

**An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Gilbert and Sullivan**

*Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody*. Carolyn Williams. New York: Columbia UP 2011. 454 pp.

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<1>Midway through Carolyn Williams's *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* are some radically new observations on the sexual politics of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. These include a memorable take on *Iolanthe* (1882) that notes the erotic appeal of the character Strephon, who is "fairy down to the waist" but "mortal" below and whose entry into Parliament provides the occasion for joking about a "fairy member" (198). Equally cogent is her commentary on *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), which looks at not only the character of Ruth, the older nursemaid who harbors a quasi-incestuous desire for her charge Frederick, but also the "polymorphous fantasy" (139) of the pirate band. Williams perfectly captures the humor inherent in the nineteenth-century juxtaposition of sexual desire and propriety in a scene in which Frederick escapes from his lustful nursemaid Ruth into the pirate life and subsequently becomes the object of attraction for the virginal Mabel and her maiden chorus. Here the lure of the tenor exists not only in his voice but also the costume of pirate tights and "skirt" that show off his attractive legs.

<2>Williams's substantive study is all the more praiseworthy because her biting insights into gender and sexuality, sharpened through the lens of contemporary critical theory, are tucked within what could pass as a much more staid study of Gilbert and Sullivan. There is an impressive amount of scholarly and critical detail here on Victorian theater history and enough enthusiasm to please any Gilbert and Sullivan fan. The book moves through an opera-by-opera reading that includes narratives of production and reception and refreshingly updated readings of the operas.

<3>Few can dispute that Gilbert and Sullivan were masters of a potent brand of English comic opera, which actively incorporated a myriad of British and Continental theatrical and musical styles, forms, and traditions. Williams traces three aspects of their operas: the creation of a distinctively "G&S" comic opera genre, developing through the early works of *Thespis* (1871), *Trial by Jury* (1875), *The Sorcerer* (1877), *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), and *The Pirates of Penzance* that incorporated parodies of other genres such as English classical extravaganza, French opéra bouffe, and melodrama; their consideration of gender and sexuality in *Patience* (1881), *Iolanthe*, and *Princess Ida* (1884); and what Williams calls "cross-cultural and auto-ethnographic

thinking” (xv) in the late operas *The Mikado* (1885), *Ruddigore* (1887), *The Yeoman of the Guard* (1888), *The Gondoliers* (1889), *Utopia, Limited* (1893), and *The Grand Duke* (1896). She emphasizes how parody, the imitation and twisting of form, convention, and role, consistently informs Gilbert’s characterizations, narratives, and staging. Sullivan’s musical humor, with its echoes of Verdi’s “Anvil Chorus” in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Handel in *Trial By Jury*, and Mendelssohn and Wagner in *Iolanthe* also shows a mastery of parodic technique.

<4>Williams also considers the gender politics of the operas through parody’s intertextual layering, and this approach provides a particularly useful way of thinking about the complexity of gendered representation. Well before contemporary feminism conditioned sensibilities, nineteenth-century critics pointed out the troubling aspects of ridiculing older female characters such as Buttercup (*Pinafore*), Lady Jane (*Patience*), or Katisha (*Mikado*). Williams argues against the charge of misogyny as “too blunt an instrument with which to approach” these exaggerated caricatures (xv). Instead, she offers ways to look at them as characterizations that move between masculine and feminine, comparing them with the Dame figures of pantomime: “if the Dame figure of pantomime is already a gender parody (an inversion of conventional feminine behavior), the Dame of Savoy opera is a parody of that parody” (215). She also analyzes how parody informs the basic structuring of male and female choruses; though this might seem to reflect Victorian gender stereotypes, it instead “exposes their absurdity” (19) and makes them available for critique. Parody highlights the overall theatricality of conventions and social formations, and how these are created and re-created through performative repetition. Such an approach allows Williams to find a feminist angle on the operas without making defensive or grandiose claims for Gilbert and Sullivan as the secret champions of women’s rights. For Williams, Gilbert and Sullivan demonstrated a paternalistic late-nineteenth-century feminism that “advanced the material interests of their female performers while holding them to strict rules of conduct” (21).

<5>The study of parody, genre, and gender roles allows for both revealing commentary on the defining aspects of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas, and also a myriad of minute historical details that Williams points out with an expert eye. Such details might well be lost to most modern-day audiences of Gilbert and Sullivan, and Williams takes care to describe them in ways that nod toward contemporary sensibilities. She includes discussions of contemporary films and dramas such as Mike Leigh’s *Topsy-Turvy* (1999) and Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love* (1997). She also provides relevant contemporary parallels, describing, for instance, developments in stage technology “Victorian Fairyland” in works such as *Iolanthe* as “very much a creation of industrial light and magic” (194).

<6>This rich network of past and present allusions includes the third chapter’s fascinating look at the coding of masculinity through tableaux vivants, attitudes, and posing in Victorian theater and parlor entertainment. Williams also looks at the development of the patter song, which in the Savoy version (“stuffed as full as a Victorian sofa, yet [which] pretends to be empty” [293]) registered the nightmare pastiche of modern life, with its emphasis on bureaucracy, mechanization, acceleration, and consumption. She points to a series of little-known references, such as how “pinafore” refers to a favorite costume in pantomime, a favorite genre of Victorian children (102), and how the name of Major-General Stanley in *The Pirates of Penzance* gestures

towards British colonialism in Africa (134). What might otherwise seem trifling detail is well integrated into a broader examination of Gilbert and Sullivan's use of parody to create self-consciously theatricalized performances of gender, race, and nation. For instance, parody provides new insight into the battles over the operas as intellectual property, such as during the December 1876 Great Britain and U.S. premieres of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Staging nearly simultaneous yet "original" performances allowed Gilbert, Sullivan, and manager Rupert D'Oyly Carte to claim dramatic copyright in both nations; this "'Gilbertian' absurdity," whereby the existence of two "originals" might legally restrain the proliferation of other productions, evokes the very nature of parody, insofar that "parody itself engages the same vexed issues of temporal priority, the relation between author and work, and the relation between an original and its copies" (125).

<7>The popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan operas then and now relies on their appeal to a wide range of audience members, some who might grasp their satiric force and others who might enjoy them for simpler reasons; parody, Williams notes, enables a "differential reception" whereby audience members have a range of responses, thus providing a certain "democratic hospitality" (13). But while parody has the potential to undercut authority and challenge the status quo, it can also become predictable, deterring investigation into the relative value or power with which certain kinds of representations are invested. Williams is well aware that comic mimicry can produce particularly slippery effects. For example, she illustrates both the potential and pitfalls of parody in a reading of a scene in *Utopia, Limited* in which stage directions describe a gathering of Cabinet Council members to perform in the style of "*Christy's Minstrels*." In this version of a blackface minstrel number, Williams finds that the allusion to "the former American colony and its internalized cultural other, the Southern slave race," creates "a sort of imperialist *mise en abîme*" (337). But while the stage arrangement, instrumentation, and music imitate traditional blackface minstrelsy, the characters themselves do not appear in blackface. Instead, this scene relies on its self-consciousness, a "sort of whiteface masquerade," that consorts with the opera's colonial plot, in which the natives of the South Sea island are learning to act English. Thus the opera makes blackface and other kinds of racial performance an open "masquerade": "as if race could be put on and taken off easily as a costume, theatrical genre, or national identity" (337). Yet as Williams is quick to note, this parody acts as a diversion rather than a tool of subversion, so that "seriously critical implications are raised, only to be deflected" and "once again, the more profound and dangerous questions about imperial domination are turned back toward the parody of English institutions" (338).

<8>In the endless proliferation of background material, historic reference, and satiric allusion that is at the heart of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas, it can be hard to concentrate on a sustained argument or focused critique. Ultimately, Williams does an admirable job of maintaining a running commentary that engages the politics of the operas even while offering her own little list of interesting scholarly details. She avoids the sense of *déjà vu* that sometimes dogs scholarship on these operas, and wrestles new meanings out of what might otherwise be relegated to nostalgia.