

Savoyardage

The newsletter of the Madison Savoyards, Ltd.

March 2006 – Number 84

**“PRECIOUS NONSENSE”:
PARODYING POETRY IN *PATIENCE*
BY EMILY AUERBACH**

My title comes from remarks about Reginald Bunthorne’s poetry in *Patience*. Bunthorne, a character combining elements of Oscar Wilde, Algernon Charles Swinburne, James McNeill Whistler, and other aesthetes of the late nineteenth century, carries lilies and wears velvet breeches. To an audience of rapturously lovesick maidens, Bunthorne ponderously announces that he will recite “a wild, weird, fleshly poem” that will be “very tender, very yearning, very precious.” He tells them that his poem entitled “Oh, Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!” represents “the wail of the poet’s heart on discovering that everything is commonplace.” Bunthorne advises his female groupies that in order to understand the poem, they should “cling passionately to one another and think of faint lilies.” They do so while he recites a poem full of fancy phrases but meaning nothing. Lady Angela exclaims, “How purely fragrant!” Lady Saphir adds, “How earnestly precious!” Not so, however, with *Patience*, the blunt, down-to-earth milkmaid. *Patience*, like the little child in Hans Christian Andersen’s *Emperor’s New Clothes* who points out that the emperor is naked, simply says of Bunthorne’s poem, “Well, it seems to me to be nonsense.” At that point, Lady Saphir responds, “Nonsense, yes, perhaps—but oh, what precious nonsense!”

Of course Gilbert is playing on the double meaning of precious: precious can mean of high worth, valuable, but it can also mean affectedly dainty and over-refined. Reginald Bunthorne’s poetry is indeed “precious nonsense.”

To get ready for the summer’s production of *Patience*, why not take a brief look at the targets of Gilbert’s humor? We detect what Gilbert is satirizing when the lovesick maidens enter draped in “aesthetic draperies,” playing archaic instruments like lutes and mandolins, swooning over the charms of the effeminate poet Reginald Bunthorne, and criticizing the Dragoon Guards for being too utilitarian and unpoetical. In part, the aesthetic movement of the late 19th century celebrated art for art’s sake as a reaction against England’s gritty industrialism, crass commercialism, and prosaic practicality. After all, Napoleon had called England “a nation of shopkeepers,” while Germany dismissed England as “das Land ohne Musik,” or the country without music. Aesthetes often sought for beauty outside of contemporary England, whether from the Orient, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance.

We hear Gilbert mocking that desire to be anything other than present-day England in Lady Jane’s remarks to the Dragoon Guards about why their uniforms are so offensive. She points out that the military men are wearing red and yellow, primary colors, instead of soft and soulful pastels. She offers the following fashion suggestion for them in order to improve their uniforms: “Still, there *is* a cobwebby grey velvet, with a tender bloom like cold gravy, which, made Florentine fourteenth-century, trimmed with Venetian leather and Spanish altar lace, and surmounted with something Japanese—it matters not what—would at least be Early English!” One of the funniest moments in *Patience* will be near the end when the Dragoon Guards, desperate to regain the love of the maidens, appear dressed like Oscar Wilde, carrying flowers, and trying to strike uncomfortable medieval poses.

We also can tell what Gilbert is satirizing when Reginald Bunthorne reveals to the audience that he is an “aesthetic sham” who only poses as an aesthete so he can win the attention of the ladies. Bunthorne goes into a long list of what he in reality is NOT:

A languid love for lilies does *not* blight me!
Lank limbs and haggard cheeks do *not* delight me!
I do *not* care for dirty greens
By any means,
I do *not* long for all one sees
That’s Japanese.
I am *not* fond of uttering platitudes
In stained glass attitudes.
In short, my mediaevalism’s affectation,
Born of a morbid love of admiration!

He goes on to say that “if you’re anxious to shine in the high aesthetic line,” all you need to do is drop transcendental terms into conversation, carry flowers, and seem mystic and deep. He ends up by confessing, “The meaning doesn’t matter if it’s only idle chatter of a transcendental kind.”

To understand Gilbert’s parodies, let’s look at a few poems that may have inspired his sense of the ridiculous. When Lady Jane chides the Dragoon Guards, she complains that they are “not Della Cruscan.” Della Crusca was the pen name of a late 18th-century English poet living in Florence who wrote affectedly pedantic verse. Della Crusca and a score of imitators penned overwrought poetry like this example:

Hushed, be each ruder note! Soft silence spread,
With ermine hand, thy cobweb robe around;

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Attention! Pillow my reclining head,
Whilst eagerly I catch the golden sound.
Ha! What tone was that, which floating near,
Seemed Harmony's full soul—whose is the lyre?
Which seizing thus on my enraptured ear,
Chills with its force, yet melts me with its fire?

From that sort of ornate verse Gilbert will pick up on the use of synaesthesia, where the senses blend, as when you might say “silver silence” or “perfumed darkness.” He also will milk the heavy use of exclamations and lamentations—Ha! Alas! Ah me!—and the piling up of so many images and mixed metaphors—cobwebs, ermine, cold—that we end up confused, as when Lady Jane talks about “a tender bloom like cold gravy.” Gilbert also seizes the use of alliteration, as with “soft silence,” by having Bunthorne talk of the “languid love of lilies” and Grosvenor enter saying with an overabundance of f-words, “I have loved you with a Florentine fourteenth-century frenzy for full fifteen years.” Sound matters more than sense. As Grosvenor adds, “I am aesthetic and poetic.”

Here's a sample of an Oscar Wilde poem from 1876, written just five years before *Patience*, called “La Bella Donna della mia Mente,” or Lovely Lady of My Memory:

My limbs are wasted with a flame,
My feet are sore with traveling,
For calling on my Lady's name
My lips have now forgot to sing. . . .

Her hair is bound with myrtle leaves,
(Green leaves upon her golden hair!)
Green grasses through the yellow sheaves
Of autumn corn are not more fair. . . .

Her neck is like white melilote
Flushing for pleasure of the sun,
The throbbing of the linnet's throat
Is not so sweet to look upon.

As a pomegranate, cut in twain,
White-seeded, is her crimson mouth,
Her cheeks are as the fading stain
Where the peach reddens to the south.

O twining hands! O delicate
White body made for love and pain!
O House of love! O desolate
Pale flower beaten by the rain!

In *Patience* Gilbert capitalizes on Wilde's heavy use of vegetable and fruit imagery by having Bunthorne speak of a “sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion.” He also parodies Wilde's tendency to wallow in a melancholy mood.

Bunthorne mournfully asks Patience, “Oh, but my heart is a-weary! . . . Do you know what it is to be heart-hungry? Do you know what it is to yearn for the Indefinable . . . to seek oceans and to find puddles?” When Patience says he confuses and frightens her, Bunthorne responds, “Don't be frightened. It's only poetry.” Patience concludes, “Well, if that's poetry, I don't like poetry.”

Bunthorne was modeled not only after Oscar Wilde but also after the dissolute, decadent poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. We can get a good taste of Swinburne by sampling a bit of his poem “Love and Sleep”:

Lying asleep between the strokes of night
I saw my love lean over my sad bed,
Pale as the duskiest lily's leaf or head,
Smooth-skinned and dark, with bare throat made to bite,
Too wan for blushing and too warm for white . . .
And all her face was honey to my mouth,
And all her body pasture to mine eyes;
The long lithe arms and hotter hands than fire,
The quivering flanks, hair smelling of the south,
The bright light feet, the splendid supple thighs
And glittering eyelids of my soul's desire.

Throw in a few words like “lithe,” “wan,” and “quivering” and a heaving bosom and you're well on the way to writing a decadent poem.

In addition to raiding the Della Cruscan and stealing from Swinburne and Wilde, Gilbert also appears to have taken some ideas from Tennyson. (And by the way, an earlier version of *Patience* even featured a character named Reverend Lawn Tennyson.) In Tennyson's “King Arthur,” Gawain's ghost is “blown along a wandering wind” and cries into Arthur's ear, “Hollow, hollow, all delight! Hail, King, tomorrow thou shalt pass away.” Gawain's ghost continues to repeat the lines, “And I am blown along a wandering wind, / And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight.” I suspect Gilbert took his title for Bunthorne's poem from Tennyson's doleful refrain. Here, then, is Bunthorne's “wild, fleshly poem” entitled “Oh, Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!”:

Oh, Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!

What time the poet hath hymned
The writing maid, lithe-limbed,
Quivering on amaranthine asphodel,
How can he paint her woes,
Knowing, as well he knows,
That all can be set right with calomel?

When from the poet's plinth
The amorous colocynth
Yearns for the aloe, faint with rapturous thrills,

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How can he hymn their throes
Knowing, as well he knows,
That they are only un compounded pills?

Is it, and can it be,
Nature hath this decree,
Nothing poetic in the world shall dwell?
Or that in all her works
Something poetic lurks
Even in colocynt and calomel?
I cannot tell.

Some have suggested that one way to read Gilbert's "Oh, Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!" is as a statement that contemporary verse is constipated, or blocked. Maidens are writhing and yearning, and the poet is on his "plinth"—or the pedestal a statue is placed upon. To get things going again, perhaps poets should try "calomel" (a purgative), "colocynt" (an emetic), or "aloe" (a cathartic drug).

Bunthorne utters a poem overloaded with obscure polysyllabic words, but it has the desired effect: the admiring maidens pronounce it "precious." Only Patience finds it "nonsense." When Bunthorne meets Patience shortly after his recitation of "Oh, Hollow! Hollow! Hollow!" he discovers that she responds literally to his metaphor-studded diction. At first, she has assumed that "hollow hollow hollow" refers to a hunting song. Now she takes his mention of hollowness to signify an empty stomach:

Bunthorne: Ah! Patience, come hither. I am pleased
with thee. The bitter-hearted one, who finds all
else hollow, is pleased with thee. For you are not
hollow. *Are you?*

Patience: No, thanks, I have dined . . .

Bunthorne: Tell me, girl, do you ever yearn?

Patience: I earn my living.

Patience unknowingly cuts right through Bunthorne's affectation.

Gilbert satirizes both the way we can take something fancy and pretend to understand it and also the way we can take something simple and pretend it's deep.

Archibald Grosvenor, who calls himself the apostle of simplicity, says, "Here is a decalet—a pure and simple thing, a very daisy—a babe might understand it. To appreciate it, it is not necessary to think of anything at all." He then recites doggerel no better than any nursery rhyme:

Gentle Jane was good as gold,
She always did as she was told;
She never spoke when her mouth was full
Or caught bluebottles their legs to pull . . .

Teasing Tom was a very bad boy
A great big squirt was his favorite toy;
He put live shrimps in his father's boots
And sewed up the sleeves of his Sunday suits. . . .

Here Gilbert chooses to use not the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare and Milton (deDUMdeDUMdeDUMdeDUMdeDUM) but the trochaic tetrameter of everyday nursery rhymes (DUMdeDUMdeDUMdeDUM--), as in "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall / Humpty Dumpty had a great fall" or "Georgie Porgey pudding and pie, / Kissed the girls and made them cry."

To hear the maidens respond, however, you would think Grosvenor had uttered a dramatic masterpiece for the ages. Angela gushes, "Marked you how grandly—how relentless—the damning catalogue of crime strode on, till Retribution, like a poised hawk, came swooping down upon the Wrong-Doer?" Ella chimes in, "Oh, sir, you are indeed a true poet, for you touch our hearts, and they go out to you!"

Humor also comes in *Patience* when Grosvenor transforms himself from "a beauty which has not its rival on earth" into a commonplace man with stick and pipe, while the Dragoons transform themselves into Oscar Wilde look-alikes. When the Dragoons change clothes, Angela describes them in ridiculous language: "The immortal fire has descended on them, and they are of the inner brotherhood—perceptively intense and consummately utter." Gilbert mocks both the hopelessly prosaic John Bulls of the day—the soulless Englishmen with stick and pipe who lacked appreciation for the fine arts—and also the affected aesthetes who had carried their pursuit of art for art's sake to a ridiculously over-refined extreme. Advertisements for *Patience* carefully stated that the show did not desire to satirize the whole aesthetic movement but only "the outpourings of a clique of professors of ultra-refinement who preach the gospel of morbid languor and sickly sensuousness." *Patience* did not seek "to cast ridicule on the true aesthetic spirit, only to attack the unmanly oddities which masquerade as its likeness."

After all, even Oscar Wilde satirized himself and the hyperbolic features of aestheticism. The fact that Wilde enjoyed *Patience* and agreed to travel to America to appear in the audience, lily in hand, suggests that he took the show as a celebration of his persona, not an attack on his person.

Taking a close look at some of the sources of Gilbert's parodies makes me appreciate to an even greater extent Gilbert's incredible wit. In each work, he succeeds in aiming his satire in several directions at once. For example, in the *Mikado*, Gilbert manages to satirize the Japanese, the British, and all of humanity. In *Patience*, he not only lampoons the culture-lacking British dragoon guards and clueless milkmaid but also the dandified, pretentious, aesthetic charlatans and their gullible followers.

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The competition in *Patience* between Bunthorne and Grosvenor over who should be most admired as an artist may have reflected Gilbert's awareness of the feud between John Ruskin and James McNeill Whistler. When art critic Ruskin called one of Whistler's blurry, abstract paintings ("Nocturne in Black and Gold—the Falling Rocket," 1874) evidence that Whistler had "flung a pot of paint in the public's face," Whistler sued Ruskin for libel. Whistler won, but the jury had the last laugh by valuing his art so little that they awarded him only a farthing for damages. As the *Times* concluded of the trial, the verdict was "a censure on both."

Patience, which opened just three years after the 1878 Whistler-Ruskin trial, can best be enjoyed as a censure on us all. Jonathan Swift once said that satire is a looking glass in which we behold every face but our own. Ultimately all of us stand indicted in *Patience* for our tendency to follow fads, to pretend to like art that we don't understand, or to dress up simple thoughts in highfalutin rhetoric.

The only presence to emerge from the satire unscathed is Gilbert. He ironically attacks poetry while writing exquisite verse of his own. Any close reading of the libretto of *Patience* shows that through his skillful parodies Gilbert has indeed created something "precious": he has made valuable sense out of the nonsense of his day—or any day.

As always when I take a look at a libretto for a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta, I come away struck by the sheer wit and genius of Gilbert's words, even before Sullivan adds his exquisite musical settings. I wish Gilbert were around today to pen witty satires of UW faculty meetings, trigger-happy vice presidents, and Hollywood phonies. I remain sad that after dreaming that my husband (Keith Meyer, a Savoyard and physician) was starring in a production of Gilbert & Sullivan's "HMO Pinafore," an operetta with singing doctors, drug representatives, and insurance agents, I awoke with only a vague memory of the concept rather than a finished libretto and score. Gilbert and Sullivan, where are you when we need you?

Meanwhile, how lucky we are indeed to look forward to a summer production of *Patience*. As the stage fills with long-haired aesthetes and military men, we can delight in the way Gilbert's treasured words combine with Sullivan's delightful music!

Emily Auerbach is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

HAIL, POETRY! - A FULL HOUSE

Performing before a full FUS (First Unitarian Society) Meeting House on Friday evening, February 3, twenty-five Savoyards singers brought two dozen Gilbert & Sullivan songs to life.

The Hail, Poetry! audience welcomed John Hyland

back to center stage, heartily applauded Emily [Wallace] Whelan's return from Australian opera stages, and Wendy Rowe's special appearance from regional opera. Other soloists and singers who also offered a veritable "who's who" from previous Savoyards productions were Rachel Bishop, Sean Bode, Ethan Bremner, Paul Bushland, Anna Farkas, Caryl Farkas, Chad Graham, Bill Hoyt, Scott Hurlbert, Julie Hutchinson, Susannah Brooks Jacobson, Emerald Jean, Christiaan Smith Kotlarek, John Kruse, Jenni Macheel, Keith Meyer, Ilona Pinzke, Bill Rosholt, Jim Rowe, Dan Weinstein and Dick Yde.

Long-time Savoyards favorites Bill Lutes and Martha Fischer brought down the house with their rendition of the Katisha/Ko-Ko scene from *The Mikado* by accompanying each other in singing, acting, piano and general high jinks.

Jim Fleming's dramatic readings of the poems from *Patience* highlighted the concert theme which showcased the brilliance and wit of Gilbert's lyrics.

John Barker's post-intermission Operetta Quiz ranged from challenging the entire audience to identify recorded G&S singers, songs and productions to inviting speculation about which G & S characters could be TV anchors and politicians today.

"Hail, Poetry!" and the double chorus from *Patience* resounded throughout. Many in the audience sang these and five other choruses from where they were seated during the evening. They used song-sheets distributed earlier inviting one and all to revisit or sample some G&S music during impromptu opportunities to join the singers.

Before the performance, 40 loyal donors had gathered for refreshments, fellowship and lively commentary on *Patience* by UW-Madison Professor of English Emily Auerbach who presented the Parodies of Poetry in *Patience*. (see preceding article) She encouraged G&S fans to pay thoughtful attention to the words, not just the music, when enjoying these favorite light operas.

Following the concert, audience members relaxed with each other and enjoyed treats spread on tables decorated with G&S rhymes and other themes of the upcoming July production.

Kudos to all who created this enjoyable evening, the Board and particularly Helen Baldwin who administered the pre-concert and post-concert events; John Kruse who located the musicians and coordinated the concert; guest artists Bill Lutes, Martha Fischer, Jim Fleming and John Barker; chorus director Terry Kiss Frank and accompanist Martha Saywell; and FUS Music Director Dan Broner for arrangements. Special thanks to all volunteers and especially to the two hundred members of the audience who attended what has become an annual Savoyards' "winter joy."

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OUR NEW WEBSITE WWW.MADISONSAVOYARDS.ORG

Our new website went on-line in November. It is intended to provide the public comprehensive information about the Madison Savoyards. In addition to news about upcoming productions and other events, there is audition information, ticket order forms (yes, you may order your *Patience* tickets now!), names of board members and advisors, background on Gilbert & Sullivan, and many other interesting items. There is also an archive of previous programs featuring images of the program cover, which is a clickable link to the complete program in Adobe Acrobat (pdf) format. We now have all the programs from 1977 to the present plus 1972 but would like to have them all to complete our archive. If anyone has any of those missing programs, please let us know and we will scan it, add it to the site, and return it to you. Two of our fans have already provided programs for the web site archive. The site also has video clips from last summer's *Pirates of Penzance* you may download and play on your video iPod or computer. There is also a collection of recent issues of Savoyardage. The site has had visitors from around the world (Guatemala, Belgium, Jordan, the UK, Japan, South Africa, Canada, the Netherlands, and Costa Rica) and has led to interesting contacts from G&S fans and producers in Wisconsin and elsewhere. Please visit often and give us your ideas and suggestions for improving the site.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE DVD

A DVD of last summer's production of *The Pirates of Penzance* is available for ordering at our website. The DVD contains the entire production from the beginning of the overture to the end of the final curtain call. It is indexed for easy access to all musical numbers and has excerpts showing alternate cast leads. There are over two hours of video with a stereo audio track.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT *from Caryl Enra Farkas*

There is snow on the ground as I write this, but all the Savoyard signs of spring are here. Another delightful midwinter evening with the Savoyards has come and gone. Our stage director and music director for this summer's production are making preparations and setting the rehearsal calendar. A beautiful set design is ready for construction. Posters are ready to be printed. Auditions are set and Old Music Hall on campus is booked for July. Tulips and birdsong can't be far behind!

We eagerly look forward to this year's show. Though *Patience* is one of the "lesser known" Gilbert and Sullivan operas, it also contains some exceptional examples of Sullivan's composing as well as Gilbert's sharp humor.

Savoyards last put on *Patience* in 1991 with Michael Goldberg directing the stage and Scott MacPherson directing music. This year we have the benefit of stage director Terry Kiss Frank's talent and experience with Gilbert and Sullivan. She was the Production Coordinator and played Lady Jane in '91 and brings her insight and knowledge of the opera to this production.

It's always special to work with long-time members of the company. Their familiarity with the operas and their understanding of the Savoyards' mission -to mount productions worthy of W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan - makes for exceptional theater.

We are also very pleased to have Blake Walter return for another summer as our music director. His commitment to getting Gilbert's words heard and Sullivan's orchestration articulated brought high praise in *The Pirates of Penzance* last year. We expect the music of *Patience* will be just as much a joy to hear.

This will be Savoyards' 44th summer of Gilbert and Sullivan. The years have flown by and we now find ourselves to be one of the few G&S companies in the world with this kind of experience and longevity. Visit our new website to learn more about Madison Savoyards' history and see why audiences keep coming back year after year to see and hear these witty and beautiful operas (www.madisonsavoyards.org). With each passing year we are becoming more keenly aware of the depth and timelessness of Gilbert and Sullivan's work and we are devoted to presenting an authentic as well as creative production.

For now, we'll try to be patient as *Patience* takes shape and we hope you will make plans to join us in July.

AUDITIONS FOR PATIENCE

Auditions will be held on March 30 (6-9 pm) and April 1 (2-5 pm) with call backs as needed on April 2 (2-5 pm). The first rehearsal will be on May 31 (6:30 - 9 pm). To schedule an audition, call The Madison Savoyards at 231-9005. Please bring the completed audition form (available on the website: www.madisonsavoyards.org) to the audition.

