

THE IMAGE OF THE MYTHICAL WOMAN IN MID-VICTORIAN GYNOTOPIA: GENDER AND GENRE IN ALFRED TENNYSON'S *THE PRINCESS* (1847)

A IMAGEM DA MULHER MÍTICA NA GINOTOPIA
MÉDIO-VITORIANA: GÉNERO E MODO EM
THE PRINCESS (1847) DE ALFRED TENNYSON

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This article intends to explore the image of the mythical woman (Athena) in one of the first Victorian works on a feminist utopia, Alfred Tennyson's long mock-heroic narrative poem *The Princess* (1847), and how contemporary women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh* (1857) responded not only to his representation of the feminine, and of the battle of the sexes enacted in it, but also to his way of writing. As its subtitle *A Medley* indicates, the poem is a deliberate mixture of different genres and genders: the lyrical and the epic, the feminine and the masculine, suggesting not only innovative experimentation in terms of traditional literary forms but also a problematization of essentialist images and concepts. Yet, for Tennyson, the resolution of the political conflict is dependent on the resolution of the love plot, which ultimately results in the highly contested transformation of the feminist 'Ida' in a domestic figure.

Keywords: Athena, gynotopia, Tennyson, gender, genre

Este artigo propõe-se explorar a imagem da mulher mítica (Atena) numa das primeiras obras vitorianas sobre uma utopia feminista, *The Princess* de Alfred Tennyson, poema heróico-satírico publicado em 1847, e a forma como autoras contemporâneas, nomeadamente Elizabeth Barrett Browning em *Aurora Leigh* (1857), responderam a esta representação do feminino e à 'guerra dos sexos' que é por ele encenada. Tal como o subtítulo do poema, *A Medley*, indica, trata-se de uma 'mistura' deliberada de diferentes modos e géneros: o lírico e o épico, o feminino e o masculino, que sugere não apenas uma inovadora experimentação ao nível de formas literárias tradicionais, mas também uma problematização de imagens e conceitos essencialistas. No entanto, a resolução do conflito político passa necessa-

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riamente em Tennyson pela resolução do conflito amoroso, resultando na transformação altamente contestada da revolucionária 'Ida' numa figura doméstica.

Palavras-chave: Atena, ginotopia, Tennyson, género, modo

<p><i>They said: she is high and far and blind in her high pride but now that my head is bowed in sorrow, I find she is most kind</i></p>	<p><i>(...) maybe wildest dreams Are but the needful preludes of the truth</i></p>
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H. D. "Pallas", 1957

Tennyson, *The Princess*, 1847

According to Linda Lewis, the iconography of woman as Wisdom was tremendously important among the Victorian writers who grew up with Germaine de Staël's and George Sand's protagonists, respectively 'Corinne' and 'Consuelo'.^[1] This guiding myth of the *artist-as-heroine* created by the French novelists is exhibited in scores of English narratives, namely by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. The artist-as-heroine embodies the female Wisdom figure, which in turn usually combines attributes of the Greek and Roman goddesses, such as 'Minerva' or 'Pallas-Athena' and of the Judeo-Christian religious female icons such as the 'Virgin Mary' (Hurst, 2006). Many of these women (such as the Sybil, Sophia and Pythia) served as priestesses, being associated with insight, prophecy and wisdom. Lewis emphasises that some were indeed poets who composed their prophecies and performed them in song (2003: 18). They prophesied the future, solved questions of truth and accuracy and even assigned tasks; Minerva, for example, aided Prometheus in providing metaphorical fire and light to humans. Lewis significantly adds that some of the early Gnostic Christians considered God as androgynous, "a dyad of opposites existing in harmony in one being" (*Idem*, 19). She not only states that Holy Sophia as 'the wisdom of God' appears in texts as diverse as Virgil's *Heroides* and Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, but also that in the propagandist art of

1 Lewis (2003: 18). Corinne uses her influence as a political Sybil ("l'enthousiasme") to enter the debates of the Napoleonic era; Consuelo employs her sacred fire ("la flame sacrée") as a divine Sophia to indict injustice throughout Europe.

nineteenth-century France “the aggressive female goddess was idealized – especially if she were *Lady Liberty*” (*Idem*, 20).^[2]

This figure of the idealised female, and particularly Athena, was also very familiar to male writers in mid-nineteenth-century England. John Ruskin, who in 1869 would lecture on the “Greek Myths of Storm”, namely the legends of Athena and Bellerophon, at the University College of London^[3], believed that Athena represented to his age the attributes of art, literature, and national virtue:

I could go back into the mythical teaching of the most ancient times, and show you how the great people, – by one of whose princesses it was appointed that the Lawgiver of all the earth should be educated, rather than by his own kindred; – how that great Egyptian people, wisest then of nations, *gave to their Spirit of Wisdom the form of a woman*; and into her hand, for a symbol, the weaver’s shuttle; and how the name and the form of that spirit, *adopted, believed, and obeyed by the Greeks*, became that *Athena of the olive-helm, and cloudy shield, to faith in whom you owe, down to this date, whatever you hold most precious in art, in literature, or in types of national virtue.* (Ruskin, 1865: 159, my emphasis)

The fact that Ruskin was the patron of the Pre-Raphaelite artists and that, traditionally, Athena was considered the goddess or patroness of the artisans must also have suggested this identification, as well as some associations with the Arts and Crafts Movement, of which Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris were to be the major proponents. But other resounding names come to fore; as Lewis observes, “At the height of the Victorian period, woman as Wisdom was incorporated into the works of Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Tennyson, Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot” (2003: 21). As was to be expected, this myth would prove especially appealing not only to female novelists as Eliot, but also to the male artist, due to his inclination to create and project himself

2 “Such is the figure of the Romantic Sibyl – a prophetess holding a scroll, inspired sister of Sophia, [...] Noble poet, ..., she reigns gravely, a book in hand. Sublime priestess, her eyes raised to the skies, mouth half-opened, she sees and foresees. She proclaims, she speaks, she is the patron saint of the creative feminine word.” (Hoog, 1991: 95)

3 In her article “Mythic Language and Gender Subversion. The Case of Ruskin’s Athena”, Sharon Weltman argues that “In ‘The Queen of the Air’ (1869), a mythological study of the goddess Athena, John Ruskin presents a series of binary oppositions that he immediately conflates: Athena and Medusa, air and earth, bird and snake, formation and destruction, science and myth, male and female” (Weltman, 1997: 350).

into the form of a mythic icon (the cases, namely, of Ruskin, Tennyson and Swinburne).

In her 'allegory of the female form,' *Monuments and Maidens*, Marina Warner explores the Western tradition of the female personification of liberty, justice, wisdom, charity, and other ideals, and analyses the tensions between women's historic and symbolic sculpture, painting, poetry, and classical mythology. She significantly argues that, in spite of her profeminist outlook, the figure of Athena became generally associated with patriarchy, nationalism and Christian authoritarianism^[4], thus suggesting not only a very ambivalent independence but also a liability to subsequent appropriations of not so positive a hue:

Athena, the virgin born, chaste goddess of wisdom, the unyoked guardian of the city, the patroness of women's skills and work, is the immediate model of those exemplifications of Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance (...). Divorced from the religion that created her, disinfected of pagan cult and ritual, Athena provided the mould in which *the language of virtue* was first cast in the Renaissance and again, during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The examples of personification which still surround us, like Britannia, often return directly to Athena. (Warner, 1985: 87; 125-6, my emphasis)

Other feminist critics take a different stance; for example, Barbara Taylor associates the figure of Athena mostly with radical feminism and the emergent socialist movement, especially the Saint-Simonians because of their opposition to the contemporary marriage code (Taylor, 1983, 161-82). By 1832, followers of Saint-Simonianism, a utopian-socialist movement in France, and other forward-looking intellectuals, had indeed become preoccupied with the social and economic roles of women.^[5] In this context, an artist as Marie Spartali Stillman, a Rossettian 'second-wave' Pre-Raphaelite of Greek origins and with a political allegiance to women's independence, would deliberately include in her choice of pictorial subjects Greek hero-

4 Athena's statues and images can be found displayed in several monuments and official buildings throughout Europe and elsewhere. Her figure and symbol were also notoriously appropriated by the German National Socialist Party early in the twentieth century, eventually serving the Nazi regime's iconography.

5 Barthelémy-Prosper Enfantin, a leader in the movement, and a few disciples developed an increasingly utopian and abstract theory that justified 'protecting' women from the hardening influence of the world and removing them from the public sphere, while arguing that in the new world women would play a role distinct from, yet equal to, that played by men.

ines such as Korinna, scholar and poet, Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, and Antigone, who defied the state for the sake of her principles.^[6]

For Christine Downing, Athene's "dedication to the world of art and culture, of clear thought and realized accomplishment", was an "important testimony of how a woman might order her life" (1996: 100). As the goddess of artist and artisan, she became "the prototype of the artistically creative woman" (*Idem*, 99). Coincidentally, Athena is also the goddess of 'weaving' who influences figures such as Arachne and Penelope. Often accused of being a hard, cool and distant deity, suspicious of the emotional and sensual and seeming to deny her own femininity, Athene became identified with war and masculine power. After all, she was born, full-grown, out of Zeus's head and her ambivalent relation to the masculine and the feminine has connected her with the image of the 'androgynous'.^[7] Athena came to stand as "a splendid ego-ideal" for Downing, who sees her as a "soul-giver, soul-maker", an "anima figure" (1996: 105). And, in fact, when Prometheus first fashioned man into the likeness of the gods, Athene was the one who breathed life into the soul. As authors such as Tennyson and Barrett Browning knew quite well, Athene's example raised serious questions about the connection between relationships and creativity, art and life. It is perhaps no coincidence that as England's foremost woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was often hailed in the critical community as a modern Athena and a prophetess, as Aletha Hayter remarks:

both her admirers and detractors compared her with the priestess of Delphi and other prophetesses – she was Deborah, Minerva, Alruna, the Sybil, the Pythoness, the anointed priestess: delirious, shrieking, possessed and contorted, or clamorously earnest and inspired with a sacred passion, (...). (Hayter, 1962: 194)

6 Avant-garde movements both in Germany and outside made notorious use of the goddess's image. The Austrian painter Gustav Klimt, for example, exhibited his painting of Athene's fierce-looking and fully armed figure in Vienna, in 1898.

7 It is difficult not to associate this image with the Pre-Raphaelite 'stunner', the idealised woman, with her thick neck, long jaws and masculine features, popularised by founding member Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Edward Burne-Jones took the early Pre-Raphaelite gender conflation even further and began to paint masculine, 'stunner-esque' women and effeminate men. If we examine paintings such as *Saint George*, *The Tree of Forgiveness* and the famous *Laus Veneris* the gender blurring is very clear. Victorian art thus represents the beginning of a process which started at male privileging gender polarity and ended at complete androgyny as seen in Beardsley's illustrations of the 1890's. The anxiety over female absence and subsequent loss of male identity that punctuated early Pre-Raphaelite works seems to have been replaced by the androgynous world of the aesthetes.

As a girl, she had proudly written “The Battle of Marathon”, in which the victorious Athenians were led by the wisdom of goddess Athena. Significantly, like her creator, Aurora Leigh yearns after wisdom and yearns too for the status of a ‘Sybil’. As Lewis points out, in describing Aurora, “Browning calls forth the Woman-as-Wisdom figure that evolved from the Sophia and Minerva traditions and became merged, in Victorian England, into an icon of female virtue and patriotism – Athena as Britannia” (Lewis, 2003: 113). In the verse-novel, while Lord Howe praises Aurora as the “prophetess, / At Delphi”, Lady Waldemar ridicules her as a “young prophetess”, seeing her intellectual pride and telling her that such women as herself starve their hearts to develop their brains (Browning, 1857: 5.942-43).^[8]

But male poets were also prone to use mythical women.^[9] For example, as early as the 1830s, many of Arthur Hallam’s poems are in praise of women, thus representing a new attempt to redefine their importance in a culture. Yet, with Hallam’s precocious death and the virtual collapse of feminised art in the 1840s, a new conservatism seemed to emerge. According to Isobel Armstrong, poetry became theorised in terms of the discourse of moral statement, “collapsing into the poetry of domesticated external description” (1993: 94); thus, namely, Alfred Tennyson’s art is no longer the feminised one of the Apostles but becomes “masculinised as the product of strength, the capacity to confirm and stabilise” (*Idem*, 95). This change is quite visible in Tennyson’s 1842 revisions of *The Lady of Shalott*, especially in “the increasing helplessness of the feminine Soul” (*Idem*, 81), with “repercussions in the wider politics of oppression” (*Idem*, 86). On the other hand, the poet seems to increase his understanding of the real condition of women in contemporary culture, and he was the first to incorporate an image of the woman as Wisdom in his work, giving her the ‘masculine’ attributes of the goddess Athena.

Later in the century, namely in A.C. Swinburne’s poetry, the (re)use of classic female myth, becomes more aesthetically and sexually transgressive. For example, in his poem “Hertha” he attacks the Judaeo-Christian god by arguing that Hertha, the female goddess of fertility and the paradigmatic matriarch, is the true originator of all existence. Also, in his “Laus Veneris”

8 See Lootens (1996: 116-157).

9 That was especially the case of later Victorian artists, namely Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Charles Algernon Swinburne, who were particularly fond of mythological figures such as Proserpine. These poets’ masculinised female figures did not simply reverse the woman’s position in the gender polarity but rather combined the positive attributes said to be found in each sex, creating women that were powerful (and dangerous), but significantly because of their bodily passion and sexuality.

he presents Venus as the 'soul's body' and a woman's mouth is said to be 'lovelier' than Christ's. Although Swinburne's women are indeed aggressive in the masculine sense, he was nonetheless interested in the feminised mind, a mind which could put the beautiful before the good as the object of worship. In this context, the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are meaningless: they are put into question by an aesthetic ideal which would challenge the binary opposition through the use of the androgyne.

But this new awareness, as well as this image of the mythical woman, had already become evident near the mid-century in *The Princess: A Medley*, a work in which Tennyson represented in mock-heroic fashion the convolutions and adaptations in Victorian masculine and feminine gender identities. This long narrative poem, published for the first time in 1847, tries somehow to accommodate the emerging Victorian women's movement at the same time that it shows confidence in the impossibility of a violent political conflagration in England. Nevertheless, the fantastic medieval setting of the story (with its prince and princess) seems to introduce the paradigm of courtly love, which, though allowing for implicit male submission to the female in the sentimental arena, in fact promotes a heroic ideal of manliness in the sphere of action. Thus, modern critics as Thais Morgan believe that "Hegemonic masculinity is modified but not overthrown in *The Princess*" (2000: 207). The poem, as Herbert Tucker points out, "addresses a very touchy subject, the relation of the sexes in contemporary culture", but it also "avoids taking a position on a hotly debated issue" (1998: 351).

The idea for *The Princess* may have been in Tennyson's mind before 1839, as his shorter poem *A Dream of Fair Women* (1832) seems somehow to anticipate.^[10]

Those far-renowned brides of ancient song
 Peopled the hollow dark, *like burning stars*,
 And I heard sounds of insult, shame, and wrong,
 And trumpets blown for wars;
 (...)
 At length I saw a lady within call,
 Stillter than chisell'd marble, standing there;
 A *daughter of the gods, divinely tall*,
 And most *divinely fair*.

10 Tennyson seems to introduce the classic examples of the predicaments of Iphigenia, of Ariadne, as well as the poetic fragments of Sappho. All the quotations from Tennyson's poems are taken from Christopher Ricks (ed.), *Tennyson. A Selected Edition*, London: Longman, 1989.

Her loveliness with shame and with surprise
 Froze my swift speech: she turning on my face
 The star-like sorrows of *immortal eyes*,
 Spoke slowly in her place. (17-20, 83-90, my emphasis)

It is also impossible not to associate its title to Princess Victoria herself and her concerns with women's education, eventually shared with the poet. In fact, the title of the first manuscript version was, interestingly, *The New University* or *University of Women*. And, at the beginning of 1846, Elizabeth Barrett would significantly comment in a letter to Robert Browning:

[Tennyson] has finished the second book (...) in blank verse & a fairy tale, & called the *University*, the university members being all females (...) I don't know what to think – it makes me open my eyes. Now isn't the world too old & fond of steam, for blank verse poems, in ever so many books, to be written on the fairies? (*apud* Armstrong, 1993: 87)

This comment appears to emphasise not only Elizabeth Barrett's surprise at such a title but above all her surprise in relation to "the university members being all females", a totally unprecedented novelty and a radical theme, even for her. But her final question seems to reverse that sense of originality by doubting the contemporary appropriateness of its adopted style and genre. At this still early stage, she seems to hint at the basic anachronism of placing a contemporary theme like feminism in a medieval setting, transforming it into a 'fairy tale'. But Tennyson himself, it seems, was very much aware of the anachronisms and improbabilities of his story.

It is by tracing developments which took place in the two decades from his going up to Cambridge to the publication of the poem, that John Kilham suggests "how it came about that *The Princess* took the strange form it did" (1958: vii). Simultaneously attempting "to sketch out the lines of a new type of relationship", which took in consideration "the Socialist theories which were undermining conventional attitudes to marriage" and seeking for a new form of expression "capable of representing the singular diversity of his time", Tennyson sacrificed conventional poetic unity to what he himself designated as a 'medley', the mixture of exotic and realistic elements present in the alternation between the fairy tale and the college subject (*Idem*, 5). In spite of all this, Kilham believes that Tennyson saw "that an old romantic tale curiously prefigured the contemporary real-life situation" and that

the fantastic came “unexpectedly into accord with the facts of mundane nineteenth-century existence” (*Idem*, 6).

Among the Victorian long poems treating of love and marriage in a recognisable way, namely Clough’s *Bothie*, Elizabeth Barrett’s *Aurora Leigh*, Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* and Meredith’s *Modern Love*, Kilham singles out Tennyson’s *The Princess* as “depart[ing] from the rule” in addressing itself to a specific reform and as representing not only the very first but also “the boldest attempt” of all (*Idem*, vii, 2; 5). In conceiving of his feminist topic as early as he did, Tennyson shows himself to be “too bold a speculator” (*Idem*, 5). The plan of the poem was fixed within a year or so of the first controversy over a woman’s college education; the poet obviously wanted to see whether the marriage-relationship could survive the fulfilment of women’s highest intellectual aspirations. It was in his Cambridge days that Tennyson was influenced by the circle of his friends, some of whom had feminist leanings (namely, the young followers of the elder Mill and the friends of Arthur Hallam). The social revolution Mary Wollstonecraft had looked forward to with her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a text that permeates Tennyson’s, was now being initiated.^[11]

Besides this indirect influence, Tennyson was certainly aware of the debate around the woman question which had been going on in English society. Not only Hannah More’s early *Female Education* (1799), but also Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1837), Caroline Norton’s campaign in 1839 to award the custody of infant children to their mother (Child Custody Act) and the foundation of the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution (1841) led by the Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice. It is perhaps no coincidence either that in the same year that Tennyson published *The Princess* (1847), two novels by women dealing with equally strong-minded heroines came to the public eye: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.^[12] And, in 1848, Queen’s College would finally be established in London for women who wanted to be teachers. In 1851, only one year after Tennyson published the third edition of *The Princess* (1850), Harriet Taylor made her pamphlet on “The Enfranchisement of Women” public and the first Women’s Suffrage Petition

11 It may be important to point out that egalitarian feminism had continued to find support in groups on the fringes of conventional society – Unitarians, philosophic radicals or the Owenite socialists of the 1830s.

12 Although the female protagonists in the Brontë novels differ considerably from Tennyson’s protagonist, the coincidence of the year of publication of the respective works should indeed elicit some critical comparison in terms of respective influences and ideas on the woman question.

was presented to the House of Lords. Tennyson's poem became, therefore, part of the general debate on the woman question.

The text of *The Princess* is itself structurally 'framed' precisely around a group debate on women's university education, taken up by seven young men for the entertainment of a house-party (this is part of the "Prologue"). They essentially adopt a medieval "tale from mouth to mouth" and, one after another, try to fit to it a story 'made up' as they go along. The function of this experimental technique is not only to provide a more contemporary setting for the medieval tale but also to prepare the reader for what comes – the subject of the emancipation of women. That Tennyson had some pride in its technical ingenuity is apparent in his remark that "there is scarcely anything in the story which is not prophetically glanced at in the prologue" (*Memoir, apud* Kilham, 1958: 170).

The first prophetic glance that concerns us is indeed the response of 'little Lilia', the host's daughter, to the narrator's legendary tale of "her who drove the foes with slaughter from her walls" – the unexpected story of a sieged young noble woman who resisted and fought back a king who wanted to honour a marriage contract and force her to his wishes. Lilia immediately associates this case with the condition of contemporary Victorian women and accuses men:

*'There are thousands now
Such women, but convention beats them down:
It is but bringing up; no more than that:
You men have done it: how I hate you all!
Ah, were I something great! I wish I were
Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then,
That love to keep us children! O I wish
That I were some great princess, I would build
Far off from men a college like a man's,
And I would teach them all that men are taught;
We are twice as quick!'* (Prologue, 127-138, my emphasis)

In this spirited reaction to the provocative question posed by Lilia's brother, Walter, "Where (...) lives there such a woman now?", the reader is thus able to anticipate the main feminist argument of Tennyson's poem, the superior education of women, which is here remarkably summarised.

From this moment onwards, young Lilia will fully assume and even incarnate or enact the heroic and tragic role of the 'Princess Ida' in the joint

story that enfold: “some great Princess, six feet high, / *Grand, epic, homicidal*” (218-19, my emphasis).^[13] Inspired by the exemplary woman of the past – the feudal warrior-lady, the Victorian “half-child, half woman” of the present that Lilia represents will anticipate, in the embodiment of her vision, the woman of the future – the powerful and independent intellectual, who is capable of mentally surpassing her male counterparts. Through Lilia’s speech in the Prologue, Tennyson brings forward some of the major complaints and demands of the Victorian women’s movement: the inadequate education of women, their shameful treatment as mere children and the latent, but wrong, wish of emulation of the masculine model. And as the framed narrative develops, it will trace the origin of nineteenth-century bourgeois gender arrangements directly back to the feudal aristocracy, linking marital and martial ritual in a chronicle-based story.

Upon the impending break of an ancient marriage contract between two noble houses, due to the supposed whim of the betrothed princess Ida, “(...) *she had a will; (...) / And maiden fancies; loved to live alone / Among her women; certain, would not wed*” (47-49, my emphasis), the crude male sphere of power that the Prince’s father represents seems to be on the verge of martial violence, “he would send a hundred thousand men, / And bring her in a whirlwind” or “*crush her pretty maiden fancies dead / In iron gauntlets*” (64; 87-88, my emphasis). Florian, the Prince, who does not wish to win his princess by resorting to violent means, travels southward to the king’s palace with two of his friends, where he is told how the Princess was influenced by strange ideas:

‘Two widows, Lady Psyche, Lady Blanche;
They fed her theories, in and out of place
Maintaining that with equal husbandry
The woman were an equal to the man.
 (...)
 To hear them: knowledge, so my daughter held,
 Was all in all: they had but been, she thought,
 As children; they must lose the child, assume
 The woman: then, Sir, *awful odes she wrote*
 (...)
 About this losing of the child; and rhymes

13 Tennyson must have been aware of the fact that the statue known as the Phidian Pallas was a gigantic image of Pallas Athena by the famous Greek sculptor Phidias that was originally erected in the Parthenon, but no longer survives.

And *dismal lyrics, prophesying change*
Beyond all reason: these the women sang (...) (I. 127-142, my emphasis)

The Princess's father finally tells the Prince of how his daughter has left him to found a university for women in a remote retreat, where no man is allowed to enter on penalty of death. It becomes clear that Ida's separatist feminism constitutes a radical break with the ways of her father and brother. But the three friends devise a plan to infiltrate the university in "female gear" and try to win the princess's return.

According to Eve Sedgwick, Ida is both "the founder, the benefactor, the theorist, the historian, and the beau ideal of a movement" (1985: 126). They ride into her domains, significantly "where there stood a bust of Pallas for a sign", asking to enrol as students. When they are taken to see Princess Ida, who "at a board by tome and paper sat", they are profoundly impressed by her majestic godlike beauty:

With two tamed leopards couched beside her throne,
 All beauty compassed in a female form,
 (...); liker to *the inhabitant*
Of some clear planet close upon the Sun,
 Than our man's earth; such eyes were in her head,
 And *so much grace and power*, 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. 19-27, my emphasis)

But to the Prince's enthusiasm and flattering comments, the Princess replies firmly and sharply, anticipating a lesson in the required posture of the female student, the future 'new woman': to rid herself of all the feminine wiles and futilities, as well as man's beguiling language; she also tells the disguised Prince of her intention of never marrying, like Pallas-Athena who insisted on being a virgin:

'We scarcely thought in our own hall to hear
This barren verbiage, current among men,
 Light coin, the tinsel click of compliment.
 (...)
 Your language proves you still the child. Indeed,
 We dream not of him: when we set our hand

To this great work, we purposed with ourself
 Never to wed. You likewise will do well,
 Ladies, in entering here, *to cast and fling*
The tricks, which make us toys of men, that so,
 Some future time, if so indeed you will,
 You may with these self-styled our lords ally
 Your fortunes, justlier balanced, scale with scale.' (II: 39-52, my emphasis)

The three men begin then to debate amongst themselves the merits of women's equality as they move around the university, listening and learning. One of the remarkable lessons in history is given by Lady Psyche, Florian's sister and Ida's major assistant, who speaks of the past repression of women and refers to notable feminine examples of different ages and places:

Ran down the Persian, Grecian, Roman lines
 Of empire, and the woman's state in each,
 How far from just; till warming with her theme
She fulminated out her scorn of laws Salique
And little-footed China, touched on Mahomet
With much contempt, (...)
 (...) some ages had been lost;
 (...) and albeit their glorious names
 Were fewer, scattered stars (...)
 (...) in arts of government
 Elizabeth and others; arts of war
 The peasant Joan and others; arts of grace
 Sappho and others vied with any man (...) (II. 114-148, my emphasis)

Finally, Psyche the lecturer rises "upon a wind of prophecy / Dilating on the future", offering a preliminary vision of gender relations based on total equality of abilities and responsibilities, and in which woman may even aspire to the elevated status of Poet in equal terms to man:

'(...) everywhere
 Two heads in council, two beside the hearth,
 Two in the tangled business of the world,
 Two in the liberal offices of life,
 Two plummet dropt for one to sound the abyss

Of science, and the secrets of the mind:
 Musician, painter, sculptor, critic, more:
 And everywhere the broad and bounteous Earth
 Should bear *a double growth of those rare souls*,
 Poets, whose thoughts enrich the blood of the world.' (II. 155-164, my emphasis)

It is at this elevated moment that Psyche suddenly discovers the men's subterfuge, but so does her intellectual and political rival – Lady Blanche, who wants to denounce them. Psyche is then divided by her “vow” that “binds her to speak” and the love for her endangered brother, by the Spartan will to keep their hard-won ‘gynotopia’ and her own feminine compassion.

Meanwhile, Ida and the Prince, who is still in disguise, walk together and talk about Florian, but Ida only ironises the effeminate Prince's supposed lovelorn condition, “Poor boy, (...) / To nurse *a blind ideal like a girl*” (201, my emphasis), denouncing the weakness of romantic love in a man. While he wishes to discuss the celebrated marriage contract, Ida speaks vehemently of her ideals of equality: “To lift the woman's *fallen divinity* / Upon an even pedestal with man” (207-8, my emphasis). She refers probably to a remote and pagan past, in which women were not only respected but also idolised; and, finally, to the Prince's insistent call upon her womanly sensibility:

‘(...) *I dread that you,*
 With only Fame for spouse and your great deeds
 For issue, *yet may live in vain*, and miss,
 Meanwhile, what every woman counts her due,
 Love, children, happiness?’ (III. 225-29, my emphasis)

Ida replies that this domestic experience of women, this supposed bliss, does not possibly measure up to the noble sacrifice of a great deed like hers; a reply that leaves the Prince doubtful in himself “If that strange Poet-princess with her grand / Imaginations might at all be won” (256-7).

Later on, at a picnic organised on the occasion of a geological expedition, Ida invites the Prince (still in woman's disguise) to sing a song from her / his homeland, but he finds that he can only sing of love on the occasion. The Princess immediately mocks his attempt, stating that music and poetry should be employed for nobler ends than the conventional ones of wooing and deceiving women:

(...) *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.
 (...)

(...) But great is song
 Used to great ends: ourself have often tried
 Valkyrian hymns, or into rhythm have dashed
 The passion of the prophetess; *for song*
Is due unto freedom, force and growth
Of spirit than to junketing and love. (IV. 110-124, my emphasis)

The noble art of Poetry should be used for philosophical and political purposes, she claims like Athena. But when Ida suggests another attempt, Cyril inadvertently improvises a drunken tavern song, in typical male fashion, and chaos breaks out as the men's identities become obvious to all. In the confusion of revelation, Ida accidentally falls into the river, and the Prince saves her from drowning, thus assuming the conventional role of male rescuer.

The men manage to flee but the Prince and Cyril are eventually recaptured, knowing that they may face the terrible penalty of death. Meanwhile, letters arrive from both the Prince's father and Ida's father: this one had been taken hostage by the King, who in turn warns Ida not to harm the prince, and to free him, or his army would storm the castle. Under the real threat of a major male invasion of her domains, Ida gathers her courage and gives a stirring speech, saying that she will lead the maidens into battle: "To unfurl the maiden banner of our rights, / And *clad in iron burst the ranks of war,* / Or, falling, *protomartyr* of our cause, / Die" (483-85, my emphasis). For Herbert Tucker, Ida becomes with this martial gesture "a principle of pure defiance (...) that can but foresee ... the extinction of the self" (361); this extremity derives from the clear defeat her surrender would represent.

She duly summarises the six hundred years of male domination, emphasising the abasement, ignorance and prejudice to which women have been subjected, in much the same terms as Mary Wollstonecraft had put forward in her *Vindication*, in which she denounces above all the educational failures that have transformed woman into a degenerated human being, subject to man's insult and violence:

(...) dismissed in shame to live
 No wiser than their mothers, *household stuff*,
Live chattels, mincers of each other's fame,
 Full of weak poison, turnspits for the clown,
 The drunkard's football, laughing-stocks of Time,
 Whose brains are in their hands and in their heels,
 But fit to flaunt, to dress, to dance, to thrum,
 To tramp, to scream, to burnish, and to scour,
For ever slaves at home and fools abroad? (IV. 492-500, my emphasis)

It is at this high moment of eloquence that Ida publicly renounces her marriage contract and accuses the Prince and his men of barbarianism and falsehood, expelling them from her quarters: "You that have dared to break our bound, (...) wronged and lied and thwarted us – / I wed with thee! I bound by precontract / Your bride, your bondslave! (...) I trample on your offers and on you" (518-525). Ida finds the Prince guilty of precisely those things she has been trying to combat, including the attempt to enslave her through an obsolete marriage law.

Humiliated by this failure, the Prince's father wants to make war, to exert the male power of conquest ("She yields, or war"), but the son reiterates his preference to win Ida's love through peaceful means: "More soluble is this knot, / By gentleness than war" (129-30). Nevertheless, in typical medieval fashion, the martial alternative prevails in the end: the Prince and his friends finally agree to fight Ida's brothers in a "tourney" (tournament) and let the battle decide whether Ida must keep her marriage contract. This arrangement, Tucker stresses, signifies "the dependency of her regime on the sufferance of the male armed forces" (358). Ida's battle is indeed a vocal one: her decided and ferocious voice inspires maidens, as it recalls women's oppression around the world and speaks of her mission in isolation and severity:

(...)
 What heats of indignation when we heard
 Of those that iron-cramped their women's feet;
 Of lands in which at the altar the poor bride
 Gives her harsh groom for bridal-gift a scourge;
 Of living hearts that crack within the fire
 Where smoulder their dead despots; (...)
 (...) and I saw

That *equal baseness lived in sleeker times*
 With *smoother men*: [...]

Millions of throats would bawl for civil rights,
 No woman named: Therefore I set my face
 Against all men, and lived but for mine own.
 Far off from men I built a fold for them:
 (...)

And biting laws to scare the beasts of prey
 And prospered; till a rout of saucy boys
 Brake on us at our books, and marred our peace,
 (...)

I tamed my leopards: shall I not tame these? (V. 365-390, my emphasis)

Hers will be for the moment, but not for long, a victorious female voice; first of all, she and some of her strongest ‘viragos’ depend on the male assistance of Ida’s brothers; yet, in this ‘battle of the sexes,’ they manage to defeat and wound both the Prince and his friends. After acknowledging defeat, the Prince eventually falls into a coma. It is then that, rather unexpectedly, Ida asks the King to let her tend the Prince’s injuries and, afterwards, asks to let her university ladies tend not only to Cyril and Florian but to all wounded. This surprisingly compassionate attitude of ministering to the men, shows Ida’s willingness to bend her own laws, in spite of her victory, and marks a deep change in the sexual politics of the poem.

Though nursing, not learning, is now shown as being the most natural activity to women, “Like creatures native unto gracious act, / And in their own clear element” (12-13), Princess Ida cannot help feeling sad and useless because the very reason for her existence – the noble task of the enlightenment of women – has somehow been interrupted, modified and subverted by the interference of men; and this is what the following excerpt explores through apocalyptic imagery, which is suggestive of failure and disaster:

But sadness on the soul of Ida fell,
 And hatred of her *weakness*, blent with *shame*.
Old studies failed; seldom she spoke: but oft
 Clomb to the roofs, and gazed alone for hours
 On that disastrous leaguer, *swarms of men*
Darkening her female field: void was her use,
 (...)

(...) *a wall of night*,

Blot out the slope of sea from verge to shore,
 And suck the blinding splendour from the sand,
 (...)
 So blackened all her world in secret, *blank*
And waste it seemed and vain; till down she came,
 And found fair peace once more among the sick. (VII. 14-29, my emphasis)

Though Ida is not defeated through war, which is traditionally the male duty and preserve, she is ironically defeated through love and its language; this, because the lyric poems that she reads to the wounded Prince are, as Tucker claims, “persuasions to love” and “assume her assigned familial and societal place” (1988: 368-370). As she had feared in relation to her women, she becomes *voiceless*.^[14] The sudden change in Ida’s position, in her whole being in fact – “pale”, “meek”, “mild”, “broken”, in which proud Athena is transformed into a meek Aphrodite, appears at first to derive from her recognition and acceptance of the Prince’s love and of his avowed respect for the women’s cause. The reader may detect the presence of Tennyson himself, and of his own utopian projection into the future, in the Prince’s persuasive address to the Princess – an appeal to all women with feminist leanings:

(...)
 Henceforth thou hast a helper, me, that know
The woman’s cause is man’s: they rise or sink
 Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free:
 (...)
 (...) let her make herself her own
 To give or keep, to live and learn and *be*
All that not harms distinctive womanhood.
 (...)
 Yet in the long years liker must they grow;

14 According to Tucker, Ida’s becomes “an ominous silence”, a “space of defeated melancholy” (1988: 359); this because “Ida finds herself in idyllic and conventional culture after all (...) which undercuts both her mission and her identity” (*Idem*, 362). In this context, it is important to remark that these songs or lyrics had been introduced much later by Tennyson for both reasons of content and form. In formal terms, they contribute to the poet’s original intention of experimenting a generic ‘medley’ (mixing both narrative and lyric language); in terms of the story, the love songs have the deliberate function of contributing to and enhancing the love interest that will ensure both the perpetuation of social convention and the survival of the human species.

The man be more of woman, she of man;
 He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
 (...)
 She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care
 (...)
 Till at the last *she set herself to man*,
Like perfect music unto noble words; (VII. 240-270, my emphasis)

Ida has come to symbolise not vocal energy as before, in which she had full possession of the *word*, but only its sonorous adornment. Her change is occasioned by the literal disempowerment caused by the dismantling of her university project and the consequent lack of worthy future prospects besides marriage. Although she eventually comes to love the Prince, we cannot ignore that what she loses is her own mission and identity. The resolution of the conflict is therefore achieved merely through romance or romantic love and not through an effective change in men's mentality, which might open up a possibility. In *The Princess*, sexual and political equality are not really attained in the end and perhaps Tennyson never intended them to be in order to preserve the 'natural order of things'. We could ask if he lacked the courage to offer a more radical solution or merely the capacity to project himself into the not so distant future.

As Eve Sedgwick argues, "The 'mythic' central narrative begins with the astonishing vision of a feminist separatist community and ends with one of the age's definitive articulations of the cult of the angel in the house" (1985: 120). She thus seems to imply that, far from being a para-feminist poem, as the stated project of *The Princess* insists, Tennyson's text actually deals with the patriarchal homosocial bonding which makes women an object of exchange between men. Yet, it is not without a certain regret that the poet faces the prospect of "the sacrifice of the heroic will" as represented by Ida's fall or defeat, present in Walter's final compassionate insight: "I wish she had not yielded!" and the assertion that "maybe wildest dreams / Are but the needful preludes of the truth" (Conclusion, 5, 73-4). According to James Kincaid, "Ida's search for knowledge involves the creation of a new society, a world that is specifically utopian (...)" and where "the chief enemy (...)" is time, most specifically the past" (1975: 86). In spite of Tennyson's sympathy for Ida, he implies that the Present is no time for heroism, no time for "solemnity, isolation and rebellion", but for "natural development" in the domestic sphere. On the contrary, Elizabeth Barrett Browning states in *Aurora Leigh*, published ten years later, that the Present can be as heroic or

epic as any antique age: “this living, throbbing age, / That (...) spends more passions, more heroic heat, / Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms”, and also that she “distrusts the poet who discerns / No character or glory in his times / And trundles back his soul five hundred years” (V. 200-210). The Present possesses, above all, the potential for the New Woman to emerge and Browning would set out to prove that such a woman as Tennyson’s Ida was no mere Idea, myth or idealization but an applicable concept in reality.

Aurora and Romney Leigh, just like Ida and the Prince, are destined for each other from their childhood because of their arranged betrothal. But though both ‘brides of dreams’ insist on initial separatism and independence – leaving their homes and refusing to marry in order to accomplish their respective projects, only Aurora achieves her goal, that of becoming an independent woman. Both protagonists seem to agree that “great deeds cannot die” but “children die” (III. 236-7), thus implying that the purely domestic project is naturally finite or limited in comparison. Ida’s model or ‘idea’ is her self projected into the Future through her creation of thousands like herself – her female pupils at the University. Both women poets want to immortalise themselves through a personal accomplishment that is not time-bound. Like the Prince in relation to Ida’s political cause, Aurora is impressed with Romney’s social reforms and later heroic intentions. But, like Ida in relation to the Prince, she also judges Romney for attempting to woo her with pretty but hollow words.^[15]

Moreover, Tennyson’s implicit concept of the female utility in society is reflected indirectly in Romney’s notion that the wife should have the noble role of husband’s helper. This notion is criticised and ironised by Aurora: “There’s work for wives as well (...) / When men are liberal” (III. 724-27). Browning knew that, according to the realities of the Married Women’s Property Act, it was to Aurora’s advantage to remain single. It is, therefore, significant that Aurora, like Ida, establishes the main difference between herself and Romney in the following terms: “he is overfull / Of *what is*, and I, haply, overbold / For *what might be*” (I. 1103-09, my emphasis). Ida and Aurora renounce the Prince and Romney, respectively, for the lack of imagination they demonstrate. Aurora’s most radical vision of a union is the scenario she envisions of herself and the fallen Marian raising a child together without a male presence. This vision bears obvious similarities to some aspects of Ida’s gynotopia, namely her relationship with Lady Psyche and her child. It is the shift in the relationship’s balance of power, which

15 See also Marjorie Stone (1987).

is represented in *The Princess* by Ida's conformation to the Prince's ideal and in *Aurora Leigh* by Romney's utter dependence (financial and physical) on Aurora, that allows Barrett Browning to comment on Tennyson's work. Only in these circumstances can the woman poet conceive of Marriage as heralding the beginning of a New Jerusalem, a new era of an equitable, love-based union.

For its close, which narrates the disbanding of the group of guests at the end of the day, Tennyson's poem focuses again on Lilia, the contemporary Victorian maiden: "Last little Lilia, rising quietly, / Disrobed the glimmering statue of Sir Ralph / From those rich silks, and home well-pleased we went" (Conclusion, 116 -118). As the feminine silks are symbolically removed from the noble host, Sir Ralph, the heroic and the domestic, male and female, are consequently safely disjoined, and the Victorian reader is left 'well-pleased' with the pageantry and himself; yet, the poem has significantly illustrated the heavy price to be paid for the easy pleasure of domestic comfort. Like Walter, the reader is haunted by Ida's fall but also, it has to be recognised, by the poem's refusal to ignore the consequences of that fall, which fundamentally implies the sacrifice of the heroic will, the literal downfall of the enlightened spirits of Athena, Sophia and Pythia. Like the isolated Soul in Tennyson's poem "The Palace of Art" or even the embowered Lady of Shalott herself, into whose mythic forms the poet deliberately and strategically projects himself, and whose beautiful 'song' is not shared or appreciated by the materialistic and prosaic world around her / him, Ida's grand idealistic project/*animated* discourse is shown to be too perfect, too elevated and too forward-looking both for her own time and Lilia's.

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