Changing Gender Conventions in
Gilbert and Sullivan’s

*Patience, Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida*

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# Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

2. Gilbert and Sullivan ...................................................................................................... 3
   2.1. Biography .............................................................................................................. 3
   2.2. Style ..................................................................................................................... 4

3. Victorian Gender conventions ...................................................................................... 7
   3.1. Conventional gender norms .................................................................................. 7
   3.2. Changing gender norms ....................................................................................... 9
      3.2.1. Aestheticism ................................................................................................ 9
      3.2.2. Feminism and the New Woman .................................................................. 11
      3.2.3. Challenging gender conventions ............................................................... 14

4. Patience .......................................................................................................................... 15
   4.1. Analysis ............................................................................................................... 16
   4.2. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 25

5. Iolanthe ........................................................................................................................ 26
   5.1. Analysis ............................................................................................................... 26
   5.2. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 37

6. Princess Ida .................................................................................................................... 39
   6.1. Analysis ............................................................................................................... 39
   6.2. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 52

7. Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 54

8. Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 58

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1. Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain gave rise to a new standard for musical-stage entertainment. With the collaboration between Gilbert and Sullivan from 1871 to 1896, a new type of comic operetta rose and changed the British entertainment scene (Kenrick 76, 2008). During these last decades of the nineteenth century, there were also some changes concerning the established gender conventions, due to the rise of two movements. The artistic movement Aestheticism gained popularity and also the feminist New Woman was advancing, which both had an influence on the conventional gender norms and roles in Victorian society. Both movements were seen as overtly challenging sexual codes and they were perceived as being a threat to the Victorian domestic ideology (Ledger 1997, 95). As Gilbert and Sullivan in their works often dealt with aspects of Victorian society which where relevant at the time, it is not surprising that also these changing gender norms and the two movements which embody them, Aestheticism and the New Woman movement, are addressed in their work.

Although many scholars have discussed Gilbert and Sullivan because of their role as pioneers of a new musical-stage entertainment, not many have focussed on gender in their oeuvre. Carolyn Williams however, did recently make an exhaustive study in Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody (2011). Besides focussing on genre in the Gilbert and Sullivan oeuvre, Williams extensively discusses the gender issues in Princess Ida, Patience and Iolanthe. The study makes some very good points as to how gender is treated in the operettas, and Williams’ main argument is that Gilbert and Sullivan attempt to demonstrate the absurdity of Victorian gender conventions in their work. She claims that “Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas intensely inhabit and perform Victorian gender conventions and stereotypes in order to demonstrate their absurdity” (Williams 2011, 17). Her main point is thus that the operettas mainly parody gender conventions. Although Williams makes a very good analysis of the three operettas and makes some very good arguments about how gender conventions are mocked, I would want to argue that the three operettas also parody changing gender conventions. In this thesis I will therefore focus on how Gilbert and Sullivan mock unconventional sexuality itself, rather than using the changing gender norms to comment on conventional gender roles as Williams argues. My research will therefore be an exhaustive study of how Patience, Iolanthe and Princess Ida parody the changing gender conventions and roles of the Victorian era. There are many ways in which changing gender norms are addressed, but I will mainly focus on how Aestheticism and the New Women movement, and the changing gender roles which those two movements embody, are parodied.
In this thesis I will first very shortly discuss Gilbert and Sullivan, after that I will go into how their collaboration came about, and then I will discuss how they worked and what the typical characteristics of their operettas are. After that I will cover the Victorian domestic ideology, and I will discuss Aestheticism and the feminist New Woman movement and the way they both challenge gender conventions. Then I will extensively discuss *Patience, Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* as to how they can be seen as a parody on the changing gender conventions, and finally I will draw a conclusion.
2. Gilbert and Sullivan

Gilbert and Sullivan are often mentioned in one breath but it was not until 1871 that the two men worked together. In total they collaborated on 14 operettas from 1871 to 1896, and during this period they developed their own style. First I will very shortly discuss their lives before their collaboration, and then I will go into how their partnership came about and how it evolved leading to their separation in 1896. After that I will discuss how the men usually worked, I will go into some typical aspects of their operettas and lastly I will very shortly mention why their works can be defined as parodies.

2.1. Biography

William Schwenck Gilbert was born in 1836 in London. During his youth he travelled through Europe, but the Gilbert family ultimately settled down in London. From 1857 to 1866 he made career as a government clerk and barrister, but during that time he also contributed drawings, prose and verse to the popular comic journal Fun (Crowther 1997). His most famous contribution to the journal are The Bab Ballads, a collection of ballads published under his pen-name Bab during the years he worked for Fun (Farron). Gilbert’s first professionally-performed play was Uncle Baby, which was staged in 1863. Later he also produced some burlesques and pantomimes, such as Dulcamara (1866), which according to Crowther made him famous. He eventually started writing for the Gallery of Illustration, a small theatre, which allowed him to develop a personal style since he did not have to worry about the interference of stage-managers. During the same period he also wrote some fairy comedies which he displayed at the Haymarket Theatre. Later he became involved in many plays, and even published volumes of his work (Crowther 1997).

Arthur Seymour Sullivan was born in 1842 in London. He came in contact with music at a very early age, as his father was a theatre musician. He was admitted as one of the Children of the Chapel Royal, in which he was one of soloists. In 1856 he won a scholarship, which enabled him to study at the Royal Academy of Music, and in 1858 he went to the Conservatory in Leipzig. His examination piece with which he graduated from Leipzig eventually led to him becoming famous as it was an enormous success as one of the Crystal Palace Saturday concerts. Over the years he composed many works, produced music for plays, and he also started to teach (Turnbull 2004).
In 1871 Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on their first work together, *Thespis*. When attending a performance of this opera, Richard D’Oyly Carte, a well-established booking agent, believed that it showed the way to a new form of comic operetta. Carte contacted both Gilbert and Sullivan, but due to other commitments and a lack of money a collaboration between the three did not happen until 1875 when *Trial by Jury* was staged. Some of the traits that would later characterize Gilbert and Sullivan’s canon, such as topsy-turvydom and realistic settings and costumes, were already present in their second collaboration. The operetta was an absolute success as a curtain raiser, and was even moved to the end of the evening to prevent people from leaving before the main act. Carte eventually succeeded in establishing a partnership, something which was not easy as both Gilbert and Sullivan had high demands. Two and a half years after *Trial by Jury*, Gilbert and Sullivan’s first full-length operetta, *The Sorcerer*, was staged. Since it was also a huge success, both men were encouraged to continue their partnership (Kenrick 2008, 76-80). Their first real hit was their fourth collaboration, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, which was staged in 1878. Many American companies produced unauthorized version of the operetta, so when Gilbert and Sullivan staged *The Pirates of Penzance* in 1879, they presented it simultaneously in England and America (Silvers 2012). According to Kenrick, it was not until the 1880s that Gilbert and Sullivan became confident in their collaboration. *Patience* was the first operetta to be staged at the newly built Savoy Theatre in 1881, which was the first auditorium in Great Britain with electric lighting. Gilbert and Sullivan however waited until *Iolanthe* in 1882 to experiment with this innovation. After *Iolanthe*, Sullivan started complaining about Gilbert’s use of topsy-turvydom, which lead to a new approach in *Princess Ida* in 1884. They collaborated on four more operettas after *Princess Ida*, until the tensions between them came to a climax in 1890 when a section of carpeting had to be replaced, something which Gilbert did not want to pay for. The two men separated, and it was not until a few years after the quarrel that there was a reconciliation. After that only two more operettas were staged: *Utopia, Limited* in 1893 and *The Grand Duke* in 1896. Both operettas were however not successful (Kenrick 2008, 91).

2.2. Style

During their collaboration, Gilbert and Sullivan not only developed their own style, but also a typical way of working. Kenrick argues that Gilbert often spent weeks or months developing a
story and often revised his dialogue and lyrics. Before rehearsals, he worked out the scenes on a stage-model, using wooden blocks which represented the actors. This allowed him to give attention to details during the rehearsals, as he had worked out most of the stage directions beforehand. Gilbert did not allow his actors to add or change parts of the dialogue or stage business because he was aware of the fact that “one missed word could kill a crucial laugh.” (Kenrick 2008, 84). He also insisted on the actors staying serious even if the material was comical, to ensure the topsy-turvy to work (Kenrick 2008, 84). Sullivan generally did not compose the music until the libretto was completed. Kenrick argues that he was “the first person in England to take light music seriously” (Kenrick 2008, 85) and that he “knew the value of exact adherence to tempo, orchestration, and harmony, and demanded it from musicians and singers alike in a firm but courteous tone.” (Kenrick 2008, 85). Both Gilbert and Sullivan thus worked in a very organised way and demanded the most of their actors and musicians. The one creative authority the men recognized was the audience, as they would often make changes to their operettas if they noticed that certain material did not please the spectators (Kenrick 2008, 83).

Kenrick distinguishes a few basic traits that were typical for Gilbert and Sullivan’s collaborations. He claims that the operettas often have a realistic setting and realistic costumes, but the plot shows an inversion of accepted reality, which is called topsy-turvydom. Kenrick says that Gilbert “saw reality as an uneasy blend of sense and nonsense, and felt that the ridiculous was far more amusing when depicted in a realistic context” (Kenrick 2008, 78). Other aspects are that in the operettas the course of true love generally runs in unanticipated directions, and unqualified men occupy high positions, which both add to the comical and topsy-turvy effect of the operettas (Kenrick 2008, 77-78). Gilbert and Sullivan’s works are thus comical, which is why they can be called operettas, which are short operas with a light and often comical tone. Williams claims that this genre was created through a parody of older theatrical genres such as pantomime, extravaganza and melodrama (Williams 2011, 4).

Besides parodying other genres, Gilbert and Sullivan’s work also parodies aspects of Victorian society. Williams argues that the genre of Savoy opera “became a specifically English comic opera, in large part, by launching its critique of what it means to be English.” (Williams 2011, 6). Many of their works thus critique and mock aspects which were typical of Victorian society, such as its law system, customs or gender roles. Their ridicule of these aspects can be defined as a parody, as it shows many characteristics associated with the genre: the works are mimetic and critical, which means that they always looks like what they are criticizing, they are serious and comic, and they blur the distinctions between inside and
outside, which in the Savoy operas mainly happens by creating a topsy-turvy world (Williams 2011, 6-7). As Denisoff argues when he quotes Linda Hutcheon, parody is intramural, as it addresses another work or coded discourse, whereas satire is extramural as it has an ameliorative aim with its ridicule (Denisoff 2001, 3). Parody would then be most suited to describe Gilbert and Sullivan’s work, as they ridicule the changing gender norms by imitating and addressing them, rather than trying to hold them up with an ameliorative aim.
3. Victorian gender conventions

3.1. Conventional gender norms

During the Victorian period ethical values stemmed from the teachings of the church. The construction of masculinity and femininity, and with it the position of women and men, was influenced by religious values as well as biological difference. Women were seen as the bearers of religious moral values, and were submissive to men, both as a result of religious law. Moral education of the family was their main duty, and they were also granted a role in spiritual life. Levine claims that it was this role as a bearer of moral values which was a major factor in the creation of the domestic ideology in England, also called the ideology of the separate spheres. As a result of the new industrial capitalism, industry gradually replaced agriculture. The industrial machinery was not affordable or suitable for use in the private sphere, which led to a more clear distinction between home and the workplace. As work now happened outside the house, in a factory or an office, and the working day became more structured, it became difficult for both men and women to work, as there would then be no time for domestic duties and the children would be left unattended (Levine 1987, 11-13). As women were seen as physically weaker but morally superior to men, they were thought to be best suited to function at home in the domestic sphere. Women thus stayed at home in the private sphere to take care of the children and the household, whereas men’s place was in the public sphere which included politics and economics (Shoemaker 1998, 31). The distinction between home and the workplace, and with it the roles of women and men, became clearer than ever (Hughes). Levine states that the separate spheres ideology was “a social construction, as a means of justifying the relative positions and organization of men and women in society as the best possible arrangement.” (Levine 1987, 13). But the power relations were not only portrayed as the best possible ones, they were also depicted as natural (Levine 1987, 13).

Hughes remarks that women were given a certain kind of education to prepare for their roles as wives and mothers. They were coached in ‘accomplishments’, which were certain skills such as drawing, singing and dancing, which added to a girls graceful and feminine manner. Women were assumed to desire marriage, and many women married an older man since this reinforced the natural hierarchy between the sexes and assured financial stability. In the company of men they were expected not to be too straightforward, and they were also presumed to stay chaste until marriage (Hughes). Levine argues that “Victorian perceptions of
sexuality […] were built around a fundamental belief of sexual difference. Women and men were categorized by their biology and that biology was seen as central in determining their social roles.” (Levine 1987, 129). She goes further saying that “the keynote of nineteenth-century English attitudes is the passivity and reluctant sexuality of women” (Levine 1987, 129). Women were thus expected not to be too sexual as a consequence of their biology. Instead, they had to represent purity and innocence. Levine claims that the ideology of the separate sphere mostly had a psychological effect: unmarried and working women where seen as society’s failures and it was highly effective in polarizing masculinity and femininity (Levine 1987, 13). Women who devoted themselves to intellectual education were seen as unfeminine and unattractive, as they challenged men’s intellectual superiority and did not conform to the separate spheres ideology. Later, when Universities became allowable for women, many therefore refused to go as they believed it would make them unmarriageable (Hughes).

Whereas women had to represent purity and innocence, men were expected to behave heroically and had to have a strong attitude which showed their dominance (Besserman). In contrast to women, men dominated the public sphere and were in control of political, legal and economic affairs (Marsh 2015). They were seen as functioning in a brutal and often immoral world, and Levine argues that man’s sexuality was a “mirror of his public involvements” (Levine 1987, 130). His sexuality was therefore active, violent and dominant, this in contrast to that of the woman, whose sexuality was passive. However, men did have to gain women’s respect before marriage, and they also had to gain that of peers. Appell claims that domesticity played a central role in men’s life, as marriage was a sign of true masculinity since being able to support a family was a sign of success (Appell). Marriage was thus also a major goal for men, as it helped them to gain the respect of their peers since it signalled masculinity.

The Victorian domestic ideology succeeded in polarizing femininity and masculinity, as women were limited to the private sphere whereas man mainly functioned in the public sphere. This then had an influence on the behaviour of both genders: women were expected to represent innocence and purity and therefore were not supposed to work, have an education, or acknowledge their sexuality, whereas men could be more active and dominant and therefore were allowed to engage in all public activities and could acknowledge their sexuality.
3.2. **Changing gender norms**

Towards the end of the Victorian period two important movements rose which both were seen as challenging and threatening to the Victorian domestic ideology. Aestheticism, an artistic movement, challenged the conventional ideas about masculinity, and the feminist New Woman challenged the conventional ideas about femininity. Many felt that the movements opposed to the values that were essential for the survival of Victorian culture, as they both overtly challenged conventional gender norms, and were therefore perceived as threatening to Victorian society (Dowling 1979, 436).

3.2.1. **Aestheticism**

The first movement which was seen as challenging to the Victorian ideology was Aestheticism, an artistic movement that emerged in England in the nineteenth century, with its peak in the 1880s and 1890s. The movement served as a reaction to the industrialization and modernization of the Victorian era and went against everything that is mainstream. One of the movement’s most famous phrases was “Art for art’s sake”, expressing the idea that art is autonomous and therefore without moral (Harmes 2012, 172). The Aesthetes focused on Greek studies and re-established the concept of hedonism, in which the most important goal in life is the pursuit of pleasure and beauty (Laws). One of the leading figures of Aestheticism was Walter Pater, who in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* of 1873 states that "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." (Pater 1873). This expresses the idea that the appreciation of beauty and art is more important than the engagement with the everyday (Denisoff 2001, 6). Also Decadence was a movement which became associated with the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’, and the term was often interchangeably used with Aestheticism. The term signalled a notion of intense refinement: there was the valuing of artificiality more than nature, an attitude of boredom, and an interest in perversity and transgressive modes of sexuality (Burdett). All these characteristics which became associated with Aestheticism, led to the perception of the movement as being a dissident one, since the Aesthetes’ major ideas that art is autonomous and that the most important thing in life is to pursue beauty, completely went against the Victorian ideals and norms of art having a moral and being instructive (Harmes 2012, 172). The Aesthetes thus opposed to everything that was seen as mainstream and conservative (Laws).
As a protest movement, the Aesthetes started to exploit the feminine in their protest against modernization, which was seen as something masculine because of the idea that men were best suited to function in the new industrial world (Sinfield 1994, 62). Sinfield claims that “manliness is celebrated as the proper inspiration, validation and necessary condition of trade and manufacturing” and that “the protest of art takes, in counterpart, a feminine role” (Sinfield 1994, 86). The Aesthetes’ protest via art thus lead to them being associated with sensitivity and the effeminate (Sinfield 1994, 86). According to Sinfield, this association with the effeminate did not immediately link the Aesthetes with the homosexual. They were mainly seen as men who had an excessive concern with women and were involved in female activities such as fashion and music (Sinfield 1994, 90).

Although not necessarily associated with homosexuality, the movement did however give rise to a new male tenderness. As women became more and more emancipated in the final decades of the nineteenth century, manliness became the most important ideal in the middle class public school system. These public schools led to manly friendships becoming highly appreciated, which gave rise to many male-male friendships, also called homosocial bonds (Sinfield 1994, 65). Because manliness was a typical middle-class virtue, as a result of the fact that the middle-classes worked which was perceived as a masculine occupation, effeminacy became associated with the leisure class. People like Oscar Wilde started to exploit effeminacy more and more, leading to the figure of the dandy who moves around in homosocial circles. As Sinfield claims, the dandy was an indeterminate figure and Aesthetes preferred to have a cross-sex image so that they could commute between diverse sexualities (Sinfield 1994, 73). This eventually caused the dandy, and therefore the Aesthete, to be viewed as homosexual, with Oscar Wilde’s trial in 1895 as a climax (Sinfield 1994, 1).

Effeminacy and homosexuality were perceived by many as disturbing and dangerous aspects of Aestheticism. Many felt that the Aesthete’s unconventional cross-sex image not only challenged the established ideas about masculinity, but also threatened normative heterosexual relations and as a consequence threatened the continuation of the race. If men no longer engaged in heterosexual relationships, families were no longer established which would then hinder reproduction and would threaten the survival of the race. Dowling claims that “the decadent [...] seemed to be dangerous avatars of the "New," and were widely felt to oppose [...] the values considered essential to the survival of established culture.” (Dowling 1979, 436). She goes further saying that “the loosening of sexual controls apparently encouraged by literary decadence [...] was almost universally believed by late-Victorian critics to threaten the vital bonds of state and culture.” (Dowling 1979, 438). The Decadents’,
and therefore the Aesthetes’, cross-sex image was perceived by many as a signal of the loosening of sexual controls, and was consequentially seen as threatening. Aesthetes were thus perceived as men who did not conform to conventional masculinity, and as a consequence threatened Victorian society since no heterosexual relationships were established. Many therefore started to use the Aesthete’s unconventional cross-sex image to ridicule the movement (Hatt 1999, 249).

3.2.2. Feminism and the New Woman

The second thing which was seen as threatening to the Victorian domestic ideology was the rise of the figure of the New Woman. Ledger claims that the New Woman, who was not named until 1894 in "The New Aspect of the Woman Question” by Sarah Grand, had a multiple identity: “She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet” (Ledger 1997, 1). And also Allen remarks that “It is important to note that the position of ‘New Woman’ was really no more coherent than the modern label, ‘Feminist’. There were, in fact, all kinds of New Women, and they did not make up an ideological monolith.” (Allen and Felluga 2002). The New Women rose as a consequence of the dissatisfaction with the separate spheres ideology. As mentioned, this ideology mainly had a psychological effect, as it polarized masculinity and femininity and condemned unmarried or working women. In practice, however, many women, as well as numerous men, found this ideology burdensome and many therefore committed to fight for women’s rights. In her article, Grand addressed the double-standards present in Victorian marriage which insisted on sexual virtue for women, but not for men. The New Women thus asked for equality with men, but rather than completely rejecting the separate spheres ideology, they manipulated its fundamental values. Women started to promote an optimistic self-image and many demanded a space in public life without having to give up their roles in the private sphere (Levine 1987, 13). The term then became popular to describe a new type of independent, self-supporting, emancipated and educated woman (Buzwell).

For many feminists the demand for a place in the public sphere meant that they wanted to be involved in politics. Levine remarks that women wanted political equality but that “feminist politics did not operate in the same way as male or mixed political campaigning. Indeed, it would have been difficult to do so, as women were denied access to existing channels of political influence.” (Levine 1987, 17). She goes further saying that the
movement “had no acknowledged leader, no powerful organization, no official propaganda. In short, it failed to fit the pattern of orthodox and male political organizations.” (Levine 1987, 20). However, according to Levine, this was a conscious decision as the women chose to reject the hierarchies of male political organization (Levine 1987, 20). The reason why women wanted to be involved in politics is because they believed that it would release their potential to the full. If women had political influence, they would be able to improve other aspects of life for women (Levine 1987, 62).

Many of the feminists felt that, besides politics, also education was an important step to a better life for women (Levine 1987, 14). Levine claims that

The foundation of new educational opportunities for women was one of the major areas of the new feminist activity which emerged at this time. Women saw education as the key to a broad range of other freedoms; as means of training for paid employment, […] and, of course, as the means to improving their ability to fight for the extension of female opportunities in a host of other areas. (Levine 1987, 26)

Women thus felt that education would serve as a good training for a paid job, which would allow them to enter the workplace, and that it would help them to improve the fight for women’s rights. Women therefore started to organise their own education in small groups or alone. As Levine remarks, education was much more to these women that just an antidote to boredom, it held the possibility of them becoming independent. Feminists often emphasized that marriage was not the only or best option for women, and education seemed the first step to the realisation of this independence (Levine 1987, 30). For many women, feminism was more of a life-style rather than just a form of political activism. Besides organizing themselves for education, women also started organizing themselves in debating societies and social clubs (Levine 1987, 15). Many of them had a preference for female company as they felt that education in the company of men and even communication with men often led to a limitation of possible topics. Some even chose companionship with women over marriage (Levine 1987, 19).

As Sarah Grand addressed in her article on the woman question, there was besides the wish for a place in politics and education also the demand for sexual equality. This as a consequence of the double standards in the Victorian marriage which expected sexual virtue of the wife, but not of the husband (Ledger 1997, 20). Lee argues that men were seen as slaves to their sexual appetite, and were therefore permitted to be in touch with their sexuality,
whereas women were expected to restrain their sexual urges and had to represent innocence and sexual virtue. Lee claims that “A young lady was only worth as much as her chastity and appearance of complete innocence”, suggesting that women had to repress their sexuality (Lee 1997). Women were then portrayed as either being frigid, if they represented sexual virtue, or else insatiable, if they were in touch with their sexuality. The New Women stood up against the suppression of female sexuality, which led to the perception of the New Woman as someone who believed in ‘free love’ without attachments, and therefore without marriage. This then led to an association with sexual dissidence (Ledger 1997, 12).

Many critics felt that a lot of the things the feminists stood up for were threatening to Victorian society. They were perceived as women who rejected the Victorian gender roles prescribed for women, and in the popular press they were even portrayed as women who appropriated male roles (Allen and Felluga 2002). The New Woman’s wish for education, demand for a place in the public sphere, and also their wish for sexual equality were perceived as threatening to Victorian society. Many were against the education for women, as they thought that their presence would agitate male students and teachers, and, more importantly, that the energy they invested in intellectual exertion would interfere with their involvement in domestic matters and would eventually undermine family life. Women choosing companionship with a woman over marriage also added to the fear that feminists would no longer fulfil their prescribed domestic roles as wives and mothers, as well did the idea that the New Woman believed in free love. (Levine 1987, 19). As Ledger argues, there was “the supposition that the New Woman posed a threat to the institution of marriage.” (Ledger 1997, 11). This because of the things the New Woman stood up for, but also as a result of the improvements in married women’s legal position, married women were given more rights, and because there were many unmarried women for whom the New Woman stood up demanding that they should be able to lead an independent life as a man’s equal (Ledger 1997, 12). The reason why many attached such great importance to the institution of marriage was mainly because of the fear that without conventional domestic arrangements Victorian society would fall apart (Ledger 1997, 11). Critics therefore often portrayed the New Women’s beliefs as dangerous. They were seen and portrayed as women who preferred “education and a career to marriage, children and domesticity” and “the company of like-minded women to that of eligible young men” (Ledger 1997, 124). As Dowling remarks, many feared that the New Woman would irreversibly make herself unfit for the role as wife and mother (Dowling 1979, 446). Many thus were concerned about the consequences of this
feminist movement as they thought that it had the possibility to undermine the Victorian domestic ideology and therefore would hinder the continuation of the race.

3.2.3. Challenging gender conventions

Both Aestheticism and the feminist New Woman were seen as challenging the established gender norms, and in the Victorian imagination the two movements were often linked although they had ideologically little in common (Ledger 1997, 94). Ledger remarks that

it is no coincidence that the New Woman materialised alongside the decadent and the dandy. Whilst the New Woman was perceived as a direct threat to classic Victorian definitions of femininity, the decadent and the dandy undermined the Victorians’ valorisation of a robust, muscular brand of British masculinity deemed to be crucial to the maintenance of the British Empire. (Ledger 1997, 94)

What Ledger’s remark makes clear is that the two movements were linked because the one challenged the conventional ideas about masculinity, and the other challenged the conventional ideas about femininity. The New Woman was even blamed for the effeminacy of culture (Ledger 1997, 67). Both were thus seen as a threat to the Victorian normative family since they overtly challenged conventional gender roles, and were therefore seen as a threat to the continuation of the race. They were though to unsettle Victorian society and the fear was then that this would make society fall apart (Ledger 1997, 11).
4. Patience

*Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride* was Gilbert and Sullivan’s sixth collaboration, and was the first operetta to be staged at the Savoy Theatre. It premiered in 1881 and was one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s most popular pieces. It had a lengthy run of 578 performances and was well received by critics (Newman 1985, 264). The basis of the operetta is “The Rival Curates”, a ballad written by Gilbert in 1867 as a part of his Bab Ballads. In the story two clergymen compete to be the mildest and most spineless curate. Gilbert however felt that this clerical subject hampered his creativity as the church was still off-limits. He therefore altered his characters, making them rival poets instead of rival clergymen (Williams 2011, 174). The operetta thus turned into a parody of the Aesthetic craze that was going on at the time.

*Patience* has often been read as an attack on Aestheticism, but Newman claims it is rather “an attack on certain by-products of the movement.” (Newman 1985, 266). The sexual aspects of the movement in particular, effeminacy and homosexuality, seem to play an important role in the piece. Denisoff argues that “Gilbert positioned his work between, on the one hand, a comic critique of unconventional sexuality and, on the other hand, an appreciation of the titillating that has been read as a […] deflation of the image of such unconventionality as threatening.” (Denisoff 2001, 57). As well as criticizing or parodying changing gender norms, Gilbert thus also at some points appreciates unconventional sexuality. Denisoff argues that “Gilbert would not have offered a parody that discouraged his audience from celebrating the work publicly; from a basic economic standpoint, he would have wanted aestheticism’s popularity to continue.” (Denisoff 2001, 57). Gilbert’s parody of Aestheticism would therefore, as Newman suggested, be an attack on certain aspects of Aestheticism and not necessarily on the whole movement. My argument is then that mainly the sexual aspects of the Aesthete’s, being effeminacy and homosexuality, are attacked and are portrayed as being threatening to Victorian society.

Williams claims that “*Patience* […] play[s] with changing gender norms and roles” (Williams 2011, 187) but mainly to “show how serious the maintenance of normative gender relations within the conventional family really was.” (Williams 2011, 156). In this thesis, however, I would like to argue that Gilbert and Sullivan not only exploited changing gender norms to mock the conventional family, but also to parody the changing gender conventions themselves and the way they were perceived by the Victorian audience. Williams argues that there are three parodic types as far as femininity is concerned in the operetta who characterize the range of positions available for females. Patience represents the stereotypical and
respectable Victorian woman as she is ignorant of bodily functions, sexual feelings and strong emotions. She therefore personifies a stupefied femininity, and at the same time also parodies the Victorian demand for it. The Aesthetic Maidens are a second type as they serve as a representation for Aestheticism’s trendiness. They are superficial, as they just go along with the Aesthetic craze, and wrong-headed. The third type is Lady Jane, who embodies the strong-headed woman since she is a figure of female power and self-interest. (Williams 2011, 152-153). Masculinity also has three positions: there are the Dragoon Guards, who represent the stereotypical Victorian men, there is Bunthorne the Aesthetic poet, and Grosvenor the idyllic poet. Bunthorne and Grosvenor as literary men are not only opposed to the manly Guards, but also to each other (Williams 2011, 152). As Williams explains, idyllic poetry was associated with moralism and simple-mindedness, as opposed to Aesthetic poetry which was associated with deviancy and femininity (Williams 2008, 393-394). Mainly Aestheticism then is important when analysing unconventional sexuality and changing gender norms as the movement was seen as a threat to conventional gender since it overtly challenged Victorian sexual codes (Ledger 1997, 95). Therefore Bunthorne, who is a representative of Aestheticism, will be the central focus of my analysis. He is the most deviant character in the operetta, as he overtly challenges gender conventions with his effeminacy and homosexuality, and can be seen as a representative of the changing gender conventions.

4.1. Analysis

*Patience* portrays Bunthorne and Grosvenor, two poets, in their struggle for the love of Patience the milkmaid. Bunthorne, the Aesthetic poet, displays many characteristics that were associated with Aestheticism. He is narcissistic, and has an unconventional cross-sex image as he is very effeminate. He is occupied with art, which was regarded as a feminine occupation, and he is portrayed as a rather feminine and feeble man as he for instance “stagger[s] [...] into the arms of COLONEL” (Gilbert 1881, 7) after having finished a poem. Besides that, Bunthorne is also a real womanizer who is desired by the Aesthetic Maidens (Sinfield 1994, 92). Although he is desired by many, Bunthorne is solely interested in Patience, the only woman in the operetta who does not desire him and does not seem to be a part of the Aesthetic craze. Despite the fact that Bunthorne is concerned with female attention and claims to be madly in love with Patience, some moments in the operetta seem to hint that he is not sincerely interested in women and might even be homosexual. Bunthorne appears to be a
lady-killer, who does better with the women than the manly men do, but according to Denisoff, this image of the Aesthete as a womanizer often served as a cover up for homosexuality (Denisoff 2001, 67). He argues that “the dandy-aesthete’s womanizing image [...] offered a cover for men whose predominant erotic interests were directed toward their own sex.” (Denisoff 2001, 67). Denisoff’s suggestion is then that Bunthorne’s concern with women is merely an act to cover up his same-sex desire (Denisoff 2001, 67). This idea is confirmed when looking at Bunthorne’s treatment of Patience. Although he is competing for her love with Grosvenor throughout the whole operetta and claims to be madly in love with her, he is in no way loving when he and Patience are in a relationship. He exclaims “Love me! Bah!” (Gilbert 1881, 25) when she expresses her feelings for him, making it clear that he does not love her. Patience says that she is “miserable beyond description” (Gilbert 1881, 24) in her relationship with him, again suggesting that he is not very loving. What is more, Bunthorne is only concerned with the fact that the Aesthetic Maidens have lost interest in him since Grosvenor has entered the scene, saying that “The damozels used to follow me wherever I went; now they all follow him!” (Gilbert 1881, 26). Bunthorne’s love for Patience thus turns out to be insincere, which makes clear that he is only using her as a cover-up for his homosexuality. His feelings towards Lady Jane also point in this direction. Although first disgusted by her, he accepts her as his lover in the last scene of the operetta, a thing he probably does because he realizes she is his last chance on having a lover to cover up his same-sex desire. Besides using the women to cover up his homosexuality, Bunthorne also claims that “It’s no use; I can’t live without admiration.” (Gilbert 1881, 31), suggesting that he is a narcissus who likes attention, but is not interested in starting a romantic relationship with the ladies. And also the fact that he admits that he is not a real Aesthete by saying “I’m an aesthetic sham!” (Gilbert 1881, 10), suggests that he uses his image as an Aesthete as an easy way to attract the attention of women, which then ensures him that he will be able to cover up his homosexuality. It thus becomes clear that Bunthorne’s feelings for the maidens, Lady Jane and even for Patience are in no way sincere and that he just fakes interest in them to hide his homosexuality. His Aestheticism then serves as an easy way to attract women’s attention, and ensures him that he will have lovers to cover up his same-sex desire. Bunthorne thus clearly embodies the changing gender norms, as his effeminacy and homosexuality both challenge conventional Victorian sexual codes. He is a deviant character, who enjoys female attention but only uses it to cover up his same-sex desire.

Although he also claims that “I am aesthetic” (Gilbert 1881, 20), Grosvenor represents a different type of poet than Bunthorne. Williams argues that the first represents the Idyllic
poet, whereas the latter embodies the Aesthetic poet (Williams 2008, 375). Grosvenor’s poems are simple, pure, narrative and moralistic (Williams 2008, 391), as opposed to Bunthorne, whose poetry is difficult and a “lyric refusal of constative or narratable content.” (Williams 2008, 386), which means that there is no moral in his poetry. The biggest difference however between the two men, is that Bunthorne is an effeminate and homosexual man, whereas Grosvenor is much more masculine and heterosexual. Although he is narcissistic and concerned with beauty, as he himself claims “Ah, I am a very Narcissus!” (Gilbert 1881, 30), Grosvenor is not effeminate. His physical appearance is masculine, as he says that “I am much taller and much stouter than I was” (Gilbert 1881, 14). Grosvenor is also, unlike Bunthorne, not concerned with women as he claims that “it is my hideous destiny to be madly loved at first sight by every woman I come across” (Gilbert 1881, 14) and wonders “what is this mysterious fascination that I seem to exercise over all I come across? A curse on my fatal beauty, for I am sick of conquests!” (Gilbert 1881, 24). Since Denisoff suggested that Bunthorne’s concern with women served as a marker and cover up for his homosexuality, the fact that Grosvenor is not interested in female attention seems to imply that he is heterosexual, as he has nothing to cover up. Supporting this is the fact that his love for Patience seems to be sincere, as he has no attention for other women, and ultimately even marries her. Grosvenor thus appears to be much more masculine than Bunthorne, and is also not homosexual.

In addition to that, Williams argues that also their poetry marks a difference between the two men, as idyllic poetry was associated with moralism and simple-mindedness, whereas Aesthetic poetry was associated with deviancy and femininity (Williams 2008, 393-394). The type of poetry Grosvenor is occupied with, thus reveals that he is not feminine or deviant, but rather embodies the Victorian ideals in which poetry is simple and has a moral. Grosvenor thus differs from Bunthorne in that he is not effeminate or homosexual, and in that he is not deviant but rather embodies the Victorian ideals concerning poetry and masculinity. It seems then that the operetta for these reasons treats Grosvenor completely different than Bunthorne; he is mocked less and is included in the Victorian family system as he receives the ultimate prize, Patience. This happens after Grosvenor becomes commonplace, and is thus even more masculine than he was before. It becomes clear that Gilbert and Sullivan attack the changing gender norms, and not the conventional gender norms as Williams argues, as Bunthorne, who embodies these changing norms, is mocked, whereas Grosvenor who seems to embody Victorian ideals much more, is not.

Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience* plug in on the fear that was rising during the end of the 19th century concerning the naturalness of gender. Linda Dowling remarks that
Decadentism, which is related to Aestheticism, “raised […] fears for the future of sex, class and race.” (Dowling 1979, 436). The fact that sexual controls became looser under the influence of Decadentism and the rejection of the natural by the movement, led to the belief that Decadentism was threatening to Victorian culture and state. (Dowling 1979, 438). Also Williams remarks that

The idea that gender was not natural but culturally determined and, worse, the idea that social behaviour, including gender, might be merely theatrical – both gaining currency in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – were associated with the fear that the heterosexual, reproductive “serious family” might be seriously threatened. (Williams 2011, 163).

Magazines such as Punch discussed the dangers that male effeminacy posed (Dowling 1979, 445) and although Patience appeared much earlier, it also discusses the idea of gender as a natural institution at many points. The most prominent scene addressing this issue is the one where the Dragoon Guards try to take on an Aesthetic posture. As both Grosvenor and Bunthorne, but mainly the latter with his effeminacy, seem to be influencing society, the Dragoon Guards, who represent the stereotypical Victorian male with their strong group identity and old-fashioned manliness, no longer seem to be in the running as a possible marriage candidate for women. The military men are proud of their masculinity, which is portrayed in the fact that they dedicate a whole song to their uniform, but the Aesthetic Maidens do not seem to share that enthusiasm (Williams 2011, 152). We learn that the Maidens are engaged to the military men but have completely lost interest in them because they are not Aesthetic and therefore not effeminate. Here Gilbert and Sullivan try to make the point that the effeminacy of the Aesthetes, which is part of the changing gender conventions, unsettles normative relations, as it makes women lose interest in the masculine Victorian man. The Dragoons show awareness of the fact that they are no longer of any interest to the maidens and claim that they never anticipated this change in gender norms:

The peripatetics
Of long-haired aesthetics
Are very much more to their taste –
Which I never counted upon,
When I first put this uniform on! (Gilbert 1881, 9)
The Dragoons realize that gender conventions are changing and that the only way to win back the Maidens is by changing their ways and becoming Aesthetic too: “Yes, it’s quite clear that our only chance of making a lasting impression on these young ladies is to become as aesthetic as they are.” (Gilbert 1881, 28). When the men change their behaviour and pose, the stage-directions describe them as walking in “stiff, constrained, and angular attitudes” (Gilbert 1881, 27), referring to the way Aesthetes were often perceived and portrayed by satirists. Their bodies in cartoons such as those by George Du Maurier, seem spineless, forced and feminine, as opposed to the typical Victorian male uprightness (Williams 2011, 158). The Dragoons try to imitate this Aesthetic posture, but fail terribly leading to a stiff and constrained posture.

Gilbert seems to ridicule the idea that gender would be theatrical and culturally determined by pointing out that the Dragoon Guards cannot bend their bodies into a shape that does not come natural to them, being the effeminate posture of the Aesthetes. Williams claims that “Unlike the Aesthete […] the Dragoon Guards cannot perform a body language other than their own.” (William 2011, 159) suggesting that there is such a thing as natural behaviour for a certain gender and that male effeminacy is unnatural. Judith Butler argues that “gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex.” (Butler 1988, 528). This means that in the popular imagination gender is by nature determined by biological sex, which implies that there is such a thing as natural behaviour for a certain gender. Gilbert seems to make exactly this point by making clear that the Dragoons cannot take on an effeminate pose as this is unnatural, which then suggests that the Aesthete’s effeminacy is dangerous to society as it enforces the idea that gender is theatrical and can be culturally determined. The Dragoons’ inability to take on an unnatural pose is then meant to be attractive to a Victorian audience as it reinforces the idea that men should be masculine (Williams 2011, 159), and the Aesthetes’ effeminacy is then meant to be threatening and unattractive as it suggests that there is such a thing as theatricality and performativity what concerns gender.

Kopelson also sees the performative and theatrical aspect of gender and sexuality in Patience, but besides defining effeminacy and homosexuality as theatrical, he also explains heterosexuality as being performative and imitative. Kopelson identifies two anxieties concerning gender in the operetta: having to perform a gender or sexuality, and performing a gender or sexuality badly. Bunthorne then performs a gender or sexuality badly as he makes a
bad copy of the right sexuality, trying to enact manly Aestheticism, and makes an inappropriate copy of the wrong gender by acting like a woman. The same goes for the Dragoon Guards when they try to enact Bunthorne’s homosexuality; they move like Aesthetic men and dress like Aesthetic women. Homosexuality and effeminacy in Patience are thus defined by Kopelson as being a bad copy of the right sexuality and a bad copy of the wrong gender. But besides seeing homosexuality as imitative and theatrical, Kopelson claims that heterosexuality also has a theatrical aspect. He explains that “whereas Bunthorne is a homosexual who pretends to be a heterosexual, to want to marry Patience, Grosvenor is a heterosexual who pretends to be a heterosexual.” (Kopelson 1993, 262). Grosvenor’s transformation to a commonplace man, in which “he has had his hair cut, and is dressed in an ordinary suit of dittoes and a pot hat.” (Gilbert 1881, 34) is thus defined as a drag, as he is heterosexual even before he transforms, the transformation just also makes him look and behave like a heterosexual. His heterosexuality after having transformed his looks is thus merely an act, since Grosvenor imitates heterosexuality in his appearance to match his sexual orientation. Butler relates to this idea of heterosexuality as being performative as she claims that

There is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction. (Butler 198, 522)

The point Butler makes is that gender is a construction, constructed by the acts which are seen as an expression of that gender. So even heterosexuality does not express an interior self, it is merely a construction (Butler 1988, 528). Grosvenor’s heterosexuality has thus a performative aspect to it as it is, like homosexuality, a copy or enactment, but unlike homosexuality, an appropriate and convincing one. The reason why heterosexuality is seen as an appropriate act, is because heterosexual attraction is necessary for reproduction and thus for the continuation of the race. Butler claims that

To guarantee the reproduction of a given culture, various requirements […] have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which […] in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system. The association of a natural sex with […] an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to
the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests. (Butler 1988, 524).

The idea is that heterosexual attraction is depicted as natural and appropriate, to be sure of reproduction. Grosvenor’s commonplace heterosexual appearance is then merely a construction, not the expression of an essence, but is portrayed and perceived as natural as it ensures reproduction. Defining effeminacy and homosexuality as inappropriate thus has to do with the idea that only heterosexuality guarantees posterity.

In short, Kopelson defines both homosexuality and heterosexuality in *Patience* as being performative and theatrical, with as a critical difference that the first is inappropriate and the latter is not (Kopelson 1993, 260-261). Kopelson’s theory might then point out that it is the inappropriateness of homosexuality that serves as a threat to Victorian Society and not so much the theatrical aspect as Gilbert also seems to define heterosexuality as theatrical. Gilbert and Sullivan would then acknowledge the idea that gender is theatrical and might be culturally defined, but parody effeminacy and homosexuality, two changing gender conventions, as they are inappropriate enactments that are threatening to Victorian Society.

The other characters in the operetta seem to be aware of the inappropriate performative aspect of effeminacy and homosexuality. When the Dragoons meet the Maidens, they immediately confess that the Aesthetic way of behaving does not feel comfortable to them: “Ladies, we will not deceive you. We are doing this at some personal inconvenience with a view of expressing the extremity of our devotion to you. We trust that it is not without effect.“ (Gilbert 1881, 29). And also the ladies show awareness of the fact that the Aesthetic posture does not come natural to the men as Saphir claims that “for beginners it’s admirable” (Gilbert 1881, 29). The argument is again that the performative aspect of gender is not threatening, as the ladies see no harm in the Dragoon’s effeminacy since their effeminacy and attempt to enact Bunthorne’s homosexuality is clearly a drag. The men are thus all heterosexual, and only enact effeminacy, and they therefore pose no threat to Victorian society. The Dragoon Guards being unable to take on the Aesthetic posture might then not be a matter of naturalness, but a matter of true heterosexuals making a bad copy of an inappropriate sexuality.

Gilbert and Sullivan mock the changing gender norms by portraying them as inappropriate and dangerous to the Victorian domestic ideology. Kopelson’s theory makes clear that the two seem aware of the performativity of gender, but condemn it if the act is inappropriate and threatening to the normative Victorian family. Bunthorne, who is a deviant
character with his effeminacy and homosexuality, is then the main laughing stock as his performance of gender is seen as inappropriate since it threatens heterosexual relationships. This in contrast to Grosvenor, whose act of heterosexuality is not condemned, as it is appropriate and convincing. The argument is then not necessarily that there is such a thing as natural behaviour for a certain gender or that theatricality and performativity of gender is dangerous, but inappropriate enactments are, which is why Gilbert and Sullivan see and portray effeminacy and homosexuality as out of place. The changing gender norms themselves are thus parodied as they are portrayed as unfitting and dangerous, rather than, as Williams claims, using them to mock the maintenance of normative gender roles.

The ending of the operetta seems to re-establish gender conventions and discards the changing gender norms in which men behave in an effeminate way or even display same-sex desire. Both Bunthorne and Grosvenor are discontented towards the end of the operetta by how things have evolved; Bunthorne misses being adored by women and Grosvenor does not like the fact that every woman falls madly in love with him. After a melodramatic scene Grosvenor is convinced by Bunthorne to change his ways and to become “absolutely commonplace” (Gilbert 1881, 31). Grosvenor does not seem to mind the fact that he from now on has to dress in an ordinary way as he claims “I have long wished for a reasonable pretext for such a change as you suggest. It has come at last. I do it on compulsion!” (Gilbert 1881, 32). This change in Grosvenor’s behaviour leads to Patience being able to love him as he is now a commonplace man. The changing gender conventions in which men are effeminate and maybe even homosexual, seem to be discarded by Grosvenor’s transformation as it also brings about a change in the women: they claim 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.” (Gilbert 1881, 34). The Aesthetic Maidens thus simply become girls and are no longer interested in the “new” man who is effeminate. For Bunthorne this has as a result that he not only loses Patience, but also that he is no longer admired by the other women. When Lady Jane leaves him for the Duke he ends up as the only person in the operetta who does not marry, but he does not seem to mind as he claims that:

In that case unprecedented,
Single I must live and die –
I shall have to be contented
With a tulip or a lily!
(Takes a lily from button-hole and gazes affectionately at it). (Gilbert 1881, 35)
The threat that Bunthorne with his effeminate and homosexual behaviour seemed to pose to normative Victorian families and relationships is discarded: women are no longer interested in him and he threatens no heterosexual relations as he ends up alone. It seems as if Bunthorne is denied marriage because of his cross-sex image and his subversion of Victorian gender conventions. Gilbert simply makes Bunthorne fall outside of the Victorian family system, ridiculing the changing gender conventions by making it clear that they lead to no stable relationships. Butler claims that performing one’s gender in the wrong way, initiates a set of punishments (Butler 1988, 528), which seems to be exactly what happens with Bunthorne at the ending of the operetta: he receives a punishment, being that he is denied marriage, for not performing his gender in the right way and posing a threat to Victorian society. The point Gilbert and Sullivan might then be trying to make is that the changing gender norms will lead to punishments for those who enact them. *Patience* then serves as a warning that these unconventional gender roles not only threaten society but also hold a penalty for those who enact them. However, this analysis might seem a bit harsh considering that *Patience* is a comedy, something which Denisoff agrees on. He claims that Bunthorne’s last lines in the operetta are confusing. In “Am I alone and unobserved?” Bunthorne confesses that he is an Aesthetic sham and that “A languid love for Lilies does not blight [him]” (Gilbert 1881, 10), but in the last scene he does seem to be pleased with a tulip or lily as a substitute for marriage. Denisoff then argues that Bunthorne is not denied marriage, but as a homosexual rather remains single and dedicated to something which he regards as false, than having to marry a woman. In this light, Gilbert and Sullivan do not to take the threat that the new gender norms pose too serious. Denisoff argues that the comic elements in the play and mainly the topsy-turvy ending in which changing gender conventions are discarded, prevent the effeminate and homosexual aspects of Aestheticism from being seen as a real threat to the Victorian family, and prevents Gilbert’s parody from being insulting or dismissive (Denisoff 2001, 69). This then is in accordance with Denisoff’s idea that Gilbert from an economic standpoint would have wanted Aestheticism popularity to continue, and would therefore not bring down the whole movement (Denisoff 2001, 57). The operetta thus parodies unconventional gender norms but never takes them too serious by adding comical elements and by discarding the threat Bunthorne posed to society, which re-establishes conventions in the end.
4.2. Conclusion

It becomes clear that Gilbert and Sullivan parody the changing gender norms in *Patience* by addressing two by-products of Aestheticism, effeminacy and homosexuality, which were seen as challenging to the conventional gender norms. They mock these changing gender norms by ridiculing the character that embodies them, being Bunthorne.

Bunthorne is portrayed throughout the operetta as a threat to the Victorian domestic ideology because of his deviant characteristics, being effeminacy and homosexuality. These new gender norms pose a threat to conventional gender roles as women no longer feel attracted to the masculine Victorian man, and as no normative relationships are established because of Bunthorne’s homosexuality. But, his effeminacy and homosexuality seem to pose another threat, as both are seen as theatrical, and therefore suggest that gender is performative. However, Kopelson remarks that also heterosexuality is portrayed as performative in *Patience*, as Grosvenor’s commonplace look is also a drag. Gilbert and Sullivan thus seem to suggest that there is such a thing as the performativity of gender, but condemn it only if it is threatening to society, which is the case with homosexuality. It is an inappropriate enactment, as it does not ensure reproduction, and therefore threatens normative relationships and the conventional family. Throughout the operetta, Bunthorne’s deviant characteristics, being homosexuality and effeminacy, are thus defined as threatening to Victorian society as they unsettle normative relationships by being inappropriate enactments. This then addresses the fear that the new gender norms lead to no normative relationships, which has as a consequence that the continuation of the race is hindered.

The ending, however, discards the threat the new gender norms posed by re-establishing gender conventions. With Grosvenor becoming commonplace, all the ladies also discard Aestheticism, and with it effeminacy and homosexuality. Gilbert and Sullivan let the dissident Bunthorne fall out of the Victorian family system as the ending leaves everyone with a partner, except for Bunthorne, which disposes of the threat he posed to the Victorian domestic ideology. Gilbert and Sullivan either deny Bunthorne marriage, as a penalty for not performing his gender in the right way, or, as Denisoff argued, Bunthorne chooses to stay alone and dedicated to something he regards as false, as he as a homosexual rather remains alone than having to engage in a heterosexual relationship. The changing gender norms are thus first portrayed as a threat, but are then ridiculed by pointing out that they lead to no stable relationships, and by discarding them in the end. This then suggests that the conventional gender roles, are the best possible ones as they only lead to stable relationships.
5. *Iolanthe*

*Iolanthe; or; The Peer and the Peri* was Gilbert and Sullivan’s seventh collaboration. It was the second operetta to be performed at the Savoy Theatre, but the first to premiere there. *Iolanthe* was first staged in 1882, three nights after the final performance of *Patience*, and ran for 398 performances in London. The “fairy opera” satirizes the House of Lords and is therefore mainly read as a comment on the English Law system. Silvers claims that “the House of Lords is lampooned as a bastion of the ineffective, privileged and dim-witted.” but that the criticism is “received as good fun” (Silvers 2013). Besides satirizing the English Law system, Gilbert and Sullivan also address gender issues in *Iolanthe*.

Williams argues that the operetta deals primarily with the strong-minded woman and that women stay on top in the end (Williams 2011, 189). She claims that the strong fairies serve as a medium to mock the conventional Victorian male, represented by the Peers (Williams 2011, 187). This interpretation gives us the idea that Gilbert and Sullivan mock gender conventions by letting the strong fairies, who represent changing conventions, stay on top defying the conventional Peers. I would, however, want to argue the opposite, namely that Gilbert mocks changing gender conventions by making the fairies, who can be seen as representatives of the New Woman, appear very incompetent and by suggesting that their disengagement from men is threatening and unnatural. They attempt to create a separate society, which Gilbert identifies as dangerous to the Victorian domestic ideology, but this fails, undermining their power and ridiculing the changing gender norms. As in *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan again address the idea of gender roles being determined by biological sex, and their mocking of the changing gender roles receives its strength by re-establishing gender conventions in the ending of the operetta and by suggesting that these are the best possible roles.

5.1. **Analysis**

The subtitle of the operetta, *The Peer and the Peri*, reveals that there are two separate groups; the Peers on the one hand, who represent men in general, and the Peris on the other hand, who embody women in general. The two groups physically occupy different spheres as the men lead their lives on earth, and the women live in Fairyland. The link to the Victorian gender ideology in which women and men were believed to function best in separate spheres is easily
made (Williams 2011, 188). Women were thought to belong to the private sphere, in which the household and the children played the most important role, and men’s place was in the public sphere, which included politics and economics (Shoemaker 1998, 31). The Peers in *Iolanthe* fit into this ideology as they represent a stereotypical Victorian masculinity and are mainly concerned with the public sphere. They are all men of the law and believe that “The Law is the true embodiment of everything that’s excellent” (Gilbert 1882, 7).

Yet, although *Iolanthe* reminds us of these separate spheres in which men and women are divided into two groups, with Strephon and Phyllis as an exception, there is a critical difference. Unlike the Victorian women, the fairies are besides being concerned with the private sphere also participating in a public sphere of their own. Since they have their own society, they also have their own leader and their own political system which needs to be governed. The fairies are therefore not only concerned with the private, being the household, but also with the public, being politics. This engagement in politics and in the public sphere reminds us of the New Women who demanded more political rights as they believed that “political participation would release women’s potential to the full.” (Levine 1987, 62). Levine claims that women demanded a space in public life without having to give up their private life (Levine 1987, 14). The New Woman movement’s political organization was, however, very different from that of men. As Levine argues, they consciously rejected male political hierarchies, something which the fairies also do. Their political management happens in a separate sphere from that of the men, and is also completely different from that of the Peers as we learn that they have their own “fairy system” (Gilbert 1882, 2). In that sense, Fairyland can be seen as a realization of the society the New Women longed for, as the fairies have a place in the public sphere and have their own political system which differs from that of men.

Although living in two separate societies, there has been some mixing between the worlds, as the opening scene reveals. Iolanthe appears to have married a mortal man twenty-five years ago and was banished for that. She has been obliged to leave Fairyland and she was forced to divorce. The fact that there are laws about the mixing of the two spheres suggests that the fairies strongly value the distinction between the two worlds and want to maintain the segregation. However, later on in the operetta Leila, Fleta and Celia also confess that they like the Peers, which again raises the possibility of the mixing of the spheres. The Fairy Queen strongly reacts to this confession by claiming that it is a sign of weakness and by encouraging them to restrain themselves: “Oh, this is weakness! Subdue it!” (Gilbert 1882, 29). She even blames them for disregarding the fairy laws: “Is this your fidelity to the laws you are bound to
obey?” (1882, 29). It seems as if the Fairy Queen in particular is opposed to the mixing of the spheres as the other fairies do not seem convinced of the segregation, suggested by the fact that they see no harm in crossing the boundaries between the two worlds (Zurcher 2012, 84). In the same scene Celia, Fleta and Leila for instance call the Peers their foe, but at the same time they cannot suppress exclaiming “Don’t go!” (Gilbert 1882, 29), which makes clear that they do not see the Peers as their foe, but feel obliged to say or feel that since it is the law. By being submissive to a set of rules they do not believe in, the fairies come across as mindless. According to Zurcher this mindless following of the law might reveal Gilbert’s feelings about the New Women movement and its followers. Apart from a few leaders, in Iolanthe being the Fairy Queen, there were a lot of women who did not know what exactly they were supporting (Zurcher 2012, 84). The fairies could then serve as representatives of these women who just joined the New Women, but were not really convinced of the movement’s principles.

Besides not seeming convinced by certain laws, the fairies at some points also seem unaware of certain rules. In the first scene in which Iolanthe’s banishment is discussed, Leila claims she was banished because she married a mortal. Fleta then seems to be completely ignorant of the law, asking “Oh! Is it injudicious to marry a mortal?” (Gilbert 1882, 2), after which Leila says that it is not just any prohibition, but that doing so “strikes at the root of the whole fairy system” (Gilbert 1882, 2). The first few lines of the operetta instantly make clear that the fairies, although they have been living in fairyland for more than twenty-five years as they all remember Iolanthe, do not really know their laws. It again seems as if the Fairy Queen is the only one who does know every rule as she reminds others of the law and encourages them to respect it. Williams claims that she is therefore a “crucial figure of female power” (Williams 2011, 189) and calls her a “strong-minded woman” (Williams 2011, 199). She is the highest authority in Fairyland and seems to be the one who stimulates the others to live away from men. However, as a law-enforcer she herself does not always seem to follow the rules. When we learn that a fairy who marries a mortal should receive the death penalty, which Iolanthe did not, the Fairy Queen intervenes saying that she loved Iolanthe too much to sentence her to death. The Queen thus made a legal exception for Iolanthe, although she functions as the highest authority and as a law-enforcer. The question rises as to how powerful the Fairy Queen really is and whether she is indeed that as strong-minded as Williams claims. It is unclear why she does not simply change the law, since she has the power to do so, and keeps following an arbitrary set of rules. When she sees Private Willis, the Queen even admits that she is just as sensitive to manly beauty as the other fairies, but still she does not change the law making it possible to marry a mortal. In the ending of the
operetta, it is even the Lord Chancellor, a man, who has to help her solve the problems the fairies have put themselves in. He is the one who suggests to change the law as the Fairy Queen herself seems unable to come up with a solution. So although she appears to be strong-minded and a good leader, it becomes clear that the Fairy Queen is rather weak and is an inadequate leader. She is the highest authority figure, but seems to have no power to change the law, and therefore also comes across as unintelligent (Zurcher 2012, 84).

The most absurd aspect of the fairies’ way of governing a society, however, is that although many fairies seem ignorant of the law and even doubt certain rules, they do have a rather authoritarian way of ruling. When Strephon is placed in parliament by the Fairy Queen, Celia claims that “yes; we influence the members, and compel them to vote just as he wishes them to.” (Gilbert 1882, 27). Leila then remarks “It’s our system. It shortens the debates.” (Gilbert 1882, 27). The fairies seem not open to negotiation when it comes to the law, as they force everyone to vote how Strephon wants them to, since this shortens the debate. This way of ruling, which is rather authoritarian as there is no possibility to discussion, seems ridiculous when we consider that most of the fairies do not know all the rules and some of them are even unhappy with the law. Again, this portrays the fairies as inadequate leaders.

In relation to the fairies’ way of governing their society, Higbie argues that “the fairies are [...] mindlessly subservient to an arbitrary set of rules” (Higbie 1980, 72). This seems a good evaluation of the fairies’ governance, as it suggests that their laws are arbitrary, and therefore not logical, and that they do not use their common sense when it comes to the law but just follow the prescribed rules. So not only is their system inadequate, but so are they. The fairies’ involvement in the public sphere is thus not very successful, and this is exactly the point Gilbert and Sullivan are trying to make. They mock the changing gender conventions in which women occupy a place in the public sphere by portraying the fairies as being very incompetent at governing a society. Many of them do not seem to know the law, and seem discontent or not convinced by their own law system. Even the Fairy Queen turns out to be an incompetent leader as she sometimes bends the rules, even though she is the most important law-enforcer, and at other times mindlessly follows them. Even more absurd then is the fact that they rule in a very authoritarian way even though they are unable to follow their own rules. Gilbert’s technique is clear: by portraying the fairies, and thus women in general, as being very incompetent at governing a society, the point is made that women are not consistent or fair when it comes to politics, which is why they should not be involved in it. The new gender conventions and with it the New Women’s wish to enter politics is mocked, by making clear that a woman’s place is not in the public sphere. Besides mocking the
movement’s principles, its supporters are also ridiculed by making the fairies come across as unintelligent and not fully aware of what they are supporting. Gilbert then suggests that many supporters of the New Women also did not know what they were supporting, but mindlessly followed the movement’s principles (Zurcher 2012, 84). Gilbert thus mocks the New Women movement and the changing gender norms not only by making them seem absurd (women are inadequate leaders and should not have a place in the public sphere), but also by ridiculing the movement’s supporters (the fairies are incompetent and have no clue as to what they are supporting).

Besides making the fairies, and therefore the New Women, appear as incompetent leaders, ridiculing the changing gender norms in which women occupy a place in the public sphere, Gilbert also exposes the new norms as dangerous. The fairies in their all-female society are not really occupied with finding a husband or establishing a family, something which was associated by a Victorian audience with the New Women. As mentioned, there was the idea that the New Woman posed a threat to the institution of marriage as they were perceived as women who preferred a career and the company of like-minded women to marriage and domesticity (Ledger 1997, 124). The fear was then that the New Woman would make herself unfit for the role of wife and mother, and that this would lead to the downfall of Victorian Society, since no normative heterosexual relationships would be established (Dowling 1979, 446). This fear is addressed by Gilbert and Sullivan as the fairies in Iolanthe, just like the New Women, do not seem interested in marriage and prefer the company of women to that of men. The fact that the laws serve to maintain the segregation, makes clear that the fairies have no intention of engaging with men. Iolanthe is even punished for trying to establish a family with a mortal as the Fairy Queen breaks her and her husband up to make sure that the segregation of the two spheres is maintained. The fairies’ involvement in the public sphere and politics, and their preference of the company of women to that of men, therefore leads to the women posing a threat to the institution of marriage, as no normative relationships are established. They seem to value their role in the public sphere and the company of like-minded women much more than a romantic relationship. However, towards the ending of the operetta, the women do become interested in the men. And when Celia, Fleta and Leila show interest in men, the Queen encourages them to follow the rules and to not engage in a relationship. As Higbie suggested, the fairies seem to mindlessly follow the rules, and whether their disengagement from men is thus consciously decided upon is doubtful. It rather seems as if they follow the rules, which prescribe that they should withhold from men, but are not fully convinced of this (Zurcher 2012, 84). The law thus serves to
prevent a mixing of the two societies, and therefore prevents the fairies from taking on the conventional roles of wives and mothers, but the fairies themselves do not seem too happy with these rules. This is confirmed by the scene in which the Fairy Queen falls for Private Willis, but decides to suppress this attraction because of the law, as she explains in the song “Oh, foolish fay”:

We must maintain
Our fairy law:
That is the main
On which we to draw – (Gilbert 1882, 30)

The Fairy Queen thus decides to follow the law, although she would rather give in to her attraction to Private Willis. It becomes clear that although the fairies in the beginning of the operetta were not interested in the men because of their role in the private sphere and the preference of each other’s company, it is eventually the fact that they mindlessly follow the rules which seems to preserve the segregation. Rather than that the fairies consciously decide to keep suppressing their attraction to men, they are forced to do so by the law. Gilbert and Sullivan seem to argue that the fears existing about the New Woman not engaging in heterosexual relationships because of a preference for a career and like-minded company are valid. However, it is also the mindless following of the principles of the movement which leads to a disengagement from men. Again the supporters of the New Woman movement are ridiculed, as it is suggested that they support principles which they are not fully convinced of, but feel obliged to do so since they have made a commitment to the movement.

Besides not engaging with men, the fairies also pose a threat to the conventional Victorian ideology as they can be associated with sexual dissidence. The word “fairy” was generally associated with “woman” during the Victorian period and more specific, with female sexuality (Williams 2011, 198). The fairies can thus be seen as representing female sexuality. Williams claims that women in the private sphere were kept separated from the public world which included work, money but also sexuality (Williams 2011, 198). Lee then argues that in the latter half of the Victorian era, men were seen as slaves to their sexual appetite, whereas women were expected to restrain their sexual urges and had to represent innocence and sexual virtue. Women were thus sexually repressed (Lee 1997). It was then the New Women who demanded sexual equality with men as a consequence of these double standards in the Victorian marriage which expected sexual virtue of the wife, but not of the
husband (Ledger 1997, 20). This then led to the perception of the New Woman as someone who believed in free love and overtly challenged sexual codes, since a woman who acknowledge her sexuality was perceived as a fallen woman (Williams 2011, 198). The fairies, who are representatives of female sexuality, can therefore be linked to the New Woman as they are both overtly sexual. This sexuality of the fairies, and therefore the New Woman, is then perceived as threatening to the Victorian domestic ideology, as women were not expected to be overtly sexual. As Broad argues “Sexual deviance questioned paternity, disregarded sexual ‘purity’, problematized English inheritance laws, and disrupted ideologies of the Victorian nuclear family, where men were the dominant ‘public’ sex and women were the subservient ‘private’ sex.” (Broad 4-5). Overt sexuality thus went against many of the basic values of Victorian society, and was therefore perceived as threatening to the Victorian domestic ideology. With the fairies being overtly sexual they go against the conventional ideas of femininity which prescribe sexual virtue for women, and they also challenge the established idea of masculinity by not being submissive. The fairies’, and therefore the New Women’s, overt sexuality thus threatens Victorian society as it challenges the established ideas bout masculinity and femininity.

Gilbert and Sullivan address the fear that the changing gender conventions would lead to women no longer fulfilling their domestic roles. As the fairies have separated themselves from the men and are occupied with manly things such as politics, they are no longer occupied with establishing relationships or starting families. Besides not being interested in establishing relationships with the men, the women also appear to be sexually dissident. They acknowledge their sexuality and are therefore overtly sexual, which associates them with the fallen woman, and challenges the conventional ideas about masculinity and femininity. Gilbert suggests that the changing gender norms are dangerous as they lead to a collapse of Victorian society since women do not engage in relationships as a consequence of their engagement in the public sphere, but also because they overtly challenge Victorian sexual codes. No normative relationships are then established, leading to a collapse of Victorian society.

As a result of the women’s behaviour, moreover, the men too no longer seem interested in engaging in a relationship. The Peers show no interest in the fairies. Only Phyllis, the one woman who also lives on earth and has nothing to do with the New Women, manages to draw their attention. When discussing who will be the lucky one to marry Phyllis, Lord Mountararat and Lord Tolloller decide that they will have to go into battle and that one of them will have to be killed. They then express their affection for each other in a scene
which portrays them as rather effeminate. They speak in an affected way, address each other lovingly and claim that their lives will be pointless without the other:

**LORD MOUNT.** *(much affected).* My dear Thomas!

**LORD TOLL.** You are very dear to me, George. We were boys together – at least I was. If I were to survive you, my existence would be hopelessly embittered.

[…]

**LORD MOUNT.** But it would not do so. I should be very sad at first – oh, who would not be? – but it would wear off. I like you very much – but not, perhaps, as much as you like me.

**LORD TOLL.** George, you’re a noble fellow, but that tell-tale tear betrays you. No, George; you are very fond of me, and I cannot consent to give you a week’s uneasiness on my account. (Gilbert 1882, 31-32)

When Phyllis eventually intervenes saying “I do hope you’re not going to fight about me, because it’s really not worth while” (Gilbert 1882, 32) the two men agree and decide that their friendship goes above anything claiming that “Not even love should rank above True Friendship’s name!” (Gilbert 1882, 32). The two Lords then go “lovingly, in one direction, and Phyllis in another.” (Gilbert 1882, 32). Lord Mountararat and Lord Tolloller’s decision to choose their friendship over getting involved with Phyllis, clearly shows that the men are not keen on engaging in a relationship. This is supported by the fact that when some of the fairies do eventually fall for the Peers, the men do not seem enthusiastic. Lord Mountararat claims that “It’s our fault. They couldn’t help themselves.” (Gilbert 1882, 39) which suggests that the men have a rather passive engagement and might not be fully supporting their involvement with the women. And also in some other scenes the Peers appear as very effeminate and even weak. When Strephon summons the fairies and the Fairy Queen puts a spell upon parliament, the Peers are scared exclaiming “Oh, spare us!” (Gilbert 1882, 22). The men seem feeble and easily scared, and are even overruled by the fairies who in this scene are more powerful than the Peers. This reminds us subtly of *Patience*, with its effeminate men and homosocial bonds, which is not surprising as Aestheticism and the New Women were often linked in the Victorian imagination. Both were seen as movements which overtly challenged Victorian sexual codes and in the press the New Woman was even blamed for the effeminacy of culture (Ledger 1997, 95-97). Very subtly Gilbert seems to be alluding to the idea that the changing conventions, being that women become more and more independent and engage in manly
things, have as an effect that men are no longer interested in women and that they even become effeminate. So not only the women disengage in establishing normative relationships, their behaviour also leads to the men not conforming to the Victorian domestic ideology. Gilbert addresses the fear that lived among many Victorians that the changing gender conventions would make Victorian society fall apart. The fairies’ disinterest in men and the men no longer being interested in the women, leads to a society without normative relationships, which puts a stop to the continuation of the race. Gilbert thus parodies the changing gender conventions mainly by exposing them as a threat to Victorian society. They hinder reproduction as both women and men no longer seem interested in the opposite sex, which might lead to a collapse of society.

The ending of the operetta however, like *Patience*, re-establishes gender conventions. Although Williams argues that the ending lets women stay on top as the men enter their world, which would mean that the new gender norms prevail, I would argue that the fairies succumb, leading to a re-establishment of conventional gender norms. The two separate spheres, in which women were consciously separated from men and thus from their domestic roles, are joined, leading to a disappearance of the women’s society and with it their disengagement from men. The threat that the new gender conventions posed to society are thus discarded by letting the women’s society disappear, which implies that the women succumb to the conventional Victorian domestic ideology and no longer occupy an important position in the public sphere.

Although the fairies have tried the whole operetta long to maintain the segregation and to resist their attraction to the Peers, they eventually give in at the end. Iolanthe is reunited with her mortal husband, Celia, Fleta and Leila admit to have completely fallen for the men, and even the Fairy Queen is keen on changing the laws to marry a mortal man. The fairies in the ending thus succumb to the Peers, which means that they will engage in a relationship and consequentially will have to let go of their refusal to take on the conventional roles of mothers and wives. This return of the fairies to the conventional roles of wives and mothers, seems to be a result of natural attraction. It becomes clear towards the ending of the operetta that the women feel attracted to the Peers, but deny this as the laws prescribe a separation. First they do not have any attention for the men as a result of their segregation and involvement in the public sphere, but towards the ending it is more a case of the fairies consciously deciding to follow the rules, which prescribe a disengagement from men. This behaviour, of consciously but mindlessly disengaging from men, is defined as unnatural. When the Fairy Queen sees Private Willis, she immediately falls for him. She claims that his “attributes are simply
godlike.” (Gilbert 1882, 30), which seems to suggest that she regards him as superior to herself. She even goes further claiming that “if I yielded to a natural impulse, I should fall down and worship that man.” (Gilbert 1882, 30). It appears as if the Fairy Queen admits that she defies nature when she spreads the idea that the fairies are superior to the Peers and that they should not engage with men (Zurcher 2012, 83). She claims that if she would give in to her natural instinct, which the fairies clearly do not as they insist on obeying the law, she would fall for Private Willis’s heterosexual attraction. The Queen even literally confesses that she suppresses this attraction by saying “But I mortify this inclination; I wrestle with it, and it lies beneath my feet! That is how I treat my regard for that man!” (Gilbert 1882, 30). And as mentioned, in the song “Oh, foolish fay” the Fairy Queen explains that she does no give in to this attraction because she feels that she has to follow to law. The Fairy Queen’s reaction to Private Willis thus makes clear that the fairies’ decision to follow the rules and disengage from men is not natural, as she explains that her natural impulse would be to give in to heterosexual attraction. And also the other fairies clearly feel this natural attraction between a woman and a man, as all of them fall for a Peer. Since the fairies realize that they are going against nature by following the laws, their persistence to obey the rules again makes them come across as unintelligent and mindless. Especially the Fairy Queen, who has the power to change the rules, again appears as an inadequate leader as she prefers to mindlessly follow the rules and defy nature, rather than changing the laws which would allow the fairies to give in to natural attraction. The parallel can then be drawn with the New Women, who know that they are defying nature by withholding from men, but still decide to do so and to mindlessly follow the movement’s principles.

By suggesting that a disengagement from men is unnatural, Gilbert and Sullivan mock the changing gender norms. They make clear that heterosexual attraction is natural, and that one should not try to defy it. They even seem to make the point that trying to resist this attraction is useless, as the fairies ultimately do succumb to the Peers. This then implies that the fairies will have to let go of their refusal to take on their conventional roles of wives and mothers, and will return to their conventional roles. Besides making the point that heterosexual relations are natural, Gilbert and Sullivan also mock the fairies, and therefore the New Woman, as they again suggest that they are unintelligent. They realize that they are going against nature when they do not engage in heterosexual relationships, but still decide to follow the rules and to withhold from men. By re-establishing gender conventions in the ending, the threat that the disengagement from men posed is then discarded.
This succumbing to heterosexual attraction also implies that the fairies’ separate society, in which they as women had the highest authority, will disappear, and that as a result that they will no longer be in power and will lose their spot in the public sphere. Throughout the operetta it becomes clear that women should not be on top, and the ending confirms this idea by again making a strong point about women leadership. As the fairies all have fallen for a Peer, which is prohibited by the law, they should all be sentenced to death. The Fairy Queen seems unable to come up with a solution as she claims that “You have all incurred death; but I can’t slaughter the whole company! And yet (unfolding a scroll) the law is clear – every fairy must die who marries a mortal!” (Gilbert 1882, 39). It is then the Lord Chancellor who comes up with the solution to avoid that all the fairies would be sentenced to death as he remarks that “the insertion of a single word will do it. Let it stand that every fairy shall die who doesn’t marry a mortal, and there you are, out of your difficulty at once!” (Gilbert 1882, 39). It is thus a man who has to solve the problems the women have got themselves into. It once again becomes clear that women are inadequate leaders, as the Fairy Queen is unable to come up with a solution, and that men are eventually more fit for a role in the public sphere and politics. Gilbert and Sullivan thus ridicule the changing gender norms in which women occupy a space in the public sphere by making clear that the fairies are inadequate leaders as they get in troubles and find no solution themselves. It is only after the intervention of the men that the problems are solved. So while Williams claims that the fairies are strong-minded and stay on top, the ending rather ridicules the fairies by making them appear as unintelligent and inadequate leaders, and by letting them give in to men. Rather than saying that the women stay on top, it would be better to argue that they succumb which causes them to have to let go of their refusal to take on their domestic roles and even forces them to give up their roles as political leaders. The ending thus discards the threat the new gender norms posed by making the women give up their role in the public sphere and by making them give in to heterosexual attraction. Gilbert and Sullivan then suggest that these are the best roles for women, as they are no adequate leaders and defy nature when they disengage from men.
5.2. Conclusion

In *Iolanthe* Gilbert and Sullivan parody the changing gender conventions by mocking the New Woman movement and two of its points of controversy. They ridicule the New Women’s wish for a place in the public sphere, and they discuss the women’s disengagement from men.

In *Iolanthe* the fairies live in a separate society in Fairyland, which can be seen as a realization of the society the New Women longed for: the fairies have a role in the public sphere, as they govern their own society, and their political system is different from that of the men. However, throughout the operetta the changing gender conventions are ridiculed by making clear that the fairies are inadequate leaders: many of them are not pleased with the laws, they do not know every rule, and they have a rather authoritarian way of ruling. Gilbert and Sullivan make clear that a society with women on top is not a success as the women are portrayed as unintelligent what concerns their handling of the law, and appear to be very incompetent leaders. The suggestion is then that women are not fit for a role in the public sphere, which ridicules the New Woman’s wish to function in the public world. Besides that, also the supporters of the New Woman movement are ridiculed, by suggesting that many of them were unaware of the movement’s principles.

A second aspect which is parodied, is the New Woman’s disengagement from men. The fairies in *Iolanthe* seem not to be interested in men because of their role in the public sphere. But also later, when they do feel attracted to the Peers, they decide not to give in to their attraction as they insist on obeying the law which prescribes a segregation. The critique is that the fairies mindlessly obey arbitrary laws, but Gilbert and Sullivan also try to point out that withholding from men is unnatural and even dangerous, as no relationships and therefore no families are established, which threatens the continuation of the race. Moreover, the fairies can also be associated with sexual dissidence, as they represent female sexuality, which again links them to the New Woman, and portrays them as challenging to the conventional ideas about femininity. Both of these aspects, being sexual dissidence and a disengagement from men, then portray the fairies and the New Woman as dangerous, since they unsettle normative relationships which might cause Victorian society to fall apart. Gilbert and Sullivan then also allude to the idea that as women occupy themselves with manly things, the men too no longer conform to the Victorian domestic ideology, as they have become effeminate. This again addresses the threat that the New Woman poses to society, as she not only influences women but also men to no longer conform to the Victorian domestic ideals. Gilbert and Sullivan thus
make clear that the new gender norms pose a threat to society as normative heterosexual relationships are unsettled, which threatens the continuation of the race.

The ending of the operetta then discards the threat the changing gender norms posed by re-establishing gender conventions. As the women succumb to the Peers it is suggested that they will take on their conventional roles of wives and mothers, and that they will lose their place in the public sphere as their separate society disappears. The merging of the two spheres thus discards the two aspects which were seen as threatening to society, which suggests that only the conventional roles lead to a stable society.
6. Princess Ida

*Princess Ida; or, Castle Adamant* was first staged at the Savoy Theatre in 1884 and ran for 246 performances. It is the only Gilbert and Sullivan operetta with three acts, and it is the only one written in blank verse. The operetta is based on Tennyson’s poem *The Princess* which was written in 1847, and on Gilbert’s eponymous play which was written in 1870 (The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive).

*Princess Ida*, like *Iolanthe*, can be read as a comment or parody on the New Woman movement. Zurcher argues that the plot bears many similarities to *Iolanthe*, and that “*Iolanthe* was a more conservative predecessor to *Princess Ida.*” (Zurcher 2012, 83). It indeed seems as if Gilbert and Sullivan deepen the points they made in *Iolanthe* about the changing gender norms in *Princess Ida*. Whereas the fairies in *Iolanthe* disengaged from men because of the law, the Princess and her women consciously decide to renounce men (Zurcher 2012, 84). And where the women in *Iolanthe* were involved in the public sphere as a result of the fact that they live in another world, the women in *Princess Ida* consciously decide to engage in the public sphere as they start a University in which education plays the most important role. Both operettas thus deal with the New Woman movement in a similar way, but Gilbert and Sullivan seem to take some points of controversy even further in *Princess Ida* than in *Iolanthe*.

*Princess Ida* mocks two important points of controversy that were associated with the New Woman and which can be seen as changing gender norms: the women in Ida’s community have a strong wish for education, and they consciously renounce men. Williams in her analysis of *Princess Ida* does not link the women in Ida’s community to the New Women movement, and also does not seem to have attention for the fact that Gilbert mocks the changing gender conventions mainly by ridiculing the women’s wish for education and their renunciation of men. My analysis will therefore mainly focus on those two aspects and on how Gilbert uses them to mock the New Woman and the changing gender norms.

6.1. Analysis

As in *Iolanthe*, the women in *Princess Ida* have separated themselves from men, and live in a self-sufficient society in which education plays the most important role. In Act I we first learn of the women’s community when Gama explains to Hildebrand where his daughter is. He
claims that Ida “rules a woman’s University, with full a hundred girls, who learn of her.” (Gilbert 1884,8). The women’s separation from the patriarchal world is rather extreme, as we learn that the Castle in which they stay is surrounded by high walls making it unable for men to enter. The fact that Ida is referred to as being the ruler of this community, implies that the women govern their own society and therefore occupy a place in the public sphere. Their community seems very peaceful and well organised as the stage-directions at the beginning of Act II reveal: “Gardens in Castle Adamant. A river runs across the back of the stage, crossed by a rustic bridge. Castle Adamant in the distance. Girl Graduates discovered seated at the feet of Lady Psyche.” (Gilbert 1884, 12). The women are, unlike the conventional Victorian woman, mainly occupied with educating themselves. When we enter the University, the women speak for the first time in a song, in which they make clear that knowledge is very important to them: “In search of wisdom’s pure delight, Ambitiously we soar” (Gilbert 1884, 13). And also when we meet Ida, the leader of this community, she makes clear that knowledge and education are the main focus in the University. She addresses Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, and says that she hopes to succeed in bringing the women in her University knowledge: “Let fervent words and fervent thoughts be mine, that I may lead them to thy sacred shrine!” (Gilbert 1884, 14). This wish for education aligns the women in Ida’s community with the New Women movement, as this was one of the movement’s most important points of controversy. Levine argues that education was seen as the key to improving life for women, as they believed that it served as a training for paid employment, but also because it would improve their ability to fight for women’s rights (Levine 1987, 26). Besides that, education also held the possibility of women becoming independent (Levine 1987, 30). Education was thus seen as the key to improving life for women, and Ida too is convinced of this. She strongly believes that education will illuminate women as she asks Minerva:

Oh, goddess wise
That lovest light
Endow with sight
Their unillumined eyes. (Gilbert 1884, 14)

The Princess compares not being educated to being “unillumined”, which suggests that Ida believes that education will open women’s eyes and will help them to achieve things in life. Besides being convinced of the idea that education will help women achieve things in life, Ida
also believes that women are equal, if not superior, to men. She claims that “In all things we excel” (Gilbert 1884, 15) and that “Woman, […], shall conquer Man.” (Gilbert 1884, 14). The Princess can therefore be seen as a representative of the New Women movement, since she believes that education will improve women’s lives and that woman is equal to man. She expresses the idea that women have the same intellectual capacity as men, since she is convinced that women excel, and that they will eventually even surpass man. Like in *Iolanthe*, the separate society created by the women can be seen as a realization of the society the New Women longed for. Ida’s ladies are independent women who have a place in the public sphere, as they govern their own society, and they are mainly occupied with educating themselves.

But in spite of the fact that education is claimed to play the most important role in Ida’s community, the educational level of the University seems questionable as it turns out that the women do not seem to have a lot of theoretical knowledge. In a conversation with Ida, Blanche explains what she will be teaching the women under the subject of Abstract Philosophy:

There I propose considering, at length,  
Three points – The Is, the Might Be, and the Must.  
Whether the Is, from being actual fact,  
Is more important than the vague Might Be,  
Or the Might Be, from taking wider scope,  
Is for that reason greater than the Is:  
And lastly, how the Is and Might Be stand  
Compared with the inevitable Must! (Gilbert 1884, 15)

After this the Princess claims that “The subject’s deep – how do you treat it, pray?” (Gilbert 1884, 15). Ida’s reaction reveals that the women are not occupied with hard theoretical knowledge as she assumes that Blanche and the other ladies will treat the subject by praying. And also Blanche’s explanation of what she will be teaching as abstract philosophy makes clear that the subject material does not have a theoretical foundation. The fact then that Ida finds this philosophy difficult suggests that the women’s intellectual capacity is not very high, which is strange considering that their main occupation is studying. When Ida talks about how women excel, she claims that “In Mathematics, Woman leads the way” (Gilbert 1884, 14). After which she says that
The narrow-minded pedant still believes
That two and two make four! Why, we can prove,
We women – household drudges as we are –
That two and two make five – or three – or seven;
Or five-and-twenty, if the case demands! (Gilbert 1884, 14-15)

This again suggests that the women are not as learned or smart as they claim to be, as they do not seem occupied with learning theoretical mathematics. They rather, as “household drudges” (Gilbert 1884, 15), have practical knowledge and domestic skills. As they are in charge of domestic matters, the women have learned to be flexible, which is why they are able to make five, three or even seven out of two and two. So although only being occupied with learning, the women seem to have a limited intellectual capacity, the University’s educational level is very low, and the women have practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. Gilbert seems to suggest that the changing gender norms, being that women with their practical domestic skills will receive a place in the public sphere which requires theoretical knowledge, are ridiculous by making clear that women do not have the same intellectual capacity as men and are not as skilled what concerns theoretical knowledge. They claim that they excel and that they will surpass men, when in fact they do not have the theoretical knowledge that is required to be in a leading position. Women’s idea that they will be able to enter the workplace when they are educated is then ridiculed: by undermining their intellectual capacity, Gilbert makes clear that women will never be fit to execute a job properly or function in the public sphere. As they are only practically skilled, they will not be able to occupy important positions which require theoretical knowledge. The changing gender norms are thus mainly mocked by making them appear as ridiculous and suggesting that women are intellectually not fit for a place in the public sphere as they do not have the same intellectual capacity as men, and are better at practical things than at acquiring theoretical knowledge. The New Woman’s wish for education is then a useless demand, as women are not fit for an education.

The focus on education only also has as a consequence that Ida’s ladies have no interest in men. During the Victorian era, many objected to the participation of women in education, because of the fear that they would as a consequence no longer fulfil their domestic roles. It was claimed that their presence would agitate male students and teachers, but the main concern was that their removal from an involvement with domestic matters would
undermine family life. Women who focussed on knowledge were thought to have less experience and skills what concerns domestic matters, which would hamper their fulfilment of their domestic chores (Levine 1987, 26). This fear of women neglecting their domestic role as a consequence of their focus on education is addressed in *Princess Ida*. Gama for instance claims that

> Their hearts are dead to men.  
> He who desires to gain their favour must  
> Be qualified to strike their teeming brains,  
> And not their hearts. They’re safety matches, sir,  
> And they light only on the knowledge box. (Gilbert 1884, 8)

Gama’s words suggest that the women do not engage in relationships as a consequence of their occupation with education. He claims that they are not interested in romantic relationships as their hearts are dead to men, the only thing that does interest them is knowledge. If the women have no interest in men, they also do not fulfil their conventional domestic roles. Besides making clear that women have no intellectual capacity and that their wish for education is therefore ridiculous, Gilbert also addresses the fear that the changing gender conventions in which women wish to be educated, will have as a consequence that women will lose their domestic skills and will not fulfil their domestic roles. This threatens family life, as no relationships are established, and might cause Victorian society to fall apart as there will be no continuation of the race. The changing gender norms in which women focus on education is therefore identified as a threat, since it will lead to the women entering the public sphere when they are not qualified for this, and as a result will keep them from fulfilling their domestic roles. The women will thus neglect their domestic chores because of their focus on education, but are at the same time not smart enough to acquire the theoretical knowledge needed to occupy a position in the public sphere.

Besides suggesting that education forms a threat to the Victorian domestic ideology, Gilbert and Sullivan address another important aspect of the New Women movement that is regarded as dangerous to society. Throughout the operetta it becomes clear that the women, and mainly Princess Ida, not only unconsciously fail to fulfil their domestic roles as a consequence of their focus on education, but that they also consciously renounce men. Physically the women have isolated themselves from men, with high walls to maintain this segregation, but also mentally they are convinced of the idea that man is no good. In their
opening song the women claim that “Man is Nature’s sole mistake” (Gilbert 1884, 13). Psyche even has a list of what is wrong with men:

Man will swear and man will storm –  
Man is not at all good form –  
Man is of no kind of use –  
Man’s a donkey – Man’s a goose –  
Man is coarse and Man is plain –  
Man is more or less insane –  
Man’s a ribald – Man’s a rake,  
Man is Nature’s sole mistake! (Gilbert 1884, 12-13)

Although all the women repeat this idea, it seems to be primarily the Princess who is convinced of it. We learn in her conversation with the disguised Hilarion, Florian and Cyril that one of the conditions to enter the University is that “you must prefer our maidens to all mankind!” (Gilbert 1884, 21). And she even goes further saying “Will you undertake that you will never marry any man?” (Gilbert 1884, 21). The Princess consciously encourages the ladies to renounce men by making it a condition to enter her University, which implies that they also do not fulfil their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Ida even punishes those who seem to let themselves in with men or who embrace their domestic role. When Blanche hands out the punishments that Ida prescribed, we learn that Sacharissa is punished for bringing in wooden chessmen, and Chloe is punished for drawing a perambulator. The reasons why they are punished thus have to do with domesticity, suggesting that the Princess is against women accepting their domestic roles (Zurcher 2012, 95). Even when Ida herself is saved by Hilarion, she still stands behind her own resolution to renounce men. She claims

So quick! away with him, although  
He saved my life!  
That he is fair, and strong, and tall  
Is very evident to all,  
Yet I will die, before I call  
Myself his wife! (Gilbert 1884, 34)
And also when Hildebrand’s soldiers attack Castle Adamant, the Princess persists. It becomes clear that Ida does not want to take on the role of wife and mother, and encourages the other women to do the same. Gilbert makes the same point that he made in *Iolanthe*: with the New Women becoming more and more independent and consciously letting go of their conventional domestic roles, the Victorian normative family and with it the continuation of the race is threatened. With Ida and the other women’s focus on education, they fail in fulfilling their domestic roles, and they even go further as they also consciously renounce men, which will cause Victorian society to fall apart.

The men, however, seem not to regard the women’s ideas as threatening, as they are sure that natural attraction will re-establish conventional behaviour. They clearly regard the women’s ideas as foolish and are not shy to mock them (Williams 2012, 242). Many of them seem to have a negative perception of Ida. She is portrayed by Hildebrand as being “a strange girl” who “does odd things” (Gilbert 1884, 2) and even Ida’s father says that “she’s so particular” (Gilbert 1884, 9). The outside world thus perceives the Princess herself, but also her ideas as strange. Not only Hildebrand and Gama find Ida’s ideas particular, Florian, Hilarion and Cyril too have questions when they enter the University. Florian wonders “what can girls learn within its walls worth knowing” and decides that “I’ll teach them twice as much in half-an-hour outside it.” (Gilbert 1884, 17). They go on mocking the women as Cyril expresses his doubt about whether the women will be able to live without men:

They’ll mock at him and flout him,
For they do not care about him
And they’re “going to do without him”
If they can – If they can! (Gilbert 1884, 19)

He even suspects that “The object of these walls is not so much to keep men off as keep the maidens in!” (Gilbert 1884, 19), implying that most of the women would rather return to their expected and conventional roles. As mentioned, the men seem convinced that the women will eventually return to these conventional roles as wives and mothers, because of the belief that these roles are natural. As in *Patience* and *Iolanthe*, Gilbert addresses the idea that biological sex comes with particular gender roles, and that these roles are therefore natural. The women’s denial of giving in to heterosexual attraction, which implies that they also deny their domestic roles, is then defined by several characters as unnatural behaviour. When Hilarion learns about the Princess’s University and sets out to get her back, he feels very confident in
his quest because of his belief that nature will help him win Ida back. He says “But we will use no force her love to gain, Nature has armed us for the war we wage! (Gilbert 1884, 9), suggesting that he believes he will win her back because of natural attraction. The idea is that nature has made him an attractive heterosexual man, something which he believes will make Ida fall for him as it is natural for a woman to fall for a man. This then implies that he regards Ida’s refusal of engaging in a heterosexual relationship as unnatural (Williams 2011, 251). Hilarion believes that the conventional role for a woman is to be a wife, and that Ida will return to this role once she sees him, as a consequence of natural attraction.

The idea of the love between a man and a woman as natural is supported by Melissa’s reaction when she sees a man for the first time. Upon seeing Florian she says “Is this indeed a man? I’ve often heard of them, but, till to-day, never set eyes on one.” (Gilbert 1884, 24). She then goes further, saying “They’re quite as beautiful as women are! As beautiful, they’re infinitely more so!” (Gilbert 1884, 25). The fact that Melissa has never set eyes upon a man, but is immediately attracted when she does meet one, suggests that the attraction a woman feels for a man is natural. She even explicitly says that

My natural instinct teaches me
(And instinct is important, O!)
You’re ev’rything you ought to be,
And nothing that you oughtn’t, O! (Gilbert 1884, 25)

The use of the word “instinct” suggests that it is hereditary and innate that a woman feels attracted to a man and vice versa. This then implies that withholding from the opposite sex is unnatural and something that is consciously decided upon, which has indeed happened in Ida’s University. Melissa thus confirms natural attraction as she falls for men and literally defines this as being her natural instinct. She not only defies the idea that women should withhold from men, but also points out that women are not superior. By claiming that man is everything he should be, and nothing that he should not, she suggests that men are perfect. And also the fact that she finds men more beautiful than women supports this idea. This recalls Iolanthe, in which the Fairy Queen, who like Ida is convinced of the superiority of women, sees Private Willis and admits that he is superior. Melissa thus undermines Ida’s belief that women are superior and surpass men by expressing that she finds men perfect, and she also defies the Princess’s idea that women should renunciate men by making it clear that heterosexual attraction is only natural (Williams 2011, 249).
Psyche also seems to relate to the idea that the attraction and communication with men is only natural. We learn that she is a truly wise woman as Hilarion describes how Psyche was always the smartest at school. She is the first one who discovers that the ladies are actually men in disguise, and she decides to support them. A point Gilbert might be trying to make is that truly wise women realize that communication with and being attracted to men is only natural. When witnessing Melissa’s attraction to the men, Psyche even starts to doubt Ida, claiming that

The woman of the wisest wit  
May sometimes be mistaken, O!  
In Ida’s views, I must admit,  
My faith is somewhat shaken O! (Gilbert 1884, 25)

Which Cyril confirms by stating:

On every other point than this  
Her learning is untainted, O!  
But Man’s a theme with which she is  
Entirely unacquainted, O! (Gilbert 1884, 25)

As in *Patience* and *Iolanthe*, Gilbert and Sullivan address the idea of natural behaviour and gender roles being determined by biological sex. Women’s attraction to men is defined by Hilarion, Melissa and Psyche as something natural, implying that the new gender conventions, according to which women should withhold from men, are unnatural. Upon seeing men the women immediately start to doubt Ida, suggesting that what they have learned in the University, being that they should renounce men, has nothing against the power of natural heterosexual attraction. Gilbert’s suggestion is then that women should not try to defy this attraction, as it not only threatens Victorian society by not establishing relationships, but is also unnatural, a point which is proven mainly by Melissa. Besides identifying the new gender norms as threatening and unnatural, the supporters of the norms are also ridiculed by making clear that some of them are already letting go of their resolutions and beliefs when they are confronted with men. Melissa and Psyche doubting Ida after meeting the men suggests that they did not really know what they were supporting before. The ridicule is then also aimed at the New Women, as the parallel is easily drawn with many of the movement’s
supporters of which Gilbert suggests that they also did not know what they were supporting (Zurcher 2012, 84).

Towards the ending of the operetta, Princess Ida’s community starts to fall apart. As in Patience and Iolanthe, gender conventions are re-established. When the Princess discovers that the new ladies are actually Hilarion and his men in disguise, she stumbles into the stream and is saved by Hilarion. After this her ladies find that “This doughty deed may well atone!” (Gilbert 1884, 31), which makes clear that the women believe that Hilarion should be forgiven for his deeds because he saved the Princess. They even beg her “Have mercy, O Lady, - disregard your oaths.” (Gilbert 1884, 31). The women thus all seem to be letting go of their promise to renounce men, as Hilarion’s deed proves to them that men are capable of doing good things. However, this is not the first instance in the operetta where the cracks in Ida’s community show. Earlier it becomes clear that Melissa and Psyche doubt Ida’s ideas about men, and it also turns out that some of the women are not happy with the Princess’s way of governing the University. Blanche in particular is jealous of Ida’s leader position as she claims “I should command here – I was born to rule, but do I rule? I don’t. Why? I don’t know. I shall some day. Not yet, I bide my time.” (Gilbert 1884, 16). And also later she says “For years I have writhed beneath her sneers” (Gilbert 1884, 27). The ladies thus appear not to be fully convinced of Ida’s ideas, although they all stay in the University. According to Zurcher, Gilbert here again mocks the New Women movement’s followers, who did not really have an idea about what they were supporting. The women in Ida’s community have no problem rejecting her ideas once a better alternative comes up, which demonstrates that they are not really strong-minded or fully convinced of what they are supporting (Zurcher 2012, 84). The Princess herself, however, persists. She claims “I know not mercy” (Gilbert 1884, 31) and decides to fight for her ideas and beliefs even after learning that Hildebrand and his soldiers are coming. She says “Yet I will die, before I call myself [Hilarion’s] wife!” (Gilbert 1884, 34). The fact that Hilarion saved her does not change Ida’s mind, portraying her as strong-minded. This in contrast to the other ladies, who already seem to be letting go of their resolutions and whose belief in Ida seems to be somewhat shaken. In Act III we see that they have armed themselves for the battle against Hildebrand but are not really confident about it:

Thus our courage, all un tarnished,
We’re instructed to display;
But to tell the truth unvarnished,
We are more inclined to say,
‘Please you, do not hurt us,’ (Gilbert 1884, 35)

Besides being very frightened, the ladies also appear to be very incompetent. Sacharissa, who is a surgeon, is asked to heal those who are wounded. She asks Princess Ida if that also means that she has to “cut off real live legs and arms?” (Gilbert 1884, 36) after which she says that “In theory I’ll cut them off again with pleasure, and as often as you like, but not in practice.” (Gilbert 1884, 37). Sacharissa appears to be scared to practice her profession, suggesting that she is an incompetent doctor. And also Chloe, who is a fusilier, seems incompetent as she does not want to use weapons because “They might go off!” (Gilbert 1884, 37). It quickly becomes clear that the women are all scared to execute their professions, suggesting that they are incompetent, but also again making an argument about the natural behaviour that comes with biological sex. Williams argues that this scene “relentlessly pursues the essential nature of gender” (Williams 2011, 250). About the women she says that “whatever martial bravery they may have learned would now be only an act or a disguise, and they simply cannot put it on” (Williams 2011, 251). The point Williams makes is that the ladies’ bravery in waging a war is merely an act. This behaviour is constructed, and immediately falls apart when they are under pressure (Williams 2011, 251). Butler’s idea that gender is an act and therefore something which is constructed seems applicable here, as Williams seems to suggest that bravery is a characteristic that is not incorporated in the construction of the female gender, which is why the women fail to put it into practice. Butler says

It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics. (Butler 1988, 528-529)

Gilbert could be making a point about how bravery is an inappropriate characteristic for women, as it contests the expected gender identity for them, which is why the women eventually are unable to put it into practice. Again it becomes clear that Gilbert and Sullivan are aware of the performativity of gender, and of the idea that certain acts are not fit for certain genders. The women adopting a characteristic which does not match their biological sex, being bravery, is not only seen as inappropriate, but they are also simply unable to put it to practice. This reminds us of Patience, in which the Dragoon Guards were unable to take on
the Aesthetic posture as it was a bad copy of an inappropriate sexuality. The same then goes for the ladies as they make a bad enactment of the male sexuality. Again Gilbert condemns inappropriate gender performativity, as it is out of place for the women to adopt a characteristic which was generally associated with the masculine sex. Gilbert seems to point out that the women in Ida’s community try to adopt roles which were associated with men, those of brave warriors, educated doctors and fusiliers, which fails since those roles are inappropriate enactments for women. As they are out of place they are threatening to Victorian society, which is why Gilbert and Sullivan condemn them and ridicule the women trying to perform them.

Since everyone has abandoned her, the Princess has no other choice than to do everything herself. She takes on the role of surgeon, fusilier, chemist and even musician and says that “I’ll meet these men alone since all my women have deserted me!” (Gilbert 1884, 37). Ultimately she is even obliged to let some of her resolutions go. Her brothers and father claim to want to fight on her side, and against the rules of the University, she lets the men in claiming that “In this emergency, even one’s brothers may be turned to use.” (Gilbert 1884, 39). From her father, Ida then learns how “terrible” life was with Hildebrand. Gama was treated very well but says

Oh, don’t the days seem lank and long
When all goes right and nothing goes wrong,
And isn’t your life extremely flat
With nothing whatever to grumble at! (Gilbert 1884, 40)

Although being the one person in the University who still seems to believe in the ideas that women deserve to be educated and should withhold from men, the Princess eventually decides to yield after hearing what her father had to go through while being imprisoned. The reason why Ida gives up her resolutions is absurd: she yields because her father did not enjoy his good treatment with Hildebrand. Although Ida first appeared to be a strong-minded woman by keeping up the fight although she was abandoned by everyone, she actually turns out to be very weak. She gives in to Hildebrand and his men because of a ridiculous reason. Not only is the leading figure of the changing gender norms and the New Woman movements portrayed as weak, but also the changing conventions themselves are undermined as even the Princess no longer believes in them. So with the ladies, including the Princess, no longer
believing in their feminist resolutions, the whole movement and the threat it posed is discarded.

After yielding, the Princess discusses her noble aim saying that

You ridicule it now;  
But if I carried out this glorious scheme,  
At my exalted name Posterity  
Would bow in gratitude! (Gilbert 1884, 44).

After which Hildebrand claims that

But pray reflect –  
If you enlist all women in your cause,  
And make them all abjure tyrannic Man,  
The obvious question then arises, ‘How  
Is this Posterity to be provided?’ (Gilbert 1884, 44)

Although having yielded for her father’s sake, it is eventually this posterity that fully convinces the Princess to return to her conventional gender role. Ida gives in to Hilarion because of her understanding that heterosexual relationships are necessary for reproduction. After hearing Hildebrand’s argument she claims “I never thought of that!” (Gilbert 1884, 44), suggesting that before she did not realise that her renunciation from men threatened the continuation of the race, and that after hearing this she immediately realizes that it is necessary for her to yield and to give in to this attraction for the sake of the continuation of Victorian society. Hilarion claims “Madam, you placed your trust in Woman – well, Woman has failed you utterly – try Man, give him one chance, it’s only fair” (Gilbert 1884, 44). And Ida seems to approve of this idea as she says “I see my error now” (Gilbert 1884, 45). The ending of the operetta thus re-establishes gender conventions as a result of Ida’s insight that she should indeed return to her conventional gender role to make sure that Victorian society continues (Zurcher 2012, 102). Gilbert and Sullivan make the point that heterosexual attraction is necessary, and that the new gender conventions, in which women renounce men, are threatening to Victorian society as they hinder the continuation of the species. After all, reproduction is necessary for the continuation of Victorian society, which leads to the idea that heterosexual attraction is natural. Butler claims that it is indeed this need for reproduction
which brought to life the idea of a natural sex with a natural attraction to the opposing sex or
gender (Butler 1988, 524). Gilbert might fit this way of thinking in that he condemns gender
changes and defines them as unnatural only if they are threatening to Victorian society and
reproduction. He is aware of some sort of performativity of gender identity, but he does not
approve of gender constructing when it threatens reproduction and thus might break apart
Victorian society. He therefore defines these changing norms which are dangerous to society
as unnatural. As in Patience and Iolanthe, Gilbert defines non-heterosexuality, being
asexuality in Iolanthe and homosexuality in Patience, as something inappropriate that stands
in the way of reproduction and therefore threatens Victorian society. The women’s resolution
in Princess Ida to renunciate men and become asexual, like the women of the New Women
movement, is thus condemned since it hinders procreation. And it is this realisation which
then leads to a re-establishment of conventional gender roles.

6.2. Conclusion

In Princes Ida, Gilbert and Sullivan mock the changing gender norms by addressing two
important points of controversy of the New Woman movement. They ridicule the feminist
movement’s wish for education as a means to improve life for women, and they mock the
New Woman’s refusal of fulfilling conventional domestic roles by renouncing men.

Ida’s University can be seen as a realization of the society the New Women longed
for: the women in Ida’s University are mainly occupied with studying, and they have a place
in the public sphere as they govern their own community. However, it is suggested that they
are not fit for this role as they have no theoretical knowledge, have a low intellectual capacity,
and as also the University’s educational level itself is very low. It is made clear that the
practically skilled women are not fit for a place in the workplace as they do not have the
theoretical skills or intellectual capacity needed for a place in the public sphere. The New
Woman’s demand for education thus seems useless, as it becomes clear that women are not
made to function in the public sphere. Besides, their focus on education also leads to them
failing their domestic roles. As they invest all their energy in studying, they have no interest
in men or in establishing romantic relationships. It thus becomes clear that women and
education are not a good match, as women are not made to function in the public sphere, and
as it is a threat to Victorian society since women are no longer occupied with domestic chores.
or with establishing heterosexual relationships as a consequence of being occupied with education.

Besides unconsciously disengaging from men, the women also consciously decide to renounce men, as did the New Women who preferred female company to that of men. This then again leads to the women not fulfilling their conventional roles as wives and mothers. However, Gilbert and Sullivan show that the conscious decision of withholding from men has nothing against the power of natural attraction, as is proven by Melissa. The women’s renunciation from men is then defined as unnatural, as it goes against natural attraction, and is therefore portrayed as threatening to Victorian society.

The ending of the operetta re-establishes gender conventions, as all the women eventually give in to the men and let go of their wish to be educated. The ladies in Ida’s University are eventually unable to enact the roles which were generally associated with the male sex, as their attempt at being brave warriors and educated women fails. Gilbert and Sullivan suggest that these roles are bad copies of the wrong sexuality, and are thus inappropriate, which ridicules the changing gender norms by suggesting that women are not supposed to fulfil masculine roles. Ida’s women are also portrayed as mindless as they quickly let go of their resolutions, which seems to reveal Gilbert’s feeling about many of the New Women of which he believed that they joined a movement but had no clue as to what they were supporting. And eventually also Ida appears to be weak as she yields for her father’s sake, but mainly because of posterity. It is then this posterity which completely undermines the changing gender norms, as Gilbert and Sullivan make clear that the conventional gender roles are the best ones since they only guarantee reproduction. Also Ida realizes this, as she immediately decides to give in to the men once she realizes that this is necessary for the continuation of the race. The threat the changing gender norms posed to the Victorian domestic ideology and society are thus discarded by letting the women give in to natural attraction, which leads to the women no longer having a place in the public sphere. The suggestion is then again, that only conventional gender roles lead to a stable society.
7. Conclusion

Gilbert and Sullivan parody changing Victorian gender conventions in *Patience*, *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* by addressing two movements which had a big influence on the conventional gender roles. Unlike Williams’s claim that the operettas inhabit gender conventions to show their absurdity, Gilbert and Sullivan clearly also make a strong parody on the changing gender conventions. In *Patience* Aestheticism with its effeminacy and homosexuality is mocked, and in *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* many of the points of controversy of the New Women are ridiculed. Both movements were seen as overtly challenging Victorian sexual codes and were perceived as threatening to the Victorian domestic ideology. When analysing all three operettas, it becomes clear that Gilbert and Sullivan ridicule these changing gender norms by making three strong points: they mock the idea of women having a role in the public sphere in *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida*, they address the idea of gender as being defined by biological sex mainly in *Patience* but also in the two other operettas, and all three operettas end with a re-establishment of gender conventions, suggesting that these are the best possible roles.

A first strong point Gilbert and Sullivan make concerning the changing gender norms and the New Women, is that women should not occupy a place in the public sphere. The societies in both *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* can be seen as realisations of the society the New Women longed for, being one in which women have a public role. But, the operettas make clear that such a society with women on top does not function. *Iolanthe* shows the fairies who govern their own society and are therefore involved in politics. The women, however, appear to be very inadequate leaders as they fail to govern their society in a good way. They are ignorant of their own law, are not convinced of the rules and rule in an authoritarian way. Eventually the Peers even have to interfere to prevent all the fairies from being sentenced to death, which shows that the women themselves are incompetent leaders. And also *Princess Ida* portrays a community in which women occupy roles in the public sphere, as the Princess governs the University and as all Ida’s ladies are occupied with educating themselves. However, it becomes clear that Ida is not a good ruler, as is suggested by Blanche, and it appears that the women do not have a high intellectual capacity or theoretical knowledge, suggesting that they are not fit for a role in the public sphere. Both operettas thus make clear that the New Women’s wish, being that women will have a role in the public sphere which includes education and politics, are ridiculous, as women are not fit for that role. The changing gender norms are thus mocked as the societies in *Princess Ida* and *Iolanthe*, completely fall apart due to the fact that women occupy a place in the public sphere. Gilbert
and Sullivan clearly suggest that these new gender roles in which women function in the public sphere will lead to a collapse of Victorian society, and should therefore not become reality. Both operettas also address the fear that if women are active in the public sphere, they will neglect or even refuse their domestic roles. The fairies in *Iolanthe* first have no interest in men, and later do not engage in relationships because of the law and their inability to change it. And the women in *Princess Ida* do not fulfil their domestic roles because they are too occupied with studying. Condemning women who have a place in the public sphere thus not only has to do with the idea that women are not fit for that role, but also with the fear that women will no longer fulfil their domestic roles because of their investment in the public sphere. Gilbert and Sullivan then suggest that the changing gender conventions are a threat to Victorian society, as they disrupt the public sphere, but also unsettle normative relationships and therefore the continuation of the race.

A second point, is that all three operettas mock the changing gender norms by portraying them as a threat to the Victorian domestic ideology. The way in which Gilbert and Sullivan make this point, is by addressing the nature of gender, and by suggesting that non-heterosexuality is unnatural and threatening to Victorian society. *Patience* mainly focusses on the performative aspect of gender to mock these changing gender norms and the Aesthetic movement. In the operetta Gilbert and Sullivan seem to acknowledge that there is such a thing as performativity of gender and that all gender is thus an enactment. Bunthorne is seen as someone who makes a bad copy of the wrong gender and a bad copy of the right gender. His homosexuality is therefore imitative and theatrical. But, besides seeing Bunthorne’s homosexuality as performative, Kopelson also defines Grosvenor’s heterosexual look as a drag, as he enacts heterosexuality in his looks to match his sexual orientation. So both heterosexuality and homosexuality are seen as performative, with as a main difference that the first one is seen as an appropriate enactment, since it poses no threat to reproduction, whereas the latter is seen as inappropriate as it challenges and threatens the Victorian domestic ideology and the continuation of the race. What Gilbert and Sullivan seem to suggest is that the changing gender norms, in *Patience* being effeminacy and homosexuality, are inappropriate as they hinder reproduction, and should therefore be condemned. Effeminacy and homosexuality are then ridiculed by suggesting that they are unnatural and inappropriate enactments.

In *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* the parody on the changing gender norms is made by suggesting that women’s disengagement from, or conscious renunciation of, men is unnatural. In both operettas the leading figures are not engaged with men: Ida in *Princess Ida*
is convinced that women should renunciate men, and in *Iolanthe* the laws prescribe a
segregation. The fairies’ disengagement from men even has as an effect that also the Peers are
no longer interested in the women, and therefore do not engage in heterosexual relationships.
However, in both operettas several characters, being the Fairy Queen in *Iolanthe* and Melissa,
Hilarion and Psyche in *Princess Ida*, express the idea that heterosexual attraction is natural
and should therefore not be rejected. It is then eventually this natural attraction which leads to
a return to conventional gender roles in both works. In *Iolanthe* the fairies give in to the Peers
and even change the law making it possible to marry a mortal man, and in *Princess Ida* first
the ladies decide to give men a chance, and eventually also the Princess yields because of her
realization that heterosexual relationships are necessary for reproduction. Gilbert and Sullivan
make clear that heterosexual attraction is natural, and that one should not try to defy it. The
changing gender norms, which prescribe a disengagement from men, are then seen as a threat
as it is suggested that they hinder natural attraction, and therefore go against nature, which as
a result hinders the continuation of the race.

In short, *Patience, Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida* all three address the idea of the nature of
gender to parody the changing gender norms. These new norms are defined as unnatural and
inappropriate, which makes them dangerous to the Victorian society as they hinder
reproduction and therefore threaten the continuation of the race. *Patience* makes clear that
homosexuality is inappropriate and ensures no reproduction, and *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida*
point out that renunciation or a disengagement from men also hinders posterity. All three
operettas thus condemn non-heterosexuality, being homosexuality in *Patience* and asexuality
in *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida*, as it is inappropriate and threatening to Victorian society. It is
then because non-heterosexuality is threatening, that it should be discarded.

A third way Gilbert and Sullivan mock the changing gender norms is by re-
establishing gender conventions in the ending of each operetta. In *Patience* Bunthorne
remains single, discarding the threat his sexual deviancy posed, in *Iolanthe* the fairies’ and
Peers’ separate societies merge, which re-establishes normative relationships and disposes of
women as leaders, and in *Princess Ida* the Princess gives in to the men which ensures
reproduction. The happy ending of the operettas is thus always established by making the
characters go back to their conventional roles. This seems to be the best way to ridicule the
changing gender norms, as this implies that the conventional roles are the best possible ones
as they only lead to a stable society. This in contrast to the changing gender roles, which
disrupt society. Higbie suggests that “the happy ending is thus made possible by a kind of
surrender, an admission that the individual’s opposition to authority has not been serious.”
(Higbie 1980, 75). What Higbie’s remark makes clear is that one should not forget that the operettas are comedies, and that the threat the new gender norms posed are therefore never taken too serious, which is made clear in the end as dissident characters surrender. Not taking the threat the changing gender norms pose too serious, is then a strong way to undermine them: as every character eventually returns to conventional roles, the point is made that the changing norms are not very convincing and do not stand firm. They are easily overthrown by the conventions, suggesting that these are much stronger and much more convincing. The ending of the operettas thus always makes clear that the gender conventions are the best possible ones, as they lead to a happy ending and a stable society, and that the changing gender norms do not stand firm as they are easily overthrown by the gender conventions.

We can conclude that Gilbert and Sullivan parody the changing genders norms, and therefore Aestheticism and the New Women, via three main arguments. They make clear that women should not be in the public sphere, they argue that non-heterosexuality is inappropriate and threatening to the establishment of normative families and therefore to the continuation of the race, and they suggest that the conventional gender roles are the best possible and most firm ones, by making clear that only the gender conventions lead to a stable society. Gilbert and Sullivan’s main way of parodying the changing gender norms is thus by proving that they unsettle Victorian society, either by disrupting the public sphere or by unsettling normative relationships, and therefore pose a threat to the established gender norms and even to Victorian society in general. But, as mentioned, the threat the changing conventions pose is never taken too serious. Gilbert and Sullivan make clear that these new gender norms can easily be overthrown and that they lead to no stable society, by re-establishing gender conventions in the end, suggesting that these are the best possible roles. The threat the changing gender conventions pose is then discarded, which undermines these new norms, but also avoids Gilbert and Sullivan’s parodies from being insulting.
8. Works Cited


