



*A Dream  
of  
Fair Women*



A  
DREAM OF FAIR WOMEN

BY THE

LAUREATE LORD TENNYSON

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## FAIR WOMEN OF TENNYSON'S DREAM.

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The "Dream of Fair Women" has been a favorite study in women's clubs and seminaries and elsewhere. But a sad drawback to the popular enjoyment of the poem has been the lack of an index or key for the identification of the characters. To be able to name these is an accomplishment which students prize, and which many a teacher of literature lacks; for the personages are not selected generally from the "stock" characters of history. Mary, Queen of Scots, is not in the list, nor is Elizabeth; and one may look in vain for Josephine of France. Some of the characters, indeed, it requires no little research and ingenuity to identify.

The first who speaks is Helen of Troy, whose beauty caused a ten years' war. Of course, it is easy to guess her from the first utterance she makes:

"I had great beauty; ask thou not my name;  
No one can be more wise than destiny.  
Men drew their swords and died. Where'er I came,  
I brought calamity."

But it is not so easy to identify the second character who speaks.

"'My youth,' she said, 'was blasted with a curse;  
This woman was the cause.'"

Only indirectly was Helen the cause of the "curse" of the ill-starred Iphigenia. The latter, a Greek princess, was chosen for a sacrifice to propitiate the gods at the beginning of the Trojan war, which was caused by the

abduction of Helen. Iphigenia relates how she swooned as the sacrificial knife approached her:

“The bright death quivered at the victim’s throat;  
Touched, and I knew no more.”

It is pleasant to remember, however, that there is a version of the story to the effect that Iphigenia escaped the final sacrifice, much as did Isaac, the son of Abraham, in the Scripture narrative. The hand of the priest was stayed by divine interposition: a brute victim was substituted, and the fair maiden was whisked away miraculously to distant Tauris, there to be a priestess of the chaste goddess.

Next comes the queen of the great world tragedy, Cleopatra, the matchless heroine of ancient history. In her speech is a tone of pride and exultation over her conquests of men, and satisfaction that she had at least outwitted Octavius, “that dull, cool-blooded Cæsar,” by securing an asp and causing it to bite her. She died robed and crowned upon her couch, as she exclaims, being a victor even in death.

Next is Jephtha’s daughter, whose story is familiar to Bible readers, being related in full in the “Book of Judges.” It is a sad story, and has furnished the subject for many poems and paintings. Jephtha had vowed to sacrifice to God whatever should first come forth from the doors of his house on his return home from his victory, and, alas! it was his beloved daughter who rushed forth to meet him first.

Next is “Fair Ros’amond,” of whose story there is much doubt, though it concerns historical personages. The daughter of Lord Clifford, she became the object of the affections of Henry II. of England. He concealed her at Woodstock in a maze, or labyrinth, we are told;

and when he visited her he traced his way by following a silken thread which was strung along the walls on one side of the passages to be followed. The queen, Eleanor, discovered the clew and followed it. She bore a dagger and a bowl of poison, and offered her rival a choice as to the manner of her death; and the unhappy woman drank the fatal draught. Old ballad lore of the English seems to confirm the truth of the story as told. At all events, it has been pretty generally received as true in the main. Fair Rosamond cries:

“Would I had been some maiden coarse and poor!  
 O me, that I should ever see the light!  
 Those dragon eyes of angered Eleanor  
 Do haunt me, day and night.”

The next is a heroine little known to students of history. She utters no speech, and she appears at day-break, almost at the close of the dream. The poet says:

“Morn broadened on the borders of the dark  
 Ere I saw her who clasped in her last trance her murdered father’s head.”

This was Margaret Roper, the daughter of the ill-fated Sir Thomas More, and the wife of his biographer. More’s daughter was permitted to see her father just before his execution. She secured his head by a ruse, and hid it in her cabinet, and left orders that it should be placed upon her breast when she should be buried. Her wishes were carried out.

There is but a mere mention of Joan of Arc, and then, at the very last, is the vision of—

“Her who knew that love can vanquish Death;  
 Who kneeling, with one arm about her king,  
 Drew forth the poison with her balmy breath,  
 Sweet as new birds in spring.”

This was another Eleanor, the wife of the prince who became the great Edward I. of England. Prince Edward served in the last of the crusades, and his faithful wife followed him to Palestine. He was once stabbed with a poisoned dagger, and the princess saved his life by drawing the poison from his wound with her lips, at the imminent peril of her life.

It will be seen that Tennyson chose eight "fair women" from the heroines of a period of 2,700 years. They are thus ancient, medieval, and modern. There are great queens and gentle maidens, generally unfortunate, but generally pure and noble. There is but one picture of the devoted wife: there are two of loving daughters. The poem is tragic, from first to last. It is simply a piece of art, in which lovely and unfortunate women are arranged as flowers in a bouquet, though they seem to come together fortuitously, as do all the materials of dreams. There is no particular moral to be drawn from the dream, though there seems to be a sad recognition of fate in the words:

"In every land  
I saw, wherever light illumineth,  
Beauty and anguish walking hand in hand  
The downward slope to death."



# A DREAM OF FAIR WOMEN.

By THE LAUREATE LORD TENNYSON.

1832.

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## I.

I read, before my eyelids dropt their shade,  
    "The Legende of Goode Women," long ago  
Sung by the morning star of song, who made  
    His music heard below ;

## II.

Dan Chaucer, the first warbler, whose sweet breath  
    Preluded those melodious bursts that fill  
The spacious times of great Elizabeth  
    With sounds that echo still.

## III.

And for a while the knowledge of his art  
    Held me above the subject, as strong gales  
Hold swollen clouds from raining, tho' my heart,  
    Brimful of those wild tales,

## IV.

Charged both mine eyes with tears. In every land  
    I saw, wherever light illumineth,  
Beauty and anguish walking, hand in hand,  
    The downward slope to death.

## V.

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 ;

## VI.

And clattering flints battered with clanging hoofs:  
 And I saw crowds in columned sanctuaries;  
 And forms that passed at windows and on roofs  
 Of marble palaces;

## VII.

Corpses across the threshold; heroes tall  
 Dislodging pinnacle and parapet  
 Upon the tortoise creeping to the wall;  
 Lances in ambush set;

## VIII.

And high shrine doors burst thro' with heated blasts  
 That run before the fluttering tongues of fire;  
 White surf wind-scattered over sails and masts,  
 And, ever climbing higher,

## IX.

Squadrons and squadrons of men in brazen plates,  
 Scaffolds, still sheets of water, divers woes,  
 Ranges of glimmering vaults with iron gates,  
 And hushed seraglio.

## X.

So shape chased shape as swift as when to land  
 Bluster the winds and tides the self-same way,  
 Crisp foam flakes scud along the level sand,  
 Torn from the fringe of spray.

## XI.

I started once, or seemed to start, in pain,  
 Resolved on noble things, and strove to speak,  
 As when a great thought strikes along the brain,  
 And flushes all the check.

## XII.

And once my arm was lifted to hew down  
    A cavalier from off his saddle-bow,  
That bore a lady from a 'leaguered town;  
    And then, I know not how,

## XIII.

All those sharp fancies by down-lapsing thought  
    Streamed onward, lost their edges, and did creep,  
Rolled on each other, rounded, smoothed, and brought  
    Into the gulfs of sleep.

## XIV.

At last methought that I had wandered far  
    In an old wood: fresh washed in coolest dew,  
The maiden splendors of the morning star  
    Shook in the steadfast blue.

## XV.

Enormous elm-tree boles did stoop and lean  
    Upon the dusky brushwood underneath  
Their broad-curved branches, fledged with clearest green,  
    New from its silken sheath.

## XVI.

The dim, red morn had died, her journey done,  
    And with dead lips smiled at the twilight plain,  
Half-fallen across the threshold of the sun,  
    Never to rise again.

## XVII.

There was no motion in the dumb, dead air,  
    Not any song of bird or sound of rill;  
Gross darkness of the inner sepulchre  
    Is not so deadly still

## XVIII.

As that wide forest. Growths of jasmine turned  
 Their humid arms festooning tree to tree,  
 And at the root thro' lush green grasses burned  
 The red anemone.

## XIX.

I knew the flowers, I knew the leaves, I knew  
 The tearful glimmer of the languid dawn  
 On those long, rank, dark wood-walks drenched in dew,  
 Leading from lawn to lawn.

## XX.

The smell of violets, hidden in the green,  
 Poured back into my empty soul and frame  
 The times when I remember to have been  
 Joyful and free from blame.

## XXI.

And from within me a clear under-tone  
 Thrilled thro' mine ears in that unblissful clime,  
 "Pass freely thro'; the wood is all thine own,  
 Until the end of time."

## XXII.

At length I saw a lady within call,  
 Stillier than chiseled marble, standing there:  
 A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,  
 And most divinely fair.

## XXIII.

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.



HELEN OF TROY.







IPHIGENIA.



## XXIV.

“I had great beauty: ask thou not my name:  
No one can be more wise than destiny.  
Many drew swords and died. Where'er I came  
I brought calamity.”

## XXV.

“No marvel, sovereign lady: in fair field  
Myself for such a face had boldly died.”  
I answer'd free: and turning I appealed  
To one that stood beside.

## XXVI.

But she, with sick and scornful looks averse,  
To her full height her stately stature draws;  
“My youth,” she said, “was blasted with a curse;  
This woman was the cause.

## XXVII.

“I was cut off from hope in that sad place,  
Which yet to name my spirit loathes and fears:  
My father held his hand upon his face:  
I, blinded with my tears,

## XXVIII.

“Still strove to speak: my voice was thick with sighs,  
As in a dream. Dimly I could descry  
The stern, black-bearded kings, with wolfish eyes,  
Waiting to see me die.

## XXIX.

“The high masts flickered as they lay afloat;  
The crowds, the temples, wavered, and the shore;  
The bright death quivered at the victim's throat;  
Touched: and I knew no more.”

## XXX.

Whereto the other, with a downward brow :

“I would the white cold heavy-plunging foam,  
Whirled by the wind, had rolled me deep below,  
Then when I left my home.”

## XXXI.

Her slow full words sank thro' the silence drear,  
As thunder-drops fall on a sleeping sea ;  
Sudden I heard a voice that cried, “Come here,  
That I may look on thee.”

## XXXII.

I turning saw, throned on a flowery rise,  
One sitting on a crimson scarf unrolled ;  
A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold, black eyes,  
Brow-bound with burning gold.

## XXXIII.

She, flashing forth a haughty smile, began :  
“I governed men by change, and so I swayed  
All moods. 'Tis long since I have seen a man.  
Once, like the moon, I made

## XXXIV.

“The ever-shifting currents of the blood  
According to my humor ebb and flow.  
I have no men to govern in this wood :  
That makes my only woe.

## XXXV.

“Nay—yet it chafes me that I could not bend  
One will; nor tame and tutor with mine eye  
That dull cold-blooded Cæsar. Prythee, friend,  
Where is Mark Antony?





CLEOPATRA.

## XXXVI.

“The man, my lover, with whom I rode sublime  
 On Fortune’s neck; we sat as God by God;  
 The Nilus would have risen before his time  
 And flooded at our nod.

## XXXVII.

“We drank the Libyan sun to sleep, and lit  
 Lamps which outburned Canopus. O my life  
 In Egypt! O the dalliance and the wit,  
 The flattery and the strife,

## XXXVIII.

“And the wild kiss, when, fresh from war’s alarms,  
 My Hercules, my Roman Antony,  
 My mailéd Bacchus leapt into my arms,  
 Contented there to die!

## XXXIX.

“And there he died; and when I heard my name  
 Sighed forth with life, I would not brook my fear  
 Of the other; with a worm I balked his fame.  
 What else was left? Look here!”

## XL.

(With that she tore her robe apart, and half  
 The polished argent of her breast to sight  
 Laid bare. Thereto she pointed with a laugh,  
 Showing the asp’s bite.)

## XLI.

“I died a Queen. The Roman soldier found  
 Me lying dead, my crown about my brows,  
 A name forever!—lying robed and crowned,  
 Worthy a Roman spouse.”

## XLII.

Her warbling voice, a lyre of widest range  
Struck by all passion, did fall down and glance  
From tone to tone, and glided thro' all change  
Of liveliest utterance.

## XLIII.

When she made pause I knew not for delight;  
Because, with sudden motion from the ground,  
She raised her piercing orbs, and filled with light,  
The interval of sound.

## XLIV.

Still with their fires Love tipt his keenest darts;  
As once they drew into two burning rings  
All beams of Love, melting the mighty hearts  
Of captains and of kings.

## XLV.

Slowly my sense undazzled. Then I heard  
A noise of some one coming thro' the lawn,  
And singing clearer than the crested bird,  
That claps its wings at dawn.

## XLVI.

“The torrent brooks of hallowed Israel  
From craggy hollows pouring, late and soon,  
Sound all night long, in falling thro' the dell,  
Far-heard beneath the moon.

## XLVII.

“The balmy moon of blessed Israel  
Floods all the deep-blue gloom with beams divine;  
All night the splintered crags that wall the dell  
With spires of silver shine.”





JEPHTHA'S DAUGHTER.



## XLVIII.

As one that museth where broad sunshine laves  
 The lawn of some cathedral, thro' the door  
 Hearing the holy organ rolling waves  
 Of sound on roof and floor

## XLIX.

Within, and anthem sung, is charmed and tied  
 To where he stands,—so stood I, when that flow  
 Of music left the lips of her that died  
 To save her father's vow;

## L.

The daughter of the warrior Gilcadite,  
 A maiden pure; as when she went along  
 From Mizpah's towered gate with welcome light,  
 With timbrel, and with song.

## LI.

My words leapt forth: "Heaven heads the count of  
 crimes  
 With that wild oath." She rendered answer high:  
 "Not so, nor once alone; a thousand times  
 I would be born and die.

## LII.

"Single I grew, like some green plant, whose root  
 Creeps to the garden water-pipes beneath,  
 Feeding the flower; but ere my flower to fruit  
 Changed, I was ripe for death.

## LIII.

"My God, my land, my father,—these did move  
 Me from my bliss of life, that Nature gave,  
 Lowered softly with a threefold cord of love  
 Down to a silent grave.

## LIV.

“And I went mourning, ‘No fair Hebrew boy  
 Shall smile away my maiden blame among  
 The Hebrew mothers’—emptied of all joy,  
 Leaving the dance and song,

## LV.

“Leaving the olive-garden far below,  
 Leaving the promise of my bridal bower,  
 The valleys of grape-loaded vines that glow  
 Beneath the battled tower.

## LVI.

“The light white cloud swam over us. Anon  
 We heard the lion roaring from his den;  
 We saw the large white stars rise one by one,  
 Or, from the darkened glen,

## LVII.

“Saw God divide the night with flying flame,  
 And thunder on the everlasting hills.  
 I heard Him, for He spake, and grief became  
 A solemn scorn of ills.

## LVIII.

“When the next moon was rolled into the sky,  
 Strength came to me that equalled my desire.  
 How beautiful a thing it was to die  
 For God and for my sire!

## LIX.

“It comforts me in this one thought to dwell,  
 That I subdued me to my father’s will;  
 Because the kiss he gave me, ere I fell,  
 Sweetens the spirit still.

## LX.

“Moreover, it is written that my race  
 Hewed Ammon, hip and thigh, from Aroer  
 On Arnon unto Minmeth.” Here her face  
 Glowed as I looked at her.

## LXI.

She locked her lips; she left me where I stood:  
 “Glory to God,” she sang, and passed afar,  
 Thridding the sombre boskage of the wood,  
 Toward the morning star.

## LXII.

Losing her carol I stood pensively,  
 As one that from a casement leans his head,  
 When midnight bells cease ringing suddenly,  
 And the old year is dead.

## LXIII.

“Alas! alas!” a low voice, full of care,  
 Murmured beside me: “Turn and look on me:  
 I am that Rosamond, whom men call fair,  
 If what I was I be.

## LXIV.

“Would I had been some maiden coarse and poor!  
 O me, that I should ever see the light!  
 Those dragon eyes of angered Eleanor  
 Do haunt me, day and night.”

## LXV.

She ceased in tears, fallen from hope and trust.  
 To whom the Egyptian: “O, you tamely died!  
 You should have clung to Fulvia’s waist, and thrust  
 The dagger thro’ her side.”

## LXVI.

With that sharp sound the white dawn's creeping beams,  
 Stolen to my brain, dissolved the mystery  
 Of folded sleep. The captain of my dreams  
 Ruled in the eastern sky.

## LXVII.

Morn broadened on the borders of the dark,  
 Ere I saw her, who clasped in her last trance  
 Her murdered father's head, or Joan of Arc,  
 A light of ancient France;

## LXVIII.

Or her who knew that Love can vanquish Death,  
 Who kneeling, with one arm about her king,  
 Drew forth the poison with her balmy breath,  
 Sweet as new buds in Spring.

## LXIX.

No memory labors longer from the deep  
 Gold mines of thought to lift the hidden ore  
 That glimpses, moving up, than I from sleep  
 To gather and tell o'er

## LXX.

Each little sound and sight. With what dull pain  
 Compassed, how eagerly I sought to strike  
 Into that wondrous track of dreams again!  
 But no two dreams are like.

## LXXI.

As when a soul laments, which hath been blest,  
 Desiring what is mingled with past years,  
 In yearning that can never be express  
 By signs or groans or tears;



JEANNE D' ARC.



## LXXII.

Because all words, tho' culled with choicest art,  
Failing to give the bitter of the sweet,  
Wither beneath the palate, and the heart  
Faints, faded by its heat.

GENERAL QUESTIONS.

---

I. What poem by Chaucer suggested "The Dream of Fair Women"? At what period of Chaucer's life was it written? What was its purpose? Of the nineteen characters which Chaucer essayed to describe, how many are portrayed in the poem?\* How long is his poem in its incomplete state?

II. At what age did Tennyson publish this poem? How many characters are given in it? What is its length? What differences do you find in the construction of the two poems?

III. Are Tennyson's characters selected with an artist's view to variety and contrast? How many of them are Greek? How many English? How many Jewish? Who are the others? What is the range of time covered by the lives of the Fair Women? Which character is the most recent?

IV. How would you describe the meter of this poem? Is it frequently employed? Do you know of any other poem of similar meter? Is the meter regular? How many exceptional feet, if any, do you find in it?

V. What proverbial expression do you find in the 1st stanza? What in the 2nd? What in the 3rd? What in the 4th? What in the 5th? What in the 34th? What in the 63rd? What in the 69th? What in the 70th?

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\*Since this poem by Chaucer is not in common use, and may not prove available for reference by the reader, the questions relating to it may be omitted.



## QUESTIONS ON THE STANZAS

I-II. How does the author describe, in the first line, his going to sleep? What poems of Elizabeth's age may be said to "echo still"?

III-IV. How did Chaucer's subject affect Tennyson? How were Tennyson's feelings kept in control by a knowledge of the art with which Chaucer wrote?

VI. What were the "clattering flints" that were worn by the feet of cavalry horses? What were the "columned sanctuaries" to which people fled in time of peril, in ancient times? How did the sacred temples of old differ in appearance from modern churches? How did they protect the refugees?

VII. Why was the Roman device for undermining a city wall called a "tortoise"? How are the besiegers on the walls represented as attacking the "tortoise"? Why should they take stones from the wall itself, to throw down?

VIII. When refugees had reached the temples, why did the pursuers seek to drive them out by means of fire? Why did they not murder these in the temple itself?

IX. What means of capital punishment are described here?

XIII. How do fancies lose "their edges" in our dreams? Are dreams generally shadowy, and ill-defined?

XIV-XV. Of what sort of a forest did the poet dream?

XVII. How is the unnatural stillness of the scene described?

XVIII-XXI. How did the rank growth affect the dreamer?

XXII-XXIII. How is Helen of Troy described? What is the story of Helen? Is her story really historical, or legendary?

XXV. What does the poet say to Helen? Who next appears?

XXVI-XXIX. What is the plaint of Iphigenia? Why did the kings of the Greeks desire that she be offered as a sacrifice? What was the "bright death" with which she was killed? How was Helen, indirectly, the cause of her death?

XXXII. Who next appears? Of what country was Cleopatra queen?

XXXIII-XXXIV. What is the tenor of her speech?

XXXV. Why does Cleopatra call Octavius "that dull, cold-blooded Caesar"? What was her hope when she fell into his power? (Read Plutarch; also Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra.")

XXXVII. In what constellation is the star Canopus? How far north can it be seen? Is the fame of a star which one has never seen apt to be greater than the reality? Is Canopus a bright star? Why is the sun, setting to the west of Egypt, called the "Libyan sun"?

XXXVIII. Who was Hercules, or Herakles, in the mythology of the Greeks and Romans? Who was Bacchus?

XXXIX. What were the circumstances of Antony's death? Who is meant by "the other"? What is meant by "the worm"?

XL. At what does Cleopatra exult?

XLIII-XLIV. What feature of her face is described as having the greatest power over men?

XLIV. Who now appears upon the scene and sings a song? What is the story of Jephtha's daughter?

XLVI-XLVII. Of what beloved land does she sing?

XLVIII-XLIX. What effect has the song upon the singer?

LI. What does the poet exclaim? To what does he refer? What is her answer?

LIV. What is meant by her "maiden blame"? Was it a reproach to an Oriental girl to die unmarried?

LIX. What is the comfort of the maiden?

LX. To what events of Bible history does she refer?

LXI. What is meant by boskage?

LXIII. Who next appears in the dream? What is the story of "Fair Rosamond"?

LXIV. What is her lament? Who was Eleanor?

LXV. What does Cleopatra say to her? Does this illustrate the difference between the pagan and the Christian? Who was Fulvia?

LXVI. How does the poet describe the dawn?

LXVII. Who next appears? Who was Margaret Roper's father? Did Sir Thomas More deserve death? What is the story of Margaret? Who was Joan of Arc? Is her time generally known as ancient?

LXIII. Who next appears? What was the heroic act of the Princess Eleanor? Was Edward her present or her future "king"? Why were they in Palestine?

LXX. Why does the poet seek to dream the vision over again?

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