

## **Domination and Performance: The Influences of Freud, Said, and Butler on Hwang's *M. Butterfly***

*William Baker*

*Writer's comment:* Producing an essay that wove together the works of Sigmund Freud, Edward Said, and Judith Butler required a certain challenging degree of critical ingenuity. That process, however, ended up being quite rewarding, a fact which I hope is reflected in the final version of this essay. I would like to thank Dr. Simpson for allowing me the leeway to go beyond the parameters his original assignment--the prompt of which dealt exclusively with works of literary theory--in order to examine David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* as part of my essay. I would also like to thank Melanie Madden for her insights into feminist criticism, insights that were invaluable in the writing of this piece.

– *William Baker*

*Instructor's comment:* It is indeed the case that William Baker's essay disobeyed the terms of the assignment, which asked for discussion of a theoretical text or texts and not for "applied" theory, i.e. the application of one or more theories to a literary text. I limit the assignment in this way for a good reason. For most students, the invitation to write about a text in the light of a theory either encourages them to use theory as a prop (or as a whipping boy), and not to read it carefully, or to make a mess of both text and theory in the effort to yoke them together. William Baker earned his right to disobey, however, by a series of stunning papers and examinations showing him to be far ahead of his peers in his grasp of both literature and theory. And here, his conjunction of Said and Butler (along with Freud) is quite startling, not one that many have made. It does, of course, fit Hwang very beautifully—and one might note that the Yale-educated Hwang is himself here writing in the light of theory in the first place! William Baker's paper is elegantly written and argued—a model of the genre of fitting theory to literature that few have been able to emulate.

– *David E. Simpson, English Department*

**D**espite the fact that it is based on a documented and

(purportedly) true episode, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988) hinges on a development so seemingly fantastic that many viewers simply cannot accept it. The story, as such, focuses on one Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat working in Peking in the 1960s who falls in love with, and subsequently delivers secret material to, Song Liling, an opera diva and undercover Chinese agent. Of course, in an act of critical gamesmanship, I have concealed the most shocking detail of the relationship between Gallimard and Song: Song is actually a man in disguise, a fact which Gallimard does not (or will not, or cannot) accept over the course of their decades-long relationship. Just by this thread outline, one can sense the ripeness Hwang's play presents in terms of the possibilities for applying critical theory. Indeed, one can draw on a surprisingly rich theoretical tradition from throughout the twentieth-century to dissect Hwang's work. With this in mind, Said's *Orientalism* becomes central in finding a means to describe the intersection of East and West, and the gendering of Oriental and Occidental in the play. Similarly, Freud's "Fetishism" provides an initial framework for attempting to understand the ways in which patriarchy, domination, and exoticism become irrevocably intertwined in Gallimard's sexual psyche. And yet, ultimately, the work of Said and Freud only provides the context for Hwang's more fundamental concerns. Indeed, the construction of gender in terms of performance emerges as the more radical and haunting theme of *M. Butterfly*, a theme for which the work of Judith Butler, and specifically her essay "Gender Trouble," becomes an essential meta-language.

Although Hwang would later claim in interviews that he had not read *Orientalism* until after writing his play (1576), *M. Butterfly* seems absolutely suffused with notions from Said's landmark text. One line in particular from Said's piece aligns itself perfectly with the thematic developments in Hwang's play. "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European," Said writes in the introduction to his text, "but also because it could be--that is, submitted to being--*made* Oriental" (1994). This notion, that the Western mind views the East as lying prostrate before it, ready to be ravaged and remade, is one that is reiterated again and again throughout *M. Butterfly*, until Song finally states such thoughts aloud in the penultimate scene: "The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated -- because a woman can't think for herself" (1572).

Lest we accuse Hwang of grossly simplifying Said's notions of the Oriental and the Occidental in an almost Manichean fashion, let us note the interesting ways in which Hwang subtly problematizes the

relationship, suggesting the Oriental has had its own views of itself permanently altered by the cognitive system of the Europeans. Towards the end of the play, Song testifies before a French judge and uses his relationship with Gallimard as an example of how Western egotism and narcissism will presage the fall of European power. Consider, however, in an extension of the previously referenced passage from *M. Butterfly*, Song utilizes the imprecise language of a generalized “Asian” culture (rather than simply “Chinese”) in his own comparison:

Song: The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated – because a woman can’t think for herself.

Judge: Your armchair political theory is tenuous, Monsieur Song.

Song: You think so? That’s why you’ll lose in all your dealings with the East. (1572)

Earlier in the play, the same notions of the East/West dynamic are expressed somewhat more indirectly through the intertextual use of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, which deals with the illicit affair between a Japanese woman and an American sailor; it is an opera and a love-story over which Gallimard obsesses. Gallimard’s interest in and explanation of Puccini’s famous duet “The Whole World Over” gives us a clear gateway into his simple and unabashedly masculinist, chauvinist, and Western sexual ideology: “To give a rough translation: ‘The whole world over, the Yankee travels, casting his anchor whenever he wants’” (1551). Not to belabor the obvious, but such references to “casting anchor” in this context are tinged with a kind of simplified Freudian association. The play’s relationship with Said points in such directions, with Said’s word-choice of “submission” suggesting the language of rape. But it is through Hwang’s allusions to Freud (or, at least, to the popular notions of Freudian phallic imagery) that the connections between politics and sexuality in the play are ultimately made clear, as Freud famously made such connections in his work. Consider, in this regard, certain lines from “Fetishism,” in which the Freud directly links castration anxiety with the fears that lead to geopolitical conflict. “In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Altar are in danger,” Freud writes in that essay, linking castration anxiety and fetishism with the governmental and cultural fears that lead to war, “and similar illogical consequences will ensue” (953).

If one chooses to develop such associations further, one might easily argue that Hwang’s play revolves around bringing together Said’s political views with a kind of “pop” Freudianism. To be sure, one could suggest that Hwang appears to link Gallimard’s obsessions with the East and submissive women in general (and with Song in particular) with overused, devalued, almost-vulgarized Freudian concepts—specifically,

those of fetishism and castration anxiety. In this interpretation of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang's Gallimard is a simple creature whose actions are consistently organized in such a way as to subvert any fears of castration anxiety and to reassert his threatened masculinity. When Gallimard is initially rejected by Song, for example ("So much for protecting her in my big Western arms") (1554), he turns to a series of other women to reestablish his virility. Lest we miss this connection, Hwang has one of these mistresses, a young Danish student named Renee (another Freudian touch!) vocalize such issues through her personal evaluation of the male member:

[It] just hangs there. This little...flap of flesh. And there's so much fuss we make about it. Like, I think the reason we fight wars is because we wear clothes. Because no one knows--between the men, I mean--who has the biggest...weenie. (1565)

So, it would seem, Gallimard returns again and again to Song order to subvert any fears of the castration anxiety created by her initial rejection of him, and (more generally) to reassert his masculinity. Gallimard must feel dominant, as dominant as possible: thus, he lords over what he perceives to be the "weakest" possible creature, an Asian woman. Similarly, Gallimard breaks off his relationship with Renee over concerns about his threatened role as the dominant partner in the relationship. "It was exciting to be with someone who wasn't afraid to be seen completely naked," Gallimard tells the audience in confidence. "But is it possible for a woman to be *too* uninhibited, *too* willing, so as to seem almost too...masculine?" (1564).

That Gallimard chose a man to play the role of the ultimately submissive woman finds a certain logic within this interpretation of the play: only a man could truly play a woman in the simplified, stereotyped way that allowed Gallimard to fully exercise his masculine, fully dominant role. Similarly, only an "Oriental" could complete the role by projecting the image of true helplessness put upon the East by Europe, according to authors like Said, through the process of colonialism. "[B]eing an Oriental, I could never be completely a man," Song succinctly puts it towards the end of the play (1572). Such a view of Gallimard makes him a textbook Freudian "fetishist," one who creates such an elaborate means of gratification in order to save himself from becoming a homosexual in the conventional sense "by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects" (954). Interestingly, Freud himself wrote in "Fetishism" about what he perceived to be the intersection of the fetishist and the Chinese culture, examining in that essay concepts of male domination of the Chinese female which indirectly remind one of issues played out in *M. Butterfly*.

“Another variant [of the fetish] might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated,” Freud explains. “It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman after it has been mutilated” (956).

Often, however, Hwang’s take on Freudian concepts in *M. Butterfly* can seem somewhat simplified and facile. Even if one considers it in concert with the playwright’s version of Said’s post-colonial views, Hwang’s apparent linking of Gallimard’s motivations with easy, widely-accepted notions of Freudian fetishism and castration anxiety cannot satisfy the critical viewer. This, I would argue, is intentional. If Hwang’s version of Freud seems to be elegant hogwash, it is because Hwang views Freud himself as elegant hogwash. That Freud delineates so clearly between “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” and relies on such a non-specific concept as the “fetish,” is limiting in the context of a story like Gallimard’s. And, indeed, Freud himself at times in “Fetishism” seems to admit his methods and theories have their limits, particularly in the intersections of sexuality and gender roles: “Why some people become homosexual as a consequence of that impression [of castration], while others fend it off by creating a fetish, and the great majority surmount it, we are frankly not able to explain” (954).

To use Freud to truly attempt to explain Gallimard’s story, to claim that this diplomat created such an extreme “fetish” to “fend off” homosexuality, trivializes the events explained in *M. Butterfly* into the realm of deep psychosis or even farce. Instead, the work of Judith Butler is far more useful in grappling with the sexual and gender dynamics of the play; in particular, her essay “Gender Trouble” is quite instructive in this regard. Of course, “Gender Trouble” appeared in 1990, two years after Hwang’s play premiered, meaning Hwang could not have been directly influenced by that particular essay. And yet, the similarity of the themes examined in “Gender Trouble” and *M. Butterfly* speaks to a certain *zeitgeist* regarding the intersections of gender, sexuality, and performance coming to the fore in the popular culture of the late-1980s and early-1990s. When Butler writes lines like “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right,” she places herself within the framework of the same debate engaged by Hwang in *M. Butterfly*, albeit minus the post-colonial dimension of Said’s work which Hwang utilizes (2500). Indeed, at times Hwang’s play seems almost like an allegorical dramatization of Butler’s concepts. Note that the story of *M. Butterfly* is told from the points-of-view of the “punished” Song and Gallimard, literally imprisoned, ostensibly for

their espionage, after they have failed to “do their gender right.” I say “ostensibly” because once in custody, their captors seem far more concerned about the sexual aspects of Song and Gallimard’s “crimes,” especially since the “intelligence” obtained by Song from Gallimard turns out to be mostly useless. Consider, once again, the contentious and yet darkly humorous exchange between the French judge and Song, as the magistrate demands simple explanations for the decades of Gallimard’s Byzantine self-deception:

Judge: Just answer my question: did he know you were a man?  
Song: You know, Your Honor, I never asked. (1572)

Even this analysis, though, might still put *M. Butterfly* in the category of a cautionary Freudian drama, a work which suggests the repercussions (both internal and societal) of failing to modulate one’s behavior to one’s proper, biological gender. What Hwang’s play actually and more radically examines, though, is the very nature of a “right gender,” a questioning which is central to Butler’s “Gender Trouble.” The concept of gender-performance plays a key role in understanding these assertions, but not, as one may assume, in terms of Song’s “performance” as a woman. Song is an interesting pragmatist, a figure who at times almost seems above or beyond normal cultural concerns as he/she consciously adopts various identities and then ruminates on the consequences (“[B]eing an Oriental, I could never be completely a man”) (1572). Instead, the issue of gender-performance is much more central to the character of Gallimard, whose “obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (to use Butler’s terms) again and again reasserts itself, but only as a facade (2497). This is not to say Gallimard is simply a repressed homosexual (again, the pop-Freudian analysis), but something much more unfocused and indistinct, not conforming to the usual patriarchal categorizations, albeit in an *unconscious* act of cultural rebellion. As Butler explains:

if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (2501)

Truly, Gallimard’s life—in both his outwardly conforming appearance and his internal self-deception—has been one of “performative accomplishment,” a notion that has been mimicked by the theatrical nature of *M. Butterfly*: chronology is unhinged, characters change costumes before the eyes of the audience, and Gallimard

frequently speaks to the viewers: "Why can't anyone understand? That in China, I once loved, and was loved by, very simply, the Perfect Woman" (1570). Hwang brilliantly gives visual form to the themes of Gallimard's gender indeterminacy and performance in the play's final moments. As *M. Butterfly* concludes, Gallimard, alone in his French prison cell, admits to himself that Song was indeed a man. And yet, this very revelation causes Gallimard to reject such a culturally-sanctioned "reality" and abandon himself to his own fantasies:

I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth. (1574)

As he continues his soliloquy, Gallimard is accompanied on-stage by dancers who provide him with a wig and a kimono, items which he dons; he "becomes" Cio-Cio-San from Puccini's opera, complete with a climatic suicide via knife. Before that last, bloody action, Gallimard's final words find him not in the chaos of gender-performance, but lost in a kind of orgasmic satisfaction. "It is 1988. And I have found her at last," he explains. "In a prison on the outskirts of Paris. My name is Rene Gallimard--also known as Madame Butterfly" (1574). In Hwang's play, then, Gallimard is not experiencing through gender-performance a damaging disconnect with reality that comes about through a revelation (i.e., that Song is a man). Instead, he is in the process of finding a kind of freedom: he is now free from the need of the "Other," in the sense that Butler uses the term--"The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female 'Other' suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory" (2489). At the close of *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard is not experiencing some kind of perpetual fantasy of auto-gratification, but rather a reevaluation of the human subject. Indeed, Hwang posits Gallimard as nearly existing beyond the Platonic ideal of the "individual" (i.e., a being which is separated into two halves, man/woman, that will eventually be reunited in one entity). In other words, for Hwang, Gallimard is poised to move beyond the Western standards of absolute and logical (or biological) gender.

But Hwang, as though he does not wholly believe in such escape, puts Song on the stage during Gallimard's final reverie, dressed as a man, and calling out reminders of the lingering gender conflict which has driven the play: "Butterfly? Butterfly?" (1574). Thus, through his conclusion to *M. Butterfly*, Hwang revises and critiques the very influences upon which the play initially seemed to be built. Said's notions of the East/West dynamic are overturned, with Song now in the position of (apparent) dominance. Similarly, Freud's notions of the fetish as substitution for homosexuality come to naught: with the gender roles

of Song and Gallimard reversed (or, more accurately, exploded) at the play's finale, the simple categories of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" lack their former currency. Indeed, all that remains is what Butler might term "dissonance." "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance," she writes in "Gender Trouble," "then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (2498). Hwang and Butler each identify this "dissonant" scenario in their respective works; neither finds it necessary to offer a simple and easy "solution" to it. Instead, both authors simply are satisfied to examine the hitherto largely ignored dynamics of such liminal cultural space.

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