

FICTION AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS FICTION: ALEXANDRE DUMAS FILS AND LA DAME AUX CAMÉLIAS

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[...] remembrance does not proceed as mechanical reproduction but tends to creation. Hence autobiographies are not to be regarded as objective narratives. To regard them as merely sources of special historical information is usually to misconceive the character of this genre. The actual events of a life, outwards and inward alike, tend, indeed, to lose purely historical value for the very reason that they are recorded as the events of the narrator's own life, and every autobiography can be shown to be deficient in detailed accuracy. Our most ordinary recollections are impregnated in our own minds by distorting influences, and rarely remain free from self-deception; so that the whole body of recollection is an autobiography, even when it is entirely free from tendentiousness, must of necessity be regarded with scepticism.¹

On 2 February, 1852, Alexandre Dumas the Younger's play *La dame aux camélias* was produced at the Vaudeville Theatre in Paris. It was an instant success, made Dumas's name – he was twenty-seven – and became one of the most popular French plays of the nineteenth century. It was a landmark in French theatre for several reasons: it was one of the first dramas to take contemporary life as its theme; it was one of the first plays to show a modern – as opposed to a historical – courtesan in a sympathetic light; finally, it was well-known that much of the play was autobiographical. The significance of autobiography in Dumas's work is that it directs us as readers towards a deeper appreciation of an aesthetics whose origins lie deep within the personal experiences of the author.

In 1848, Dumas *fils* had already published a novel bearing the same title and had not concealed the fact that it was based on his own life, on his own love-affair with the courtesan Marie Duplessis, who had died of consumption in 1847. Many patrons in the first-night audience had known her, a few even figured as minor characters in the play; certainly everyone knew all about her, for her life and death had been subjects dear to journalists, men about town, and everyone interested in gossip – in other words, all of Paris. People still remembered Marie Duplessis's frequent appearances in a box at the theatre, when she was the cynosure of all eyes; they remembered her smart blue coupé, drawn by magnificent English thoroughbreds, in which she used to drive to the Bois de Boulogne. They remembered, too, the suction held in her apartment after her death to pay off her numerous creditors, when crowds of people, Dickens amongst them, had gone to wonder at the elegance and luxury in which a courtesan had lived, and to speculate about the scenes which had taken place against that sumptuous decor.

Marie Duplessis – her real name was Rose Alphonsine Plessis – was a peasant girl from Normandy. She had not come from a good home: her grandmother had been half-beggar, half-prostitute; her father was ill-natured, vicious, hard and debauched; his wife had left him, abandoning her two daughters. Alphonsine's father is said to have sold Alphonsine to some gypsies; at any rate, when she was about fourteen she turned up in Paris, starving, dirty and in rags. Within a relatively short time she became the best-dressed woman in Paris, a trend-setter, a celebrity.

Alphonsine's progress from rags to riches was, for the age, classical. At first she eked out a living as a *grisette*. A *grisette* was a Parisian girl who worked in 'clean' trades: dressmaking, sewing, embroidery, braiding, flowers and so on. Since *grisettes* were very badly paid, they were often, but not always, of easy virtue. Mimì, in Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1849) but less so in Puccini's opera, is a *grisette*. Alphonsine's first love-affairs may have been with poor students in the Latin Quarter, but they were probably more sordid. Eventually she found a restaurant-keeper who set her up in a modest way in a little flat. However, her extraordinary beauty soon caught the eye of a rich young nobleman – the Comte de Guiche, later Duc de Gramont, then aged twenty – and from then on she was launched on her career. She lived in luxury and opulence, with wealthy lovers heaping both attention and riches on her. These lovers were largely members of the exclusive *Jockey Club*, and were regarded as the fops and lions of Parisian high society.

Alphonsine's massive bills were paid by Count Gustav Stackelberg. A Russian diplomat, he retired in Paris and was at the time eighty years of age. Three of Stackelberg's daughters had recently died young of consumption; it is said that he was so struck by Alphonsine's likeness to one of them, and by the fact that she suffered from the same disease, that he offered to keep her in luxury, with no strings attached. Strange though this story may seem, usually reliable sources vouch for its truth. However, Dumas *fils* maintained that the Count's motives were less disinterested. Stackelberg occasionally accompanied Marie Duplessis, as Alphonsine Plessis now called herself, to the theatre; he does not seem to have objected to her numerous lovers.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, courtesans usually came from *le demi-monde*, to which neither Marie Duplessis, nor the later courtesans of the Second Empire, ever belonged. Since Dumas *fils* himself invented the expression after Marie's death in his play *Le Demi-Monde* (1855), and since he rightly foresaw that it would be misinterpreted, here is his own definition: "Let us establish, for dictionaries of the future, that the *Demi-Monde* does not, as people believe and say in print, represent the mob of courtesans, but the group of society people who have come down in the world. Not everyone who wants to belong to the *Demi-Monde* can do so".² Society women who, for some reason such as, for instance, an indiscreet love affair, an illegitimate child – in short, anything very exciting but highly improper – were no longer accepted by their peers, formed the *demi-monde*; their manners were acceptable but their morals were not. These women were often very short of money and, either from poverty or inclination, sometimes became courtesans. Since they were educated women, from the same social set as the men who frequented them, they could provide much more than sex; they could entertain and amuse with their witty conversation, they could organise elegant parties and provide intelligent conversation. The *demi-monde* was a supremely refined, exquisitely decadent, naturally permissive society.

Despite her humble origins, Marie Duplessis belonged to this tradition of refined and intelligent courtesans; she certainly did not resemble the courtesans of the Second Empire, coarse harpies such as Cora Pearl. Unlike them, she appears to have been sensitive, modest and intuitive, to have had what Liszt described as an "enchanting nature",³ to have had a heart. Unlike them, she was never responsible for scandals, debts, suicides. Sophistication came naturally to her, characterised by distinction in appearance, taste, and behaviour. She came across as well-bred without having had any breeding of any sort except one that was coarse and abusive. When she arrived in Paris she could only just sign her name, but she soon learned to write correctly, to ride, to dance, and play the piano, to behave like an accomplished lady. Her library was quite extensive: it consisted mainly of the Romantics – Dumas *père*, Lamartine, Musset, Walter Scott – but also included Molière, Cervantes and, significantly, Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731), which plays a prominent part in the novel of Dumas *fils*.

Above all acquired virtues, Duplessis learned to conduct intelligent conversation with her suitors and guests. This, perhaps, was her main charm and attraction. Jules Janin witnessed her first meeting with Liszt in a theatre. Liszt was enthralled by her conversation and they talked throughout a whole act of the play. "No coarse expression ever passed her lips",⁴ said an Englishman who knew her. "Lola Montés could not make friends. Alphonsine Plessis could not make enemies".⁵ Despite her way of life, Marie Duplessis retained a capacity for feeling and an innocence rare in her profession, which gave her an added piquancy. "She had been a *grisette*", said Dumas, "that is why she still had a heart".⁶ Liszt went further: "The habit of what one calls (and perhaps is) corrupting never touched her heart".⁷ She represented the Romantic heroine: thin, pale, with large dark eyes, she was melancholy and suffered from what Baudelaire famously called 'ennui', Musset's *mal du siècle*. Above all, she bore what was, ever since *Werther*, the greatest Romantic distinction: she was marked in the prime of youth by the fatality of a certain, early death. "I shall not live", she told Liszt. "I am an odd sort of girl and I will not be able to hold on to this life, which I don't know how to lead, and which I don't know how to bear, either. Take me, take me away wherever you like; I won't be in your way. I sleep all day, in the evening you'll let me go to the theatre, and at night you'll do what you like with me".⁸ Liszt did contemplate taking her to Constantinople but nothing came of it. He was profoundly moved by her death and said that, had he been in Paris when she died, he would have had his "quarter of an hour as Des Grieux".⁹

Dumas *fils* first met Marie Duplessis in 1844. They were both twenty years old at the time, but whereas Marie had already reached the summit of her career, Alexandre had not yet published anything and was merely the son of a famous father, a hard act to follow in any situation. The story of their meeting is exactly retold in Dumas's novel: Dumas figures as Armand Duval (Alfredo Germont in the opera), and Marie as Margeurite Gautier (Violetta Valéry in the opera). The course of their love-affair is described in the novel with many details and subsidiary characters taken from real life; the play is necessarily more schematic, the opera even more so. "However", writes Dumas, "Marie Duplessis did not have all the pathetic adventures which I ascribe to Marguerite Gautier, but she wanted nothing better than to have them. If she did not sacrifice anything to Armand, it is because Armand did not wish her to. To her great regret, she was only able to play the first and second acts of the drama".¹⁰ There are two important incidents in the drama that do not occur in real life. Firstly, Dumas *père* does not intervene in the love-affair and his character in no way resembles that of Duval *père* who, in the fiction, speaks for conventional morality. This is not at all the line of the author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, who is an excellent sensualist and bon vivant. The second important difference is that Dumas *fils* does not return

in time to have a reconciliation with his mistress, as Duval does in the stage version. The end of the story in real life is far more realistic than the drama and infinitely more poignant and tragic.

Just a year before she died, Marie left for London with the Vicomte Edouard de Perregaux, who was one of her protectors. They married in 1846, at the Register Office in Kensington, returning to Paris soon afterwards. The marriage was, in all probability, not legally recognised in France, and they both seemed to have regretted it anyway. They never lived together as husband and wife, and Marie did not use her husband's name, although she did sometimes use his title and his coat of arms. She died of consumption a fortnight after her twenty-third birthday. Of the many men who had been her friends or lovers, only her husband and, perhaps, old Count Stackelberg attended her funeral. Dumas was abroad at the time; when he heard the news he hurried back to Paris and, overwhelmed with remorse and nostalgia, wrote his novel in a few days. He probably was present, with Perregaux, when her body was later exhumed in order to be re-buried elsewhere. This grizzly scene is described in detail in his novel. Marie Duplessis became something of a cult figure; for many years after her death people used to place camellias on her grave.

The title of the novel and the play is Dumas's own invention. Marie Duplessis is never referred to as 'la dame aux camélias' in her lifetime. However, she did manifest a predilection for those flowers and almost always wore or carried them, partly because they were very expensive and she loved everything expensive, but mainly because they have no scent – scent made her feel faint. Dumas may have derived his title from the nickname of a certain Lautour-Mézeray, who was known as 'l'homme au camélia'. He was a dandy who never went out without a camellia in his button-hole and is reputed to have spent over 50,000 francs on this commodity.

Later, Dumas *fils* turned his novel into a play. At first it was banned by the censors, but it was finally produced after the accession of Napoleon III, thanks to his half-brother, the Duc de Morny. Although *La dame aux camélias* was a box-office success from the first, it did arouse a good deal of controversy. Many people felt that it was a glorification of vice, the product of a permissive society; others, more perceptive, discerned in it in embryo the moralising element which was soon to become an integral part of all the work of Dumas *fils* . The majority, however, accepted it simply as a moving human story. In *La dame aux camélias*, which is not typical of his work as a whole, Dumas *fils* for once outstrips his famous father, and creates a play that has stood the test of time. It has done so partly because in it, the younger Dumas expresses a deeply-felt personal experience, but it lives mainly because in the part of Marguerite Gautier he creates a magnificent opportunity for a great dramatic actress. Among the many great actresses from various countries who seized that opportunity were: Madame Doche (the first Marguerite), the legendary Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, Ludmilla Pitoëff, and Edwige Feuillère (Paris, 1937; London 1955). Amongst many famous productions, there was one by Meyerhold (1935). It was a very popular part of the silent cinema; there were eleven versions between 1907 and 1927, including one by Sarah Bernhardt in 1911. On the screen the part has been played by Yvonne Printemps (1934) and the legendary Greta Garbo in *Camille*, 1937. To date, Mauro Bolognini's 1981 version with Isabelle Huppert as Marguerite is the twenty-third film to be based on Dumas's play.

What is at work in Dumas's work is the creative nature of memory. At the end of the first performance of his play, Dumas's friends asked him if he was going on to a party to celebrate its success. He replied that he was not, as he was spending the evening with a lady. He then went to have a quiet supper with his mother. This anecdote contains the key to Dumas's life and work, and particularly to his relationship with Marie Duplessis, for he was illegitimate and the difficulties both he and his mother had had as a result had marked him profoundly. Dumas's mother, Catherine Labay, who had also been a *grisette*, had lived with Dumas *père* when he first came to Paris, aged twenty-one, and was quite unknown. When he became famous, he abandoned her but he recognised his son with whom he was very friendly and affectionate, despite the difference in their characters. Catherine Labay was a virtuous and hard-working woman and she was adored by her son. He had seen what she had suffered on his behalf and he himself had suffered taunts at school about his illegitimacy. His mother's difficult life had made him able to see the woman's point of view better than most men of his time and had made his relationship with Marie different to the relationships she usually had with men. Dumas was sympathetic to women who, at that time, could barely earn a decent living without resorting to prostitution. He was also very understanding of the predicament of illegitimate children and was shocked by the callous treatment women often received from men. He campaigned all his life against these social ills and in this respect can be called a pioneer of women's liberation – indeed, he was the first to use the word '*feministe*' in 1872.

However, Dumas was far from supporting feminism in all its aspects. As he grew older and society under

Napoleon III became ever more permissive, he became an ever more intransigent moralist. He desired to defend the family and family life, something he himself had never had. He waged war on adultery in any form for any reason and even maintained that a husband could and should kill an adulterous wife! All this in theory: Dumas was himself an adulterer and had an illegitimate child. Like many moralists, he did not practise what he preached. Many of his ideas were far-fetched but some were not and his numerous writings on illegitimacy and the problems of unmarried mothers did much to change public opinion and, thus, eventually, French legislation. Dumas's Preface to the 1868 edition of *La dame aux camélias* is a passionate defence of 'fallen' women, and an attack on 'respectable' marriages for money or position, which he considered, as Tolstoy did, to be another form of prostitution.

The first performance of Dumas's play coincided with the birth of the Second Empire, an epoch to which Marie Duplessis had never belonged and which represented everything that Dumas *filis* deplored. Under Napoleon III's despotic regime, which silenced public opinion and took all political initiative away from the French people, the nation, encouraged by the court, gave itself up to money-making and the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. It clearly marks the birth of Decadence as a way of life, as a mood rather than a movement. What emerges is an affluent, empty and cynical society. Paris became what it had never been before, but what it still remains in the imagination of some foreigners: the world centre for night life and sexual permissiveness. Dumas himself laid the blame for this on the newly-invented railways, which had made access to Paris easier for provincial Frenchmen and foreigners. Marie Duplessis, with her melancholy ennui, her love of poetry, and her romantic belief in the possibility of love, would have had no place in the Second Empire. She belonged, rather, to the Romanticism of 1830. In 1868, Dumas himself said that his play could not have been written then. "Not only would it no longer be true, it would no longer be possible".¹¹ By then, men no longer expected companionship, culture or refinement from courtesans, who had become merely expensive prostitutes, conspicuous symbols of decadent affluence.

The poignancy of Dumas's play lies in the fact that Art uses the space offered up by fiction to explore the relationship between life and art. The closeness of fiction to autobiography is an intentional trope which allows Proust to make the perilous journey from the personal to the universal. As in Proust's *A La Recherche* and Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Art presents itself a means of making available to a public a personal vision, a revelation "which, if there were no art, would remain forever the secret of every individual".¹² The correspondences between Marcel and his creator, then, go far beyond mere autobiographical disclosure. *La dame aux camélias* is no memoir: it is a monument marking a lifetime's quest after a truth rarely glimpsed. Autobiography here is a matter of both remembering and remembering, a recollecting and a re-collecting, an aide memoire and a striving to put together fragments that may not be "well shored up against ruin".¹³

The Libretto and the Opera

Amami Alfredo, quant'io t'amo

Any comparison of Piave's libretto with the play will show how much he preserves of what is admired in Dumas's work. Contemporaries used to the clichés of Romanticism noted the play's *simplicité* and *fraicheur*. It does not depend on improbable coincidences, the characters were not stereotyped, and the language was realistic. Piave moulds the unusually informal sequence of scenes that make up the play's five Acts into four scenes, concentrating on three principal characters. In these he keeps closely to the characterisation and directly translates whole passages into Italian verse.

Piave differs most from Dumas in the first Act. His opening scene nevertheless captures the spontaneous gaiety of the original. Dumas had to add a song here because the licence of one of the theatres, where he hoped the play would be accepted, demanded that *couplets* should be included at all performances. The dance is a Polka, the most fashionable dance in Paris in the 1840s. Piave takes trouble to ensure (by his late arrivals, the *brindisi* and the general surprise that there will be dancing) that Violetta's reception, although much larger and more opulent than Marguerite's intimate supper party, is not at all formal. Her delight in the pleasures of the moment, the ephemeral and the transitory remains not only an intrinsic part of her existential way of life, at least initially, but also a necessary aspect of her exquisite charm.

Dumas makes a point of Marguerite's straightforward way of speaking when she meets Armand. However, when Armand talks of love his language is poetic. "*Aimes moi*", says Marguerite, "*comme un bon ami...*" to which Armand romantically replies, "*Voulez-vous être aimée ... d'un amour profond, éternel?*" Carried away by an unexpected new emotion she invites him to return when the flower she has given him as faded – "*l'espace d'un soir ou d'un matin*" – a line that has been compared to Malherbe: "*Et rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses, l'espace d'un matin*".¹⁴ Dumas's Act ends in laughter as the guests make fun of the long tête-à-tête in a raucous peasant wedding chorus. Piave collects miscellaneous epigrams from the Act ("*Ce qui me soutient, c'est la vie fiévreuse que je mène*", "*Puisque j'ai à vivre moins longtemps que les autres, il faut bien que je vive plus vite*")¹⁵ for Violetta's *scena*, inspired by Marguerite's self-questioning soliloquy in the second Act. Otherwise, the librettist eliminates this Act, in which four days after meeting him Marguerite makes practical arrangements for a country retreat with Armand.

The play's third Act is set in Auteuil, which is not in the 16th arrondissement of Paris and was then a fashionable suburb. Dumas probably relocates it from Bougival, ten miles from Paris, where it is in the novel, in order to make the quick journeys to Paris more credible on the stage. Marguerite's interview with Duval – the pivotal scene of both play and opera – is almost directly translated into the libretto. Verdi matches Duval's stiff language with four-square musical forms. The sentiments expressed here by Dumas for the first time are to be repeated with an almost over-riding obsession in his later plays. The contrasting tragic lyricism of Marguerite's replies may be illustrated by the lines:

Ainsi, quoi qu'elle fasse, la creature tombée ne se relevera jamais!
Dieu lui pardonnera peut-être, mais le monde sera inflexible!¹⁶

The Act ends with Armand's angry cry when he reads Marguerite's letter and with his father's embrace. The next Act takes place a month later. Although his letter will be read aloud in the final Act, Duval does not reappear. By introducing him into other scenes so as to tighten the dramatic conflict, Piave rather strains the credibility of the plot but enables Verdi to achieve unforgettable, if melodramatic, effects.

Apart from the fancy-dress choruses, the libretto follows the fourth Act of the play closely until Duval's unexpected arrival. Violetta, unlike Marguerite, does not, however, explain that she is late because she has come from *La Favorita* at the opera – an ironic, if telling, remark that gives Armand an opportunity to comment that that is another story of a woman faithless to her lover. He has, so far, pointedly compared their relationship to *Manon Lescaut* a number of times. Dumas closes the Act with the Baron's challenge. The opera's final Act differs in some interesting details but not essentials: the progress of her illness is similarly charted, the carnival is observed and the religious overtones are retained. The last lines of the play are:

Dors en paix, Marguerite! Il te sera beaucoup pardonné parce que
tu as beaucoup aimée.¹⁷

It may be regretted that the character of Prudence Duvernoy, an older woman who interests herself in Marguerite's affairs, should have been eliminated from the libretto entirely, for the role of Flora in the opera certainly does not fill Prudence's shoes. Part of Marguerite's soliloquy, which inspired "*É strano!*" is, in the novel, Prudence's exposition to Armand of the true situation. "Women like that imagine that they will be loved but not that they will love".¹⁸ The irony is, of course, that the truth is that "Women like that know they will love but not that they will be loved". Violetta's generosity to the poor in the last Act was originally a scene where Prudence borrows almost half Marguerite's remaining funds to buy presents. Dumas is even more explicit about her financial difficulties in the novel: Marguerite's possessions are security for her debts and she has scarcely any money, even for medicine, because nothing can be sold. "You would not believe amidst what luxury Madame is dying",¹⁹ writes the maid to Armand, pointing disapprovingly at Prudence's behaviour. In short, Prudence reminds us of practical and mercenary aspects of Marguerite's character that do not interest Verdi.

La dame aux camélias has been well described by Ghéon as the "bourgeois flower of romanticism".²⁰ Dumas observes Armand's love and romantic idyll of a country retreat with an unsentimental eye. Courtesans of previous centuries have been portrayed on the stage in Romantic drama. One remembers Victor Hugo's *Marion Delorme* (1831), for instance, and Balzac's novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1843) depicts the heroine as a victim of a ruthless society. Dumas shows a contemporary courtesan taking practical steps to change her life. Her capacity for self-sacrifice contrasts with the selfishness of both disreputable Prudence and respectable Duval, and her passionate sincerity is all the more appealing because she knows that a vile society will not allow her to forget her past. She is dispassionately aware

of the reasons why she will never enjoy the new life for which she longs. Her frightening existentialism dissipates in the face of love. Love gives her the hope that she has never had but the cruel hand of realism steps in and the blossom is nipped in the bud by a Baudelairean swipe of the *fleurs du mal*, namely, death. In this regard, Verdi considers Gemma Bellincioni an outstanding interpreter of the role. Perhaps she brings to it a flavour of those *verismo* roles she creates and for which she makes herself so famous – Santuzza, rejected by the Church and the villagers because her lover betrayed her, in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and the tormented heroine of Giordano's *Fedora*, whose happy marriage in an idyllic country retreat is shattered by forces she has herself set in motion years earlier.

Verdi's choice of *La dame aux camélias* as the subject for an opera is both original and a stroke of genius. There is no work in which he can have found a model for such an opera. Admittedly, the medium affects the message. One may suspect that the heroine of the original true life story of Dumas *fil's* love affair with a courtesan is hardly acceptable as a role for an operatic diva of the 1850s. Even in Dumas's novel in which he first idealises her, she is, although a woman of charm and grace, a swearing, drinking young woman who is far from the conventional heroine. Her red camellias worn on the days of the month when she is 'not available' acknowledge a physical fact not generally referred to in polite society. In the play, which Dumas takes one further step from reality this meaning of the camellias does not feature, along with the lewd language – and also much of the obvious enjoyment of the promiscuity in which the heroine indulges. From the play it is not a far cry to Piave's libretto, and although there are necessary cuts that may damage its delicate psychology, as Ernest Newman alleges, the courtesan now emerges as the victim of self-sacrifice that fits in well with the conventions of romantic opera. However, this hitherto unknown approach to realism poses such problems that Verdi never attempts such a subject again and when the *veristi* of the *fin-de-siècle* follow up his suggestion they vulgarise his conception.

The difficulties are, in the first place, those of a musical language. Of its nature, *verismo* does not spare anyone's feelings apart from the fact that it inevitably asks for a total reconfiguring of musical structure. This involves taking leave of the old paradigm of cavatina followed by a cabaletta, and the heavy dependence on arias. Verdi, never a revolutionary (but always an innovator), more or less sorts out these difficulties in *Rigoletto*, with just one fully-fledged aria, the *Caro Nome*, with its utilisation of a sophisticated *recitativo accompagnato* followed by an *arioso*. In this regard, Verdi is influenced by his predecessors, Rossini and Donizetti, who, by giving the melodic interest to the orchestra are able to allow the action on the stage to develop naturally without the singers engaging in rigid, predetermined structures. The strong, regular musical phrases, the constant repetition of tight, short, rhythmic motives, no doubt appropriate to the heroic figures of historical drama such as a Nabucco or an Attila, do not fit the bourgeois, un-heroic (in the traditional sense) characters of this new style of story. A more conversational melody has to be created, for both orchestra and voice. When Verdi says that he considers *Rigoletto* his favourite from the professional point of view, he probably means that he has succeeded in precisely this. When he declares his leanings for *La Traviata* as an amateur (a word that implies 'love' rather than 'technical perfection') he may well have been referring to his compromise – for there is much of the old *cavatina* / *cabaletta* here, although subsumed into the continuous flow of music in such a highly imaginative way that one may agree to disagree with his own assessment: for what is greater skill than the assimilation of existing, well-tried and tested forms into something new, integrating the past with the present in a seamless fabric of wonderful music?

Finally, there is a need for a new orchestration. Again, *Rigoletto* has led the way. The composer who uses the low register of the clarinet and the high one of a muted double bass to convey the sinister atmosphere of the assassin's alley near the Mincio is ready for further adventures in sound. It is in *La Traviata* that these succeed.

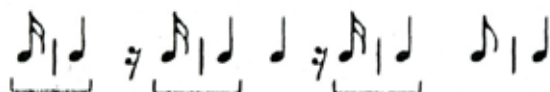
Act One

The Prelude to Act One shows at once a new approach to Italian opera. It is a tone picture in two parts. The opening, which is heard again at the beginning of Act Three when Violetta is dying, is an expression of the weak constitution of the heroine. The delicacy of the scoring is extremely beautiful, the violins divided in a way not unlike that in the overtures to Wagner's hauntingly beautiful *Lohengrin*, Weber's *Euryanthe* (neither of which Verdi probably knew at this time) and Verdi's own *Aida*.²¹ The dynamic markings insist both on the quietest of tone and sustained sound achieved through the displaced accents, while the heartbreak is conveyed by the broken motif as the melody rises to its climax. The second phase has the famous melody associated with Violetta's love for Alfredo. The dynamics again are full of *pianissimos*, with *forte* only at the moments of passion when the violoncellos burst twice into

the *diminuendo*. After this it almost comes as a shock for the curtain to go up on a party and on brash and brilliant party music. This music, which would normally be played by a wind band on stage, as in *Rigoletto*, is now given to the orchestra in the pit and it is soon plain that this is part of the building up of a natural atmosphere, for the voices seem to be in competition with the music as at real parties while the tunes change from time to time in the manner of dances at balls. Against this, the characters are introduced to us – and to each other: Violetta and her multitudinous guests who include her ‘protector’ the Baron, her friend Flora, and the young attractive Alfredo, who is introduced by one Gaston. As yet they are not strongly differentiated, and it is only as they take supper that the situation begins to emerge. The Baron is already jealous of Alfredo who, Gaston has revealed, had called at Violetta’s house every day two years ago when she had been ill. When she asks the Baron to lead a toast, he refuses. She passes the invitation over to Alfredo, who is more than willing to accept.

The following *brindisi* is the first real interruption to the dance music and yet its insertion does not seem to break up the continuity. Verdi has, in any case, finished in the ‘wrong’, in the sense of unexpected, key so as to make the conclusion of the section indecisive. Drinking songs have a habit of being an incitement to dramatic action, both in Shakespeare and in Verdi – think of Iago’s *Drinking Song* in *Othello*, Stephano and Trinculo’s similar revelry in *The Tempest*, and Shakespeare’s own *Drinking Song* in *Macbeth*. It is a seemingly harmless ploy used by these two geniuses to alienate the attention from the public to the private, from the mundane to the psychological. It enables the dramatist and the composer to shift focus and to suddenly home in with a brilliant spot-light on the main characters and the true course of action, while the rest of the public is suddenly obscured in darkness.

Like the Duke of Mantua’s *ballata* in *Rigoletto*, which arrives at the same stage in the action, the *brindisi* is a direct, memorable tune. The chorus, as is normal in such circumstances, is unaware of the deeper meaning of the song and takes up the melody without danger – it is just a way of further joining in in the fun, as it were, hardly sensitive to the subsequent division of the melody between Violetta and Alfredo, which is a natural way for the two protagonists of showing their increasing affection. The dance music is resumed but suddenly Violetta feels faint, to the alarm of her guests, most especially Alfredo. The fact that life goes on inexorably is pointed out by the sublime indifference of the band which continues playing the waltz while the lovers, now alone, have the opportunity to reveal their feelings – a broken, consumptive melody for Violetta and Alfredo’s ardent love shown by the gradual building up of his part into what at first seems to be an aria. ‘*Un dì felice*’ is memorable for its insistence on a rhythmic fragment:



which is welded into the grand climax that seems vaguely familiar because it is related to the second section of the Prelude. There is also an unexpected turn to the minor key to express the mysterious delights of love.



The aria now turns into a duet as Violetta replies with flirtatious *fioriture*. Her increasing love comes in later phrases, where falling chromatic figures convey deeper feeling perhaps new even to her. There is a duet cadenza, which is the first real reminder of operatic convention. Then Gaston returns and, with him, the insensitive, superficial world suggested by the waltz. Alfredo and Violetta bid their farewell to one another, and the guests depart to the opening music of the Act. At this moment one realises that there have been events but no conspicuous break in the music, no recitative, no formal arias – although plenty of splendid tunes. How it has been done is almost miraculous and, such is the extended nature of the scene that to call the final stage of the party *Stretta dell'Introduzione Atto 1* almost seems absurd.

We are now far into the play. Only from the singer’s point of view can it be so imagined for now comes the first true recitative and aria. Violetta is alone and muses over the events of the evening. Her recitative

is so well thought out that we must wonder whether the orchestra's first notes should be a dramatic *tremolando* or a measured, quasi-thematic motif (the notation could mean either). In any case, the aria is masterly and a *cavallo di battaglia* for any soprano worthy of her stuff. Its first section, 'Ah, fors'è lui' in the minor key reveals Violetta's new-found love. The second phase, 'A quell'amor' is Alfredo's proclamation of his love, 'Di quell'amor', in the major key as it must be, but complete with the mysterious tinge of the minor key – that juxtaposition of 'croce e delizia' which is the essence of the opera. The second strophe complete with cadenza is often omitted in performance. In accompanied recitative she numbers the reasons for putting aside this fantasy. With a cadenza, she tells herself to enjoy her habitual hedonistic life of superficial flirtation, and the following *cabaletta*, 'Sempre libera' would conclude the matter, as far as she is concerned, in a conventional opera. However, Alfredo ruffles things and is heard singing of his love and yet again of 'croce e delizia' beneath the balcony. Violetta's mood infects this too, and her brilliant melismatic runs express her feverish excitement and her frantic determination not to succumb to something only she is able to realise is much bigger than herself.

Act Two

Critics have noted that by cutting out the emotional development embodied in the second Act of Dumas's play, where the point is made that the lovers cannot afford to live together unless the heroine continues to give herself to her rich protector, Piave and Verdi have made a rather abrupt transition to the already-achieved domesticity of their second Act. However, opera does not need to work in the manner of a well-made play and can assume gaps of several months in the action. Within a few bars of its opening, Act Two seems quite natural in atmosphere.

The scene is a bourgeois country house near Paris, and Alfredo enters in bourgeois country clothes. After a few bars of introduction he tells the audience of his contentment living with his beloved. He does this in an initially conventional *recitativo stromentato*. This moves into an *arioso* for a moment of passionate expression of his delight that Violetta has also given up her past life for him, leading naturally into the aria 'De' miei bollenti spiriti', its urgency of emotion conveyed partly by the strange orchestral accompaniment with repeated notes by bowed cellos and basses and plucked upper strings, partly by the rapid alternations of *forte* in the tenor's upper register and *pianissimo* phrases.

The atmosphere is broken by a return to the brittle quaver figure that has been heard in the brief introduction to the Act. The maid, Annina, comes in breathless and, in answer to his question, replies that she has been to Paris to sell her mistress's horses and carriages to pay for the expensive luxury of an idyllic country life. To the brittle quavers is now added a rhythm more often associated with funereal marches, as Alfredo realises the disastrous situation and his hitherto extraordinary lack of sensitivity and perception. The march-like rhythm and quaver figure turn into the expression of his determination to ride to Paris to remedy the situation. His next set piece, 'O mio rimorso' is really the *cabaletta* to 'De miei bollenti spiriti', although it has been inserted into the actions so cleverly that one hardly notices that, and it comes the nearest to the grand manner of *Il Trovatore* that is to be found in the opera, with insistent vocal motifs and military rhythms in the orchestra. When he leaves, Violetta enters with Annina who explains that he has gone to Paris. There is now the first piece of extended recitative in the opera as Violetta first reads a letter from Flora inviting her to a ball, an invitation Violetta is not disposed to accept. Then, her manservant announced a guest who introduces himself as Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont. He accuses her of ruining his son, who has expressed his intention of selling his possessions. The truth is very different, she says, giving him a paper proving that it is she who is selling her property. Germont is taken aback (the orchestra underlines this with a curious short repeated phrase) but suggests that it is her guilty past that is making her do this. In a great outburst she says that it is her love for Alfredo that governs her life now. Germont realises that he must appeal to her to make a noble sacrifice. Even before he asks her to leave his son, she feels the impending disaster, as the orchestral *tremolando* makes abundantly clear. His plea opens the duet 'Pura siccome un angelo', whereby he tells her that she is ruining the chances of marriage for Alfredo's sister. Violetta's anguished reply is given first in a kind of broken recitative as the orchestra develops an agitated figure; and the passionate ebb and flow of the argument between them is expressed by swift changes of tonality culminating in Violetta's statement of the depth of her love for Alfredo that clearly Germont cannot understand. The brevity of phrase, and repetitiveness of the melody lead into a truly expansive section 'Ah il supplizio è sì spietato', which takes Germont aback.



He admits that giving up Alfredo will be a great sacrifice for her – but then pursues his case. She is still young and beautiful, but in the way of things, Alfredo is unlikely to remain in love with her as she grows older – and then what will happen? The nagging insistence of yet another short motif wears her down and eventually she gives in. She tells Germont in a most memorable, lyrical passage that he can tell his daughter that she will sacrifice herself, *'Dite alla giovine'* and Germont is moved and comforts her in a melody that frequently clashes against the harmonies.

Verdi here miraculously draws the two themes together as the two of them grieve in their very different ways. The climactic cadenza finished, they have to take practical steps. In recitative Germont tells her that she has to tell Alfredo that she had never in fact loved him – but she knows that Alfredo will just not believe her. If she leaves him he will follow. To give her courage, she asks Germont to embrace her and then she sits down to write a note to her beloved. From *arioso*, the music moves into another quasi-march rhythm as she thinks she will die, while Germont attempts to comfort her that her present anguish will mellow with time, enabling her to forget and resume her happiness. Before Germont leaves, they again embrace indicating the true emotional bond that has grown between them. The musical motif of the word *'sacrifizio'* underlines Violetta's mood and after Germont has gone, the rhythm provides a link with the next stage of the action. She rings for Annina to take a note to an address that surprises the maid (although we are not told it) – and the strangeness of Violetta's mood is hinted at in a hesitant, anguished melody for the clarinet.

Violetta is put into confusion by Alfredo's return. Alfredo is clearly baffled by the change in atmosphere and a nervously inconsequential conversation follows, as tends to happen in moments of heightened consciousness. This is a moment where the music never seems to develop properly. Suddenly, Violetta cries out *'Amami Alfredo, quanto t'amo'*. This is the supreme psychological moment of the opera, when Violetta is utterly isolated and in extreme solitude, distanced from the only powerful source of emotional nourishment she had ever known in her life. Rather than addressing these words to him – that is a futile exercise anyway for he can neither understand the context in which she is speaking, nor grasp the horrendous inference of her words – Violetta seems to be speaking her heart out to herself. It is a moment of a kind of supreme self-knowledge that opera has ever presented us with. The melody, which is related to her expression of love in their Act One duet, *'Di quell'amor'* now appears in the form we first heard it in the Prelude, *con passion e forza* is the instruction – but it is mercifully brief for the emotional intensity is strained to unspeakable heights. Bidding him a quick goodbye, significantly turning to the minor key for just a single note, she runs out into the garden.

Alfredo, not surprisingly, is now completely out of countenance. A servant enters with Violetta's letter. Alfredo has only to read the opening to realise she has left him, and jumps to the erroneous assumption that she has returned to the luxuries provided by her old protector. His anguish is as sudden as Violetta's had been a few minutes ago (the change of key and the use of the orchestral *tutti* are both very similar) but his father, having entered from the garden, tries to comfort him by singing an expressive aria which attempts to bring him to his senses by reminding him of his family home in Provence. This is very consistent in tone with his patriarchal address to Violetta earlier. Alfredo is not really convinced, the unease returns both between the strophes of the aria and at its end. He catches sight of Flora's invitation, guesses where to find Violetta and dashes off, followed by his father, to confront her.

The scene changes to Flora's mansion, the mood of the party music of Act One returns and, as earlier, a conversation between the characters is given musical continuity in the orchestra. A ballet of fancy-dressed

guests begins with a group of gypsies. During this episode, Flora engages in gossip with friends. Will Violetta come (presumably with the Baron, who seems now again to be in favour) or will Alfredo, who has also been invited? The ballet resumes with Spanish bullfighters, much applauded by the other guests, including Flora's immediate friends. The gaiety is interrupted by the entrance of Alfredo, who is followed shortly by Violetta on the arm of the Baron. The minor key, a shifty theme played by violins and clarinets in uncomfortable lower register, conveys the immediate sense of deep unease. Violetta is taken aback on seeing Alfredo and her anguish is clear from her phrase '*Ah, perchè veni incauta?*' the lyricism of which is strangely at odds with the tense, febrile music of the others. Alfredo insists on playing at cards for high stakes with his rival (as it seems to him), the Baron. Alfredo cleans him out, the atmosphere electric as the Baron needles him with the saying '*sfortuna nell'amore, fortuna reca l'giuoco*'. The tension is broken when all go off to supper. There is an uneasy cadence before Violetta returns followed by Alfredo. She tells him to leave at once. Alfredo believes that she thinks it might come to a duel in which the Baron might be killed, but in heroic tones expressed in another finely rhythmic melody, he sings that he does not care whether he, Alfredo, will die because he will have had his revenge.

Violetta protests that it is not the Baron for whom she is afraid but him. He tells her that if this were so she should leave with him but she declines. To a significant and terrifying orchestral *tutti* he flings open the door of the ante-room and calls the others to hear. His accusation is made in yet another melody built from short repetitive rhythmic motifs: this woman spent her fortune on me – now I pay her back. He flings his winnings on the floor. There is a moment of pandemonium while everybody sings *velocissimo*, accusing Alfredo of appalling indecorous behaviour towards someone so generous and noble in heart. Germont the elder, who has arrived unannounced, takes control. He is ashamed of his son and is prepared to disown him. Alfredo, in a nervous motif, is shocked, while Violetta despairingly says that he understand nothing of her love – a subtle reference to her earlier '*Amami Alfredo, quant'io t'amo*'. From these different emotions one of the greatest ensembles in Italian opera is built up, as usual in Verdi, with an exquisite melody:



surrounded by significant subsidiary figures. Verdi, with insight and tact, dispenses with any *stretta* or superficial working up to an artificial fast climax.

Act Three

The extraordinary and beautiful Prelude to this Act begins with the music with which the opera starts, and is similarly scored, but after a few bars the theme is differently developed, for there is now no place for the lively, passionate love theme associated with Alfredo. All is impending death, as is revealed when the curtain rises on Violetta's bedroom. La Traviata is gravely ill and attended only by Annina. The themes of the Act's Prelude are used as the background to the conversation of mistress and maid and the doctor, who tries to cheer up Violetta with comforting words about convalescence. On the way out, he reveals to Annina the truth: there is so little time left, nor remains there much money. Violetta's only comfort is the letter sent her by Giorgio Germont that she reads aloud, solo strings playing Alfredo's '*Di quell'amor*' as she remembers that very first meeting. The emphasis is now surely on the first word of '*croce e delizia*' – the music breaks off suddenly. In a sepulchral voice (the instruction is Verdi's) she speaks: '*È tardi*' for Alfredo's return promised in Germont's letter. She tries to get up, she looks at her withered body in the mirror and realises that the only embrace she will now know is the cold one of death. She sings her farewell to life '*Addio del passato*', a remarkable aria based, as so often in Verdi, on a short motif that recurs in about every bar. The cruellest part of her destiny is that Alfredo, her love for whom is expressed in a single expansive phrase, is not here to comfort her – the oboe's echoes of her obsessive little motif convey the essence of loneliness. Then, as is supposed to happen with consumptives, she suddenly finds her strength again and begs for divine pardon on a penitent sinner. This short passage in the major key gains its musical strength by the orchestral scoring, thick at both bottom and top, the yawning gap in the middle somehow embodying the emptiness of Violetta's life:

Violetta

del-la tra - via-ta sor - ri - di al de - si - o, a

pp legg *f*

fls. obs. vlns. ds. vlns.
cellos piaz. bores arco

but it is too late – the motif of the first section returns and she finishes each strophe on a top A *un fil' di voce* – no doubt impossible for consumptives yet extraordinarily evocative and moving.

Carnival revellers are heard outside to underline that, as ever, people may be dying but life goes on. Then, in one of the very few musically weak passages in the whole opera, Annina comes in excitedly to tell Violetta that Alfredo has arrived: the obvious link passage is forgiven when he comes in and with an enormous outburst Violetta throws her arms around him. Their excitement is expressed by commonplace but effective broken chords in the orchestra. For a moment, hope returns and Alfredo proposes that they should leave Paris and live together. Violetta sings the second strophe of this duet and then they sing together – but “the fragility of their future prospects is underlined by a curious chromatic figure that keeps recurring”,²² ‘*de’ corsi affani*’ and is developed into the final cadenza. Realism returns and in another weak musical link, Violetta suddenly goes limp and becomes pale, compelling Alfredo to send Annina to fetch the doctor. There is a thunderous chord on the brass and Violetta realises that if Alfredo’s return cannot revive her, she is indeed doomed. The lovers sing another duet of quite a different kind, ‘*Gran Dio! Morir si giovane*’, the effect of which is mainly achieved by having the initial *forte* giving way to an extended *pianissimo*, together with pitting the softer bars with the more robust ones.

Dramatically and musically there is one final peak that the dying heroine achieves; then all is lost. Germont arrives, although his words of comfort that he now considers her as his daughter, hardly seem enough. The funereal chords that often convey a sense of doom in Verdi (as in the ‘*Miserere*’ scene of *Il Trovatore*) usher in the last stage, as all the characters are now present. Violetta’s heroic nature (as opposed to what could have been made into one of pathos, as in Puccini’s similar consumptive in *La bohème*) is made still clearer by her hope that Alfredo will find a suitable bride. Hers is an active not just a passive love. She suddenly revives, to a wild version of ‘*Di quell’amor*’ even ending on a top Bb; then falls back dead, leaving the others to grieve.

Verdi never repeated this type of intimate contemporary subject. After 1853 he turned back to history, Schiller and Shakespeare for subjects and a new scale of operatic composition.

- 1 Georg Misch, ‘Conception and Origin of Autobiography’, in *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Trev Lynn Broughton, vol. 1 (London & New York: Routledge, 2007) pp. 61–76.
- 2 Alexandre Dumas *files*, *Correspondence 1851-1854* translated by G.R. Grier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 72–3.
- 3 Quoted by Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), p. 311.

- 4 Albert Dresden Vandam, *An Englishman in Paris: Notes and Recollections* (London: Echo Library, 1892), p. 38.
- 5 Alexandre Dumas fils, *The Lady with the Camelias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 1831.
- 6 Alexandre Dumas fils, *Correspondence 1851-1854*, p. 76.
- 7 Leon Plantinga, p. 298.
- 8 Alexandre Dumas fils, *Correspondence 1851-1854*, p. 78-9.
- 9 Ibid., p. 81.
- 10 Alexandre Dumas fils, *Correspondence 1851-1854*, p. 116.
- 11 Ibid., p. 86.
- 12 Marcel Proust, quoted in John Arthos, 'Rhetoric of the Ineffable: The (Post-)Modern Audience's Equipment for Living', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 22:2 (1993), 246-273 (p. 267).
- 13 T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 65.
- 14 F. de Malherbe, 'Consolation à M. du Périer', *Poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 72.
- 15 Alexandre Dumas, *La Dame aux Camélias* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 188, 213.
- 16 Ibid., p. 301.
- 17 Ibid., p. 375.
- 18 Alexandre Dumas, *The Lady with the Camelias*, p. 1775.
- 19 Ibid., p. 1865.
- 20 Quoted by Leon Platinga, p. 354.
- 21 Incidentally, despite their obvious grandeur and large mise-en scène, one will carefully note that both *La Traviata* and *Aida* are closet dramas. The real important action takes place inside a relatively sheltered spaces away from the glaring eyes of the masses – The Temple of Memphis, Amneris's private chambers, a thicket by the river, a tomb in *Aida* and a drawing-room, a private garden in Parisian house and a lady's bedroom reminiscent of the third Act of *La bohème*. One is beguiled into thinking that both operas deal with the public and the external because of the wonderful large scenes in Act One and Two of both operas where in real fact they deal with the most private and intimate of human thoughts and feelings. *La Traviata* is an opera that discusses privilege as that quality that brings with it responsibility and its consequent and necessary suffering in the form of self-sacrifice.
- 22 Linda Hutcheon & Michael Hutcheon, in *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 44.