

1978

Gilbert Without Sullivan

Walter P. Bowman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Bowman, Walter P. (1978) "Gilbert Without Sullivan," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 5 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol5/iss1/4>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

GILBERT WITHOUT SULLIVAN

Walter P. Bowman

State University of New York
College at Brockport

Preface: *"Gilbert Without Sullivan" is a revised version of a paper Walter P. Bowman read at the Fifteenth Annual Names Institute held at Madison, New Jersey, in May 1976. The paper was also the Keynote Address at the Conference on Literary Onomastics held at Brockport in June, 1977. It is particularly appropriate that we have Professor Bowman's revised essay to introduce this volume of LITERARY ONOMASTICS STUDIES on the occasion of his retirement from the Department of English at Brockport. No one has done more to promote the study of literary onomastics than Professor Bowman, and we feel certain that his contributions to the study will continue long after his retirement date. We like to think that "Gilbert Without Sullivan" marks, not the end, but a turning-point in his interest in literary onomastics.*

There are many reasons why the Department of English asked that this volume be dedicated to Professor Bowman. For more than twenty years, Walter Bowman has read papers on names at national, regional and foreign gatherings of onomatologists. Among his many contributions

have been the following:

"Parly-II, the Second Paris."

"Ftatateeta, Dolly, the North Thames Iced Mutton Company,
and Perusalem: Bernard Shaw's Use of Names"

"Terms for Periods and Movements in Comparative Literature"

"Names in Theatrical Terminology"

"The Ladies of Valbona" (by Archer M. Huntington)

"The Titles of Dramatic Works: Problems for Translators"

{also as "Play Titles: Translational Transmogrifications."}

"Names in Milton's Poetry."

He was patient with us when we confessed we did not know what onomastics meant. He probably would have suffered our singing Gilbert and Sullivan out of key with his characteristic good humour. He brought a special style the Department of English will not see again soon. His work combined, as the titles of his papers suggest, a scholarly concern for precision and a good ear. He is a man of talent and wit.

Walter P. Bowman was also co-founder, with Doctor Grace Alvarez-Altman, of LITERARY ONOMASTICS STUDIES (with whom he worked as Associate Editor in 1974), and of the annual CONFERENCE ON LITERARY ONOMASTICS. He served as Secretary of the CONFERENCE in 1973. He was secretary to the first meeting of the South Central Modern Language Association Section on Onomastics, and has served in a presiding role of sections at many of the conferences he has attended--most notably initiating

Bowman 3

a third section of the 12th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Bern, 1975. In the paper which follows, Professor Bowman refers to yet another of his papers, "An Onomastic Review of Gilbert-and-Sullivan," a paper read at the annual meeting of the Northeast Modern Language Association held at Boston in April, 1973, and again at the CONFERENCE ON LITERARY ONOMASTICS held at Brockport in June, 1973. It was later published in the first volume of LITERARY ONOMASTICS STUDIES, pp. 28-39, which appeared in 1974.

J.R.M.

Focusing on names, I propose to examine a book of witty verse written in the 1860s by W. S. Gilbert, seeking signs of the talent which was to establish him in the 1870s as the librettist of the best light operas in our language--an eminence accorded them still, a hundred years later.

From boyhood on I have enjoyed this book, The Bab Ballads, my copy of which stood on my parents' bookshelves when I was being brought up on those light operas (The Mikado and all, even the now unplayed first of them all, Thespis)--an aunt at the piano using perhaps the earliest scores published in America, their pages disintegrating with age. Later I was to sing chorus parts in Iolanthe and other productions of a light opera company. You may therefore think it wise to mistrust the report to follow. After all, you are reading the words of an enthusiast!

Bowman 4

It was my friend Professor E. Wallace McMullen of Fairleigh Dickinson University who set me to studying The Ballads onomastically, by reading and later publishing an essay entitled "An Onomastic Review of Gilbert and Sullivan."

The Bab Ballads (1869) is a collection of seventy-nine short narrative poems, all but two rhymed, often resembling in technical respects the authentic folk ballads of the Middle Ages, as for example in stanza form, line length, meter, and incremental repetition. ("Bab" was Gilbert's childhood nickname. In some editions the nickname is set off in the title with quotation marks.) But the resemblance is especially fascinating when we look at gruesome, gory details, starkly stated. Old ballads like "Edward" and "The Twa Corbies" might be called paternal ancestors of "The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell,'" a piece which I happily append to this paper, although the London Punch rejected it in those starchily Victorian days as "too cannibalistic." Literary ballads like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (slightly parodied in "The Yarn") might be called maternal ancestors. In the latter group could also be included the limericks (not ballads) of Edward Lear, for let it not be forgotten that comic verse flourished mightily in an era of good comedy in many genres. Gilbert's pieces, with his own clever illustrations, originally appeared in the London Fun in the 1860s when he was in his thirties. As he himself acknowledged apologetically in his Preface, they were dashed off to meet journalistic deadlines, and what we have in the first collection and in More Bab Ballads (1873) are selections by

Bowman 5

the author rather than the whole corpus. Much more polished, being the products of more careful labor and of revision during stage rehearsals, are the texts of the light operas.

Only two of the ballads contain no names at all. Most of them provide more than one name--sometimes only a few, sometimes several. Names are sometimes repeated within a single ballad (as in "The Yarn": the ship's name) and from one ballad to another.

For my readers interested in methodology, I shall explain that I listed the ballads by title, then under each title noted the place names in capital letters, the invented personal names in italics, and the other names (e.g., "Sunday," "Caesar," "Saracen," "Adelphi play") in lower-case letters. By thus grouping hundreds of names, I could readily select general patterns and particular specimens likely to interest my readers. I arranged and commented on these, omitting those in several categories which seemed ordinary, obvious and of little or no humorous significance (epochs, seasons, languages, theatres, institutions, and so forth).

For Gilbert chose names for comic value. They ranged from the ultra-plain (in "Pasha Bailey Ben") --

I am not good at Turkish names,
And so I call him Simple James --

to the ludicrously fanciful (Mademoiselle de la Sauce Mayonnaise, in "Lorenzo de Lardy") --

Alice Eulalie Coraline
Euphrosyne Columbine Thérèse
Juliette Stephanie Celestine
Charlotte Russe de la Sauce Mayonnaise.

This humor in the names as such was enhanced by the subtle cleverness of alliteration, meter, and rhyme:

Today, the ballads cannot be fully understood at sight by American (or even British) readers, for many names are "topical" (e.g., Martin Tupper, the moralizing poet, in "Ferdinando and Elvira"). The personalities and events which would have been fairly common knowledge, at least in the U.K., are now over our heads, unless we come to know a good deal about the history and literature of Gilbert's times. (The light operas, but not the ballads, have been well annotated by Green, Goldberg, and others.)

The names of persons as individuals or as members of some group, may now be considered with some care. There are the living (Martin Tupper, as above) and the dead (Caesar, in "Haunted;" Dicky de Lion, i.e., Richard I, Richard Coeur de Lion, in "Sir Guy the Crusader"). There are the most banal (James, as above; Jane, in "The Bishop and the Busman") and the most fanciful (the French girl's mentioned above; the musical girl Doh-Reh-Mi-Fa, in "King Borria"). There are names from mythology (Jove and Venus, in "Babette's Love") and nursery or fairy tales (Bo-P, in "The Precocious Baby"). There are the names of nations (Saracen, in "Sir Guy the Crusader;" the French people, in "Babette's Love") and ethnic or religious groups (Jew, in "The Bishop and the Busman;" Christian, in "The Bishop of Rum-Ti-Foo").

The place names range from the real and common (Pentonville, a London prison, in "To a Little Maid;" the Strand, a London avenue,

Bowman 7

in "Tempora Mutantur") to the amusingly fabricated (the communities of Assesmilk-cum-Worter, in "The Rival Curates," and Turniptop-by-the-Sea, in "The Force of Argument").

And now, what conclusions may we draw from our survey?

Highly interesting, in view of the stated purpose of this paper, is the direct connection manifested between the ballads and the light operas. Gilbert "stole" from himself, "plagiarized" his own writings. The Mikado takes a sad willow song and a wandering minstrel from "The Troubador"--as well as two charactonyms from the two halves of Pish-Tush-Poo-Bah (in "King Borria"). Pinafore takes a reversal of social ranks (in "General John"), a ship's captain who is extraordinarily kind-hearted and has "sisters, cousins, aunts" (in "Captain Reece"), good sailormen who never swear with "a big big D-----" and mention of "peppermint drops" and the line "I can hand, reef, and steer" (in "The Bumboat Woman's Story")--as well as the charactonym Little Buttercup (in the last-mentioned ballad).

A second noteworthy feature is the merit of the ballads in their own right as successful light verse displaying wit and humor in their merry mockery, part of the fun lying in the surprise of the unexpected name. It is no wonder that anthologies of comic verse give place for "The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell'" and "Ellen McJones Aberdeen." I cannot recall whether or not I have ever seen "The Precocious Baby" or "The Story of Prince Agib" so honored. They should be.

A third important observation one may make is that Gilbert gives us a lively presentation of Victorian social and political life. Like the readers of Fur and of his two ballad collections drawn from that periodical, he sprang from the middle class, not from the lower or upper classes. We get the attitudes of his time and place and social condition. If he pokes fun at Scots and Irishmen and foreigners and "niggers," it is because they differ from the posited norm of The Englishman—who also gets laughed at, in general or (e.g., that stock character of the ages, the clergyman) in particular. The current events of the times are reflected in allusions to the exploration of the Dark Continent; to Turkey, recent ally in the Crimean War; to France, always bound to Britain in a love-hate relationship; and to the world-wide expansion of imperial power.

Thus we have profited from a close look at names in a minor Victorian book of verse. It seems to me that the only characteristic of the light operas not earlier shown in the ballads is sentiment; for in the former there are moments that touch the heart, that move one emotionally with an assist from Sullivan's often tender music; whereas the ballads are for the head, purely comic, laughing, lightly biting.

The editors of LITERARY ONOMASTICS STUDIES are generously allowing me to quote two long and famous ballads, "The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell'" and "Ellen McJones Aberdeen." They are no longer copyrighted.

THE YARN OF THE "NANCY BELL,"

'Twas on the shores that round our coast
 From Deal to Ramsgate span,
 That I found alone on a piece of stone
 An elderly naval man.

His hair was weedy, his beard was long,
 And weedy and long was he,
 And I heard this wight on the shore recite,
 In a singular minor key.

"Oh, I am a cook and the captain bold,
 And the mate of the Nancy brig,
 And a bo'sun tight, and a midshipmite,
 And the crew of the captain's gig."

And he shook his fists and he tore his hair,
 Till I really felt afraid,
 For I couldn't help thinking the man had been drinking,
 And so I simply said:

"Oh, elderly man, it's little I know
 Of duties of men of the sea,
 And I'll eat my hand if I understand
 How you can possibly be

"At once a cook, and a captain bold,
 And the mate of the Nancy brig
 And a bo'sun tight, and a midshipmite,
 And the crew of the captain's gig."

Then he gave a hitch to his trousers, which
 Is a trick all seamen learn,
 And having got rid of a thumping quid,
 He spun this painful yarn:

"'Twas in the good ship Nancy Bell
 That we sailed to the Indian Sea,
 And there on a reef we come to grief,
 Which has often occurred to me.

"And pretty night all the crew was drowned
 (There was seventy-seven o' soul),
 And only ten of the Nancy's men
 Said, 'Here!' to the muster-roll.

"There was me and the cook and the captain bold,
 And the mate of the Nancy brig,
 And the bo'sun tight and the midshipmite,
 And the crew of the captain's gig.

"For a month we'd neither wittles nor drink,
 Till a-hungry we did feel,
 So we drewed a lot, and accordin' shot
 The captain for our meal.

"The next lot fell to the Nancy's mate,
 And a delicate dish he made;
 Then our appetite with the midshipmite
 We seven survivors stayed.

"And then we murdered the bo'sun tight,
 And he much resembled pig;
 Then we wittled free, did the cook and me,
 On the crew of the captain's gig.

"Then only the cook and me was left,
 And the delicate question, 'Which
 Of us two goes to the kettle?' arose,
 And we argued it out as sich.

"For I loved that cook as a brother, I did,
 And the cook he worshipped me;
 But we'd both be blowed if we'd either be stowed
 In the other chap's hold, you see.

"'I'll be eat if you dines off me,' says Tom.
 'Yes, that,' says I, 'you'll be,--
 I'm boiled if I die, my friend,' quoth I.
 And 'Exactly so,' quoth he.

"Says he, 'Dear James, to murder me
 Were a foolish thing to do,
 For don't you see that you can't cook me,
 While I can--and will--cook you!'

"So he boils the water, and takes the salt
 And the pepper in portions true
 (Which he never forgot), and some chopped shalot,
 And some sage and parsley too.

"'Come here,' says he, with a proper pride,
 Which his smiling features tell,
 'Twill soothing be if I let you see
 How extremely nice you'll smell.'

"And he stirred it round and round and round,
 And he sniffed at the foaming froth;
 When I ups with his heels, and smothers his squeals
 In the scum of the boiling broth.

"And I eat that cook in a week or less,
 And--as I eating be
 The last of his chops, why, I almost drops,
 For a vessel in sight I see.

* * * * *

"And I never larf, and I never smile;
 And I never lark nor play,
 But sit and croak, and a single joke
 I have--which is to say:

"Oh, I am a cook and a captain bold,
 And the mate of the Nancy brig,
 And a bo'sun tight, and a midshipmite,
 And the crew of the captain's gig!"

ELLEN McJONES ABERDEEN.

MACPHAIRSON Clonglocketty Angus McClan
 Was the son of an elderly labouring man;
 You've guessed him a Scotchman, shrewd reader, at sight,
 And p'r'aps altogether, shrewd reader, you're right.

From the bonnie blue Forth to the beastly Deeside,
 Round by Dingwall and Wrath to the mouth of the Clyde,
 There wasn't a child or a woman or man
 Who could pipe with Clonglocketty Angus McClan.

No other could wake such detestable groans,
 With reed and with chaunter--with bag and with drones:
 All day and all night he delighted the chiefs
 With sniggering pibrochs and jiggety reels.

He'd clamber a mountain and squat on the ground,
 And the neighboring maidens would gather around
 To list to his pipes and to gaze in his een,
 Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

All loved their McClan, save a Sassenach brute,
 Who came to the Highlands to fish and to shoot;
 He dressed himself up in a Highlander way;
 Tho' his name it was Pattison Corby Torbay.

Torbay had incurred a good deal of expense
To make him a Scotchman in every sense;
But this is a matter, you'll readily own,
That isn't a question of tailors alone.

A Sassenach chief may be bonily built,
He may purchase a sporran, a bonnet, and kilt;
Stick a skean in his hose--wear an acre of stripes
But he cannot assume an affection for pipes.

Clonglocketty's pipings all night and all-day
Quite frenzied poor Pattison Corby Torbay;
The girls were amused as his singular spleen,
Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

"Macphairson Clonlocketty Angus, my lad,
With pibrochs and reels you are driving me mad.
If you really must play on that cursed affair,
My goodness! play something resembling an air."

Boiled over the blood of Macphairson McClan--
The Clan of Clonglocketty rose as one man;
For all were enraged at the insult, I ween--
Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

"Let's show," said McClan, "to this Sassenach loon
That the bagpipes can play him a regular tune.
Let's see," said McClan, as he thoughtfully sat,
"In my Cottage' is easy--I'll practise at that."

He blew at his "Cottage," and blew with a will,
For a year, seven months, and fortnight, until
(You'll hardly believe it) McClan, I declare,
Elicited something resembling an air.

It was wild--it was fitful--as wild as the breeze--
It wandered about into several keys;
It was jerky, spasmodic, and harsh, I'm aware;
But still it distinctly suggested an air.

The Sassenach screamed, and the Sassenach danced,
He shrieked in his agony--bellowed and pranced.
And the maidens who gathered rejoiced at the scene,
Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

"Hech gather, hech gather, hech gather around;
And fill a' ye lugs wi' the exquisite sound.
An air fra' the bagpipes--beat that if ye can:
Hurrah for Clonglocketty Angus McClan!"

Bowman 13

The fame of his piping spread over the land:
 Respectable widows proposed for his hand,
 And maidens came flocking to sit on the green--
 Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

One morning the fidgetty Sassenach swore
 He'd stand it no longer--he drew his claymore,
 And (this was, I think, extremely bad taste)
 Divided Clonglocketty close to the waist.

Oh! loud were the wailings for Angus McClan,
 Oh! deep was the grief for that excellent man--
 The maids stood aghast at the horrible scene,
 Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

It sorrowed poor Pattison Corby Torbay
 To find them "take on" in this serious way;
 He pitied the poor little fluttering birds,
 And solaced their souls with the following words:--

"Oh, maidens," said Pattison, touching his hat,
 "Don't blubber, my dears, for a fellow like that:
 Observe, I'm a very superiour man,
 A much better fellow than Angus McClan."

They smiled when he winked and addressed them as "dears,"
 And they all of them vowed, as they dried up their tears,
 A pleasanter gentleman never was seen--
 Especially Ellen McJones Aberdeen.

Walter P. Bowman

State University of New York
 College at Brockport