

The Sexuality of the Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan

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About a year ago I saw a production of *The Yeoman of the Guard*, a work I had not seen since my days long ago in the Oberlin College G&S Players, when I was deeply involved in the logistics of production. Now seeing it wholly as a spectator, and perhaps fully seeing it for the first time, I was struck by the work's obsession with sex and with death. These themes are treated not in an ironic or playful manner, as for example in *Mikado* whose madrigal "Brightly dawns our Wedding Day" has nothing touching the real pain and morbidity of the *Yeoman* madrigal, "Strange Adventure," in which a "modest maiden must marry, though the altar be a tomb." And—depending on how one interprets "falls insensible"—*Yeoman* could put the lie to Katisha's quip that "no one ever died of a broken heart." Perhaps the film *Topsy-Turvy* with its strong sexual sub-text (Sullivan's promiscuity; Gilbert's impotence?) influenced this take on the opera. In any event, to test the theme of sexuality in G&S I reviewed all the works in the cannon with that particular eye. The result is the following essay, which as it was written led to some other avenues for exploration including a possible categorization of the operas and a speculation as to where the collaboration might have gone if it had not disintegrated.

Gilbert and Sullivan operettas once were a major and seemingly integral part of American popular culture. Few students escaped hearing or being in a G&S production during high school, and amateur companies abounded on both sides of the Atlantic. This Anglo-American affinity, enhanced by the wartime alliance of the Second World War, seems to have been eroded by the cultural revolution of the 70's. Musicals such as *Bye, Bye Birdie* and *Grease* replaced *Pirates* and *Pinafore* as high school productions, and rock and roll carried an authenticity that 19th operettas lacked. For baby boomers, the G&S *oeuvre* is either unknown or seen as a quaint relic from an earlier era, the continued existence of some seemingly vigorous local companies notwithstanding. Perhaps it is significant that the King James Bible, the 1928 Prayer Book and the Hymnal 1940 went out of active use in the Episcopal Church at about the same time, a time when the Beatles became the prime British musical import. Hence, knowing the arcane British allusions in the libretti is no longer a badge of honor that it once was among intellectuals save for a small group of devotees. The average age of those attending professional productions of the works tends to confirm this trend.

This shift of the G&S cannon from contemporary to historical status may facilitate a critical perspective on these works. Traditionally, they have been seen as comic critiques of political foibles and social pretension, and parodies of operatic conventions, heavily draped in topical realities but not lacking a timeless element. Another view, presented in the book *Modified Rapture* by Allan Fischler (1999) sees them not as comedies but as Masques, stylized productions that celebrated the established values of the time, not unlike the way Elizabethan masques celebrated the glories of 16th century England and its queen. These 19th century Masques celebrated Victorian bourgeois virtues of order,

balance, and the rule of law. The pirates were actually “noblemen who had gone wrong” but who were righted by the incantation of the monarch’s name. [The fact that they were drinking sherry in their opening chorus should have been the tip-off!] In *Ruddigore*, Rose Maybud is protected by the Union Jack, that “glorious rag,” as if by a crucifix. In *Pinafore*, social disorder is dispelled by the Handelian assertion of Ralph’s almost mystical status as “an Englishman,” a chorale that also ends the opera. In *Gondoliers*, recognition of the impracticality of egalitarianism and news of a nursery mix up restored the social hierarchy to everyone’s satisfaction.

In addition to affirming the values of society, the operas are often seen as having brought respectability to the Victorian popular theater replacing bawdy vaudevilles with productions that the entire family could attend. This is perhaps why a young person of the 21st century coming upon one of them would be likely to find it corny, irrelevant and stuffy. However, if one were to see these works as Nina, the Polish aviator, saw a Victorian household in Shaw’s *Misalliance*, a new perspective might be gained along with an expanded definition of “stuffy.” In her words...

“This is a stuffy house. You seem to think of nothing but making love. All the conversation here is about love-making. All the pictures are about love-making. The eyes of all of you are sheep’s eyes. You are steeped in it, soaked in it; the very texts on the walls of your bedrooms are the ones about love. It is disgusting. It’s not healthy. Your women are kept idle and dressed up for no other purpose than to be made love to.” G.B. Shaw, *Misalliance*

Taking a cue from Nina’s take on British late Victorian society, the burden of this short essay is that Gilbert and Sullivan operettas much like what she saw in that stuffy Victorian household are “steeped and soaked” with “love-making”, saturated with erotic energy, albeit covered with euphemisms, but pervasive. As put by Dr. Daly— the highly sexed curate of *The Sorcerer*, whose “fluttering heart” had to be stilled: “The air is charged with amatory numbers—Soft madrigals, and dreamy lover’s lays. Time was when this old heart would have throbbed in double-time at the sight of such a fairy form.”

One might say that sexual situations and themes figure in most works for the musical theater, *Oklahoma* and *Carousel* for example where the romantic pairing of love and death prevails. Then there is Mozart in *Così fan Tutti* (“Will she or won’t she?”) *Abduction from the Seraglio* (“Did she or didn’t she?”) *Don Giovanni* (“She will!”) *Marriage of Figaro* (“The revenge of ‘she’”). However, the Mozart-DaPonte operas did not claim to be family entertainment, and during most of the 19th century *Così* was seen as too immoral to be performed. Mozart was keenly aware of the sexual element in art and life so that even in his Masses female arias sound like love songs to the deity. “Gilbert & Sullivan” can be characterized in many ways but usually not as “sexy.” However, Shaw’s Polish aviator’s comments might well apply to those eminent Victorian theatrical structures, some more than others.

In *The Sorcerer* (1877), the opening chorus sets the theme, using the “S” word itself in a verbally provocative manner:

“For today young Alexis—young Alexis Pointdexter
 Is betrothed to Aline—to Aline Sangazure,
 And that pride of his sex—is of his sex is to be next her
 At the feast on the green—on the green, oh, be sure!”

Young Alexis wants to go beyond his own marriage for, believing that “pure and lasting happiness” results from love leading to marriage, his goal is “to steep the whole village up to its lips in love, and to couple its citizens in matrimony without distinction of age, rank, or fortune.” To accomplish this he feeds them all a sleeping draught from which upon waking each will fall in love with the first person seen, a device he believes will also be helpful in insuring the true love of his fiancé who resists the administration of the love potion with, as it turns out, good reason.

As a result, the usually proper village succumbs to an orgy of “love making” in which social disorder is inflamed with sexual disorder and becomes unhinged from its usual moorings. There is more “wooing and undoing, sighing and suing” in this early opera than would seem possible. As Dr. Daly puts it, “I have never remarked it before, but the young maidens of this village are very comely. So likewise are the middle-aged. Also the elderly. All are comely—and (with a deep sigh) all are engaged.”

The misalliances of both age and rank that result from the love philter can be corrected only by the death of John Wellington Wells the provider of the drug who “sinks through the trap amid red fire” while the chorus sings of “the rollicking bun.” This curious character in his end carries echoes of Don Giovanni and pre-figurations of Jack Point. Sex and death, a not uncommon operatic pairing, are here adumbrated, but they are given full play in *Yeoman of the Guard* where the executioner’s block—hardly the “big black bloc” and “cheap and chippy-chopper” of the *Mikado*—dominates this most sexually charged late work to be dealt with in detail anon.

In *Trial by Jury* (1875) the mainspring of the plot is seduction and betrayal. The plaintiff, Angelina, having been seduced—off stage to be sure—by the defendant Edwin has been abandoned and is suing him for “breach of promise of marriage.” The fact that the female chorus refers to her as “the broken flower” makes her actual seduction unambiguous. From the moment she enters, the air is certainly charged with “amatory numbers,” and she is treated as a sexual object by all the men. The Jury sing in unison, “We love you and would make you, would ma-a-a-ke you ours.’ The delayed arrival of “ours” in the score gives that line a salacious double meaning. The Judge, who eventually does “make her,” is more specific and repetitive by stating: “Oh never, never, never, since I joined the human race; Saw I so exquisitely, fair a face”; wholly objectifying her, he then describes her as “designed for capture.”

The defendant’s song is a paean to promiscuity in which women are compared to different cuts of meat, and he is portrayed as a comic Don Giovanni, who upon entering the court exclaims: “Be firm, be firm my pecker.” [Pedants will point out that when this line was written, “pecker” meant “heart.”] However, in this post-modernist world where

text takes the place of author, it may be more valid to let the text speak for itself to today's audience!] In the final chorus, Edwin—as an aside—openly questions the Judge's virility: "I wonder whether they'll live together in marriage tether in manner true?"

Compared to *Trial* and *Sorcerer*, *H.M.S Pinafore* (1878) and *Pirates of Penzance* (1880) seem chaste, for sex is used primarily as a backdrop for a political and social allegory about equality and social hierarchy. *Pinafore* is the most masque-like work, asserting the value of a ranked society in which a love match is blessed only when the baby mix-up renders love and rank congruent. The older, female character, often a grotesque, sexually voracious, and frustrated figure in the later operas, is here seen as a "plump and pleasing person" genuinely desired by the captain whom by his change in rank is free to marry, and be more or less true to. It would be difficult to imagine Ralph and Josephine having sex, although one may wonder at the role that had been played by the dozens of "sisters, cousins, and aunts" that Sir Joseph will need to say "goodbye to" upon his marriage to one of them, but in this Victorian masque farce trumps sex.

Pirates also deals with the social order while poking mild fun at the British obsession with "duty." The older female character is cruelly passed off by the pirates on an innocent young man, who is soon—if not immediately—so captivated by a band of young women who are about to (by Victorian standards) skinny-dip in his presence that he offers "to marry" anyone of them at once. "Marriage," blessed by a conveniently located "Doctor of Divinity" is clearly a stand-in for more immediate sexual activity, a possibility realized by Major Stanley who creates a whopper of a lie to protect the virtue of his daughters. As Frederick puts it: "Had you not acted as you did, these reckless men would assuredly have called in the nearest clergyman and have married your large family on the spot." However, and even though the female chorus spends the entire second act in nightgowns, the erotic element, so endemic in *Sorcerer* and so essential to the humor of *Trial*, is merely background in *Pirates*.

However, in *Patience* (1881) it is back again in the foreground, for although *Sorcerer* might be seen as a spoof on the love philter theme, and *Patience* as a spoof of the aesthetic movement with Bunthorne patterned on Oscar Wilde, in both cases (and unlike *Pinafore* and *Pirates*) sexual desire is so definitively the single channel for the plot, that they both can be seen as "steeped and soaked" in it. In both, the opening lines of the chorus set the theme. Rather than swabbing the decks or drinking sherry, we have: "Twenty love six maidens we; lovesick all against our will." The closing lines resolve this longing, but not fully:

"Greatly pleased with one another.
To get married we decide.
Each of us will wed the other,
Nobody be Bunthorne's Bride."

Reginald Bunthorne, the Oscar Wilde parody figure, thereby joins that small company of those not mated at the end of a G&S opera—J.W. Wells, Jack Point, and Major General Stanley. However, whereas these characters vanish, die, or are too old to matter,

Bunthorne, a young and seemingly good looking man we are led to believe, lives a solitary and—given his prototype—homosexual life perforce contented with only “a tulip or lily!” Because the subtext of the opera is the “love that dare not speak its name,” the sexual aspect of *Patience* has a sense of unreality to it. The sexual element of *Sorcerer* is consistently contrived and hence believable, in *Pinafore* and *Pirates*, secondary, but in *Patience* it is fully charged, hovering between contrivance and absurdity, although occasionally—as in the magnet and churn song—touching on genuine sentiment.

In *Iolanthe* (1882) the sense of unreality is paradoxically made more believable by introducing a supernatural element, involving inter-species love. But, even though the Lord Chancellor, is reunited with his past love (“Iolanthe, thou livest.”) and is thus rescued from what was shaping up to be an improper lusting after his young ward—she in whose “pond” both Liberal and Conservative peers would “fish”—and in spite of sexual allusions (“We were boy’s together, at least I was”) and puns (“I’m a fairy only down to the waist”), political satire is the main message of the opera. A comparison of its first act finale (“With Strephen for our foe no doubt”) with that of *Patience* (“Fickle Fortune will decide who shall be our Bunthorne’s bride”) shows politics trumping love. The second act big chorus number is a paean to the House of Lords and the British art of muddling through.

Ruddigore (1887) however, is firmly on the erotic side. Virtually every song deals with love-making of one form or another: “I know a youth who loves a little maid;” “My heart says to this maiden strike;” “If somebody there chanced to be, who loved me in a manner true;” “The battle’s roar is over O my love; Embrace your tender lover, O my love;” “In sailing o’re life’s ocean wide, your heart should be your only guide;” “Happily coupled are we, you see;” “Welcome gentry, for your entry (sic) sets our tender hearts a-beating;” The opening and closing choruses tell it all. Beginning with:

Fair is Rose as bright May-day;
Soft is Rose as warm west-wind;
Sweet is Rose as new-mown hay—
Rose is queen of maiden-kind!
 Rose all glowing
 With virgin blushes, say—
 Is anybody going
 To marry you today.

And ending with:

For happy the lily
That’s kissed by the bee;
And, sippin tranquilly,
Quite happy is he;
And happy the filly
That neighs in her pride;
But happier than any,

A pound to a penny,
 A lover is when he
 Embraces his bride!

The female chorus is unremitting in desire to have a wedding, and the great bravura piece in the opera is the monologue of Mad Margaret, a female figure whose rampant sexuality (“T’is only that I’m love lonely, That’s all”) is domesticated in the second act only by the incantation of the name of a suburban town.

In one sense, *Princess Ida* (1884) deals almost exclusively with sex, but the potentially erotic elements—“I am a maiden cold and stately” etc, delivered in drag—are subsumed in what is essentially a political/cultural critique of Victorian feminism and Darwinism. The opera ends in an accolade to traditional gender arrangements. King Gama addressing the all female society—“...how is this posterity to be provided?”

Likewise, *The Gondoliers* (1889), although it begins with an extended and quite glorious musical section with women wanting to marry and moves to marriage by lottery, the main burden once again is social and political critique in which, although the nobility is portrayed as anachronistic, the main target is egalitarianism—“When every one is somebody, then no one’s anybody.” And when a confessional baby nurse is dragged in at the end to match love with social rank, it is clear that we are in the realm of the masque and not of erotic comedy. At the end, all is set in order according to the mores of late Victorian England. One wonders why this very British opera was set in Venice; perhaps to give Sullivan Italian words to set. Indeed it is *Gondoliers* that is more suitable for updating than *Mikado*, recently given an gratuitous and unconvincing 1930’s hotel lobby setting, a work that Gilbert labored long and hard properly to set in Japan, a setting it is tied to as much as *Yeoman* is to Tudor London or *Meistersinger* is to medieval Nuremberg.

Looking at what might be termed the sexual quotient we see that some are on the high scale and others less so. For some, this particular quality is essential to the plot; for others it serves merely as background for other themes. Hence, two categories suggest themselves—**Masques**, works criticizing social and political practices but ultimately celebrating the social order, and **Erotic Comedies**, which may contain forays into social criticism, but really deal with love and sex, coupling and uncoupling, sighing and suing. By this measure the masque opera category include *Pinafore*, *Pirates*, *Iolanthe*, *Princess Ida*, and *Gondoliers*. The erotic opera group would consist of *Trial by Jury*, *Sorcerer*, *Patience*, *Ruddigore* and, *Yeoman*. *The Mikado*, the most balanced, integrated, and perhaps the best of them all is *sui generis* and hence may well require a separate analysis.

Now for the *Yeoman of the Guard* whose sex and death drenched themes are introduced by the lovesick Phoebe Merrill in a song that opens the opera.

When maiden loves, she sits and sighs,
 She wanders to and fro:
 Unbidden tear-drops fill her eyes,

And to all questions she replies
 With a sad “heigho!”
 T’is but a little word—“heigho!”
 So soft ‘tis scarcely hard—“heigho!”
 An idle breath yet life and death
 May hang upon a maid’s “highho!”

In the second stanza the total empire of love is expressed in the phrase, “Yet all the sense of eloquence, lies hidden in a maid’s ‘Ah me.’”

In particular, Phoebe is lusting after a prisoner in the tower awaiting execution for sorcery, one Colonel Fairfax. Her father, Sergeant Merrill, who believes Fairfax has been falsely charged, enlists her to sexually divert the jailor, Wilfred, (who is lusting after her) so that the keys can be lifted in order to release Fairfax. It seems that a man’s life does indeed hang on “a maid’s high-ho.” In the teasing song “Were I thy bride” Phoebe produces a list of erotic pleasures that she believes she will never have to deliver. Fate will, of course, prove her wrong as it will for many in this opera. Once free, Fairfax is hidden by being disguised as Sergeant Merrill’s son, Leonard, who has just returned from the wars but who remains in hiding for most of the opera. This disguise enables Fairfax, *cum* Leonard, to enter the Merrill household. Once there, Phoebe uses the cover of seemingly chaste sisterly kisses and caresses to make love to Fairfax, something that he responds to with avidity no doubt starved for female company by his long incarceration. In this process, Wilfred, the jailor, seeking to contain Phoebe’s “indiscriminate caress(s)” instructs her “brother” to be ready “to take those favors from her.” Needless to say the proto-lovers take full advantage of this license to indulge, for Wilfred enjoins Leonard/Fairfax in specific detail to remain constantly in Phoebe’s presence. “She will not quit thy sight etc.”

As if this erotic matrix were not enough, Fairfax—in order to avoid seeing his estate go to a hated kinsman—arranges to be married an hour before he is to be executed. The person chosen is one Elsie Maynard betrothed to Jack Point who together form a pair of wandering performers with Elsie the singer/dancer and Point the jester. They are introduced by way of a folk song entitled “The Merryman and his Maid” which is also the sub-title for the opera and plays a key musical and emotional role in the opera. The song, sung in alternate verses by Elsie and Point, is about a maid who leaves the lowly born merryman for a noble lord but returns to the merryman when her almost lover “turns up his noble nose in scorn.” The final couplet, sung by both in unison reads: “His pains were o’re, and he sighed no more, for he lived in the love of a ladye.”

Indeed the love of a lady is the overwhelming theme of this work. It seems to overwhelm the crowd as well, for upon its conclusion one calls out, “a kiss for that, pretty maid!” followed by a chorus of “Aye, a kiss all around.” Elsie—well armed it seems—then draws a dagger and warns the man to withdraw. He persists, “trying to kiss her.” In the midst of this erotic turmoil, Elsie’s cry for help is answered by the lieutenant, a friend of Fairfax, who disperses the crowd and, upon hearing of Elsie’s sick mother and her lack of money to provide for her, proceeds to introduce his indecent proposal.

“How say you maiden will you wed
 A man about to lose his head?
 For half an hour you’ll be a wife
 And then the dower is yours for life”

Jack Point agrees while reiterating the conditions of the bargain.

Though as a general rule of life
 I don’t allow my promised wife
 My lovely bride that is to be,
 To marry anyone but me,
 Yet if the fee is promptly paid,
 And he in well-earned grave
 Within the hour is duly laid,
 Objection I will waive!

Hard upon being married while blindfolded Elsie, in her big recitative and song, contrasts the joy of marriage in general with hers, a union that brings her only “gold and sadness.” In this song she shows sympathy for her husband who is “too young, too brave to die,” and laments the fact that this marriage will not last. —“Oh weary wives who widowhood would win, rejoice that ye have time to weary in.” The focus is wholly on the phantom husband and not on Jack Point, marriage to whom would most certainly now be a second one. Her emotional turmoil at this point is very human, rather than artificial such as that of Yum-Yum when faced with a similar kind of situation. Although--unlike Robert Redford and Meg Ryan in the film *Indecent Proposal*--Fairfax and Elsie do not see each other, the plot of the opera parallels that of the film. Hence it is believable, at the end of the first act finale—a magnificent musical treatment of consternation and confusion upon the escape of Fairfax—that when Elsie, assailed by conflicting emotions, faints, it is in Fairfax’s arms that she remains “insensible” while the curtain falls.

In Fairfax’s first act aria he reflects philosophically on death. In the second act he does the same on the fact that although he is free, he is bound by matrimony to an unknown woman. This does not keep him from turning his attention to Elsie who has been taken into the Merrill household to recuperate. Dame Caruthers, who has been nursing her, notices both this and the fact that Elsie in turn finds “Master Leonard” attractive. She tells Fairfax that in her sleep Elsie has spoken of a clandestine marriage scheduled to end in an hour and avers that it is of “that accursed Fairfax that she is speaking.” This macabre situation serves as the text of that haunting unaccompanied madrigal “Strange Adventure” in which the union of altar and tomb is clearly made.

Fairfax, whose recent life has been full of adventure, now has another one offered to him:

“So my mysterious bide is no other than this winsome Elsie! By my hand, ‘tis no such ill plunge into Fortune’s lucky bag! I might have fared worse with my eyes

open! But she comes. Now to test her principles. T'is not every husband who has a chance of wooing his own wife.”

In dialogue that follows, Fairfax is ardent and Elsie confused, but she adamantly points out that she is married and to the same Fairfax who has recently escaped. Fairfax/Leonard urges her to flee with him. Elsie in high style answers:

“Oh! For Shame, for shame Master Leonard. I am wed—not the less because I love not my husband. I am a wife, sir, and I have a duty, and—oh sir! —thy words terrify me—they are not honest—they are wicked words, and unworthy thy great and brave heart!”

At his point, Fairfax is ready to end the charade and to flee with Elsie. ‘Nay Elsie I did but jest. I spake but to try thee—“

This resolution is interrupted by a gunshot and the chorus and Wilfred, with Point as a corroborative witness, claiming that he has killed Fairfax as he was attempting to swim the river. This “cock and bull” story was concocted by Jack Point who gained the complicity of Wilfred by offering to train him as a jester. This turn in the plot serves not only to prolong and complicate the story, but also to show that Jack Point would go as far as perjury to secure Elsie’s hand. The stage directions read, “Exeunt all but Elsie, Point, Fairfax, and Phoebe” and it is here that the heart—nay the breaking heart—of the opera is revealed in the two ensembles that follow. Now that her husband is dead, Elsie is free to choose and Point naturally presents himself. Fairfax—still known to all, except Phoebe, as Leonard—with an aristocratic sensuousness worthy of Don Giovanni leads his two women into the song that begins “A man who would woo a fair maid, should ‘prentice himself to the trade.”

Point listens with mounting panic which turns to alarm as Fairfax successfully woos Elsie to show how it is done, a sequence that ends with Fairfax dismissing Point—“I promised thee I would show thee how to woo, and herein lies the proof of the virtue of my teaching. Go thou and apply it elsewhere!” At this point, Phoebe breaks into tears realizing that she has lost Fairfax to Elsie much as Point has lost Elise to “Leonard.” Phoebe’s seemingly incestuous tears might be lead an astute observer to speculate on who Leonard Merrill actually is, or on what is going on in the Merrill household. What follows is the great quartet, “When a wooer goes a wooing,” which, like the quintet in *Meistersinger*, is the climax of the opera. At its end, Elsie and Leonard are clearly to be married, Phoebe is heartbroken, and Point is suicidal—“Jester wishes he was dead” is his and the ensemble’s last line.

Some plot tidying up follows. In her grief and in his carelessness Phoebe and then her father let it out, in the presence of Wilfred and Dame Caruthers respectively, that they have harbored the convict Fairfax disguised as Phoebe’s brother, Leonard. This indiscretion leads to their blackmail-induced and loveless marriages. With silence so purchased, the Elsie-Leonard wedding ceremony shapes up as the second act finale, the only shadow remaining being the potential arrival of the real Leonard Merrill. On cue he

arrives but also with a *deus ex machina* in the form of a pardon for Colonel Fairfax. Elise can now be told that the man whom she openly loves is indeed the man that she had covertly married, and he—now innocent—can come back to life. The word spreads that the pardoned Fairfax is coming to consummate the marriage he had made while in prison, thereby disrupting the Elsie-Leonard nuptial rite.

However, rather than revealing himself directly, he turns the erotic screw one more time by proclaiming to Elsie, while hiding his face: “All thought of Leaned Merrill put aside; thou are my own, I claim thee as my bride.” Expecting to confront a stranger, Elsie, upon seeing him, exclaims “Leonard!” and the chorus continues its celebration of Elsie’s marriage now to Fairfax, no longer accused of sorcery and free to share his life, his love, and his wealth with Elsie, taking her away from a life of strolling performer into what we assume will be a high station in society. (Fairfax is described as arriving for his wedding “handsomely dressed, and attended by other Gentlemen.”)

All are now mated save Point who, accompanied by tremolo strings, wanders in and rebukes the crowd: “O thoughtless crew, ye know not what ye do; attend to me and hear a song or two”. He then reprises the “Merryman and his Maid” hoping that singing about the return of the maid from the noble lord to the lowborn lover will affect reality. However, Elsie changes her part of the song and coldly turns her back on Point after singing:

“It is sung with the ring of the song maid’s sing
 Who love with a love life-long, O!
 It’s the song of a merry maid, nestling near,
 Who loved her lord—but who dropped a tear
 At the moan of the merryman, moping mum,
 Whose soul was sad, and whose glance was glum,
 Who sipped no sup, and who craved no crum,
 As he sighed for the love of a ladye.”

Just as Elsie at the end of Act I is left “insensible in Fairfax’s arms,” the stage directions for Act II finale read: “Fairfax embraces Elsie as Point falls insensible at their feet.” Does Point die, in a kind of *liebestod*? Some has staged it so; others have kept him distraught but alive, and others—I’m told—have him wink to the audience from a recumbent position. The latter solution goes against Sullivan’s music which portrays genuine, rather than mock, feelings. *Yeoman* is not parody, nor is it a masque to affirm some kind of social virtue. It is the best example of the erotic opera type. Dame Caruthers’s identification of and with the tower as a devourer of men resonates with echoes and intensifies the appetites and anger of the older maiden archetype of earlier operas. This is perhaps why the Duchess of Plaza Toro coming after *Yeoman* is erotically bland as if Dame Caruthers had exhausted the full force of that archetype.

So what is *Yeoman* all about if not about sex and death? There is some clever verbal parody of the jester’s calling (Is this Gilbert mocking himself?) and an opulent imaginative picture of life on tower green at a certain historical time. However, it does

seem to be highly sexualized—“steeped and soaked” so to speak, not unlike *Trial* and *Sorcerer*, but not like *Pinafore* or *Pirates*. Actually the longing and heartache of *Yeoman* is deeper than that of *Così fan Tutti* for Elsie, Point, Phoebe, and Fairfax are clearly real people, more so than the Mozart-DaPonte characters who have too much of *opera buffa* about them.

A recent submission to SavoyNet put it quite well:

Some people criticise Yeomen for its plot holes. How myopic! I think it's WSG's finest libretto. It is truer to life than any of the other Savoy operas -- no wonder Sullivan liked it so much. The relationship between Phoebe and Wilfred, which I believe the opening dialogue sets us up to expect, is no fairytale romance, but a believable and imperfect match of two different and complex characters, who will nevertheless marry and could potentially be happy.

Martin Wright
Melbourne

Indeed Savoy net submission on the Phoebe-Wilfred relationship all speak to the deep humanity of these characters as fully fleshed out and not actors either in a comedy or a masque, representing a particular idea or political type. It is in this sense, of course, that *Yeoman* verges on opera and is very different from all the others. Of interest in this regard is its influence on *Gondoliers*, a work that also has some special aspects—a double plot, a complex operatic-type role for the Grand Inquisitor, the long stretch of continuous music at the outset, a setting of an Italian text, and—in spite of elements of satire—a rich portrayal of wholly human emotions. The ballad “Take a pair of sparkling eyes” as an expression of love is worlds apart from say “A Maiden fair to see” from *Pinafore*, or “Is there not one maiden here?” from *Pirates*, both of which bear the mark of satirical parody. “Iolanthe thou livest” captures a bit of humanity, but I believe it took the full blown humanity of *Yeoman* to clear the way for works of a more mature and encompassing nature. Even the madrigal “Try we lifelong” has a genuinely felt philosophical aspect lacking in the earlier ensembles. Indeed, one wonders what Sullivan and Gilbert might have accomplished if they had continued working closely and not suffered a separation.

When they came together again, --- years later-- to produce *Utopia Ltd.* and *The Grand Duke*, the path opened by *Yeoman* and followed, in part, by *Gondoliers* was not taken, which is perhaps why posterity has kept these two works more or less out of the cannon, and certainly on the margin of performances.

So in conclusion, does the “**Masque-Erotic Comedy**” distinction hold up? And where does *The Mikado* fit? The fact that that is not an easy question may tell us something about the special quality of that work, and suggest a separate essay into its essential nature. Perhaps it is simply a splendid comic opera, the high mid-point of a theatrical collaboration and literally incomparable.