

## Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)

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by Nicola Whitehead

'She had founded; they must build: / Here might they learn whatever men were taught: / Let them not fear...'

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born on August 5, 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire. His father, George Clayton Tennyson, a clergyman and rector, suffered from depression and bouts of alcoholism and violence. Tennyson was educated at Louth Grammar School and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he joined the literary club 'The Apostles' and met Arthur Hallam, whom he would immortalize in *In Memoriam*. In 1850, he succeeded William Wordsworth as Poet Laureate, a post which he held until his death in 1892.

England in Tennyson's youth was an explosive mixture of ignorance, poverty, and exploitation. The rapid increase in population and Industrial Revolution had led to mass migration from country to towns where inadequate housing and poor sanitation posed a serious health risk. There were no police to deal with popular discontent and the middle classes were afraid of mob violence, a fear awakened by the French Revolution. While a student at Trinity College, Tennyson was involved in defence of the university against a threatened invasion by rioters. Although he disliked the rioters' methods, Tennyson felt great sympathy for their cause and was anxious that their wrongs should be righted. He was, nevertheless, sure that reform could only come about through Parliament.

Tennyson's first large scale attempt to treat a contemporary issue was on the subject of women. His sympathy for women, first aroused by his mother's marriage predicament (his father's violence and drunkenness eventually led to marital breakdown), encouraged by Ovid, implied in 'Kate' and made explicit on 'A Dream of Fair Women', was strengthened by feminist writers. On both sides of the Channel socialists advocated the emancipation of women, and criticized the institution of marriage. Charles Fourier, for example, advocated sexual equality; Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin put forward a system of free love as a substitute to the 'tyranny' of marriage; and Robert Owen suggested a form of civil marriage without oaths and with easy arrangements for divorce. Tennyson sought emancipation for women, but not liberation. He was fearful of feminist extremists who tried to foment a sex war, and, despite the breakdown of his parent's marriage, was against the abolition of marriage which he considered to be the foundation of society.

Tennyson's *The Princess*, therefore, pleads for equal rights for women, but also that the sons of man, and laws which are admittedly 'barbarous', are not blamed 'Too much'.

The Prologue presents a group of young friends at a country-house fête; they speak of women's rights, and then begin the tale of a princess who founds a university for women. The subsequent seven stanzas tell the story of a heroic princess who forswears the world of men and founds a women's university where men are forbidden to enter. When summarized, the story of *The Princess* today seems scarcely pro-feminist: a talented and enterprising woman, who wants to devote her life to the education of women and has founded a college for that purpose, forgoes her ideals after succumbing to her compassion. But at the time, these views were radical. Tennyson's pro-feminist views were undoubtedly tempered by his attitude toward marriage. He sought not to turn women into men, but for equality whilst fostering 'the like in difference'. His plot begins as parody and burlesque but slips from 'mock to earnest' subtly eliciting sympathy for Ida and her cause.