

Gilbert and Sullivan - *Princess Ida*

by Nicola Whitehead

Princess Ida is based on Tennyson's narrative poem of 1847, *The Princess*. Gilbert retained Tennyson's blank verse style and basic story line about a heroic princess who runs a women's college and the prince who loves her. Whilst the idea of a women's college had been new in 1847 when Tennyson wrote *The Princess* (the year 1848 saw the founding of the first women's college, Queen's College, London by F.D. Maurice), by the time Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on *Princess Ida* in 1883, a women's college was a less radical concept. In 1869 Girton College had been established as the first constituent college to cater for women at the University of Cambridge, closely followed by Newnham in 1871; Somerville (1878) and Lady Margaret Hall (1878) were established at the University of Oxford, and Westfield College (cited as the model for Gilbert's Castle Adamant) at University of London in 1882.

In *Princess Ida* King Hildebrand awaits the arrival of King Gama and his daughter, Princess Ida who is betrothed to Hildebrand's son, Prince Hilarion. Gama advises Hildebrand that Princess Ida has foresworn men and founded a women's university as Castle Adamant, one of his many country houses. At Castle Adamant, Ida teaches her students to reject marriage in favour of education. Ida's pupils learn that man is nature's 'sole mistake'. Hilarion refuses to accept Ida's rebuttal and sets forth to engage Ida not by force, but by love, 'We'll storm their bowers with scented showers of fairest flowers'. Ida eventually yields to Hilarion while lamenting the failure of her cherished scheme.

The opera satirizes feminism, women's education, and Darwinian evolution, all of which were controversial topics in conservative Victorian England. As in *Patience* and *Iolanthe*, the two previous Gilbert and Sullivan operas, *Princess Ida* concerns the war between the sexes. In *Patience*, the aesthetic-crazed women are contrasted with vain military men; in *Iolanthe*, the vague and flighty fairies (women) are pitted against the ineffective, dim-witted peers (men); and in *Ida*, overly serious students and professors at a women's university defy a marriage-by-force ultimatum by a militaristic king and his testosterone fuelled court. Gilbert and Sullivan produced in *Princess Ida* an operetta that brought a contemporary issue into the public consciousness and in doing so possibly (as was often the case) influenced political discourse.