

***M. Butterfly* as Total Theatre**

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* from the perspective of a semiotics on theatre, following the work of Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991). The reason for such an approach is that Hwang's play has mostly been analysed as a critique of the interconnections between imperialism and sexism, neglecting its theatricality. My argument is that the theatrical techniques used by the playwright are also a fundamental aspect to be considered in the deconstruction of the Orient and the Other.

In a 1988 interview, David Henry Hwang expressed what could be considered as his manifest on theatre whilst *M. Butterfly* was still being performed with great commercial success on Broadway:¹

I am generally interested in ways to create total theatre, theatre which utilizes whatever the medium has to offer to create an effect—just to keep an audience interested—whether there's dance or music or opera or comedy. All these things are very theatrical, even makeup changes and costumes—possibly because I grew up in a generation which isn't that acquainted with theatre. For theatre to hold my interest, it needs to pull out all its stops and take advantage of everything it has—what it can do better than film and television. So it's very important for me to exploit those elements.... (1989a: 152-53)

From this perspective, I would like to analyse the theatricality of *M. Butterfly* as an aspect of the play to which, traditionally, not much attention has been paid to as to its content and plot. Drawing from the theory of postmodern aesthetics (intertextual references, parody), the play's usage of dramatic shape, stage pictures, language, theatrical proxemics, kinesics, and character construction, contribute to relate thematic content and the text's politics to form.² However, before analysing the theatricality—the different sign systems—of Hwang's play and its contribution to the creation of meaning, it is necessary to provide a few preliminaries on the use of intertextuality, particularly the close references to Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904).

Hwang himself has described *M. Butterfly* as an attempt “to link imperialism, racism and sexism” in the construction of the racial (Asian) Other (in Savran 1988: 127), using Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* as a mediating text which epitomises Western stereotypes of the East in order to question and, ultimately, to deconstruct them. The feminised, submissive, exoticised and inscrutable images of the East had such weight in the West's own construction that Hwang admitted being aware of such stereotypes even before becoming acquainted with the opera's plot for writing the play (Hwang 1989b: 95). This is related to what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the “effects of public fantasies on individual lives” (1999: 308), that is, how national entity narratives are internalised and adapted in the construction of the individual—the Subject linked to a

particular geographical location. Needless to say, Puccini's opera reflects the unequal political relations between East and West as a result of the latter's imperial and colonial enterprises in Asia. In turn, this has its effects upon the ways in which the Asian Other is constructed as a foil to the Western Universal Subject.

The opera, which premièred in the Scala of Milan on 17 February 1904, seems to be based upon a true story of a *geisha* who committed suicide after being abandoned by an American lover (Liao 1990: 37).³ Its most direct source, however, is a one-act play by the American playwright David Belasco, *Madame Butterfly*, which was performed at London's Duke of York Theatre in 1900. The tragic story of the young Japanese woman who dies for the unrequited love of a Euro-American man formed part by that time of the West's fantasy about Asia and, particularly, about Asian women. In fact, the first literary precedence of the Madame Butterfly myth dates from 1887 when Julien Viaud, a French naval officer, published his travel book *Madame Chrysanthème* (Lauretis 1999: 309). However, it was Puccini's opera which finally immortalised such an image—what precisely made it the most appropriate text to be deconstructed in Hwang's play.

M. Butterfly, therefore, may be best described as an exercise in deconstruction by first presenting situations drawn from the opera's plot which are immediately subverted. This has structural effects, creating a sense of interruption by which a fluid narrative is disrupted—a reflection of the incoherence of the postmodern universe.

As pointed out by Dorinne Kondo in "*M. Butterfly*: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity", Puccini, together with his collaborators, the librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, included in *Madama Butterfly* all of the clichés associated with the Orient:⁴

... a woman's death in opera, and most especially, the various markers of Japanese identity: Butterfly as *geisha*, that quintessential Western figuration of Japanese woman, the manner of Butterfly's death, by the knife—the form of suicide conventionally associated in the West with Japan, the construction of the Japanese as a 'people accustomed/ to little things/ humble and silent' ... In Western eyes, Japanese women are meant to sacrifice, and Butterfly sacrifices her 'husband', her religion, her people, her son, and ultimately, her very life. The beautiful, moving tragedy propels us toward narrative closure, as Butterfly discovers the truth—that she is, indeed, condemned to die as her identity as a Japanese *geisha* demands—an exotic object, a 'poor little thing', as Kate Pinkerton calls her. In Puccini's opera, men, women, Japanese, Americans, are all defined by familiar narrative conventions. And the predictable happens: West wins over East, Man over Woman, White Man over Asian Woman. (1997: 34-35)

What is being underlined by the opera's plot is the emasculation of Asia and its peoples placing them, consequently, in a position of inferiority versus the masculine West. This is enhanced by the fact that Butterfly rejects a Japanese pretender, Prince Yamadori, a man whose social and economic situation is far better than that of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, a mere naval officer. Such an image of Asian men's inferiority has permeated into contemporary times, as Hwang expresses in one of his later plays from 1992, *Bondage*. In this play, a dominatrix, who pretends to be an Asian woman for her client, who in turn is assuming the role of an Asian man during one of their S&M sessions, says that since "Asian men have oppressed their women for centuries," they are now "paying for their crime by being passed over for dates in favor of white men" (2000: 268).

Hwang foregrounds the absurdity of such an assumption in *M. Butterfly* through the words of the Chinese opera diva, Song Liling, performing the role of the Butterfly/lotus blossom myth, to René Gallimard who, in his daydreams, assumes the Pinkerton role:

... what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner—ah!—you find it beautiful.⁵
(17)

The misinterpretations of the Other are a result of an essentialist view of subjectivity based upon gender and racial discourses. For this reason, Gallimard is unable to perceive the irony of a Chinese diva playing the part of a Japanese woman through the interpretation of a Western opera when he praises Song for being such a convincing Butterfly. Song replies to his compliments: “Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know” (17).

Theatrically, this is conveyed, in the first place, by moving the main action from Japan to China and, especially, by the appropriation of elements from Japanese *kabuki* theatre and Chinese Beijing opera as if both formed part of a monolithic culture. This runs parallel to the fact that Asian immigrants in the United States have traditionally been viewed and represented as either Chinese or Japanese, which is in accordance to the Western perception that all Asians look alike.

When Song Liling first appears on stage she is in traditional Chinese clothes dancing, initially, to the sound of Chinese music which gradually dissolves into the Love Duet of Puccini's opera (1). In her second appearance she dances to that same music but now dressed as Butterfly, the Japanese *geisha* (10). The fact that she appears upstage as Gallimard is watching enhances the objectification of her image by the male, Western gaze (and that of the audience, whose attention is drawn to her strong entrance from upstage).

This essentialised construction of the Orient, in terms of theatrical sign systems, is reflected on Broadway's first production of the play. Eiko Ishioka designed a semicircular ramp which curved around the interior sets, allowing for a “fluid movement over and between defined spaces on the stage” (Shimakawa 2002: 122), an idea to be used in later productions. It is down this ramp that Song Liling makes her spectacular entrance, a reminder of *kabuki's hanamichi*, a passage that runs from the left-hand side of the stage through the audience all the way up to the theatre's end.⁶ The most evident appropriations from *kabuki*, however, are the use of *kurogo*, stage assistants clad in black, and the onstage changes that characters undergo which, in traditional Western theatre, take place in the backstage. The obvious example in *M. Butterfly* is the transition from Act two, scene eleven, to Act three, scene one, when Song directly addresses the audience announcing his upcoming transformation on stage, removing his makeup, wig and *kimono*, and appearing in a man's Armani suit (78-80).

In the play's final scene Gallimard also carries out his final transformation on the stage. In his act of self-sacrifice, Gallimard and Song exchange the Pinkerton/Butterfly roles they have been performing during their twenty-year-old relationship. Although the stage directions merely indicate that “*Dancers bring the*

wash basin to him and help him make up his face” (92), it is more than probable for the director to make the same kind of choice as David Cronenberg in the film adaptation of the play.⁷ In the film, Gallimard clumsily puts on makeup that evokes the one typically used for female characters in Beijing Opera: a whitened face with rouge surrounding the eyes and covering both sides of the nose as well as the cheeks. The makeup, together with the *kimono* outfit—the traditional Japanese costume—are incoherent cultural elements. The sign system in makeup and costume exemplify the confusion of Asian cultures and Gallimard’s—as well as that of the West—utterly ignorance on the East by juxtaposing Chinese and Japanese cultural elements. This confusion and generalisation, in turn, is reflected in Gallimard’s own words: “There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Of slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils” (91). Another aspect of Japanese *kabuki* theatre and Chinese Beijing opera theatrical devices adopted and manipulated by the play is that of cross-dressing.

Male performers impersonating female characters in Beijing opera—known as *dan*—dates from the latter part of the eighteenth century. This practice was enhanced by a growing custom in the last years of the century: purchasing boys from impoverished families, especially from the southern provinces of China. A contract would be stipulated by which the child, after a given period of time during which he would be trained in the art of Beijing opera, would return to his parents. Some of these boys, during their stay in the capital, would also be used as courtesans, partly due to the legal restrictions on female prostitution. Eventually, as *dan* actors, they would perform the role of women not only on the stage, but also in certain areas of social life as mentioned before (Mackerras 1988 (1983): 103-104). They were considered to incarnate what Gallimard describes as the “Perfect Woman” (4), that is, the abstract ideal of femininity because, as Song herself explains, “only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (63). This notion is more clearly exemplified in a play by an Asian American playwright, Chay Yew, titled *Red* (1998), in which two of its characters proclaim in unison the reason for the existence of *dan*:

We know
 how women are to behave.
 How women are to move.
 To talk.
 To grace the earth.
 Femininity is created for men by men.
 Femininity is an art. (2002: 45)

This idea is further enforced by *kabuki* theatre, in which the tradition of men playing women’s roles—the *onnagata*—has its origins in 1629 when women were forbidden to appear on stage.⁸

It must be emphasised that in the case of the Japanese *onnagata* performers, these did not merely attempt “to express femininity, but to *become* a woman” (Gunji 1985: 39, emphasis in original). In order to accomplish such a feat, these actors went to the extremes of living outside the theatre as women, wearing women’s clothes and using their free time in ‘typically’ female tasks like sewing. As Masakatsu Gunji points out, an “intense effort to become a woman, by being ultimately doomed to failure, served to create for other men a kind of abstract femininity, that somehow summed up its essence better than any individual woman ever could” (1985: 39).

It is precisely *kabuki*’s traditional viewpoint of femininity and its concept of the *onnagata* that Hwang uses in *M. Butterfly*. This is reflected in Song’s continuing

performance of a woman even in Gallimard's absence, as in Act two, scene four (47-48). Once again, the fact that Gallimard is unaware that in Beijing opera female roles were traditionally performed by men illustrates his ignorance on Asia and, metaphorically, also that of the Western world.

Bearing in mind that *M. Butterfly*, as its author insists, is an American play that belongs to the Western tradition (Hwang 1989a: 146; 152), cross-dressing, together with other theatrical resources, create a type of aesthetics in which meaning and the play's political concerns and aims are embedded in form and stage pictures. From the perspective of Western theatre, these techniques are linked to Brechtian theory, particularly that related to the processes of defamiliarisation or alienation effect. Due to their extensive use in contemporary drama, such techniques, according to some scholars, have become quite conventional.⁹ However, they continue to be very effective in terms of making the audience aware of the constructed nature of representations and, consequently, of subjectivity itself. By creating a distancing effect between audience and character/actor, the former is enabled to have a critical stance in relation to what happens on stage instead of experiencing a process of identification as in the case of bourgeois theatre's well-made play. Hwang proclaims this principle in the text itself in the following dialogue between Gallimard and Song:

SONG: ... How can you objectively judge your own values?

GALLIMARD: *I think it's possible to achieve some distance.*

SONG: Do you? (*Pause*) It stinks in here. Let's go.

GALLIMARD: These are the smells of your loyal fans.

SONG: I love them for being my fans, I hate the smell they leave behind. *I too can distance myself from my people.* (21, my emphasis)

Cross-dressing, in this sense, highlights what Judith Butler has coined as the performativity of gender by having a male actor "passing" as a woman. It must be noticed that for cross-dressing to produce an alienation or A-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), the audience has to be made aware that the actor's biological sex does not coincide with that of the character. This, in turn, helps the performer in his task of distancing himself/herself from the role so that "character is re/presented as character, i.e., as a construct" (Aston and Savona 1991: 35, emphasis in original). The audience, thus, is empowered for analysing critically the theatrical reality performed on the stage. Hwang was looking for such an effect as revealed, first of all, in the "Author's Notes" in which he specifically states that the audience must "believe that Gallimard was seduced by a man disguised as a woman" (in Shimakawa 2002: 123). This is further emphasised by the play's program, which included the *New York Times* notice on the spying case which sparked Hwang's imagination for writing *M. Butterfly*:

A former French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer have been sentenced to six years in jail for spying for China after a two-day trial that traced a story of clandestine love and mistaken sexual identity. ... Mr. Bouriscot was accused of passing information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi, whom he believed for twenty years to be a woman. (Remen 1994: 392).

The performative or, better said, the de-essentialised nature of gender is reinforced later on in the play when Song moves and acts according to a stereotypical image of normative masculinity as he occupies Pinkerton's/Gallimard's space. This kind of performance and his nude scene on stage deconstruct the concept that as an Oriental,

Song can “never be completely a man” (83). This is finally epitomised in the final stage picture, which offers a complete reversal of the end of Puccini’s opera: Gallimard, dressed as Madame Butterfly, lies dead on the ground whilst Song, standing “as a man” (93, my emphasis), stares at the transvestite body of Gallimard uttering Pinkerton’s last words, which are also the last words in the opera, “Butterfly? Butterfly?” (93).

De-essentialising gender is also achieved through the character of comrade Chin, who is everything but feminine. She represents the ideals of equality as proclaimed by the Communist Revolution which, in theory, also included the obliteration of gender inequality as represented in the androgynous form of the Mao uniform. In response to Song’s statement that, because of her unfemininity, according to Song’s (and Gallimard’s) standards, she cannot understand a man’s mind, Chin bluntly answers: “Oh no? No I don’t? Then how come I’m married, huh? How come I got a man? Five, six years ago, you always tell me those kind of things, I felt bad. But not now!” (72).

It should be pointed that Song also represents a more threatening version of Asian womanhood when she assumes the postures typical of the dragon lady as she is identified, in a stage direction, with Anna May Wong, the first Chinese-American actress to reach success in Hollywood (27). In many of her films she precisely played this foil to that of the lotus blossom, as a “wily, possessive, vindictive, and manipulative” woman (Wong 1996 (1991): 315). This also corresponds with the representation of the other Western women in the play whose self-assurance, especially in sex, threatens Gallimard’s position as a male from the standpoint of traditional masculinity.

Moreover, Song’s cross-dressing and multiple performances not only de-essentialise gender, they also de-essentialise race and ethnicity. Song has played the part of a Japanese woman although he is Chinese, an image upheld by the West that has been generalised to represent Asian women. Consequently, what is being deconstructed and called attention to is the interaction of gender and racial discourses in the construction of Otherness.

Cross-dressing, therefore, exemplifies the blurring of boundaries in the construction of subjectivities based on gender, race and ethnicity. This unfixing of borders can also be reflected in the stage design as on the first 1988 Broadway production.¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the onstage ramp divided spaces so as to convey the feeling of permeability. Karen Shimakawa has noticed, for example, that the panels used for representing the walls of Gallimard’s cell were also used as the *shoji* screens in Song’s apartment (2002: 122-23). It should also be noticed that initially it is Gallimard who is empowered to trespass the limits of space as representative of the Universal, Western Subject embodied in a white, high-middle class and, apparently, heterosexual man. This is represented in his entry into Song’s apartment; as holder of phallic power he can both move across limits whilst simultaneously preserving those boundaries which ensure his privileged position in relation to Otherness (121). Ironically, it is Song who actually manages to trespass successfully those gender and racial boundaries, undercutting Gallimard’s ordering of reality.

This process of unfixing is further reflected in other aspects of the play’s proxemics. As mentioned previously, Song first appears at the opening of the play upstage dancing along the elevated ramp whilst Gallimard is downstage contemplating her. In terms of binary oppositions, such a stage picture visually alters the male/female white/coloured opposites by placing Song literally *above* Gallimard. There are other instances in which Song appears upstage, being the subject of the gaze rather than its object (reflecting her role as a spy). For example, in Act two, scene one, when both lovers are spending time together in their Beijing flat, Song deceptively tries to get

information on Vietnam from Gallimard. In the change of location between scene one to scene two the stage directions indicate that “*Song remains upstage, watching*”, while Gallimard is discussing American intervention in Vietnam with the French ambassador Toulon (44). The same technique is used in Act two, scene five, when the location changes again from Gallimard’s and Song’s flat to a scene downstage with his wife Helga, who unsettles Gallimard’s masculinity by clearly suggesting that he could be infertile and, therefore, unmanly.¹¹ Song is placed visually in a privileged position which conveys her access to knowledge and, consequently, her empowerment versus Gallimard. This is further emphasised in the transition between Act two, scene six to scene seven. In scene six, Song tells Gallimard that she is expecting a child, causing his total submission to Song/Butterfly. This is visualised by Gallimard kneeling before her. The beginning of scene seven shows a transition in time in which Song is reporting to comrade Chin. Both characters are downstage whilst Gallimard remains upstage kneeling throughout the whole scene. Visually the upstage, where Gallimard is situated, would stand for the positive element of the binary whereas the downstage, where the Others are positioned, would stand for the negative one. However, what the stage picture conveys is the blurring of boundaries and their ultimate deconstruction as Gallimard’s disempowerment is being staged at the expense of the empowerment of the margins—of the Other.

From the point of view of kinesics, this change in power positions is mirrored in Song’s gestures and movements. For example, in Act two, scene two, she is in a *chong sam* curling at Gallimard’s feet (43), whereas in scene five of the same act it is Gallimard who appears in a more submissive position as he lies in Song’s lap (49).

Song’s actions in the following scene are also very significant. It is at this point in the play where Gallimard narrates, and performs, his “extra-extramartial affair” (54) with the Danish student Renee as a means of reassuring his manliness after the incident with Helga.¹² Gallimard also tries to reassert himself by displaying power over Song—just as Pinkerton exercised his power over Madame Butterfly—by making her suffer:

I saw Pinkerton and Butterfly, and what would she say if he were unfaithful ... nothing. She would cry, alone, into those wildly soft sleeves, once full of possessions, now empty to collect her tears. It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee. (56)

By the time Gallimard utters these words Song has already appeared upstage with a distressed expression, as specified by the stage directions, arranging flowers in a vase. Although her performance may be a reminder of the role she plays in the Beijing opera *The Drunken Lady* (26) about a concubine who becomes an alcoholic once she is rejected by the Emperor, her subsequent behaviour signifies something else. This point in the play, being the prelude to Gallimard’s fall in his career, is symbolised by Song “*who slowly and deliberately clips a flower off its stem*”, an action she repeats soon afterwards (57). Cutting the flower off its stem is, figuratively, a reminder of castration. On the one hand, Renee’s sexual liberation threatens his masculinity and, on the other, it is also threatened by his loss of ambassador Toulon’s support. Structurally, the scene is situated between his unsatisfactory extra-extramartial affair and his professional downfall, both situations being provoked on the one hand by a Western, liberated woman and, on the other, by an Asian wo/man. Being humiliated by Renee and Toulon, the only one who can reassure him is Song/Butterfly. As Gallimard tells the audience: “What I wanted was revenge. A vessel to contain my humiliation. Though I hadn’t seen her in several weeks, I headed for Butterfly’s” (58). However, it is clear that Butterfly

will not be the vessel that will contain Gallimard's humiliation for her behaviour contradicts his words as she picks the flower vase and "*hurls it to the ground*" (58). The incoherence between the extra-dialogic stage direction and Gallimard's words puts us in alert.

Space is also used to reflect Gallimard's psychic reality. The play opens with Gallimard in the "enchanted space" of his prison cell (2). As Shimakawa states, "it is only within this 'enchanted space' ... that Gallimard has the power to conjure up 'the Perfect Woman' and his vision of the Orient" (2002: 121). If we take Gallimard's prison cell to be his dreamlike world, that is, a path to his unconscious, then the fantasy he recreates for us is the representation of his unfulfilled wishes. His fundamental desire is that of control. Theatrically, this is revealed by another A-effect technique: the actor playing out of character. The actors step out of their roles to make comments on what is taking place on stage in order to engage the audience in critical and deconstructive analysis.

Thus, Gallimard endeavours to be in control of the situation by finding a new ending to his story, "one which redeems my honor, where she [Song] returns at last to my arms" (4). In order to achieve this, we have theatre within theatre as Gallimard takes the role of Pinkerton whilst he begins to narrate his story. He behaves, in a sense, as a master of ceremonies, introducing the characters to the audience—such as his childhood friend, Marc, who performs the role of Sharpless, the American consul in Puccini's opera (5). Gallimard also tries to be the stage director of his play, for example, when he draws our attention to one of Song's first appearances, describing her movements. This works, in effect, as an intra-dialogic stage direction, not only for Song, but even for men in the audience: "as she glides past him [Gallimard], beautiful, laughing softly behind her fan, don't we who are men sigh with hope?" (10).

However, even in this enchanted world Gallimard is unable to have control of his psychic life, to fulfil his wishes. Ultimately, he has no control over Song who, also playing out of character, disobeys Gallimard's commands, as when she allows Chin to appear on stage: "GALLIMARD (*To Song*): No! Why does she have to come in? / SONG: Rene, be sensible. How come they [the audience] understand the story without her? Now, don't embarrass yourself" (47). This is better exemplified towards the end of Act two, scene eleven, just before Song announces her upcoming transformation on stage: "GALLIMARD: You have to do what I say! I'm conjuring you in *my* mind! / SONG: Rene, I've never done what you've said. Why should it be any different in your mind? Now split—the story moves on, and I must change" (78). Ironically, it is Marc, who seems to appear only in Gallimard's fantasies, who is able to perform the kind of masculinity acceptable from a patriarchal and imperialist point of view. He is the one who, unlike Gallimard, can move across time and space without having his own boundaries as a typical, white, heterosexual male challenged and blurred.

Inconsistency is also mirrored in character construction. Hwang has acknowledged Sam Shepard's influence on his theatre and in an interview conducted by David Savran (1988: 120), he specifically mentions Shepard's "Note to the Actors" in the preface to his 1976 play *Angel City*. Shepard suggests that character should be considered as a "fractured whole" and built "more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation". He definitely advocates for a fractured representation of character rather than the realistic type of bourgeois drama.¹³ Such a representation of character conveys the postmodern concept of subject fragmentation and, consequently, incoherence. In the case of Gallimard, it also represents what David L. Eng had identified as his split ego (2001: 145-46).

There are two instances where Gallimard expresses such a split. Firstly, when he ponders briefly at his reasons for not undressing Song when he had the opportunity: “Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps. Happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it” (60). The second instance takes place when Gallimard is forced to confront the fact that Song is a man: “I knew all the time somewhere that my happiness was temporary, my love a deception. But my mind, kept the knowledge at bay. To make the wait bearable” (88). The question is the same asked by everybody. Did Gallimard know? The possibility that Gallimard, at least, might suspected about Song’s biological sex, that Song was, in fact, performing “the Perfect Woman” can be found at the beginning of the play when he perceives her bold language which contradicts with the stereotypical meekness of Oriental women. However, he finds explanations for such a behaviour in order to make her fit into his own expectations of a submissive, silent, lotus blossom: “She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Oriental in her at war with her Western education” (27). These are manifestations of Gallimard’s split ego as an attempt to satisfy his pleasure without threatening social mores, that is, the Law of the Father.

According to Freud, this is achieved, within a heterosexual context, through the mechanism of fetishism by which, in order to be able to deal with the trauma of female bodily difference, the man projects a substitute penis on the woman’s body. Such a substitution functions, simultaneously, as a mechanism for denying the homosexual desire the boy once had for the father. The problem, in Gallimard’s case, is that Song, as a biological man, already has a penis. Eng argues that what Gallimard experiences is “reverse fetishism” (2001: 150). That is, he castrates Song as a result of the racial discourse by which Asian men, as the colonised Other, have been emasculated. In the process, Gallimard not only reconciles his search for pleasure with the Law of the Father but also re-instates his manhood by making the Asian body less masculine (151).

On the other hand, Song also shows contradictions in character construction once his true sex has been publicly revealed. Apparently, he seems to be a cruel, manipulative man but, as Shimakawa states, in his last dialogue with Gallimard it is not too clear what his real motives were as he seems to show some feelings for him (1993: 357). Song, as the objectified Other, refuses to be placed within strict boundaries as an act of insubordination, offering Gallimard other possibilities for looking at the world and, consequently, for establishing relationships other than the ones prescribed by hegemonic discourses. However, as Song proclaims, Gallimard hardly has imagination (90) and that prevents him, in Kondo’s words, “to accept the complexity and ambiguity of everyday life, ... to open himself to different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power” (1997: 43-44). For this reason, in the play’s final stage picture, dressed as a *geisha* in an artificially over-whitened face, Gallimard inflicts his own punishment for having been discovered—to himself and to the world—crossing those boundaries. It is an image that clearly exemplifies Hwang’s definition of total theatre, a theatre which uses “whatever the medium has to offer to create an effect” (Hwang 1989a: 152).

Notes

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² In theatre studies, proxemics is concerned with “understanding the organisation of space, and the ways in which spatial codes are used to generate meaning” (Aston and Savona 1991: 112). Kinesics can be defined as the study “of the human body as a means of communication”, including movement as well as facial expressions which help “to fix the meaning of an utterance” (116-17).

³ The American writer John Luther Long wrote a short story based on the Butterfly myth, published in 1898 in *American Century*. The author claimed that his text was based on a story related to him by his sister and brother-in-law, who had spent some years in Japan as missionaries. It seems that years later Long explained that the *geisha*, upon whose life the story was based, did not actually commit suicide. See the introduction in Giacosa and Illica 1988.

⁴ I use the term “Orient” referring not so much to a geographical location but to Edward Said’s thesis on Orientalism—that is, the images grouped around the East that manifest its inferiority to Europe and North America. See Said 1991 (1978) for further information.

⁵ Henceforth all references to the text are from the 1989 Plume edition.

⁶ Originally, the *hanamichi* ran from the centre of the front of the stage to the audience. Eventually, its position moved to the left-hand side and then, in order to create some sort of balance, a narrower *hanamichi* was added at the right-hand side.

⁷ The film, directed by David Cronenberg, was released in 1993 and starred John Lone and Jeremy Irons. The screenplay was by David Henry Hwang though it seems he introduced many changes following Cronenberg’s criteria.

⁸ It must be noted that “women kabuki” (*onna kabuki*) was also known as *jūjo kabuki*, translated as “prostitute kabuki” in which prostitutes, some of them very famous courtesans, used kabuki troupes as a means of carrying out their real businesses. The 1629 Shogunate’s decision was addressed to curtail the *daimyo*’s (feudal lords) increasing “immoral” behaviour (Gunji 1985: 20-21).

⁹ See, for example, Remen 1994, “The Theatre of Punishment: David Henry Hwang and Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*”.

¹⁰ *M. Butterfly* opened at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre on 20 March 1988, directed by John Dexter.

¹¹ The idea that Western, liberal women are a threat to the hegemonic concepts of masculinity to which Gallimard is unable to live up to is visually represented on stage by the tripling of characters. That is, the same actress plays the roles of Renee and the pinup girl in the men’s magazine, and also that of the woman at the party at the opening of the play who says that he is not a good-looking man. It should also be noticed that a doubling of characters also takes place with the roles of Ambassador Toulon and the judge—the ones who, in relation to Gallimard, stand for the Law of the Father.

¹² Curiously enough, the masculine and the feminine form of the name, Rene/Renee, have the same pronunciation in French. Kondo points out that this “underlines the theme of gender ambiguity” (1997: 38). Renee is sexually uninhibited and does not mind taking the initiative, an attitude considered by Gallimard as “almost too...masculine” (54), which undermines his manhood and therefore feminises him.

¹³ The whole text reads as follows:

The term ‘character’ could be thought of in a different way when working on this play. Instead of the idea of a ‘whole character’ with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation. This

is not the same thing as one actor playing many different roles, each one distinct from the other (or ‘doubling up’ as they call it), but more that he’s mixing many different underlying elements and connecting them through his intuition and senses to make a kind of music or painting in space without having to feel the need to completely answer intellectually for the character’s behavior. If there needs be a ‘motivation’ for some of the abrupt changes which occur in the play they can be taken as full-blown manifestations of a passing thought or fantasy, having as much significance or ‘meaning’ as they do in our ordinary lives. The only difference is that here the actor makes note of it and brings it to life in three dimensions. (Shepard 1988 (1984): 61-62)

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