the statue of Sir Ralph, in the contemporary world, and to the figure of the Prince, in the Romance world. In the Prologue, Lilia symbolically emasculates the “broken statue” of Sir Ralph — “Lilia, wild with sport / . . . had wound / A scarf of orange round the stony helm, / And robed the shoulders in a rosy silk” (Prologue, 100-03) — creating an androgynous figure in the “feudal knight in silken masquerade” (Prologue, 227). What precipitates the Romance narrative, in turn, is the threat of a similarity that unmakes “difference,” a blurring of sexual characteristics which unmans the man and desexes the woman. The Prince, “blue-eyed, and fair in face, / Of temper amorous . . . / With lengths of yellow ringlet,” is “like a girl” (I, 1-3). Princess Ida, on the other hand, chooses to forfeit the woman’s role by refusing any association with men; her father tells the Prince: she “loved to live alone / Among her women; certain, would not wed” (I, 48-49). Here, again, while the frame-narrative registers only a slight and playful

inversion of sex roles, the lower (embedded) narrative level — the Romance — is marked by a more severe perturbation.

The disruptive power of such violations of gender codes is neutralized in the poem's conclusion as the Prince envisions a bond of likeness enhanced by a measure of difference: "in the long years liker must they grow; / The man be more of woman, she of man" (VII, 263-64). Much is left unresolved by this sweeping gesture of reconciliation, however, and it is my intention in the following to scrutinize these fissures in the text's gendered fabric. I will more specifically pursue a threefold argument, demonstrating that: a) the knowledge articulated by the Prince in the poem's conclusion — his apocalyptic vision — is clearly consistent with his *unchanging* character throughout the poem; b) the Prince's vision significantly elides Ida's own revisionary project in *The Princess*; c) although the poem ultimately denies Ida's project a place in the promised land, it does allow for the sustained presentation of a critique of gender ideology from a woman's point of view.

Throughout the poem, the Prince's feminine qualities — that is, qualities deemed feminine by the traditionalist discourse which serves as a point of reference throughout — are highlighted. Physically, the Prince not only looks "like a girl," but for the most part is also dressed in "female gear," a dress in which he feels comfortable, having employed it on previous occasions on which all three young men (the Prince, Florian, and Cyril) "presented Maid / Or Nymph, or Goddess" (I, 193-94). In his longing for the Princess, of which he speaks to her while still in disguise, Princess Ida 'rightly' perceives a feminine tendency:

Poor boy . . . can he not read — no books?
Quoit, tennis, ball — no games? nor deals in that
Which men delight in, martial exercise?
To nurse a blind ideal like a girl,
Methinks he seems no better than a girl; (III, 198-202)

Significantly, too, the Prince is the only one of the male characters to sing a lyric, the lyrics being specifically designated, within the generic scheme of the poem, to serve as a 'feminine' counterpart to the combined narrative of the seven male storytellers. In his lyric, moreover, the Prince clearly attributes to Ida (the "South") traditionally male properties, while he (the "North") assumes feminine ones:

O tell her, Swallow, thou that knowest each,
That bright and fierce and fickle is the South,
And dark and true and tender is the North. (IV, 78-80)

The Prince's reluctance to claim the Princess by "manly" force, choosing to win her more "by gentleness than war" (V, 130), is clearly related to this

sexual ambiguity. A warrior, one of Ida's brothers, puts it thus: "Like to like! / The woman's garment hid the woman's heart" (V, 294-95). When the Prince does finally succumb to the taunting pressure and goes out to battle (to prove his manhood), he fails this test, too. Falling victim to his "weird seizures" and suffering severe injury in a battle he loses, the Prince is reduced to being totally dependent on and at the mercy of others. In the description of the Prince's (and the other men's) final, and in a sense triumphant, entry into the once all-female Institute, a sexual imagery of active penetration is mitigated by images of death and passivity:

Then us they lifted up, dead weights, and bare
Straight to the doors: to them the doors gave way
Groaning, and in the Vestal entry shrieked
The virgin marble under iron heels. (VI, 328-31)

Thus, in spite of the Prince's final claim to success in winning the Princess, the narrative clearly withholds from him any recuperation of a properly manly (in the traditionalist sense) character. The Prince's concluding vision of love, which advocates the crossing of sexual boundaries, is itself characterized as a *feminine* vision. Having related this vision to Ida, she confesses "A dream / That once was mine!" and adds, "what *woman* taught you this?" (VII, 290-91; emphasis added). In view of the Prince's consistent characterization throughout the poem, the still prevalent critical emphasis on the alleged quest or "education" of the Prince appears misplaced.²⁸ One might rather see in the Romance's conclusion a legitimization, and not a transformation, of the Prince's sexual ambiguity (but not of Ida's).²⁹ This legitimization is accomplished through formal displacement, as gender inversion/perversion, heretofore present on the level of characterization, is enshrined in the act of poetic closure. In effect, the Prince *is*, from the very beginning of the Romance narrative, a man already grown to "be more of woman."

While allowing a fuller scope of sexual identity to the Prince, the vision which seals the Romance narrative fails its female protagonist in aborting Ida's own quest for self-knowledge. This verdict, I submit, is suggested by the overall thrust of what might be called Ida's text — the narrative unit made up of her assembled speeches (or utterances) throughout the poem. Speaking in the first-person feminine, Ida challenges the hegemonic perception of "womanhood" and attempts to put forth an alternative vision. Unlike the Prince's idealized woman who is "No Angel, but a dearer being, all dipt / In Angel instincts, breathing Paradise, / *Interpreter* between the Gods and men" (VII, 301-03; emphasis added), Ida refuses the role of interpreter or mediator, choosing instead to become an active *pursuer*. This pursuit, self-consciously undertaken, Ida understands to be as much an *unlearning* as it is a learning, as much a shedding of a "dead self" (III, 205) as a work to "mould / The

woman to the fuller day" (III, 314-15). Thus challenged, the poetic universe of *The Princess* registers a recognition that "womanhood" is not the unmediated expression of the "true" nature of woman, but a set of pre-conceived ideas claiming to reflect such unmediated reality. Consequently, the Prince's recuperation of this traditionalist perception of "womanhood" in his apocalyptic vision — "let her make herself her own / To give or keep, to live and learn and be / *All that not harms distinctive womanhood*" (VII, 256-58; emphasis added) — although not directly contested by the narrative, remains unacceptable in terms of Ida's critique. Viewed from the vantage-point of this critique, the Prince's vision only feigns freedom of self-determination for woman; in his vision of the ideal woman, independent will is still paradoxically contained within and thus made subordinate to the same constraining hegemonic "womanhood." While Ida's text indirectly underscores the similarity between the Prince's ideal of love and the traditionalist discourse it avowedly rejects, the fact that her own voice is silenced in the poem's conclusion points to yet another instance of a higher narrative level suppressing a conflict at a lower narrative level.

Ida's pursuit, we note before turning to her text, is significantly framed by a narrative which, *disregarding* its momentous probing of received notions, seeks to establish certitude and closure. The poem, misleadingly, opens and ends as a panegyric. In the Prologue, the narrator cites from a "gallant glorious chronicle" praising the "miracle of noble womanhood," "a lady, one that armed / . . . and sallying through the gate, / Had beat her foes with slaughter from her walls" (Prologue, 32-49). Both the Romance story and the frame-narrative end with triumphant tributes and praise. The Romance ending is a panegyric to the new relationship between the sexes which will bring "the statelier Eden back to men" (VII, 277), while the poem's Conclusion reiterates this apocalyptic vision as the contemporary narrator affirms, "This fine old world of ours is but a child / Yet in the go-cart. Patience! Give it time / To learn its limbs: there is a hand that guides" (Conclusion, 77-79). The tenuousness of the narrator's projection becomes apparent, however, as we scrutinize his use of the child-figure. For here as elsewhere in the poem the figure betrays an unacknowledged tension, exposing in a *mise en abyme* fashion the poem's strained attempt at what McGann has called an "accommodation of differentials." The immediate context for the narrator's forward-looking gesture shows the figure of the child to be *functional* and *relative* rather than stable and univocal, as it is appropriated, in turns, by different characters for different and indeed opposed ends. The "Tory member's elder son" uses it to condemn "Revolts, republics, revolutions" — the "sudden heat" coming from across the "narrow seas" — which he argues to be "No graver than a schoolboys' barring out" (Conclusion, 50-70). Then the narrator turns the conservative's figure on its head, expressing hope in "This fine old

world of ours [which] is but a child," and can thus, given the appropriate guidance, still 'grow up' to be a better world. The strategy which underlies the narrator's use of the child-figure here as elsewhere in the poem, and in particular with reference to women, is reminiscent of Patmore's use of the child-figure in *The Angel in the House*. First, the narrator metaphorically reduces the object — "this world of ours" or "woman" — to a state of childhood, a state identified with both "nature" (the inevitable, the nature of things) and ignorance (lack of knowledge, which entails lack of self-knowledge and absence of an independent will). Having thus reduced the object, the narrator can then proceed to mould it — with a "hand that guides" — under the pretext of following the ultimate authority of "Nature." In the poem at large, both the frame-narrator and the Prince (as the Romance narrator) attempt to contain the problematic issue of female subjectivity and independent female will within the figure of the child. Thus, Lilia in the Prologue is referred to as "half child half woman" (Prologue, 101); she is "little Lilia" in the poem's closing lines (Conclusion, 116). The Prince allows woman to gain in "mental breadth" only to circumscribe the horizons of such expansion by a conditional: "She [will gain] mental breadth, nor fail in childward care, / Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind" (VII, 267-68).

While the framing narrative thus appears to present a consistent front of hegemonic conformity, a front reinforced by the Romance's own conclusion, a different discourse does erupt in the course of the poem, challenging, de-centring this hegemony. For while the Prince is 'excused' from any active pursuit of the truth, being the victim of disabling "weird seizures" (I, 14) which affect his faculty to "know / The shadow from the substance" (I, 8-9), Ida's character gains an heroic stature as she indefatigably scrutinizes, tests, and challenges received opinions. The reader has a premonition of this disruptive female power already in the Prologue, when in a curious instance of narrative 'mind-reading,' Lilia, as if in response to the narrator's 'over-voice' describing her as "half child, half woman," speaks out: "I wish I were / Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then, / That love to keep us children!" (Prologue, 131-33). As if further abiding by the laws of narrative 'wish-fulfilment,' Princess Ida adopts Lilia's cause, turning the figure of the child, both as image and as 'real' character, into a central preoccupation of her text. Even before the Princess actually appears in the narrative, her struggle is introduced, almost unwittingly, by the "little dry old man" who is her father (I, 116); "knowledge, so my daughter held," this weak father of a strong daughter tells the Prince, "was all in all: they had but been, she thought, / As children; they must *lose the child*, assume / The woman" (I, 134-37; emphasis added). On her first appearance the Princess fulfils the promise gleaned from these lines. While the Prince-narrator caresses with words the beautiful "female form" (II, 20) he recreates for the reader — "breathing

down / From over her arched brows, with every turn / Lived through her to the tips of her long hands, / And to her feet" (II, 24-27) — the Princess, as if in defiance of the narrator's attempt to cast her into a properly feminine role, rises up to *speaking*. She chooses to speak, moreover, of *speech*, establishing a very clear connection between self, knowledge, and language. To Cyril's words of praise — "as though there were / One rose in all the world, your Highness that, / He [the Prince] worships your ideal" (II, 36-38) — which echo the Prince's adoring portrayal of her, Ida answers:

We scarcely thought in our own hall to hear
This *barren verbiage*, current among men,
Light coin, the tinsel clink of compliment. (II, 39-41; emphasis added)

Still believing Cyril to be a girl out of the Prince's court, she reprimands: "Your flight from out your bookless wilds would seem / As arguing love of knowledge and of power; / Your language proves you still the child" (II, 42-44). For Ida the figure of the *woman as child* — central to the traditionalist discourse — can no longer mask the abominable practice of imposed ignorance and denial of power; internalized by women, she argues, this image and its accompanying practice have given rise to "the habits of the slave, / The sins of *emptiness*, gossip and spite / And slander" (II, 77-79; emphasis added).

For Ida, the traditionalist discourse is "barren," for it stultifies female subjectivity, permitting only "emptiness" in the guise of a childlike being who is never allowed to grow into maturity, into the woman of the "fuller day" (III, 315). The extreme significance attributed to discourse — to language, knowledge, public speech, the retelling of history — is evident from its central function within the women's Institute; the women fight back with words. With words they retell and revise the mythological past — the story of creation — so that for them the first sin, causing man's fall, consists in "the man / . . . / . . . Raw from the prime . . . crushing down his mate" (II, 104-06). With words they retell history, redefine justice, speak of the silenced, running down "The Persian, Grecian, Roman lines / Of empire, and the woman's state in each, / How far from just" (II, 114-16). With words they redefine "Nature," bring to court "custom" (II, 127); "Let them not fear," Psyche reassures her female students,

Some said their heads were less:
Some men's were small; not they the least of men;
For often fineness compensated size:
Besides the brain was like the hand, and grew
With using; (II, 131-35)⁸⁰

As F. E. L. Priestley has noted, if there are comic overtones to the portrayal of the women's college, the comedy is double-edged: "in so far as Ida's college

is ridiculous, it may be because it imitates a ridiculous [male] model.”³¹ In this poetic medley of styles which attempts to move in a “strange diagonal” (Conclusion, 27) — maintaining a balance between mock-heroic and heroic, between comic and tragic — the reader is always ultimately “returned . . . to the noble conception of Ida.”³² In my reading, this nobility of character is inseparable from the nobility of the cause espoused by the women at the Institute: the pursuit of knowledge and self-knowledge in the pursuit of freedom itself. In her letter to her brothers shortly before the narrative dénouement that will seal her fate, Ida reaffirms the women’s vision:

We plant a solid foot into the Time,
And mould a generation strong to move
With claim on claim from right to right, till she
Whose name is yoked with children’s, know herself;
And Knowledge in our own land make her free. (V, 405-09; emphasis added)

Ida’s and Psyche’s aspirations are to create a new *topos*, a new feminine identity. Lilia, in the Prologue, already sets up the epistemological basis for such an undertaking by claiming women’s present character to be an *acquired* rather than a natural one: “it is but bringing up” (Prologue, 129). Similarly, Ida fiercely objects to any reiteration of the dominant discourse within the Institute, recognizing in it the enemy from within and striving to cast it away as that which constitutes the “dead self” (III, 205). For the student of women’s writing, Ida’s words resonate with the force of a long tradition of female reflection as she exposes the manipulateness of a discourse which uses praise to capture and fantasy to subordinate:

Knives are men,
That lute and flute fantastic tenderness,
And dress the victim to the offering up,
And paint the gates of Hell with Paradise,
And play the slave to gain the tyranny. (IV, 110-14)

This revisionary practice is undermined, in the poem, by the ‘conservatives’ of both sexes who perpetuate the very evils condemned by Ida and Psyche. Thus the three men overhear women at the Institute murmuring “that their May / Was passing: what was learning unto them? / They wished to marry; they could rule a house; / *Men hated learned women*” (II, 439-42; emphasis added). Similarly, Cyril persistently evokes Psyche’s “heart” and her appeal to his “heart” in an attempt to shift ground again to the idiom of the hegemony; he addresses the militant Princess thus: “O fair and strong and terrible! . . . / . . . / But Love and Nature, these are two more terrible” (VI, 147-49). The plot of the Romance (narrated by the seven men) proves Cyril to be right; Ida not only gives Psyche’s baby back to her but also forgives her her betrayal.

Their reconciliation, however, is not brought about by Ida's forgiving *affection* for her long-standing friend, but is itself an act of self-betrayal to which Ida submits while being overpowered by her desire for the Prince. Her last words to Psyche express her anguish at realizing her imminent fall back into the abyss of "emptiness" and childlike effacement from which she had been striving to rise; she calls out to her: "O Psyche . . . embrace me, come, / Quick while I melt; . . . / . . . / Come to the *hollow* heart they slander so! / Kiss and be friends, like *children* being child!" (VI, 267-71; emphasis added). In total conformity with the hegemonic discourse, woman, even of Ida's stature (and preferably of Ida's stature, to underscore the inevitable), will turn her back to everything most dear to her — and here the male narrator takes particular pleasure in 'exposing' female friendship — in order to win the man.

The cumulative effect of this traditionalist discourse lends further force to the poem's closing gestures. In the Romance's last lines, Ida is completely silenced as the Prince's desire and his vision/resolution suppress all articulation of doubt or resistance. We juxtapose two decisive moments in the Romance. The first moment is Ida's last authentic speech, her last speech as an autonomous character, a speech which, unlike the rest to come, is *not* a recitation from a book. This speech in effect ends her text. Here Ida pleads with her father and brother to convince the Prince's father to let her keep and nurse the Prince back to health. Her plea, however, is as much a confession of her desire for the Prince as it is an admission of the agonizing and irredeemable conflict engendered by this desire:

Help, father, brother, help; speak to the king:
 Thaw this male nature to some touch of that
 Which *kills me with myself*, and drags me down
 From my fixt height to mob me up with all
 The soft and milky rabble of womankind. (VI, 286-90; emphasis added)

The Prince's last patronizing words in the Romance's ending — the second moment — are indeed no match to this agony: "come, / Yield thyself up: . . . / . . . / Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me" (VII, 342-45). The Princess has by now indeed "yielded up," not so much to the Prince as to a traditionalist representation of woman. Following the Prince's re-entry into the Institute now turned hospital, Ida forfeits her voice, as the 'feminine' lyrics which she reads at the Prince's bedside ("Now sleeps the crimson petal" and "Come down, O maid") are allowed to take over her character. Throughout the narrative Ida has adamantly objected to the kind of poetry represented by the lyrics, claiming that "song / Is duer unto freedom, force and growth / Of spirit than to junketing and love" (IV, 122-24). Now, however, this "soft and milky rabble of womankind" takes over her character, speaks instead of her, through her.³³ In this climactic ending, a curious narrative 'conspiracy'

takes place. While the Prince subverts Ida's very meaning in attributing a very different sense to her self-perception as battling a (traditionally feminine) "dead self" — he sees her "Glowing all over noble shame; and all / Her falser [rebellious] self slipt from her like a robe, / And left her woman" (VII, 145-47) — the ventriloquist in Ida (an accomplice in her own undoing) recites the lyrics to the exclusion of the original character. When Ida does speak in her own voice in this concluding section, her doubt and self-scrutiny clearly attest to a fissure in the Prince's magnificent fabric. Ida's last words, to which her previous speeches could be seen to serve as a gloss, are words of warning against the blinding effects of discourse. Disentangling herself from the Prince's fantasy in which her complex character is totally dissolved into the combined figure of a mother/desired woman, Ida reprimands him:

It seems you love to cheat yourself with words:
This mother is your model. I have heard
Of your strange doubts: they well might be: I seem
A mockery to my own self. Never, Prince;
You cannot love me. (VII, 314-18)

The import of Ida's words is clear: the self which the Prince can love is a "mockery" to her "own self." Her "own self," we remember, is the self she had attempted to rescue from the debilitating figure of the child, a self for which she desired a "living will" (IV, 129), a self the Prince ultimately fails to recognize.

While Ida seeks to affirm and have others recognize her (and woman's) living will — "Till all men grew to rate us at our worth, / Not vassals to be beat, nor pretty babes / To be dandled, no, but living wills, and sphered" (IV, 127-29) — the Prince, aided by a narrative that will ultimately vindicate his cause, needs to break that will in order to realize his own: "and yet her will / Bred will in me to overcome it or fall" (V, 340-41). "Whole in ourselves and owed to none" (IV, 130) is the self-knowledge sought by the women in the Institute; but the narrative, with the iron hand of a hegemonic idiom, successfully conspires to crush this aspiration.³⁴ Ironically, but also typically, this narrative aggression is couched in the language of the tenderest feelings; systematically, all the women in the poem (save perhaps Blanche) are brought back to the feminine locus proper, the "heart." Here is Princess Ida's metamorphosis, brought about by the Prince's illness:

then once more she looked at my pale face:
Till understanding all the foolish work
Of Fancy, and the bitter close of all,
Her iron will was broken in her mind;
Her noble heart was molten in her breast. (VI, 99-103)

Significantly, this 'transformation' is presented only *indirectly*, being reported by the Prince. While leaving Ida's text intact, Tennyson allows the Prince's 'wishful thinking' to take over the narrative. In the last book, the narrative (the male narrator) coercively renames Ida, transforming her from a militant warrior — "Too hard, too cruel" (V, 505) — to a gentle and loving woman. "Then came a change," recounts the Prince, creating an elaborate narrative to explain this change as coming "out of long frustration of her care," and "out of memories of her kindlier days, / . . . And out of hauntings of my spoken love" (VII, 77-94). He concludes this narrative by reinstating woman (Ida) in her properly feminine *locus*, love: "From all a closer interest flourished up, / Tenderness touch by touch, and last, to these / Love" (VII, 98-100).

Having listened carefully to the interplay of narrative voices in the poem, I find it extremely significant that we never hear of Ida's transformation from the Princess herself. As if hard pressed to provide more authentic evidence to support the approaching resolution, yet incapable in all 'honesty' of making Ida's character conform to these changes, Tennyson (through the narrator) is impelled to 'paraphrase' the key speech Ida never makes in the poem. Instead, in the passage that follows the above-cited narrative relating Ida's transformation, the Prince-narrator proceeds to 'report' her alleged confession to him. The indirect speech mode used in his report is a stylistic device laden with thematic significance, for by employing it the narrative implicitly acknowledges the basic incongruity between Ida's character (as established through her text) and her alleged transformation on which the poem's resolution so heavily depends.

So 'transformed,' the Princess is brought down from her former heights; she is now "low-toned," "pale," "meek" and "mild," her voice trembling (VII, 208-12). "She said / Brokenly," reports the Prince, "that she knew it, she had failed / In sweet humility; had failed in all; / . . . [she] sought far less for truth than power / In knowledge" (VII, 212-22). In this alleged confession the Princess not only repudiates that which has been her driving force throughout — knowledge — but also admits to being now overcome with its very antithesis, "something wild within her breast, / A greater than all knowledge, beat her down" (VII, 222-23). In examining the Prince's narrative, however, we realize that this transformation has in effect been anticipated by the text. The opening of Book VII signals (or makes way for) Ida's new character by annihilating her former identity. From the heights of her pursuits, Ida is brought down to be engulfed by an abyss of nothingness:

And she as one that climbs a peak to gaze
O'er land and main, and sees a great black cloud
Drag inward from the deeps, a wall of night,
Blot out the slope of sea from verge to shore,

And suck the blinding splendour from the sand,
And quenching lake by lake and tarn by tarn
Expunge the world: so fared she gazing there;
So *blackened* all her world in secret, *blank*
And *waste* it seemed and *vain*; (VII, 20-28; emphasis added)

Ida's former (rebellious) self is thus obliterated, effaced, made to dissolve into "a great black cloud." The Princess never re-emerges from this abyss which sucks her into narrative oblivion. The figure which replaces her in the Romance's conclusion is a simulacrum of her, a mere projection of the Princenarrator's desires. As such she, reportedly, admits her folly; as such she forfeits her own voice in favour of the feminine lyrics she now reads to the Prince.

With the dissolution of female subjectivity the poem's conclusion proves to be a *tour de force* of the hegemonic discourse. In the end, the Prince, whose desire has haunted him throughout the poem — "every hoof a knell to my desires" (IV, 156) — experiences satisfaction: "and out of languor leapt a cry; / Leapt fiery Passion from the brinks of death" (VII, 140-41). As we leave Ida, however, she recites a song of longing, a call for love (as yet unanswered), her own speech being tinged with doubt. Similarly, in the conclusion of the frame narrative the narrator takes pleasure in Lilia (who is now silenced) — "Lilia pleased me, for she took no part / In our dispute" (Conclusion, 29-30) — and is also given the narrative 'privilege' of seeing his deepest beliefs affirmed. Lilia herself, however, remains as puzzled in the poem's conclusion as she had been at its inception, the narrative 'forever' withholding the very possibility of an answer to her question — "You — tell us what we are" (Conclusion, 34).

While Tennyson's iron hand of conventional idiom thus seals the woman's quest by crushing her "will" and "mind" to glorify her "heart," one should not rush into complicity with this 'resolution' to cover up the problematics in response to which such an act of aggression was initiated. As I hope has clearly emerged from the preceding discussion, both the poem's crowning vision of "like in difference" and the critical view that such a vision constitutes a satisfactory *resolution* of gender tensions in the poem only succeed in silencing a very powerful discourse presented in the poem through the characters of Psyche and Ida, the discourse of an emergent female subjectivity. Within the contemporary Victorian context, however, it will remain for Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* to bring this project to fruition. In a very 'real' textual sense, *Aurora Leigh* is a fulfilment of a desire expressed in *The Princess* but never fully gratified. In the Prologue to *The Princess* Lilia exclaims:

I wish I were
Some *mighty poetess*, I would shame you then,
That love to keep us children! (Prologue, 131-33; emphasis added)

In the Conclusion, the women plead in favour of a "solemn close," resenting the men's "banter": "A gallant fight, a noble princess — why / Not make her true-heroic — true-sublime?" (Conclusion, 17-20). While neither of these desires is satisfied in *The Princess*, both are amply provided for in the poem that is a celebration of the woman poet's text. The poet-narrator of Barrett Browning's grand epic is indeed "true-heroic, true-sublime." She is learned, and not "cramm'd with theories out of books," and her learning not only triumphs in full articulation but also issues in a knowledge of "what we [women] are."

NOTES

- 1 Adrienne Munich, "Notorious Signs, Feminist Criticism, and Literary Tradition," in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 257.
- 2 In *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969). *The Princess* is composed of seven Books, a Prologue, and a Conclusion. In my references I use roman numerals to indicate book number, and arabic numerals to indicate line numbers.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 113. Freud, however, would consider the fascination with the enigma of femininity to have been an exclusively male preoccupation throughout history.
- 4 Munich, p. 244.
- 5 Mary Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in this Text?" *New Literary History*, 14, No. 1 (1982), 139.
- 6 T. Reiss, "The Environment of Literature and the Imperatives of Criticism: The End of a Discipline," *Europa*, 4, No. 1 (1981), 63.
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 95.
- 8 Jerome McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 5.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 10 Alan Sinfield, *Alfred Tennyson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 9.
- 11 Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 189.
- 12 James Kissane, *Alfred Tennyson* (New York: Twayne, 1970), p. 95.
- 13 Elton Edward Smith, *The Two Voices: A Tennyson Study* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 43.
- 14 Studies in this vein include: Ann C. Colley, "The Conflict between Tradition and Modern Values in Tennyson's *The Princess*," in *Women, Literature, Criticism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1978); Terry Eagleton, "Tennyson: Politics and Sexuality in 'The Princess' and 'In Memoriam'," in *1848: The Sociology of Literature*, ed. F. Barker, et al. (Univ. of Essex, 1978); Sinfield's *Alfred Tennyson*; Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: *The Princess* and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry*, 25, No. 2 (Summer 1987), 102-27; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985).
- 15 Sinfield, pp. 142-43.
- 16 Charles Kingsley, "On Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Earlier Works," in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. Jump (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 180.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 18 Donald S. Hair, *Domestic and Heroic in Tennyson's Poetry* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 109, 120.
- 19 Richard McGhee, *Marriage, Duty, and Desire in Victorian Poetry and Drama* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980), p. 42.

²⁰ "The Princess and the Queen," *Victorian Poetry*, 25, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1987), 134-35.

²¹ McGann, p. 179.

²² On this issue I have found the following studies particularly useful: Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*, trans. A. Rudolf (London: Allen Lane, 1974); John Killham, *Tennyson and The Princess: Reflections of an Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1958); and two volumes edited by Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), and *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977).

²³ A useful historical perspective on the issue of mating arrangements and ideals is provided by Lawrence Stone's important book, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977).

²⁴ I explore these issues at length in "Of Selfsame Desire: Patmore's *Angel in the House*," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 30 (1988), 538-61.

²⁵ S. E. Dawson, *Study, with Critical and Explanatory Notes, of Alfred Tennyson's Poem The Princess* (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1882), p. 33.

²⁶ Marjorie Stone explores important aspects of this matrix, and the ways in which the mixing of genders interacts with the mixing of genres and styles, in "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion." While Stone concludes that "Tennyson unsettles conventional genre and gender distinctions in *The Princess* only to uncover or reconstitute those he sees as fundamental" (115), it is my contention here that that recuperation is not symmetrical, so that, to use Tennyson's own terms, while "man-woman" is elevated to an ideal, "woman-man" is rejected as unnatural (see Stone, 111-12).

²⁷ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980).

²⁸ See, for example, Winston Collins, "The Princess: The Education of the Prince," *Victorian Poetry*, 11, No. 4 (Winter 1973), 285.

²⁹ Eagleton points out that by winning Ida the Prince "is, so to speak, incorporating the female into himself, and thus coming to terms with the 'feminine' aspects of himself in ways fully acceptable to the symbolic order (i.e., in marriage)," p. 100.

³⁰ The view of natural history advanced by the women at the Institute is indebted to Tennyson's reading of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Chambers's *Vestiges of Creation*. Killham's chapter on "The Princess and Evolution" is particularly illuminating in this regard.

³¹ F. E. L. Priestley, "Control of Tone in Tennyson's *The Princess*," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 4th ser., 1 (1963), 300.

³² *Ibid.*, 300.

³³ Although I accept M. Stone's analysis of elements of gender inversion in the lyrics, I still maintain that with regard to Ida the lyrics represent a pre-empting of her character and of her text. With the loss of her voice here, Ida disappears as an integral character, and her text is supplanted by an alien text bearing the marks of traditionally feminine gender and genre coding.

³⁴ I say "successfully" advisedly, for the profound satisfaction with which critics have observed and commented upon the poem's conclusion clearly testifies to the narrative's successful masking of the violence of its rhetoric. A typical example is A. Dwight Culler's celebratory prose in the conclusion of his chapter on the poem in his *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1977): "when he [the Prince] melted her heart and persuaded her to come down into the valley, marry, and have a child, he was essentially asking her to take up her abode in the English Idyl. For this form, based in love, centering upon marriage and the child, is that which he found most in harmony with his genius. Certainly it is that in which his poetic problems were ultimately resolved" (p. 148). For an illuminating discussion of the "violence of rhetoric" see Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).