

Princess Ida meets transgenderism

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By Terry A. Hurlbut

May 29, 2023



The Victorian Era gave us, in addition to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, two extremely talented writers. William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan stand out among the great comedy duos of theater (and later, film). But their eighth collaboration, *Princess Ida or Castle Adamant*, itself stands out – because it was decades ahead of its time. It premiered in 1884 and enjoyed a long run of 246 performances. When your editor took part in a production of it at Yale College in 1978, a contemporary playwright could have written it. Today one must wonder whether the “woke” crowd would even allow it. Because if they did, it would only be because they utterly failed to understand everything the work implied.

Princess Ida – the play and the character

Gilbert and Sullivan set *Princess Ida* in medieval times – but their trademark satire against haughty men in authority remained. To this the playwrights added a new twist: women rebelling against the male authoritarianism of their day. For Princess Ida, the title character, has run away to avoid a marriage arranged twenty years before – when she and her intended were mere infants. That sort of rebellion is typical of stories set in that period – but the form of the rebellion is not. Ida has shut herself and over a hundred maidens in a castle, and established a women’s university!

That university has many ambitious aims, as the libretto makes clear. But in addition to academic rigor – of a sort – the university imposes a strict requirement of isolation from all males. Ida expels one young lady for bringing a set of chessmen onto the campus!

| *Blanche, Prof. Of Sciences:* The first is Saccharissa. She’s expell’d!

| *Ladies:* Expell’d!?

| *Blanche*: Expell'd – for although she knew / No man of any kind may pass these walls,
/ She dar'd to bring a set of chessmen here!

| *Saccharissa*: I meant no harm; they're only men of wood.

| *Blanche*: They're men with whom you give each other mate, / And that's enough!

Another student draws a three-term suspension for sketching a double baby stroller in her notebook!

But Princess Ida herself delivers a laundry list, not so much of grievances, as assertions that anything a man can do, a woman can do better. And then she declares war – absurd, but predictable.

Into this cloister come Prince Hilarion, her intended, and his two fast friends – entering surreptitiously of course. They take a chance on introducing themselves to Psyche, Professor of Humanities. (One of Hilarion's two friends is her brother.) She is willing to accept the men as friends – but Ida is not.

A riddle and a resolution

One of the men gives himself away to Princess Ida as a man, by getting drunk, singing an outrageously vulgar drinking song, and then making an advance on Ida herself. Ida, repulsed, cries out in disgust – prompting Hilarion to strike his friend. When the friend cries out Hilarion's name, the game is up.

| *Ida*: Infamous creature! Get you hence away!

| *Hilarion (pushes Cyril down to the lawn)*: You dog! I'll give you something more to sing about!

| *Cyril*: Hilarion, are you mad!?

| *Ida*: Hilarion...! Help! / Why these are men! Lost! Lost! Betray'd! Undone! / Girls, get you hence! Man-monsters, if you dare / Approach one step, I ... AH! (*Falls into the moat*)

Hilarion rescues Princess Ida, but she is *not* graceful. Indeed she pronounces sentence of execution on the three – but then Hilarion's father, King Hildebrand, shows up with an army. Or rather, with some of his courtiers who think they can play at soldiering against a bunch of women. Hildebrand lays an ultimatum on Ida, who then vows defiance. Faced with that, Hilarion's men have second thoughts, and it shows. It might not be obvious to Ida's university students, but it is to the audience. (At least, that's how we interpreted it.)

But the next day, the women are in no mood to try their hand at open warfare, and desert Ida. Ultimately Ida must yield – but Hildebrand, displaying uncommon wit, stumps her with a riddle. How, he asks, is “posterity” to come into being if men and women remain apart? Science Professor Blanche disclaims any ability to answer the riddle – and Hilarion urges her to “try Man, / Give him one chance; it’s only fair!” Circumstances leave Ida no choice, so she accepts Hildebrand’s terms of surrender.

Reception

The Yale Gilbert and Sullivan Society produced this play in the Spring of 1978, to a very good reception. Of course, your editor’s female classmates (in the audience) hissed, and the males cheered, when Hilarion begged Ida to “try Man / Give him one chance.” Which goes to show that they understood the premise – perfectly.

Gilbert and Sullivan showed remarkable foresight in anticipating the radical or “separatist” feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. They also anticipated the one argument upon which such feminism must fall – or else o’erleap, to paraphrase Shakespeare. And that is: men and women must get along, or else extinction for both results. This is why civilizational values are what they are – and must prevail.

What would Princess Ida and her faculty say today?

Now consider what would happen if “trans-women” – men who pass for women after accepting surgical mutilation and hormonal poisoning – sought admission to the University of Adamant. Princess Ida and especially Professor Blanche *would not* accept the proposition! In a key scene, Blanche questions her daughter closely after overhearing her take part in a discussion with Professor Psyche – and with Hilarion and his friends. The first thing she notices are their deep voices – far too deep to be female.

| Two are tenors, one is a baritone!

After that she discovers cigars among the personal effects one of them has left carelessly lying on the quad.

| Why, these *are* men! And you knew this, you minx!

She is ready to denounce the three before Ida until her daughter persuades her to leverage their presence to her own advantage.

Now imagine what either Ida or Blanche would say to a Will “Lia” Thomas. (Or even to Renée “Second Serve” Richards, who, decades earlier, was also a mediocre male athlete using women’s sport as a retirement program.) “Why, these are men!” either of them would cry, just as they do in the original.

Precedent

The precedent for this kind of spectacle actually comes from ancient Rome, in the first Consulship of Julius Caesar. Caesar's mother Aurelia, fulfilling the office of First Lady of Rome, presided over the Festival of Bona Dea. This was supposed to be a women-only affair. But Publius Clodius, a young Roman with more money than sense, crashed the party – and Aurelia detected and denounced him.

What would that have mattered if, as has become fashionable to say, gender is fluid and interchangeable? Where is then the premise of radical feminist separatism, as Princess Ida practices it? Not to say that the premise is sound; it isn't. But radical feminism has hit the crossroads, and already its proponents begin to know it.

This has actually split the alternative-lifestyle community. These "trans-women" want to call themselves women – and whenever any woman disputes that, they call her "TERF" – for Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist. If that's an insult among them, that seems a *non sequitur*. Bizarrely, it isn't. Indeed it follows logically from the twisted thinking that has brought us to this pass. And it's a twist even Gilbert and Sullivan could never have imagined.