

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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THE PALACE OF TRUTH
A FAIRY COMEDY IN THREE ACTS
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SYNOPSIS, ANALYSIS AND METRICS
BY
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“When pitch-encrusted night aloft prevails;
When no still goddess through the mid-air sails;
When scorpions vomit forth their poisonous scum;
When to the demon tryst gaunt witches come,
When noisome pestilence stalks through the glen,
Bellowing forth its enmity to men;
When ghastly toads scream loudly through the air;
Oh, I would not—no, I would *not* be there!”

— Recitation by King Phanor while playing his mandolin. (Act I)

This is a very charming and humorous play which can be easily read from the page, but it has also appeared on stage numerous times since its first performance in 1870. The playwright is none other than W. S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, and this was one of his most popular plays before teaming with Sullivan. Although there has been some (a lot of) criticism regarding the originality of Gilbert with this play, he still manages to give it that Gilbertian touch. The origins of his play come from Madame de Genlis’ fairy story written under the same name (Le Palais de la vérité). There is no secret as to where Gilbert found his inspiration.

A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

The play begins in the King's country home with him in a recitation and playing his mandolin. He has his two yes-men (Zoram and Chrysal) sprouting all manner of compliments, which the King heartily enjoys. Aristæus on the other hand is very blunt and honest. Meanwhile, with the entrance of Queen Altemire, she is clearly concerned about the coming engagement between her daughter Princess Zeolide and Prince Philamir, whom she believes does not love her. It comes about that the King has an enchanted palace that the Queen has never visited for some eighteen years and she is surprised and jealous suspecting something is not quite right. The King agrees to take everyone to the palace including Princess Zeolide and Prince Philamir to learn the truth between the two, because this palace is enchanted and those within its walls are compelled to tell the truth.

Once all have arrived at the palace, there is an immediate effect on everyone except the King who is the possessor of the talisman, making him immune from telling the truth. As expected, people are saying things to and about each other which they normally would not do, leading to some comical moments. Some of the women and men profess love for each other, forming unlikely couples including Prince Philamir who has said some strange and unwanted things to Princess Zeolide. He comes to realize that the palace is enchanted due to what others are saying to each other, but does not realize he is also under its influence. The King also starts to tell the truth because Mirza has swapped the talisman for an imitation. The King soon realizes and wants to leave.

Later that night in the Avenue of Palms, there are pleadings by Prince Philamir to Mirza and she gives him the true talisman. The King arrives and the Prince gives him the talisman. Now the Queen who has been found with Gélanor, states truthfully that it was an innocent meeting. The King, now with the talisman denies his situation with Azèma and the Queen believes him thinking he must be telling the truth. All ends well between Prince Philamir and Princess Zeolide with the Queen breaking the talisman and ending the enchantment of the palace. Everyone notes what they have learnt from their experiences.

ANALYSIS AND METRICS

From a metrical point of view, the most outstanding feature of this play is that it is written entirely in blank verse. There are minor variations throughout including to the rhythm, but overall Gilbert has demonstrated great skill, as we would expect.

There are a number of comedic elements, but we might say that it still has the structure of a drama. The reasons are the seriousness of some events and interaction between the characters, and also the period of time for the performance. The performance itself is approximately two hours in covering a real time of twelve hours for everything to occur. Although the characters find themselves in awkward and amusing situations, the play does not become or border on melodramatic.

Most verses follow a clear iambic pentameter rhythm, but not to the point of monotony. Verse splits and the language used in conversation keep the rhythm in a natural flow, and one barely notices that the composition is in blank verse.

A common technique in such a play is to split a verse between two or three people. Note that stage directions and character movement have been removed from the following sample extracts of the play.

From Act I—

Phanor: A wonderful musician—and a man
Of infinite good taste!

Zoram: Why, from my birth
I have made melope and counterpoint
My favourite study.

Phanor: And you really care
To hear my work again, oh, melodist?

From Act I—

Chrysal: ...
A rose full blown!

Aristæus: Say over-blown.

Phanor: What's that?

and from Act III—

Phanor: ...
So, madam, I've detected you!

Altemire: How, sir?

Phanor: Never mind how—and you too Gélanor
Oh, I'm ashamed of you!

Gélanor: Your majesty,
I don't know what you mean.

Phanor: You bad old man!

In these instances you will find that the split lines combine from pairs or triplets to give a single blank verse. This technique is successfully used throughout the play to great effect. Enjambment and mid-line stops are used and help the blank verse come across as normal conversation.

From Act II—

Azèma: How, sir?
I think it's time that I should take my leave.
I shall be in the Avenue of Palms
At ten o'clock to-night. I mention this
That you may take the hint and be there, too.

Any line can be taken to examine the metrics, but we are expecting that of the typical blank verse and possible variations.

From Act I—This verse is typical iambic pentameter.

Zoram: My lord, I pray you send the fellow hence,
 | Mÿ lôrd | Ĩ prāy | yōū sēnd | thĕ fĕl | lōw hēnce

From Act II—Combining the two lines to form one verse. Notice the rhythm has not been altered. Metrical accent and speech stress align perfectly.

Chrysal: Your Royal Highness seems disturbed.
 Philamir: I am!
 | Yōūr Rōy | ăĥ High | nĕss sĕems | dĭstŭrbed | Ĩ ăm

and from Act III—Once again combining the two verses.

Azèma: I am Azèma.
 Altemire: And I am the Queen!
 | Ĩ ăm | Ăzĕ | mă Ānd | Ĩ ăm | thĕ Quĕēn

We note the exchange of trochee for iamb in this verse at feet one and four, but it is necessary to give the appropriate emphases on the required words considered important. The trochee following iamb in feet three and four is very dramatic requiring the pause after Azèma to place the accent on And and then I. i.e. The pause from Azèma to Altemire.

We do find some variation in rhythm in some verses such as that from Act I:

Zeolide: ...
 So furious—from excess of tenderness,
 ...

This variation is welcome. We note the amphibrach and dactyl almost give the rhythm of a feminine ending with the dash being metrically timed, easily gauged in the manner of speaking:

| Sō fūr | ĩōus | ° frōm | ěxcĕss ōf | tĕndĕrnĕss

The scansion of this verse will also depend upon your pronunciation of excess. There are two ways this can be pronounced, emphasis on the first or second syllable. However, I believe that the emphasis on the second to be more suitable and dramatic for this verse.

From Act I—

Phanor: ...
That prompts you to perpetual persecution.

█ Thăt prōmpts | yōū tō | pĕrpētŭ | ăl pĕr | sĕcŭtiōn

Here we find the appropriate substitutions for the iamb, both being the amphibrach and leading to the typical feminine ending. Brilliant! However, if we would like to step outside the box, the line could be scanned as:

█ Thăt prōmpts | yōū tō | pĕrpēt | ūāl | pĕrsĕ | cŭtiōn

which is an interesting scansion to accommodate the longer line, however the metrical accent does not quite make it with the speech stress. Another possible scansion is:

█ Thăt prōmpts | yōū tō | pĕrpēt | ūāl pĕr | sĕcŭtiōn

giving a very inviting and delightful verse of iambs combining with an anapest and amphibrach, fitting somewhat better than an expected six feet that may occasionally occur in blank verse consisting of twelve syllables. But, definitely no Alexandrine here!

and from Act II—

Zeolide: ...
The flowers that decked my life are worthless weeds.
...

Attempting to obtain an iambic rhythm or any form of femininity is futile:

█ Thĕ flōw | ěrs thāt | dĕcked mŷ | lĭfe āre | wōrthlĕss | wĕĕds (?)

We notice that the metrical accents do not align with the speech stress. Clearly there are other metrics at work in this verse.

█ Thĕ flōwĕrs | thăt dĕcked | mŷ lĭfe | āre wōrth | lĕss wĕĕds

In this scansion we find both metrical accent and speech stress aligning perfectly. It is the minor variation of the amphibrach in the first foot which forces the alignment, and fits better with the iambic rhythm being a valid substitution.

FINAL COMMENTS

The play is very enjoyable simply to be read from the page, you may say a closet drama. It also enjoyed great popularity as a stage play. As to the advantages? Perhaps a bit of eye-candy such as costumes and props, but more likely the characters interaction with the audience using asides, facial expressions and body language often given by hints and directions in the script. Whereas all of this can be easily imagined, the artistry lies in that fact that the play is suitable to both conditions.

Essentially we have what we call a poetic drama. The descriptor drama has been touched on previously as the play may be classified as a drama. The poetic nature includes not only the style in which it is written being blank verse, but also the use of poetic techniques and devices.

The conversation between the character has been expertly woven as blank verse with other devices such a alliteration. Prince Philamir is the main character using alliteration and lines abound in metaphors when expressing his love for Princess Zeolide. This is not done continually, but enough to be impressive.

From Act I—

Philamir: ...

By quivering willows at the waterside,
Lapped in a lazy luxury of love!
There we'll forget the world of work-a-day,
...

If you take the time to read this play, I am sure you will not be disappointed. It is short enough to be enjoyed in a single sitting, but has enough depth to keep you entertained and marveling at the overall construction, flow of the play and interaction between the character each with their own special charm. This will also be a lead-in to why the Gilbert and Sullivan operas were so popular.

Enjoy The Palace of Truth, it is sure to bring a smile to your face.

LINKS TO OTHER ARTICLES CONCERNING THE PALACE OF TRUTH

1. [To the Original Review of the 1870 performance.](#)
2. [Regarding Gilbert's originality for this play.](#)
3. [The Palace of Truth \(PDF\)](#)