

Tennyson, the weird seizures in *The Princess*,
and epilepsy.

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Tennyson, the Weird Seizures in *The Princess*, and Epilepsy

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

jsfc Tennyson, the Weird Seizures in *The Princess*, and Epilepsy* Barbara Herb Wright Alfred Tennyson frequently revised his published poetry from one edition to the next. His long poem *The Princess* is no exception. First published in late 1847, it was revised for slight stylistic changes two months later in its second edition, of 1848. The 1850 third edition added the six intercalary songs between the poem's divisions. In the fourth edition, of 1851, Tennyson made the major addition of the "weird seizures" of the Prince, with their emphasis on the prince's confusion between "the shadow" and "the substance" (or between illusion and reality). Of all the revisions made, the seizures have been criticized as inept and puzzling, in one critic's words as "a truly grotesque and disconcerting feature [added] to an already overburdened structure."¹ Commenting on the seizures, Tennyson himself fails to enlighten his readers as to the purpose of the addition. He notes ambiguously that "the words "dream, shadow", "were and were

not" doubtless refer to the anachronisms and improbabilities of die story."² A late editor of *The Princess*, P. M. Wallace (Lincoln, 1891), noted: "It must be clearly shown that it was not the glamour of [die Prince's] physical or moral brilliance diat won his lady from her isolation. His too emotional temperament and susceptibility to cataleptic seizures . . . was no doubt intended partly to emphasise this point."³ When Tennyson saw the proofs of die Wallace edition, he changed "no doubt" to "probably," and deleted "partly," even at diat late date of 1891 further clouding — almost playfully — the purpose the seizures had originally been intended to serve. Since then the critics have tended to approach the "weird seizures" from the point of view of their artistic purpose. Clyde de L. Ryals, for ex- * I thank my husband, Roy R. Wright, M.D., for talking about epilepsy with me. I also thank both him and David Stumpf, M.D., for helping direct my research to the books and periodicals that provide the basis for this essay. *Literature and Medicine* 6 (1987) 61-76 © 1987 by The Johns Hopkins University Press 62 TENNYSON, THE PRINCESS, AND EPILEPSY ample, notes die widespread appearance of trance states, which resemble the Prince's seizures, throughout the corpus of Tennyson's poetry. These states occur, Ryals observes, "only when the speaker or the protagonist is isolated by an inability to project or accept love for something or someone other dian self." * Catherine Barnes Stevenson argues that the seizures are "important components of the narrative structure that clarify the artistic purpose of the poem by focusing attention upon the sophistication, the artifice, and die process of the narrative."⁵ Jerome Hamilton Buckley observes: "Far from being an unnecessary intrusion in the medley, the 'weird seizures' . . . reinforce its deepest theme, the clash between shadow and substance, illusion and truth, the ultimate relation of art and life."⁶ James E. Sait, on the other hand, views the Prince's seizures not only as a metaphor that helps develop the poem's theme of "the evolution of a Utopian society. . . [and] the ideal relation of man and woman," but also more literally as a biographical reflection of Tennyson's interest in mesmerism, or animal magnetism, which began to develop in 1845.⁷ One may suggest another biographical reason for the insertion of the "weird seizures": that they describe the aura of temporal lobe epilepsy, otherwise known as complex partial seizures or psychomotor seizures. Lending believability to such a suggestion is the fact that, according to biographer Robert Bernard Martin, both Tennyson's father and uncle suffered from epilepsy — and die poet himself purportedly feared he had the disease as well.⁸ Moreover, his fears not only of epilepsy but also of mental illness and blindness led him to read voraciously in medical literature. Late in his life he told his son: "I used from having early read in my father's library a great number of medical books to fancy that I had all the diseases in the world, like a medical student" (UH, 280). That the Prince's seizures — and their implication in die poetic narrative of *The Princess* — reflect the...



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