Propriety, Duty, and Order: Gilbert and Sullivan and the Victorian Family Narrative

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Propriety, Duty, and Order
*Gilbert and Sullivan and the Victorian Family Narrative*

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Preface

The Not-So-Happy Family

The Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro are the only married couple in any of Gilbert and Sullivan’s Savoy Operas. In combination with their daughter, Casilda, these three make up the group that most closely resembles a traditional family, which is hardly a ringing endorsement for the conventional family structure. In order to explain what qualifies her as the Duke’s wife, the Duchess plays with Gilbert and Sullivan’s classic career song, in which characters (usually men) explain their qualifications – or lack thereof – for the position that they hold in society. In her almost-touching aria, the Duchess sings to her daughter,

When I merely
   From [my husband] parted,
We were nearly
   Broken-hearted –
When in sequel
   Reunited,
We were equal-
   Ly delighted.
So with double-shotted guns and colours nailed unto the mast,
I tamed your insignificant progenitor – at last! (The Gondoliers 603-4)

The line break between “equal” and “ly” lifts up the possibility of the “we” being equal before the line break changes the adjective into an adverb. As an adverb, the word “equally” is intentionally vague. Either the word is in reference to the “we,” meaning that the Duke and Duchess felt equally delighted to see one another, or else it refers to the “nearly” a few lines prior. The unclear modification matches the Duke and Duchess’ haphazard marriage. Earlier in the song, the Duchess explains her original attempts to use traditional femininity by “giving him the very best, and getting back the very worst/ that is how I tried to tame your great progenitor –

1 Thepsis (1871), Trial by Jury (1875), The Sorcerer (1877), H.M.S. Pinafore (1878), The Pirates of Penzance (1879), Patience (1881), Iolanthe (1882), Princess Ida (1884), The Mikado (1885), Ruddigore (1887), The Yeomen of the Guard (1888), The Gondoliers (1889), Utopia Limited (1893), and The Grand Duke (1896).
2 Three obvious exceptions to this pattern are The Sorcerer, Iolanthe, and The Gondoliers.
at first” (603). Finding this tactic unsuccessful, she uses her “threatening appearance” to scare her husband into submission and thus, “tames [Casilda’s] insignificant progenitor.” Not only is the Duke unimportant, but also the word “progenitor” reduces his role to a transmitter of genes. The Duchess of Plaza-Toro reverses traditional ideas of masculinity. In the first half of the song, she describes herself as a passive victim of abuse, and the Duke as Casilda’s “great progenitor.” Once she asserts herself over her husband, the two are a “reciprocating couple” and yet, the Duke of Plaza-Toro becomes insignificant. In many ways, the Duchess’ song represents the extent of married domesticity in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas. It seems that in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operatic world, the family is always a place of violence and toxicity that degrades its members.

Why would two men – who were obsessed with purity and propriety – intentionally write out all possibility of domestic felicity?

All of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas focus on the concept of marriage, and yet, none of them take the idea too seriously. In Iolanthe, when Strephon and Phyllis get engaged to each other, the former insists that they should be married quickly before they change their minds, since they should regret their decision after the fact. Frederic and Mabel, the loving couple in The Pirates of Penzance, take marriage somewhat more seriously, since each promises “to be faithful to \( \frac{\text{his}}{\text{her}} \) sooth/ till [they] are wed, and even after” (The Pirates of Penzance 181). Five of the main characters in The Gondoliers go as far as to sing “O moralists all,/ how can you call/ marriage a state of union true” (612). In Patience, the title character realizes that the only form of true love is one that leaves “everything for him,/ nothing at all for her” (231). Marriage is the central plot point for all of Gilbert and Sullivan’s works and yet they continually mock, shun, or ignore the institution all together – that is, until the end when the operas’ conflicts are quickly solved with the promise of a mass marriage.
Sisters, Cousins, and Aunts: The Alternative Families

Gilbert and Sullivan often reduce marriage, love, and family to duty, etiquette, or propriety. In ignoring the traditional Victorian family structure, they critique the norms of domesticity. Unlike their contemporaries, Gilbert and Sullivan do not use broken families as a plot device, nor do they suggest that the newfound focus on familial love and felicity is the key to domestic happiness. Instead, they used their newly developed art form to deconstruct Victorian family ideas, focusing primarily on questions of marriage, sex, and the apparent myth of parental affection. While Gilbert and Sullivan tend to ignore the parent/child relationship, they frequently offer other examples of guardianship. In H.M.S. Pinafore, for example, a gaggle of sisters, cousins, and aunts act as a placeholder for Sir Joseph’s parents. Likewise, the Major-General in The Pirates of Penzance, takes charge of a large group of wards instead of having children of his own. Gilbert, in fact, seems to have a fascination with Wards in Chancery, as they take part in several of his operas, including Iolanthe and The Pirates of Penzance. Family-like commitment and affection does make an appearance in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas in the form of nontraditional relationships. While the mother figure is often absent in their stories, their operas often include nannies, wet nurses, foster mothers, and other women who take the place of a traditional mother, despite having no blood connections to the ones that they nurture.

Gilbert and Sullivan conduct their operas like a case study on human social behaviors. Each one plays with a central theme ranging from the effects of female education in Princess Ida to the newly conceived idea that marriage is solely based on love in Trial by Jury. Each one of their operas takes this theme or virtue and examines a hypothetical society that takes social constructs to the extreme with each character following the created logic until the very end. This

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2 Three obvious exceptions to this pattern are The Sorcerer, Iolanthe, and The Gondoliers.
3 Three of their operas end with these illegitimate maternal figures revealing some hidden secret that resolves the plot.
structure establishes a topsy-turvy world, much like the one that Lewis Carroll creates in *Alice in Wonderland*. *Patience*, for example, creates a society where love has been socially constructed into a duty. The characters consistently obey newly established standards of love and marriage, often to the point of absurdity. New concepts of love work themselves into the very center of the story’s world, which, in turn affects each character’s thoughts and movements. Using this literary technique and combining it with unrepentantly English music, Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaboration created a brand new art form – the Savoy Opera – that managed to make English audiences laugh at the traditions and constructs they revered.

**The Savoy Opera**

Between 1871 and 1896, librettist, William Schwenck Gilbert, and promising English composer, Arthur Sullivan, single-handedly – or rather duel-handedly – created the Savoy Opera. Collaborating on a total of fourteen operas, the two men combined elements of Victorian melodrama, opera bouffe, and traditional opera to create something that was quintessentially British. Although both men had successful careers outside of their collaboration, working together, Gilbert and Sullivan used each other’s talents to create clever musical works that drew in audiences from a range of social classes.

Even before he started working with Gilbert, Sullivan was considered the foremost English composer of his day. Despite constant fears that Gilbert’s lyrics took precedence over his music, Sullivan was considerably more popular than his librettist (Oost 39). During his education

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4 Scholars still debate over which word to use to describe Gilbert and Sullivan’s works. The “Savoy Opera” often refers to all of their works, including *Thepsis, Trial By Jury, H.M.S. Pinafore,* and *The Pirates of Penzance,* which did not open at the Savoy Theatre in London. In the music world, some people refer to their works as “operettas” as a way of demeaning their place in the traditional opera canon, but, as Paul Revitt points out, operettas are a particularly German art form (19). In my research, people who study Gilbert and Sullivan – or the English Comic Opera – consider their 14 works to be operas. Thus, I will keep with the tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan scholars and use the term “opera.”
at the Royal Academy of Music, Sullivan was awarded the Mendelssohn Scholarship for not one but three years of his education. During the nineteenth century, many people considered English music to be inferior to that which was produced by composers in Continental Europe. Victorians, however, possessed a growing sense of pride in their music. According to Carolyn Williams, “Sullivan was regarded as the ... personification of hope for English national music” (1). As a popular English composer, Sullivan used his music to bring a softening edge to Gilbert’s harsh criticism. Like Sullivan, Gilbert enjoyed success in his work as a comic journalist, poet, and playwright before he began collaborating with Sullivan. Following a failed career as a barrister, Gilbert began writing columns to support himself. After being asked to write a Christmas show, Gilbert wrote *Dulcamara* in 1866 in just ten days. Despite his lack of experience in the theatre, his Christmas burlesque proved to be a success. Between the 1860s and the early 70s – when he began collaborating with Sullivan – Gilbert produced playlets, plays, and opera burlesques at an incredible rate. During his era, critics considered Gilbert on par with playwrights like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw (Williams 3-4). Both Gilbert’s and Sullivan’s popularity helped them fashion a completely new form of theatre that became quintessentially Victorian.

The emerging popularity of the melodrama focused on dynamics of middleclass morality, in particular the Victorian family. According to Michael Booth, “a standard feature of Victorian theatre, [is] an idealistic dramatization of the family bond deemed so important in Victorian domestic life” (155). Many late nineteenth century plots focus on the importance of the family, and in particular, father-daughter relationships. These loving relationships often include a father who dotes on his child. The conflict of these familial plots usually arises out of some form of misunderstanding, which is eventually resolved (155). Alternatively, some melodramas depicted “‘unnatural’ father-daughter relationships” (156). Insomuch as the traditional melodrama
depicted images of domestic felicity, these alternative narratives displayed discordant families where the innocent heroine was often the daughter of an abusive or miserly father, who found salvation in her virtuous lover (Booth 156). Likewise, fictional representations of motherhood in the conventional melodrama utilizes the tropes of the “angelic” and “monstrous,” although, Ann Kaplan explains that “this ‘monstrous’ mother… is all but eclipsed by nineteenth century sentimentalism” and that Victorian theatre chose to focus on “the maternal self-sacrifice melodrama, figuring the ‘angelic’ mother-figure” (13).

The conventional Victorian melodrama used villains and heroes to reaffirm the value of traditional family structure, which was central to the ideal Victorian society (Booth 155). Gilbert and Sullivan are the exception to the rule. Examining the absence of families, and, in fact, healthy relationships, fuels my interest. In this thesis, I will discuss what families mean to Gilbert and Sullivan, and how they use their operas to critique Victorian ideals of the conventional family. Although the traditional family rarely serves as an important piece of character development, their operas are riddled with examples of alternative family structures, which suggests that unconventional families influence society far more than the cultural myth of the traditional family. In the first chapter, I look at Gilbert and Sullivan’s most popular work, The Pirates of Penzance, to examine how this melodramatic parody combines aspects of legitimate drama and illegitimate music to criticize the narrative of the legalistic and hierarchical family structure in England that invested in empty titles. My second chapter looks at the way Gilbert and Sullivan respond to the developing idea of aesthetic love in the Victorian family in Patience. By critiquing both the sensual nature of Anglo-Catholicism and the oppressive constructs of Low

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5 As I will discuss in later, English theatre has much more heritage than English music. Playwrights, like Shakespeare and Marlow legitimate the dramatic tradition, whereas English music has little heritage.
Church Anglicanism, Gilbert and Sullivan challenge conventional ideas of love, relationship, and traditional gender roles.

Gilbert and Sullivan build three types of family archetypes: borrowed family, legal family, and biological family. Both *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Patience* deal with borrowed family and legal family while staying peculiarly silent when it comes to biological family. Legal family, like the bonds of marriage in *Patience* and the Wards in Chancery in *The Pirates of Penzance*, are products of human law and the desire to make illegitimate actions legitimate. As I discuss in the second chapter, Wards in Chancery often suggested some form of sexual indecency. Whether they were bastard children or the product of a broken home, becoming someone’s ward allowed them a type of fabricated legitimacy in the eyes of the extremely conservative Victorian society. Marriage, likewise, aims to unite the members of the natural or biological family. In both operas, the legal family inhibits people from finding happy and healthy relationships. Ultimately, *Pirates* is an opera where family becomes a narrative, while *Patience* depicts marriage and family as an aesthetic or artistic choice. I posit that in their operas, Gilbert and Sullivan parody the relatively new idea that a healthy family – and in particular marriage – is based on love. Their operas, instead, suggest that the idea of a natural or normal family is nothing more than a myth.
Chapter I
“Let Us Shut our Eyes and Talk About the Weather”
Narratives of Legitimacy in the Victorian Family

“I don’t know whose ancestors they were, but I know whose ancestors they are, and I... their descendant by purchase.”

-Major-General Stanley (The Pirates of Penzance 171)

Major-General Stanley has a very curious idea about what family is and what it means. In the opening scene of Act II of The Pirates of Penzance, he explains the delicate situation he placed himself in when he bought a set of ancestors. While Pirates is completely void of parents or blood relations, the Major-General acquires an old family home and chapel with the remains of an ancient family. While most of the characters are convinced that purchasing a chapel does not mean that the Major-General acquires any relatives, the Major-General says “I don’t know whose ancestors [in the chapel] they were, but I know whose ancestors they are, and I...their descendant by purchase” (The Pirates of Penzance 171). The Major-General’s newly bought family resembles many of England’s nouveau riche who acquired vast expanses of land and historic houses in order to buy noble status. Gilbert satirizes England’s growing upper middle class with the Major-General’s absurd concern bringing dishonor to his newly purchased family (Bradley 230). In Pirates, there are several cases of the upper middle class trying to emulate their social superiors. Sir Garnet Wolseley, for example, was known for buying vast amounts of land to hide his humble past (Bradley 230). In the world of Pirates, characters, like the Major-General, often appeal to people’s family history in order to judge their social legitimacy. Although the Major-General purchased his lineage along with his new house, not all the characters in Pirates were as lucky. Indeed, orphan-hood emerges as, paradoxically, another type of family narrative, to which the Major General lays claim before he buys his ancestors.
The Pirates of Penzance contains two types of orphans, the Wards of Chancery who have been legitimized by the Courts of Chancery, and the less fortunate pirates who have no family, legal or otherwise. Throughout the opera, the narrative of the pirates’ orphan experience becomes a key part of their identity. Monica Cohen explains that Gilbert distinguishes the Major-General as the true pirate, unjustly claiming himself alternately as an orphan or the last of a line of distinguished ancestors, whereas the pirates claim a righteous moral compass rooted in their orphan-hood. The opera’s greatest instance of thievery is when the Major-General elicits the pirates’ sympathies by pirating their orphan narrative (341-3). At the end of the first act, the Major-General escapes from the pirates’ clutches by telling them that he is an orphan. Unfortunately, once the Major-General financially acquires dead family members, the pirates no longer feel any allegiance to him. This concept of ancestry reveals that family and nobility can be bought and sold. Furthermore, if this acquisition means that Major-General Stanley is no longer an orphan, being an orphan suggests that one has no family history either living or dead. Likewise, the family narrative is a way to exclude people from legitimate society. The orphaned pirates eventually regain their nobility, not by their actions, but rather when Ruth, an old nursemaid, reveals that the pirates are all noble by birth. In the Gilbertine world of The Pirates of Penzance, parents are only important as a link to a respectable past; yet Gilbert and Sullivan challenge the idea that the family is only a tool to identify people’s legitimacy.

Gilbert and Sullivan deflate the familial narrative by intentionally reversing roles that society views as necessary for a legitimate family. The Pirates of Penzance examines the importance of the Victorian family narrative by making it the chief item that characters buy and steal in an opera about intellectual piracy. Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaboration on Pirates resulted in an opera that depicts marriage and family as nothing more than a social scam, set up
as a way of hiding dysfunctional and unhealthy families behind a cheap façade of propriety. In *Pirates*, what is unoriginal becomes revolutionary, the forgotten becomes crucial, and lowly is exalted. In particular, I will discuss how *Pirates* uses inverted gender roles, illegitimate English music, and under-qualified authority to dissect the construct of a Victorian family.

Although he is a tad dishonest, Major-General Stanley is quite an accomplished gentleman and takes no time in rattling off his merits during his famous patter song, “I am the model of a Modern Major-General.” He displays aspects of a truly humanist education, being well versed in the art of rhetoric and music, informed in the science of plants and animals, and bragging of a complete understanding of Great Britain and her history. He can even “whistle all the airs from that infernal nonsense, *Pinafore*” (*The Pirates of Penzance* 163). This accomplishment pleases his captive audience so much that they all take up his line, singing about whistling the airs from Gilbert and Sullivan’s most recent opera, *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The chorus’ repetition of the Major-General’s words in combination with Gilbert and Sullivan’s own self-quotation dances very closely with literary piracy. *The Pirates of Penzance* is so closely linked with the success of *Pinafore* that any examination of the social satire of *Pirates* would be incomplete without first discussing its predecessor. The Major-General’s reference to *Pinafore* provides us with the framework to understand *The Pirates of Penzance* as a social satire about literary piracy, central to which is the appropriation of the familial narrative.

*H.M.S. Pinafore* first opened in 1878 at the Opera Comique Theatre in London to great acclaim. This work was Gilbert and Sullivan’s fourth opera and first major hit. During its two year run, *Pinafore* gained so much recognition that it led to the “*Pinafore Craze*” (Orel 8; Cohen 342). Cohen explains that people in England and America were so taken in by the wit of Gilbert’s script and Sullivan’s music that Gilbert’s words began appearing in English-language
newspapers and Sullivan’s music was constantly reproduced at public and private events (343). Consistently ineffective – and in some cases, nonexistent – copyright laws failed to protect Pinafore from international piracy (350). American copyright laws only protected American novelists yet did little to guard English authors. A mere seven months after it opened, there were at least eight unauthorized productions of H.M.S. Pinafore in New York City alone, and even more in other major American cities (Cohen 343; Williams 122). In England, there were over 100 pirated versions of the opera within a year of its original production, which led to confusion about what constituted a legitimate performance. The original investors of H.M.S Pinafore hired literal pirates to steal original set and costume pieces from the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company’s original production, in order to start their own run of the opera (Cohen 342; Williams 122-3). Continuing disputes over the “legitimate” continued, which led to there being two 375th performances of the original H.M.S. Pinafore on the same night; one with the original cast and managed by Richard D’Oyly Carte in conjunction with Gilbert and Sullivan, and the other with the original investors and set and costume pieces, but without the blessing of the opera’s creators (Williams 123).

Into this world of intellectual piracy Gilbert and Sullivan’s next opera was born. In an opera about a band of pirates, theft revolves primarily around the stolen family narrative (Cohen 341-2). Both Carolyn Williams and Cohen agree that The Pirates of Penzance criticizes literary piracy that occurred in both England and America. This argument, I believe, is only a part of the puzzle. I argue that Gilbert and Sullivan’s fifth opera deals with much more than illicit productions of their prior works, but rather that the satire uses the Victorian family (or lack thereof) to attack the illegitimate acquisition of power and social status employed, for the most part, by Britain’s middle and upper classes. Although the only form of piracy is of an intellectual
nature, all the characters in *The Pirates of Penzance* are orphans. Gilbert and Sullivan set up a society where the family narrative is a form of intellectual property, and thus when the Major-General pirates the pirates’ family history he steals their property.

**The Illegitimate Genre Gives Birth**

Critics cannot seem to make up their minds about the cultural value of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas. Sullivan’s music, in particular, remains a point of contention. Critiques range from praising his music as an esteemed Victorian institution, while others condemn its simplicity (Revitt 20). Yet Sullivan’s popularity during his time and his mastery of the undefined art form of English music cannot be denied. Many of England’s composers – particularly in the nineteenth century – had little musical tradition to draw from, which led to a feeling that British music was the bastard product of Continental masterpieces. The Licensing Act of 1737 established licensed theatres, which, in turn, further discredited English music. Under the act, only two English theatres could produce “legitimate drama.” Adding music to a piece of theatre made the work “illegitimate” but also no longer subject to censorship. Carolyn Williams points out that this loophole lead to the “invention of illegitimate culture” (127). Early Victorian drama employed music to widen the appeal of theatre despite the fact that doing so would eliminate the piece’s respectability. Williams acknowledges that “music became the dominant strategy for identifying a production that made no claim to legitimacy… thus it is no exaggeration to say that music was a mark of illegitimacy in theatre” (127). Legitimacy here, as Williams uses it, pertains both to someone or something’s respectability and heritage in conjunction with its perceived cultural sophistication. English music, like the orphans of Penzance, has no clear heritage – big

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6 During his studies, Sullivan was awarded the Mendelssohn Scholarship to celebrate his compositions. Mendelssohn is not English.
names in English music tend to be either pre-Reformation or imported talent, such as Frederic G Handel – nor was it considered to be socially respectable or culturally sophisticated.

English music in *The Pirates of Penzance* underlines the characters’ struggle to find legitimacy in preexisting familial constructs. In the opera, music seeks legitimacy by imitating the conventions of French and Italian opera, which inevitably leads to piracy. Unlike theatre and literature, musical quotations and references are often considered to be forms of piracy. In *Pirates* and several of his other operas, Sullivan uses the illegitimacy of musical parody to address themes of genre and society, by playing with musical institutions, making them hyper-serious, absurdly sanctimonious, or radically humorous as the mood and Gilbert’s libretti strike him. The music in *The Pirates of Penzance* uses stylistic imitation of other composers to critique England’s political and domestic institutions. Mabel’s Act I aria, “Poor Wandering One” closely resembles the operatic techniques of Sullivan’s French and Italian Contemporaries. Composers, such as Charles Gounod, use coloratura trills and cadences to create what Sullivan mockingly called “the farmyard effect.” By employing these techniques, Sullivan pirates the “oper-acrobatics” of the more legitimate Continental operatic tradition (Bradley 210). Mabel, whilst singing of purity and redemption, sounds legitimate, even though the music is, at some level, inauthentic. Using this parody, Gilbert, with his words, and Sullivan, with his music, create a platform on which what people hear becomes closely associated with legitimacy. By sounding legitimate, Mabel sings her own purity into existence in a similar way that the Major-General lies his own ancestors into existence. The fact that Sullivan first introduces Mabel, the young ingénue, with an illegitimate rendition of the French operatic style is ironic. As I will discuss

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7 An aria is a song in an opera sung by a solo singer. Sullivan bends this convention when he has the chorus repeat the final phrase in each verse.
later, Mabel, along with all her sisters, are Wards in Chancery\(^8\) under the guardianship of Major-General Stanley. This heritage puts her validity in doubt and yet, by drawing upon Continental operatic conventions, she sounds legitimate.

In most of Sullivan’s arias, the chorus – male, female, or mixed – often repeats the last phrase in each verse (Revitt 28). In *The Pirates of Penzance*, this musical technique plays an important role in the plot by emulating the literary and intellectual piracy that the opera addresses. During her aria, Mabel’s sisters join in with her, repeating the line, “Take heart; no danger lowers/ Take any heart – but ours” (*The Pirates of Penzance* 159). In the misogynist world of the play, Mabel fulfills her duty by offering her love to Frederic, a complete stranger, so that he might be saved. Her sisters’ close imitation of her song reflects the duality of the wards’ position. They are simultaneously legitimate members of society, being established as wards by the Court of Chancery, and yet, their position as wards creates the possibility of illegitimacy, suggesting some form of sexual misconduct. What gives them their legitimacy is not only the legal status that they received, but also the way they sound. Being a ward, Mabel has no claim to legitimate parentage, like Frederic, and yet, through the Courts of Chancery, she has been given family; unlike the pirates, however, the wards sound and act the part of nobility. Likewise, the music is not always pirated continental opera, but occasionally made English for the pleasure of its listeners. During the chorus – in particular when Mabel’s fellow wards repeat her words – the music shifts from the reputable sounds of Continental opera to a carnival-like ump-pa, before ending with the songs most elaborate “oper-acrobatics.”\(^9\) Sullivan gives the impression that,

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\(^8\) Wards in Chancery were often children or young adults who were orphaned or victims of abusive or neglectful parents (Bradley 216).

\(^9\) In the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Houston’s 2015 production, the soprano takes this final section as an opportunity to display her vocal technique. During the aforementioned performance, Mabel took musical piracy a step further by vocally quoting several arias from the canon, including the famous Queen of the Night aria from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* and “Glitter and Be Gay” from Bernstein’s operetta *Candide*. A
despite the façade that opera creates, the music is quintessentially English. By using the French operatic style, Mabel sounds legitimate and by speaking in proper English, Mabel and her fellow wards make their pirated position hyperbolically British.

Mabel’s legal father, Major-General Stanley also uses operatic parody to establish his own legitimacy. “I Am the Model of a Modern Major General” imitates the list songs of contemporary operas, but gives it a new twist. The list song, like the Sullivanian patter song, consists of rapid lists of adjectives or nouns. “Figaro” from Rossini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and “Madamina, il catalogo è questo” from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* exemplify the style of the continental operatic tradition. Both composers rely on the singer’s ability to maneuver complicated lists while keeping up with a fast-paced melody. Gilbert and Sullivan’s patter songs are similar, but, instead of the words being written to carry the music, melody takes a back seat to the wit of Gilbert’s lyrics. Almost every Savoy Opera contains a career song (Revitt 30). Much like “The Judge Song” in *Trial by Jury* or “When I First Put this Uniform On” from *Patience*, “I Am the Model of the Modern-Major General” in *The Pirates of Penzance* explains the singer’s career and the qualifications that he possesses or, as is more often the case, the qualifications he lacks.

The Major-General’s patter song, which has become one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s most popular and most parodied\(^\text{10}\) (Bradley 216), explains in detail Major-General Stanley’s vast knowledge. Carolyn Williams argues that this aria, with its lists of skills, “makes it clear that [Major-General Stanley’s] so-called expertise is only a patchwork of more or less irrelevant information, undigested and outdated” (133). While the Major-General’s ethics and social status leave much to be questioned, unlike Williams, I posit that the Major-General’s aria displays that

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\(^{10}\) Modern examples include “Right Hand Man” from *Hamilton* when Washington raps, “I am the model of a modern Major-General/ the venerated Virginian veteran/ Whose men are all lining up.”
he is extremely qualified, and yet has only achieved a junior rank of general (*The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan* 216). He possesses skills that would benefit any military man. Unlike other professional songs, such as Sir Joseph Porter’s “I am the Monarch of the Sea” in *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the Major-General’s song does not disclose his ascent to his position, nor does it reveal that his position is the result of incompetence, obedience, and good penmanship, as is the case with Sir Joseph. Instead, the audience hears an aria in the style of an operatic list song in which the Major-General rattles off his qualifications that do not pertain to his profession. Williams explains that Major-General Stanley is, very likely, an allusion to contemporary generals of the day. Most likely, he is meant to parody Viscount Sir Garnet Wolseley in both physical appearance and skillset. Sir Wolseley, known for his military success was also accused of possessing outdated knowledge (134). Furthermore, both Williams and Ian Bradley point out that Sir Wolseley, just like Major-General Stanley, sought to hide his humble lineage by purchasing large plots of land (134; 230). The two military figures are intelligent and capable, and yet both Sir Wolseley, in real life, and Major-General Stanley, in the opera, feel it necessary to hide their past by using their new money to purchase a family narrative for themselves.

Gilbert and Sullivan are quintessentially English. As John Revitt points out, their charm lies in their ability to produce witty, not bitter satire; mock the institutions that they hold so dear; and, most importantly, create “a mirror in which the Englishman can privately behold himself and chuckle” (19). Despite its simplicities, Sullivan’s music brings the softening edge of humor to Gilbert’s otherwise harsh criticism. In the Savoy Opera, and in particular *The Pirates of Penzance*, both the music and lyrics are equally important. Gilbert and Sullivan are one of the first pairs of librettists and composers to be listed as a unit. Mozart, Strauss, and Stravinsky – members of the more legitimate opera canon – are rarely associated with Schikaneder,
Hofmannsthal, and Diaghileff, their respective librettists (Revitt 21). By working together in an unmistakably English style, Gilbert and Sullivan combine the establishment of Shakespeare with the limited traditions of Handel. Just like the characters mishearing words like “orphan” and “often,” or “pilot” and “pirate,” the audience hearing a French styled aria, about marital morality, written in a quintessentially English manner or an Italian list song, about an illegitimately qualified member of society, that has been pirated by Sullivan to create a British patter song questions legitimacy, both in music and family.

The Slave of Duty: The Topsy-Turvy World of Penzance

Like all of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas, their story about a group of noble pirates and the untrustworthy middle class has two titles, The Pirates of Penzance and The Slave of Duty. Keeping with the tradition of most scholars and theatrical conventions, I have refered to this opera by its more common name, The Pirates of Penzance. However, the work’s other title, The Slave of Duty, is important. The less popular title illuminates how Gilbert creates a new world in which all the characters are endued with features ill-fitted to their rank and station in life. Revitt points out that “the satire in its final subtlety is that the conventions of society are equally topsy-turvy, that is, they are arbitrary also, and yet in their structure are also logical – indeed, plausible because they are fact” (22). In The Pirates of Penzance the pirates, Frederic, and Mabel all operate under a strict sense of duty that introduces the main conflict of the plot. Thus social upheaval is the only solution for characters stuck in a duty-bound society. This sense of duty becomes the main target for the opera’s satire. What makes the satire humorous is the reality of duty and the way that it influences – in a much less dramatic way – nineteenth century ideas of respectability in family life. Pirates uses humor to show the ridiculousness of English familial
structure, revealing the detrimental side of the stress the English placed on people’s legitimacy, based on their family history. Gilbert draws on ridiculous situations and employs the light-hearted music of Sullivan to sublimate his harsh criticism of Victorian society, and, as is the case with *The Pirates of Penzance*, to criticize the English obsession with the family narrative.

In the topsy-turvy world, Gilbert uses humor to tackle the tragic parts of Victorian life. The ludicrousness of Penzance, a ritzy resort town, as the location for a band of wild, yet duty bound pirates distracts from the fact that the opera is about group of orphans who have turned to piracy to deal with the abuse they have met throughout their lives. As Frederic, the opera’s principle character and main love interest, points out, the pirates “make a point never to molest an orphan,” to which Sam, one of the pirates replies, “of course: we are orphans and know what it is” (150). Here it is slightly unclear what the “it” refers to. Clearly the pirates understand what it is to be an orphan, but it also seems as if Sam knows what it is to be molested.\textsuperscript{11} Although Gilbert’s use of the word most likely was not intended to call up images of sexual molestation, this strong language shows the extent to which society has abused orphans. The pirates’ honor is unrelenting, for they also never attack any party that is weaker than they, which means that every battle they enter, they are inevitably defeated. Just as Penzance is the last town a Victorian would expect to find a dangerous gang of pirates, a gang of orphan pirates is not the group most people would search to find a strong sense of morality and empathy.

*The Pirates of Penzance* has two career songs, one for the Pirate King and the other for Major-General Stanley. “I Am a Pirate King,” establishes the piratical career as socially shunned, but also morally respectable while the Major-General’s song merely highlights his eclectic

\textsuperscript{11} Nineteenth century usage of the word “molested” did differ from our own; however, the modern connotation of “molestation” as a form of sexual harassment slowly came into use at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “molest” was more commonly used to indicate that someone was attacking or injuring another person (“molest, v.”).
knowledge. The Major-General first pirates intellectual property when he introduces himself by singing, “I am a Major-General / and it is- it is a glorious thing/ to be a Major-General” (162) which is melodically identical to the refrain “I am a Pirate King/ and it is- it is a glorious thing/ to be a Pirate King” (151-2). This musical piracy links the two career songs. The introduction of the pirate’s occupation uses words like “cheating” and “sanctimonious” to describe the land, while simultaneously using words like “true” and “brave” in reference to the pirate’s job. The second verse of the Pirate King’s song is thus,

When I sally forth to seek my prey  
I help myself in a royal way.  
I sink a few more ships, it’s true,  
Than a well-bred monarch ought to do;  
But many a king on a first-class throne,  
If he wants to call his crown his own,  
Must manage somehow to get through  
More dirty work than ever I do. (The Pirates of Penzance 152)

While the Major-General steals the Pirate’s melody when he introduces himself, the Pirates, or at least the Pirate King, seemingly appropriates the dialect of the Major-General’s social class. Although occasional informal words, like “sally,” appear in the pirates’ speech, for the most part they speak proper English. What distinguishes the pirates as social and economic minorities is not the way that they sound. In his song, the Pirate King uses the language of his social superiors. The beginning of the second verse is overtly unclear. Even the word “royal” takes on a double meaning. The surface level interpretation of the Pirate King conducting himself “in a royal way” launches a critique on the way that the British elite interacts with their social inferiors. Gilbert and Sullivan often targeted prominent figures in society as the butt of their cultural satire. Thus the idea that royalty would be associated with piracy is not out of the question. In this interpretation, Gilbert degrades royal behavior to the level of the poor pirates;
however, by associating royalty to piracy, Gilbert also elevates the pirates to the level of noble behavior.

The class conflicts continue in the song’s implication that the Pirate King does significantly less dirty work than the nobility, and yet he simultaneously “sinks a few more ships, it’s true/ than a well-bred sailor ought to do” (The Pirates of Penzance 152). The invocation of the British sailor here ties The Pirates of Penzance even closer to H.M.S. Pinafore in which all the male characters in the opera are members of the Queen’s Navy. Pinafore depicts the sailors, particularly Ralph Rackstraw, as highly virtuous men, dedicated to their Queen. In Pirates, British sailors suddenly become associated with piracy. This confusion establishes the most important characteristic of the topsy-turvy world in the opera; it becomes impossible to tell who is the villain and who is the hero. Monica Cohen concludes that this association of the pirates to a well-bred sailor establishes a link between the social elite and piracy both of literature and physical goods. Historically, England was known as a “nation of pirates,” due to its official endorsement of pirates during the 1500s. The revelation at the end of the opera that the pirates of Penzance are all, in fact, noblemen invokes piracy’s close association with English naval history (354). The opera resolves with all the pirates abandoning their piratical identity and assuming their noble “ranks and legislative duties” (The Pirates of Penzance 190). Thus, the opera connects both the noble privateers and impoverished pirates, which means that what makes one person a pirate and another a nobleman is not his actions, but rather his family narrative. In

12 “From the beginning of the seventeenth century when the War of the Spanish Succession was finally over, the distinction between a pirate who loots other ships and a privateer who is hired by a government to loot other ships often rested on the distinction between peacetime and wartime, which is why we see waves of piracy immediately following the end of a war, when ‘those with a taste for maritime violence and robbery’ could no longer indulge it with impunity (Earle 12). Today's pirate might have been yesterday's sailor, the word "pirate" thus emerging as a function of geopolitical shifts.” (Cohen 354)
the topsy-turvy world of Penzance, Gilbert does not reduce his characters to heroes and villains, but rather by their family background on which characters base their social status.

The opening scene of The Pirates of Penzance takes place on the deck of the pirate ship where the crew celebrates Frederic’s 21st birthday. As a part of the opera’s social parody, Frederic was apprenticed to a pirate crew when he was eight years old. Frederic’s nursery maid mistook her instructions and, instead of indenturing him to a pilot she committed him to apprentice a pirate. Again there is a connection between the behavior and customs of the Royal Navy and a band of pirates. During this celebration, Frederic informs them that, once freed from his apprenticeship, it will be his social duty to eradicate the pirates. Just before noon – the time that his obligation to the pirates becomes void – he says,

Individually I love you all with affection unspeakable, but, collectively, I look upon you with a disgust that amounts to absolute detestation. Oh! Pity me, my beloved friends, for such is my sense of duty that, once out of my indentures, I shall feel myself bound to devote myself heart and soul to your extermination. (The Pirates of Penzance 149)

Thus Frederic establishes the main conflict between emotional attachment and legalistic duty. In this scene, Frederic differentiates emotions and the choice of fervent action. Although he loves each of the pirates, his heart and soul is dedicated to the pirates’ destruction. In Pirates, people are duty-bound to a group of people or an idea whereas emotional attachment is a form of individual attachment. Bound by duty and an “affection unspeakable,” the pirates provide an alternative family that is, if not homoerotic, certainly homo-social. Frederic separates his emotions from his sense of duty and expects the same from his piratical friends. Furthermore, Frederic expects the pirates to pity him by separating their love and compassion for their former apprentice from self-preservation. Throughout the course of the opera, the characters – and more specifically wards and orphans – are bound to duty over any form of emotional obligation.
So bound to this moral law, the Pirates of Penzance become easy targets for the ignoble members of the British Navy, who have no shame in continually molesting the orphan pirates. Ultimately, the pirates’ compassion makes their “career” not a lucrative one. Whenever the pirates capture a ship the people on board claim to be orphans. Herein lies one of the greatest ironies of the opera. The pirates, who, unbeknownst to everyone, are noblemen, only attack British naval ships. Historically, English sailors and their piratical counterparts come from the same social class. In *Pirates*, the British Navy evades capture by claiming to be orphans, thus eliciting the pirates’ sympathy. In fact, as Frederic points out that “one would think that Great Britain’s mercantile navy was recruited solely from her orphan asylums – which we know is not the case” (150). Here Gilbert introduces the familial conflict that continues to haunt the pirates throughout the opera. The British Navy, and therefore the British Government, denies those who live outside of traditional familial confines – orphans – acceptance into society. Not only do the British ships lie to avoid capture, and therefore, rob the pirates of their livelihood, but also if “Britain’s mercantile navy was recruited solely from her orphan asylums” as Frederic suggests, the orphans would not be forced into piracy.

In their greatest example of piracy, the Pirate King and Ruth steal Major-General Stanley’s tactics, at the climax of the second act, when they appeal to Frederic’s sense of duty for their own personal gain. According to the terms of Frederic’s apprenticeship, he is bound to the pirates until his 21st birthday, not his 21st year. For most, this semantic subtlety would make no difference, but, as Ruth and the Pirate King reveal, Frederic’s birthday is on the 29th day of February during a Leap Year. Describing Frederic’s predicament, the Pirate King chants,

For some ridiculous reason, to which, however, I’ve no desire to be disloyal, 
Some person in authority, I don’t know who, very likely the Astronomer Royal,\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) The Royal Appointment of the chief astronomer at Greenwich Observatory existed from 1675 to 1972 (Bradley 238).
Has decided that, although for such a beastly month as February, twenty-eight days as a rule are plenty,
One in every four his days shall be reckoned as nine-and-twenty. (176)

In this section, the Pirate King invokes several establishments of authority. In both operatic tradition and Sullivan’s own conventions, text-heavy sections of music are often delivered as recitatives\(^\text{14}\); in this instance, however, the libretto designates it as a chant. By parodying the chant, Sullivan implies worship in the Anglican Church, which created its own form of four-part chant, known as Anglican Chant. Likewise, the text of the chant calls upon the secular authority of Royal appointment. Working together, Gilbert and Sullivan expose two of the major power structures in England. Unlike some of their other critiques of political and religious power, Gilbert and Sullivan resist the urge to give a value judgment on the validity of English institutions of authority, but rather address the emptiness of strict adherence and blind acceptance of the rules and regulations established by such institutions. Despite not understanding the reasons behind a Leap Year, the Pirate King blindly accepts the 29\(^\text{th}\) day of February because it is linked with “some person in authority.” According to the Pirate King, Frederic’s accident of birth is “owing to the agency of some ill-natured fairy.” Critiquing this “clumsy arrangement of days,” the Pirate King suggests that Frederic is a victim of the calendar, and by extension, the powers that assembled it. Regardless of the absurdity of the situation, in the topsy-turvy world ruled by propriety, the Pirate King and Ruth appeal to Frederic’s sense of duty. As a slave to that quality, Frederic feels obliged to fulfill his indentures with the pirates of Penzance until 1940.

In the subsequent duet between Frederic and his betrothed, Mabel, the two soon-to-be parted lovers exclaim the predicament of the situation. In a fit of desperation, the two sing,

\begin{align*}
\text{MABEL:} & \quad \text{Stay, Fred’ric, stay!} \\
\text{FRED:} & \quad \text{Nay, Mabel, nay!}
\end{align*}

\(^{14}\) “A type of vocal writing, normally for a single voice, with the intent of mimicking dramatic speech in song” (Monson).
In this duet, Mabel and Frederic differentiate between duty and law. Despite an absence of legal requirement, Frederic feels it necessary to obey his sense of duty. Throughout the course of the opera, Gilbert associates duty with purity, mercy, and order. Characters that possess and follow a strict sense of moral and social duty are simultaneously the social outcasts—wards, orphans, and pirates—and the people who most closely follow the constructs of a society that does not accept them. Likewise, those bound by a sense of legalistic loyalty to the British Government are, not necessarily evil or bad, but rather incompetent men, unable to execute the tasks that their societal inferiors can. At the end of their duet, Mabel and Frederic sing, “Oh here is love, and here is truth,… {He} will be faithful to {his} sooth/ ‘Till we are wed, and even after” (*The Pirates of Penzance* 181). The addition of the final phrase in the last line implies that society expects something different from someone who is bound by duty than someone who is required by law and religious authority to act a certain way. The two associate love with truth, and an engagement as a promise of fidelity. Yet once legally and religiously bound in matrimony, the characters’ faithfulness becomes optional.

The pirates continually search for the domesticity and the respectability that society has denied them, seeking marriage to escape their rank in life. Unlike *H.M.S. Pinafore*, where Gilbert and Sullivan insist that, “love is a platform upon which all ranks meet” (131), *The Pirates of Penzance* depicts a much more cynical attitude towards marriage between people of different social classes. In Frederic’s marital proposition he asks that one maiden,

Who would not give up willingly
All hope of matrimonial ambition
To rescue such a wretch as I
From his unfortunate position? (The Pirates of Penzance 157)

In this plea, marriage acts as a way both parties might ascend the social ladder. The maiden who would accept Frederic’s proposal would “feel the moral beauty/ of making worldly interests/ subordinate to [a] sense of duty” (157). Frederic’s plea saddles the maidens with the duty to support and elevate the validity of their male counterparts. Likewise, it then becomes men’s job to gain respectability, even if the woman’s “homely face and bad complexion” (157) has led her to accept his proposition. Fortunately for Frederic, dutiful behavior seems to go hand in hand with earthly beauty, and his salvation comes in the form of the beautiful ingénue. When Mabel bursts onto the stage and, taken up with her sense of duty – and, as her sisters suggest, Frederic’s unusual beauty – she accepts his proposition. In doing so, Mabel provides Frederic with a way to escape his poverty, and, what is even worse, his illegitimate position.

Unlike Frederic, the pirates are not, initially, as successful in winning the ladies’ hearts. In a scene that could easily suggest rape, the pirates attempt to sneak up to the women and grab them. Initially, this scene seems to contradict the character of the pirates that Gilbert builds up in the first half of the opera. Despite priding themselves on never molesting orphans, the pirates capture a group of Wards in Chancery and, although, for mercy’s sake, they never attack a party weaker than themselves, they prey upon a group of vulnerable women alone on the beach. Either the pirates are not the slaves of duty that Gilbert has made them up to be, or the group of women on the beach is stronger and a greater force than they. The women are of a higher social class and, therefore have more power than the pirates. In the end of the first act, the pirates relinquish the women, not because the pirates are physically overpowered, but because they respect the rank and station of the wards’ father, who is a Major-General. The pirates’ hesitancy to attack these women further testifies to the power of the familial narrative. The wards’ family status
gives them more power than the orphaned pirates. Indeed, when Mabel calls upon her father’s name to rescue herself and her sister from an indecent marriage with the pirates, her family-based social status acts as her salvation.

**Hardy Lasses: Illegitimate Gender in its Respectable Familial Proper Form**

Although we cannot ignore issues of nineteenth century sexism when examining gender in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Gilbert does intentionally queer the power dynamic between men and women.\(^\text{15}\) Throughout the opera, women assert their intellectual, social, and physical power over their male companions. Unlike their contemporaries, Gilbert and Sullivan were “resolved that [their] plots, however ridiculous, should be coherent; that [their] dialogue should be void of offence; and that on artistic principles no man should play a woman’s part and no woman a man’s” (Revitt 26). This artistic decision made the women on stage attainable to the male gaze while underlining men’s sexuality, which endowed the two acknowledged genders of the nineteenth century with sexual agency.

When Gilbert and Sullivan first introduce the female chorus in *The Pirates of Penzance*, human sexuality becomes the focal point. John Revitt explains that women in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas fit into two basic molds, hyper virtuous or overtly sexual – though the latter are rarely beautiful. Both Frederic’s and the female chorus’s virtue borders on naïveté since neither of them has been exposed to someone of the opposite sex. In what could easily be interpreted as commentary on the Victorian obsession with prudence, each woman, assuming they are completely removed from the male gaze, removes a shoe. The ladies’ accidental immodesty

\(^{15}\) This altered power dynamic is not uncommon in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas. In *Patience* a man falls prey to women’s sexual appetite and raffles himself off to be married. In *Iolanthe*, the female chorus consists of a gaggle of fairies who are both immortal and much more intelligent than their male counterparts. In *Princess Ida*, women take on men’s roles as professors and students.
manages to scandalize themselves and Frederic (Revitt 25). Gilbert and Sullivan first introduce the female chorus by physically removing them from their male counterparts. When Frederic intrudes on the maidens’ privacy, he is a man entering a woman’s world, yet the young maidens sexually objectify Frederic far more than Frederic objectifies them. Throughout their scene together the maidens make constant references to his physical beauty, whereas Frederic only appeals to a “sense of duty” (157). Despite admiring his beauty, none of the women want to marry Frederic. By highlighting feminine sexuality, Gilbert and Sullivan expose the absurdity of the expectation that sexual desires were the result of marriage, thus critiquing a family structure that was based on marital fidelity and sexual purity.

During the young maidens’ debut on the stage, they quickly assume physical power over their surroundings. In their chorus, “Climbing Over Rocky Mountain” the women establish themselves as both powerful and sovereign people. Making its first appearance in *Thespis*,¹⁶ this chorus originally depicted hoards of men and women ascending Mount Olympus where they would rule with their godly power. Although Gilbert adapted the text in order to fit into *The Pirates of Penzance*, his edits barely reached beyond altering gender pronouns and slightly changing the words in one of the wards’ solo. By pirating their own work, Gilbert and Sullivan associate the women of *Pirates* to the gods of Olympus. Textually, the women associate themselves with rugged mountains and god-like sovereignty. Likewise, Sullivan alternates between light bird-like ornamentations in the woodwind instruments, which might suggest nineteenth century views of femininity, and a heavy, lumbering bass line in the strings. By combining lyrical and musical forces, Gilbert and Sullivan first introduce the female chorus in a conflictingly gender-ambiguous manner. These inverted gender roles allow Gilbert and Sullivan

¹⁶ *Thespis* or *The Gods Grown Old* was Gilbert and Sullivan’s first collaboration. The original libretto and score were lost. “Climbing Over Rocky Mountain” is one of its two surviving songs (Bradley 204).
to engage in conversations about power dynamics in the traditional family by pointing out the flaws in assumed male dominance.

Like the American male-transcendentalists of the decades preceding *The Pirates of Penzance*, these women climb through the mountains to reach a place where they might abandon worldly cares. Gender queering comes to a head when Kate, one of the wards, sings,

Far away from toil and care,  
Reveling in fresh sea air,  
Here we live and reign alone  
In a world that’s all our own.  
Here in this our rocky den,  
Far away from mortal men,  
We’ll be queens, and make decrees—  
They may honour them who please. (*The Pirates of Penzance* 155)

During this verse, the melody shifts when Sullivan trades the high-pitched chirping in the upper stringed and woodwind instruments for the lower pitched cello. Furthermore, unlike the song’s first solo, Kate’s melody is noticeably lower. Textually, the song shifts from a leisurely hike to a place where women are sovereign and making decrees. Likewise, the maidens now establish themselves in a “rocky den,” which is vastly different from “[t]hreading long and leafy mazes/dotted with unnumbered daisies” (155) that occupied them just a few lines before.

Although our Victorian forbears were not as concerned with the gendered nature of words like “men” or “mankind” as modern writers might be, Gilbert intentionally plays with the gender of this terminology. In the song, the true gender implications of the phrase “mortal men” are ambiguous. “Men” could quite possibly be a generic term for all people, or it could be Gilbert’s intentional choice to establish the divide between men and maidens. During “Climbing Over Rocky Mountain,” and the following scene, the women create a schism between themselves and “mortal men.” The maidens’ chorus ends with the following conversation;

EDITH: … I wonder where papa is. We have left him ever so far behind.
ISABEL: Oh, he will be here presently! Remember poor papa is not as young as we are, and we have come over a rather difficult country.
KATE: But how thoroughly delightful it is to be so entirely alone! Why, in all probability we are the first human beings who ever set foot on this enchanting spot.
ISABEL: Except the mermaids…
KATE: Who are only human beings down to the waist.
EDITH: And who can’t be said strictly to set foot anywhere. Tails they may, but feet they cannot. (The Pirates of Penzance 156)

Most importantly, by using the word “human beings” instead of “men,” or even “mankind,” Gilbert deliberately plays with gender. In conjunction with Kate’s solo, separating the wards from mortal men allows the audience to view women (or at least two Victorian men’s idea of women) removed from their male companions. Not only does this scene expose women interacting free from male dominance, but also gaining their independence through their own agency. Through their hardness, the women physically overtake their father. In an inversion of social roles a group of young maidens are stronger than a man in charge of the British Military. The women also engage in the same definition debates that occupy their male counterparts throughout the play. The logic and rhetoric that the young women use to discuss the slight differences between mermaids and human beings proves as complicated as the reasoning employed when the Pirate King informs Frederic of the nature of his indentures. By inverting gender roles and empowering women to engage in similar types of activities as their father, Gilbert and Sullivan call into question power distribution within the traditional family structure. When the physical and mental prowess of the young women overtakes that of their adoptive father, it further works to undermine the Major-General’s authority.

By separating women from men, Gilbert toys with the traditional familial structure of Victorian England. He creates women who are intellectually equal to men and, to an extent, more powerful than men. Although I have primarily focused on the female chorus’ appearance in the first act, throughout the opera, they prove their intellectual superiority. While the Major-General
is consumed by emotions at the beginning of the second act, his daughters talk sensibly to him. The policemen shake in their boots, while the maidens militantly sing about heroism. Although Gilbert and Sullivan perpetuate the misogynist archetype of women as either sexual temptresses or pure virgins, they endow both their young virgins and middle-aged temptresses with characteristics not normally associated with their rank. The young virgins in *The Pirates of Penzance* assume a rank above men, both socially and physically, while proving to be intellectually equal to men. They provide a means of salvation and respectability to helpless men, and, in turn become the targets of the pirates who never attack anyone who is weaker than they. Although empowering women, *Pirates* also links women’s influence to their roles in domestic affairs. Like the Major-General, feminine authority is a result of their family. Furthermore, women, like the virtuous Mabel, provide men with an escape from societal marginalization.

**Badass Nannies: Melodramatic Oddities**

A complete understanding of *The Pirates of Penzance* cannot occur without examining Ruth. Victorian theatre grew in respectability over the course of the nineteenth century. As a result, “a standard feature of Victorian theatre, [was] an idealistic dramatization of the family bond deemed so important in Victorian domestic life” (Booth 155). Despite the stress that their contemporaries placed on wholesome family life and strong parental ties, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates* does little to exonerate the Victorian family. Completely void of a natural father, and riddled with faulty patriarchs – like the corrupt Major-General, the socially indecent Pirate King, and the cowering Chief of Police – the opera, likewise, refuses to display a proper matriarch. Ruth is the opera’s only maternal figure. Far from pure, throughout the opera Ruth continues to make an appearance as Frederic’s middle-aged, sexually aggressive, nanny. She preys on
Frederic’s naïveté by lying about her age and beauty, attempts to seduce Frederic, and helps the Pirate King take advantage of Frederic’s sense of duty. Despite her untrustworthiness, Ruth proves to be the missing link in the chain of the opera’s legitimacy.

Acting simultaneously as Frederic’s mother figure, nanny, scorned lover, condemner, and salvation, Ruth represents conventions of wealthy families while challenging the nature of the traditional family. During her first aria, Ruth cements her role as Frederic’s caretaker by singing,

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.

... Mistaking my instructions, which within my brain did gyrate,
I took and bound this promising boy apprentice to a pirate.
A sad mistake it was to make and doom him to a vile lot.
I bound him to a pirate – you! – instead of to a pilot.(148-9)

Ruth’s allusion to Frederic’s father is the only time in the opera that someone mentions a direct parental figure, and yet she immediately undermines his authority by assuming the duty of binding Frederic to the apprenticeship. Here Ruth deflates the image of domestic affection that traditional Victorian melodrama attempts to build up. Frederic has neither a doting father nor angelic mother – traditional stock characters in Victorian melodrama – but rather a nurse. Williams suggests “Frederic’s mistaken career is determined in the nursery, where parental authority is absent… Parental absence… usually suggests the vulnerable modern subject, no longer covered by patriarchal protection” and that “Ruth is a surrogate parent, an oblique and inadequate substitute for a grounding authority missing in the modern world” (137).

Yet Ruth does not merely act in the place of Frederic’s parents; she acts as his father and mother. The ultimate task of parentage falls into her lap. Although Frederic’s apprenticeship is his father’s idea, it is entirely up to Ruth to make it happen. Likewise, Ruth, and not Frederic’s father, must live with the consequences of her mistake. In her confession, Ruth manages to
condemn the lifestyle of the wealthy families that ushered their children into the arms of nannies and governesses, even though those were the same people that came to the theatres to watch melodramatic shows that played with “strong emotion, both pathetic and potentially tragic, low comedy, romantic coloring… domestic sentiment, domestic setting and … the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice” (Booth 151).

Gilbert’s initial critiques target wealthy parents for leaving their children in the care of inadequate nurses, and yet Ruth’s song also acts as a caution against such hasty judgments. Although Ruth is quick to condemn herself as a “stupid nurserymaid” (149), she later sings “a nurserymaid is not afraid of what you people call work./ So I made up my mind to go as a kind of piratical maid-of-all-work” (149). Here, Ruth asserts the value of the work she does in the context of the pirate ship. The “you” that she refers to is the group of pirates on the ship, which, as the audience learns later, are all, actually noblemen. By using this phrase, Ruth trivializes the noblemen’s concept of work.

In a side comment, Williams points out that the pirates can never be “ruthless” as long as Ruth remains with them (136). Ruth’s name is much more than a pun, but rather a metaphor. As I will discuss later in Patience, Gilbert enjoys using characters name as a clue to the greater theme of an opera. In the case of The Pirates of Penzance, the instances of ruthlessness are almost exclusively directed towards Ruth on account of her age and physical appearance. Yet Ruth eventually delivers Frederic and the pirates from their undesirable fate. In their duet, Frederic accuses Ruth of deceiving him by telling him that she was pretty and preying upon his innocence. He realizes her lies when they encounter a gaggle of young and beautiful maidens. After this encounter, Ruth and Frederic sing,

**RUTH**
Don’t, beloved master,

**FREDERIC**
Yes, your former master
The two voices sing phonetically similar words which suggests that the two are in harmony with one another. Although musically they compliment one another, Ruth and Frederic’s perspectives completely contradict each other. In Ruth’s mind, despite her constant love, Frederic has crushed her, leaving her with no money or inheritance. Meanwhile, Frederic refers to himself as Ruth’s “former master” who “saves [her] from disaster.” Most importantly, Ruth is already in the past to him as he looks towards the pretty young ladies, and yet he has the audacity to prop himself up as her salvation. In driving Ruth away, Frederic gains a more socially acceptable suitor, and it is not until the end that Ruth reasserts her authority.

Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas tend to follow the conventions of two types of the theatre popular in Victorian England, the melodrama and the extravaganza. *H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance,* and *The Ruddigore* are all examples of melodramatic operas. According to Carolyn Williams, a melodrama usually ends with “a sudden, purportedly realistic ending, in which a document is produced or a secret confessed, revealing social identities and relations that have been hidden or unknown” (5). The finale of the opera finds all the characters on stage with the pirates of Penzance getting to ready to attack Major-General Stanley for his deception, the cowering policemen preparing their defense, Ruth pleading Frederic for his protection, Frederic dutifully explaining his obligation, and the wards poking their noses into the whole affair. Just as it seems as though the pirates will vanquish the Major-General, the police chief leaps foreword and sings “we charge you [the pirates] yield, in Queen Victoria’s name!” to which, the Pirate
King explains that they “yield at once, with humble mien,/ because with all [their] faults, [they]
love their Queen” (190). Just as the policeman begin to weep (presumably due to their loyalty to
their queen) and the useless Major-General Stanley encourages the policemen to punish the
pirates, Ruth enters and sings, “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” (190).
Suddenly, the entire atmosphere of the show changes. Unlike *H.M.S. Pinafore*\(^\text{17}\), the finale of
*Pirates* does not switch the power dynamic between two people, but rather elevates the pirates,
to the level of the Major-General. As a result, Major-General Stanley gives all of his daughters
away to marry the pirates. The curtain falls on the wards singing a reprise of Mabel’s aria, “Poor
Wandering One” while embracing the pirates.

Gilbert creates the perfect ending to a melodrama, and yet small details act to separate
*The Pirates of Penzance* from a traditional melodrama. Throughout the opera, Ruth’s character
challenges the opera’s place in the traditional melodrama. Although she reveals a great secret at
the end of the show, unlike Buttercup’s revelation at the end of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, Ruth has no
claim to this knowledge. She only associated herself with the pirates of Penzance after
mistakenly indenturing Frederic to their band, so Ruth has no knowledge of the pirates before
this point. Furthermore, the pirates do nothing to confirm their new designation. Ruth merely
sings the narrative of the pirates’ nobility into being without any basis for her claims. Thus, Ruth
becomes a conduit of illegitimate authority. In an opera that focuses on – if not obsesses over –
familial lineage, Ruth’s revelation and its subsequent acceptance indicates that family is nothing
more than a narrative, and what separates the noble from the ignoble is not a lone lineage of

\(^{17}\) The finale of *H.M.S. Pinafore* reveals that the opera’s hero, a British tar named Ralph, and his lover’s father,
Captain Corcoran were switched a birth, thus, Ralph is actually the captain, and the captain is actually a British tar.
respectable ancestors, nor is it pure and virtuous behavior, but rather a story that an unattractive, middle-aged, nanny can create.

Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaboration presents *The Pirates of Penzance* as an opera about what the audience hears far more than what happens in the plot. While Ruth sings the pirates’ status into existence, the opera is full of other instances where the way in which characters say something affects their actions. Although Gilbert uses similar patterns of speech and jokes in all of his works with Sullivan, the heavy reliance on homonyms is unique to *The Pirates of Penzance*. Whether it is Ruth confusing the word “pilot” with the word “pirate” or the Major-General confusing the work “often” and “orphan,” these misheard phrases challenge the observers to think about what the characters are saying, least their thoughtless acceptance of the plot lead to devastating consequences, much in the same way that Ruth misunderstanding “pilot” forced Frederic into indentures. Sullivan, with his music, achieves the same effect that Gilbert does with his words. By emulating musical techniques from other countries with recognizably English style, Sullivan creates something that on the surface is entertaining, and yet, underneath sounds as out of place as a nursery maid on a pirate’s ship. Employing the turns of phrase – both musically and literarily – into a play about characters that live outside of the family norms, I argue that Gilbert and Sullivan expose Victorian familial sentiment as nothing more than a flimsy façade for the sake of propriety.
Chapter II
Mothers, Great Aunts, and Puppy Love
The Aesthetics of Relationships

BUN.: Suppose... for one moment I were to curse you? [GROSVENOR quails.]

... GROS. [wildly]: But you would not do it – I am sure you would not. [Throwing himself at BUNTHORNE's knees, and clinging to him.] Oh, reflect, reflect! You had a mother once. BUN.: Never!
GROS.: Then you had an aunt! [BUNTHORNE affected.] Ah! I see you had! By the memory of that aunt, I implore you to pause ere you resort to this last fearful expedient. Oh, Mr. Bunthorne, reflect, reflect! (Patience 239)

In their opera, Patience, Gilbert and Sullivan only mention family twice; in fact, Bunthorne's aunt is the closest relative to anyone in the opera. A conflict between two aesthetic poets has come to a head as Reginald Bunthorne, the fleshly poet, threatens Archibald Grosvenor with magic. Gilbert and Sullivan set each of their operas in a society that acts as a caricature of a particular aspect of Victorian life. The humor of their opera derives from the sundry ways that the characters strictly obey societal constructs, typically to the point of absurdity. Bunthorne’s aunt acts as a substitute for his mother, thus pulling into question the role of a mother in her child’s life. Like many of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas, it has a notable absence of conventional family. Although the opera creates many different forms of alternative family, no character has any familial ties. While keeping propriety at the forefront, Patience satirizes traditional family structures and lifts up alternative relationships.

In order to dissuade Bunthorne from doing something wicked, Grosvenor attempts to invoke Bunthorne’s mother. Here the family – and particularly motherhood – represents socially correct behavior. Grosvenor’s plea emphasizes the assumed importance of family in the social structure, yet, as Bunthorne reveals, this construct is absent from his life. Although maternal mortality was more common in the 1880s, it was still different to say that one’s mother died, as opposed to saying that one has never had a mother. In the libretto, Grosvenor’s assertion “you
had a mother once” is not a question; he assumes that the conventional family narrative applies to Bunthorne. By denying his mother, Bunthorne also distances himself from the family. Gilbert opens the door for a conversation about alternative families, raising the question of both where Bunthorne came from, but also who raised him. Grosvenor quickly sidesteps these questions by ignoring Bunthorne’s father and inquiring about Bunthorne’s aunt. In this way, Grosvenor isolates the patriarch from morality, suggesting that men’s morality derives from their relationship with women, while reemphasizing the importance of familial compassion. In Patience, Gilbert and Sullivan continually call attention to what is absent from the opera’s plot. Even the opera’s second title, Bunthorne’s Bride, ironically directs attention to the fact that, in the end, no one will be his bride (Williams 167).

The entirety of Patience can be summarized in Bunthorne stepping aside to avoid the untidy question of his lineage; Gilbert and Sullivan continually allude to societal alternatives before closing the door on divergent behavior. Much of this divergent behavior centers on marriage as a plot device. Indeed, Patience accepts love and marriage as the basis for conventional family life. Thus by pointing out the flaws in marriage, Gilbert and Sullivan show the incongruities of traditional family conventions. Aestheticism provides an alternative to these oppressive familial conventions, where briefly, characters like the lovesick maidens, Grosvenor, and the Dragoons can indulge in the sensual reality of aesthetic relationships, before their sense of duty and propriety get the better of them and they resign themselves to dutifully unpleasant relationships. These relationships are the basis for the conventional family structure that Grosvenor and Bunthorne invoke during their conversation. Therefore we cannot separate the question of Gilbertine love from the issue of Victorian domesticity. Thus Patience is about all of
the relationships that the characters allude to as an alternative to the traditional family before they accept the reality of Victorian morality when they get married.

In *Patience*, Aestheticism becomes a forum to discuss the art of family and marriage by inverting social norms and expectations. For the majority of *Patience*, women are the ones with sexual agency, chasing around the attractive men and shunning those who do not live up to their unnatural standards of beauty. Men, on the other hand, are nothing more than the objects of affection, unable to either win or reject the maidens’ love. By inverting traditional gender roles, Aestheticism offers an opportunity to open the conversation about relationships that dwell outside the bonds of hetero-normative, Anglican marriage. The middle portion of the opera opens up the possibility for family alternatives before the finale abruptly slams the door shut with the mass marriage. These marriages only occur once Grosvenor and the young ladies adopt acceptable – albeit insufferable – manners. While Gilbert and Sullivan wished to examine social constructs surrounding gender and family, they were equally committed to reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Yet I argue that the ending merely operates as a cheap façade that, for the sake of propriety, quickly brushes the untidy realities of Victorian family life under the rug, but not before showing them off. By examining what Gilbert and Sullivan omit from *Patience*, we can better understand it as a commentary on the actions of marriage and family. In satirizing Victorian poetry and Aestheticism, Gilbert and Sullivan deflate marriage to nothing more than a series of half-hearted actions that stem from an unpleasant social duty.

**Family Alternatives: the High and Low Church Divides**

Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera *Patience* clearly parodies the Aesthetic Movement of mid-nineteenth century England. Tempted by the folly of Aestheticism, the young ladies, except
Patience, follow the out-of-reach poet, Reginald Bunthorne, who resembles Algernon Charles Swinburne, both in dress and untraditional portrayals of masculinity. He appears to scorn the female gaze, while focusing on flowers, poetry, personal physique, and other tropes of Victorian Aestheticism. Concerned with the efficacy of their own aesthetic, Colonel Calvery and his fellow Dragoons become frustrated when the effeminate poet monopolizes the attentions of their former fiancées, challenging the prowess of their traditional masculinity. *Patience* displays characters, especially the twenty lovesick maidens, consumed by both the aesthetic of love and the love of Aestheticism. By sprinkling in references to the sensual and homoerotic stereotypes of Roman Catholicism, Gilbert and Sullivan open the conversation of *Patience* as not only a commentary on English Aestheticism but also a response to the homoeroticism in Anglo-Catholicism.

The growing aesthetic movement was not merely limited to literature and art, but also was closely associated to the Oxford Movement within the Church of England. This movement, beginning in the 1830s, sought to incorporate Roman Catholic traditions of worship into Anglican liturgy, giving birth to Anglo-Catholicism. The resulting worship embraced daily mass, affirming the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, increasingly elaborate services, the reinstitution of liturgical vestments, burning incense, and emphasized seven – as opposed to two – sacraments. While High Church Anglicanism is ritualistic, Broad Church and Low Church tendencies – which embrace more aspects of traditional Anglican worship – were much more socially accepted in English society. Members of the Oxford Movement placed a greater emphasis on ministering to the poor and destitute than the Church of England had done for the past century (Pickering 67). As a result, High Church Anglicans established themselves as orthodox in both liturgy and outward ministry. The Oxford Movement and Aestheticism go hand

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18 Clothing used during the celebration of Holy Communion, usually extremely elaborate. These include chasubles, copes, and miters.
in hand. Jamie Horrocks points out “certain gestures, poses, expressions, and body types that visually align the male aesthete with his pictorial antecedent, the Ritualist” (3). The word, “Ritualist,” was an insult that Low Churchmen would often throw at Anglo-Catholics. Horrocks reveals that male Aestheticism — and by extension, Anglo-Catholicism — is strongly linked to physical actions and appearances. Thus, the two nineteenth century trends became a set of actions and appearances more than a philosophy or doctrine. Furthermore, both the literary Aesthetic Movement and Anglo-Catholicism became an unofficial community for male homosexuals.\(^{19}\)

David Hilliard explains that For many homosexual men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Anglo-Catholicism provided a set of institutions and religious practices through which they could express their sense of difference in an oblique and symbolical way. A large number of religious and social rebels were similarly attracted to Anglo-Catholicism at this time. (184)

Thus, the High Church Anglicanism counterculture provided a safe haven for social and political outliers. The predominant culture of Low Church Victorian Anglicanism provided little opportunity for those that operated outside of a Protestant, upper class, and hetero-normative family. While Gilbert and Sullivan neither advocate for nor condone homosexuality, I believe that they used what many Victorians considered to be a sexually deviant religious and artistic movement to critique the overly oppressive construct of Low Church Anglicanism. Both Bunthorne and Patience display the shortcomings of traditional familial conventions. The two characters have a closer relationship with their aunts than with their own absent mothers. While Gilbert and Sullivan mock Aestheticism, they also discard the unforgiving Low Church morals

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\(^{19}\) Most research pertaining to homosexuality and Anglo-Catholicism unfortunately only mentions male homosexuality. The existence of lesbian Anglo-Catholicism is considerably more rare, but does exist, although scholarship surrounding it does not. One example is Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper, commonly called Michael Field. I suggest that this void stems back to the idea that women do not have sexual agency. For the purposes of this paper, I will often refer to male homosexuality as merely “homosexuality,” not in a way to dismiss female sexuality, but rather because Gilbert and Sullivan’s depiction of alternative sexuality only focuses on men.
that reduce romantic relationships to nothing more than a duty and dismiss alternative families, such as aunts and homo-social communities. While Aestheticism provides the characters with an opportunity to have romantic relationships based solely on love and emotions, Low Church marriage recognizes the reality of worldly duty. In *Patience*, aesthetic romantic love is shallow while dutiful familial love is miserable. Therefore, Gilbert and Sullivan try to find alternative relationships to the broken societal model, while still living within Victorian confines of sexual and social propriety.

Although the opera never blatantly mentions homosexuality or high churchmanship, it is full of subtle hints that suggest that both are important in the social commentary of the opera. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 forbade references to sex, sexuality, or religion in theatrical productions (Booth 146); it is therefore unsurprising that *Patience* merely alludes to Anglo-Catholicism and questions of male homosexuality. Examined allegorically, each character, or set of characters, represents a certain group in English society. The Officers of the Dragoon Guards act as a symbol of obtuse traditional masculinity. As both members of the British military and the male chorus, these men represent duty of mankind, and in particular, lower-middle class men. Neither attached to Aestheticism, nor their careers as army men, the Dragoons represent the ideal Englishman; dedicated to his queen, willing to work, and acutely interested in the lovely ladies with whom he is acquainted. The Dragoon’s group of fiancées represents the dangers of newly found notions of romantic love. These women pine over an unachievable man, and yet their love is easily transferable to another, provided he is more unattainable. The women abandon their fiancés, pursue a man who deviates from the current social norms, and betray their traditional Anglican sensibilities by adopting the tropes of Anglo-Catholicism. These ladies not only represent the follies of female Aestheticism, but also the allure of infidelity. For the women of
the play, one can only be “in love” when separated from the object of her love. Finally Patience, the ingénue, and Bunthorne, the man that loves her, represent logical and robust Low Church Anglicanism set in conflict with the emotional and aesthetic Anglo-Catholicism. By separating the characters into four different categories – traditional masculinity and femininity and modern fads of masculinity and femininity – Gilbert and Sullivan examine the parts of a traditional family. Yet in this allegory, the most cohesive relationship does not form between the Dragoons and the maidens, but rather within each category. Shunning traditional expectations, the men and women in the play use their romantic interests to form homo-social bonds with one another.

Most of the existing theories about Patience center on Bunthorne’s character as a parody of, if not Oscar Wilde himself, the aesthetic movement that he belonged to, and by association, male homosexuality. Bunthorne becomes a beacon of what the opera calls, “vegetable love.” During his patter song, Bunthorne explains how one might gain the admiration of others, exposing his eccentricities as nothing more than a ploy for attention. He sings,

And everyone will say,
When you walk your flowery way,
‘If he’s content with a vegetable love which certainly would not suit me,
Why what a particularly pure young man this pure young man must be! (Patience 209)

The “flowery way” references an earlier line in the song, “if you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily, in your mediaeval hand” (209). Bunthorne’s obsession with lilies seems to be a direct reference to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who viewed them as a symbol of purity. In dress, Bunthorne also resembled Wilde’s unmistakable style. Pictured above is an illustration of the original Bunthorne and on the proceeding page is an image of Oscar Wilde. The two men are
strikingly similar, yet when *Patience* debuted in 1881, Wilde was little more than an obscure poet. Carolyn Williams argues that, “*Patience*... informed the public figure of Wilde more than the figure of Wilde informed *Patience*... Gilbert served as Wilde’s dresser on the world-historic stage” (167).

As a relatively young poet, Wilde owes much of his international fame to Richard D’Oyly Carte, Gilbert and Sullivan’s producer. As the owner of the Savoy Theatre – which was built for the express purpose of holding *Patience* (Williams 151) – Carte acted as the businessman behind all but one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s full-length operas. Motivated to launch a tour of *Patience* in the United States, Carte needed Americans to be familiar with the movement that the opera parodied. In England, people like Algernon Charles Swinburne had already established the Aesthetic movement. Swinburne was known for writing about unconventional sex and improper social behaviors ("Swinburne, Algernon Charles"). Americans, however, had little exposure to the Aesthetic Movement. As a solution, Carte hired the unknown Wilde to travel to America, conducting lectures in major cities²⁰ that would eventually welcome the American tour of *Patience* (Williams 165). By alluding to Wilde and Swinburne, Bunthorne lives outside of the traditional family structure. For the characters in *Patience*, family – and in particular marriage – is about the outward appearance of love much more than it is about inward familial affection. The pining ladies and Dragoon Gaurds act the way they do because it matches the preconceived image of what love looks like. Indeed, their obsession with physical appearance and actions turns family into art and aesthetics, much in the same way that the Major-General turns an appropriated narrative into family history.

²⁰ This tour included stops in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Leadville.
The opera’s title character, Patience, challenges social assumptions about family in a completely different way. She is, in many ways, the antithesis of Bunthorne. While Bunthorne spends his time in idleness and thought, Patience is employed as a milkmaid. Carolyn Williams explains that Patience’s occupation likely parodies the pastoral cliché of “a milkmaid simple to the point of simple-mindedness” (152) while simultaneously “mock[ing] the typical heroine of melodrama, the central object of desire, who provides the motive for the plot, yet remains oddly blank except when testifying to her own purity” (153). Far from being merely pious, Patience’s piety borders on absurdity. While Gilbert and Sullivan parody Anglo-Catholic deviance from social norms, Patience and the Guards of the Dragoon serve as a warning against accepting traditional concepts of family and relationships in Low or Broad Church Anglicanism. The male chorus and main ingénue play into Low Church models of love to the point of absurdity in the same way that Bunthorne embraces Aestheticism. Void of any conventional family structure, Patience takes place in the wake of their failure. The Dragoons and their former fiancées – who are now the Twenty Lovesick Maidens – are examples of failed romantic love. Likewise, Patience’s childhood crush on Grosvenor has evolved into a complicated and oppressive decision between perusing her passion or resigning herself to an unhappy duty-bound relationship with a man she actively dislikes.

If Bunthorne and his fellow Aestheticists represent Anglo-Catholicism, then it follows that Patience is the embodiment of staunch Low Church Protestantism taken to its extreme. Not only is she the only character with solid employment, but she also continually sets herself apart from her aesthetic peers by her obsessive practicality. Like Frederic and Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Patience often equates love with duty, and approaches matters of the heart as matters
of the law. As a true Protestant, upon realizing that she is neglecting her duty by her celibacy, she says,

   It’s perfectly dreadful to think of the appalling state I must be in! I had no idea that love was a duty. No wonder they all look so unhappy! Upon my word, I hardly like to associate with myself. I don’t think I’m respectable. I’ll go at once and fall in love with... a stranger! (Patience 212-3)

The continuous theme of love as a duty and a symbol of propriety draw a parallel to St. John Rivers’ proposal to Jane in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, published in 1847. Here love is depicted as Jane’s duty, not only to St. John, the man who lifted her out of destitution, but also as a good Christian woman. As a part of his proposal, St. John says, “God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service” (Bronte 407). In his proposal, Rivers associates love with labor and good works. Thus, Gilbert sets Patience in a society that draws distinct lines between prudent and imprudent love. While Bunthorne is an example of Anglo-Catholic self-indulgent deviancy from the socially acceptable Anglo-Christian and hetero-normative love, Gilbert resigns Patience to a dutifully miserable relationship common in Low Church ideals of propriety.

**Love’s Patient Acts**

   “You can’t get high aesthetic taste, like trousers, ready made” (Patience 234), or at least, that is what the Duke, Colonel, and Major of the Dragoon Guard seem to think. To add to the scathing parody of the Aesthetic movement, the three symbols of traditional masculinity attempt to adopt the poetic Aestheticism that was so effective with the young maidens. In a trio, the three of them explain the peculiarities of acting aesthetic. Although they assert that Aestheticism,
unlike trousers, is not pre-manufactured, the rest of characters seem to adopt this persona and discard it with ease. For the characters in *Patience*, their actions stem from a specific identity; Bunthorne and the lovesick maidens do not act aesthetic in order that they might become an aesthete, but rather choose to be an aesthetic and act accordingly. Likewise, Patience does not *act* virtuously to become dutiful but rather *is* dutiful, and therefore she must act virtuously. For the Dragoons, their heterosexual masculine identity is that which transcends all other categories. Throughout the opera, they continually alter their persona solely to gain the love of young ladies. Unlike Bunthorne – who seeks the *admiration* of the young women – the Dragoons are keen to be in relationship with the women. The Dragoons originally adopted the British uniform because it “has been as successful in the courts of Venus as on the field of Mars” (*Patience* 206) yet the three most important men abandon their uniform for Aestheticism so that they might be popular with the young ladies. Although they cannot properly emulate the aesthetic actions, their attempt is successful in winning the shallow affections of the maidens.

Through her naïveté, Patience inadvertently differentiates between socially accepted forms of love and illegitimate types of relationships. Patience’s character is defined by an absence of love and her obsession with dutiful works. When she makes her debut on stage, Patience immediately establishes her aversion to romantic relationships, singing “I thank thee, Love, thou comest not to me!/ Far happier I, free from thy ministration, /Than dukes or duchesses who love can be” (*Patience* 197). By both using the archaic “thou” form and differentiating between herself and the “dukes and duchesses” in love, she separates herself from all of the other people in the opera. Ironically, despite both Bunthorne and the pining women’s attempts to be “early English” and reject modernity, it is Patience who uses medieval speech both in her first recitative and her subsequent aria.
While Patience initially claims that she, free from the ministrations of love, is happier than people in much more exulted ranks, Patience later reveals to Angela, one of the pining ladies, that she has loved one person in her life,

ANG.: Noble girl! But is it possible that you have never loved anybody?
PA.: Yes, one... my great-aunt –
ANG.: Great-aunts don’t count.
PA.: Then there’s nobody. At least – no, nobody. Not since I was a baby. But that doesn’t count, I suppose.
ANG.: I don’t know. Tell me about it. (Patience 211)

In the following duet, Patience tells about a childhood crush she had when she was four years old on her playmate. Despite Patience’s continual assertions that he was nothing more than her juvenile sweetheart, Angela asserts that “spite of all [her] pains,/ the interesting fact remains –/
He was a little boy” and assures Patience that her story is an “old, old tale of Cupid’s touch” (212). When Patience later comes across the object of her childhood crush, she finds that he has become an aesthetic idyllic poet and her affection becomes the central point of the plot.

Angela and Patience’s conversation delineated between legitimate and illegitimate relationship by discrediting domestic affection in favor of heterosexual puppy love. According to Angela, the affection that Patience feels for her great-aunt does not even count as love. Notably, this scene both displays an absence of family life. Patience’s first example of love is not heterosexual affection, nor is it even a member of her immediate family, but rather a distant relative. Gilbert often places his main characters, particularly women, in alternative families. The main female characters in The Pirates of Penzance, Iolanthe, Ruddigore, Utopia Limited, and The Mikado all come from some form of family that deviates from social norms. Given Gilbert’s history of queering the family structure, it follows that Patience, too, comes from an untraditional family. Unlike Ruth, Frederic’s alternative mother figure in The Pirates of Penzance, whose authority is blindly accepted, Angela dismisses the validity of affection between Patience and her
aunt while recognizing her childhood sweetheart as legitimate love. While Grosvenor links Bunthorne’s morality with his family’s matriarch, Angela discredits Patience’s relationship with her aunt. Although family is the basis of morality, here conventional romantic love is valid and familial ties do not count, which suggests that Angela believes that family, as an institution, is illegitimate.

**Sexual Duty**

*Patience*, as an opera about human behavior, would not be complete without mentioning sex. During the story, sex influences most of the characters. Each person – with the exception of Patience – spends the entire opera perusing their sexual desires. Patience and the Dragoons, as representations of traditional gender roles, align with the traditional narrative about Victorian sexuality. Patience, in her simplicity and beauty, attracts all the men of the play, in particular the two poets. Yet, as Carolyn Williams points out that Patience has “never loved” and “remains oddly blank except when testifying to her own purity” (153). She becomes a symbol of virtue while screaming at the least implication of impropriety. Gilbert often uses the false dichotomy between virtue and sexual promiscuity to satirize Victorian propriety that borders on prudishness. The Dragoons, on the other hand, red-blooded military men, sing a career song about adopting their uniform because

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...every beauty
Will feel it her duty
To yield to its glamour at once.
They will see that I’m freely gold-laced
In a uniform handsome and chaste –
But the peripatetics
Of long-haired aesthetics
Are very much more to [women’s] taste –
    Which I never counted upon,
When I first put this uniform on! (Patience 207)
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Although Bunthorne, along with the rest of the Aesthetic Movement, is associated with effeminacy, the military men are equally obsessed with their own aesthetic, which is tied up, not only with their masculinity, but also their propriety.

While the men’s uniform acts as a symbol of their chastity, the opera’s women seem less concerned about their own virtue. In the song, the women are the ones who “yield to [the uniform’s] glamour at once.” This language implies that the women are the ones who give up their purity, while the uniform remains “handsome and chaste.” If the Dragoon’s uniform is “handsome and chaste” but the uniform no longer appeals to the women, it suggests that neither does chastity. The Twenty Lovesick Maidens no longer pine over masculinity, but rather the out-of-reach poet who has, as Lady Jane says, “come over us. He has come among us, and he has idealized us” (*Patience* 204). Here Bunthorne’s presence is rife with sexual undertones. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the sexual connotation of the phrase “to come” originated in 1604. While Gilbert might not have intended this innuendo, the phrase had sexual connotations even in the 1880s (“come, v.”). Using Bunthorne as the sexual deviant allows them to subtly examine relationships, both familial and sexual, that depart from the norm.

All of the operas characters establish the connection between love and duty, especially where women are concerned. Notably, Patience believes that love, in order to be true, must be utterly selfless. It then follows that love must be a burden, and she, therefore resigns herself to “loving” the self-indulgent and insufferable poet, Bunthorne, instead of the idyllic poet, Grosvenor, who was the object of her childhood love. Patience never has a spoken public declaration of love, and yet hidden in the chaos of the Act I Finale, she sings,

List Reginald while I confess
A love that’s all unselfishness;
That’s unselfish, goodness knows,
You won’t dispute it, I suppose.  
For you are hideous – undersized,  
And everything that I’ve despised,  
And I shall love you, I presume,  
Until I sink into the tomb!\(^2\) (Patience 223)

This exclamation is Patience’s only real declaration of love – except for when she later exclaims “Oh Reginald” (243) at the end of Act II – and yet it is completely incomprehensible from the audience’s perspective. Herein lies a perfect example of Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaboration at its best. The Girls, Grosvenor, Bunthorne, and the Dragoons, all mask Patience’s declaration by singing completely different words to the same brisk melody. Examining a score published in 1881 by Hitchcock Publishing House reveals that Patience deviates from the melody only twice during the song. She holds an extended scream on a high A, an octave above most of what the maidens sing, while they declare their love. Shortly after this, she sings, “I shall love,” again singing significantly higher than anyone else (Sullivan 81-2). This musical setting results in chaos that drowns out women’s complaints, while highlighting feelings and emotions, notably hetero-normative love, that reinforce existing social standards. Furthermore, Patience, and, indeed, most of the young women, sing so high that their words disappear as the singers must focus more on airflow at the expense of diction. In a form of tragic irony, the women’s physical voices actually rob them of their symbolic voice in the song. While Sullivan typically ends each act with similarly high vocals for the young women, the entire chorus usually sings the same words. In Patience, however, the women are singing something completely different from their male counterparts. By the end of the first act of the opera, Sullivan’s music makes only the words of traditional masculinity stand out, while the Dragoons sing; “now is not this ridiculous, and is not this preposterous” (Patience 223). The audience only hears what supports the

\(^2\) Although the last four lines appear in the original libretti, it has not appeared in any score of the opera since then. In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that these words were ever set to music (Bradley 314).
conventional family; a woman singing the words “I shall love” and men complaining when women do not give them the attention they deserve, yet the music is far more complicated. The vocal dynamic at the end of Act I show the brokenness of the traditional family structure as it relates to gender by having men vocally overpower the plights of women.

“Everything for him. Nothing at all for her:” The Loving Sacrifice

The hetero-social relationships in *Patience* are continually founded on the assumption that women must give up something in order to get married. Indeed, the finale of the opera, on the surface, suggests that traditional gender roles are necessary in order for the construct of marriage to work. At the end of the opera, Archibald Grosvenor sheds his aesthetic persona to become “a steady and stolid-y, jolly Bank-holiday/ Every-day young man” (*Patience* 242). Following his example, the impressionable young girls reason that, “Archibald the All-Right cannot be all-wrong; and if the All-Right chooses to discard Aestheticism, it proves that Aestheticism ought to be discarded” (243). Thus, the young women throw away Aestheticism, and with it their emotional expression when they marry Officers of the Dragoon’s Guard on the spot.

In many of Gilbert’s plots, family, marriage, and love are exposed as nothing more than accidental social constructs that carry little to no real meaning. In *H.M.S. Pinafore*, for example, Gilbert plays with a very literal accident of birth. The lowly sailor, Ralph, is unsuitable for Josephine, the daughter or Captain Corcoran. At the end of the play, an old wet nurse reveals that she accidentally mixed up Ralph and the Captain when they were babies under her charge. Thus, Ralph ascends to take the place of the Captain while Josephine and her father fall in rank. Because of this reversal, Josephine – now the daughter of a lowly British tar – can marry Ralph,
despite his newly exalted rank. This social reversal makes a marriage between Josephine and Ralph suddenly proper. The mass marriage at the end of the opera represents an order being restored; the mass marriage at the end of Patience, however, does not pose a solution to the opera’s plot. Unlike H.M.S. Pinafore, in which the three principle characters end up married and all united under unaltered patriotism, Patience leaves all the characters seemingly unhappy. Paul Revitt explains that, “[a]s Oscar Wilde found it convenient to mix bags in Victoria Station, so does Gilbert create a genealogical shuffle to sanction the marriages in H.M.S. Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance” (22-3). Patience, unlike Gilbert and Sullivan’s two most recent operas, does not end with the revelation of a grave secret that rearranges the social order of the family to insert propriety into existing relationships, but rather changes character behavior, so that they can enter into the socially acceptable institution of marriage.

Patience reveals that marriage and family are even less than social constructs; they are, instead, nothing more than polite and commonplace behavior. As mentioned in the prior chapter, Gilbert and Sullivan operas all end as either a melodrama or an extravaganza. Williams explains that H.M.S. Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance are both examples of a melodramatic plot where the resolution comes from a secret – in their case an accident at birth – that, in the logic of the topsy-turvy world, reestablishes social order. The key to a melodramatic ending is its believability. Although ridiculous, the resolution is, at the very least, logical. Extravaganzas, on the other hand, “[end] with an elaborate ‘transformation scene,’ in which the stage set slowly opens us and turns inside out… to reveal a formerly hidden world of enchantment” (5). Unlike their first five operas, all of which fit into this dichotomy, Patience is neither fully a melodrama nor an extravaganza. The end of Patience is both a transformation scene and reveals a hidden truth. Patience, for example, ends up with the man she truly loves because her legalistic
understanding of affection allows her to marry the newly-made insufferable Grosvenor. Alternatively, the aesthetic women, who once idealized Bunthorne, follow the example of Grosvenor to become completely common. The *Patience* finale, much like the characters’ behavior, does not fit neatly into the theatrical conventions of the melodrama or the extravaganza.

Breaking from comedic theatrical traditions, Gilbert intentionally excludes one character from the mass marriage that takes place at the end of the opera. Bunthorne is left “to be contented / with a tulip or lily” (*Patience* 244). Williams explains that by contrasting Bunthorne’s solitude to Patience, Grosvenor, the Lovesick Maidens, and the Dragoons’ final marriage, Gilbert “seems to encode homosexual subtext, especially coming as it does after so many references to his aesthetic effeminacy” but that it is not “necessary to think that those implications were intentional on Gilbert’s part; they can remain folded within the popular stereotype and… Gilbert could have deployed the stereotype without becoming critically conscious of them” (168). Regardless of the intent, by resigning Bunthorne “to be contented /with a tulip or lily,” Gilbert forces a crack in the assumed propriety of the opera’s “riot of marriages” (Williams 167). The final words that Bunthorne sings are,

In that case unprecedented,
    Single I must live and die –
I shall have to be contented
    With a tulip or lily!\(^{22}\) (*Patience* 244)

These words and their melody reference an earlier point in the opera when the Duke, Colonel, and Major of the Dragoons work to figure out how to divide Sophir and Angela’s hands in marriage among the three of them. The Duke, as the highest official, is allowed to choose. The

\(^{22}\) This references an earlier line, “When you walk through Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily, in your medieval hand” (209). This is a reference to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who viewed lilies as a symbol of purity and virtue. Both Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Oscar Wilde loved these flowers. See Rossetti’s painting, *The Blessed Damozel* (Bradley 286).
quintet that follows displays the possibilities, which would leave one man single. The refrain of the song is

In that case unprecedented,
Single I must live and die –
I shall have to be contented
With their heartfelt sympathy! (Patience 236)

I believe that this is the slight difference that suggests that Gilbert was, at the very least, conscious about the implications of excluding Bunthorne from the marriage plot. Unlike the Duke, Colonel, and Major – all of whom act as symbols of traditional English Masculinity – Bunthorne’s comes with no sympathy, but rather scorn. The chorus joyously repeating the line “[he] will have to be contented/ with a tulip or lily” makes it seem as they are mocking Bunthorne. They quickly continue with,

Greatly pleased with one another,
To get married we decide.
Each of us will wed the other,
Nobody be Bunthorne’s Bride! (Patience 244)

Bunthorne is excluded from the communal celebration, which contains a tinge of irony. Williams explains that the subtitle, Bunthorne’s Bride, is not realized at the end of the opera. I argue that this irony goes a step further in critiquing the action or decision of marriage as the culturally correct choice.

Despite singing that they are “pleased with one another, / to get married we decide,” Gilbert depicts all the marriages are haphazard, if not downright oppressive. For example, Patience can only marry her childhood sweetheart, because, in the end Bunthorne alters his languid state, embracing life’s frivolity, Patience exclaims that “it will no longer be a duty to love [Bunthorne] but a rapture – a joy – an ecstasy,” but soon realizes that she can never marry him, because, “love, to be pure, must be absolutely unselfish, and there cannot be anything
unselfish in loving such a perfect being as [Bunthorne has] now become” (*Patience* 242). Fortunately, for Patience, Grosvenor conveniently abandons his aesthetic persona, adopting, instead, a commonplace attitude and appearance. This change horrifies and shocks Patience, but these emotions are what allow her to marry the man she “loves.” In essence, Gilbert and Sullivan leave Patience – and to a lesser extent all the female characters of the play – stuck in a marriage that is based on their self-sacrifice.

Feminine self-sacrifice leaves the opera’s women in an unhappy state, and yet the men, too, are left with much to desire. When the Duke finally chooses to select a wife, he explains,

> 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! (*Patience* 243)

Throughout the opera, characters continually make quips about Jane’s age and appearance. At the opening of Act II, she sings a song that laments her growing age, greying hair, and unattractive appearance. In the misogynist world of the play, Jane is the spinster that no one wants to marry, and yet, in the end, she makes the most advantageous marriage. The Duke’s sacrifice shows the extent to which the social behavior of marriage is broken, not because Gilbert and Sullivan set up a society where successful marriage means that important men marry pretty women, but because the Duke chooses to marry a woman *because* she is plain. Not only does marriage come at the expense of women, but also the happiness of men. In his speech, the Duke, like Patience, equates love with duty, suggesting that marriage is a question of fairness, not of desire. The Duke claims that he is taking Lady Jane’s hand as an act of charity. Indeed, the women of the opera are only ever in love with a man that can never love back. Only by settling for the Dragoons can the women realize their affection. It follows, therefore, that women are
trapped in unhappy marriages, and men’s insincere duty to promote a fair relationship merely exacerbates the problem, leaving dutifully miserable husbands and condemned wives. Furthermore, the absence of any conventional family, further suggests the brokenness of the Victorian family model. *Patience* is no more a story about love than *The Pirates of Penzance*, but unlike *Pirates*, it leaves gaping holes in the social construct that it examines. The façade of frivolity and domestic felicity with which Gilbert and Sullivan plaster over the bleak situation of Victorian marriage and family does little to hide the failings of a structure designed to uphold morality, decency, and happiness.
Conclusion
The Failed Marriage of the Savoy Power Couple

“Gilbert and Sullivan was the heartiest thing that came out of the Victorian Age. It is one of the Victorian institutions most worth preserving.”  
- A.H. Goodwin  
(quoted in Revitt 20)

By the time that Goodwin wrote his book, *Gilbert and Sullivan: A Critical Approach to the Savoy Opera* in 1926, Gilbert and Sullivan had already become an institution. Indeed, this institution remained a center of Anglophone culture through the end of the twentieth century. Even Colorado has a long history of supporting Gilbert and Sullivan legacy. The Denver-based Empire Lyric Players are among the country’s longest running theatrical companies committed to Gilbert and Sullivan (“ELP’s History”). Pictured to the left is Donald Adams, a performer during the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company 1968 performance of *The Pirates of Penzance* at the Opera House in Central City, Colorado (“Donald Adams in ‘The Pirates of Penzance’”). Our very own College of Music at the University of Colorado Boulder sponsored summer festivals solely devoted to Gilbert and Sullivan through the 1980s and consistently performed the Savoy Operas until 2006 (Hansen). If Gilbert and Sullivan are truly “the heartiest thing to come out of the Victorian Age” and “one of the Victorian institutions most worth preserving” than it follows that the Victorian institutions of family and marriage are less important than the operatic works that satirize them.

Over the course of Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaboration, the Savoy Opera acted as an alternative family for the quirky librettist and promising English composer. Yet, by the end of their partnership, Gilbert and Sullivan’s relationship resembled that of the Duke and Duchess of
Plazo-Toro. After the failure of *The Grand Duke* in 1896, their partnership came to an end. Gilbert had grown annoyed with Sullivan’s compositions. At the same time music critics felt that Sullivan ought to pursue more “serious” music. Despite the animosity between the two artists, the Gilbert and Sullivan narrative lives on. The two men have become a symbol of Victorian theatre and English heritage, yet much like the unhappy marriages and dysfunctional families that their operas depict, Gilbert and Sullivan’s legacy is based more firmly on the narratives that they tell in their operas far more than on the reality of their relationship.

What separates Gilbert and Sullivan from their contemporaries is their willingness to invent a new genre in order to launch their social commentary. The Savoy Opera fits into no singular genre. Instead, they queer theatrical, literary, and musical conventions to create something new. This new genre helped Gilbert and Sullivan explore topics such as love, sexuality, and family differently than their contemporaries. By focusing on marriage as the foundation for the traditional family, Gilbert and Sullivan pull apart the power structure and commitments that build up the Victorian family, so that we might better understand what creates a happy family. While not all of their operas focus intently on familial relationships, in *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Patience* marriage is the basis of family life.

In *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Patience*, family ultimately boils down to duty. While men in both operas are subject to the mercy of women, women are expected to love diligently. Indeed, Gilbert and Sullivan create worlds in which women do not merely love their husbands, but are bound by duty to love them. Although Gilbert only writes marriage plots, the finales of *Pirates* and *Patience* pull random people together into the bonds of matrimony. Given this haphazard approach to marriage, it is no wonder that Gilbert and Sullivan skeptically approach the families based on such marriages. While distant or absent families merely serve as a plot
device in more conventional melodramas and extravaganzas, Gilbert and Sullivan intentionally write familial closeness out of existence because, ultimately, the image of family love and affection is little more than a myth in the face of the English sense of duty.

Gilbert and Sullivan play with ideas about legal, biological, and borrowed families. The borrowed family, which takes the form of art and aesthetics in *Patience* and the familial narrative in *The Pirates of Penzance*. While these relationships are not perfect, they attempt to fill in the void left by the legal and natural families; they provide people with the opportunity to find love. Neither Frederic and Mabel nor Patience and Archibald truly love one another. Ignoring the fact that neither one truly knows the other, their relationships are all based on legalistic duty and the necessity of propriety. Frederic does, however, love his fellow pirates. Likewise, the Twenty Lovesick Maidens build a supportive community while wallowing in their unrequited love for Bunthorne. Gilbert and Sullivan enjoy opening different doors to see where they lead, and, while all doors are eventually closed, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas examine alternative families that fit within the confines of Victorian morality.
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