



# **Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody (Gender and Culture Series)**

*Carolyn Williams*

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Long before the satirical comedy of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan were the hottest send-ups of the day's political and cultural obsessions. Gilbert and Sullivan's productions always rose to the level of social commentary, despite being impertinent, absurd, or inane. Some viewers may take them straight, but what looks like sexism or stereotype was actually a clever strategy of critique. Parody was a powerful weapon in the culture wars of late nineteenth-century England, and with defiantly in-your-face sophistication, Gilbert and Sullivan proved popular culture could be intellectually as well as politically challenging.

Carolyn Williams underscores Gilbert and Sullivan's creative and acute understanding of cultural formations. Anxiety drives the troubled mind in the "nightmare" patter song of Iolanthe and is vividly realized in the sexual and economic phrasing of Lord Chancellor's lyrics. The modern body appears automated and performative in the "railway" song of Thespis, mirroring Charlie Chaplin's factory worker in the film, *Modern Times*. Williams also illuminates the use of magic in *The Sorcerer*, the parody of nautical melodrama in H.M.S. Pinafore, the ridicule of Victorian poetry in *Patience*, the autoethnography of *The Mikado*, the role of gender in *Trial by Jury*, and the theme of illegitimacy in *The Pirates of Penzance*.

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