Victorian Middle-Class Ideology in W. S. Gilbert’s Savoy Operas

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By

Erin T. Clemmer
Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2000

Director: Rosemary Jann, Professor
Department of English

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Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the memory of my father, whose endless encouragement and faith inspired me to begin this journey, and to my husband, whose unfailing love and support has carried me through to the end.
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ABSTRACT

VICTORIAN MIDDLE-CLASS IDEOLOGY IN W. S. GILBERT’S SAVOY OPERAS

Erin T. Clemmer, M.A.

George Mason University, 2010

Thesis Director: Dr. Rosemary Jann

This thesis explores Victorian middle-class ideology through the lens of W. S. Gilbert’s Savoy Operas, focusing on three general categories: intelligence and aptitude, morality and gentlemanliness, and domesticity and steadfast love. Gilbert’s Savoy Operas portray these three areas in such a way as to promote middle-class superiority over the upper and working classes, effectively flattering the middle classes and strengthening their perceptions of being the bulwark of society. Additionally, Gilbert’s middle-class characters display qualities of the emerging professional ideal, which promoted a system of reward based on personal merit, and directly challenged the upper classes and the privilege and power that they possessed solely through birth.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, literary critics wrote countless books and articles discussing the life and works of Victorian novelists and poets, yet comparatively little mention was made of the theatrical drama of the time, save of works from a few late-Victorian playwrights such as Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. However, recent research has begun to reveal the importance of long-neglected theatrical works to the study and understanding of Victorian culture. As Kerry Powell states,

The theatre of the Victorian and Edwardian period, once thought to be comparatively insignificant, even unworthy of attention, has today become one of the most fruitful areas of inquiry into the literature and culture of the age. . . . As we learn more about Victorian and Edwardian theatre, we enrich not only our understanding of a previously undervalued phase of theatre history and theatrical literature, but also of the complexly textured social world which engendered this drama and was in turn informed and articulated by it. (xiii)

Thus, the study of Victorian theatrical drama is a portal to a greater understanding of the complexities of that society, and until adequate scholarly attention is given to this genre our view of Victorian society will be limited.

This essay will focus on theatrical works from arguably the most popular dramatist
during the Victorian era: W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911), who wrote numerous plays, poems, stories, and critical essays, and whose most famous works are the fourteen comic operas created in collaboration with composer Arthur Sullivan that are collectively, though somewhat inaccurately, termed the *Savoy Operas*. Alan Fischler, one of the most prominent modern day critics of Gilbert, states that “In the century between the end of Sheridan’s playwriting career and the beginning of Shaw’s, W. S. Gilbert stands without close rival as the most successful and significant of all British dramatists” (1).

However successful Gilbert was as a dramatist, his works have been mostly excluded from modern literary canons and largely neglected in literary study. As Andrew Crowther explains in *Contradiction Contradicted*,

[Gilbert’s] most famous works, the librettos for such pieces as *The Mikado* and *The Pirates of Penzance*, are an integral part of Britain's national culture, and yet their importance in its cultural history is often neglected, reduced to a footnote to Oscar Wilde. It is as if the operas were thought too popular to deserve serious examination. (13)

Though the Savoy Operas were undeniably popular and entertaining, it would be a grave error to relegate them to casual entertainment, believing they do not merit scholarly examination. Crowther continues:

If we put to one side the easy nostalgia for chocolate-box Victorianism—and, just as importantly, the easy scorn for the faults of that age—we shall soon discover that these operas were an intelligent and far from naïve response to the concerns of the day, which are often still our concerns, and that Gilbert was skillfully using
popular forms to serious ends… (15)

While undoubtedly pillars of popular Victorian entertainment, the Savoy Operas reveal important tenets of Victorian class ideology that makes them well worthy of critical examination.

In this essay, I will be building upon the groundwork laid by distinguished social historians, such as Harold Perkin, J. F. C. Harrison, and Nancy Armstrong, who have identified characteristic beliefs and behaviors of the Victorian middle classes that formed their ideology and emphasized their distinction from both the upper and working classes. In the battle for social dominance, these middle-class tenets played an important role in strengthening the middle classes and in increasing their power and influence in society as a whole. I will focus on three general aspects of middle-class ideology which Gilbert seemed to indicate should determine merit and worth: intelligence and aptitude, morality and gentlemanliness, and domesticity and steadfast love. I will demonstrate how Gilbert’s Savoy Operas portray these three aspects in such a way as to promote middle-class superiority over the other classes, effectively flattering the middle classes and strengthening their perceptions of being the bulwark of society. Additionally, I will show how Gilbert’s middle-class characters display qualities of the emerging professional ideal, which promoted of a system of reward based on personal merit, and how this directly challenged the upper classes and the privilege and power that they possessed solely through birth.

Although Gilbert’s operas strongly promote middle-class superiority, they stop short of seriously challenging or threatening the existing social order of the day; this is
evident in the ways in which the social status quo is always maintained at the closing curtain. The privileged upper-class characters, who receive the brunt of Gilbert’s satire, are exposed and derided for their failings, but they are never punished, nor is their social status seriously threatened. They may be shown as unmeritorious and inferior, but they nevertheless continually retain higher social status than the more worthy middle-class characters. This combination of both class criticism and class reinforcement adds a certain amount of tension to the operas, as they mirror the tensions and complexities that existed within Victorian middle-class ideology.

The goals of this essay are to explore Victorian middle-class ideology through the lens of Gilbert’s operas and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social beliefs, biases, and expectations that largely defined the middle classes. Although predominately overlooked in literary criticism, when studied Gilbert’s dramatic works have received far more analysis for their distinctive style of comedy and satire than they have for their class ideology. This essay is an effort to address that deficiency.

Both Jane Stedman and Michael Ainger have written superb biographies of Gilbert, which have contributed invaluable background information for the arguments discussed in this essay. My textual source for Gilbert’s operas is Ian Bradley’s excellent compilation, *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*. I have largely drawn on the works of Alan Fischler, one of the preeminent critics on Gilbert, particularly his book, *Modified Rapture: Comedy in W. S. Gilbert’s Savoy Operas*, which provides valuable

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1 See Jane Stedman’s *W. S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and His Theatre* and Michael Ainger’s *Gilbert and Sullivan: A Dual Biography*. 
insight into Gilbert’s unique brand of comedy and his creative use of law and authority as a way of resolving conflict, which greatly appealed to the strict morality of his conservative middle-class audience. Andrew Crowther’s *Contradiction Contradicted: The Plays of W. S. Gilbert* provides an in-depth analysis of Gilbert’s major plays and, to a lesser extent, his operas, and focuses on Gilbert’s satire and his use of inversion to challenge existing assumptions. This essay will take Fischler’s and Crowther’s research a step further by focusing on how middle-class ideology is both revealed and reinforced through the operas’ satire and comedy, and by analyzing the ways in which the three main classes are portrayed through the representations, actions, and treatments of the characters.

This essay will generally follow the format that Fischler adopted in *Modified Rapture* of focusing on the “high Savoy operas,” the nine operas which were “written during the period of Gilbert’s greatest popularity, when his distinctive dramaturgy was most fully developed” (ix). However, the majority of my focus will be on seven of those operas that are most representative of Gilbert’s comedy, characters, and ideology: *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1880), *Patience* (1881), *Iolanthe* (1882), *The Mikado* (1885), *Ruddigore* (1887), and *The Gondoliers* (1889). Each of the following three chapters will focus on one major aspect of middle-class ideology and will demonstrate how Gilbert’s middle-class characters show undeniable superiority in this

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2 The “high Savoy operas” also include *Princess Ida* (1884) and *The Yeoman of the Guard* (1888). In order to make an essay of this somewhat limited nature manageable and more focused on Gilbert’s typical operas, I have found it necessary to largely omit *Princess Ida*, which was based on Tennyson’s poem, “The Princess,” and whose characters did not originate with Gilbert; as well as *Yeoman of the Guard*, which is one of Gilbert’s most unusual operas in its serious nature and greatly diminished satire.
particular area when compared with characters from both the upper and working classes. Chapter 2 will describe how Gilbert promoted a system of reward based on intelligence and aptitude, which challenged the still-common practice of reward being conferred on the basis of birth and wealth. In Chapter 3, I will show how the rising middle classes sought to elevate their social status by claiming the rank of gentlemen through their rigid morality, effectively challenging and transforming existing definitions of what constituted a gentleman. The final aspect of middle class ideology that I will discuss, in Chapter 4, is that of domesticity and steadfast love, revealing how Gilbert’s middle-class women far exceeded women from both the upper and working classes in their domestic management and in the strength and constancy of their affections. The cumulative result of these three chapters will be a greater understanding of the ways in which Gilbert’s Savoy Operas both reflect and reinforce middle-class ideals, and their effect in promoting middle-class superiority.
CHAPTER 2: INTELLIGENCE AND APTITUDE

Within Victorian society, perhaps no single factor determined social status more than a person’s birth, and this was particularly true for the overwhelming majority of the aristocracy who owed their power and prestige solely to their lineage. It is no surprise that Victorian middle classes—who were strong believers in “the virtues of self-help” (Harrison 271)—often attacked the custom of social advantages being conferred by birth rather than by merit; their literature and drama frequently and stereotypically portrayed members of the upper classes as idle, immoral, and unmeritorious of their advantages in contrast to the middle-class’s ideals of diligence, honesty, and integrity. As Harold Perkin states of the Victorians, “by the light of the productive [middle-class] entrepreneur, the leisured gentleman, the ideal citizen of the old society, was a useless parasite who contributed nothing to society and abused his indefensible wealth and power” (Origins 228). Gilbert’s Savoy Operas are filled with satire for and criticism against the so-called undeserving aristocracy, and many of the operas present a sharp critique on the concept of status-by-birth. With a few exceptions, Gilbert’s upper-class characters are predominately ignorant or inept and are far less talented than their middle-class counterparts.

By examining how Gilbert portrayed the upper-class characters who are the targets of his sharpest satire and criticism, we can see how Gilbert attacked the concept of
status-by-birth and promoted a meritocratic ideology which was exemplified largely through his middle-class characters. Gilbert’s upper-class characters are most often comic characters who are not only blind to their deficiencies but are extremely vocal about their inflated self-worth. No other class of characters as a whole receives such strong ridicule or is so blatantly exposed for their failings as is the upper class. However, although the upper-class characters are predominately portrayed as ignorant, inept, and generally useless, they are never punished or chastised for their faults. Their failings are exposed to inflate the middle-class audiences’ sense of self-worth; yet the upper-class characters are given much allowance, and their social status is never seriously threatened.

Gilbert’s satire of status-by-birth reflects the late-Victorians’ changing society and the increasing influence of a rapidly growing set of professionals who placed a strong emphasis on personal merit. Gilbert, himself, was an important example of this emerging segment of society, as he was one of the first Victorians to make playwriting profitable and to become famous for his works. His career fortuitously spanned a time when

… authorship at last became a profession in the material sense. It was no longer mainly a pastime for gentlemen like Dryden, Addison and Pope and a low-paid occupation for Grubb Street hacks like Defoe or Johnson, but a regular profession at which a Walter Scott, a Southey or a Cobbett could make a comfortable and sometimes a handsome living. (Perkin, Origins 255)

However, playwriting and the theater in general had been held for so long in contempt by the middle classes, and playwrights were notoriously unrecognized and underpaid. Few
could make a decent living in their profession, let alone achieve any significant acclaim; yet, as Fischler states,

[During the last half of the nineteenth century] dramatic changes … occurred in respectable society’s perception of the theater and in the dignity accorded to its playwrights. … Gilbert was recognized as having been at the forefront of this change, for he could proudly reflect after receiving his knighthood that he was, to date, “the only dramatic author upon whom, qua dramatic author, it has ever been conferred.” (4-5)

Although social and economic changes were undoubtedly contributing factors, most of Gilbert’s success was due to his own talent and merit. Gilbert had begun his literary career in a humble, low-paying job writing “theatre reviews and satirical essays” (Jenkins 99), and, solely through his own merit, had worked his way up to being one of the most popular dramatists in Victorian England. To Gilbert, talent and merit were among the most essential, ideal qualities in a profession, and in this he reflected the prevailing attitudes of the growing body of professionals of his day.

As Perkin explains of Victorian professional men, “Their ideal society was a functional one based on expertise and selection by merit. For them trained and qualified expertise rather than property, capital or labour, should be the chief determinant and justification of status and power in society” (Origins 258). Gilbert’s Savoy Operas strongly support these ideals of expertise and merit, which were serious threats to an aristocratic-based society that most often conferred power and privilege on the basis of
birth. Perkin states that the emerging body of professionals were somewhat successful in bringing about change within late-Victorian society in that they

… persuaded the State and the public to accept … social justification by service, the need for expertise and selection by merit in public administration, and the principles of happiness, progress and efficiency as the aims of government. Much of this was achieved at the practical level, by moralizing society in and through the process of social reform. (Origins 267)

In the Savoy Operas, Gilbert’s satire of unmeritorious characters is a forthright attempt to moralize society and to encourage social reform even through such a congenial venue as popular entertainment. According to Perkin, Victorian professionals like Gilbert sought to promote social reform by “infusing into [the three main classes] large doses of the professional ideal, and coaxing, goading or shaming their members into living up to them” (Origins 261). This is clearly seen in Gilbert’s treatment of the meritorious middle-class characters who are held up as the ideals and stand in stark contrast to the ineptitude and ignorance of the upper-class characters who have received their power solely because of their birth.

In attacking the practice of bestowing command and authority on the basis of birth, Gilbert primarily focused on two professions: the law and the military. In Gilbert's operas, the majority of legislators and officers come from the upper classes and are mostly inept in their professions. Often, a middle-class hero will be introduced into these professions and will prove that he has far more worth and talent than the upper-class characters who hold all of the power. However, the middle-class hero does not supersede
the upper-class authority figures, but instead exemplifies middle-class superiority and meritocratic ideals without causing major disruption to the existing class ideology.

Few, if any, institutions in Victorian society possessed such strongly segregated class delineations as the military. With little regard given to aptitude, officers in the army purchased their commissions and promotions, and officers in the navy used wealth and social influence to obtain rank and promotions; because of the material and social advantages needed for advancement, officers in both the army and navy were often members of the aristocracy or gentry. In contrast, enlisted soldiers and sailors hailed from the working classes, often from among the most poor and destitute (Peck 13). Because of the privileged birth and wealth that officers possessed, they were closely allied with the governing powers. As Heather Streets remarks in *Martial Races*,

Socially, British officers in the army maintained firm connections with those at the centres of political and cultural power. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century approximately half of the army’s officer corps hailed from Britain’s elite classes of aristocrats and landed gentry. As a result, these men shared family connections and social ties with their class peers who dominated British political and social life. Not surprisingly, then, officers frequently moved in the same social circles as political elites, and also used their connections to gain access to others. (118-9)

The practices of unmeritorious command and social hobnobbing is clearly seen—and satirized—in *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), Gilbert and Sullivan’s first major success.

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3 The sale of commissions, which was limited to the army, was abolished in 1881 under the Cardwell Reforms, led by Edward Cardwell, the British Secretary of State for War from 1868-1874. As Streets explains,
The *H.M.S. Pinafore* is commanded by well-to-do Captain Corcoran who draws Gilbert’s satire as he grovels to and curries the favor of Sir Joseph Porter, the First Lord of the Admiralty who pays a visit to the ship and condescendingly courts Captain Corcoran’s beautiful daughter, Josephine. Captain Corcoran’s wealth and high connections presumably led to his position as captain, which launched him and his daughter higher into the society of aristocrats and influential political leaders. Being immensely socially ambitious, Captain Corcoran adopts aristocratic affectations, reminds those around him that he is “related to a peer” (127), and falls just short of forcing Josephine to accept Sir Joseph’s suit. When he believes that Josephine has finally complied with his wishes, he joyfully exclaims, “At last my fond hopes are to be crowned. My only daughter is to be the bride of a Cabinet Minister. The prospect is Elysian.” (167).

Gilbert makes it obvious to his audience that Captain Corcoran is much more interested in social status and genteel manners than he is in maintaining the necessary discipline and order needed for effectively commanding a navy vessel. He treats his crew with inappropriate delicacy and leniency for being their commanding officer, as if acting under the assumption that social graces will ensure his crew’s obedience, respect, and loyalty:

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As a means of encouraging middle-class men to enlist as officers, in 1871 Cardwell abolished the purchase system by Royal Warrant (amidst loud protest in the House of Lords). In so doing, he and like-minded military reformers hoped to eliminate financial wealth as a prerequisite for holding high rank, and encourage instead promotion by merit and long service. (103) However, “the impact of these reforms was manifestly disappointing” (Streets 103). Because the military was deeply entrenched in its ways and slow to change, the role of wealth, social connections, and political influence still played a strong role in dictating a person’s military rank and promotion (Peck 16) during the time that Gilbert wrote the Savoy Operas, so that while certain reforms had been passed the underlying ideology was predominately unchanged.
CAPT. I do my best to satisfy you all—

[CREW]: And with you we’re quite content.

CAPT. You’re exceedingly polite,

And I think it only right

To return the compliment …

Bad language or abuse,

I never, never use,

Whatever the emergency;

Though “Bother it” I may

Occasionally say,

I never use a big, big D— (127-9)

Captain Corcoran’s lack of effective leadership is more clearly exposed when democratic ideals of freedom and equality are introduced to the sailors, as he is unable to restore order and control when his “kindly crew rebel” (155) against being under authority. He obviously does not possess the necessary talent and abilities needed for effective military command.

In *A Most Ingenious Paradox*, Gayden Wren argues that *H.M.S. Pinafore* is largely a satire of the practice of status-by-birth:

In an approach reminiscent of Swift, Gilbert does not explicitly state his own opinion that the Victorian idea of class distinctions by birth is absurd. Instead, he posits the contrary—such distinctions are natural and proper—and then carries that idea to its logical extreme, proving that the idea itself is ridiculous. (67)
Captain Corcoran is the captain of the *H.M.S. Pinafore* not because of merit, but because of his privileged birth and wealth which have enabled him to obtain full command of a navy vessel and its sailors. Even Sir Joseph Porter acknowledges this by telling Captain Corcoran, “That you are their captain is an accident of birth” (which later proves all too true) (139). Similarly, Ralph Rackstraw, though “the smartest lad in all the fleet” (123) who possesses tremendous aptitude in his nautical profession, is the lowest-ranking sailor (Able Seaman) without hope of advancement because of his working-class origin. When it is revealed in the final scene of the opera that Captain Corcoran and Ralph were accidently switched while infants, Ralph immediately takes command of the ship as its rightful captain (and presumably inherits Corcoran’s elaborate house and possessions), and Corcoran assumes the role of a humble, working-class sailor. The social transformation is instantaneous, complete, and comical for its absurdity. As Wren states, “The idea that a ship should be entrusted to someone based on birth alone is so silly and yet so logically consistent with the existing practice that real-life status-by-birth is implicitly discredited by the opera’s resolution” (68); yet at the same time, the ending is highly satisfactory because Ralph’s merit in his profession will make him an admirable and effective captain.

Although the practice of status-by-birth is discredited, there are nevertheless critical elements within the opera that support existing class ideology and create conflict and tension within Gilbert’s social satire. The very fact that the opera’s conflict is advantageously resolved when the true higher-class character (Ralph) takes command of the ship can be seen as support for higher-class power and authority. It is no coincidence
that Ralph is the brightest and most capable sailor and stands out among the true working-class sailors, making an immediate, favorable impression on Sir Joseph Porter. He also wins the heart and admiration of Josephine, Captain Corcoran’s daughter, who sees his worth and merit despite his humble position and wrestles to subdue her affections because of the social inappropriateness of such a match.

It is important to see that Ralph is an *exceptional* working-class sailor, rather than a true representative of his supposed class. Although the opera touts democratic ideals and class equality, such statements are ultimately undermined by an adherence to existing ideology. As Wren observes,

Such devices as long-held secrets, concealed identities, and switched babies were, of course, standard in Victorian melodrama. The discovery of long-lost noblemen hidden among the peasantry was also a staple, serving the Victorians’ desire to allow change yet keep things as they were: They could cheer a noblewoman’s right to marry a peasant, but it was much neater and less disruptive of social norms if, after ringing declarations of equality, it turned out that the peasant was himself a nobleman all along. (65)

The audience could support working-class Ralph’s protestations that he was “any man’s equal” (a common sentiment in Victorian nautical melodrama) and approve of his love for higher-class Josephine, but they were far more comfortable with the idea that his social status be elevated so that a marriage between him and Josephine would be socially acceptable. As Andrew Crowther states in his book *Contradiction Contradicted*, “*[H.M.S. Pinafore]* is] an opera that uses all of the conventions of melodrama and
ridicules them, but in the end it is difficult to see which has won out, the conventions or
the ridicule” (104). This illustrates the tension that existed in Victorian middle-class
ideology between their desire for social change and their desire to keep the status quo.

In The Gondoliers (1889), Gilbert satirizes a nobleman, the Duke of Plaza-Toro,
who achieved high military rank solely due to his noble birth and proved to be
completely inept in his military command. Although it has little to do with the main plot,
Gilbert included a lengthy song about the Duke of Plaza-Toro’s army career, which
functions both to expose the Duke’s failings and to criticize the British custom of military
command being conferred with little regard for merit. In his first scene, the Duke boasts
about his nobility—claiming to be related to ninety-five noble families (877)—and
demands excessive obeisance from anyone of lower rank. However, his demand for
respect and honor becomes comical as he exposes himself for being the indolent coward
that he is.

With true Gilbertian wit, the Duke, pompously speaking of himself in the third
person, informs his daughter, “My child, the Duke of Plaza-Toro does not follow
fashions—he leads them. He always leads everybody. When he was in the army he led
his regiment. He occasionally led them into action. He invariably led them out of it”
(881). He then proceeds with a song about his self-perceived military achievements, with
snide interjections from his wife and daughter who are not deluded by his claims of
prowess. Though presented in a self-flattering light, the Duke tells of how he failed to
adequately command and lead his regiment into battle, where they quickly gave up the
fight and retreated. However, the Duke is not abashed by this, for his talents of self-protection and self-preservation are unsurpassed:

When, to evade Destruction’s hand,

To hide they all proceeded,

No soldier in that gallant band

Hid half as well as he did.

He lay concealed throughout the war,

And so preserved his gore, O! …

The Duke of Plaza-Toro! (883)

The Duke’s accomplishments do not end there. He proudly boasts of how

When told that they would all be shot

Unless they left the service,

That hero hesitated not,

So marvelous his nerve is.

He sent his resignation in,

The first of all his corps, O! …

The Duke of Plaza-Toro! (883)

The Duke’s blindness to his deficiencies and his thinly-veiled egoism are consistent with qualities found in the majority of Gilbert’s upper-class characters, and such faults emphasize the folly of birth dictating authority without sufficient regard given to merit or character. The Duke gained command of an entire regiment because of his noble rank,
yet he clearly lacks the talent, intelligence, and bravery required for such a position of leadership and responsibility.

In *Patience* (1881), Gilbert presents another duke involved in the army; however, in this opera he takes a vastly different approach. Unlike the majority of Gilbert’s upper-class characters who seem ignorant of their lack of talent and intelligence, the Duke of Dunstable is well aware of his mediocrity and, indeed, revels in it. He is thoroughly fatigued of the continual deference and adulation that he receives as a duke and has entered the army (seen here as a fairly modest lieutenant⁴) to escape the wearying effects of nobility. As he explains to the Colonel,

DUKE. [I received such unending] flattery, adulation, and abject deference, carried to such a pitch that I began, at last, to think that man was born bent at an angle of forty-five degrees! Great Heavens, what is there to adulate in me! Am I particularly intelligent, or remarkably studious, or excruciatingly witty, or unusually accomplished, or exceptionally virtuous?

COL. You’re about as commonplace a young man as ever I saw.

ALL. You are!

DUKE. Exactly! That’s it exactly! That describes me to a T! Thank you all very much! Well, I couldn’t stand it any longer, so I joined this second-class cavalry regiment. In the Army, thought I, I shall be occasionally snubbed, perhaps even bullied, who knows? The thought was rapture, and here I am. (281)

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⁴ Although the sale of commissions had been abolished by the time that Gilbert wrote *Patience* (see previous note), this opera was set at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the purchase of commissions was still standard practice. The Duke of Dunstable would most likely have entered the army as an entry-level Coronet and eventually purchased a promotion to Lieutenant (Armatys).
Nowhere else in Gilbert’s operas do we see a nobleman described as a “commonplace young man,” and certainly nowhere else do we see a nobleman highly pleased with such a description.

The Duke of Dunstable is a unique example of a nobleman in the Savoy Operas: not for his mediocrity—for almost all other noblemen are portrayed so—but for his awareness of his limitations and his position of relatively little power. In this regard, the Duke of Dunstable is the antithesis of the Duke of Plaza-Toro. Both characters possess the same noble rank, both purchase commissions in the army, and both have a notable lack of military talent. However, the Duke of Dunstable is entirely without the self-centered egoism and demand for adulation that defines the Duke of Plaza-Toro; he is seen in a lower and more meritorious position of leadership as a modest lieutenant, while the Duke of Plaza-Toro is in a position of leadership that is clearly undeserved. In the description of the Duke of Plaza-Toro’s military command, we see a regiment in complete disarray, unable to function in any worthwhile capacity. In contrast, the regiment which the Duke of Dunstable joins as an almost entry-level officer appears by all accounts to be orderly, disciplined, and effectual. One may assume that if the Duke of Dunstable had achieved full command, then his regiment would have borne a close resemblance to that of the Duke of Plaza-Toro. As it is, order and effectiveness define the Duke of Dunstable’s regiment because it is governed predominately by merit, while chaos and cowardice defined the Duke of Plaza-Toro’s regiment because it was governed solely by birth.
It is important to note that the Duke of Dunstable is a very likeable aristocratic character, which is a rare occurrence in Gilbert’s operas. Although Gilbert does not villainize his upper-class characters, he freely satirizes them and gleefully exposes their faults. However, satire is largely absent in Gilbert’s treatment of the Duke of Dunstable, which is highly significant particularly when compared to Gilbert’s ample satire of the Duke of Plaza-Toro. The implication of these different treatments is that Gilbert is not attacking nobility per se, but rather the nobility’s assumption of authority and power based solely on birth with little or no regard given to merit. For Gilbert, an arrogant, self-inflated nobleman in an unmeritorious command is reason for satire, whereas a mediocre but honest nobleman in a more meritorious command is not.

Just as Gilbert satirized the power and authority that the upper classes had within the British military due to their wealth and privilege, he also satirized the undeserved power that aristocratic legislators possessed because of their lineage. In Iolanthe (1882), Gilbert’s hurls some of his sharpest satire at the concept of status-by-birth in his attack on the British House of Lords. This opera contains many references to the superiority of middle-class talent and intelligence over that of the upper classes, and such statements often come directly from the mouths of the aristocracy. In no other opera are the upper-class characters so uniformly inept and ineffective in their positions of leadership—nor so self-deludingly vocal in being so—as in Iolanthe.

Partway through Act I, the House of Peers and the Lord Chancellor make their first appearance in a fantastic display of pomp and splendor that testifies to their presumed importance. As Ian Bradley states,
The entrance of the peers in *Iolanthe* is undoubtedly the most spectacular scene in any of the Savoy Operas. Indeed it must rank alongside the triumphal march in Verdi’s *Aida* and the procession of apprentices and masters in the last act of Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger* as one of the greatest processional scenes in the entire world of opera. (372)

This tremendous procession was well-calculated by Gilbert to be impressive: the more dignified and important the peers were initially made to appear, the more comical their true exposure would be. Like the majority of Gilbert’s aristocratic characters, the peers are immensely egocentric, have an overly-inflated sense of self-importance, and demand excessive homage from the lower classes. In their processional song, they exclaim,

Bow, bow, ye lower middle classes!
Bow, bow, ye tradesmen, bow, ye masses!
Blow the trumpets, bang the brasses! . . .

We are peers of highest station,
Paragons of legislation,
Pillars of the British nation! (375)

However, Gilbert does not allow the peers to look impressive for very long, for immediately after their entrance he gives the Lord Chancellor a song that starts out earnestly enough in stating that “The Law is the true embodiment / Of everything that’s excellent” but quickly deteriorates into a self-indulgent song about “pretty young Wards in Chancery” (375). This frivolous theme continues as Lord Tolloller calls the assembly to order and to “the business of the day,” which the Lord Chancellor announces:
“Phyllis, who is a Ward of Court, has so powerfully affected your Lordships, that you have appealed to me in a body to give her to whichever one of you she may think proper to select, and a noble Lord has just gone to her cottage to request her immediate attendance” (377)  

Conflict soon erupts as that very day Phyllis is to be wed to Strephon, an Arcadian shepherd and the fairy Iolanthe’s son. However, since Phyllis is a Ward in Chancery, Strephon must first obtain the Lord Chancellor’s permission to marry her, which is emphatically refused. The selfish callousness that the Lord Chancellor and the House of Peers display in separating the two lovers and in their added deception brings the wrath of the fairies down upon the entire House. As punishment, the Fairy Queen uses her power to launch Strephon into Parliament where, as she informs the peers,

Every Bill and every measure
That may gratify his pleasure,
Though your fury it arouses,
Shall be passed by both your Houses! (407)

The Fairy Queen announces that Strephon will end the peers’ beloved shortened sessions on Fridays, and that they “shall sit, if he sees reason, / Through the grouse and salmon season” (407). The peers’ reactions of horror and dismay at these, and similar,

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5 Ian Bradley notes about the text: Gilbert seems to be a trifle uncertain about Phyllis’s exact station in life. First, in his original version of the Iolanthe libretto, we are told that she owns the farm on which Act I is set...That information is later cut out, as is the subsequent and rather conflicting intelligence that she is the daughter of a private stationed at the Wellington barracks. Next, Strephon informs us that she has both a grass-plot and a fish-pond, yet here we are told that she lives in a cottage. It is all rather confusing. (376)
pronouncements emphasizes their frivolity and adds to their image of ineptitude in their legislative duties.

After displaying the peers’ foolishness and general ineptitude in the first act, Gilbert spends the second act attacking their intelligence. Strephon, now the most powerful, unstoppable member of Parliament due to the Fairy Queen’s power, proposes a bill “to throw the Peerage open to Competitive Examination.” In response to this radical idea, Lord Mountararat, one of the preeminent lords in Parliament, rhetorically asks, “I don’t want to say a word against brains—I’ve a great respect for brains—I often wish I had some myself—but with a House of Peers composed exclusively of people of intellect, what’s to become of the House of Commons?” He then launches into a song, “When Britain Really Ruled the Waves,” that lauds the (supposed) historic inefficiency and ineptitude of the House of Peers and how Britain has been better off for it. As he claims,

… while the House of Peers withholds

Its legislative hand,

And noble statesmen do not itch

To interfere with matters which

They do not understand,

As bright will shine Great Britain’s rays

As in King George’s glorious days. (417)

It is noteworthy that this song is not about Parliament as a whole, but specifically about the House of Lords. The House of Commons with its partially middle-class membership escapes such derision, and one may assume that Gilbert, despite his occasional satire of
Parliament as a whole, had a higher regard for its competency and worth. By focusing his attack on the House of Lords and overlooking the House of Commons in *Iolanthe*, Gilbert singles out aristocratic legislators and makes them the sole target of his political satire.

Although Gilbert exposes both the ineptitude and the ignorance of the House of Lords, he nevertheless treats them with a great deal of indulgence. They are exposed, but not punished; they are mocked, but not disgraced. Before the final curtain, the entire House of Peers has been happily wed to the fairies. Lord Mountararat says to Lord Tolloller, “Well, now that the Peers are to be recruited entirely from persons of intelligence, I really don’t see what use we are, down here, do you, Tolloller?” to which Lord Tolloller responds, “None whatever.” Immediately, the entire House of Peers flies off with the beautiful fairies to “Fairyland” where “pleasures come in endless series” (445-6). Despite their obvious failings, the lords are given a happy ending.

In *Pirates of Penzance* (1879), which followed one year after the highly successful *H.M.S. Pinafore*, Gilbert places a middle-class hero in relief between two groups of upper and working-class characters and proves that this hero’s talent and worth are greater than that of the other classes’ characters. At the opening curtain, we see Frederic and a group of pirates celebrating the completion of Frederic’s indenture with them. Ruth, Frederic’s working-class nursery maid who has stayed with him throughout the years, explains how his indenture to the pirate band was the direct result of her inexcusable yet innocent mistake in confusing the word “pilot” with “pirate” (195), thus binding Frederic to the wrong nautical profession. Although the audience does not
discover until the closing curtain that the pirates are truly “noblemen who have gone wrong” (261), the revelation comes as no great surprise: Gilbert clues the audience by giving the pirates the same characteristics that he gives his other upper-class characters. The pirates are generally ignorant and inept in their profession—desirable though that may be—and only middle-class Frederic has the intelligence to understand why they “don’t seem to make piracy pay” (197). Frederic is the only middle-class character in the pirate band, and he is, by the Pirate King’s own admission, the best and most talented member of the group (195). Not only is Frederic the most competent, he is also the most conscientious and so leaves the pirate band the moment he is freed from his indenture. In this opening scene, we see middle-class Frederic as the only exemplary character among inept upper-class pirates and a bumbling working-class nursery maid.

This strong social trichotomy seen among the three classes of characters and Frederic’s superiority over the other two classes is further enhanced by the entrance of the police brigade in the early part of Act II. The police are clearly working-class characters, and, though well-meaning and good-hearted, they are clumsy, unimpressive men who do nothing to inspire fear or respect in the hearts of the pirates to whom they have been summoned by Frederic to defeat. As a brave, moral, upstanding middle-class hero, Frederic is elated at the opportunity to lead the police into action against the pirates:

Now for the pirates’ lair! Oh, joy unbounded!

Oh, sweet relief! Oh, rapture unexampled!

At last I may atone, in some slight measure,

For the repeated acts of theft and pillage
Which, at a sense of duty’s stern dictation,

I, circumstances victim, have been guilty. (237)

Although Frederic is bold, courageous, and eager to attack the pirates, the cowardly police are very much otherwise, confessing to the audience that they are “going to meet their fate / In a highly nervous state” (233). Just as Frederic stood out among the upper-class pirates for his intelligence and talent, he likewise stands out against the working-class police for his bravery and competency.

However, before Frederic has the chance to lead the police “to death and glory” (239), he is forcibly accosted by the Pirate King and Ruth who work upon his conscience and his resolute sense of duty to coerce him back into the pirate band on the grounds that he was apprenticed to the pirates until his twenty-first birthday, which, being on February 29, would not be reached for another sixty-three years. With a heavy heart, Frederic complies: “Well, you have appealed to my sense of duty, and my duty is only too clear. I abhor your infamous calling; I shudder at the thought that I have ever been mixed up with it; but duty is before all—at any price I will do my duty” (241). With that, Frederic returns to the pirate band, and the police “must do [their] best to capture these pirates alone” (249). Although Gilbert is clearly poking fun at Frederic’s overly keen sense of duty and his impeccable moral character—which were highly revered values to the middle classes—it is undeniable that Frederic is the most ideal male character within the opera. His qualities are mildly mocked, yet he nevertheless reinforces the perception of middle-class superiority.
As with the upper-class characters in Gilbert’s other operas, the upper-class pirates are never punished or chastised for their crimes but instead are exonerated solely because of their nobility. At the close of the play when the pirates are forced to yield to the police “in Queen Victoria’s name,” Major-General Stanley demands, “Away with them, and place them at the bar!” (261). The pirates have clearly done wrong and must be tried and punished by the courts for their crimes. However, Ruth quickly intervenes:

One moment! let me tell you who they are.

They are no members of the common throng;

They are all noblemen who have gone wrong! (261)

The revelation of the pirates’ true high social statuses immediately dispels any thoughts of justice or punishment. Major-General Stanley has an instant change of heart and exclaims,

No Englishman unmoved that statement hears,

Because, with all our faults, we love our House of Peers. …

I pray you, pardon me, ex-Pirate King,

Peers will be peers, and youth will have its fling.

Resume your ranks and legislative duties,

And take my daughters, all of whom are beauties. (261)

Not only do the pirates get off unpunished, but Major-General Stanley apologizes to them for even the thought of having them tried for their crimes. The prevailing attitude changes from justice to indulgence, for “peers will be peers.” The pirates are completely absolved and are given Major-General Stanley’s young, beautiful daughters in marriage.
As seen with the other operas, although the upper classes are greatly satirized for their faults, they are never punished but instead are given happy endings.

Gilbert’s derision for and satire of the upper classes serves a dual purpose: not only does it amuse Victorian middle-class audiences, it also inflates their sense of self-worth. Speaking of the Victorian dramatist H. J. Byron, who was a mentor to Gilbert, Jim Davis notes, “In demonstrating that a successful middle-class tradesman was as good as any haughty aristocrat Byron appealed directly to the complacency of the middle-class theatre-going public” (qtd. in Fischler 78). In the same way, Gilbert appealed to his middle-class audience by showing that their talent, intelligence, and abilities, which were the driving forces behind the Industrial Revolution were far greater than that of the upper classes.

While Gilbert had no qualms about deriding the aristocracy’s intelligence or questioning their inherent right to authority and control, he does not appear to have desired that they be superseded, even by the far more meritorious middle classes. No matter how inept or undeserving, nowhere in the Savoy Operas is a nobleman degraded or made subservient to the middle or working classes. As Crowther says of Iolanthe, “The opera is full of incisive satire at the expense of British political institutions, but one always feels that Gilbert has affection for the thing he condemns” (123). It is this practice of both condemning and supporting that adds complexity to the Savoy Operas and gives important insight into the tensions and contradictions that existed within Victorian middle-class ideology.
CHAPTER 3: MORALITY AND THE *GENTLEMAN*

To the middle-class Victorians, the concept of the *gentleman* was central to their evolving class identity and was a concept that infused much of their social discourse and literature. As Robin Gilmour writes in *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*,

… the idea of the gentleman carried some of the best hopes as well as the deepest contradictions of Victorian experience; behind the snobbery, the anxious debates about who did and did not qualify as a gentleman, the uneasy relationship to the aristocracy, there lies the struggle of a middle-class civilisation to define itself and its values, a process in which the novelists were intimately and sympathetically involved. (14)

The middle-classes’ struggles in creating a social identity and in defining their values as a social entity are evident throughout the Savoy Operas, and in these operas we see how Gilbert sought to promote the middle-classes’ claims to *gentlemanliness*, particularly through its moral qualifications. Gilbert’s operas also reveal aspects of the middle-classes’ “uneasy relationship to the aristocracy” and the contradictions that existed therein between their desire for acceptance and their desire for social prestige.

The definition of the term *gentleman* underwent great debate and transformation during this time of social upheaval, as the rapidly expanding middle classes challenged its
traditional qualifications in an attempt to be included within its scope. As Gilmour writes, “the rank of gentleman was the point of entry for those seeking to penetrate gentry society … it was a station which aspiring members of the middle classes could hope to penetrate and, to some extent, make over in their own image” (Idea 5). It was through the rank of the gentleman that the middle classes sought to make their claim upon society and to gain acceptance by the upper classes, effectively widening the gap between themselves and the working classes (Ferris 408).

Prior to the Victorian era, the idea of the gentleman functioned as a type of social pyramid, with the aristocracy forming its peak and the gentry and landed elite expanding down to its base. Because the qualifications of a gentleman incorporated the fluid gentry rather than being limited to the fixed aristocracy, the lower boundaries of qualification were somewhat vague and therefore open to interpretation and debate, which greatly increased during the Victorian era. Land ownership became a tool for social status— the “one sure passport to social consideration”— and many affluent middle-class men, such as Gilbert himself, purchased country estates to help secure their social status as gentlemen (Harrison 30).

If being a gentleman had been restricted to persons of high birth or land ownership, then it would have been difficult for many among the middle classes to have attained its status. However, there was a crucial element of morality that was intrinsic to being a gentleman, and it was this moral aspect that “made [the idea of the gentleman] accessible to reinterpretation and modernization” (Gilmour, Idea 5). Emphasizing the moral component over the birth and land qualifications gave the middle classes greater
leverage to influence who was included within its rank, and this moral element gradually became more foundational to its definition. As Fitzjames Stephen wrote in 1862, the word *gentleman* “implies the combination of a certain degree of social rank with a certain amount of the qualities which the possession of such rank ought to imply; but there is a constantly increasing disposition to insist more upon the moral and less upon the social element of the word” (qtd. in Gilmour, *Idea* 4-5).

In 1886, George H. Calvert wrote in his book, *The Gentleman*, that “gentlemanhood needs what all concomitants and constituents of civilization need,—a moral basis; without which basis civilization bears neither flowers nor fruit—nay, without which, civilization were not, and could not be” (106-107). With their belief in their unrivaled possession of this moral basis, the middle classes saw themselves as the bulwark of civilization and claimed the right to be designated as gentlemen.

Calvert describes gentlemanliness as something that is intrinsically internal and radiates outward through the genuine manners and temperament of a man:

The gentleman is built from within outward: for the thorough building there must lie ready stores of largeness and bounteousness: a man of small soul can only be a gentleman in a superficial sense: whatever station he may inherit, with whatever varnish of manners he may glisten, against one intensely selfish, gentlemanliness is closed: the genuine gentleman must possess a good degree of moral freedom; for only this can furnish the illumination to lead the footsteps up from the dark ways of the petty self: the gentleman robes manliness in courtesy.  (80)
In the Savoy Operas, the majority of Gilbert’s upper-class characters are depicted as not being true gentlemen; they are men of “small souls, “intensely selfish,” and mired in “the dark ways of the petty self.” Such attributes of a gentleman as Calvert describes are typically seen in Gilbert’s middle-class characters. They fit the mold of a gentleman in that:

The gentleman is never unduly familiar; takes no liberties; is chary of questions; is neither artificial nor affected; is as little obtrusive upon the mind or feelings of others as on their person; bears himself tenderly towards the weak and unprotected; is not arrogant, cannot be supercilious; can be self-denying without struggle; is not vain of his advantages, extrinsic or personal; habitually subordinates his lower to his higher self; is, in his best condition, electric with truth, buoyant with veracity. (155-6)

John Newman, another late-Victorian author, described a gentleman as having “a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life” (120) and that “It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain” (208). Although not without faults, Gilbert’s middle-class characters are largely defined by such qualities and are seen as true gentlemen.

However much the Victorian middle classes sought to emphasize the moral qualities of the gentleman, they did not wish to completely disregard its social qualities, for doing so would diminish its value in their estimation. As Gilmour explains,
The idea of the gentleman could never have fascinated the Victorians as it did if it had been limited by caste or by a strict science of heraldry, nor, on the other hand, if it had been a totally moralised concept, a mere synonym for the good man. It was the subtle and shifting balance between social and moral attributes that gave gentlemanliness its fascination. … it was not its susceptibility to moralisation alone which made the notion of the gentleman appealing to the Victorian middle classes. … A significant part of its appeal lay in the special position the gentleman occupied in the traditional social hierarchy, a position—or rank—which shared in the prestige of landed society while being, in important respects, distinct from the aristocracy itself. (Idea 4-5)

Behind their claims to moral status, what the Victorian middle classes craved was social status and acceptance by the upper classes; or, as Fischler states, “the ruling passion of the middle class became the lust for respectability” (13). While it was the moral component of gentlemanliness that opened the door to their achieving such status, it was predominately its social component and its closer proximity to the aristocracy that gave the status tremendous appeal.

Although the middle-class Victorians sought respectability and acceptance from the upper classes, they nevertheless maintained a somewhat conflicting desire to be distinct and set apart from them. They coveted the prestige that the upper classes possessed, and felt that though they could never fully attain such a position in society because of their lack of birth they were more qualified for such prestige through their own merit, and, in that respect, were superior to the upper classes, though not wishing to
displace them. Such sentiments run powerfully throughout the Savoy Operas and were no doubt strongly felt by both Gilbert and his audience. As Fischler states,

Gilbert himself was heir to the “fundamental melodramatic belief … that virtue is associated with lowliness and crime with rank, a supposition highly satisfying to the middle-class,” and many among his targeted audience shared “the contempt for the ‘un-working’ aristocrat which the bourgeois invariably feels.” Even the later Victorian middle class, wishing though they did to blend in with the aristocracy, would have quietly continued to nurture a sense of moral superiority, knowing that they had not been undeservingly born to an exalted station but rather had earned their social dignity. (85)

Just as the middle classes felt themselves to be superior to both the upper and working classes in terms of intelligence and merit, they also claimed superiority through their strong morality. Throughout the Savoy Operas, Gilbert promotes a type of status-by-morality, where the protagonists are predominately middle-class and are morally superior to the upper-class characters, the vast majority of whom are relatively immoral (without being true villains) and become objects of satire.

Perhaps the most greatly satirized character in all of the Savoy Operas is Reginald Bunthorne, the “aesthetic sham” in Patience. Though it is not explicitly stated, Bunthorne is undoubtedly of the aristocracy, as the opera’s first act is set at “Castle Bunthorne” and as Bunthorne has the luxury of moping about all day like the idle rich. He presumably does not work for his income, which is subtly critiqued upon during one exchange with Patience:

34
BUN. Tell me, girl, do you ever yearn?

PA. (misunderstands him). I earn my living.

BUN. (impatiently) No, no! Do you know what it is to be heart-hungry?

It is Patience, the embodiment of virtue and common sense, who earns her living as a dairy maid, while Bunthorne idly spends his days seeking admiration from the ladies or sitting in Patience’s dairy “eating fresh butter with a tablespoon” (i.e., the fruits of her labor) (273). Such conduct was contrary to the middle-class perceptions of gentlemanliness. As John Ruskin once stated, “Gentleman have to learn that it is no part of their duty or privilege to live on other people’s toil” (Works 344).

The main plot of Patience initially centered upon two rival clergymen, but Gilbert changed these characters into two aesthetic poets, Bunthorne (“a Fleshly Poet”) and Grosvenor (“an Idyllic Poet”), out of fear that his original plot conception would offend his morally sensitive middle-class audience. As Fischler states,

Clearly, Gilbert was not concerned that audiences who might have been offended by hypocrites in clerical clothing would object to them in aristocratic guise. On the contrary, he must have known that his picture of the aesthete who neither sows nor reaps but merely gushes and mopes would correspond quite satisfactorily to the bourgeois conception of the aristocratic idler. (86)

To further this stereotype, Bunthorne is depicted not only as idle and self-centered, but also as dishonest and hypocritical. He is initially seen as a consummate aesthete given to pretentious displays of wild, poetic fervor and followed by an adoring crowd of “young and wealthy” aristocratic ladies from important families; yet when alone, he confides to
the audience that he is an “aesthetic sham” and that his “mediaevalism’s affectation, / [is]
born of a morbid love of admiration” (292-3). His immoral behavior is also seen in his
bullying of his honest rival, Archibald Grosvenor, and in his contempt and harsh manner
towards the aging, unattractive Lady Jane who alone remains with him after the other
ladies abandon him for Grosvenor.

Although he is upper class and therefore entitled by birth to be called a
gentleman, Bunthorne clearly does not possess the moral qualities of such a title. As
Calvert says, “A man of low sentiments will betray ignobility, however tutored he may
have been in polished schools; nor will the proudest pedigree insure the wearer of a ducal
coronet against coarseness and foulness of nature and their infallible outward
manifestations” (112). Because of his moral failings, the aristocratic Bunthorne is not
seen as a true gentleman and is consistently satirized and exposed throughout the opera
for the selfish hypocrite that he is, becoming one of Gilbert’s most disagreeable
characters (Wren 113). It is his middle-class rival, the idyllic poet Grosvenor, who far
exceeds him in qualities of gentlemanliness and wins not only the heart and hand of the
beautiful heroine, Patience, but also the admiration and respect of the audience.

Despite being somewhat satirized by Gilbert for his aestheticism and idyllic
poetry, Grosvenor’s status as a gentleman is firmly fixed throughout the opera. He is
presumably a member of the middle classes, though his social rank is not explicitly
stated. While reintroducing himself to Patience after being away for fifteen years, he tells
her that he is “a man of property,” yet immediately qualifies that by saying, “Money I
despise it, / Many people prize it” (301). These lines echo the tension that existed within
the Victorian middle classes between their desire for wealth and property (the passport to social acceptance) and their desire to be free from greed and morally blameless. With these few introductory lines, Grosvenor claims that he possesses both the material and moral qualities of a gentleman.

Though possessing both of these qualities, it is Grosvenor’s moral attributes that are of primary importance and function as a foil to Bunthorne. Both poets have property and at least a certain degree of wealth, so it is their moral qualities that are brought into relief and reveal whether or not they are true gentlemen by its middle-class definition (Ferris 414). While Bunthorne’s aestheticism is merely a ploy for gaining admiration from the ladies, Grosvenor claims to have selfless motivations:

Grosvenor also tells Bunthorne, “[The attentions of the young ladies] are the plague of my life. … I assure you, if you could only suggest some means whereby, consistently with my duty to society, I could escape these inconvenient attentions, you would earn my everlasting gratitude” (343). While Gilbert is clearly poking fun at Grosvenor and his misguided sense of responsibility, it is also evident that Grosvenor’s aestheticism is not for his own selfish gain as is Bunthorne’s, but is motivated by a high sense of duty, a quality dear to the hearts of the Victorian middle classes. Additionally, Grosvenor
displays the middle-class ideals of hard work and personal merit. Like Patience who “earns her living” (and unlike Bunthorne who does not earn his living), Grosvenor devotes significant time and effort to fulfilling his perceived obligations: “Ladies, I am sorry to appear ungallant, but this is Saturday, and you have been following me about ever since Monday. I should like the usual half-holiday. I shall take it as a personal favour if you will kindly allow me to close early to-day” (323). Grosvenor is well aware that he has been faithfully discharging his duties as a “trustee of Beauty” and so has earned the right to politely request “the usual half-holiday.” His language is unpretentious and couched in middle-class terms of duty, work, and merit, which contrasts with Bunthorne’s educated and refined, but self-indulgent, manner of speech.

Bunthorne’s and Grosvenor’s poems reflect their authors’ social statuses and moral natures. Bunthorne’s first poem that he reads to the adoring ladies is a “wild, weird, fleshly thing” that is filled with refined vocabulary and Latin terms, beginning thus: “What time the poet hath hymned / The writhing maid, lithe-limbed, / Quivering on amaranthine asphodel.” It is an egocentric, obfuscated poem, which Bunthorne claims is “the wail of the poet’s heart on discovering that everything is commonplace.” His aristocratic female admirers declare it to be “purely fragrant” and “earnestly precious,” and only lower-class Patience sees it clearly for the “nonsense” that it is, though at the same time such wild passion and sensuality frighten her modest heart (287).

Conversely, Grosvenor’s idyllic poetry is nursery-like in its simple rhymes and conveys a strong moral message—“a pure and simple thing, a very daisy—a babe might understand it” (321). His first poem that he reads aloud begins, “Gentle Jane was as good
as gold / She always did as she was told” and concludes with an appropriate reward for Jane’s goodness: “when she grew up she was given in marriage / To a first-class earl who keeps his carriage.” Grosvenor then remarks to the ladies, “I believe I am right in saying that there is not one word in that decalet which is calculated to bring the blush of shame to the cheek of modesty” (323) Though virtuous Patience is not present for these recitations, one can well imagine that she would have reacted far more favorably than she did to Bunthorne’s “wild, weird, fleshly” poem. At the insistence of the ladies, Grosvenor recites another one of his poems, this one about a wicked boy named Tom who tormented his family and “the consequence was he was lost totally / And married a girl in the corps de bally” (323). Unlike Bunthorne’s, Grosvenor’s poetry is simple, unpretentious, and morally faultless, with the good duly rewarded and the bad duly punished. Although Grosvenor’s poetry is overly-simplistic to the point of being almost absurd, it is presented with such honesty and sincerity that his character and his status as a gentleman are not threatened by any satirical statement that Gilbert may be making about idyllic poetry.

It is important to note the rewards and punishments for the characters in Grosvenor’s poems: Jane, the model of morality, is rewarded with high social status through marriage to an earl, while Tom, the model of immorality, is punished by marrying a low-class ballet dancer which would have destroyed his respectability and social standing (“he was lost totally”). These poems exemplify the Victorian middle-classes’ desire for status-by-morality, and the opinion (quietly held, if not directly stated)
that if moral distinction is obtained then social distinction should be conferred. As Fischler states,

Actuated by a desire to prove to the world that their new status had been achieved as much by means of moral desert as sharp business practice, the middle class became more demonstratively, rigidly, and self-denyingly obedient to written and unwritten social and civic codes of behavior … than any other segment of English society. (13)

In these simple poems, we see the preeminence that morals and manners take over birth or familial status in the minds of Gilbert and the middle-class Victorians. Jane is a gentlewoman because of her moral excellence, and for that she is given the social status that she deserves. Tom is not a gentleman, and for that he appropriately loses any social status that he may have had through birth. Thus, social status is (ideally) the natural outcome of moral merit, and both of these qualities make up gentlemanliness.

While Gilbert is undeniably satirizing both “fleshly” and “idyllic” poetry in the characters of Bunthorne and Grosvenor—and most likely both the carnality of the aesthetic movement and the prudishness of Victorian middle-class morality—the personal attributes of these poets deserve analysis apart from Gilbert’s satire. Gilbert may be saying that “fleshly” and “idyllic” poetry are both absurd; yet, he clearly depicts Grosvenor in a far more favorable light than Bunthorne and rewards him with love and a happy marriage to the beautiful, well-respected heroine. In Gilbert’s—and no doubt in his audiences’ eyes—middle-class Grosvenor is a gentleman, and upper-class Bunthorne is not.
What Calvert states of a man who attempts to be a gentleman merely through external qualities can well apply to Bunthorne:

There needs no wide experience to learn, that a man, malleable and clever, with histrionic gifts, can put on good manners, and wear them with an air so original, that others than the dull-witted will be taken captive, not perceiving that they are imitative and cuticular. A man of this stamp plays his part well; but he is a social actor, not a gentleman. Nay more; in so far as through mannerliness he deceives, and compasses selfish ends, that are at times to others injurious or ruinous, he is more hateful than the ruder knave, who has not the art to get currency for his gilded brass. (115-6)

Bunthorne, with his “histrionic gifts” and poetic affectations, is completely motivated by selfishness and causes a great deal of pain to those around him: his treatment of both Lady Jane and Grosvenor is harsh and cruel, his deceptions seduce the (admittedly inconstant) ladies into leaving the soldiers who love them and to whom they are engaged, and he frequently frightens modest Patience with his unwanted, forceful advances. He is a detriment to his community and most certainly not a gentleman.

Martyn Green, a leading actor with the D’Oyly Carte company in the early twentieth century, describes an incident that occurred when he was playing the role of Bunthorne. During one rehearsal, his stage manager requested that he tone down his theatrics of this “poseur-charlatan,” reminding him that Bunthorne is a gentleman. Green complied and was careful to be a thorough gentleman in all respects, even throughout the satirical songs. Later, this same director confronted him, “‘Mr. Green, I am not seeing
anything of Bunthorne. There must be more flamboyancy, more of the poseur, of the fraud!” As Green explains,

That I had been playing the role on stage in this manner for some time seemed to have escaped his notice. I said, “But you’ve already told me that Bunthorne is a gentleman! Surely no gentleman would behave that way…?”

I thought for a moment he would explode. Then: “Of course he’s a gentleman,” he said. “Of course he’s a gentleman, but—er—only financially!”

And between you and me, I don’t think Gilbert could have come up with a better answer. (214)

This anecdote illustrates the material and outward characteristics of a gentleman that Bunthorne possesses, yet his obvious moral failings which ultimately disqualify him as a true gentleman.

Although Grosvenor is mildly mocked and satirized for his overly simplistic poetry and stringent morality, there is a certain honesty and integrity about him that ensures his status as a gentleman. As Calvert states,

We will prize good manners at their real worth, which is high, when they are truthful, when they faithfully represent what the heart is and wills. … There is nothing hypocritical about the genuine gentleman, and the heartiest would rather have his outward mien below than above his interior self, and under no circumstances other than simple … the gentleman is known by his manners, and this recognition is a homage; for it implies, that in his bearing there is neither
effort nor artifice, and that his manners are but the polish of a fine grain, not a varnish to make the grain seem finer than it is, or to disguise a coarse. (115-6)

Grosvenor is at all times polite and courteous, even when pushed to the limits by his relentless female admirers. He consistently demonstrates that he is generous, and also that he is capable of great sacrifice, as seen when he releases Patience from their engagement when she (misguidedly) deems it necessary. Though not an overly intelligent man, there is “nothing hypocritical” about him, and his delight in the final scene when he exchanges his aesthetic garb for simple yet respectable clothes shows his desire for an outward appearance that is consistent with his inner self. In short, Grosvenor’s middle-class qualities of honesty, integrity, and morality cause him to be the most ideal male character and ensure his social status as a true gentleman.

Although the concept of status-by-morality permeates Patience and Gilbert’s other Savoy Operas, this ideal is tempered by a strong degree of leniency for the upper classes and their supposed faults, as upper-class characters are rarely punished at all, particularly not to the degree of their offenses. Though Bunthorne may deceive all those around him, bully his rival, and hurl contempt upon a faithful but aging spinster, his worst punishment is being the only person to be denied marriage at the closing curtain—many far more deserving working-class characters, such as Ruth in Pirates of Penzance, are given a similar fate. Bunthorne is spared the public humiliation and disgrace that he deserves, and instead sings, “Single I must live and die – / I shall have to be contented / With a tulip, or lily” as he “takes a lily from button-hole and gazes affectionately at it” (353). Though the closing chorus proclaims, “Each of us will wed the other, / Nobody be
Bunthorne’s Bride” and there is satisfaction in such pronouncement, Bunthorne suffers no serious disgrace nor loss of social status at the closing curtain despite his selfish behavior, his hypocrisy, his deceptions, and the pain that he has caused the other characters. Being upper-class, he is allowed to preserve his social status and respectability despite his immoral behavior—an allowance that Gilbert almost always gives his undeserving upper-class characters.

The Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro in *The Gondoliers* are also excellent examples of Gilbert’s immoral yet leniently treated upper-class characters. The Duke is a vain, cowardly man, utterly inept in his positions of leadership and completely consumed with his own social importance and appearance. The Duchess is scarcely any better, being depicted as a domineering, egocentric wife. When we first see the Duke and Duchess, they are impoverished, as seen in this scene in Act I when they reveal to their daughter, Casilda, that she had been secretly wed in infancy to the King of Barataria:

CAS. I, the Queen of Barataria! But I’ve nothing to wear! We are practically penniless!

DUKE. That point has not escaped me. Although I am unhappily in straitened circumstances at present, my social influence is something enormous; and a Company, to be called the Duke of Plaza-Toro, Limited, is in course of formation to work me. An influential directorate has been secured, and I shall myself join the Board after allotment.

By the second act, the Duke and Duchess have become quite affluent, “dressed with the utmost magnificence” (943) and arriving with the pomp and splendor that they
regrettably lacked in their Act I entrance. They soon reveal to the audience that their newly-acquired wealth has been dishonorably gained, as they sing about the various ways in which they have scammed unsuspecting commoners and exploited their noble rank through their new corporation, The Duke of Plaza-Toro, LLC:

   BOTH. In short, if you’d kindle
   
   The spark of a swindle,
   
   Lure simpletons into your clutches—
   
   Yes; into your clutches.
   
   Or hoodwink a debtor,
   
   You cannot do better
   
   DUCH. Than trot out a Duke or a Duchess—
   
   DUKE. A Duke or a Duchess! (955)

Such confessions are made with complete innocence, as if they are unaware of any wrongdoing, which not only exposes their true character but adds to the comedic effect. As Crowther explains, “[Gilbert’s] comic theory depended on his characters saying in all innocence the things that laid bare their character to the audience: they revealed their iniquities by trying to conceal them” (107).

Although the Duke and Duchess are gentlefolk by birth, they clearly lack the moral qualities of such a title and are satirized for their dishonesty and greed. As Fischler states,

… striking evidence of Gilbert’s intention to flatter the bourgeoisie at the aristocracy’s expense is the high Savoy operas’ displacement of the greed motive
inasmuch as greed occurs at all in Gilbert’s mature librettos, it does so exclusively in his aristocratic characters. (87)

Just as Bunthorne sat in Patience’s dairy consuming the fruits of her labor, so do these greedy aristocrats prey upon the hard-earned profits of the middle and working classes, particularly those who are eager to advance their businesses through obtaining aristocratic patronage. The Duke and Duchess charge fees to “clumsy dressmakers” and tailors for permission to be claimed as their customers. Morality is routinely sacrificed for monetary gain, as the Duke states:

I sit, by selection,

Upon the direction

Of several Companies bubble…

As soon as they’re floated

I’m freely bank-noted—

I’m pretty well paid for my trouble. (953)

The Duchess has her share of moral indiscretion as she claims (presumably for compensation):

I present any lady

Whose conduct is shady

Or smacking of doubtful propriety …

When Virtue would quash her,

I take and whitewash her,

And launch her in first-rate society. (951)
The Duke and Duchess, as with others of Gilbert’s upper-class characters, are willing to take bribes, sell favors, and rent out social appearances if it brings them financial gain, for “in the high Savoy operas, aristocratic greed merges with dishonesty” (Fischler 88, Wren 170).

Gilbert’s method for exposing such immoral upper-class characters is to challenge their status as gentlemen (or gentlewomen). Though they may be gentlemen by birth, they are clearly not true gentlemen by moral merit and are thus satirized. Gilmour states that during the Victorian era

… the idea of the gentleman becomes a reforming concept, a middle-class call to seriousness which challenged the frivolity of fashionable life and reminded the aristocracy of the responsibilities inherent in their privileges. … [It] is on the side of decency, the values of family life, social responsibility, the true respectability of innate worth as opposed to the sham respectability of fashionable clothes. (Idea 11)

This “sham respectability of fashionable clothes” is what Gilbert attempts to strip away throughout his operas, though perhaps much of his motivation is to flatter his middle-class patrons and appeal to their sense of superiority. Despite his necessity to cater to his audience, Gilbert had a passion for speaking bluntly and, in both real life and in his plays, “gleefully unmasked the pretensions of the world around him” (Jenkins 99).

The imagery of clothing is a common theme for Gilbert’s dishonest upper-class characters which reveals their superficiality and moral deficiencies in being concerned
only with external appearances. Calvert describes such preoccupation with fashion and appearance as a type of vulgarity and inconsistent with the qualities of a true gentleman:

… fashion dealing with perishable outsides, striving ever with a restless multitudinous effort to make appearance do the work of substance, becomes the parent of vulgarities. … The opposite of beauty is ugliness; but neither is ugliness of itself vulgar, nor he who is content with it. But when to a deficient sense of the beautiful is joined the pretensions to possess it, there is a beginning of vulgarity, which blows out into full grossness when there follows a self-sufficient vainglorious display of the pretension. A man is vulgar, not because he has no sense of beauty in conduct or bearing, but because, not having any, he wishes ambitiously or ostentatiously to seem to have. Vulgarity thus consists in a pretentious, obtuse conceit. (133)

In many of Gilbert’s upper-class characters, we see strong displays of ostentatiousness and an “effort to make [fashionable] appearance do the work of substance.” Bunthorne and Grosvenor are both characterized by their elaborate aesthetic garb, but when Grosvenor is released to become an “every-day young man,” he is transformed into a common middle-class man with “his hair cut. . .dressed in an ordinary suit of dittoes and a pot hat” (349), while vain, hypocritical Bunthorne persists in his artificial aesthetic style, even adopting a lily (à la Oscar Wilde) at the closing curtain. Similarly, the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro are preoccupied with clothing and appearance, and their daughter, Casilda, protests that she has nothing to wear when she is informed that she is the Queen of Barataria, as if fashionable clothing were of primary importance in such a
role of power and responsibility. When the Duke and Duchess reappear in Act II
“dressed with the utmost magnificence” (943), the audience soon learns that their
excessive display of fashionable attire and wealth has been dishonestly gained through
his greedy corporate practices. Casilda remarks, “My only hope is that when my husband
sees what a shady family he has married into he will repudiate the contract altogether” to
which the Duke replies, “Shady? A nobleman shady, who is blazing in the lustre of
unaccustomed pocket-money?” (949). Like the emperor and his new clothes, the Duke
may believe that he leads fashions and is admired by all, but his audience (and daughter)
sees the naked truth beneath the sham.

Despite the ways in which the Duke and Duchess are satirized and exposed to the
audience, their dignity remains intact throughout the opera, and they are spared any sort
of punishment for their dishonesty. The worst that they experience is perhaps some slight
embarrassment upon learning that their hired servant, Luiz, whom they frequently
derided, is the true King of Barataria and consequently their son-in-law. However, upon
assuming the throne, Luiz does not castigate them for their harsh behavior towards him
while he was their servant, but takes the mindset of the closing chorus that sings to him,
“The past is dead, and you gain your own” (967). He assumes his rightful place as king,
and all prior offenses are immediately forgotten, particularly those offenses given by
upper-class characters. Instead of receiving what they deserve, the avaricious Duke and
Duchess are rewarded with seeing their daughter happily married and Queen of Barataria.
In fact, their position at the end of the opera is far more favorable than it was at the
beginning, for they are parents of the queen and still possess their dishonest profits.

49
Like the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro, Pooh-Bah in *The Mikado* is a gentleman of high birth who exploits his nobility for financial gain, and he has no qualms about selling state secrets or any other information that may bring a profit. His greed has led him to assume conflicting positions of leadership which he could not possibly adequately discharge, though he does not care in the slightest about doing so. As Pooh-Bah explains in such a self-exalting way:

POOH. When all the great officers of State resigned in a body, because they were too proud to serve under an ex-tailor, did I not unhesitatingly accept all their posts at once?

PISH. And the salaries attached to them? You did.

POOH. It is consequently my degrading duty to serve this upstart as First Lord of the Treasury, Lord Chief Justice, Commander-in-Chief, Lord High Admiral, Master of the Buckhounds, Groom of the Back Stairs, Archbishop of Titipu, and Lord Mayor, both acting and elect, all rolled into one. And at a salary! A Pooh-Bah paid for his services! I a salaried minion! But I do it! It revolts me, but I do it! (567)

Pooh-Bah calls bribes—which he eagerly takes after a calculated moment of hesitation—"insults" and claims that his motivation for taking money is merely to mortify his immense pride. However, the protestations that he gives over being "paid for his services" are merely a thin veil to hide his greed—a veil which the audience and other characters clearly see through. Like Bunthorne and the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro,
Pooh-Bah’s outward adornment of respectability does not fool the audience for a moment.

Clothing functions as an important theme with Pooh-Bah as well. Though Gilbert gives little detail about his costume, it is undoubtedly quite grand as Nanki-Poo, the emperor’s son, is instantly able to discern that Pooh-Bah is “a nobleman of the highest rank” (567). Additionally, in one scene with Ko-Ko and Pitti-Sing, one of the three young maids, Pooh Bah is described thusly:

PITTI. (who has been examining POOH-BAH). I beg your pardon, but what is this? Customer come to try on?

KO. That is a Tremendous Swell.

PITTI. Oh, it’s alive. (She starts back in alarm.)

Ian Bradley notes that “The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘swell’ in its colloquial sense as ‘a fashionably or stylishly dressed person; hence, a person of good social position, a highly distinguished person’” (580). Pooh-Bah’s elaborate external appearance attempts to mark him as a man of great importance and social status, yet this merely superficial display without internal refinement is, in Calvert’s words, vulgar and ungentlemanly. The great irony is that Pooh-Bah makes his greedy profits at the hand of Ko-Ko, the lower middle-class ex-tailor (i.e., a maker of fashionable clothing) whom nobody else will serve. It is Ko-Ko the ex-tailor who has given Pooh-Bah these numerous positions of authority (when nobody else would take them) that serve as outer trappings and inadequately attempt to cover Pooh-Bah’s inner greed and corruption.
Through such superficial, dishonest behavior, Pooh-Bah proves that although he is born a gentleman, he is not a gentleman in the middle-class sense of the word as he does not possess the moral qualities of such a title. Gilmour states:

… the gentleman model … provided a focus for the moralisation of traditional society. Reformers could develop both the potential for ‘gentleness’ and ‘manliness’ in the concept: the first in the civilisation of domestic life, the second in promoting an ideal of conduct for young men which was decent, generous, open, of the world but not worldly, and brave without the recklessness and licentiousness of aristocracy. (Victorian Period 20)

Pooh-Bah is, in effect, a model of the aristocratic non-gentleman as determined by the middle classes. He lacks gentility in the “civilisation of domestic life” which is seen in his incivility toward Yum-Yum and the two other young ladies: “Go away, little girls. Can’t talk to little girls like you. Go away” (581). He has no interest in, or respect for, Victorian values of marriage and domestic life. Though Pooh-Bah may behave decently towards those whom he deigns as his equals (who are very few), he lacks the previously-mentioned gentlemanly qualities of manliness: he is greedy and miserly, secretive unless it pays to be more open, immensely worldly, and cowardly though he may claim to

… greatly pine

To brightly shine,

And take the line

Of a hero fine … (589)
In Pooh-Bah, as in many of Gilbert’s upper-class characters, we see a middle-class critique upon the idea that being a gentleman is something that is achieved predominately through birth and wealth, rather than through character and moral excellence. Such characters as these expose upper-class immorality, while at the same time reinforcing middle-class moral superiority.

However, such criticism is almost effaced by the opera’s ending. Like the other dishonest, upper-class characters, Pooh-Bah remains unreformed and unpunished at the closing curtain. Although his sham respectability has been stripped away in the eyes of the audience, the prevailing sentiment is one of amusement and indulgence, as overly permissive parents may have towards their spoiled, ill-behaved child. As Jenkins notes, “Gilbert’s comedy, however direct and critical, strengthens the values it seems to attack” (129). Gilbert may deride these upper-class characters and expose their pretentions of respectability, but little effort is made to punish or correct their failings, effectively reinforcing their immoral behavior. Though their entitlement to the rank of gentleman is challenged, it is never seriously threatened and remains intact at the closing curtain.
CHAPTER 4: DOMESTICITY AND STEADFAST LOVE

Within middle-class Victorian society, domestic life was a dominant theme as the middle classes placed tremendous value on both the physical and emotional aspects of the home. In a lecture given in 1864, John Ruskin characterized the immense expectations that were given to the concept of home in middle-class Victorian society:

But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love,—so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light,—shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea;—so far it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home. (Sesame 59)

Few things were more sacred or more to be desired than marriage—the foundation of the home—and Victorian drama largely centered upon this belief: the most popular theater genre was comedy, where good characters are rewarded with loving marriages and bad characters are denied marital bliss. Gilbert generally adhered to this form, with the exception that his undeserving upper-class characters are often given marriages, though rarely ideal ones based on love and companionship. It is Gilbert’s middle-class characters who possess the greatest qualities to be desired in marriage in both their
domestic management and their steadfast love. In his treatment of characters, Gilbert shows that the middle classes were superior to both the upper and working classes in matters regarding the home and the heart, which strengthened their perceptions of their class’ social significance. As Nancy Armstrong states, “On the domestic front, perhaps even more so than in the courts and the marketplace, the middle-class struggle for dominance was fought and won” (24).

All of the Savoy Operas contain characters who are depicted as undesirable in that they lack certain qualities—largely determined by gender—that were considered by Victorian middle-class standards to be desirable in marriage. The women of this type are generally spinsters who covet love and marriage, but they do not possess the qualities of youth and beauty that were so greatly desired by potential suitors both young and old. Because of this, their prospects for marriage are greatly diminished, although possessing certain ideal qualities (which will soon be discussed) could, at times, counteract such disadvantages. The men of this type generally lack manners, morals, or other gentlemanly qualities that would make them desirable husbands. Both women and men are satirized for these perceived deficiencies, although women dominate this category in number and receive far more derision than their male counterparts (Stedman, “From Dame” 25). (Though much can be, and has been, said about gender roles and prejudices in Victorian drama, this analysis will focus on class structures and will limit gender discussion only to how it directly pertains to middle-class ideology.)

The home was the center of the middle-class Victorians’ world, and domestic life carried strong expectations about men’s and women’s roles. Men were to take on the
rigors of the world, financially provide for their families, and have the final say in their homes; while women were to efficiently manage the home, tenderly care for their families, and submit to their husbands. Although a middle-class lifestyle was dependent upon the husband’s occupation and income, it was domestic life that received the greater emphasis within the culture of the day. As Helene Roberts states, “Sentiment’s favorite domain in Victorian times was near the warm cozy hearth of the home where the wife, sweet, passive and long-suffering, waited patiently for the return of her husband” (48). J.F.C. Harrison elaborates: “The Victorian ideal of womanhood centred on marriage and the home. Woman’s mission in life was to be the guardian of moral, spiritual and domestic values. She was, in the words of Coventry Patmore’s apotheosis of married love, ‘The Angel in the House.’” (157). Whether true to reality or not, this “angel of the house” was the ideal held by many middle-class Victorians and was promoted throughout their art and literature.

Although a Victorian middle-class wife was to submit to her husband, she nevertheless possessed great authority within her family’s domestic realm and was expected to manage the home in an efficient and organized manner (Harrison 158). This domestic competence was of particular importance to the middle classes in distinguishing themselves as a class entity. As Elizabeth Langland states,

…the bourgeoisie seemed eager to acknowledge the wife’s management role to distinguish her from the idle aristocracy, for whom at least a part of these functions was usually performed by a capable housekeeper. Initial perceptions of a wife’s managerial position in the bourgeois home increasingly gave way to an
assertion of importance equal to that of her husband. *Guide to English Etiquette* (1844) claims that “she is, in her sphere, as important as man in his,” and explains that “the whole of the internal administration is in her hands—she has the management of the children and of servants, she can make her husband’s home happy or miserable, she can increase his estate by the management and frugality, or she can reduce him to beggary by her willfulness and extravagance” (72-73).

(46)

Even though the man was the head of the household and had the final word, much of his happiness and well-being depended upon his wife. He might be responsible for earning the income to support a middle-class lifestyle, but she was responsible for ensuring that that income was used in such a way as to enable them to maintain that lifestyle, which would contribute to the continued nurture and well-being of the family. Therefore, it was expedient for a man to choose a wife who had proved herself accomplished in domestic management.

This domestic competence was considered to be virtually inseparable from moral excellence, which as we have seen was an important, defining factor of the Victorian middle classes. As Langland reports:

John Butchener’s *Instructions in Etiquette for the Use of All* (1847) insists that management is allied with feminine excellence: “The proper arrangement and government of a household is closely connected with our . . . virtues” (60).

*Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1862) ranked “tolerable knowledge of
domestic affairs” with such character traits as “religion, industry, and chastity”

(43). (46)

The middle-class Victorians’ staunch morality directly influenced their conceptualization of the ideal wife and defined the qualities that a woman—if she is to be desirable and suited for marriage—should possess. This female ideal powerfully shaped Victorian middle-class ideology and created clear social constructs that challenged the ideologies of the other classes. As Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*,

It is my contention that narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines. This struggle to represent sexuality took the form of a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behavior of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart. … [The] female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies. (5)

These “competing ideologies” not only encompassed upper-class ideology, but working class ideology as well. Armstrong states that the Victorian middle classes, particularly its reformers, perceived the working class as being “promiscuous and insufficiently gendered,” and that they “portrayed [working class] women as masculine and [working class] men as effeminate and childlike” (20). Langland supports this by saying, “Social
ideology inscribed the lower classes as inherently less moral, less delicate, more physical, and more capable of strenuous physical work” (41). In Gilbert’s operas, both the upper-class and the lower-class women have seemingly masculine traits, both physically and emotionally, that form a strong, unfavorable contrast to the ideal feminine qualities found in his middle-class women.

Perhaps the most essential quality of the ideal middle-class woman was the strength and steadfastness of her affections. As Harrison states, it was a wife’s role to “sanctify the home by her loving tenderness and chaste discipline. Home was to be a haven, a sanctuary, a place of peace and emotional security” (158). This bit of heaven on earth was to be cultivated through the wife’s submission, patience, steadfastness, undying love, and self-sacrifice, as she completely gives herself for her husband and children. It was because of this that love—rather than social or financial ambition as with the upper classes, or practicality or sexual desire as with the lower classes—was to be the motivation for marriage. Love was the exalting force that was seen to elevate the middle classes above the rest of society. As Armstrong states, “one may conclude that the power of the middle classes had everything to do with that of middle-class love” (4). Such was the Victorian middle-class ideal of womanhood, which is found in so many of Gilbert’s middle-class female characters.

As previously described, Gilbert’s undesirable female characters from all classes are predominately unmarried, middle-aged women who desire love and marriage but have little charm or beauty to recommend them. Such characters were common stereotypes within Victorian melodrama and a source of great amusement. These aging
women, or * dames* as they are often labeled, are generally given the roles of comic characters and are treated disparagingly, as they are ridiculed and satirized for their deficiencies. Jane Stedman describes these women:

The mid-Victorian dames had always two characteristics in common: they were at least middle-aged and they were at least very plain, if not positively hideous. Their makeup was caricature, their action slapstick. ... Other characteristics which the dame might possess include a hasty, even cruel temper; shrewishness; an unrequited passion; an avid love of flattery; and a misplaced dependence on the disguising powers of cosmetics and false hair ... it is the question of appearance which preoccupies these characters most, and a stereotypic scene jeering at them and the camouflages they use appears in play after play. (“From Dame” 23)

It is worthwhile to note that dames were most often played by male comedians, thus emphasizing their masculine qualities which contrast with the middle-class feminine ideal. Stedman argues that having the dames played by a man allowed the audience to mock and laugh at the character without a breach in chivalry, and that such characters were popular in their offering the audience an escape from the idealized “angel of the house” which was so widely promoted (“From Dame” 26). While such characters may have provided an escape from the Victorians’ womanly ideal, they nevertheless reinforced that ideal by creating a strong contrast between the “angel” and the “dame” and by becoming such an object of ridicule and shame that none would wish to identify with them.
Although Gilbert certainly used the role of the dame in his operas, he did so with important deviations from the stereotype. Gilbert insisted that the dames were always to be played by women, and they exhibited little, if any, grotesque makeup and false hair; they were also less dependent on slapstick humor. Gilbert treated the dame characters far less cruelly and far more sympathetically than many other Victorian dramatists, giving them lines that were calculated to elicit pity from the audience. Stedman argues that “Gilbert used the [dame-like] characters of Ruth, Lady Jane, and Katisha not merely to satirize middle-aged spinsterhood, but also to satirize the premium which his contemporaries placed on youthful beauty. Each has lines which clearly indicate that youth and beauty are not the only qualities advantageous in a marriage” (34).

While there is merit to Stedman’s argument that Gilbert’s satire was directed at an excessive preoccupation with youth and beauty, the operas reveal that the larger target of Gilbert’s satire is women, particularly those among the upper classes, who possess little or no domestic capability nor natural affection. It is these qualities that directly determine whether a dame will be compassionately or satirically treated. A careful analysis of Gilbert’s dame-like characters reveals how those who exhibit stronger domestic and emotional qualities are always of the middle classes and are more favorably depicted, receiving far less satirical treatment. However, although the upper-class dames are depicted as the least desirable and least affectionate, they are nevertheless given the same outcome of marriage as the middle-class dames, and their social status is never seriously threatened, which is not true of the lower-class dames.
Gilbert’s dames in the high Savoy Operas are almost equally divided between the working/middle classes and the upper classes. The working and middle-class dames include: Buttercup (Pinafore), Ruth (Pirates), Dame Hannah (Ruddigore), and Dame Carruthers (Yeoman). Each of these women must prove that she is domestic and worthy of marriage, and her marital reward is determined by this. Any whose domestic qualities are severely lacking are not allowed to achieve their dreams of marriage and must remain spinsters. Gilbert’s working and middle-class dames are generally far more mild and submissive than their upper-class counterparts, so that, while they lack youth and beauty, they more closely resemble the ideal “angel of the house.” Being so, they generally receive far less satire and derision and are given much more respect.

Gilbert’s upper-class dames include: Lady Jane (Patience), the Fairy Queen (Iolanthe), Lady Blanche (Princess Ida), Katsisha (Mikado), and the Duchess of Plaza-Toro (Gondoliers). Each of these women is strong-willed, domineering, and somewhat masculine, thus more closely resembling the dame stereotype of Victorian melodrama and receiving the expected satire. They are usually quite independent, and the least desirable among them have little or no relationships in the sense of visible family or friends; they are also generally far more fickle and less faithful than the working and middle-class dames. However, these upper-class dames are treated with a surprising degree of sympathy, and all are permitted to marry well, despite their domestic and emotional failings. Similar to what we have seen with the upper classes and immorality,

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6 Although the Duchess of Plaza-Toro is married and so not a spinster, she fits the dame mold in every other respect. Gilbert includes a song in Act II about her aggressive role in securing the Duke in marriage, showing that she strongly resembles other upper-class dames, such as Jane and Katsisha.
the upper-class dames are not punished for their failings, nor is their social status threatened.

Of the upper-class dames, Lady Jane (Patience) and Katsiha (Mikado) are the strongest examples of their type. Not only are they both aging and unattractive, but both conform to the stereotypical dame in having a “hasty, even cruel temper; shrewishness; an unrequited passion; [and] an avid love of flattery” (Stedman, “From Dame” 23). However, unlike most Victorian dames in melodrama but typical of Gilbertian dames, they do not attempt to achieve artificial beauty through cosmetics and false adornments; rather, they candidly admit their unattractiveness while lauding their superior qualities of steadfast love and faithfulness—the most ideal qualities of womanhood—which they claim the youthful heroines, their rivals, do not possess. Gilbert gives both of these spinsterstouching lines and plaintive songs mourning their loss of youth and beauty, which helps endear them to the audience. However, their behavior towards the heroines reveals spiteful jealousy and malice, which prevent them from being truly sympathetic characters, thereby giving the audience more liberty to deride them and also justifying the satire directed at them.

Lady Jane is one of the leaders of the “twenty love-sick [upper-class] maids,” yet at the same time she possesses a marked independence and is often absent from their tight-knit group. The opera opens with all of the women present but Jane, as they sing and sigh about Reginald Bunthorne until Jane dramatically enters and interrupts them. There is no reason why Jane should not be present with them at the opening curtain, but her initial absence and dramatic entrance exemplify her strong independence and
domineering personality. Jane’s first words to the ladies belittle Patience, whom she divulges as the object of Bunthorne’s affections, and they reveal Jane’s spiteful jealousy. She repeatedly draws attention to Patience’s low social status as “the village milkmaid” and insinuates that Bunthorne could never genuinely love someone so low and unworthy: “‘Tis but a fleeting fancy—‘twill quickly wear away” (273). While the other upper-class ladies treat their rival kindly, if somewhat patronizingly, calling her “poor child,” Jane’s conduct towards Patience remains cold and disdainful, referencing her as a “puling milkmaid” and at one point commanding her, “Away with you, away with you, and to your milk-pails go!” (311).

As with the other upper-class Gilbertian dames, Jane has set her heart upon marrying the man of her choosing (Reginald Bunthorne) and aggressively pursues him, doing everything that she can, whether through sheer force or manipulation, to secure him in marriage. Her behavior is in every way the antithesis of the ideal “angel of the house,” and makes her undesirable and unworthy, by Victorian middle-class standards, of marriage. Although she lacks desirable qualities of a woman, Jane claims to be far more loving, faithful, and worthy of being a wife than her lower-class rival, Patience: “Oh, Reginald, if you but knew what a wealth of golden love is waiting for you, stored up in this rugged old bosom of mine, the milkmaid’s triumph would be short indeed!” (273).

The second act initially seems to prove Jane’s claims of superior love and faithfulness, not only regarding Patience but also regarding the “love-sick maidens.” The curtain opens with Jane alone on stage (a significant contrast to the crowd of adoring women that opened the first act), and she explains,
The fickle crew have deserted Reginald and sworn allegiance to his rival, and all, forsooth, because he has glanced with passing favour on a puling milkmaid!

Fools! Of that fancy he will soon weary – and then I, who alone am faithful to him, shall reap my reward. But do not dally too long, Reginald, for my charms are ripe, Reginald, and already they are decaying. Better secure me ere I have gone too far! (319)

Here, the audience witnesses what appears to be strong proof of Jane’s faithfulness and constancy, which does much to elevate her worthiness for the “reward” of marriage (if the catty “puling milkmaid” comment can be overlooked). To further solicit the audiences’ favor, Gilbert then gives Jane a plaintive, sympathetic song that mourns her fleeting charms: “Sad is that woman’s lot, who year by year, / Sees, one by one, her beauties disappear” (319). By this point, the audience admires Jane for her faithfulness and pities her for her inevitable loss of youth and beauty.

Throughout the second act, Jane seems to continue to prove her faithfulness to Bunthorne, even assisting him to defeat his rival, Grosvenor. When in the final moments of the opera Bunthorne is crushed as Patience and Grosvenor pledge themselves to each other, Jane consoles him by saying, “Cheer up! I am still here. I have never left you, and I never will!” (351). Bunthorne then yields in gratitude of her faithfulness and agrees to take her as his wife. Though the audience feels little regard for Bunthorne, there is a sense of joy in seeing Jane’s (presumed) faithfulness rewarded. However, that immediately changes as the wealthy Duke enters with the determination of at long last choosing a wife:
DUKE. I have a great gift to bestow. Approach, such of you as are truly lovely. 

(All come forward, bashfully, except JANE and PATIENCE.) In personal appearance you have all that is necessary to make a woman happy. In common fairness, I think I ought to choose the only one among you who has the misfortune to be distinctly plain. (Girls retire disappointed.) Jane!

JANE (leaving BUNTHORNE’S arms). Duke! (JANE and DUKE embrace. BUNTHORNE is utterly disgusted.)

In one word, Jane proves that all of her faithful words and deeds of the second act were not driven by a love for Bunthorne, but rather by a desire for a socially ambitious marriage. As long as she believes that Bunthorne is her best chance for an auspicious match, she is faithful to him; but as soon as a more socially advantageous catch comes along, she unhesitatingly drops Bunthorne and jumps at the new opportunity. This fickleness and personal ambition show that Jane does not possess the womanly qualities desirable for marriage. Ruskin describes the desirable woman as such:

She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman. (Sesame 60)

At first, Jane seems to possess many of these qualities as she stays by Bunthorne’s side and appears to be devoted to him when all of the other ladies have abandoned him for
Grosvenor, but her quick exchange of Bunthorne for the Duke proves that she is motivated by “self-development” (i.e., social ambition) and “loveless pride.” She shows that she does not possess the nurturing and emotional qualities that the Victorian middle classes so idealized in a wife. However, Gilbert does not punish her for these failing, but allows her to have a socially advantageous marriage to a well-liked and highly prestigious aristocrat.

Like Jane, Katisha in The Mikado is set on marrying a particular man, Nanki-Poo, who is the Mikado’s son and heir to the throne. She takes a bold, assertive stance in an attempt to secure him in marriage, which the Victorians would have construed as masculine and distasteful in a woman—a far cry from the passive, demure woman of their ideal. As Nanki-Poo explains to his beloved Yum-Yum,

Some years ago I had the misfortune to captivate Katisha, an elderly lady of my father’s Court. She misconstrued my customary affability into expressions of affection, and claimed me in marriage, under my father’s law. My father, the Lucius Junius Brutus of his race, ordered me to marry her within a week, or perish ignominiously on the scaffold. That night I fled his Court, and assuming the disguise of a Second Trombone, I joined the band in which you found me when I had the happiness of seeing you! (585)

It is not until the end of Act I that Katisha makes her first appearance. As the villagers dance and celebrate the impending marriage of Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum, Katisha dramatically and domineeringly enters, immediately provoking their disfavor:

KAT. Your revels cease! Assist me, all of you!
CHORUS. Why, who is this whose evil eyes
Rain blight on our festivities?

KAT. I claim my perjured lover, Nanki-Poo!

CHORUS. Go, leave thy deadly work undone!

KAT. Come back, oh, shallow fool! come back to joy!

CHORUS. Away, away! ill-favoured one!

After berating Nanki-Poo for deserting her and ominously threatening Yum-Yum, her rival, Katisha reveals what seems to be genuine love and sorrow beneath her terrible temper and shrewishness. The music softens and the villagers become quiet and still, as Katisha sings a melancholy song of unrequited love:

The hour of gladness
Is dead and gone;
In silent sadness
I live alone!
The hope I cherished
All lifeless lies,
And all has perished
Save love, which never dies!

Here, as with Jane, the audience is moved to compassion for Katisha’s love and faithfulness, despite her lack of youth and beauty and her outbursts of bad temper. Katisha’s display of abiding love and the audience’s compassion for her continue in the second act, as she learns of Nanki-Poo’s (supposed) execution and, reminiscent of
Shakespeare’s Juliet, longs for death as well: “Alone, and yet alive! Oh, sepulcher! / My soul is still my body’s prisoner!” (639). Such sorrow and anguish do much to excuse her lack of modesty and her domineering manner, gradually endearing her to the audience.

Although Katisha claims such noble and idealized sentiments, her words eventually betray her true motive. When she reappears in Act II, this time with the Mikado, her social ambition is clearly evident, as she overbearingly interrupts the Mikado to trumpet her own superiority and her high position as his “daughter-in-law elect” (621). Additionally, when she believes that Nanki-Poo has died, her first words are, “Oh where shall I find another? Where shall I find another?” (631). This repetition suggests to the audience that her sorrow might not be over losing Nanki-Poo, himself, but rather over losing her greatest chance for marriage and its resulting social supremacy. This suspicion is confirmed in her conversation with Ko-Ko:

You have slain my love. He did not love me, but he would have loved me in time. I am an acquired taste—only the educated palate can appreciate me. I was educating his palate when he left me. Well, he is dead, and where shall I find another? It takes years to train a man to love me. Am I to go through the weary round again, and, at the same time, implore mercy for you who robbed me of my prey—I mean my pupil—just as his education was on the point of completion? Oh, where shall I find another? (641)

Like Jane, Katisha proves that her real desire and motivation are for a socially ambitious marriage, and that all of her protestations of love and faithfulness are merely show, or at the most, genuine sorrow at losing the prospect of achieving her ambitions. When Ko-Ko
courts her to preserve his own life, it takes very little to win her over, as he is now her only chance for marriage, and they immediately marry. However, Katisha’s wrath explodes when she discovers that she has been deceived: that Nanki-Poo is alive and married to Yum-Yum. Again, her distress could be construed as proof of her faithfulness had not her previous words betrayed her true motivations. Instead, the audience sees her wrath as proof of her social ambitions to be the Mikado’s daughter-in-law, rather than as proof of genuine love, and they agree with the Pitti-Sing, who sings:

Your anger pray bury,

For all will be merry,

I think you had better succumb . . .

And join our expressions of glee! (649)

Although Katisha proves that she lacks genuine love and faithfulness and that she possesses little, if any, of the domestic qualities that the Victorian middle classes desired in a wife, she is nevertheless allowed to marry a man of high social status (despite his humble origin). Being an upper-class lady of court, Katisha is given a socially prestigious marriage, and her social status is never threatened despite her tremendous failings.

In contrast to Jane and Katisha, Buttercup\(^7\) (*Pinafore*), Dame Hannah (*Ruddigore*), and Dame Carruthers (*Yeoman*) are all middle-class spinsters who must prove their domestic worth in order to be rewarded with marriage. Although they are cast

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\(^7\) Although Buttercup states that she was a “baby farmer” in her youth, she is currently a lower middle-class woman, whether through personal achievement in her business or through her prior marriage. This sets her socially above Ruth, the nursery-maid in *Pirates of Penzance*, who is consistently seen as working-class.
in the *dame* mold, they are generally well-liked and are far closer to the “angel of the house” model than the upper-class dames. The fact that Gilbert gives these middle-class dames softer, gentler, more modest, and more genuinely faithful natures than their upper-class counterparts is significant in the way it reveals middle-class prejudices of their being more domestic, loving, and faithful than the upper classes.

Act I of *H.M.S. Pinafore* opens with a song by the sailors introducing themselves, which is immediately followed by the entrance of Little Buttercup, the bumboat woman who sells domestic supplies to the sailors. Her domesticity, gentleness, and femininity (emphasized by her frequently being called “little” despite her plumpness) make her well-liked among the sailors. She is, perhaps, the least stereotypical of Gilbert’s dames, for although she is at least middle-aged and unmarried (a widow) she is still considered “a plump and pleasing person” (129), as Captain Corcoran so eloquently states. She is, in effect, the mother of the ship and exhibits her domestic worth by bringing desirable provisions and delicacies for the crew.

Buttercup additionally proves that she possesses a compassionate, nurturing spirit when she notices that Captain Corcoran is distraught and seeks to care for him:

> Sir, you are sad! The silent eloquence
> Of yonder tear that trembles on your eyelash
> Proclaims a sorrow far more deep than common;
> Confide in me—fear not—I am a mother! (129)

Captain Corcoran responds to her gentle concern by confiding that his daughter is reluctant to marry Sir Joseph Porter. With her domesticity and nurture proven, the
audience is now prepared to hear that Buttercup, herself, secretly loves someone: “Ah, poor Sir Joseph! Ah, I know too well / The anguish of a heart that loves but vainly!” (129). Her modesty and passivity are a far cry from Jane’s and Katisha’s domineering pursuits, which enable her to win the audience’s respect and support despite her lack of youth and beauty.

Like the upper-class dames, Buttercup endeavors to prove her love and faithfulness, but she does so modestly and unobtrusively. She does not sing overt songs of unrequited love, as do Jane and Katisha, but instead, like the “angel of the house,” she sits patiently and waits—with a few asides to the audience—as at the opening of Act II where we find her in the moonlight “seated on quarter-deck, gazing sentimentally at [Captain Corcoran]” (155). As soon as Captain Corcoran notices her, he gently chides her for still being onboard:

CAPT. (coming down). Ah! Little Buttercup, still on board? That is not quite right, little one. It would have been more respectable to have gone on shore at dusk.

BUT. True, dear Captain—but the recollection of your sad pale face seemed to chain me to the ship. I would fain see you smile before I go.

CAPT. Ah! Little Buttercup, I fear it will be long before I recover my accustomed cheerfulness, for misfortunes crowd upon me, and all my old friends seem to have turned against me!

BUT. Oh no—do not say “all”, dear Captain. That were unjust to one, at least.
CAPT. True, for you are staunch to me. *(Aside.)* If ever I gave my heart again, methinks it would be to such a one as this! (157-8)

Buttercup proves her faithfulness and undying love by being willing to sacrifice her reputation for the sake of caring for her beloved. Captain Corcoran is drawn to her love, gentleness, and faithfulness, and the audience cheers when she gains him in marriage at the end of the play. Gilbert ensures that Buttercup’s value as a wife is well proven and rewards her for her possession of idealized feminine qualities. Captain Corcoran’s desire for Buttercup and his eagerness to marry her (albeit not until their social ranks are reconciled) contrast greatly with Bunthorne’s reluctant obligation to take Jane and Ko-Ko’s begrudging necessity to marry Katisha.

Like Buttercup, Dame Hannah *(Ruddigore)* is unmarried and has lost any youthful beauty, yet she is well-respected and well-loved within her community. Her domestic worth is proved in her lovingly raising her niece, Rose, and in her encouraging the young and beautiful Rose to marry, as she believes it is a “pity that so much goodness should not help to make some gallant youth happy for life!” (665). Early in the play, the audience learns that Dame Hannah has pledged herself “to an eternal maidenhood”:

Many years ago I was betrothed to a god-like youth who woo’d me under an assumed name. But on the very day upon which our wedding was to have been celebrated, I discovered that he was no other than Sir Roderic Murgatroyd, one of the bad Baronets of Ruddigore. … As a son of that accursed race he was no

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8 Dame Hannah is a middle-class woman whose title of “Dame” is a somewhat-antiquated reference to her matronly status rather than an aristocratic title. Her middle-class status is seen in her ownership of a cottage (though not wealthy), her proper speech, and her polite manners.
husband for an honest girl, so, madly as I loved him, I left him then and there. He died but ten years since, but I never saw him again. (661)

Dame Hannah’s continued faithfulness to her suitor when all hope has been lost is evidence of her capacity for genuine love and of her worthiness for marriage. Her steadfastness has been tested, as one of the girls explains: “Dame Hannah—you’re a nice old person—you could marry if you liked. There’s old Adam … he loves you with all the frenzy of a boy of fourteen” (661). Though we see old Adam, his love for Dame Hannah is never alluded to again as it merely functions as proof of her resolute devotion despite other opportunities for marriage.

Dame Hannah displays somewhat more of the stereotypical dame qualities in the second act, after she is carried away to Robin’s (the new bad Baronet) lair. Robin has ordered his servant, Adam, to carry off a maiden from the village (he did not care whom) as part of his mandatory daily crime, but when he sees that Adam has brought Dame Hannah he is completely taken aback and remarks, “Dame Hannah! This is—this is not what I expected” (743). For the first time we see Gilbert’s (gentle) satire against Dame Hannah as a spinster, and the audience laughs at her being “a maiden” and yet so different from the young, beautiful girl that Robin envisioned by that description. Gilbert’s satire continues in the scene:

   HAN. … Unappalled by the calm dignity of blameless womanhood, your minion has torn me from my spotless home, and dragged me, blindfold and shrieking, through hedges, over stiles, and across a very difficult country, and left me, helpless and trembling, at your mercy! Yet not helpless, coward sir, for
approach one step—nay, but the twentieth part of one poor inch—and this
poniard (*produces a very small dagger*) shall teach ye what it is to lay unholy
hands on old Stephen Trusty’s daughter!

ROB. Madam, I am extremely sorry for this. It is not at all what I intended—
anything more correct—more deeply respectful than my intentions towards you,
it would be impossible for any one—however particular—to desire.

HAN. Bah, I am not to be tricked by smooth words, hypocrite! But be warned in
time, for there are, without, a hundred gallant hearts whose trusty blades would
hack him limb from limb who dared to lay unholy hands on old Stephen
Trusty’s daughter! (743)

The humor, of course, is that Dame Hannah believes she must fiercely protect her honor,
which is completely unthreatened because of her lack of youth and beauty and because of
Robin’s (mostly) uncorrupted gentlemanliness. However, her words reveal her belief in
her “blameless womanhood” and her womanly worth. She has been torn from her
“spotless home,” which shows her domestic competence, and lies “helpless and
trembling,” which shows her lack of masculine qualities. However, she does produce “a
very small dagger,” as might be suitable for a woman in extreme circumstances, and
displays far more fight than is common in a stereotypical Victorian maiden.

Nevertheless, Dame Hannah’s domestic worth and womanly devotion remain proven and
untarnished, and she is duly rewarded by being united in marriage with her (resurrected
and reformed) love, Sir Roderic.
In both Dame Hannah and Buttercup, we see a genuine love and a faithfulness when all hope is lost that greatly contrast with the fickleness of Jane and Katisha, who quickly abandon their professed loves and jump at another suitor. Gilbert’s middle-class dames, despite being older and somewhat unattractive, display the same qualities that Ruskin so admired in heroines from popular Victorian literature, in that they possess: … endless varieties of grace, tenderness, and intellectual power … a fearless, instant, and untiring self-sacrifice to even the appearance of duty, much more to its real claims; and, finally, a patient wisdom of deeply restrained affection, which does infinitely more than protect its objects from a momentary error; it gradually forms, animates, and exalts the characters of the unworthy lovers, until, at the close of the tale, we are just able, and no more, to take patience in hearing of their unmerited success. (Sesame 53-4)

Not only do Buttercup and Dame Hannah exhibit “grace,” “tenderness,” “untiring self-sacrifice,” and a “patient wisdom of deeply restrained affection,” but such qualities have a transforming effect upon the men they love, who are in many ways unworthy of these virtuous women.

Compared with middle-class dames like Buttercup and Dame Hannah, Ruth from *The Pirates of Penzance* is more satirized and less liked and respected, largely as a result of her domestic failures; even so, she is still far more appealing than upper-class dames like Jane and Katisha. The audience soon learns of Ruth’s domestic failings from her own mouth:

*When Frederic was a little lad he proved so brave and daring,*
His father thought he’d ‘prentice him to some career sea-faring.

I was, alas! his nurserymaid, and so it fell to my lot

To take and bind the promising boy apprentice to a pilot …

I was a stupid nurserymaid, on breakers always steering,

And I did not catch the word aright, through being hard of hearing;

Mistaking my instructions, which within my brain did gyrate,

I took and bound this promising boy apprentice to a pirate. (195)

As Frederic’s nursery maid, it was Ruth’s responsibility to care for him and protect him, yet she colossally failed in her domestic duties by binding him to a pirate apprenticeship. Her weak defense of being hard of hearing is not quite believable and does little to excuse her domestic blunder. Rather, the audience sees her as an incompetent, though good-hearted, domestic servant and consequently unworthy of Frederic’s love.

The pirate band treats Ruth as an undesirable spinster, urging Frederic to take her with him when he leaves and to marry her. Clearly, they would be happy to be rid of her presence. Although Ruth has been the only woman onboard ship, she lacks the domesticity that is seen in Buttercup and fails to be the nurturing, caring mother of the ship. Because of this, she never gains the pirates’ respect and admiration, which Buttercup continually held with the sailors. Buttercup may have also failed in her domestic duties when she was young by accidently mixing up Ralph and Captain Corcoran when they were babies; but her continued proofs of domestic capability and nurturing nature excuse that mistake, and it is not held against her. Ruth, on the other
hand, proves that her mistake was consistent with her non-domestic, non-nurturing nature, and so she is more strongly judged.

Ruth’s lack of domesticity opens her up to satirical (and apparently justifiable) attack and ridicule. Gilbert includes some sharp jabs at Ruth’s age and loss of beauty, having the pirates say meaningfully that “there are the remains of a fine woman about Ruth” and that “there is not one here who would rob [Frederic] of this inestimable treasure for all the world holds dear” (199). Frederic, who has not seen another woman since he was eight years of age, is finally, though reluctantly, convinced by underhanded assurances from Ruth and the pirates of Ruth’s desirability and suitability as a wife for him, despite her forty-seven years to his twenty-one. However, no sooner does he begin to consent to marry her than he hears the voices of young girls—General Stanley’s young, beautiful daughters—and discovers how he has been deceived.

Like Jane and Katisha, Ruth tries to claim that her love, which “has been accumulating forty-seven years,” is far superior to that of “a maiden tender—her affection raw and green” (203-4). She begs and pleads with Frederic to accept her love and not to leave her, but he, bitter at her deception, sends her away. In this scene, we see that although Ruth is reminiscent of the upper-class dames in her lack of domesticity and in believing that her older, more mature love is superior to that of her younger rivals, she does not possess the domineering personalities nor bullying natures of the upper-class dames. The audience has cause to believe that Ruth’s love is more genuine than that of the upper-class dames and is perhaps more enduring. At the very least, she is far more gentle and modest than the upper-class dames and is consequently less satirized.
Although Ruth is a more sympathetic character than the upper-class dames, she does display a certain amount of vindictiveness that contributes to her presumed unsuitability for marriage. It is she and the Pirate King who accost Frederic, hold a pistol to his head, and work upon his conscience to coerce him back into his indentures. Not only is Ruth the one who disregards Frederic’s best interest by compelling him to return to the pirate band, but it is she, as the co-founder of the apprenticeship contract, who had failed to adequately oversee the contract’s terms. Such domestic failings are inexcusable, and they are largely responsible for her punishment of celibacy at the end of the play. As the curtain falls, Ruth is deprived of her love and left alone, as the pirates disband to “resume [their] ranks and legislative duties” and to marry General Stanley’s lovely daughters.

As a working-class woman, Ruth failed to prove her domesticity and worthiness to be a wife, and so she was deprived of marital bliss. Had Jane or Katisha been held to the same domestic standards, they, too would have remained celibate. However, because of their social status and rank, they are allowed liberties that would have been inexcusable in the working or middle classes. Although upper-class dames are given marriages despite their lack of ideal feminine qualities, the middle-class—and to a small extent, the working-class—dames are undeniably shown as their superiors in matters of both the home and the heart. This satire of the upper classes and their domestic and emotional failings are consistent with what we have seen of their presumed ineptitude and moral inferiority. Again, we see the superiority of the middle classes and the higher
standards that they demand of themselves coupled with derision of, yet leniency for, the upper classes.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

By promoting the superiority of the middle classes through their intelligence and aptitude, their morality and gentlemanliness, and their domesticity and steadfast love, Gilbert both reflected and reinforced middle-class ideals and the ways in which the middle-classes perceived themselves in relation to the other two classes. This effectively strengthened the middle-classes’ sense of worth and value within society as a whole. As Perkin explains,

The class ideal thus sublimated the crude material self-interest of the competition for income, sanctified the role of class members by the contribution they made to society and its well-being, and so justified the class and its claim to a special place and special treatment within the social framework. (Origins 219)

The middle-class ideal, as promoted throughout Gilbert’s operas, was flattering and appealing to its members in that it emphasized their virtues while minimizing or overlooking their failings. As Fischler argues, this flattery may have helped appease the conscience of a class whose

… recent successful struggle up the economic ladder had inevitably involved not only hypocrisy against their avowed ethical principles of self-denial but also cupidity…Thus, they can only have been delighted by the assurances offered by
the Savoy operas that hypocrisy and greed were, after all, exclusively attributes of the aristocracy. (85)

By exposing the other classes’ failures and deficiencies, particularly those of the more privileged upper classes, Gilbert’s operas gave the middle classes a sense of social distinction and excellence that elevated them in their own eyes and “justified the [middle] class and its claim to a special place and special treatment within the social framework.”

Gilbert’s operas appealed to the growing middle classes and its emerging segment of professionals through their emphasis on personal merit, rather than on traditional valuation by birth, rank, or wealth. John Gray, an early-Victorian lecturer, once stated,

In the old world, men are respected in proportion as they are enabled by the possession of wealth to command the labour of others. … In the new, we hope to secure to all men the value of their services to society in whatever way they may be given; to respect men in proportion to their utility in promoting in any shape or way, the happiness of our species; and to attach value, not to pieces of metal, but to every thing which tends to improve the condition of the human race, physically, morally, or intellectually. (qtd in Perkin Origins 259)

In Gilbert’s operas, the middle-class characters have the greatest “utility” and, more than any other class, “improve the condition of the human race, physically, morally, or intellectually.” Their merit in these three areas not only contributes to the well-being of others, but also proves their value and worth as individuals. We see intellectual merit in characters such as Strephon (Iolanthe), whose intelligence makes him an effective reformer in Parliament, weeding out aristocratic corruption; and Ralph Rackstraw, whose
nautical talent and aptitude make him a better captain than Corcoran, bringing greater competence and efficiency to the *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Moral merit is seen in characters such as Grosvenor, whose moral strength preserves him from hypocrisy and conceit in the face of tremendous adoration, and who functions as a catalyst to draw the “twenty love-sick maidens” away from Bunthorne’s corrupting influence and to reconcile them to the worthy soldiers who love them and to whom they were engaged. Physical, as well as emotional, merit is seen in characters such as Buttercup, who brings material comforts to the ship’s crew and whose gentle concern and steadfast love uplifts Captain Corcoran during times of trouble. Dame Hannah also possesses physical and emotional merit in her provision of a warm, nurturing home and motherly care and guidance for her orphaned niece, Rose, and in her longsuffering, enduring love for Sir Roderic, the bad Baronet, which has a reforming effect upon him. It is these qualities of intellectual, moral, physical, and emotional merit that give worth and value to Gilbert’s middle-class characters, benefitting those in their communities and elevating them above characters from the other classes.

Gilbert’s operas reflected and reinforced the middle classes’ perceptions of their own class superiority, as well as the growing influence of the professional ideal that was beginning to reshape the middle classes. As Perkin states,

Class society in Britain, at its zenith between 1880 and 1914, already contained the seeds of its own decay. These took the form of the values and beliefs of the professional social ideal, which were beginning to infiltrate and change from within the moral outlook of the three major classes. Those classes, too, possessed
their own powerful ideals of what society should be and how it should be organized to recognize and reward their own unique contribution to the welfare of the community. Each class believed that its contribution was the most vital one, and should be rewarded accordingly. (Rise of Professional 116)

In Gilbert’s operas, the middle classes are always depicted as the most ideal and “the most vital,” consequently deserving the greatest reward. The most pointed satire in these operas is directed at the so-called “undeserving” upper classes, whose privileges and wealth were obtained by birth and not by personal merit. However, although the upper classes are exposed and ridiculed, their lack of punishment and their continued social status despite their failings indicate that Gilbert did not wish to completely alienate them. His satire of the upper classes was immensely flattering to the middle classes, contributing to their sense of superiority, yet it never went so far as to seriously threaten or try to overthrow existing class structures.

While Gilbert was a member of the middle classes and in all probability adhered to much of their ideology, one of his main goals in flattering the middle classes was to cater to his audience in order to make a successful living as a dramatist (an occupation that was notoriously undervalued and underpaid during the Victorian era). The financial success of Gilbert’s operas hinged on his ability to woo back the middle classes, who for over a century had largely abandoned the theater, believing, as Richard Altick notes, that “the playhouse was the favorite resort of the devil” (qtd in Fischler 3). Citing the assessment of Allardyce Nicoll, Fischler remarks of the mid-nineteenth century,
...in an age in which “Typical audiences were composed mainly of lower-class citizens with a sprinkling of representatives from the gayer and more libertine section of the aristocracy,” the latter were not numerous enough to fill the expensive box seats, and the former were not rich enough to buy any other than the cheap seats in the pit and the gallery. (3-4)

Although this was beginning to change by the late-nineteenth century with the influence of popular, more respectable playwrights such as Dion Boucicault and J. R. Planché, the middle classes predominately held aloof from the theater, and Gilbert faced a formidable challenge in obtaining their patronage. Because of his necessity to attract and appeal to the middle classes, Gilbert was required to be as much of a businessman as he was a dramatist. James Ellis describes Gilbert thusly: “As shrewd a businessman as Carte himself, Gilbert felt his audience’s pulse with professional skill. … Whatever compromise with artistic principles may have been involved, Gilbert almost invariably geared his comic operas to that dictator of popular taste, the middle-class businessman” (qtd. in Fischler 35). Although Gilbert’s audience spanned the lower to the upper classes, it was primarily the middle-classes’ money and numbers that made the operas profitable and contributed to their success. As Fischler states, “Gilbert clearly recognized that his success was founded upon giving this public what it wanted…he claimed to have conceived his works with the preferences of his patrons at the forefront of his mind” (34).

While it was ultimately Gilbert’s immense talent as a dramatist—and his corroboration with an equally talented composer—that led to his success, Gilbert’s ability to gauge his audience’s tastes and to conform to their expectations of what society should
be like are valuable in giving us insight into Victorian middle-class ideology. Even though created for popular entertainment and amusement, the characters within these operas are a portal to a greater understanding of Victorian society as a whole and, particularly, the tensions and complexities that existed within the growing and evolving middle classes. Though long neglected in scholarly studies, Gilbert’s Savoy operas, and Victorian drama as a whole, are valuable literary sources and worthy of greater focus and attention. Critics such as Alan Fischler, Andrew Crowther, and Jane Stedman have made great contributions to Victorian studies by bringing Gilbert’s operas to the attention of the scholastic world. If we are to continue to grow in our understanding of Victorian culture and ideology, then we must turn the spotlight on these previously overlooked works of popular Victorian drama and examine the wealth of insights that lies within their plots and characters.

There is far more research that should be conducted in generally neglected works of both theater and literature that were immensely popular during the Victorian era but have lost either their appeal or their relevancy throughout the years. Such works hold valuable insights into Victorian culture and ideology, and it is vital to examine the qualities that contributed to their initial success. For example, by looking at how characters from the various classes were portrayed, as I have done in this essay, we will gain a deeper understanding of Victorian class ideology and the ways in which the middle class saw itself in relation to the other two. Such analyses will give a clearer picture of

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9 For more information on the role of the theater in both reflecting and influencing the Victorian audiences’ ideologies, see Davis and Emeljanow’s “Victorian and Edwardian Audiences.”
the class delineations and of how class relations played out in everyday life. In short, by focusing on largely neglected works of popular entertainment as much as on the classic works that fill our canons, we will gain a deeper understanding of Victorian culture and ideology.


CURRICULUM VITAE

Erin Thomas Clemmer graduated with distinction and with honors in the major from George Mason University in 2000 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English (concentration in eighteenth and nineteenth century British and American literature) and a minor in computer science. She was a recipient of the Outstanding English Majors Award for her undergraduate achievements. In 2004, Erin returned to George Mason University for graduate studies while maintaining her full-time employment as a software programmer and database analyst for the Washington, D.C., Department of Health. She anticipates being graduated in May of 2010 with a Master of Arts degree in English (concentration in literature).