

Grace Lavery, Berkeley Book Chats, December 4, 2019

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, Director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Grace Lavery of the English department discussing her book, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics the Idea of Japan*. She is joined by Judith Butler of the Comparative Literature department.

Judith Butler: Grace, do you want to begin by talking a little bit about your book? Maybe speaking about the title, an interesting title, an interesting comma between quaint and exquisite. Four terms, Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics the Idea of Japan. I was thinking one could add another set of terms like eccentricity or Orientalism or any, not any number, but some set of number of terms. Do you want to just talk to us about that first?

Grace Lavery: Certainly, that's a great idea. I think I also have to say thank you so much, Judith, for agreeing to do this event. It's extremely moving for me to be able to talk about my work with you. Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan. One of the things that's weird about writing a book is that you get used to saying the title so often that it becomes a kind of elevator pitch in its own respect. And it's become de-familiarized to me. But one of the things that was very important to me when I realized that this was going to be the title was that I didn't want quaint and exquisite to be coevil terms. That is to say I didn't want this to be one of those books.

Grace Lavery: And there were a lot of them at the moment, which were about lists of aesthetic categories or about aggregations or constellations of ideas. For me quaint and exquisite were two very discreet ideas that had a certain kind of relation to each other but were both drawn paleonymically to use Derrida's work from the archive that I was exploring and also required some kind of reevaluation. So for those of you who haven't had a chance to read the book, which maybe is everyone, don't bother, but if you want to, the argument that I make is that the particular way of writing about Japan and in particular Japanese beauty that emerged in Britain in the 19th century and I think still in some ways continues to hold sway today is marked by characterization of Japan as exquisite in so me way.

Grace Lavery: Which is a word that is everywhere in the archive of Victorian Orientalism as far as it has bearing on Japan and I think has a quite specific meaning, albeit one that isn't regularly or rigorously theorized. And what exquisite I think means for people who are interested in Japan is that Japanese art for Victorians represented a supreme achievement of some kind. It wasn't merely quite good that there was something kind of supreme or hyperbolic or extreme about the particular form of Japanese beauty, but also that that extremeness, that very quality of supremacy was in some way threatening or was in some way a kind of, something that created as much anxiety as desire or stimulated as much kind of ambivalence as it did pleasure.

Grace Lavery: Which is why one can refer equally to a tea ceremony as exquisite and torture as exquisite. And in some of the contemporary valences of exquisite that I followed through the book, it turns out that word turns up dozens of times in *50 Shades of Gray* to describe sexual experiences that are kind of poignant or edgy, but not in a way that's actually disruptive or kind of like highly commodified or kitschified form of edginess. And quaint was quite different. Quaint I think was for me a term that also was very frequently associated with Japan in the 19th century, but referred to the way in which objects, for instance, Victorian objects or Japanese toys or paintings, whatever, become usable as historical evidence.

Grace Lavery: The way that they pass into history or as I put it in the book, the way in which they fail to pass into history or failed to become historical. So my idea was that there's something about, again, it's kind of kitschified form of Japanese beauty that became highly theorized in the 19th century that was not available to a kind of straightforward or positivist claim about history somehow subverted or renegotiated that. So what I do in the book is I try to work through those objective re-negotiations of the historical in relation to particular objects and also reflect on how the effects of those objects in various different ways are colored by this mode of aesthetic experience that I've called exquisite.

Grace Lavery: I've only talked about the first part of the question

Judith Butler: That's great.

Grace Lavery: But I also talk too much.

Judith Butler: No, no.

Grace Lavery: The rest is boring.

Judith Butler: No, no, keep going. I mean, one question I have about the next two, *Victorian Aesthetics* and *The Idea of Japan*, so yes, the materials that you so deftly and elegantly engage are drawn from the Victorian period. And you're trying I think to say something quite new about Victorian aesthetics and a particular kind of sensibility that runs through it. And I found that enormously illuminating. But sometimes it seems that we're talking about Victorian aesthetics, but then there's something called the West and we're talking about the idea of Japan. That is to say the idea of Japan that the Victorians entertained, constructed, circulated. And that of course, raises the question of well, where's Japan? Or is this an orientalist fantasy?

Judith Butler: And you have a number of interesting things to say about that, but maybe my first question would be, do you want to say that by examining Victorian writing on engagement with the idea of Japan, we are actually looking at a broader structure that we could call a Western relation to the East? Can we leap like that or can we derive a generalization on the basis of this? How far do you want to go? How do you see this material in relationship to established ways of thinking about Orientalism?

Grace Lavery: Yeah, so the first part of that question I think asked me to think about whether or not the idea of Japan is finally distinguishable from other ideas of Asia or an orient or the thing that is not the West, if that is a negative construction that we want to formulate. That was a big question. It was a question that was posed to me quite directly at a couple of different moments in the composition of the manuscript. Within the field of East Asian studies, which is not my field, there is a challenge using prevailing ways of thinking about Orientalism to talk about

Japan for the simple reason that Japan was an empire, that Japan was a regional empire that had a mission of national and racial consolidation that was in certain ways modeled after European and North American programs of national and racial consolidation that it invaded during the time that I'm talking about Taiwan and Korea.

Grace Lavery: And that it won the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and 1905 to the great surprise of Western powers that simply did not imagine that that was going to happen. And that moment the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War was immediately reported in British newspapers as the first of presumably many wars against European powers that would be won by Asian powers. That was the idea. So however we're going to think about the Orientalism of these works and I do, we can, I think default to the Sadian way of thinking about Orientalism because in that model, knowledge of the orient, however fictitious or grounded in fantasy forms the basis for a certain kind of colonial power. And again, in the work of someone like Kojin Karatani or Tani Barlow or Alan Tansman, in fact, that relationship is just questioned.

Grace Lavery: It can't quite land in the same way. So what I started to think about was, well, what about if the orientalist gesture is not the claim of knowledge? I know X about Japan, but actually the claim, I know nothing about Japan, right? So what I learned was that, and this again, so fairly obvious one engages the archive that since about the 1880s onwards, after the moment at which it became obvious to British readers and writers that Japan was somehow different, right? Whatever that meant, maybe it meant that it had a well-developed railway network. Maybe it meant that it had a kind of modernizing account of race. Maybe it meant... I mean, it could have meant anything.

Grace Lavery: But once that difference was established, it became the kind of standard rhetorical gesture of an orientalist text about Japan to begin by saying, well, of course, I don't understand anything about Japan at all and now here's a book about the subject. And a version of that disclaimer continues again up until the present day in fact in the work of someone like [Holland Baths 00:10:15] in *Empire of Science*, I know that that's the present day. But like famously *Empire of Science* begins with, I'm creating a far away sign system and I'm going to call it Japan, but the object itself is going to be forever foreclosed or in a much more contemporary a book called *Great Mirrors Shattered* by John Whittier Treat, which is a book that I like in certain respects. But again has this mode of creating and sustaining orientalist knowledge through disclaimer that one knows nothing.

Grace Lavery: So what I'm interested in is the condition of possibility within orientalist critique, which actually comes out of Karatani as well of thinking, well, what does it mean if knowledge in relation to the orient or like an object of colonial desire inflicts spatial desire or transnational desire? What if that object is partially known and the partiality of the knowledge is actually far more troubling than would be the total absence of knowledge such that one desires to know less than one in fact knows? And that again is one of the possible explanations I think of one of the ways in which this book leads me back to aesthetic theory in fact, because the condition of desiring to know less than one knows is kind of somehow in the undertow of accounts of the aesthetic where understanding is bisected or cuts across by knowledge.

Judith Butler: I found this to be a somewhat, I found it to be a strong statement on your part. It's not an easy statement to make given the importance and depth of the critique of Orientalism and yet it seems to me that you are taking an approach to this that suspends the question of moral judgment or condemnation. You're not interested

in saying, "Oh look, these people made use of their limited or absent knowledge of Japan to construct a fantasy for their own consumption. End of story. Let's go home."

Grace Lavery: Yeah. I think that's true.

Judith Butler: Okay.

Grace Lavery: Yeah, no, in the background of a lot of this was thinking about, we've been going through as a discipline, a relation to something called reparative reading or something where we're going to be reading affirmatively and positively about phenomena that may hurt us in certain respects. And I was thinking Orientalism would seem to be a limit case for that because at least in the kind of conventional ways of writing and thinking about it, it's pure cruelty, pure instrumentalization of bodies and subjects. And in fact, some of the instrumentalization of bodies and subjects that I talk about is quite extreme in fact. I don't think I shy from talking about violence. I think it's about, talk of violence a lot.

Judith Butler: Yes. Would it be right to say you neither applaud nor condemn?

Grace Lavery: Yeah. No, I think that... I mean, I think I would say I condemn the Orientalism of the orientalist writers that I'm talking about, but I'm also skeptical about most of the tools that we have for debunking that mode of engagement in writing. And that skepticism is founded on the particular histories of the genre that I'm talking about.

Judith Butler: So let me read something from your wonderful book. Which really I have to say was in no way predictable and I really appreciated that so much of when I'm sad, it's like, oh, I think I know where this is going. And I had no idea where it was going. I was on a wild ride with you and even paragraph to paragraph, I thought, wow, and wonder, one had to stay with you to follow the course of this. And I appreciated that demand. It was hard work.

Judith Butler: It was good work, but it was also, because it returned time and again to the question of feeling of desire, of fantasy, it also pulls, it pulls your reader in and it's also, I will just say this as an aside, even though you engage in debates about how best to read Kant's third critique in relationship to contemporary affect theory or what can psychoanalysis tell us about abandonment and melancholia and is Kant truly a melancholic and very high level kinds of conceptual work. There's also an affective pull throughout that allows us to move between abstraction and feeling in ways that I thought were quite wonderful.

Judith Butler: And I found that to be a real accomplishment of your writing and quite singular. So that's just me. Maybe that just says more about what I usually read. But thank you.

Grace Lavery: Thank you. That means a lot.

Judith Butler: So you mentioned, you're talking about several things including the Mikado which you give a long reading of a very interesting one. Maybe you can talk to us about that. And you then refer to the reality effect enacted by the Orientalists you're talking about and suggest that reality effect takes the rhetorical form of praeteritio. Quote: "I don't really know anything about Japan, but," okay? Which is sort of like the structure of fetishism, right? I know very well that I know nothing about Japan make home men, right? "The orientalist argument worlds itself by insisting on the other worldliness of its object. Likewise, the Mikado's

jovial ambiguity about its location makes claims about the real world that which we might call the epistemological ambition of realism while refusing to represent that world realistically, realism's aesthetic strategy."

Judith Butler: And then a line that I would love for you to talk about, "I have come to refer to this position affirming realism's epistemology while negating its aesthetic as queer realism." Could you talk to us?

Grace Lavery: Yeah, Thank you. And hearing those lines back as well. I'm really reminded of some of the stuff we were talking about at the start, which is that that verb worlds, it simply comes from the fact that I was asked to submit a version of that chapter to a special issue on worlding realisms. So the kind of world as a verb was one that I acquired contextually and obviously I didn't get rid of it, so I liked it enough to retain it. But in a sense, I encountered that and I think I'm not fully the author of that part of that idea. So the distinction between the aesthetic and the epistemological grounds of realism is, I think within Victorian studies, a fairly familiar idea at this point, especially since the antinomies of realism in Frederick Jameson's powerful, I think epistemic defense of realism.

Grace Lavery: Which is to say you can imagine a version of realism which defends itself epistemically by saying this is the way the world is in some way, whatever that means. And we can imagine an aesthetic defense of realism or an aesthetic of realism, which would be something like in Victorian period, like *The Bourgeois* novel, right? So George Eliot, for example, who frequently, although I think is really committed to the epistemic defensive realism nonetheless defaults to a kind of aesthetic set of claims about realism. How do we know we're in a realist novel? We just look at how beautiful the people around us are and if they're too beautiful, we're in a Jane Austen novel. There's no realism, right?

Grace Lavery: But if we see people are kind of like actually interestingly unbeautiful, then the absence of beauty therefore indicates a kind of realist aesthetic. And that's the version of what Ian Watt would call the seamy side of, realism is the seamy side of things. So that distinction I think is fairly familiar, but we're not used to thinking of them as at odds with each other. We were used to thinking of them as different kinds of emphasis or different aspects of the same paradigm. What I was thinking about with the *Mikado* is historically speaking, the one thing that every reader of the *Mikado* has had to say about this opera is, "Oh, it's not really about Japan." Right? Whatever else we can say about the *Mikado* is not really about Japan.

Grace Lavery: Now I'm able to in the book explain that idea in historical terms. It turns out like people decided it wasn't about Japan in 1908 for very specific reasons. But even not withstanding that, that raises the question of what it means to be about something. What is being depicted if not Japan? What is the aboutness, what is the substance of this thing that's being represented? And so for me, the answer to that was that it turns out that the real conditions of possibility for describing Japan in a manner that reflected a realist epistemology or a realist epistem were not available through realist aesthetics. For real historical reasons, the real object called Japan could not be represented realistically. That sentence was given to me by someone else and I liked it so much that I really wanted to use it and I couldn't.

Grace Lavery: So then the other part of the question is, why is this queer? What is queer about this? Or what is queer about the kind of split of the epistemic and the aesthetic insofar as they might be grounding different notions of the real or grounding different notions of realism? And I think I have a couple of different answers to that. So the local answer would be that I have asked myself many times why it is

that people seem so sure that the Mikado is a satire? If it's a satire, what's it a satire of? It's not as though, like if any, anything about the Mikado, one of the things that it's apparently satirized is there was a character who has too many jobs, right? Pooh-Bah.

Grace Lavery: Was it the case that in 1885 like a bunch of British writers were concerned that government officials had too many jobs? No, not really. I mean, the argument has been made against me that maybe this is something to do with a kind of like Sidney Webb argument about socialism. And I kind of think, well maybe, but I think it's actually that satire might just be too attractive for words to describe this. But one of the things that is at play here is within the world of the Mikado, flirtation has been made punishable by death. That's the kind of premise. So that is to say from the start of this play, we are in a world where anyone who flirts, lies, or winks and less connubially linked shall forthright have his head off, right? So decapitation connected to even solicitation or winking.

Grace Lavery: And I thought, well, this is kind of fascinating because the summer of 1885 when The Mikado opened at the Savoy opera was the same summer in which Henry Labouchère proposed the famous amendment to the Criminal or Amendment Acts, which criminalized the flirtatious relationships between men that would eventually lead to the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde in 1895. And the Labouchere Amendment was notable legally for criminalizing not a sexual act, but the solicitation of a sexual act. So, in other words, within a kind of triangulation through Japan as a framework for thinking about the thing that can't be directly represented, you have a fairly literal epistemically grounded claim about the nature of law and so far as it would affect homosexual men in London in 1885.

Grace Lavery: But that doesn't quite make sense or you can't quite access it until you have worked through the coding of Japan as queer in a more general aesthetic sense anyway. So that's the local answer. My supposition or my hope is that it would be possible more broadly to think of queer forms of realism that would offer, this is just a kind of longer term claim. The book that I'm writing now is about George Elliot in a way of asserting a kind of realism to queer life in the face of an expectation that the lines of queer people will always be marked by simply parody, pastiche, misdirection, and those ideas around the anti-realism of queerness seem to me to be, especially in our present moment, pretty damaging.

Grace Lavery: So to try to renovate a way of thinking about queer realism is... And actually in the Elliot project, which I wrote, this is not the purpose there, but in the Elliot project specifically a trans realism to think about realism as a term on which queer people have a particular purchase and a particular set of claims seems to have a kind of political urgency as well.

Judith Butler: In describing your project, you suggest that there might be a kind of link between the interest in Japan and queerness. And what would that link be exactly? Why Japan? What makes Japan queer or what makes queerness a part of Japanese men in that sense?

Grace Lavery: It's a big, big mystery. And I guess the first thing I can say is that I'm not the first person to make this claim both within East Asian studies and in American cultural studies. In British cultural studies it seems to be something that has been noted many times. It happens in a number of different places. And as soon as one starts looking at 19th and early 20th century texts about Japan, what one notes is that the word queer comes up a lot. And also many of the men who were writing these books turn out to be bachelors who kind of lived essentially what looked like gay lives. So the question is, not merely a heuristic one, but a historical one, like why on earth did that happen?

Grace Lavery: The same could not easily be said for other kinds of Orientalism in the same way. I mean, from the evidence in the historical archive that I've been able to assemble, which is as incomplete as anybody's, that seems to be the case. And I think I have a couple of hunches. One of which is that because Japan was exempted from the particular form of colonial administrative desire that would have affected other kinds of Orientalisms, it therefore left itself open to a different kind of utopian longing that would not organize itself around the kind of reproduction of the colonial family or the reproduction of the colony as a space of white futurity.

Grace Lavery: And one can imagine ways in which 19th century gay men would have an interest in that kind of thing. And then another possibility would be the routing through aestheticism rather than the aesthetic of Victorian aesthetics, but aestheticism as a social formation that was among other things a set of social connections for wealthy gay men in the England of the 1863 to the 1890s. So in other words, the social networks were already in place that would allow for Japan to be coded through those kinds of connectivities. I say this is obvious, but if you haven't, no one else would know this. And I said, look at the stuff. But like in the '80s, the phrase Japanese young man was a euphemism for a gay man, right? Which is why when Gilbert and Sullivan have [inaudible 00:26:59] step forward in the beginning of patients and confess to the audience that he's not really anesthetic. He says, "Concede me if you can," sorry, I've got the wrong.

Grace Lavery: This is when the dragoons had decided they want to go become aesthetic, they say, "Concede me if you can a Japanese young man." And wild and art and the handy craftsman begins by saying, "You have heard of me perhaps as a Japanese young man." And that Japanese is an interesting term because it doesn't mean that I'm Japanese, like a Japanese person. It means I'm Japanese, like a Japanese like Willow plate or maybe wallpaper or a print or something, right? I'm not Japanese in the way that a person would be Japanese. I'm Japanese in the way a Japanese art would be Japanese.

Grace Lavery: And that beatification or aestheticization is somehow a way of demurring from separating oneself out from the Orthodox reproduction of domesticated compulsory heterosexuality that forms the major objective critique of aestheticism as a social movement.

Judith Butler: So I have one response to that and then maybe I'd ask you to talk a little bit about Wilde and then we can open it up. My one response would be, if effectively someone is saying, "I'm a Japanese young man in a coded way," meaning I'm a Japanese plate or calligraphy or something like that. I am that thing for someone that is to say a viewer as a desiring subject who has a certain idea of Japan already in play. And so I am that thing in relationship to a Victorian imaginary or a Victorian fantasy, right? There is no reality independent of the fantasy.

Grace Lavery: That's true. That's true. But I should have said this earlier, one of the things that makes this kind of ethically complicated is that this is a moment in time when the Japanese state is coming into being and producing an idea of Japan that is deeply in conversation with and in meshed within the orientalist logics that are constructing Japan as a kind of fantasy other. So the kind of absence of an independence from fantasy is a condition that also affects the many Japanese writers that I talk about here in a sense that the kind of equivocation around those kinds of fantasies is a kind of permanent condition is a felt reality for someone like Mikimoto Ryuzo just as much as it is for Oscar Wilde.

Judith Butler: Okay. So Wilde, you talk a little bit about the publication history of Wilde's books and why and note that they're very often embedded in Japanese formats

or with illustration or maybe you could talk to us just about that book history. What is that? And Wilde also seems to refer to himself as, well, he actually refers to the attribution of his Japanese fetish as a wild rumor as yet another rumor, right? Calling upon the other rumors. In fact, the ones that that landed him in jail. Could you just talk about Wilde and the intersection with the idea of Japan for a moment and then we will shortly open up. Sorry.

Grace Lavery: One of the things that I find really fascinating about Wilde's relation to Japan is that it seems to have begun when he was in America. The spark seems to have landed when he was on tour in the United States between 1878 and 1879. And specifically when he was visiting the prison in Lincoln, Nebraska, which was at that time, the largest prison in the world or the largest modern prison in the world. And someone while he was on a tour of this prison, started telling him about Japanese art. And he got really into it and he immediately wrote home to Walter Sickert the painter and said, "We have to go to Japan together." And then Sickert said, "I can't go to Japan." And then he wrote to Whistler and Whistler said, "I'll go to Japan with you." But that didn't really happen.

Grace Lavery: Before Wilde had left the United States, he'd found some boy whose name we don't know and told him that they needed to go to Japan together immediately. And they didn't go, you know. So Wilde actually wrote a lot about really wanting to go to Japan and never went to Japan, and then in *The Decay of Laying*, 1891, which is the document that everyone has written about this quotes at length, he says, "If you want to see a real Japanese effect, he will not behave like a tourist and go to Japan. Rather, you will study the acts of certain Japanese artists and you will see a Japanese effect in Piccadilly as well as you'll see it anywhere." Right? So there's that sense that with the process that he's been going through his abstraction, he's acquired the ability to abstract his orientalist desire into something purely aesthetic.

Grace Lavery: The part around book history that you're referring to is that in the second half of the 19th century, the most expensive paper that you could print your book on if you wanted to was Japanese vellum. It was more expensive than India vellum. It was more expensive than handmade English paper. And most of the late Victorian aestheticism books were published in both the cheap version for the you and me of the world and then very expensive luxury edition for wealthy collectors. Wilde interestingly did not generally do that. Somewhat to my surprise, especially since it's a big part of the plotted picture of *Dorian Gray*, if anyone remembers that, he didn't really do that until after he was released from prison. And one of the reasons for that was that he was only publishable after he was released from prison by a pornographer.

Grace Lavery: So his work was circulating as though it was pornography and his publisher was a man named Leonard Smithers. And in order to make money as a pornographer, this is like one of those things that once you've learned it, you just think that's so intuitive, but I would never have thought of it, right? If you're going to make money as a Victorian pornographer, you run two editions. You run a really cheap version that someone can dispose off as soon as they're finished with it and you run a really expensive version that is so expensive that you can put it on your shelf and claim that it's classy erotica. Right? So most really late Victorian pornography is published in those two editions.

Grace Lavery: And for what it's worth, the really cheap paper ended up preserving itself much better than the really expensive style. Anyway. So my point being, it was actually when Wilde's work was being published in that format that he turned to Japanese vellum as one of the grounds in which he was published. And one of the things that I found so moving and fascinating was in 1905, five years after he



had died, another pornographer named Charles Carrington put out a transcript of the trials of Oscar Wilde that begins with a deep and passionate critique of the carceral logic under which he was killed by the state through being sentenced to two years with hard labor and a sort of deeply moving account of the viability and necessity and ethical value of gay love and gay sex. 1905, right?

Grace Lavery: And it was only published on Japanese paper. And the reason for that is that it was such a scandalous work, the trials, that it could only be, the circulation had to be limited among readers whose sensitivity and sympathy could be assured to the stuff that was being published. So in other words, the kind of Carrington trials in 1905 became this way for me to think about how Japanese vellum in it's highly orientalist, totally abstracted, totally commodified way also became a vehicle for something deeply intimate actually and a way of producing a kind of physical co-presence between people who were persecuted by the same laws.

Judith Butler: Wonderful. Thank you. I'd love to take questions from the audience. Yeah. Let's go here and here. Yeah.

Speaker 4: Thank you. So you've spoken a little bit about how the idea of Japan as an abstract idea both can occur anywhere and still holds way today. And I want to ask about how you mobilize the idea of Victorian aesthetics because not only are your objects not all British, you talked about Rousseau and then you also talk about late 20th century objects and early 21st century objects in your final chapter when you talk about film. And I was wondering if you could talk about the movement of Victorian aesthetics in relation to the idea of Japan fourth term.

Grace Lavery: Yeah. Thank you. And also Mary, I want to say in this space thank you for all of your work on the book. You were an extraordinary research assistant. It was a real honor to work with you. Yeah, so the kind of portability of the notion of the Victorian in this book is something that I have thought about from a number of different angles, partly because one of the great virtues of Victorian as a designation within scholarship is it has fixed dates. The line that I tend to spin is like if you ask a romanticist if a text is romantic, they'll come up with a kind of like really complicated theory. If you ask a modernist whether a text is modernist, they'll come up with a really complex evasion. And you ask a Victorian as whether a text is Victorian, they'll ask you when it was published, right?

Grace Lavery: There's a sense in which I said, there's a kind of basic historical economy which I want to preserve although the problem is I haven't done that. Right? So I violated my principal because I do think that there is something importantly Victorian about many of the post 1901 accounts of Japan that I have been interested in. And to take one example that comes quite near the book, the scene between O-Ren Ishii and the bride, Beatrix Kiddo at the end of Kill Bill part one, right? Which is, and many of you will have seen this sort of snow. There's a beautiful little water clock thing in the background, there's swords. The word that all of the reviewers, all of the reviewers use to describe this scene was exquisite, right?

Grace Lavery: And what they meant by that was there was a sudden eruption of abstraction into a scene was not previously abstract and that that abstraction was somehow being written on the body in the form of both hyper aestheticization and a form of violent interruption, violent by section of the body. To me, that framework for thinking about the conjunction of violence and beauty as they would converge on the object of Japan is remarkably proximate to the stuff that one would see in Algernon Charles Swinburne saying that Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain harmonies and color, it's the annihilation of everything else.

Grace Lavery: That continuity surprised me because the historical conditions of 1877 do not resemble the historical conditions of 2004 at all. Or at least in so far as they're both brought under the kind of like late capitalism, like on that kind of macro periodic scale one could certainly say that. But in terms of the way that American mass culture was relating to Japan in a kind of broader sense, that seems really different. But the recurrence of that particular shorthand where Japan means the extreme form of beauty that can hurt you, that consistency is remarkable and I wanted to remark it.

Grace Lavery: And Victorian seemed like a good way to do so while evading the question of the modern, which seemed importantly not to the question that I was interested in adjudicating because in the confrontation between Japan and the Victorian or the West or the 19th century British writer, which I accept is sort of slippage in the book. But in that encounter, the co-evilness of modernity is a premise. So it is assumed by both sides that modernity can be plural, but modernity of Japan is distinct from and in some way competitive with their account of modernity that one would find in Wilde's own thoughts.

Speaker 5: Thank you for the talk. So you just talked a little bit more about exquisiteness and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about quaintness. And so I haven't gotten the chance to read your book yet, so sorry if the answer is just read the book but—

Grace Lavery: It'll never be that.

Speaker 5: —but I was wondering if maybe the way that you were talking about quaintness earlier, I was wondering if you could maybe expand on ways that that relates to more familiar like queer theory categories for thinking about queer aesthetics on the one hand and then queer relations to history on the other. And to elaborate on that a little bit, it seems to me like the way you're talking about this quaintness has something to do with both a temporal relation to history and also is an aesthetic category that seems kind of comparable to something like camp where something is outmoded yet you have like a desiring or an effective relationship to it.

Speaker 5: And so I guess I'm wondering like, yeah, on the one hand, how do you relate quaintness to more familiar categories like camp? And then on the other hand, does it relate in any way to recent theories of queer relations to history or temporality?

Grace Lavery: So I'll answer the second part first because it's a little bit of a shorter answer, which I will say yes. I would say methodologically, some of the primary commitments that I was making in the composition of this book were Ann Cvetkovich, I would say Ann Cvetkovich was deeply important actually. And then to some extent have a love as well and some of those other thinkers of the queer touch across time—

Judith Butler: —Dinshaw—

Grace Lavery: —Dinshaw, no, I know. But the reason why I feel complicated about Dinshaw is because I think Dinshaw was reading a fiction that's really wrong. And so actually there's a weird critique of Dinshaw in the book.

Judith Butler: I see.

Grace Lavery: But it's like, it's such a small fry, but she's like, actually I kind of feel strongly about poor fiction anyway. So that part is just like, I can say yes that is important. But the question of camp is really interesting and not one that I'd thought of. I think, here's my instinctive response. It's important to me that quaintness not be routed through the logic of repetition or imitation or outmodedness exactly. And talking about something like redundancy, like primary redundancy. That is to say an object that perhaps is original, but is also unimportant. And the lack of importance is what produces the condition of historical relation that I think of as quaint.

Grace Lavery: And again, it's a descriptive term, so I'm describing the way I think Victorians understood Japan as possessing a history and the ways in which that history might be understood in relation to other models of thinking historically. So it seems plausible to me that one could offer an account of camp and people do this obviously all the time, but people could offer an account of camp that successfully distinguishes between camp as drag or camp as parody and camp as like a thing that's built to fail. But the built to fail aspect of camp would still be what I'm interested in here. And, yeah.

Judith Butler: Okay. Do we have a last question or two? Maybe we have time for some quick ones? Yes, in the back.

Speaker 6: [Inaudible]

Grace Lavery: Right. Since there was no microphone, I'll repeat the question if that's okay. Which was, one of my chapters has an epigraph from confessions of a Mask by Yukio Mishima and I've been asked to reflect on the significance of Mishima for the project. And I think, yeah, again, I think I can simply say yes. What I take from Mishima as a figure in this book, he's not figure, he writes about a great deal, is that Mishima almost uniquely among readers of Wilde understood that for Wilde beauty and violence were twinned. And Mishima was a fabulous reader of Wilde to that degree because when Victorian British Reitzes were thinking about, for instance in *The Nightingale* in, what's it called?

Grace Lavery: *The Nightingale* in the Thrush, I can't remember what it's called, but the thorn in the heart, you remember the scene that Nightingale has to sing a song of love and while singing the song of love, pierce his heart with a thorn and bleed out onto a flower to stain a white flower red and then give the flower to a student so the student can give it to his beloved. And then the kind of pay-off is like the beloved doesn't like it. And then the student decides that love is dumb anyway and he should go back to his studies. Right? But the whole purpose of the story has been about the value of an account of beauty that is founded upon suffering and a suffering whose primary metaphor is exsanguination, which of course it was for Mishima as well.

Grace Lavery: So I'm careful in the book not to claim expertise over Japanese literature, most of which I have not read in the original. I'm not competent to read in the original, but I have certainly thought often that Mishima is a figure that brings together the kind of queer interest in beauty as violence routed through in that case an auto-orientalized account of Japan. So thank you.

Judith Butler: I think we have come to the end of our time. I wanted to just thank you, Grace, for the gift of this book and of your extraordinary mind, your extraordinary language, and for taking us on this ride. I also note that as much as you acknowledge that you're working within a kind of Orientalism that hasn't been properly described by other orientalist models, excuse me, you also refer to an

intercultural transmission, which at least gestures towards a reciprocity, which moves outside that logic. And I think maybe the last question also touches upon that.

Grace Lavery: Yeah. I think that's important.

Judith Butler: Great. So thank you enormously.

Grace Lavery: Thank you so much, Judith. Thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in the series.

tje