

SPECTACLES OF SIN AND SUFFERING: *LA TRAVIATA* IN VICTORIAN LONDON

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When *La traviata* made its London premiere in May of 1856, it was a success largely (according to the press at least) because of the soprano playing the part of Violetta. Marietta Piccolomini was a young and attractive Italian of aristocratic family, whose story of her devotion to music against the opposition of her family was a singular source of fascination. But this popular success, particularly with women, also made *La Traviata* the subject of significant controversy in the London press.¹ By August, an intense debate had sprung up about Violetta as a representation of the prostitute, not only in reviews, but also in editorial articles and letters in *The Times* and *The Spectator*, which were then gathered and reprinted for review in *The Musical World* and Boston's *Dwight's Journal of Music*. In this debate,

1. See Susan Rutherford, "La Traviata or the 'Willing Grisette'," in *Atti del Convegno "Verdi 2001,"* ed. Roberta Marvin and Fabrizio Della Seta (Florence: Olschki, 2003), 586–88. Many reviews pointed to the large presence of women in the

La traviata became the locus of a complex discussion of appropriate theatrical subjects for sympathetic identification, as well as sympathy's status as a moral response to suffering. It was the figure of Violetta who revealed the faultlines of ambivalence plaguing sympathetic response.

Current criticism of *Traviata*, centering as it does around the workings of sympathy toward Violetta, tends to display concerns oddly similar to those of the Victorian critics. If the quest for acceptance by an alienated woman was threatening to the Victorian middle class, the victimization of such a woman seems equally troubling now. Violetta and her ancestor Marguerite in Dumas' novel and play, *La dame aux camélias*, have been seen as instruments of the preservation of bourgeois power by Catherine Clément and Roland Barthes, to name two among many.² Jann Matlock neatly summarizes this critical approach in her analysis of Dumas' novel within the Revolutionary politics of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. From this perspective, she says, Marguerite

rallies support for bourgeois values.... Her pitiful death transforms her into a commodity to preserve family values, property values, promised wage values for men, and most of all, men's liberties. This novel surrounds her, it would seem, with the plots of tolerance, ensuring that if she circulates, she will do it only as pure representation, as a story in the place of a body....

audience for *Traviata* and were particularly troubled by it. One reads, for instance, "We should have thought the production of *La Traviata* an outrage on the ladies of the aristocracy who support the theatre, if they had not by crowding their boxes every night shown that they did not notice the underlying vice of the opera." *Dwight's Music Journal* (23 August 1856), from *The Spectator*.

It is unclear, however, whether there really was a larger than usual number of women in the audience for *Traviata* or if the press chose to focus on their presence because of the subject matter of the opera.

2. See Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 60–65; Roland Barthes, "The Lady of the Camellias," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 103–5.

Revisionist treatments of the opera and Dumas' play have often worked to rescue these works from this complicity with bourgeois structures of power, as we will see. But Matlock goes on to argue that the nineteenth-century reception of the novel actually suggests that Dumas' narrative has had a quite different effect:

Yet Dumas's courtesan left moralists as well as republicans reeling from the dangers they saw depicted in his book.... Whether she was imagined as a seductress, as a redeemed Magdalen, or simply as a poor girl sacrificed to the desires of those around her, Marguerite's story was read as potentially endangering to its audience. Even represented within the strict network of tolerance, which exacts punishments as well as repentance, this prostitute aroused anxiety.³

A very similar anxiety was voiced by Victorian critics of *La traviata*—an anxiety that I want to connect to the troubled workings of sympathy as a response to suffering and alienation in the theatre, and the extension of that sympathy to social and political realities. If an audience's pleasure in Violetta's sacrifice to the social order is often troubling to modern critics and revisionist directors, the need to limit our response to her is not entirely new. A comparison of Victorian and contemporary feminist criticism of *La Traviata* suggests that it is the very slipperiness of our response to Violetta, as much as the specific directions it takes, that engenders so much anxiety.

VIOLETTA, PROSTITUTION, AND THE MORAL STAKES OF SYMPATHY

For Victorian critics of *Traviata*, the central object of debate was whether Violetta, as a prostitute, was a worthy object of sympathy, and if so, where the limits of an audience's sympathetic response to her should lie. What gave this debate its urgency was the thinness of the divide perceived between stage and life, and more specifically between the spectatorial pleasure offered by both the theater and the streets of

3. Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 111–12.

London. These are modes of spectatorship that Victorian critics seem unable or unwilling to keep apart. As these critics try to negotiate the problem of *Violetta*, they tell us a great deal about the problem of forming an effective social response to prostitution in this period, and they reveal an anxiety about an increasingly spectatorial mode of public existence in London in which the prostitute figured largely.

The debate around *Traviata* took for granted real and sometimes direct connections between an audience's response to *Violetta* and its response to prostitution. On one extreme, critics suggested that *Traviata's* representation of prostitution rendered it so alluring as to actually invite imitation.⁴ In *Punch*, this fear was satirized in an illustration depicting a young, extravagantly dressed prostitute who is recognized, with some surprise, by a woman who asks how long she has "been fine," while an advertisement for *Traviata* (a "great success") hangs suggestively in the background (figure 1). On the other extreme, at least one London pamphleteer saw the press's denunciation of *Traviata* as symptomatic of a general climate of pitilessness toward women victimized by Victorian society, especially in the middle-class response to the everyday spectacle that the streets of London had become. In a pamphlet entitled "Remarks on The Morality of Dramatic Compositions with particular reference to *La traviata*, etc.," the writer begins a section on prostitution with a reference to the "Pharisaical" attacks on *Traviata*. After describing in great detail the "harrowing spectacle" of young girls in the Haymarket, drawn unambiguously as victims—childlike, intoxicated, hungry, anguished—the writer concludes:

4. A leader in the *Times* suggested that *Traviata* invited imitation of prostitution by its "exhibition upon the stage with all the alluring additions of scenery and song." See *The Times* (7 August 1856), reprinted in *Musical World* (16 August 1856): 521. *Traviata's* representation of "vice" is also singled out on the basis that it is drawn from modern life rather than a traditional or historical story. Very few reviewers pay any attention to the fact that the opera was set in the eighteenth century, reading it as a portrait of modern Paris. See *The Times* (7 August 1856), reprinted in *Musical World* (16 August 1856): 521.



*'The Great Social Evil' by Leech, Punch 12 September 1857.
Time: Midnight. A Sketch not a Hundred Miles from the Haymarket.
BELLA: 'Ah! Fanny! How long have you been Gay!'*

Figure 1. "The Great Social Evil," *Punch* (12 September 1857). In Nicholas John, ed., *Violetta and her Sisters: The Lady of the Camellias, Responses to the Myth* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994), 238.

And it is to these unhappy young creatures that pity is denied,—it is against them that a putrescent Conventionalism is to bar the gates of mercy; and they are never to be named except to be denounced; as if society by ignoring their wrongs could blot them out of existence, and erase from the ominous page of its debits the very names of the victims and monsters it has made. Shame! Shame! Shame!⁵

For this pamphlet-writer, Violetta, and all prostitutes with her, is a pure object of sympathy, the denial of pity for whom is an act of heinous inhumanity.

However, most of the debate about the morality of *Traviata* took place in a middle ground between these two extremes, circling around intricate questions of sympathy, condemnation, and the moral response to prostitution. For many critics, the danger of *Traviata* was that it made the bourgeois position towards prostitution ambiguous through its sympathetic portrait of Violetta, especially as played by Piccolomini. *The Saturday Review* stated, “by the fascination which Mme. Piccolomini throws around the character, and the poetry she infuses into it, the moral sense is deadened, and our perceptions of right and wrong are in danger of becoming misty and confused.”⁶ At the end of an otherwise enthusiastic review of the premiere, and particularly of Piccolomini’s performance, *The Saturday Review* argued, “it is opposed to all the highest interests of morality to excite our sympathies in behalf of such a character as Violetta, who, while deserving of our pity, ought not to be represented in such a way as to excite our admiration and love.”⁷ This review presents a complex amalgam of compatible, but not equally acceptable, ways of relating to a character: sympathy,

5. “Remarks on The Morality of Dramatic Compositions with Particular Reference to *La traviata*, etc.,” in *Violetta and her Sisters: The Lady of the Camellias, Responses to the Myth*, ed. Nicholas John (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994), 239.

6. *Saturday Review* (9 August, 1856): 339–40.

7. *Saturday Review* (31 May 1856): 105.

pity, admiration, love. The reviewer painstakingly attempts to break sympathy down into its component parts, trying to isolate the acceptable and unacceptable ones. Pity is acceptable, but no other aspect of sympathy is. Pity implies a certain amount of distance between spectator and spectacle, while sympathy involves a kind of fellow-feeling—of putting oneself in another's place—that is extremely dangerous when applied to Violetta, because it implies a level of acceptance of her that is not allowable, as the opera's narrative makes clear when it condemns her to death.

When it came to questions of sympathy and condemnation in the debate over *Traviata*, a dominant way of defining both the moral imperative and the acceptable limits of sympathy toward Violetta was the narrative of the repentant Mary Magdalen. The Magdalen story functioned as a “plot of tolerance” (as Matlock puts it) in which Violetta could potentially be both legitimated and contained.⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century there was a long tradition of linking the sentimental mode, the Magdalen narrative, and the social problem of prostitution. The word “Magdalen” itself is almost synonymous with the sentimental, at least in the form of “maudlin,” which means both penitential prostitute and “characterised by tearful sentimentality; mawkishly emotional; weakly sentimental.”⁹ In the mid- to late-eighteenth century, the Magdalen narrative became a touchstone of sentimental literature, with the term “Magdalen” loosened to mean any penitential fallen woman rather than specifically a prostitute, as when Samuel Richardson describes the heroine of the sentimental novel *Clarissa* as a Magdalen.¹⁰

8. Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 111.

9. Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 171, quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

10. Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 169.

The image of the Magdalen had long crossed the borders between the literary or dramatic representation of prostitutes and the journalistic or scientific representation of prostitutes deployed by activists to generate a political response. It had been profitably tied to charities or Magdalen Hospitals for the reform of prostitutes already in the mid-eighteenth century. The institution and funding of Magdalen Hospitals at this time, Linda Mahood argues, was partly dependent on the recasting of prostitutes as suitable objects of charity rather than criminals, and a major strategy for reformers was to generate a “cult of sentimentality” around them.¹¹ The London Magdalen Hospital provided its own brand of sentimental theater: its services, which the residents were required to attend, were “noted for spectacular scenes of sentimental distress displayed by the serried ranks of penitent prostitutes.”¹² These services, as Markman Ellis notes, were open to the public, and became quite fashionable events, both as a gesture towards benevolence and as a slightly scandalous entertainment. Numerous Magdalen stories were also published, many of them directly related to the Hospital. William Dodd, the Preacher at the Magdalen Hospital, published a number of short stories on the lives of the Hospital residents in *The Public Ledger* and his *Account of the Magdalen Hospital*. This blurring of the divide between fiction and reality in the sentimental tradition became even more pronounced when, in 1760, Richardson published an anonymous collection of fictional biographies called *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen-House*, with each biography structured as a first-person narrative by the penitents

11. Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 55.

12. Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 176.

themselves. According to Ellis, this book embodies the mutually legitimating relationship of the Magdalen Hospital and sentimental literature, with Lady Barbara Montagu's preface painting the book as a defense of both the charity and of "sentimental novels as a social force" (181). On the other hand, this enfolding of the penitential prostitute within the sentimental mode meant that she too could become a spectacle for public consumption, inviting no more active response than did an operatic heroine.

By the 1850s, the prostitute as spectacle had found her way into a new but related discourse, that of the urban explorer of London's poor. "For men as well as women," Judith Walkowitz suggests, "the prostitute was a central spectacle in a set of urban encounters and fantasies. Repudiated and desired, degraded and threatening, the prostitute attracted the attention of a range of urban male explorers from the 1840s to the 1880s."¹³ One of these explorers was Henry Mayhew, whose newspaper accounts of his encounters with prostitutes on the streets of London read a little like the spectacular scenes of the Magdalen Hospital. In a particularly popular account, he gathered a group of impoverished women who were pressed to prostitution to tell their tales, which were transcribed and published in a series for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849 and 1850. As Walkowitz notes, Mayhew frames this gathering in the terms of sentimentalist theater, describing how each woman recounted "her woes and struggles, and published her shame amid the convulsive sobs of the others," while he watched unseen.¹⁴ Walkowitz argues, though, that by the 1880s, this sentimentalist discourse of prostitution and poverty had

13. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 21.

14. Henry Mayhew, "Second Test—Meeting of Needlewomen Forced to Take to the Streets," in *The Unknown Mayhew*, ed. Eileen Yeo and E.P. Thompson (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), quoted in Walkowitz, *City*, 22.

become problematic, and was thought to indulge in spectacles of suffering as titillating entertainment rather than promoting useful action to alleviate it. In Charles Booth's survey of East London in 1887, he sought to distance himself from accounts like Mayhew's. He wrote,

I am indeed embarrassed by the mass of my material, and by my determination to make use of no fact to which I cannot give a quantitative value. The materials for sensational stories lie plentifully in every book of our notes; but even if I had the skill to use my material in this way—that gift of the imagination which is called “realistic”—I should not wish to use it here.¹⁵

Booth's answer to “realist” sensationalism was a mass of statistics—the only way, it seems, to avoid the ambiguous pleasures of sympathy.

The Magdalen narrative still appears to have had currency in the 1856 discussions of *Traviata*, but these discussions also reveal an anxiety—much like Booth's—about the spectatorial mode with which it was tied up. To trace both the force of the Magdalen narrative in defining *Traviata*'s meaning and the problems this kind of mapping produced, I want to take a closer look at a debate that took place in the pages of

15. Charles Booth, “The Condition of the People of East London and Hackney, 1887” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 51 (1888): 278, quoted in Walkowitz, *City*, 33. Walkowitz notes, however, that Booth indulged in plenty of storytelling despite protests of this kind.

16. *The Times* (7 August 1856), reprinted in *The Musical World* (16 August 1856): 521.

the *Times* between one of its own writers and the opera's producer, Benjamin Lumley. This debate was spurred by a strongly critical leader in *The Times*, in which the audience's sympathy for Violetta was denounced as dangerous and immoral: “It is for her that pity is asked, and it is to her that pity is given. She is the erring, but repentant sinner—the heroine for whom our sympathies are aroused.... Now, we say that, morally speaking, this is most hideous and abominable.”¹⁶ But this was not a position the *Times* was able to maintain.

For defenders of *Traviata*, it was essential to show, first, that Violetta attracted sympathy in specific and limited ways, and second, that she was a valid object of pity—indeed, that it was immoral *not* to pity her. The opera's producer, Benjamin Lumley, shrewdly made these defensive arguments in a series of letters to the *Times*, and their force is shown by the way in which the *Times* was compelled to address them. Lumley agreed that there were limits to the ways in which vice could be presented on stage. First, "its grossness should not be offensively obtruded"; second, "it should not be presented in an alluring form," that is, in a way that invited sympathy. But *Traviata*, Lumley argued against the *Times*, did not present prostitution in this manner (even if its source, *La dame aux camélias*, did):

The sympathy which the character of Violetta commands is given not to the evil of her ways, wherein she has offended, but to the nobility, sorrow and suffering by which she atones for her guilt. It may possibly be true that the vice of the Dame aux Camélias [*sic*] is presented under an alluring shape, but it is certain that the sin of the *Traviata* only wins our pity by her repentant devotion.¹⁷

Sympathy and pity, Lumley tries to show, are reserved for Violetta's repentance and self-sacrifice. And despite the obviously self-serving nature of Lumley's defense, he is not alone in his attempt to show that the audience's sympathetic response to *Traviata* is in fact quite limited. A writer for the *Leader*, while dismissing some of Lumley's points, defends the opera on these same principles. Vice is not presented as alluring, he argues; rather, sympathy is garnered only for Violetta's repentance (that is, her renunciation of Alfredo, which can really be understood as only a very

17. Benjamin Lumley, letter to *The Times* (11 August 1856), reprinted in *The Musical World* (16 August 1856): 522.

partial sort of repentance). And, it is clear in his account, this sympathy is by no means commensurate with forgiveness or acceptance.

The interest of the audience is excited purely for the healthy or moral leanings of the girl. The spectators are interested in her on that account wholly and solely. The sacrifice which she makes to morality is felt by the audience to be not too great for its object, and yet they sympathise in the sacrifice. In all these respects the admiration, the sympathy, the interest of the audience, are identified with morality as it is usually understood, and are positively repelled from vice.¹⁸

Lumley, after arguing that Violetta did not render prostitution alluring, then accused the *Times* of recommending a pitiless or callous reception of misery and repentance, in life as on the stage. Lumley sought to show an audience's compassion for Violetta was moral by invoking the Magdalen myth in order to portray sympathy for Verdi's heroine as a measure of compassion generally. Here, as in the *Times*, this discourse of sympathy is gendered female. Would you "exclude the suffering and repentant sinner from the sympathy of her sisters?" he asks.

Is it not our duty at least to admit the truth, which our Pharaism [*sic*] practically denies, that noble feelings may frequently dwell in the broken heart even of a stricken and repentant Magdalen? If, as I believe, the tendency of *La Traviata* is to soften the hearts of the pure towards those who are struggling to raise themselves from degradation, I shall never regret the part I have had in its production.¹⁹

18. "La Traviata in the Pulpit," *Musical World* (23 August 1856): 533, reprinted from *The Leader*.

19. Lumley, letter to *The Times* (11 August 1856).

Thus, in a move to show the morality of pitying Violetta, Lumley places her within a lineage of sentimental heroines, not only invoking the tradition of Magdalen narratives, as we see in the passage above,

but later legitimating *Traviata's* depiction of vice by a comparison with Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. This is a novel that Fred Kaplan has identified as a cornerstone of sentimental literature for Victorians, and that, as Ellis argues, has direct links to late eighteenth-century Magdalen stories.²⁰

The response from *The Times* is somewhat more circumspect than its original statement about the pitilessness with which Violetta should be treated, even while continuing to be highly critical. As becomes apparent, placing *Traviata* within the Magdalen myth was a canny move, for the *Times* writer has to defend his denial of pity to Violetta by arguing that it is not tantamount to the denial of pity to prostitutes in general. He claims he does not "wish to cut off from human sympathy and commiseration those poor creatures who have been led into vice by the passions and inhumanity of our own sex."²¹ This concession forces the writer to make some intricate discursive moves in order to distinguish *Traviata* from the Magdalen narrative, which he seems to admit would provide a powerful legitimization of the opera if it were indeed applicable. First, he goes back to his original critique of the presentation of prostitution as alluring in *La Traviata*, writing that the image of the Magdalen is touching, but shouldn't be "presented to the public with all the soft allurements of music and song."²² His move here is to distinguish between sympathy and allurement (as Lumley did not), and argue only against allurement in the opera. But he also makes the new argument, based on a well-founded skepticism of Lumley's motives, that *Traviata* does not invite sympathy at all, at least not sympathy in the

20. Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 185. On the importance of *The Vicar of Wakefield* for Victorian sentimentality, see Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34.

21. *The Times* (11 August 1856), reprinted in *The Musical World* (16 August, 1856): 323.

22. The role of music in determining the morality of *La traviata* is also debated in the press, but, as in this passage, critics mainly focus on the presence of music rather than its particular character. For some, music obscures the subject enough that it becomes more acceptable. In a separate debate over the 1869 play *Formosa*, which was also attacked for dealing with prostitution, one critic writes, "There is a difference between sin drowned under a din of trombones and ophicleide and the same sin blazened forth in all its repulsive

sense of a moral response to suffering: “there is nothing in the progress of the story which is peculiarly calculated to evoke the active sympathies of women.” And he reiterates in summary:

Again, with regard to the argument that the hearts of women are likely to be softened towards their erring sisters by an operatic display of the miseries of harlotry, we are compelled to express our entire dissent from it. If the implied command of the Divine Founder of the Christian religion and the recorded example of His tenderness and mercy in such a case are unavailing, neither will the warblings and simulated cough of a Piccolomini be of much avail.²³

nakedness”; see *The Times* (27 August 1869). When *Traviata* was produced at the more conservative Exeter Hall, it was simply given without a translation of the libretto, and this was

thought to obscure it sufficiently. *Punch*, however, mocked this assumption that “there can be no wicked significance in mere music”; see *Musical World* (25 April 1857): 263.

Others argued that *Traviata* sullied music, which was suited only for more exalted subjects, not “abject passions”; see *Musical World* (25 October 1856). Another critic points to the presence of music as a possible “purifying influence” to distinguish the opera from Dumas’ play; see *Musical World* (21 March 1857).

23. Lumley, letter to *The Times* (11 August 1856).

24. Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 182.

25. *The Times*, for instance, calls it simply a “tale of sin and repentance”; *The Times* (26 May 1856), reprinted in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (21 June 1856): 93.

The theater was not the place to learn the lesson of compassion, partly, I think, because of the dangers of spectatorial pleasure, and because of the unpredictability of that pleasure—its tendency to slip outside the response that was “peculiarly calculated.”

One of the innovations of the Magdalen stories, Ellis suggests, is that they provide “a narrative that translates the seduction motif (down and away from domestic respectability to the status of the fallen woman) into the discourse of repentance (up and towards the status of the virtuous penitent).”²⁴ The critical tendency to see *Traviata* as fundamentally a story of sin and repentance clearly ties it to this tradition.²⁵ Even critics point to Violetta’s repentance, Lumley’s adversary at the *Times* referring to her as the “erring, but repentant sinner.”²⁶ Defenders of the opera carefully restrict the audience’s sympathy with Violetta to her moment of repentance; Lumley argues that she “only wins our pity by her repentant devotion.”²⁷ The tradition of the Magdalen story seems to have defined the terms on which *Traviata* could be

both attacked and defended. But *Traviata* also pushed the limits of that tradition, depicting Violetta's life as a courtesan, presenting her as a savvy businesswoman rather than an innocent victim of seduction, and allowing her to return to courtesanship after she had "repented." More crucially, *Traviata* inherited some of the ambiguities of sympathy that plagued the sentimental Magdalen tradition since its beginnings—its confusion of spectacle and benevolence, its tension between the display of prostitution and the condemnation of it.²⁸ These were troubling issues to Victorian critics, who were neither blind to them, nor in entire agreement on how they were to be addressed.

"PIANGI!"

The divide between sympathetic pain and masochistic pleasure in Violetta's plight is particularly ambiguous in two scenes in *La traviata*: Violetta's death in the finale, and the Act 2 duet between Violetta and Germont. These scenes have been particularly problematic for contemporary critics of the opera and its manipulation of sympathy, as we will see in a brief look at political theorist Alessandra Lippucci's analysis of a revisionist production of *Traviata* by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and Susan Painter's study of feminist treatments of Dumas' play.²⁹ Their concerns with the finale are surprisingly similar to those of some Victorian critics, centering around the audience's pleasure in Violetta's death. Germont's intervention in Act 2 presents somewhat different problems in the formation of a sympathetic

26. *The Times* (7 August 1856), reprinted in *Musical World* (16 August 1856).

27. Lumley, letter to *The Times* (11 August 1856).

28. Ellis, *Politics of Sensibility*, 180.

29. Alessandra Lippucci, "Social Theorizing on the Operatic Stage: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's Postmodern Humanist Production of Verdi's *La traviata*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12 (1992); Susan Painter, "La Dame aux Camélias: The Myth Revised," in *Melodrama*, Themes in Drama 14 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

response to Violetta. Violetta's confrontation with Germont marks the moment of her sacrifice, and thus the point at which Violetta becomes a viable object of sympathy within the narrative of the repentant Magdalen. This is the moment when she gains her status as victim, and is thus highly problematic for directors and critics who want to question that status. It also becomes a crucial scene for Victorian critics who need to preserve that status, and the response to Germont appears to be very carefully managed—by production style, by press coverage, even by Verdi's music—pointing to an awareness of this scene as a locus of danger.

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's 1979 production portrays Germont as the most visible representative of the social order to which Violetta is sacrificed and attempts to expose and undermine his position, along with audiences' tendency to sympathize with his plight. According to Lippucci, Ponnelle attempts to deflect sympathy from Germont by caricaturing him, by making his status as the mouth-piece of social order utterly explicit.

Alfredo's father Germont dresses, acts and generally mimics the male-dominant capitalist state that in turn mimics and exploits the male-dominant template of Christianity. Decked with military medals and brandishing a walking stick and a big cigar, he is Alfredo's authoritarian father writ large....³⁰

Germont is a figure not only of acceptable norms, then, but of extreme power, rendering him more threatening than sympathetic. But Lippucci also suggests that a more sympathetic image of Germont is so established at this point that it cannot entirely be displaced:

30. Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 251.

And yet, the conventional, well-intentioned—even sympathetic—Germont may not have been entirely displaced by this caricature. For the sympathetic Germont may, as Ponnelle suspects, simply have been marginalized to the stage in the heads of seasoned spectators where he continues to enact his traditionalist role in opposition to the revisionist role Ponnelle has devised for him (251).

For Lippucci, Germont continues to garner sympathy, to the extent that blocking that sympathy requires a concerted attempt, and the ways in which he attracts or deflects sympathy continue to be seen as central to the opera's moral status.

According to Susan Painter, a similar problem with Duval *père* has to be dealt with in Dumas' play. In her critique of *La dame aux camélias*, Painter points to this confrontation between bourgeois father and wayward woman as central to a highly problematic manipulation of sympathy with strong aspects of voyeurism. She writes,

At the very centre of the play's structure lies the entrance of Duval *père*. The assumption is confident: it is that the audience are committed to all that Duval embodies. He speaks for the perpetuation of male authoritarianism and in so doing he is not evil; he is not a villain. He merely puts the voice of bourgeois morality [*sic*].³¹

This is a dominant image of Duval *père* that feminist versions of the play have to undermine, Painter argues, just as Ponnelle's production has to displace a secure "traditionalist" role. But Victorian criticism suggests that Germont's sympathetic status was not entirely straightforward at its beginnings (even if a hundred and fifty years of performance and critical tradition have made it more secure). Audiences have always had to negotiate a tension between their sym-

31. Painter, "The Myth Revised," 126.

pathy for Violetta and for Germont (along with his unseen young daughter).

Painter's description of Duval as the voice of bourgeois morality is very similar to the image of Germont insistently given by the London press. Reviews often mention Germont, much more than Alfredo, and usually with references to his respectability and his sympathy for Violetta. In *The Times*, a review describes him as a "respectable old gentleman" and later a "good old gentleman" who, while at first severe with Violetta, acknowledges that she is not simply after his son's money, and moves to "a strain of supplication, intermingled with friendly warning."³² A French critic in *The Musical World* refers to Germont's "very legitimate grief" and to the baritone's performance of the role as displaying "much sentiment."³³ The *Illustrated London News* refers to him as a "venerable old gentleman" and dispassionately describes Germont's claims on Violetta.³⁴ Reviews also dwell on the extent to which Germont sympathizes with Violetta, here and in the Act 3 Finale, which helps to build an audience's sympathy for him. Germont's letter in the final act, for instance, is said to

32. *The Times* (26 May 1856), reprinted in *Dwight's Journal of Music* (21 June 1856): 93.

33. P. Scudo, *Musical World* (29 October 1859): 695.

34. *Illustrated London News* (31 May 1856): 588; reprinted in John, ed., *Violetta and her Sisters*, 231–6.

35. *Ibid.*

reveal that he is "moved by her noble self-sacrifice," and "cannot resist her sufferings."³⁵ The illustrations accompanying this review in the *Illustrated London News* also reveal a highly sympathetic Germont, in contrast to the raving Alfredo in the money-throwing episode of Act 2, scene 2 (figure 2). But one of the most telling representations of Germont is a set of illustrations of the 1856 London production (figure 3). In the drawings of the Act 2 duet and Violetta's death, Germont appears remarkably sympathetic with



Figure 2. “Scene from Verdi’s Opera, ‘La Traviata,’ at Her Majesty’s Theatre” (Act 2, scene 2), *Illustrated London News*, 31 May 1856.

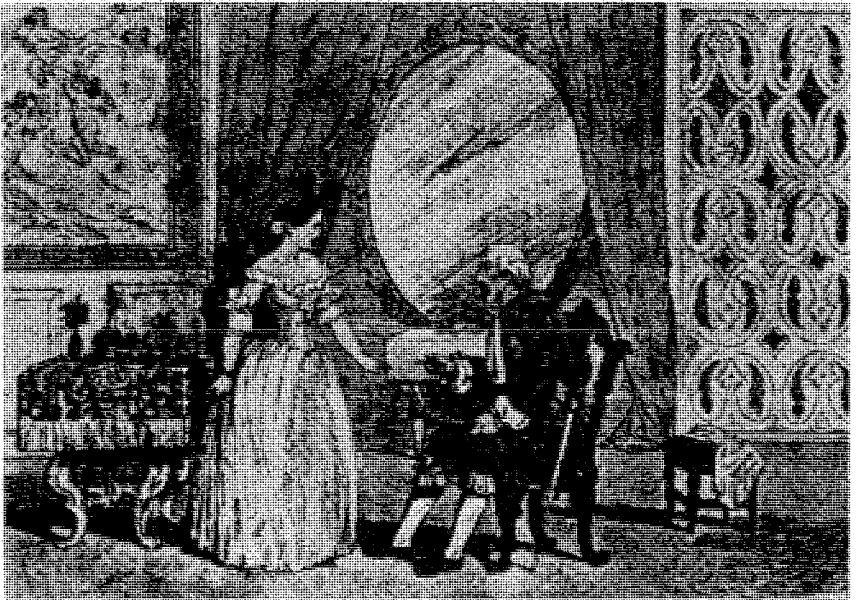


Figure 3. Illustrations of the first London performance by Crowquill. In Christiane Issartel, ed., *Les dames aux camélias: de l'histoire à la légende* (Paris: Chêne Hachette, 1981), 114.

Violetta, and also highly vulnerable. He is old, white-haired, with a costume slightly out of date in comparison with Alfredo's. In both cases he is shown seated or kneeling, looking up to her, reaching toward her in appeal. Especially in the illustration of the duet, the posture of Germont seated while Violetta stands is very striking. Compare this, for instance, to modern stagings of this scene such as the 1993 production by Liliana Cavani (which is hardly revisionist in its approach) where a noticeably younger Germont never sits, and at one point stands directly—almost threateningly—over Violetta as she sits weeping.³⁶ The London staging, by contrast—or at least this representation of it—renders Germont (and the moral order he represents) as highly vulnerable, with Violetta in a position of power that she voluntarily renounces.

There are also suggestions of a contemporary critique of Germont, however, in a French parody of *La Traviata* (figure 4). Here, over the caption "Mais le papa d'Orbel intervient en fa mineur," Germont is shown attempting to grip Violetta's heart with a large wrench while singing "Pure siccome un angelo" notated above him.³⁷ I wonder to what extent this perception of Germont hangs in the background of Victorian reception—in the insistence on his rectitude, in the attempts to accentuate his vulnerability. Germont, like Violetta, is a precarious object of sympathy, for we as spectators must sympathize in the full sense, identifying ourselves with him, while also granting Violetta a limited sympathy—limited in the same way as that granted to her by Germont. The ideal Victorian audience mirrors Germont in his con-

36. *La traviata*, Teatro alla Scala, Sony Classical S2LV48353, 1993, laserdisc.

37. D'Orbel is the title given to Germont in this cartoon. This is also a slightly confused representation of the duet, as F minor is established only in the following section, "Un di quando le veneri."



Figure 4.1. Parody of *La traviata*, from *Chronique Théâtrale*.
 In Issartel, ed., *Les dames aux camélias*, III.



Figure 4.2. Detail of figure 5.1.

strained sympathy for Violetta—a sympathy which recognizes pain but demands that it continue: as a critic in the *Leader* puts it, “The sacrifice which she makes to morality is felt by the audience to be not too great for its object, and yet they sympathise in the sacrifice.”³⁸ This sacrifice is presented by the *Leader* critic as a carefully balanced appeal to the sympathies, and it is imperative for moral order, as defined by the critic, that this balance be retained. The exchange between Germont and Violetta is the moment when this balance—this restriction on the sympathies—is laid bare, and consequently, it is the moment when it is most vulnerable, most available for questioning.

Verdi’s careful revisions to Germont’s vocal melody in the Act 2 duet suggest that he apprehended the dangers lurking here. A comparison of the final version of “Pura siccome un angelo” to Verdi’s sketches reveals a systematic attempt to avoid leaps in favor of predominantly step-wise motion, to delimit Germont’s range, and to avoid vocal display. This makes Germont’s character appear less threatening and manipulative, and more simple and straightforward (“without reserve,” as one Victorian reviewer approvingly says).³⁹ In the second phrase of this section, for instance, where the sketches show first a range of a ninth, then a seventh, the final version has a range of only a tritone (example 1). Verdi’s redistribution of the line and excision of a large leap also greatly reduces the upward thrust of the phrase and, with it, any suggestion of aggression on Germont’s part. At the close of this section, what was at first a soaring run is replaced by a very simple melody, elaborated with an inconsequential turning figure. Germont is made

38. “La Traviata in the Pulpit.” See note 18.

39. *The Times* (26 May 1856), reprinted in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (21 June 1856): 93.

Final version



Se_Al-fredo ne ga rie - de-re in se - noalla fa - mi - glia

1st sketch (transposed)



2nd sketch

**Example 1.**

Comparison of Verdi's sketches for "Pura siccome un angelo," Act 2, scene 1, m. 82. Compiled from Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata: schizzi e abbozzi autografi*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta (Parma: Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 2000).

more sympathetic here by giving him a less overt display of power, just as he is shown seated and frail in the portraits of the London staging.

That Verdi retained enough of Germont's threatening quality to make him highly ambiguous as an object of sympathy, however, seems significant. After all, there is plenty of power retained in his relentlessly repeated C's as he demands Violetta's sacrifice, counteracting his appearance of benevolence (example 2). But perhaps the most ambiguous aspect of his character and role is revealed in his exclamations of "piangi" as Violetta weeps before him later in the duet (example 3). What work do these cries accomplish? To some extent they are Germont's enacting of sympathy, his identification with Violetta's grief. At the same time these exclamations can be read as masochistic, as Germont revels in Violetta's tears while doing nothing to abate them; indeed, Germont seems as much to provoke tears as to participate in them in his employment of an upward-thrusting cry rather than a sigh motif.

There is enough ambiguity in Germont's approach to Violetta and in his musical character that an audience's reaction to him could be sympathetic or critical. This ambiguity is especially unsettling, however, because the response to Germont is so central in the formation of a larger attitude toward Violetta and her sacrifice.

"COME IN AND DIE, PICCOLOMINI"

Violetta's death is in some ways as problematic for modern critics as it was for Victorians. With ref-

97

Ger.

deh non mu - ta - te in tri - bo - li le ro - se del - l'a

99

Ger.

ff

pp stent.

stentate

mor... a' prie - ghi miei re - si - ste - re, no, no, non vo - glia il vo - stro cor, no, no.

col canto

Example 2.
 "Pura siccome un
 angelo," Act 2,
 scene I, m. 97.

249

Ger.

Pian - gi, pian - gi, pian - gi, o mi - se -

251

Ger.

ra, pian - gi, pian - gi, pian - gi... su - pre - mo, il veg - go

Example 3.

“Dite alla
giovine,” Act 2,
scene I, m. 249.

erence to Dumas' play, which she accuses of "tear-jerking manipulation," Painter criticizes "the audience's...punitive vindictiveness in seeing a whore die," and its "sentimental indulgence over an illness and death presented in a sanitized and glamorous way."⁴⁰ Painter suggests that revisionist performances rightfully "emphasize for us that it is not ethical for women to present this death uncritically for the satisfaction of voyeuristic spectators" (125).

Ponnelle's production similarly makes the treatment of Violetta's death central to rescuing the opera from a dubious ethical stance, Lippucci argues. To do this, Ponnelle has to discourage the audience from a reaction of pleasurable sympathy for Violetta in her self-sacrifice and death. And the way to accomplish this, Lippucci suggests, is to make the horrors of her victimization more explicit: "Ponnelle's device for discrediting Violetta's conventional role as a victim—which is really to say those operamakers and operagoers who condemn her to this role—is hyperbole: by inflating her status as victim to Christ-like proportions, he succeeds in demolishing it."⁴¹ But hyperbole is not the only device undermining our sympathetic response to Violetta's death. Another related method is to remove the kind of "glamorization" Painter talks about, through a process Lippucci calls "mortification":

One means of rescuing such a work is to 'mortify' it, that is, to strip it of its transitory beauty—the veil of illusion that ensnares traditionalist directors.... By stripping the narrative of its seductive worldliness and staging it as a ruin, [Ponnelle] exposed its mortality, its corruptibility as a form of historical life (263–64).

40. Painter, "The Myth Revised," 126.

41. Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 252.

Ponnelle accomplishes this mortification in his death scene, Lippucci goes on to describe, by exaggerating the ravages of Violetta's disease, and by leaving her on stage and more visible for a longer amount of time—all the way through the prelude to Act 3. "We seem to be witnessing a corpse with its eyes open—a death's head," Lippucci writes. "The longer we look at this grizzly creature the more discomfort we feel" (264).

Aspects of Lippucci's ideas and rhetoric here bear a striking resemblance to those of Victorian criticism. This concern with the audience's inappropriate pleasure—with removing *Traviata's* veil of illusion or seductive wordliness—sounds oddly familiar. The locus for these concerns has changed, to some extent at least, for where Victorians were troubled by the seductiveness of Violetta's prostitution, Lippucci is concerned with the religious aura surrounding her death. Where the Victorians wanted to block sympathy from her life as a courtesan and limit it—if allowing it at all—to her repentance and self-sacrifice, Lippucci wants to remove pity precisely from that repentance and death. Instead Lippucci seems to want a horrified repugnance.

But in fact horrified repugnance was exactly the response of many Victorian critics to Violetta's death, which was an object of controversy then as much as now. Rather than being seen as glamorous and seductive, the scene was criticized for being much too explicit and realistic. That realistic representations of physical suffering ought to be avoided on the stage seems to be a general theatrical rule on which there was real consensus, and it was a rule that *Traviata* definitely broke. A review in *The Musical World* states it thus:

A display of physical suffering upon the stage should, as much as possible, be avoided, and if the incidents of the drama require such display, they should be toned down and softened by the artists, not brought into full pathological relief.⁴²

For this writer, the London performances of *Traviata* violated this rule, with Piccolomini coughing incessantly through the last act.⁴³ Elsewhere, *The Musical World* criticizes the “display of the general and accurate progress of a mortal malady” in *Traviata* specifically.⁴⁴ The *Times* protests against “any further exhibition of consumption, dropsy, cancer, cholera, or hydrophobia upon the stage as necessary for the instruction and delight of mankind,” again with reference to *Traviata*.⁴⁵

Despite what some saw as an overly clinical portrayal of death, though, reviews also suggest that audiences were able to view it with fascination and pleasure—in short, voyeuristically. In many accounts, there is a marked fetishization of every detail of Violetta’s death, linked with a description of the audience’s intensely sympathetic response. The *Illustrated London News* reads,

As to the closing scene of the whole, we cannot attempt to describe it, made up as it was of a thousand minute traits of nature and feeling which went at once to the heart of every one, suffusing many bright eyes with tears, and moving even the most “unused to the melting mood.” Rachel’s dying scene in *Adrienne Lecouvreur* is the only thing to which we can compare it.⁴⁶

A critic in the *Saturday Review* recounts each shift in Violetta’s progress toward death in the final scene, focusing especially on realistic moments that provoked intense responses from the audience. Violetta’s reading of the letter is said to be performed “in a voice

42. *Musical World* (14 February 1857): 101.

43. In Paris, however, Piccolomini seems to have toned this down, with the cough no longer there and her suffering, this writer says, “expressed by the intonation of the voice and the feeble movements of the body.”

44. *Musical World* (25 October 1856): 683.

45. *The Times* (11 August 1856), reprinted in *Musical World* (16 August 1856): 524.

46. *Illustrated London News* (31 May 1856): 588.

so hollow and deathlike that we shudder while listening to it, as though we were in presence of the terrible reality.”⁴⁷ This critic refers to “a passion of grief too painful almost to watch.” At the same time, though, the writer indicates that Piccolomini balanced this kind of “truthfulness” with some “idealisation” in her portrayal of Violetta’s death, perhaps rendering the pleasure of watching it a little more acceptable to Victorian mores. A similar confusion of pain, pleasure, realism, and idealization is apparent in this detailed portrait of Violetta’s death in *The Musical World*.

Who of last night’s audience can forget the very attitude of the dying girl, as like the pale moon from behind a white-fringed cloud, she glided from her couch to a chair; or her sobs of agony and hectic cough breaking in on her plaintive song?... The dying scene was witnessed with intense emotion by the audience. One lady swooned in the upper boxes.⁴⁸

47. *Saturday Review* (31 May 1856): 105. This critic similarly admires the realistically detailed portrait of suffering earlier in the opera, after Alfredo denounces Violetta in Act

2: “She scarcely utters a word, but the anguish displayed in the bewildered gaze of the wide open eyes, the clenched hands, the blanched fast-closed lips, and the utter prostration of both body and mind was far more impressive than would have been the most heartrending strains.”

48. “Mdlle. Piccolomini in Dublin,” *The Musical World* (18 October 1856): 665–6, from *The Freeman’s Journal* (15 October 1856).

49. *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (23 August 1856): 167; from *The Times*.

This type of response, however, was also an object of critique. In the *Times*, we can find echoes of Painter’s dissatisfaction with “tear-jerking manipulation” and “voyeuristic spectators”:

The little artist dashed off her reckless champagne-lyric, and occupants of the stalls wagged their heads in accordance with the time; she gave a heartbroken shriek when parting from her lover, and, lo! The hearts of forty old *habitués* were rent in twain; she coughed herself to death before their eyes, and nothing was so fascinating as the last agony. “Come in and die, Ralph!” says the old citizen’s wife in Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, when she wants to see the apprentice act the closing scene of a tragedy. “Come in and die, Piccolomini” was the mental ejaculation of many a staunch *habitué*.⁴⁹

This review is very critical of the popular success of

Traviata, with remarks such as the above juxtaposed with the reviewer's own strong misgivings about the opera, which he calls "repulsive" due to the "physical and phthisical nature of the woes which it illustrated." In this review, the explicit nature of Violetta's illness and the audience's voyeurism seem to be closely intertwined. Another attack on *Traviata* (also in the *Times*) likewise seems to suggest a connection between this explicitness and a troubling voyeurism, referring particularly to female spectators, where the above review seems focused on the male spectator. Here the reviewer writes:

Deep and unmitigated censure would be the portion of an audience who could sit out such a spectacle, especially when that audience is for the most part composed of women. Surely in order to entertain an English lady, it is not necessary to take her for a saunter in the Haymarket at midnight, and to conduct her about 4 a.m. to the consumptive ward of an hospital that she may see a prostitute finish her career.⁵⁰

While one could interpret this statement as a patronizing effort to protect innocent women from the realities of everyday life, I think it is also possible to read it as a critique of a sentimentalism that treats suffering, whether on the stage or on the streets of London, as spectacle.

So Victorian criticism leaves us in a bit of a bind. It is unclear whether Violetta's death was "presented in a sanitized and glamorous way," in the style Painter so abhors, or whether it was shockingly realistic, in a manner Lippucci might have approved. Audiences seem to have been able to perceive either one. Moreover, *both* styles were seen to encourage a voyeuristic response, in slightly different ways. Of

50. *The Times* (7 August 1856), reprinted in *Musical World* (16 August 1856): 522.

these, voyeurism in response to a realistic and explicit portrayal of suffering was the more troubling, because it highlighted that crossover between spectatorial modes in the theatre and in daily life that Victorian critics found so disturbing in ways that perhaps haven't changed very much since.

But what does become clear here is that the continuum of responses that Victorian critics seem to have had in mind was not between voyeuristic pleasure and critical distance, but between voyeurism and some kind of real sympathetic identification. Indeed, while Painter's and Lippucci's notions of the death scene seem designed to open up a critical distance between the audience and Violetta's suffering, it is the potential for the *lack* of this distance that Victorian critics found most disruptive to their social norms, as we saw in the debate between Lumley and the *Times*.

In the Victorian reception of *Traviata*, there is a persistent tension between identification, voyeurism, and disgust in the response to Violetta. The anxiety that surrounded the sympathetic identification with Violetta suggests that it can—or at least once could—have the power to disrupt bourgeois structures of power. At the same time, however, sympathy was seen to slip into an easy acceptance and enjoyment of the spectacle of victimization. What Victorian criticism reveals is that Violetta's suffering—and audiences' tendency to enjoy it—has been troubling since the opera's beginnings. Our discomfort with it is not simply a matter of changing cultural values—or of our own moral superiority—but has to do with the ambiguity of the theatrical experience of sympathy, mixed up as it is with spectatorial pleasure

and inaction in the face of suffering, and the sympathetic identification with actions we cannot condone, whether they are Germont's or Violetta's. But perhaps trying to disrupt or block our sympathetic response to Violetta—besides being to some extent futile—is not the best way of addressing this problem. Perhaps we should be trying instead to recover some of the power of sympathy itself, in all its slipperiness and unpredictability.

