

The Prison of Fantasy in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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M. Butterfly, as its title suggests, is the reworking of Puccini's opera, *Madama Butterfly*. In Puccini's opera, Lieutenant Pinkerton, a United States Navy officer, purchases the conjugal rights to Cio-Cio-San, a fifteen-year-old Japanese *Geisha* girl, for one hundred yen, and marries her with the convenient provision that each contract can be annulled on a monthly notice. Meanwhile, Pinkerton leaves Cio-Cio-San for the United States to marry an American girl, Kate. During his absence, Cio-Cio-San has born him a son, and has been waiting for his return, unaware of his marriage in America. After three years have passed since Pinkerton left her, Cio-Cio-San is visited by Pinkerton's wife, who attempts to claim his son and take him to the United States. Realizing that Pinkerton has abandoned her, Cio-Cio-San commits *hara-kiri*, saying: "Death with honor is better than life/life with dishonor." At the end of the opera, Pinkerton arrives only to find Cio-Cio-San dead on the *tatami* floor.

In the Western world, *Butterfly* represents a stereotype of the Oriental woman. The stereotype of an obedient, submissive, and domestic Asian woman appeals to Westerners through other media beside the opera; for example, the "mail-order bride trade" catalogues and TV spots. The story of the white devil Pinkerton and a submissive Asian girl Cio-Cio-San has become a cultural myth in Western world. In *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang parodies and deconstructs this myth. In his play, a French diplomat Rene Gallimard fantasizes that he is Pinkerton and his Chinese lover Song is his *Butterfly*. However, as Hwang says in the "Afterword" of the play, Gallimard "realizes that it is he who has been *Butterfly*, in that the Frenchman has been duped by love; the Chinese spy, who exploited that love, is therefore the real Pinkerton" (95-96). In this paper, I will discuss how and why this role-change occurs in the play and also examine its significance.

Besides the opera, the events of the play are also based on a 1986 newspaper

article about a French diplomat's spy scandal. Stationed in China, the French diplomat, Bouriscot, had had a long-term love affair with a Chinese actor, Mr. Shi, whom Bouriscot had believed to be a woman. However, his mistress was subsequently revealed to be a spy for the Chinese government and also a man. Hwang reacts to Bouriscot's story in his interview with John Louis Digaetani as follows:

Of course, I had the same reactions as everybody else—how could it have happened? But then on some level it seemed natural to me that it should have happened, that given the degree of misperception generally between East and West and between men and women, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place. (143)

According to Hwang, Bouriscot's miscomprehension of his mistress' gender may have originated from his ignorance of Chinese culture as well as his assumptions about the stereotypical modest Oriental woman supported by the myth of Cio-Cio-San. The Chinese spy encourages these misperceptions through his performance as a submissive Oriental woman. In short, the diplomat "must have fallen in love, not with a person, but with a fantasy stereotype" ("Afterword" 94); therefore, he did not make any effort at understanding his mistress' actual personality and gender.

In *M. Butterfly*, Bouriscot is Gallimard and Mr. Shi is Song. On one level, Gallimard's assumption of the stereotypical submissive Oriental woman is not uniquely his own. In the 1960s, most Westerners believed in the stereotype of an Oriental woman and Cio-Cio-San's story was a myth. There is a cultural and historical background for the creation of this stereotype. In the history of the feminist movement in the Western world, the 1960s is characterized as the era of the "new" feminists. According to Toril Moi, the "new" feminists "were not afraid to take a stand and fight for their views" (21). In short, "[i]n the 1960s, for the first time since the women's vote was won, feminism again surfaced as an important political force in the Western world" (21). In this situation, Western men could no longer maintain their assumption of a white submissive woman in the patriarchal society. Eventually they started to view Asian women as the prototype of ideal womanhood, who is submissive and domesticated. It is partly because Asian women were still in the prefeminist stage in the 1960s (in Japan, for example, it is in the 1970s that the feminist movement started), and partly because Asian women are exotic and mysterious for Western people who readily idealize Asian women in their imagination. In other words, in their not knowing the reality of Asian women, Western-

ers can readily create their own image of "Oriental women" in their fantasy.

The mythology of submissive Oriental women also manifests itself in the relationship between East and West. In the 1960s, several Western countries still held colonies in Asia, and in the condition of colonization of Asia, Western countries were dominant and Asian countries were dominated. Eventually, Western men were thought to be dominant and Eastern women were thought to be dominated. Under this stereotypical notion of the relationship between Western men and Asian women, the submissive Cio-Cio-San image became universal for Westerners. Given this prevalent Western misconception, it is no wonder that Gallimard fantasizes that Cio-Cio-San story could possibly happen between Song, a Chinese woman, and himself, a Western man.

Gallimard's choice of a Chinese woman for his mistress is based on his own sexual inferiority complex in Western society. As a Western woman declares in Act I, Scene 2, Gallimard is not good-looking. He is a clumsy man with pimples on his face. Since he was in high school, he has never had a girl friend while his friend Marc has actively met girls and has had love affairs with them. Gallimard has never asked women out, perhaps because he was afraid that he would be rejected. He knows that he is not good-looking and he assumes that independent Western women never fall in love with a plain man like him. His first sexual experience only intensifies his inferiority complex because he knows it was arranged by Marc, whom he envies for the ability to attract girls. He thinks that he could not have had that experience without Marc's help, and concludes that he will never be able to attract women by himself.

His only sexual "conquests" are the women he finds in pornographic magazines. He feels safe in imagining his sexual experience with those girls in the magazine, because they, who never look at his face, will never reject him. Looking at the girls in the magazines, he can imagine that they want him to see them naked. He no doubt has sexual intimacy with them in his erotic fantasies. However, he can never have actual sex with them because they are only on paper.

His marriage does not ease his sexual inferiority complex because he knows that his wife is not attracted to him. What Helga wants is not Gallimard's love but the status of a diplomat's wife. She does not care that Gallimard has a Chinese mistress as long as she can remain a diplomat's wife. In short, Helga is not attracted to Gallimard as a person but attracted to his status as a diplomat.

One of the reasons why Gallimard likes the story of *Madama Butterfly* is that Pinkerton, whom Cio-Cio-San gives her submissive love, is, in his own imagination, an ugly man.¹ Pinkerton's triumph in winning Cio-Cio-San's love encourages Gallimard, who is also an ugly man, in creating his own version of "Butterfly." The story gives him a hope that even though he does not appeal to Western women, he may still be able to seduce a beautiful Asian girl. From his viewpoint, he may be able to manipulate a beautiful Chinese girl into loving him as long as he is a white man in China, an Asian country where an affair between an ugly white man and a beautiful Oriental woman becomes possible. Therefore, when he first meets Song, a Chinese actress, he already assumes that he can start a love affair with her although he does not know her personally at all.

In the very beginning of their relationship, Gallimard is irritated by Song's severe rebuke of imperialism depicted in Butterfly's tragic story. However, when he visits Song for the second time, he expects that his unwilling Butterfly still has desire deep inside her heart to submit her blind love to him. He considers that Song's arrogance is merely a mask to conceal her submissiveness. With this assumption, he concludes that Song is his Butterfly when she says "sometimes, it [fascination] is also mutual" (*M. Butterfly* 22). When he comes home from Song's opera, he begins fantasizing his imaginary love affair with Song. He conceals from his wife the fact that he went to the Chinese opera, because he feels guilty of his love affair although it is only in his imagination.

The night of his second encounter with Song, Marc appears in his dream. Marc is the person whose womanizing ability he has envied. The reason why Marc appears in his dream is that Gallimard wants to announce his encounter with his Butterfly to Marc and make him envious of it. At the same time, he needs someone—especially Marc, whom he considers an expert lover—encourage his imaginary love with Song. All that Marc says in his dream is Gallimard's wish. It is important for him that all these wishes are pronounced in a womanizer's voice, because a womanizer's endorsement will guarantee the successful outcome of Gallimard's love affair. At the end of the dream, Marc says to Gallimard, "All your life you've waited for a beautiful girl who would lay down for you . . . Stop struggling, Rene. The wait is over" (25). For Gallimard, nothing is more reliable than the womanizer's go ahead sign to pursue his love for Song. However, the important thing is that Marc is only a dream figure; the person that Gallimard is talking with is Gallimard himself. After this night, Gallimard is advised and encouraged to seduce Song by

his own inner voice embodied in Marc's figure.

Gallimard starts to go to the opera constantly, anticipating an intimate relationship with Song. He starts to create his fantasy about Song: "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). He only sees what he wants to see and creates his own image of Song. In the end of Act I, he establishes his "Pinkerton-Cio-Cio-San" relationship with Song in his imagination. Through his deliberate avoidance of Song for several weeks, he imagines that he has achieved "the absolute power of a man" (32) over her. With this power, he succeeds in getting rid of her pride and making her submit the entire love for him. He imagines that Song is his Butterfly whose heart has been pierced with a needle. For seven weeks, he fantasizes that he is manipulating Song; in other words, he is fantasizing that he is the Pinkerton who "gained power over a beautiful woman, only to abuse it cruelly" (36).

Act II is the turning point in which "Butterfly" is transformed from a mere object of Gallimard's manipulation into his indispensable fancy. Through the relationship with Song, he acquires the experience of being loved by a perfect woman, though only in his imagination, and that experience enriches his existence with significance. Eventually, he begins to live more and more in his fantasy where he is able to realize his masculine identity that he never attained in his real life.

As I discussed above, he has been suffering from a sexual inferiority complex. In addition to his inability to attract Western women, his inability to father a child deeply distresses him, because he sees it as proof positive of his "impotence." When Helga asks him to see a doctor about his possible sexual infertility, he is unwilling to go. He is afraid to find out if he is "impotent."

In contrast to Helga who hurts his masculine pride, Song shows her respect for Gallimard. When he tells her that Helga asks him to go to see a doctor, she answers that it is not Gallimard but Helga who is infertile. She then offers to bear his child herself. She believes entirely in his ability to father a child, and eventually, she herself bears him a child. Thus through Song's flattery alone Gallimard becomes neither the "impotent" nor the "weenie" but a man in full command of his masculine identity, though only on a fantasy level.²

Although Gallimard's love affair with "Butterfly" is beautifully constructed in his imagination, he still incarnates his "Butterfly" in Song, a real person. In this sense, Song helps him to construct his "Butterfly" to some extent. Nevertheless, what Gallimard sees is not Song herself but his "Butterfly" incarnated in Song.

When Song takes off his disguise and reveals his real identity as a man, Gallimard finally recognizes that the person he loves is not a woman acted by Song but “Butterfly,” his own imaginary creation.

In Gallimard’s final recognition, Song feels disappointed. For twenty years, Song has believed that he has been manipulating Gallimard. In the trial scene in Act III, he boasts his ability of performing a perfect woman for Gallimard. According to him, he knows what men want women to be since he is a man. Also, since he completely understands the Westerner’s assumption of Oriental women, he can perform a stereotypical Oriental woman in front of them. For him, Gallimard is the “greatest . . . acting challenge” (63). With make-up, false eye-lashes, earrings, high heels and submissive behavior, he aesthetically creates a perfect woman replica. If he can identify himself with Gallimard’s imaginative figure of “Butterfly,” his aesthetic challenge will succeed, and his narcissism will be satisfied. In fact, he has been fantasizing that he is fascinating and manipulating Gallimard with his performance of the perfect Oriental woman. In his narcissist fantasy, he is a Pinkerton and Gallimard is a Butterfly.

However, Song fails to notice the fact that he is only helping Gallimard create his own “Butterfly” fantasy by giving him an incarnated image. Actually, Gallimard is fascinated not by Song but by his own fantasy. Finally, when Song recognizes that he has failed in identifying himself with Gallimard’s “Butterfly,” he realizes that his fantasy is over. In the very end of the play, he reappears in men’s clothes, saying: “Butterfly? Butterfly?” (93). These words indicate Song’s confused feeling for his loss of Gallimard, the very object of his imaginative power of fascination.³

Rejecting the woman impersonated by Song, Gallimard chooses to live entirely in fantasy because he knows that no one, not even Song, can live up to the model of the perfect woman he has created in his fantasy. Only in fantasy, he achieves his identity both as a lover and a beloved of the perfect woman. In other words, outside his fantasy, his own existence has no real significance.

Gallimard’s prison cell functions as a defense of his fantasy. It literary materializes “the integrity of defined spaces” (Shimakawa 350), where he tries to maintain his white male identity. However, such “enchanted space” is, as Shimakawa argues, “cannot protect him from the incursion of the Other, can no longer be the ‘protective enclosure’” (351). By withdrawing in the prison, and by kicking Song out of his fantasy, Gallimard tries to protect his own space where he reserves his

Butterfly. Song's challenge is the attempted usurpation of this space. Therefore, Gallimard has to deny Song's real identity and kick out this intruder. Song has to make his exit, because as an Asian, Song, "constitute[s] no threat" (Moy 55) to Gallimard's sensibilities.

Without Song, Gallimard himself starts acting the role of "Butterfly" to maintain this fantasy figure. However, he loses the fantasy when he realizes that the Butterfly now embodied in himself is "the queen, the grotesquery of an aging French man in garish makeup" (Shin 187). When he loses his fantasy, his existence loses the significance, and eventually he commits *hara-kiri* to put a period to his own version of the Cio-Cio-San story.

In one sense, we can conclude that Gallimard finally becomes the victim of his own fantasy. The setting of Gallimard's prison cell implies that he is imprisoned in his own fantasy. However, Gallimard's tragedy is, to some extent, universal. In his interview with DiGaetani, Hwang mentions the universality of human fantasy:

But we prefer the fantasy over the reality. . . . [Gallimard's miscomprehension of his mistress' gender is] not actually that different qualitatively from everyday types of deceptions that people make in order to convince themselves they're in love. (DiGaetani 143)

In everyday life, we seldom understand other people's reality, especially if they are culturally or sexually different from ourselves. What we understand is likely to be what we want (or are able) to understand. Even though we try to see everything, what we see is only what we can and want to see. Moreover, when we attempt to understand those who are culturally and sexually different from ourselves, we are likely to depend on our notion of their stereotypes. Prejudice, assumption, "common sense"—these things prevent us from fully understanding other people, and contribute, on the contrary, to creating the fantasy about them. In this sense, when we think we fully understand others, we only deceive ourselves. Even though we are reluctant to identify with Gallimard, we still have to admit that we, like Gallimard, cannot completely free ourselves from fantasy dependence.

Notes

¹ There is no evidence that Pinkerton is ugly in Puccini's opera. It is through Gallimard's understanding of the opera that Pinkerton becomes an ugly man.

- ² Gallimard discusses the role of the penis with a woman named Renee, who is described as his alternative figure. In the discussion, Renee calls penis a “weenie.” This very much humiliates Gallimard.
- ³ As to this ending, Robert Skloot argues: “There is wide latitude in how these words may be delivered by the actor playing Song, depending on what the director intends as the final impression of the play” (61).

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Written by David Henry Hwang, *M. BUTTERFLY* opened on Broadway in 1988 and played over seven hundred performances before closing in 1990. Casting is demanding. The play requires four actors, one of whom must be Asian, sing well, and convincingly impersonate a woman; three women; and three male dancers who can perform traditional Chinese theatre dance. However, Hwang turns the question aside as meaningless and points out that the underlying deception - that of a false lover - is one that we've all seen countless times. The gender of the participants is less important than their feelings and motivations. Whatever else may have occurred, he argues, a human being was used in a terrible way, and his heart was destroyed in the process. Though it bent (and blew) the minds of rapt audiences with its elusive opalescence nearly three decades ago, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* returns to Broadway on heavier, drabber wings. True, the revival that opened on Thursday night at the Cort Theater, directed by Julie Taymor, has basically the same anatomy as its predecessor. But for *M. Butterfly* to have emotional impact, it must make its audiences uneasily complicit in that fantasy. The show's broken master of ceremonies, whom we meet in a French prison cell many years after the events recounted here, Gallimard does his best to frame the story of his relationship with Song as a love story worthy of tragic opera.