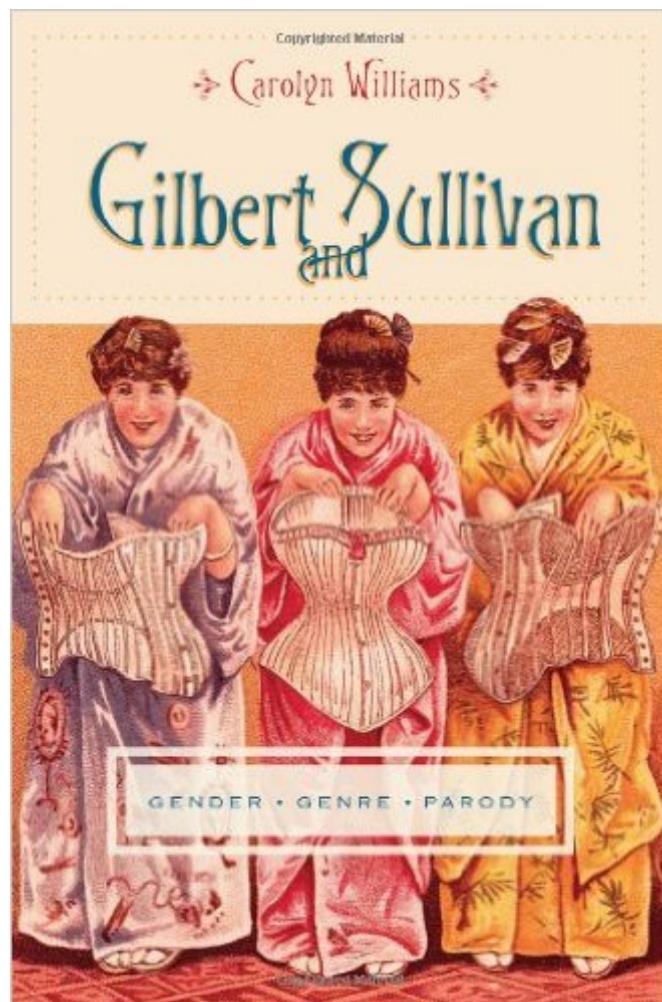


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# Gilbert And Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody (Gender And Culture Series)



## Synopsis

Long before the satirical comedy of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the comic operas of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur 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 that popular culture can be intellectually as well as politically challenging. Carolyn Williams underscores Gilbert and Sullivan's creative and acute understanding of cultural formations. Her unique perspective shows how anxiety drives the troubled mind in the Lord Chancellor's "Nightmare Song" in *Iolanthe* and is vividly realized in the sexual and economic phrasing of the song's patter lyrics. The modern body appears automated and performative in the "Junction Song" in *Thespis*, anticipating Charlie Chaplin's factory worker in *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 aesthetic and idyllic 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*. With her provocative reinterpretation of these artists and their work, Williams recasts our understanding of creativity in the late nineteenth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: the author is a colleague in the field, whom I know & respect. But I had to write this review in reply to the negative customer review by Koko, who despairs that William's analysis of Gilbert & Sullivan's works is not as funny as the comic operas. This is to miss the point and the pleasure of this book! Williams's aim is to illuminate for us how parody works, e.g. that it is "a mode, not a genre"; that we should notice how it typically plays smartly on the very question of "originality" and "convention" and "recognition"; and that it juxtaposes historical theatrical types with present-day social types to expose us all as a pack of fools. For me, one of the most important effects this book had was to rescue Gilbert and Sullivan from what I had taken to be their unthinking sexism--but of course I was not crediting the *\*parody\** enough: for instance, Williams shows how the opera's divisions over and over into male and female choruses makes a joke out of the idea of tidy gender oppositions and stereotypes. Sometimes to get a joke, you really do need to have someone explain it. With great sensitivity to the humor, Williams does that for the jokes--and for the serious cultural critiques that lurk behind them--and so there is a good chance this book will make you like your favorite Savoy opera even more.

This book was a revelation. Focusing on the three elements of the subtitle, Professor Williams devotes a chapter to each of the works in the G&S canon. She makes a persuasive case that Gilbert wrote each libretto as a parody of a particular theatrical genre that was popular at the time. She reviews the most salient examples of these genres to illustrate the aspects that Gilbert was parodying -- and makes Gilbert's work seem even more brilliant because we now understand it in the context of the times. That seems like enough for one book, but as it was written as part of the Gender and Culture series, Professor Williams takes on gender as well -- and makes that element far more interesting and integrated into her G&S deconstruction than the necessity for including it might indicate. In fact, show by show, she illustrates how Gilbert's treatment of women (and men) was either a reflection of, or more often, a reaction to, Victorian culture. Having just prepared a multimedia presentation on Gilbert & Sullivan, I can tell you this book was easily my most valuable resource of the many G&S books available.

This study has everything concerning the canon of Gilbert and Sullivan. Everything, that is except the one key element -- a sense of humor on the part of the author. Totally misses the fun and greatness of the collaboration. An academic screed, molded to fit a supposed scholarly mold. Save the money; buy a CD.

Very helpful for unpacking the background and context which would have been apparent to a Victorian viewer of the operettas, but not to a contemporary viewer. In order to understand parody, one needs to be aware of that which is parodied. For instance, without knowledge of nautical and gothic melodrama, and how they were used previously in Victorian theatre and literature, Pinafore or Ruddigore will just look like a silly mess, rather than doing something quite specific and witty of which audiences at the time would be aware. As a previous reviewer mentioned, what one might today take for sexism towards elderly ladies, is usually a parody of drag roles in Burlesque. Again, if one views Mikado as a parody of Japan, rather than of English Japonism, one will entirely miss the point. One could go on, or one could simply recommend the book to anyone who is interested in understanding G&S better from a literary/historical perspective. What the book is not doing is giving a history or biography of G&S, or a musical analysis. If one is seeking these, one might look elsewhere.

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