

# The Gilbert and Sullivan Operettas Ranked By the Quality of their Romances

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Classically, comedies often end with a marriage or multiple marriages, either completed or imminent. And, for the most part, the couples that get married at the end of a comedy are passionately in love with each other and have chosen one other freely, preferring them to all others. At the end of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Beatrice marries Benedict and Hero marries Claudio. At the end of *Emma*, Emma marries Mr. Knightley, Jane Fairfax marries Frank Churchill, and Harriet Smith marries Robert Martin; and, for good measure, Miss Taylor marries Mr. Weston at the start of the novel, Mr. Elton marries Augusta Hawkins in the middle, and, off-stage but importantly, Miss Campbell marries Mr. Dixon. At the end of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen marries Jack, Cecily marries Algernon, and Miss Prism marries Dr. Chasuble. And so on.

All of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, except *Thespis*, end in at least one marriage. However, the prospective marriages are often problematic in one way or another. People are blackmailed into marrying. People marry partners they intensely dislike. People marry partners they barely know and have no possible reason to like. People marry partners they've never met because they were engaged in infancy. People marry as part of their theatrical contract. There is the frequent suggestion that it doesn't really matter very much whom you marry, and that people are as interchangeable in a marriage as they are in a chorus. In several cases, how the minor characters are paired up isn't specified and ends up being determined by the convenience of the choreography.

To some extent, this may be justifiable artistically. The G&S operas are sharply satirical and, in places, they are parodies. However, though I am overall a huge fan of G&S, I find these ill-assorted marriages sometimes detract from the quality of the operas and leave a bad taste in my mouth. I may be overreading or misreading or overreacting.

As a pale reflection of the brilliant series of YouTube videos being produced by Rachel 'Giannesse' Middle of Forbear! Theatre on every possible aspects of the G&S operas, I have carried out my analysis by very pedantically ranking the operas from romantically most objectionable to most satisfying. This is not, by the way, at all my ranking of the operas overall. Quite the contrary; of the top six on this list, only two — *Trial by Jury* and *Pinafore* — are among my favorite operas.

## 13. Princess Ida

Hilarion will marry Princess Ida, and there are budding romances between Psyche and Cyril and between Melissa and Florian – it is not clear that these have reached the stage of engagement though.

*Princess Ida* is, of course, enormously problematic in general in its attitude toward women. It's true that Hilarion says he is in love with Ida, and that Ida, after being defeated, says that she loves him, and the roles can be performed so as to bring that out. It's also true that Cyril says that if things don't work out with Hilarion, she can go back to her position at the University, though it's not at all clear how realistic that is. But, granting all that, I don't see any way of getting around the fact that Ida is being forced to marry Hilarion as

literally a spoil of war, because her brothers were, (improbably) beaten by Hilarion, Cyril, and Florian; that she could not now refuse the marriage; and that this follows on her chosen home being first broken into and then besieged.

## 12. The Yeomen of the Guard

Elsie Maynard marries Colonel Fairfax in Act 1, Phoebe will marry Wilfred (eventually), and Sergeant Meryll will marry Dame Carruthers. Jack Point dies of a broken heart.

Though Fairfax and Elsie do fall in love afterward, at the time when they marry, they don't at all know one another; he is getting married so that his kinsman who betrayed him will not get his estate; she is getting married for a fee of 100 crowns. The other two marriages are contracted because a despicable character blackmails an admirable character into marrying them by threatening to hand them over to the law. Neither of the two latter marriages is at all necessary to the plot, and they are really quite ugly. Gilbert seems to think these are jokes.

The case of Phoebe is particularly hard to take; she's a major romantic lead — a considerably more interesting character than Elsie, despite being a mezzo-soprano — she opens the opera, and she takes a huge risk to rescue Colonel Fairfax. And what she gets in return is that he toys with her outrageously, then he jilts her, and then she is forced to marry Wilfred. This can be ameliorated in performance by playing the roles so that Wilfred is more a nebbish than a brute and so that there is actually some chemistry between him and Phoebe, as he hints at the end of their first scene. But I don't think it can be made really palatable.

*Yeomen* is the only one of the operas where, in my opinion, a different arrangement of partners — Phoebe and Fairfax, Elsie and Jack Point, Dame Carruthers and Wilfred — would have been both much more satisfying and more plausible.

## 11. Patience

Patience will marry Grosvenor. The Duke will marry Jane. Saphir will marry the Colonel. Angela will marry the Major. Ella will either marry the solicitor or one of the unnamed dragoons, depending on the choreography. The rest of the dragoons marry the rest of the maidens. Bunthorne will have to be contented with a tulip or li-ly.

That all seems fine, but there are a number of things about it that I find hard to take:

1. The idea that the Duke gets to choose whichever woman he wants because he's rich and titled, despite the fact that otherwise he's completely commonplace. In *Pinafore*, Josephine rejects Sir Joseph; in *Iolanthe*, Phyllis initially and ultimately rejects Toller and Mountararat. Why, here, do all the characters agree that, since the Duke is the great matrimonial fish, any woman he proposes to is bound to accept him?
2. The idea that Angela and Saphir have no preferences as between the Colonel and the Major and vice versa. In the finale to Act I the Dragoons reaffirm their love for the maidens and the maidens are off-and-on responsive, and in the scene following "It's clear that medieval art" the Colonel, the Major, and the Duke declare their love for Saphir and Angela, who accept their proposal conditionally, if Mr Grosvenor remains obdurate. But all these declarations and proposals are, in mathematical jargon, "many-to-many"; the Colonel never says that he loves Saphir specifically or

asks her to marry him, and likewise the Major with Angela. Quite the contrary: In the quintet “If Saphir I choose to marry,”<sup>1</sup> and the Colonel’s speech before that, the plan is that if the Duke marries Saphir, then Angela will marry the Colonel, rather than the Major; and if the Duke marries Angela, then Saphir will marry the Major, rather than the Colonel. However, if the Duke marries neither, then Saphir will marry the Colonel and Angela will marry the Major. What sense does that make? And in this whole scene, no one asks Saphir and Angela whom they would prefer, nor do they say. It’s meant to be funny, but to me it comes across as dehumanizing.

3. The Duke proposing to Jane because she is plain. That’s as idiotic as Patience accepting Bunthorne because she dislikes him, and unlike Patience’s choice, it’s offensive, first because it’s how the opera ends; second, because whereas Patience is confused about what is required in love, the Duke is simply ignoring any consideration of love; and third, because if A does not like B, then that’s at least partly a characteristic of A whereas if B is plain, then that’s purely a characteristic of B. The fact that the Duke specifically insulted Jane specifically in Act I (D: “Has he succeeded in idealizing *you*?” J: “He has.” D: “Good old Bunthorne!”<sup>2</sup>) makes it worse.
4. Jane throwing over Bunthorne when the Duke proposes. I admit that’s always very funny when performed, but it really does clash with the character of Jane as it has been built up.
5. Ella’s disappearance. That’s been often noticed; not least, I would presume, by the actresses who play that part. But it is really bizarre that everyone assumes in the quintet there are only two women whom the three men might consider marrying; especially as Ella was part of the sextet at the end of Act I. (How are they paired in this sextet, or is that supposed to be somehow staged so that that is left ambiguous?)

## 10. The Pirates of Penzance

Mabel and Frederic will marry. The other daughters will all marry the pirates. Ruth is perhaps disappointed in her connubial views toward Frederic, or perhaps she has forgotten about them — they are not mentioned at all in Act 2.

Mabel and Frederic have two of the best love songs in the G&S operas. On the other hand, he proposes to all of her sisters collectively — a “one-to-many” proposal — and presumably if Edith or Kate had taken him up on it, he would have gone with that instead. So it’s not clear to what extent he is in love with Mabel specifically.

The more serious problem is with the other daughters. Once the pirates are revealed to be all noblemen who have gone wrong, their father is perfectly happy to hand his daughters over to them *en masse* and the daughters are perfectly happy to be handed over. This despite the fact that, until about a minute ago, they were pirates intent on murdering their father and all the policemen, and a few days earlier they were planning to marry all the daughters against their will. In any case, none of the pirates have any way of knowing the daughters individually, or vice versa. There is no indication in the text or the stage direction which of the named pirates (Pirate King, Samuel) marry which of the named daughters (Edith, Kate, Isabel), or that it matters.

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<sup>1</sup>For my taste this is a lousy song, in any case, with its six-fold repetition of the tooth-achingly dreadful rhyme of “die” with “sympathy”. If I were staging it, and could get away with it, I would end the scene at “Oh it’s extremely good — for beginners, it’s admirable” and go straight to “Exeunt”. However, Rachel Middle in her video *Ranking the Quintets (PLUS!)* in the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas strongly disagrees.

<sup>2</sup>I would cut those three lines of dialogue as well.

Perhaps this is a parody of some operatic convention, and can be justified on that basis.

## 9. The Mikado

Nanki-Poo has married Yum-Yum. Katisha has married Ko-Ko.

The marriage of Ko-Ko with Katisha seems to me problematic. She is tricked into marriage; he is forced into it as part of a plan to avoid being executed. He considers her “something appalling ... a most unattractive old thing with a caricature of a face”. The scene where Ko-Ko proposes to Katisha has some fine dialogue and two wonderful songs, and it can certainly be played to suggest that there is some real chemistry between the two. But that clashes with the final scene, where Katisha calls him, “this miserable object” before she finds out that he has tricked her, and calls him a “traitor” and starts to tear him to pieces when she learns of that. In turn he insults her: “Your notions, though many are not worth a penny.”<sup>3</sup> That’s not the kind of interaction one hopes for from newly-weds, My sense is that it’s hard to know how to play Katisha in the final song. Should she be happy? resigned? still angry? I’ve seen all three of these in performance. In reality (so to speak) one can imagine her storming off again, singing “My wrongs with vengeance shall be crowned”, as at the end of Act 1.

## 8. Ruddigore

Robin will marry Rose. Despard will marry Margaret. Richard will marry Zorah. Roderic will perhaps marry Dame Hannah.

The speed with which people change partners in *Ruddigore* is unsettling; it makes their professions of love a little hard to take seriously. Again, there is the suggestion that people are fairly interchangeable as partners. In Act 1, Rose, in love with Robin, accepts Richard’s proposal; and then switches to Robin, proposes to Despard and is rejected and then goes back to Richard. At the end of Act 2, Rose switches back to Robin again and then, about 30 seconds later, Richard announces that he will marry Zorah. Certainly Richard has not asked Zorah’s opinion of that idea, and in fact this is the first time that the audience has even heard her name.

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That’s all the really problematic ones. From here on things are more or less OK, with at most minor issues.

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## 7. Iolanthe

Phyllis will marry Strephon. The Lord Chancellor and Iolanthe are reunited. The Fairy Queen will marry Private Willis. The other peers have already married the other fairies.

Again, the marriage of the peers with the fairies is too fast, and too indeterminate, and too one-sided to be wholly satisfying. In the song, “In vain to us you plead” and the subsequent scene, the fairies reveal that they find the peers attractive, but there is no sign

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<sup>3</sup>Incidentally, Ko-Ko’s claim, “You’ve a very good bargain in me,” seems to me questionable. She is a lady of the Mikado’s court, even if no longer his daughter-in-law elect; he was a cheap tailor who is now Lord High Executioner in a small town.

in the script that their feelings are returned. In fact, no peer ever says that he are in love with any of the fairies. We don't find out who Celia, Leila, Fleta, Tolloller, or Mountararat marry. And it is particularly hard to see how this works out for Tolloller and Mountararat; after they have abandoned their engagements to Phyllis, and not including the time that they spend talking to the Lord Chancellor, they have about 10 minutes or less off stage to fall in love with, woo, propose to, and marry whichever fairy it is that they marry.

## 6. The Grand Duke

Lisa will marry Ludwig; Julia will marry Ernest; the Princess of Monte Carlo will marry Rudolph. Lisa, Ludwig, and Ernest are seriously in love. Julia is resigned. The Princess has been engaged to Rudolph since they were both infants, but they meet for the first time about one minute before the end of the opera. Rudolph has been doing everything he can to get out of his engagement to the Princess and marry the Baroness van Krakenfeld, who seems much more suited to him.

## 5. Trial by Jury

Angelina will marry the Judge. Edwin is free to marry the other woman without committing burglary.

The Judge is an old lech, and Angelina is presumably after his money. That's not a problem; *Trial by Jury* is the most purely satirical of the operas. But neither is it very romantic.

## 4. The Gondoliers

Tessa marries Giuseppe; Gianetta marries Marco; Casilda marries Luiz. *The Gondoliers* is unique among the operas in that there are no broken engagements or rejected proposals. Emotionally, it is very smooth sailing, and, consequently, a little bland.

That's all fine, except that not declaring a preference among possible partners is not actually very gallant and choosing ones wife by playing Blind Man's Bluff is not actually very romantic. Again, it suggests that it doesn't matter much whom you marry. It doesn't help that Tessa and Giuseppe are, in fact, virtually indistinguishable from Gianetta and Marco, both in character and in situation — everything but vocal range.

## 3. Utopia Limited

King Paramount will marry Lady Sophy. Princess Zara will marry Captain Fitzbattleaxe.

The romance between King Paramount and Lady Sophy is very sweet. Princess Zara and Captain Fitzbattleaxe are certainly in love, and they have a few good songs, but they're pretty much non-entities – quite oddly, considering they are the lead soprano and tenor.

The quarrel over Zara between Scaphio and Phantis toward the end of Act I, resolved by entrusting to Fitzbattleaxe until they can fight a duel, is completely forgotten as soon as they have finished formulating it. To my mind, this is a case where Gilbert really “phoned it in”; pulled plot device #29 out of his file drawer for the sake of having something happen.

Added later: In Rachel Middle's video "*Utopia Limited*" - an *EXTREME* deep dive into *G&S's* most obscure and most hard-hitting *Opera*, she included a bit of dialogue devised by Natan Zamansky, given to Princess Zara at the start of Act II, that brilliantly fixes this problem:

What an ingenious idea it was to import a regiment of English nursemaids, whose power to discern the true condition of a person's birth borders on the supernatural! Why I had no idea that you had been switched at birth with the prince of a neighboring nation to whom I was in infancy betrothed. Upon learning that, Scaphio and Phantis had no alternative but to withdraw their suit.

## 2. The Sorcerer

Aline will marry Alexis. Sir Marmaduke will marry Lady Sangazure. Dr. Daly will Constance. The Notary will marry Mrs. Partlet. The women's chorus will each marry the proper partner in the men's chorus.

I am not particularly a fan of *The Sorcerer*, but Gilbert did handle the romantic situations particularly deftly here. There are four romances among the named couples plus the two choruses marry. All of the romances between the main couples are quite different in flavor; three of them (all but Partlet/Notary, which is just a plot device) are charming, even moving; and five of the six characters in those three are very sympathetic (the exception being Alexis, who is horrible.) The only other time Gilbert pulls that off is in *Ruddigore*. Furthermore, in *The Sorcerer*, it is at least plausible that the unnamed characters in the choruses who end up married were courting before the start of the opera. (That may not sound like much, but it is impossible for the choruses in *Pirates* and in *Iolanthe*.)

## 1. Pinafore

Josephine marries Ralph; Captain Corcoran marries Little Buttercup; Sir Joseph Porter K.C.B. marries Hebe. Sir Joseph is resigned rather than enthusiastic — the stage directions are specific about that — but the rest are very happy.

To my mind the courtship of Ralph and Josephine is the most profoundly romantic in any of the operas and "Ah! Stay your hand — I love you" is the most dramatic moment. (Melodramatic, sure, but, hey, this is opera.) "A Maiden Fair to See" is a beautiful love song and "The Hours Creep On Apace" is absolutely extraordinary, both musically and dramatically. Not coincidentally, *Pinafore* is the only one of the operas whose central plot is close to realistic: fundamentally, the story is that a young woman has two suitors: a poor one that she loves, and a rich one that her father prefers but she detests; and she chooses the poor one.

The twist at the end certainly gets in the way of the realism of the plot, and to some extent of the romantic success of the outcome. It is unsettling that, if Buttercup's story is true, then Josephine is marrying a man who is literally old enough to be her father, and Captain Corcoran is marrying his former wet nurse.

Buttercup's story is of course a parody of the "switched at birth" plot device, which was already hackneyed in 1878. But to my mind, though "A many years ago" is a fine song, the joke costs a lot more than it's worth. I wish that Gilbert had found some other resolution. All in all, however, though I consider it a flaw, I don't think this seriously detracts from the high romance of Josephine and Ralph.