

AN ONOMASTIC REVIEW OF GILBERT AND SULLIVAN

When the garrulous Polonius gives his opinion in elaborate language that Hamlet is mad, the Queen comments, "More matter, with less art." Polonius's reply is well-known:

Madam, I swear I use no art at all.

'That he is mad, 'tis true; 'tis true 'tis pity

And pity 'tis 'tis true; a foolish figure;

But farewell it, for I will use no art.

Although here I am anticipating a bit, since later on I will return to the "'tis pity" theme, I assure you I will "use no art."

As indicated by the titles and subtitles of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, Sir William's main business is witty satire. Imagine naming a worthy vessel, even if fictional, "H.M.S. Pinafore"! Most of the time Gilbert is ridiculous yet intelligent, and Sullivan is his perfect counterpart in music. "Pinafore" illustrates the point precisely.

Let us look again at the titles. According to the story, one of them was not only serious in tone but also offensive to the ladies attending opening night. The original form of Ruddigore was spelled with a "y" instead of an "i," which made part of the word an easy rhyme for bloody, an objectionable term in British English. Sullivan and Gilbert agreed to change the title. Gilbert suggested Kensington Gore; Or, Not Half So Good As The Mikado. A member of the original

company tells the story: 'To Gilbert Ruddy Gore meant simply red blood, and he was irritated that his innocent attempt...should be mistaken for the language of a fish-porter....He even resented jokes about the title. 'How's Bloodygore going?' asked a friend. 'You mean Ruddigore,' said Gilbert severely. 'Same thing,' was the airy response. 'Indeed? Then if I say I admire your ruddy countenance (which I don't) it means that I like your bloody cheek (which I don't).'¹

Evidently Gilbert became a bit superstitious about leaving the letter 'p' out of his titles because the names of four of his most successful operas include it: H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance, Patience, and Princess Ida. One more, Iolanthe, was known as Perola until the last rehearsal before the first performance. (The real name was withheld to throw the literary pirates off the track. The international ramifications of this activity are well known.) The author had also considered using Phyllis or Princess Pearl as the title of Iolanthe. Furthermore, the full title of the opera reads, Iolanthe Or the Peer and the Peri.

Yet Gilbert was no slave to the one letter and, most of the time, got along very well without it in his titles. Much more important to him, I believe, was the matter of alliteration, evidence of which we see in some of his other titles and subtitles, in several names of his operatic characters, and throughout his poetry. As these facts are being analyzed, I hope to illustrate Gilbert's unbelievable skill in manipulating words, and his utter devotion to innocent merriment (some of which we must admit has a bite).

Out of a total of fourteen operas five have alliterative titles if we include subtitles. Their first joint production—back in 1871—, Thespis or the Gods Grown Old, was so unsuccessful that it almost killed off the partnership then and there. Sullivan or somebody did away with the entire music score, except for one song. Whether the bit of alliteration helped or hindered is anybody's guess. Yet evidently Gilbert consciously employed the device as a desirable embellishment for both titles and character names in a majority of their collaborations. Thus, we have the titles of H.M.S. Pinafore Or The Lass That Loved a Sailor; The Pirates of Penzance; Patience Or Bunthorne's Bride; Iolanthe Or The Peer and The Peri; The Mikado Or The Town of Titipu; and The Yeomen of the Guard Or The Merryman and His Maid. (Of course, however, Gilbert was too great a craftsman to overwork any one device. Perhaps we should also count the vowel alliteration in Princess Ida Or Castle Adamant.)

Altogether the G&S characters number 180, of which fourteen alliterate. In The Sorcerer there are two: Doctor Daly, the Vicar, whose name suggests to me a spiritual authority whose company perhaps we all should seek on a regular basis, that is, every day; and John Wellington Wells, who introduces himself as a dealer in magic and spells but tells us nothing about his name, and who also worked one miracle that we know of.

Six out of the ten characters in Pinafore have alliterative names: Ralph Rackstraw, the fortunate lad who is loved by the lass; Captain Corcoran, the father of the girl in question; Dick Deadeye,

whose name strikes me like a dash of cold water, and whose total unpopularity he himself blames on his name; and three other members of the ship's crew—Bill Bobstay the Boatswain's Mate, Bob Becket the Carpenter's Mate, and Tom Tucker the Midshipmite who is only a young lad without any lines.

Patience has only three such names, all of them belonging to officers of the Dragoon Guards—Colonel Calverley, Major Murgatroyd, and Lieut. the Duke of Dunstable. Although I do not know the reason for the choice here, it may be that the theatrical success of the earlier Pinafore with its Captain Corcoran had some influence. At any rate Patience was also successful, so much so that the family name of Major Murgatroyd apparently was adopted for a pack of morbid fellows in Ruddigore, which has ten Murgatroyds in all, eight of them ghosts who make their appearance in order to whet the blunted purpose of their descendant who is charged with the obligation of committing one crime each day. Another character in Ruddigore is an entertaining caricature of theatrical madness who in a song calls herself "Daft Madge! Crazy Meg! Mad Margaret! Poor Peg!"

Patience contains other interesting names which can be identified with actual persons and places. Nowhere else in the operas did Gilbert refer to so many known individuals. Reginald Bunthorne the fleshly poet seems not to be an exact representation of Oscar Wilde or Swinburne, but perhaps a composite of the general type of each. Archibald Grosvenor the idyllic poet may not be patterned after one living person of the time; but Martyn Green tells us that the Grosvenor

Gallery alluded to in the duet of the two poets is the source of the name:²

Bunthorne:

A pallid and thin young man,
 A haggard and lank young man,
 A greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery,
 Foot-in-the-grave young man!

As you may know, the American Embassy is presently located in Grosvenor Square.

Green also makes seventeen identifications for us in the "Heavy Dragoon" song. A lot of other names in the song are already famous and unnecessary to explain. Because seventeen is too long a list to deal with here I will mention only three: the historical "Manfred" was onetime King of Sicily, later celebrated by Byron and Tschaiikowsky; "the keen penetration of Paddington Pollaky" refers to a detective, Ignatius Paul Pollaky, a Paddington police officer, who was the "scourge of criminals in that quarter"; and "the pathos of Paddy, as rendered by Boucicault" honors the acting of Dion Boucicault in Irish plays, a versatile performer also famous as an Irish and American dramatist, manager and actor.

At the end of the string of collaborations Gilbert brought two more alliterating names on stage: Sir Bailey, "Q.C." and "M.P.," in Utopia, Limited; and Julia Jellico, who is called "an English comedienne," in The Grand Duke. Let us also note, in passing, that at

the beginning of his literary career Gilbert made a hit with his collection of poems entitled Bab Ballads, the first element of which was short for "Baby," the term given him by his parents.

Just as Shakespeare was the verbal expert in his time — giving us, for example, three puns in five words (Prince. "No, if rightly taken halter." Henry IV, Pt. I, 1. 357.) — Gilbert was extraordinarily adept at exploiting word-sounds in his alliterative achievements. One of the best examples of his command of the English language occurs in The Mikado where Ko-Ko the Lord High Executioner has just received a letter from the Mikado saying that "Unless somebody is beheaded within one month the post of Lord High Executioner shall be abolished, and the city reduced to the rank of a village!" When Ko-Ko asks who it shall be, his advisers assure him he is the best contender since he is already under sentence of death. They are even willing partial success, in his attempt at self-decapitation, as a satisfactory solution. Ko-Ko's only hope is to find a substitute, an honor which Pooh-Bah and Pish-Tush decline. In a trio each one of them justifies dodging the responsibility. As the trio is concluded (in unison) one of them objects, another declines, and the third doesn't much care-

To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock,
 In a pestilential prison, with a life-long lock,
 Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock,
 From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block!

(The term dock signifies here the enclosure in a criminal court where the prisoner stands or sits.) In these thirty-eight words twenty-one are arranged in alliterative groups, if we count life-long as two words. Examining the internal repetitions would add to the statistics if we took the time.

I admit that writing poetry is as easy as taking a comfortable shower if we are content to write just words that rhyme, words that contain a regular rhythm, or words that alliterate perfectly--but none of which makes sense. It is also simple enough to write stuff that makes sense but satisfies few or none of the requirements of poetry. But I for one don't know how Gilbert ever put all of these elements together in such a delightful form as the passage given above.

It is always a temptation to lose oneself in an extended study of Gilbert's poetry. However, I have other by-paths to tread. I believe I have found another bottomless pit, a type of discovery which is familiar to anyone who has done much research. When I ask, "To what extent does the name of a character in Gilbert and Sullivan fit the person, or to what degree does the personality fit the name?" I realize I am opening the whole investigation to very lengthy interpretations. At this time I will not try to exhaust all the possibilities, but will offer some of my opinions.

Gilbert deliberately chose some names, I feel certain, because of the subtle associations they have in relation to their narrative

assignments. For example, the name of the Plaintiff in Trial by Jury signifies "little angel," yet Angelina herself is most opportunistic. In Pinafore and The Yeomen of the Guard, respectively, the malicious Dick Deadeye and Wilfred Shadbolt have most appropriate names. In Ruddigore Rose Maybud is indeed a delicate and innocent person--what else?--and the name of her lover, Robin Oakapple, with its connotation of sturdiness, is a pseudonym for Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd of the well-known criminal family, who also has a half-brother called Sir Richard Dauntless. Both the name and character of Don Alhambra del Bolero may amuse us considerably in The Gondoliers. But in my opinion Gilbert's masterpiece of onomatological satire occurs in the same opera, in the pusillanimous Duke of Plaza-Toro, the celebrated warrior who always leads his men into battle - from behind - and invariably leads them out of it, but who totally lacks that ferociously courageous quality associated with the beast for which he is named.

Gilbert had many acoustical tricks at his command, such as the repeating elements in Titipu and the subtly varying syllables of the name Pish-Tush. The remarkable thing to me is that so many of his names suggest ideas to us without always conveying specific meanings. Taken together, it seems to me that all the names in The Mikado pretty well make it impossible for an audience to be depressed during a performance of the opera. Ko-Ko has many light associations for us: his name hints that he is a nut or at least somewhat cuckoo (Professor William Nicolaisen calls him a "Ko-Ko-nut"), and it is obvious that he is not intended to be taken any more seriously than a delicious

beverage or a jar of pickles. His is the only authentic Japanese name in the opera, and the translation of the word is indeed "pickles." He is about as agreeable and accommodating an executioner as could be found - perhaps too much so for his own good. He causes no one any real trouble excepting Katisha who is bad news for everybody. True, Nanki-Poo is his rival, but there is nothing personal in Ko-Ko's attitude. He is as pleasant as hot chocolate and about as commercial. He is perfectly willing to compromise himself in order to preserve himself, and will not hesitate to distort or conceal the truth if necessary. Compared with the results of his own horrible execution, a life of comfort with a hideous hag like Katisha would have something to recommend it, I suppose.

The name of Katisha sounds like her personality which is repulsive, feline and ridiculous. Figuratively we join the rest of the cast in trying our best to ignore her, but find ourselves unable to escape her long talons entirely. Perhaps, like the liquid quinine which once was the standard cure for malaria, she is essential to the situation and its ultimate salvation. Certainly after indulging in our brief literary trip she makes sure that we return to reality.

The rest of the Mikado names are clearly designed to convey us to a never-never-land where we are led to believe we can get anything we want if somehow we can just manage to stay there long enough. As the name suggests, Pooh-Bah is the supreme minister of ridicule who will solemnly support any foolishness provided he is properly insulted with a bribe. Satirically he reduces many of our pompous

ambassadors and public officials to exactly what they are-- the well-fed establishment seeking to perpetuate its power with total unscrupulousness.

Pitti-Sing and Peep-Bo are reversal names, one of which comes straight out of Mother Goose. Perhaps heartless because their emotional existence calls for no profundity, yet they are never malicious unless it be in a just cause, such as the outwitting of Katisha. They both remind me of a more recent carefree but not unpleasant maiden--Betty Boop, a popular cartoon character of some twenty years ago.

Yum-Yum is almost the ideal young bride-to-be. Physically she justifies all the enthusiasm of her two ardent suitors - perhaps "appetizing" is the word that best describes her. Always emotionally loyal to her true love, she is deucedly practical at times. She agrees to marry her guardian not because she loves him, but because as her guardian Ko-Ko wouldn't let her marry Nanki-Poo anyway. Again, when she learns that she might have to be buried alive if her husband-to-be, Nanki-Poo, is executed, her eagerness for the match cools a bit--"It's such a stuffy death!" she says. Nor can she see any obstacle when she discovers her lover is the son of the Mikado who has run off to escape marrying the elderly ugly Katisha, and who has been masquerading in Titipu as a wandering second trombone. Besides, she is so beautiful! Who can dislike her, even when she is admiring herself? As she studies her mirror she confesses,

'Yes, I am indeed beautiful! Sometimes I sit

and wonder, in my artless Japanese way, why it is that I am so much more attractive than anybody else in the world. Can this be vanity? No! Nature is lovely and rejoices in her loveliness. I am a child of Nature, and take after my mother."

The person most deserving of our sympathy in The Mikado is the Prince. Head-over-heels in love with Yum-Yum, his emotions are buffeted about as if they scarcely existed. At one moment his suit is doomed, and the next his happiness is assured though limited--he can marry Yum-Yum if he agrees to be executed in a month. Finally, by default, he is summarily sent away with Yum-Yum. Virtue has its own reward, especially in make-believe circumstances. He is such a splendid person that we would like to associate with him constantly. But since he can never participate in our world of actuality, it is up to us to visit his whenever we can. Curiously enough, his name has the dubious honor of rhyming with that of the town he inhabits. He and his delightful colleagues are confined to the world of unreality - Nanki-Poo of Titipu - and that is pity, too!

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F O O T N O T E S

1. Deems Taylor, Ed., A Treasury of Gilbert & Sullivan (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), page 298, citing Hesketh Pearson's version of the story.
Martyn Green, Ed., Martyn Green's Treasury of Gilbert & Sullivan (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), footnote (80) on page 244.