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The Mikado's Queer Realism: Law, Genre, Knowledge

JOSEPH LAVERY

It is a commonplace among Savoyards that The Mikado is about England, not Japan: the joke was that what seemed utterly remote from the audience was in fact all about themselves. But if you actually change the location of the opera to England, as Dr Miller did, then you not only make the joke too obvious: you actually destroy it. The Mikado becomes an opera about England which is actually—surprise, surprise—about England. Where's the fun in that?

—Andrew Crowther, Letter to *The Musical Times*, July 1992

. . . Pooh Bah, it will be remembered, traced his ancestry back to a "protoplasmal primordial atomic globule"; consequently, no Japanese gentleman of rank, however sensitive, could imagine himself or his progenitors to have been made the subject of the English author's satire.

—François Cellier, *Gilbert and Sullivan and Their Operas*, 1914

About Japan

It might seem absurd to claim that so flippant a fantasy as William Gilbert and Arthur S. Sullivan's *The Mikado* could be "about" anything much at all. Yet critics have had no difficulty formulating the case in the negative: it is *not* about Japan.¹ That assessment, almost ubiquitous in both scholarly and popular writing on the 1885 opera, performs several useful functions: it reassures enthusiasts of the popular work that nobody is calling them racist; it demonstrates an intellectual

I would like to thank Zarena Aslami, Margreta de Grazia, Ian Duncan, Lauren Goodlad, Devin Griffiths, Rachel Teukolsky, and Carolyn Williams for their extremely helpful responses to this work in various stages of its development. Their extraordinary generosity and sustained engagement has made the work immeasurably richer; any remaining weaknesses are, however, entirely of my own devising.

¹ There are exceptions to the commonplace articulated in my first epigraph: Etsuko Taketani argues that the "not about Japan" myth was an alibi contrived to get British Orientalists off the hook; her argument resembles mine in certain respects. In a much more hesitant way Paul Seeley suggests that the compositional fidelity of the "Miya Sama" march to the Japanese original indicates a more serious engagement with Japanese themes than generally understood. Carolyn Williams's position on the Japan question is agnostic, but the larger goal of her indispensable book on the Savoy operas is to exhibit parody (rather than truth claim) as Gilbert and Sullivan's prevailing method. Josephine Lee's reception history, while both encyclopedic and extremely insightful, joins the consensus that *The Mikado* "defies charges that it is a racist work" (xiv).

savoir faire, the overcoming of literal-mindedness; and it locates a problem play in the relatively safe hermeneutic space of domestic satire. This article, too, stops short of exhibiting Japan as the secret referent of *The Mikado*; I will, rather, explore the interpretive practices that have installed this certainty within critical approaches to such a semiotically complex work. Early productions proudly exhibited their Japanese qualities: the putatively authentic sword and costumes onstage; the Japanese women recruited to teach the British actors how to dance; the “Miya Sama” theme, incorporated almost without amendment from a Japanese source.² It was not until the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, when the Japanese empire confronted British audiences and critics with a newly threatening aspect, that critics collectively decided, never to recant, that the opera did not contain “a single joke that is a joke against Japan,” as G. K. Chesterton put it, but was rather wholly designed to satirize and caricature British political culture (“Gilbert and Sullivan” 152). As such the affinities between *The Mikado* and a particular aspect of late Victorian Orientalism have been obscured, and the semiotic problem Japanese culture posed to Victorians has been oversimplified.

Orientalist writing dealing with Japan has long been characterized by a desire to fictionalize or formalize its object, to assure that readers realize the knowledge on offer is not to be taken too literally or too seriously. Roland Barthes famously writes, at the beginning of *Empire of Signs* (1970), that his Japan is nothing more than a “system” formed from the assessment of features of a “faraway” place, “in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself” (3). Rather than a belated critique of high Orientalism, Barthes’s gesture conforms strikingly with many similar moves by turn-of-the-century writers on Japan. One of the foremost Western authorities on Japanese culture, Lafcadio Hearn, begins his haltingly titled *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (1904) with the disclaimer that “[n]o work fully interpreting [Japanese] life . . . can be written for at least another fifty years” (3); he goes on: “after having discovered that I cannot understand the Japanese at all,—I feel better qualified to attempt this essay” (10). Hearn’s qualifications derive not from knowledge or expertise but from the frank admission of their absence; his knowledge advances in the space of avowed ignorance, and the authority of his claims depends on the paradoxical weakening of the claimant. In the course of this article, we will see comparable moves in a wider range of Orientalist writing, as well as inchoately in *The Mikado* itself, which is less idiosyncratic than it appears: it is a text in which the loud antipositivism of Hearn and Barthes manifests in a more muted key.

An Orientalist caught between fantasy and knowledge might be diagnosed with a classical paranoia: both projecting authority and wishing not to be taken seriously; loudly asserting the value of this or that truth claim and then promptly withdrawing it when confronted. It is a position quite different from that of the Orientalist elaborated by Edward Said, whose “apogee of Orientalist confidence” takes place when “[n]o merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth; no

² For a discussion of the costumes, see Bradley 576. See Seeley for an astute formal analysis of the Japanese march, the provenance of which remains uncertain, but probably A. E. Mitford played it for Sullivan.

theoretical list of Oriental attributes is without application to the behavior of Orientals in the real world" (49). Though Orientalist writing might seem formally realistic, we might gloss Said as saying that it lacks any claim to a realist epistemology. By contrast, Barthes and Hearn derive their critical dignity from something quite other than truth: the "real world" is precisely, and in such terms, what they foreclose any access to, even when their abstractions are thoroughly researched rather than "merely asserted." Such genial and convenient disavowal has made it difficult to determine how these writers, and the Orientalist ideology that informs both them and *The Mikado*, located themselves in the real world: a world that had to adapt to the emergence of a non-Western, but modern, empire that contradicted the unipolar stereotype on which Orientalism had hitherto relied.

The task of reading *The Mikado*, then, is that of finding a middle ground between truth claim ("it's about Japan/England") and disclaimer ("it's not about Japan")—to describe the movement *between* a fantasy of knowledge and the fantasy of its dissolution. Questions of this kind have motivated a number of recent returns to the theory of realism.³ Catherine Gallagher, for example, has challenged the dogmatically ethical or naively mimetic stereotypes of the nineteenth-century novel by emphasizing its internal dynamism, its dialectical traffic between the familiar and the strange. In Gallagher's terms, George Eliot's realism inheres in her capacity not to categorize particularities into types or classes but to mutate such particulars into new, eroticized configurations. "George Eliot is the greatest English realist," Gallagher writes, "because she not only makes us curious about the quotidian, not only convinces us that knowing its particularity is our ultimate ethical duty, but also, and supremely, makes us want it" (73). From such a perspective, realism is a mode triply attuned to its own absence: predicated on a curiosity about the world around us, an ethical duty to an other, and an erotic *lack* of that other, Gallagher's realism proceeds by grappling with the not (yet) categorized, the not (quite) known. Referentiality matters less to such a system than does the subjective posture out of which references are made, an ecstatic tendency that refuses the schematic authority of the fable in favor of the mutual transformation of universal and particular. For these purposes, then, realism will not be located in the verisimilitude or even referentiality of a line about Japan, of which *The Mikado* contains many: it will rather be sought in those of the opera's generic and formal patterns that cannot *but* ground themselves in the world outside the Savoy Theater; those moments, that is, when the opera touches its own membrane.

The reality effect enacted by the Orientalists mentioned above takes the rhetorical form of *praeteritio*: "I don't really know anything about Japan, but—" The Orientalist argument worlds itself by insisting on the otherworldliness of its object. Likewise, *The Mikado*'s jovial ambiguity about its location makes claims about the real world (that which we might call the *epistemological* ambition of realism) while refusing to represent that world realistically (realism's *aesthetic* strategy).⁴ For the

³ Particularly instructive in these debates have been the signal interventions of Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot"; Goodlad; Jameson; Levine; and Cleary, Esty, and Lye.

⁴ In Jameson's recent work, the realist mode is *ultimately* epistemological—and so any question of its aesthetic would be superfluous. We might adapt his notion of realism as antinomic to

purposes of this article, I will refer to *The Mikado's* position—affirming realist epistemology while negating its aesthetic—as *queer realism*. While the queerness of such does not depend on a homosexual desire (repressed or otherwise) that one might find within the text, I will argue toward the end of this essay that the strategic evasions both practiced and thematized by *The Mikado*—an opera whose plot revolves entirely around a desire punishable by death—helped to install “Japan” as a placeholder object for queer men negotiating queer identities at the fin de siècle. In this sense, “queer realism” operates as the precise counterpoint of the “epistemology of the closet.” Whereas the late nineteenth century, according to Sedgwick’s formulation, engendered a discourse in which homosexuality was everywhere known but nowhere spoken, the queerness of Japan was everywhere spoken and nowhere known. In this sense, *The Mikado* might be seen as both a transitional text in the history of British Orientalism and an attempt to retrain realism’s worlding strategies on the queerer world of the late nineteenth century.

It need hardly be remarked that realism is not a genre to which *The Mikado* could be said unproblematically to belong. The more obvious, and more well-trodden, generic pathways by which it has been explored explain more of its distinctive features—parody, extravaganza, and light opera especially. Although none of the characters represented (princes in disguise, ludicrously oleaginous bureaucrats, stock Lady Wishfort types) could be described as a realist protagonist, and although none of the plotlines (a tortuous jurisprudential fiction, a swashbuckling romantic tale) could be assimilated comfortably into realist narrative, Gilbert’s libretto consistently displays a *metatheatrical* awareness of how the opera’s very performance locates its performers and audiences. It is at this metalevel, then, that we might be able to discern a worlding realism, the protagonist of which is not the character but the actor, its plot not the presented narrative but the fate of the opera itself. The protagonist of this queer realism is a public theatrical performance, striving to assert its own identity against the ministrations of worldly powers such as censors, diplomats, and audiences.

The libretto engages such figures on a small scale. For example, the world of the town of Titipu is incorporated into the familiar world of 1880s London, as when the Lord High Executioner informs the Mikado that the Prince has gone abroad to “Knightsbridge!” (Bradley 631). (Knightsbridge, in South West London, was from 1885 until 1887 the location of a “Japanese Village,” where the seamstresses and dancers who trained the Savoyards exhibited their craftwork.)⁵ Koko’s metatheatrical joke both assimilates the world of *The Mikado* and the real world and disaggregates the two: the audience laughs, in part, because it has been folded into the fictional space, but in part at the improbability of its having been so; that is, at the sheer scale of the distance transgressed between Titipu and Knightsbridge. As hinted in this article’s first epigraph, *The Mikado's* wit derives from the incongruity of that distance with the fact that, indeed, there are at present Japanese people in

explain the relationship between realism’s characteristic forms and its implicit claims, the paradoxical entanglement of a representation and an episteme.

⁵ For an initially counterintuitive but persuasive discussion of the Japanese Village as a figurative self-representation of metropolitan London, see McLaughlin.

London. Scholars have occasionally further suggested that the name "Titipu" itself is a slightly bawdy reworking of the town of Chichibu, the site of a peasant revolt in 1884 and the source of some of the fabrics on display at the Japanese Village (Crowther 327).⁶ Whether or not such material is incorporated into the libretto knowingly, the Chichibu connection has been an important element of the play's mythology for Japanese performers seeking to *reworld* the opera as both an archive of Japanese cultural tropes in the West and a record of Orientalist fascination with those tropes.

More important, however, *The Mikado's* problematic geolocation is an indispensable feature of Gilbert's method of introducing and representing characters. The first scene opens on a "CHORUS OF NOBLES" who are "discovered," according to the libretto's stage directions, "standing and sitting in attitudes suggested by native drawings" (Bradley 559). Whether or not that suggestion has been imprinted on the opera's stage designer, or on its audience, is a question that the libretto leaves unresolved and only amplifies in the chorus's opening number:

If you want to know who we are,
 We are gentlemen of Japan:
 On many a vase and jar—
 On many a screen and fan,
 We figure in lively paint:
 Our attitude's queer and quaint—
 You're wrong if you think it ain't, oh!

If you think we are worked by strings,
 Like a Japanese marionette,
 You don't understand these things:
 It is simply Court etiquette.
 Perhaps you suppose this throng
 Can't keep it up all day long?
 If that's your idea, you're wrong, oh! (559)

The lyric's syntax constructs meaning wittily and prettily; identifying the characters at first hypothetically ("if you want to know who we are") and then defensively ("you're wrong if you think it ain't"), as though the very identity of the characters could only be established obliquely or, to use the text's own words, queerly and quaintly. Yet what is most striking is the song's analogizing of the chorus's presentation of character to the depiction of Japanese figures on a series of visual media—vase, jar, screen, fan—presumably familiar to the audience. The portability of these objects, and their broad circulation within the material culture of 1880s London, familiarizes the characters even as it defamiliarizes them. Yet there is a further twist. The finite verb of the second clause, *figure*, condenses these

⁶ This argument is advanced, in any case, by Ed Glinert, editor of the Penguin *Savoy Operas: The Complete Gilbert and Sullivan* 829–30. In Japan the Chichibu theory is most associated with the essayist Rokusuke Ei; see Enbutsu.

movements brilliantly, since to an audience listening rather than reading, it shifts the meaning of the foregoing lines. Until that *figure*, the preceding *on*-phrases seemed as though they modified the noun phrase “gentlemen of Japan”: as though the chorus were representing not “gentlemen” themselves but *representations* of gentlemen on the vase and jar—representations of representations. Once the finite clause arrives, we learn that these are indeed characters more conventionally understood, but ones become metatheatrically aware of their figurativeness and indeed of the queer-and-quaintness of that figuration.

The song sustains, I suggest, a realism without referent, which combines the listing of familiar objects (a classical realist strategy) with the estrangement of the subject from his or her identity. If Lukácsian realism depends on the possibility of commuting an individual’s narrative into a historical situation—as in the trope of the “typical” character—*The Mikado*’s “If you want to know who we are” performs that action as a subjective depletion or loss of subjective coherence. The historical situation in which such characters are planted, a situation engendered by the unprecedented event of Japanese modernity, is not one the opera can fully grasp, but neither is it a reality from which Gilbert’s libretto absents itself entirely. As with Barthes and Hearn, the “real world” cannot but exert a pressure on the Orientalist ego, and the text reverberates with its queering effects. I will proceed by examining the opera’s situation of itself in that world: first, by comparing its representation of legal authority with its own legal fortunes; second, by drawing connections between its comic Orientalism and broadly contemporary works “about Japan”; and last, by returning to the British 1880s to reconsider the opera’s queerness in light of the Labouchere Amendment, passed in the same year as *The Mikado*’s opening performance. For queer attendees of the Savoy in 1885, the worlding realism of an opera in which flirtation was punishable by death would have been all too disturbingly apparent.

The “Japanese Gentleman of Rank”

On April 30, 1887, a crowd of men and women gathered outside Yokohama Gaiety Theater, waiting to hear whether they would be seated for the Salinger Opera Bouffe Company’s performance of *The Mikado*. The chances did not look good. Two days previously, a scheduled production had been canceled by the British consul in Yokohama, whose extraterritorial legal authority over British subjects had been established by the first of the “unequal treaties” between the British and Japanese governments, the 1858 Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Sir Francis Plunkett, the British minister at Tokyo, had refused to allow Salinger to present his *Mikado* until certain elements of the play, a farcical treatment of the legal culture of a Japanese town, had been changed to erase, or at least mitigate, any offense to Japanese viewers. The characters’ names (“Nanki-Poo,” “Pooh-Bah,” etc.) were allowed to stand, presumably since no Japanese spectator would think them to suggest Japanese words, but all references to Japan would have to be replaced by the word *country* and all references to the Mikado would be replaced by simply *king*. Accordingly, the title of the opera needed to be changed, and, shortly after a messenger from Plunkett arrived conveying the Emperor’s personal approval of

the censored script, the curtain went up on *Sotyugo Shita Sannin no Otome*, "Three Graduated Debutantes," or, more loosely, "Three Little Maids from School."⁷

Accounts differ on the composition of the audience, although the *Taranaki Herald's* claim that it was "entirely Japanese" lacks credibility given the Gaiety Theater's location in "The Bluff," a cosmopolitan residential area of Japan's major port populated primarily by European and American merchants. That there were *some* Japanese spectators is, nonetheless, established; so too that Plunkett's edits had failed to disguise the play's original setting: Fukuchi Gen'ichiro, the reviewer for the *Nichi Nichi Shimbun*, wrote that the opera "showed a good understanding of traditional Japanese society" (Leiter 128). For a British spectator who described his experience in the *Times*, however, such good humor could not be taken for granted on the part of the Japanese audience members: "There were many Japanese among the audience, who laughed heartily at the performance, but whether their mirth was due to a genuine appreciation of the fun of the play or was provided by ludicrous inaccuracies in the representation of themselves and their ways it would be impossible to say" (quoted by Leiter 128). The correspondent recalls, then, watching two performances, one by the actors in Salinger's company and the other by the Japanese spectators, whose Orientalized inscrutability was apparently amplified, rather than undermined, by their apparent good humor. Indeed, the Japanese audience's laughter provoked on the part of the correspondent a desire to preempt, and ultimately to manage, its affect.

Such a desire clearly motivated Chesterton's impatient assessment, in 1907, that *The Mikado* had nothing whatever to do with Japan: it is from his note in Littell's *Living Age* that most critics have sought authority for that position. His language draws on military metaphors and projects something closer to Saidian confidence than anything one finds in *The Mikado* itself:

The cannon ball simply rebounded. And we were earnestly concerned about whether the cannon would cannon and hit our Gallant Allies. I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese. But all the jokes in the play fit the English, if they would put on the cap. The great creation of the play is Pooh-Bah. I have never heard, I do not believe, that the combination of inconsistent functions is specially a vice of the extreme East. I should guess the contrary; I should guess that the East tends to split into steady and inherited trades or castes; so that the torturer is a torturer and the priest a priest. But about England Pooh-Bah is something more than a satire; he is the truth. ("Pooh-Bah" 248)

Like those of Hearn and Barthes, Chesterton's assertions about Japan derive rhetorical authority from his admissions of ignorance: "I doubt"; "I have never heard"; "I do not believe"; "I should guess." But the rhetorical force is still stronger, working successfully to exclude the Japanese referent *entirely* from the opera on the basis of the critic's own ignorance. Chesterton's call for the individualization of the British bureaucrat echoes the influential Fabian theory that British society was bogged down by an "inefficiency" engendered by capitalism, and soluble only by

⁷ For accounts of these performances see Yokoyama xix and Leiter 128.

state intervention.⁸ Yet he does not elaborate the specific Englishness of Pooh-Bah in as much detail as he speculates about the peculiarities of the “extreme East.” There is no need for him to do so, since, for the purposes of the argument, England is the part of the opera that remains once Japan has been deleted.⁹

Chesterton’s article in *Living Age* was written for a specific purpose: to protest the censorship of *The Mikado* for the duration of a state visit to London by Prince Fushimi Sadanaru in May 1907, the first since the conclusion of hostilities between Japan and Russia in 1905. The lord chamberlain’s decision to refuse the Savoyards a license to revive the show was never explicitly explained but was widely interpreted as a move designed to avoid offending London’s Japanese visitors. As such it was condemned as spineless pandering in a variety of editorials like Chesterton’s in the *Daily News*, the *Era*, and elsewhere; public letters of support for the ban were fewer.¹⁰ Also unclear was whether the ban was the Lord Chamberlain’s own idea, or whether he was responding to representations made by Japanese diplomats, as Gilbert believed.¹¹ In any case, the potentially querulous prince furnished the Savoyards with a “real world” example of the capricious Oriental authority whose presence suffuses every aspect of *The Mikado*.

Although the titular character’s appearance onstage is delayed until the second act, he is fearfully anticipated for much of the first. He has decreed, we learn in an early number, that “[a]ll who flirted, leered or winked / (Unless connubially linked), / Should forthwith be beheaded” (Bradley 563)—a law that, while apparently popular, has necessitated the first of the plot’s many legal fixes, since the sentence, if rigorously applied, would lead to the extirpation of the townspeople. So the person who was supposed to be executed next is appointed as the lord high executioner (since “Who’s next to be decapited / Cannot cut off another’s head / Until he’s cut his own off” [565]). The elegance of both the law and its evasion are glossed in the same way by a chorus satisfied by the playing out of good form: “And we are right, I think you’ll say, / To argue in this kind of way; / And I am right, / And you are right, / And all is right—too-looral-lay!” (565). From the start, then, the opera sets an unimpeachable law against its cunning circumvention, and that plot is

⁸ Chesterton may indeed be thinking of Sidney Webb’s critique of “the pompous inefficiency of every branch of our public administration” in the latter’s tract “Twentieth Century Politics” (Webb 7).

⁹ Interestingly, though, he returns to the idea in his 1920 travelogue *The New Jerusalem*, written to oppose the sending out of Sir Herbert Samuel, Britain’s first Jewish cabinet minister, as the British representative in Palestine, calling it the action of “a parliament of Pooh Bah” and “quite obviously a flat and violent contradiction to Zionism” (149–50).

¹⁰ Among the supporters of the ban were the mountaineer Walter Weston and the diplomat and Japanologist Joseph Henry Longford. For a wide bibliography of pro-Savoy letters and editorials in the *Times*, the *Daily News*, the *Era*, and elsewhere, see Lawrence. Lawrence also describes in fascinating detail the difficulty of enforcing a ban in provincial theaters.

¹¹ See Dark and Grey. Gilbert writes, “I learn from a friend, who had it direct from the King, that the Japs made the objection to *The Mikado*, and that it was at their instance it was suppressed. A delicate and polite action on the part of a guest towards a host. The rights in the piece do not revert to me for three years; by that time we shall probably be at war with Japan about India, and they will offer me a high price to permit it to be played” (101).

staged repeatedly as the avoidance of accountability to the despotic emperor. Consequentially its characters dwell in perpetual dread of the “short, sharp shock” (591) that will follow from the Mikado’s eventual appearance, presaged in a letter received toward the end of the first act in which the emperor “decrees that unless somebody is beheaded within one month the post of Lord High Executioner shall be abolished, and the city reduced to the rank of a village!” (587).

That the death sentence is successfully avoided in the denouement is, to be sure, a generic necessity: unlike realist novels, or indeed grand opera, Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera cannot end love plots by killing off half of the characters. In *The Mikado*, however, that outcome is not brokered through legal reform or through the Mikado’s being persuaded to change his mind but rather through the hyperbolization of his legal authority. It is Koko, the executioner himself, who eventually hits on the solution:

KO. . . . It’s like this: When your Majesty says, “Let a thing be done,” it’s as good as done—practically, it is done—because your Majesty’s will is law. Your Majesty says, “Kill a gentleman,” and a gentleman is told off to be killed. Consequently, that gentleman is as good as dead—practically, he is dead—and if he is dead, why not say so?

MIK. I see. Nothing could possibly be more satisfactory! (649)

Many of Gilbert’s plots revolve around legal fixes. The famous “paradox” of *The Pirates of Penzance*, for instance, is that the pirate apprentice Frederic is denied the freedom promised to him on his twenty-first birthday because, having been born on the twenty-ninth of February, “if we go by birthdays, you’re only five and a little bit over!” (Bradley 239). Yet where the Pirates are eventually chastened, and their grip on Frederic loosened, by their loyalty to a greater sovereign (“[b]ecause, with all our faults, we love our Queen” [261]), the authority of the Mikado is strengthened, rather than abandoned, in the plot’s conclusion.

These legal fictions demarcate one border at which the imaginary meets the real and begin to connect *The Mikado*’s (extradiegetic) fear of a Japanese audience in Yokohama or in the Greenwich docks with its (intradiegetic) fear of the Oriental despot that motivates much of its plot. Yet we might reasonably ask: can affects such as paranoia, anxiety, fear, anticipation, and excitement—all of which postulate their own condition as one of unknowing—sustain a realism of whatever kind? What conditions of *unknowing* might construct the reality principle of a queer world? In order to understand, then, what kinds of knowledge “Japan” could produce for Victorians, I turn to a handful of other texts that offer comical accounts of Japanese culture: Tobias Smollett’s *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769); Basil Hall Chamberlain’s *Things Japanese* (1890); and Douglas Sladen’s *Queer Things about Japan* (1903) and its sequel, *More Queer Things about Japan* (1904).

Styles of Knowing: Smollett, Chamberlain, Sladen

Smollett’s *The History and Adventures of an Atom* offers both an early example of comic writing about Japan and an example of what *The Mikado* might look like if it

were unambiguously a satire of English political culture. A picaresque it-narrative told by a roguish atom to an amanuensis named Nathaniel Peacock, the novel describes a trip around Japan, comprising a number of eccentric “political anecdotes” (4). Like those in *The Mikado*, the Japanese politicians described are variously ruthless, stupid, and pedantic and given to pointless arguments—though, written at the high-water mark of English picaresque, the jokes are much bawdier than Gilbert’s, and the narrative involves a punishingly detailed series of ass-kissing scenes, both literal and figurative. Characters’ names, too, share with “Nanki-Poo” and “Pooh-Bah” a queasily euphemistic anality: “Nin-kom-poo-po,” “Fika-kaka,” “Sti-phi-rum-poo.” Yet the most striking difference from *The Mikado* is that *Adventures of an Atom* rests on a tight allegorical correspondence between its characters and the British political figures it has set out to describe in the service of a critique of the Seven Years’ War of 1754–1763. Taycho, known for his “fluency of abuse” (47), is a mockery of William Pitt, and Lords Chatham and Bute also appear under pseudonyms. Walter Scott understood *Adventures of an Atom* not as a set of claims about Japan but as a patriotic work, designed “to inspire a national horror of continental connexions” (272). Smollett’s novel, apparently, was not about Japan. But it did, certainly, use Japan as a setting that was *particularly* suitable for the purpose of not being thematized, and one that could lead to spectacular scenes of eroticized violence; a setting that then shaped the generic conventions of explicitly nonfictional writing about Japan a century later.

A scholar and diplomat of repute both within and without Japan, Basil Hall Chamberlain might be expected to write the antithesis of Smollett’s filthy gag book. Yet even in his attempt to establish an entirely serious, modern, and respectful tone in which English writing about Japan might proceed, one discerns vestiges of the comic queer-and-quaintness of the picaresque. His career as a Japanologist is detailed at length in Yuzo Ota’s sympathetic biography but might be exemplified by his having been appointed as the first Western scholar to have taught Japanese at Tokyo Imperial University, which he did from 1873 until his retirement, at age forty-one, in 1891. (Hearn taught English literature at the same school around the same time.) Along with E. M. Satow and W. G. Aston, Chamberlain was one of the three most distinguished British scholars of Japan, scholars whose writing helped to shift the perceptions of Japan in the minds of British readers from the folkloric depictions of Edwin Arnold and A. E. Mitford to an appreciation of Japanese military and industrial power. Chamberlain’s position on Japanese military strength fluctuated over his career—he notoriously called the Sino-Japanese war of 1894 “our war” but became critical of militarist deployments of folk myths in the later Taisho and Showa periods. Consistently, however, he maintained a commitment to representing Japanese modernity rather than tradition. The most widely read of his Anglophone books on Japan, *Things Japanese*, opens with an implicit rebuke of the tone of Arnold’s writing on Japan, noting the distaste with which an audience of Japanese diplomats, academics, and journalists received a speech of Arnold’s praising Japanese folk traditions. Adopting the first-person voice of an editor of a Japanese newspaper, Chamberlain writes: “Art forsooth, scenery, sweetness of disposition! cries this editor. Why did not Sir Edwin praise us for huge industrial enterprises, for commercial talent, for wealth, political sagacity, powerful armaments? Of course it is because he could not honestly do so. He has gauged us at

our true value, and tells us in effect that we are only pretty weaklings" (4–5). The editor, in Chamberlain's account, resolves to ensure that the enfeeblement of Japan in Orientalist representations is made more difficult, and Chamberlain responds by seeking a new genre for Japan-writing and a new tone in which to conduct it.

Chamberlain responded to the political exigencies of a modernizing Japan not merely argumentatively, but also in the hybrid form of his text: an alphabetized anthology of brief essays on Japanese culture that he calls "a dictionary, not of words but of things" (2). Part travel guide, part encyclopedia, Chamberlain addresses at the outset the generic hybridity of his collection:

We are perpetually being asked questions about Japan. Here then are the answers, put into the shape of a dictionary, not of words but of things,—or shall we rather say a guide-book, less to places than to subjects? The old and the new will be found cheek by jowl. The only thing that will not be found is padding; for padding is unpardonable in any book on Japan, where the subject-matter is so plentiful that the chief difficulty is to know what to omit. (2)

At another moment, Chamberlain describes the collection as a memorial to the "Old Japan" whose passing marks the present historical moment: "This little book is intended to be, as it were, the epitaph recording the many and extraordinary virtues of the deceased,—his virtues, but also his frailties" (8). Defined by a series of hesitant designations followed by their negations, *Things Japanese* is presented to its reader as an impressionistic and subjectivist collation of sketches, a text whose argument is a series of moving parts rather than a unified whole. Chamberlain's ambition is analytic rather than synthetic, his critical insights always entailing the splitting of apparently unified identities into a series of shifting, incommensurate entities. Romantic and fragmented perhaps even against Chamberlain's explicit aims for the collection, then, *Things Japanese* is founded on an ideology of discrimination and difference, which the author politicizes in relation to both modernity and Orientalist assumptions concerning Asia. The introductory peroration proposes a schematic counterexample to the text's own method, in which Chamberlain enumerates the various assumptions that make up "Europe's illusions about the Far East" (9). The foundational mistake is the unification of discrete Asian "peoples" by the singular designation "Orientals" or "Asiatics" (9). The fragmentary form of *Things Japanese* responds primarily to Japanese modernity but also proposes an Orientalism of parts as a corrective to the simplistically synthesized Orientalisms of Chamberlain's contemporaries.

If Chamberlain's newly particularized scholarly content needed to be mobilized as a series of almost epigrammatic entries, more populist writing on Japan took a comic tone as a prerequisite for the modernity that Chamberlain had striven to manage and turned to the picaresque as a model for knowledge production. Douglas Sladen, for example, opens his book *Queer Things about Japan* with the Horatian motto "*Ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?*—What is to prevent a jester telling the truth?" (vii), positioning himself as a jester whose gnomic jokes about Japan might prove a firmer ground for knowing Japanese culture than a more serious tone. "I am so fond of Japan that I should not have cared to criticise the

Japanese seriously" (vii). His Japan is full of playful analogies and witty exuberance: the resort town of Miyanoshita, for example, appears as "the Brighton of Japan" (317), where "[n]ice young people with European lovers go sentimental walks into the glen [*sic*]" (325). Like Chamberlain's "things Japanese," each of Sladen's "queer things" is a vignette, a series of gently descriptive passages held together by a lightly grasped narrative, in which the narrator appears as a character, though rarely a central one. When the tone or subject matter appears to require an elevated register, Sladen punctures it as quickly as possible: the chapter named "The Sacred City of Nikko, and Its Golden Shrines" begins, "A sacred city in Japan need not be taken *au grand sérieux*, as it must in some countries" (341).

Sladen's sequel, *More Queer Things about Japan*, provides a rich source of information concerning the rapid change in British representations of Japan in the wake of the Russo-Japanese war. The book initially comprised four heterogeneous, but each fairly lighthearted, sections: "Japan from a Woman's Point of View" (written by Sladen's partner, Norma Lorimer); "The Letters of Will Adams from Japan, 1611–1617"; "A Life of Napoleon, Written and Illustrated by Japanese in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century"; and "Japan from a Man's Point of View." But after the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War, Lorimer and Sladen put out a "Peace Edition" that inserted an utterly flat-affect timeline of the war, charting in bullet points the major events of almost every day from February 5, 1904, until September 5, 1905. The reprinted "Peace Edition" starkly displays the dramatic and rapid changes in the kinds of literary form that writing about Japan could take.

Yet *The Mikado* is not merely another instance of this loose genre of comic writing about Japan. Rather, it registers, both metatheatrically and at the level of plot, the fractious internal dynamics that would eventually produce the emphatically anti-positivist Orientalisms of Hearn and Barthes, working through the epistemological problems Japanology had posed at the level of theatrical form. It is an opera in which the capacity of themes to be adequately encapsulated by language (of something to be "about" something) is subjected to a relentless examination—especially through its inquiries into the force and nature of legal authority. The Mikado's edict that motivates the plot's beginnings—that flirtation shall be made punishable by execution—links speech with death and the articulation of one's thinking with a profound risk. The universe of the play, in other words, is one in which all speech is by nature a circumlocution, as is made dramatically clear when the "Lord High Everything Else" Pooh-Bah is forced to give entirely conflicting advice as he cycles through his personae—"Of course, as First Lord of the Treasury, I could propose a special vote that would cover all expenses, if it were not that, as Leader of the Opposition, it would be my duty to resist it, tooth and nail" (Bradley 575). Williams rightly notes that these parodic performances of identity unsettle the play's gender performances and, indeed, a broader array of constructions of gender that Victorian theater enacted. But amplifying Williams's sense of the opera's queerness, I will end by arguing that the weakness of *The Mikado*'s performative act—the text's ambivalence, that is, concerning the thematic presence of "Japan"—enables a new kind of nonsovereign critical practice, an interpretive practice that leaves itself open to revision and reconstruction. There is at the heart of the opera itself an incipient theory of speech contrived to avoid the executioner's ax, that might disclose

itself briefly but then be able to smile, gauge an audience's reaction, and hurriedly add "just kidding" should it be necessary to do so: a paranoid claim to subjective authority.

"A 'Japanese Young Man'"

To *flirt*, to *leer*, to *wink*: the Mikado has established as capital crimes not sex itself but its solicitation. Rather than criminalize consummation, he has banned pursuit; or, perhaps, rather than the act, the identity. If this substitution might initially seem to be possible because sex is so far from the horizon as to be unthinkable, *The Mikado* repeatedly sets the matter straight: sexual words are everywhere, from the characters' names to the sweet nothings mumbled by the dumb creatures close by. Like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," Koko's (bad faith) plaint of love to Katisha pulls hard on a single word tweeted by an unwitting (but potentially all-knowing) bird; like Poe's narrator, Koko grows increasingly and morbidly fascinated by the repetition; unlike "nevermore," "titwillow" (Bradley 643) seems to have been chosen as much for its vulgarity as for its euphony. Deprived of a sexual object, language is treated by the Mikado's law as an object in itself, and so it becomes a worldly and conspicuous object. The most illustrative example of such speech is, moreover, the first appearance in the libretto of the Japanese language, from a chorus shouting "O ni! bikkuri shakkuri to!" (601) in order to drown out the spurned lover Katisha, who is on the cusp of informing them that Nanki-Poo is the Mikado's son and not a minstrel at all. The exclamatory fragment of words suggests (though few of the Savoyards could have been expected to know) hiccuping in shock and so emerges onstage as both a confabulation of nonsense and as a corporate body resisting knowledge through a homeostatic response. Here, as with the opening "gentlemen of Japan" number, there is a queering of the line between the textual world of the libretto and the metatextual world of performance: queer realism places the performers in the world without their knowledge.

If, under pressure of law, language appears in *The Mikado* as a privileged object of erotic desire, the form that fantasy takes is accordingly judicial. The moment when the voices of Koko, Pooh-Bah, and Pish-Tush (the messenger who has brought the Mikado's letter) converge—to express their desire not

*To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock,
In a pestilential prison, with a life-long lock,
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock,
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block!* (591)

—is not eroticized solely by its thrilling trisyllabic line endings, alliterative molossi that depart dramatically from the two tetrasyllabic feet that precede them. The moment captures three voices coming together in a shared, intimate exposure of their abject humanity. For the foregoing couple of minutes, each character has been rapidly pattering over the others, muttering a different excuse for not volunteering to die, and all now sing the same words, united in hypocrisy and anxiety. The moment is not merely intimate but implicitly sexual, since the punishment in question, decapitation, has been established from the start as the opera's code word for sex, the consummation that has taken its place in the Mikado's regime. Fantasies about legal

power also motivate not one but two of *The Mikado*'s showstoppers, moreover, which take the form of gleeful indulgences of legal violence. In "As some day it may happen," it is Koko who playfully lists the social undesirables his position as executioner may allow him to kill (571); later the Mikado proudly and happily announces his "object all sublime" to be to "make each prisoner pent / Unwillingly represent / A source of innocent merriment, of innocent merriment!" (623).

I have been arguing that the queer realism of *The Mikado*, its stretching out into a world it can only struggle to inhabit, was enabled by the particularities of its Japanese setting. On the one hand, I have argued that Japan produced a number of literary subgenres in which knowledge about an Orient was advanced tentatively and comically, and that the hybrid genres of texts about Japan resolve some of the hermeneutic problems that *The Mikado* has posed for audiences and critics. On the other, I have suggested that the historical emergence of Japan as a modern and military power in the late nineteenth century necessarily conditioned both those genres and the version of the "real world" that they were able to represent; these texts, after all, are Orientalisms neither propelled by colonial desire nor nourished by Saidian "confidence." By way of concluding, however, I will turn to one of *The Mikado*'s domestic contexts in order to understand one other aspect of these queer orientations.¹² I do not do so in order to join the consensus that this opera is about Britain after all but rather to suggest that the Orientalist genres I have been adumbrating form one historical basis for a critical engagement with the legal status of queerness in the late nineteenth century.

To put it bluntly, a world in which the phrase "sex crime" described not sex itself but the eroticization of language and of the eye was indeed the world in which *The Mikado* was first performed. Or almost: the play opened on March 14, 1885, but it was not until August 7, toward the end of a long summer of sex panic, that the Liberal MP Henri Labouchere successfully appended the following amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act:

*Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof, shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.*¹³ (sec. 11)

There is a patter-song quality to Labouchere's legalese as it conducts its subordinated clauses and antimetabolic caesurae toward their murderous peroration. Foregrounding the capacity of language to induce an indecency that neither will nor can be further defined, Labouchere's own words rely on connotation and rumor,

¹² A queer orientation toward objects underscores the queer theory of Orientalism underpinning the third chapter of Sarah Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology*.

¹³ The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, it is often suggested, was passed in order to quell public outrage stirred up by W. T. Stead's "Maiden Tribute" campaign against child sex workers in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Those articles did not equate male homosexuality with heterosexual predation, but the language of "unnatural crimes" was vague enough to be put to the purpose. See Soderlund 24–66.

legislating neither this act nor that but the open secret itself. Legal language as such is not, in general, written to be spoken out loud except under specific circumstances, but the “blackmailer’s charter,” as it came to be known, was a different kind of tongue twister, one that stifled the flirtatious speech of queer men and treated imprecise language as positive evidence. Symptomatically, if not consequentially, the most famous case it produced comprised a protracted and agonizing attempt to force silence into speech, from the properly impossible question, “What is ‘the love that dare not speak its name’?,” through to the judge’s attempt to “prevent one’s self from describing, in language that I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials.” The usually loquacious defendant’s response was a minimally constructed question to which silence was the ambiguous answer: “May I say nothing, my Lord?” (Hyde 200–202, 272–73).

In the libretto of Gilbert and Sullivan’s satire of the aesthetic movement, *Patience*, a word that appears twice as a shorthand for queerness is *Japanese*: the first time is when the “fleshy poet” Bunthorne (Bradley 266) confesses in an aside to the audience that he is not a fop, after all (“I do *not* long for all one sees / that’s Japanese” [291]); the second is when he playfully reassumes the role (“Conceive me if you can / . . . A Japanese young man” [345–47]). It is surely the second of these that the anthropologist Sheila K. Johnson is recalling, however unconsciously, when, in the context of a slightly phobic argument about Americans in Japan, she claims: “The existence, in Japan, of ‘pretty young men’ is no doubt another reason why American homosexuals are attracted to the country . . . [Some] prefer the slim, beardless, high-cheekboned, aesthetic-looking youths often found in Japan” (89). (Despite being published in 1988, this passage exhibits an exquisitely fin de siècle usage of *aesthetic*.) The phrase “pretty young men” is not, as far as I can tell, a quotation *from* anywhere; it is only a semi-citation, much as it is at the beginning of Oscar Wilde’s essay “Art and the Handicraftsman,” where Wilde imagines his own Japaneseness as an ugly rumor: “You have heard of me . . . as, if not a ‘Japanese young man,’ at least a young man to whom the rush and clamour and reality of the modern world were distasteful” (305–6).

Gilbert and Sullivan did not invent the queerness of Japan for British audiences: as I have suggested, there is a longer generic history to the association. Yet *The Mikado* stands as the fullest articulation of the particular affinity between the two themes that the period produced. By constructing a realism defined by its incapacity to inhabit the world “confidently,” *The Mikado* expresses both the eroticism and the distinctive social posture of an emergent queer identity. Accordingly, it is not merely the history of British anti-Japanese sentiment that is obscured by the assessment that it is “not about Japan”: one also risks misconstruing the opera’s distinctive response to British culture itself.

* * *

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