*The Princess: A Medley*

Tennyson wrote *The Princess* during the 1840s, and it was first published in 1847.

A second edition followed almost immediately in early 1848, with minor revisions; a third edition came out in 1850, with the addition of the six songs between each part; further editions followed in 1851 and 1853 with further changes – the most significant being the addition of the detail of the Prince suffering occasional ‘weird seizures’. The text seems to have remained the same from this point on. For more information on the history of the text, and detailed annotation of the poem, see Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson* (Longman, 1969), pp.741-844.

The poem is in nine parts: a prologue, seven sections numbered I to VII, and a conclusion. On the next pages is a synopsis of what happens in each part, with line numbers keyed to an 1860 edition.

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Prologue

*1-9* The time is the present [ie the mid-19th century]. The unnamed narrator, a [Cambridge] university student, is staying at Vivian Place, the country estate [in Kent] of Sir Walter Vivian, with a group of university friends including Sir Walter’s son Walter. It is the summer day on which Sir Walter opens up his park to the local community.

*10-53* Walter shows the narrator some of the historical objects in the house, and also a book telling stories of his ancestors – including Sir Ralph Vivian, and a legendary lady, a ‘miracle of noble womanhood’, who once led a charge in a battle against a hostile king. Absorbed by these stories, the narrator takes the book with him when Ralph suggests they go outside to the ruined Abbey in the grounds.

*54-88* On the way to the Abbey, they observe all the educational activities and entertainments being put on by the local Institute [ie college] as part of the open day. The narrator finds these sights ‘strange’.

*89-106* Inside the ruined Abbey they find their friends, and some ladies including Ralph’s unmarried Aunt Elizabeth and his younger sister Lilia. A broken statue of Sir Ralph Vivian is propped against a wall, and Lilia has playfully draped an orange scarf around it.

*107-220* Aunt Elizabeth praises the educational events going on in the park in high-minded terms, but the students tell a different story by describing what they get up to at their all-male university and criticising the staff. The conversation turns to imagining what an all-female university would be like.

*220-239* With all this in mind, and to pass the time, the narrator offers to lead his six friends in a story-telling medley. They will take it in turns to tell the seven-part ‘heroic’ story of a Prince and Princess; and at intervals the ladies will sing ballads or songs to give them a break.

I

*1-39* The Prince introduces himself [though he remains unnamed]: he is the son of the king of a Northern kingdom; he suffers from a hereditary condition of occasional ‘weird seizures’ [this is a detail Tennyson only added to later editions of the poem]; as a child he was betrothed to the Princess of a neighbouring Southern kingdom, but he has never met her.

*40-66* When the time for the wedding approaches, the Princess’s father, the king of the Southern kingdom, sends a message that she prefers to live only with women and will not marry. The Northern king is angry at the broken engagement and swears he will send an army to fetch her by force.

*67-99* The Prince asks instead to be allowed to go to see the Princess for himself; his friend Florian volunteers the information that his sister married a nobleman from the Southern kingdom and is now a widow there with influence at court; she might be able to help. The king refuses these offers, but the Prince is inspired to go secretly anyway.

*100-159* With Florian and another friend, Cyril, the Prince journeys to the Southern kingdom and is entertained by the King (Gama). Gama explains that he is not against the marriage, but his daughter has fallen under the influence of two widows, Lady Psyche and Lady Blanche, who believe that women should be equal to men and not treated like children. The Princess has set up a ‘University for maidens’ in a palace near the Northern border. Gama warns the Prince he has no chance with her, but agrees to help by giving him some letters to her.

*160-245* The Prince and his two friends journey north to the palace near the border (‘liberties’) where the Princess has set up her university; in a local inn they disguise themselves as women; they then approach the university and send in a message asking to be enrolled as visiting students the next day.

II

*1-83* The three ‘students’ are admitted to an interview with the Princess (Ida), who is surprised that women from the Northern kingdom are so tall. She gives them an inspiring induction talk, then refers them to Lady Psyche.

*84-100* They join a class being addressed by Psyche, whom Florian identifies as his sister. Psyche has her baby daughter, Aglaia, with her in the class.

*101-164* Psyche gives a lecture on women in history, ending with a vision of the future in which women will be equal to men in business, science and the arts.

*165-178* Greeting her three new students privately after the lecture, Psyche is shocked to recognise her brother Florian. She warns them she must expose them and that men are barred from the university on pain of death.

*179-218* The men are sceptical about the penalty; the Prince also points out that his death would result in a war, which would ruin the university. Psyche says she will report them anyway and the Princess will decide.

*219-260* The Prince appeals to her on the basis of her family background and loyalty to the Northern kingdom; Florian appeals to her on the basis of their childhood companionship; Cyril appeals on the basis of how wise she is.

*261-295* Psyche agrees not to expose them as long as they promise to leave in a few days; she will put about the story that they left because they were too ‘barbarous’ to learn. They agree and Psyche greets her brother more warmly.

*296-346* They suddenly realise that this scene has been observed by Melissa, the grown-up daughter of Lady Blanche. Melissa is close to Psyche and promises not to reveal the secret; Psyche warns her not to reveal it accidentally.

*347-372* Still disguised as female students, the three men spend the rest of the day sampling the different subjects being taught in the university.

*373-410* Cyril tells them he has fallen in love with Psyche.

*411-455* They go in to formal dinner with the six hundred other students; the Prince admires Ida from a distance, ‘compassed with Professors’. A chapel service concludes their first day at the university.

III

*1-49* In the morning, an agitated Melissa comes to tell them that her mother, Lady Blanche, has already guessed their secret.

*50-58* Cyril immediately goes to find Blanche, hoping to gain them some more time.

*59-80* Before leaving, Melissa tells them her mother is jealous of Psyche; she was Ida’s first mentor, but now Psyche is closer to her and has more influence in the running of the university; Psyche is also more popular with the students.

*81-100* Florian tells the Prince he is attracted to Melissa; the Prince tells him how much he is smitten by the Princess: ‘she errs / But in her own grand way’.

*101-151* Cyril reports back from his meeting with Blanche: he tried various arguments to persuade her not to expose them, but only one worked – he promised that if she helped them they would use their influence to set her   
up as head of her own university; Blanche agreed to think about this.

*152-180* Ida invites the new students on a geological field trip that afternoon.

*181-229* The Prince rides alongside Ida on the trip and takes the opportunity to question why she broke off her engagement to the Prince.

*230-271* Ida is surprised by the question and replies with a strong reaffirmation of her decision not to marry but to devote her life to ‘our dear sisters’ liberties’

*272-314* They have a more philosophical discussion, and the Prince queries why there is no medical school in the university; Ida says she does not like to think of her students dissecting bodies – she herself knows enough of the ‘craft of healing’ to provide medical help in an emergency.

*315-347* The expedition sets up camp in a beautiful spot by a bridge below a mountain; the Princess and students spend the afternoon gathering geological specimens on the mountain side.

IV

*1-16* A luxurious meal has been prepared for them on their return to the camp.

*18-69* Ida asks for a song, and a girl sings ‘Tears, idle tears’; Ida is dismissive of this (‘moans about the retrospect’) and asks the Prince for a more upbeat song.

*70-147* The Prince sings a love song, ‘O Swallow, Swallow’, but Ida is scornful of this also. She asks for a more authentic song representing women in their country, but instead Cyril starts singing a bawdy tavern song. The Prince loses his temper and strikes Cyril, thus revealing their identities as men.

*147-194* In the chaos that follows, Ida and all the women rush away, but Ida falls off the bridge into the river; the Prince jumps in and rescues her, then slips away and walks back to the university, breaking in by climbing over the gate.

*195-238* He meets Florian, who tells him Psyche and Cyril have run away; Florian is worried about ‘the chances of the night’ but the Prince says he trusts Cyril.

*239-272* The Prince and Florian are caught and brought before the Princess, where Blanche and Melissa are already being interrogated.

273-352 Blanche makes a passionate speech defending her actions and accusing Ida of favouritism towards Psyche; Ida coldly dismisses her, then announces that she has decided to keep Aglaia, Psyche’s baby, as her own child.

*353-398* The scene is interrupted by a terrified woman bringing letters from Gama and from the Prince’s father; the King has arrived with his army, taken Gama hostage and surrounded the university, demanding the safe return of his son.

*399-449* His true identity now fully revealed, the Prince attempts to justify his actions to Ida and declare his love for her.

*450*-*534* Before she can answer, panic starts to break out among the female students; exasperated, Ida rebukes them, then bitterly denounces the Prince and orders him and Florian to be pushed out of the gates.

*535-553* Outside the gates, the Prince has one of his ‘weird seizures’, then recovers.

V

*1-41* The Prince and Florian make their way to the King’s camp, where their appearance in bedraggled women’s clothing causes some amusement.   
As the Prince is safe, Gama is freed. The men go off to change.

*42-105* The Prince and Florian are reconciled with Cyril, who takes them to see Psyche; they try to cheer her up but she is distraught at being separated from her baby and at having betrayed her friend.

*106-225* The Prince returns to a council meeting with Gama and the King, who is still insisting on Ida fulfilling her engagement. The Prince advises a peaceful approach but the King is impatient and claims that women respect masculine force more. Gama agrees with the Prince and suggests that his son Arac, whom Ida respects more than him, may be able to help break the deadlock.

*226-363* The Prince goes with Gama to meet Arac, who has just arrived with his two brothers, and is an unsophisticated ‘genial giant’. Unfortunately negotiations break down when one of the other brothers accuses the Prince of having a ‘woman’s heart’. It is then decided to settle the matter by a tournament with fifty knights on each side.

*364-427* From inside the besieged palace / university, Ida sends a letter thanking Arac for being her champion, expressing confidence that he will win the fight, and asking him to spare the Prince’s life as he saved hers. She adds a postscript insisting that she will not return Aglaia to Psyche.

*428-456* After hearing the letter, the King repeats his conservative view of gender roles (‘Man to command and woman to obey / All else confusion’) and suggests Ida will conform once she is married and has a ‘lusty brace of twins’.

*457-531* Before the tournament begins, the Prince has another ‘weird’ moment; and during the melee he feels he is in a dream, conscious of Ida watching from the palace. He charges into the fight, but is no match for Arac, who knocks down first Florian and Cyril, then the Prince.

VI

*1-5* The Prince explains that he was unconscious while the following events took place and is narrating what he has been told happened.

*6-13* The Prince’s side has lost the battle. Believing his son has been killed, the king runs onto the battle ground, followed by Psyche.

*14-80* From her platform on the palace walls Ida sings the song of triumph ‘ Our enemies have fallen, have fallen . . .’. Carrying Aglaia, she leads her students out to tend to her brothers who championed her cause.

*81-111* Passing the Prince’s body, Ida is moved by the king’s grief; she sees that the Prince is not dead, and offers to look after him as well.

*112-198* Psyche appeals to Ida to give her back Aglaia; Cyril, who is lying wounded on the ground, intervenes on Psyche’s behalf and offers to act as go-between if Ida is too proud to hand the baby to Psyche herself; Ida agrees and hands the baby to Cyril.

*199-203* Psyche asks Ida for forgiveness, but Ida does not speak.

*204-210* Arac appeals to Ida to forgive Psyche, but she does not speak.

*211-254* Gama appeals to Ida to forgive Psyche, but she does not speak.

*255-262* The king tells Ida that if she cannot bring herself to forgive Psyche, he does not trust her to look after his son.

*263-303* Ida relents and embraces Psyche; she offers to make the university into a hospital for all the wounded men, from both sides, despite the previous laws banning men.

*304-309* Blanche is scornful of the Princess’s readiness to break the university laws.

*310-323* Ida replies angrily, accusing Blanche of betraying her [Here Tennyson cut a number of lines from later editions]

*324-363* Despite this altercation, Ida’s offer is accepted and all the wounded, including the Prince, are carried into the palace / university. Some of the students are sent home; the more responsible (‘those held sagest’) are allowed to stay and help.

VII

*1-28* The university is transformed into a hospital, and the students flourish in the role of nurses. But Ida is depressed at her failure.

*29-75* While the Prince still lies unconscious, his friends recover and find love: Florian with Melissa; Cyril with Psyche.

*76-157* Ida gradually falls in love with the Prince as she nurses him through a delirium. When he finally wakes up she kisses him.

*158-211* He wakes up again and hears her reading aloud the lyrics ‘Now sleeps the crimson petal’ and ‘Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height’

*212-238* Ida tells the Prince she is ashamed of having made herself a ‘Queen of farce’, through her lack of humility; but she is still reluctant to marry someone who does not share her commitment to equal rights.

*239-345* The Prince assures her he does believe that ‘the woman’s cause is man’s’ and he will be her helper, though he thinks ‘equal’ is an unhelpful term. The story ends as he invites her to ‘Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me.’

Conclusion

*1-35* Walter says he wishes the Princess had not ‘yielded’; he suggests that the narrator should turn the story into a poem, but an argument then starts over the appropriate tone: the men want it to be ‘comic’, the women more ‘earnest’.

*36-38* The discussion is interrupted by the sound of the people leaving the park.

*39-105* The narrator and his friends walk up to survey the scene and the landscape, with the coast in the distance; the narrator’s friend compares conservative England favourably with revolutionary France, but the narrator says the day has given him more faith in a progressive future. He is inspired by the figure of Sir Walter Vivian, ‘a great broad-shouldered genial Englishman’.

*106-118* The friends return to the Abbey and sit in silence until it grows dark.   
Lilia removes the scarf from the statue of Sir Ralph and they go home.