

Chastity or Debauchery: Violetta's Portrayal in Verdi's La Traviata

Jiaran Zhao^{1,a,*}

¹Voice and Opera Department, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, Shanghai, 200000, China
a. caitlin27@shcmusic.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: This paper investigates Violetta, the female protagonist of Verdi's *La Traviata*, from a modern standpoint, extrapolating from the *La Traviata* reception to Violetta's portrayal in the text. Violetta Valery possesses qualities of both chastity and debauchery. In weighing in the two directions, Violetta's extravagance and resistance are greatly diminished to move closer to popular morality. Through a series of textual analyses and reception history investigations, this paper will incorporate a gender-related perspective to deconstruct the core of *La Traviata*'s story in the context of contemporary values. In addition, the discussion on Violetta's image provides inspiration for examining the inner and outer space of the character itself. Considering the results, both the conception of the *La Traviata* story and the characterisation of Violetta are re-creations of the objectification of prostitutes in a patriarchal society. Multiple factors are involved and influence the transformation of Violetta's characterisation. It is also from the heights of modernity that these factors are able to be structured in a socialised and gendered context. Despite having the potential to become Europe's nineteenth-century Medea, Violetta Valery remains inevitably weakened in romanticised narratives and descriptions into a one-dimensional individual who combines both the stereotypes of chastity and debauchery.

Keywords: characterisation, *La Traviata*, objectification

1. Introduction

In Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, the female protagonist, Violetta, undergoes a transformation from a sophisticated social butterfly to a tragic heroine of devoted love. As one of Verdi's most prestigious operatic works, *La Traviata*'s overall picture consists of a grand and beautiful musical narrative, an intriguing plot and a poignant romantic love story. The relationship between Violetta and Alfredo is widely discussed. Supposedly, *La Traviata*'s lyricism in romantic descriptions is a rarity in the worldly range of operas [1]. It contributes to the major theme throughout the play and serves as the main thread that shapes Violetta and Alfredo. In the meantime, Violetta's positional setting as a courtesan is viewed critically from multiple perspectives. In terms of the timing and presentation of the work, *La Traviata* exhibited the paradigm of female sacrifice, which fulfilled the aesthetic preferences of a significant portion of the audience and deeply influenced the presentation of the heroine of courtesans in subsequent productions of the opera. In the midst of all these works, *La Traviata*'s portrayal of the protagonist's identity as a prostitute is not exactly radical and can hardly

be regarded as a groundbreaking creation. Rather than fully restoring the image of Marguerite in Duma's novel, Verdi moulded Violetta in the direction of a tragic goddess with an indomitable soul.

Despite being projected moderately, Susan Rutherford mentioned that *La Traviata* was still feared for its potential to contaminate the female audience' [2]. In *The Musical World*, 1856, remarks made on *La Traviata* have been both scathing, i.e., against the portrayal of Violetta as a prostitute with positive, superior qualities [3]. There are also those who refute this view and praise the progressive significance of Verdi's composition. This contributed to the fact that after *La Traviata*'s introduction, despite challenging the existing system of operatic characterisation, the public did not revolt too much. Critics argued between the two points of view and eventually reached a relatively balanced situation, which together contributed to the fame of *La Traviata*. As can be seen from the opposites in the reviews, much of the discussion of *La Traviata* in the second half of the nineteenth century centred on the heroine's most striking status as a prostitute, whether it was justified or reasonable in placing her at the centrality of the opera as a marginalised figure in society, more noticeably as a depraved woman.

In more contemporary music criticism or analyses, the exploration of Violetta is no longer confined to debate about the validity of her existence but looks more closely at how she came into being. How her image is expressed both in the vocal lines and the orchestra, as well as how her operatic figure has been presented in the value systems of different eras and what derivative meanings have been assigned to it. Scholars have also explored her limitations in relation to the time in which Verdi lived and what subtle influence Verdi's attitude towards prostitution exerted on the creation of *La Traviata*.

It is ascertained currently that the study of Violetta is considerably comprehensive. The character has been well analysed in terms of libretto and music. However, there are relatively few studies initiated from a perspective combining gender theory and textual music analysis to discuss the limitations of the opera and Violetta's portrayal. In general terms, *La Traviata* was created within a patriarchal social system as it reflects in many ways the male psychological cast, as well as the constraints, impressions and outlooks of prostitutes within the rules of a patriarchal society. It is within this gap, therefore, that this paper will explore the dramatic and musical shaping of Violetta's image. Certain historical and cultural contexts refracted from Violetta will be discussed in relation to some of the central arguments of feminism and gender theory. Particularly, Violetta possesses the attributes of both chastity and carnality, of both depravity and resistance. The two distinct qualities represented by the Madonna-slut dichotomy of the patriarchal society exist in her in a paradoxical yet unified way. The considerations involved in the portrayal of Violetta must have had some periodic limitations and deserve to be scrutinised in the context of more modern standards of judgment. In the course of the research, a possibility of obtaining inspiration for theoretical analyses of opera from a gender-related perspective is promised, as well as a renewed deconstruction of the story and the core values of *La Traviata* in the contemporary context.

2. Discussion and Results

2.1. From 'Estrano!...Sempre Libera' to 'Alfredo, Alfredo, Di Questo Core'

The flamboyant section of the first act is situated at the end of Violetta's party in the mansion when she ponders over her ambiguous dialogue with Alfredo and sings in the emptiness of the aftermath of jollification the aria 'E' strano!...sempre libera'. For the first time in the entire production, Violetta has a long-lasting, largely undisturbed vocal section that serves as the centre of gravity for the stage; 'E' strano! [...] sempre libera' supports her in this one-woman show with lots of ornamental notes and a sustained high register. Verdi seems to have carefully engineered and devised the text and the music, the voices and the instruments, so that they complement, emphasise, deepen, nuance, interact and contradict each other [4]. While the vocal melody moulds rapidly, the orchestral padding is highly

consistent with the soprano's interpretation. Violetta, in this period, displayed a state of both exuberance and calmness. Those difficult vocal techniques are artificially preserved as a means of presenting Violetta in all her splendour. However, in fact, after Brindisi and Alfredo's ardent confession, which Verdi spends almost the entire first act stating, Violetta's embodied state of mind in the melody is laced with a touch of coolness. Unlike the extreme leap in tempo, it is clear from the text that Violetta is thinking about more than just marvelling at Alfredo's ardour and offer for their relationship. Violetta, at this point, bears more resemblance to the image of Marguerite in Duma's novel than she has since, namely, the pursuit of extravagance and pleasure. In many of the versions, the sopranos also convincingly portray the paradox of Violetta's obsession with the present and her yearning for Alfredo's love. It could be argued that Violetta, in the 'sempre libera' phase, still has venery instincts. The judgemental qualities she possesses fairly add complexity and authenticity to the slightly idealised Parisian high society of the first half of the first act., though this poignancy grows progressively weaker over the subsequent march of the story in Acts II and III.

A typical example is shown in 'Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core'. The non-radicality of Verdi's writing of *La Traviata* is reflected here. Posizione had been used by Verdi to denote character-and plot-driven motives, specifically presented in the development of musicality in a narrative or character [5]. Despite constantly occupying the absolute centrality of the plot, the social and musical aspects of Violetta's posizione have undergone a subtle change. The lack of convergence between the two creates an ebb and flow which could be contrasted. In 'Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core', Violetta's musical posizione rises to an unprecedented height along with the lyricism in her vocal line. She dominates the chorus, both in terms of length, melodic tonality and narrative in the text. Instead, having gone through the vicissitudes of selling her jewellery assets, settling down with Alfredo and then being abandoned, although Violetta is still sympathetic and pitied by the play's multitude, she can no longer maintain the same social position as before. Along with self-sacrifice comes the extinction of her venery instincts and the absence of social power.

Textually, both of these selections set the tone of Violetta's character in Act I and Act II, respectively. The change between the two is mostly transitioned in the dialogue between Violetta and Germont. Violetta encountered guidance and oppression from a more authoritative force. Her resistance becomes an important indicator of the fluidity of her transition from the free-surg-ing individual to a loyal devotee. From observation, the buffer that straddles this shift has been paving the way since Violetta accepted Alfredo's courtship. Violetta's extravagance and defiant nature are both diminished by the large lyrical score and arias. As Scott Balthazar argued, Violetta's mythological image is presented in a more conservative musical form [6]. Her presence as a social butterfly is brief in the first act, and exists only as a polished, symbolic figure with superficial features.

2.2. Return of the Prodigal Daughter: Chastity or Debauchery?

According to Arthur Groos's investigations, a heroine's misery is usually associated with her indiscretions and indulgences [7]. Violetta in Act I is repeatedly presented in the text and music as intensely sexually attractive as an individual. Such force is externalised and amplified in her interactions with the various characters around her. In rehearsals for multiple versions of *La Traviata*, Violetta in *Brindisi* is usually arranged to be surrounded by a group of desirable men. A notable change occurs in the second act, when Violetta leaves behind her former lifestyle and, as previously mentioned, becomes a devoted companion to Alfredo alone. All of her interactions on stage are no longer punctuated by the way she interacts with men. In order to make this transformation more distinct, as well as to give strong evidence for her Madonna image, both the gipsy women and Flora are sent a certain amount of space to corroborate it. Gipsy music emerges strong and unmissable, accompanied by short, sharp, word-for-word rhythms that quickly distance itself from the traditionally lyrical style of music that preceded it. It may not actually be rich in exotic cultural

connotations; it is depicted as originally intended to exist as a buffer in the middle of a long gig strip. Another effect is to make Violetta's subsequent appearance seem isolated and out of place, setting the stage for a wider dramatic conflict at the end of the second act. The so-called gipsy music, whether praised or rejected, assimilated or seen as alien, appears in the mainstream as the Other of European music [8]. It creates a subtle resonance with Violetta's image, given that they both exist as the Other in the story. The use of the music of the Other to accentuate the Othering of the Other is exactly where they are on the same frequency. Perhaps it is not entirely appropriate to call a character such as Violetta, who occupies one of the most dominant positions in the opera, the Other. However, whether in terms of the era in which she was created, the subjective initiative of the adaptor, or the effect of her eventual presentation in the opera. She is the cohesive embodiment of the ultimate appeals of the male gaze to a woman who carries the attributes of a prostitute.

Many feminist writings validate patriarchal society's interpretation and application of the Madonna-slut dichotomy. It is through this categorisation that Violetta gradually loses the dangerous qualities of being on the margins and becomes a likeable protagonist in line with universal values. Violetta clearly fulfilled her mission as a debauched woman through the narration and social setting of her posizione. As for the journey back to her innocent self, it requires some more unfettered and unacceptable existence to serve as a counterpoint. The position of almost all the characters is clearly shown in Act II. Flora, the elegant hostess, reveals hysteria when she learns of her husband's philandering through the gipsy girl's instructions, only to return to smiling in a single moment; the gipsy women dutifully weave their way through the large party scene as entertaining embellishments. Most versions make their stereotypes the dogma of interpretation. The female roles in this scene are almost non-resistant, most certainly Violetta. After Alfredo indignantly accuses her and summons the crowd to witness the split in their relationship, Germont once again appears as a symbol of authority. The difference is that this time, he does not stand against Violetta but rather takes a gentle, paternalistic approach to educating Alfredo about his impulsive recklessness and calming the wounded Violetta. This does not mean that the oppressions against Violetta, symbolised by Germont, have disappeared; on the contrary, they still exist, only in a more secretive and noble way. Moreover, it is gradually rationalised as Violetta's own resistance waned and her acceptance of suffering is achieved. Violetta is thus indoctrinated into the reborn Madonna, who is out of the muck, who has fallen but redeemed herself, and who is steadfast in the face of suffering. Up to this point, the logic of female tragedy in a patriarchal context has been refined and glorified once again. Survival and love are commonplace issues for the general public, yet they are not widely considered in the business world, especially from a feminist perspective [9]. Although, in terms of audience effect, the tragedies and deaths of female characters are as easy to obsess over and become legendary as the successes of tiny human beings.

2.3. The Subverted Medea

E. D. Seta points out that classic Italian operas provided a musical pattern for Italian poetry, in which a literary influence derived from Renaissance conventions [10]. However, this tracing of the nature of literature and storytelling remains different from the Italian opera of the 19th century period. If Violetta is placed in the context of classic thespian Greek drama, her weaknesses and deficiencies in resilience are revealed in all their glory. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Clytaemestra faces the elders of Argos without flinching after killing her husband, Agamemnon, and speaks frankly of her indignation and offence, takes exception to the impression of pretence based on her womanhood, and by extension, her rightful vanity. In Euripides' tragedy *Medea* of 431 B.C., the heroine shares this same murderous quality, and while still love-oriented, the base is not entirely concerned with romantic implications. Medea destroyed the lives of her own children with a resolute and unburdened mind and justified this act of preventing them from inflicting the disgrace of their father's infidelity. Meanwhile, she suffers

no punishment for her regicide compared to the pain of the disease Violetta endures physically. According to Mercer, whether or not these stories are pre-patriarchal remnants, they demonstrate the possibility of assertive and righteous female heroes with a murderous streak in ancient Greek narratives [11]. Developing into the medieval and then the 19th century literary and artistic spheres, opera was simply part of the embodiment of a misogynistic plot brought about by society as a whole.

Whether or not this misogyny was presented subjectively in the process of Violetta's creation, she became part of the process of objectification of the female characterisation. This objectification is evident in Verdi's attitude towards prostitutes. As he made clear in 1844, 'I don't like whores on the stage' [12]. After many attempts for this purpose, Violetta's inner activities in some episodes are distinguished from Margaret in Dumas' novel. An image of a woman who has all the one-way facets of a given image but never goes deeper or descends into cliché. It was this ambiguity and lack of clarity in separating the line between nobility and evil that upset some critics of the time. According to the review, *La Traviata* had made a successful appeal to "the merciful construction of good women", and evil is evil, no matter what qualifying language is wrapped around it, and if such an episode is popular in England, the hope that public morality will in any way gain from the teachings of the stage will be abandoned [13]. In contrast, there are rebuttals to such statements. The critic of *The Morning Post* strongly objected to those critics who seemed to speak so eloquently of *La Traviata* as to claim that it is so immoral, and stating that no style of theatre can avoid the exposition of episodes and things contrary to virtues, just as a painter can no more avoid the darker side of light and shade against the panel [14].

According to Zicari, the discussion of *La Traviata*'s scripts and their moral connotations in 1856 occupied so much of the attention of the entire Forum press that, while dramatic and lyrical representations were generally accepted as providing a mirror for the audience's reflections, as soon as their subject matter came too dangerously close to the problematic aspects of Victorian society, they were understood as a threat to social decency and public morality [15]. Viewed in the context of the 19th century, Violetta can perhaps be seen as a break with tradition, i.e., she is not a uniformly elegant, dignified, socially comfortable noblewoman, nor is she a naïve, uninitiated, chaste young woman. She has some personality complexity that, even if it is partially diluted in the second half of the opera, is still somewhat groundbreaking. However, it is not outstanding enough to sustain the deconstruction of the text with the addition of a feminist perspective. This once-unaccepted versatility is essentially the male perspective, adding another layer of stereotypical aura to the one-sided heroine. Such scheduling absorbed Violetta's overriding male aura and will, gradually becoming the subverted siren in a hymn of sacrifice and love [16]. Also, as the modern feminist perspective is extended and structured within this framework, the question of what weight Violetta's chastity and debauchery actually have in the presentation of *La Traviata*'s plot is no longer an issue. After all, the upper limit of an object, whether the object is complicated or simplified, can only reach a relatively convergent conclusion in the contemporary analysis of operas. It is clear that the moulding of Violetta gradually reveals its full extent, a flattened Medea that is no longer armed and defiant.

3. Conclusions

To conclude, under the influence of popular notions of decency and social conceptions of the 19th century, and by converging on Verdi's own moral attitudes, Violetta is moulded into a tragic goddess torn between depravity and sanctification. The lyricism of her love line with Alfredo is largely intensified in a single musical narrative. At the same time, her personal adventurousness and defiance are gradually weakened in this epic journey in search of her innocent self.

In the midst of the contradictions and coexistence of chastity and debauchery, Violetta's objectification is gradually revealed as she moves towards the established tragic ending. After a series of investigations of *La Traviata* in its historical context, it is there to bring some sophistication to the

field of opera at the time, namely, a trial and validation of public morality in the slowness of the controversy to open up a different perspective on the opera writing that followed.

Considering the phenomenon of misogyny in the context of Western feminist theory, even though Violetta occupies a significant portion of the entire opera, she still exists as an object under the male gaze. Compared to some of the controversial female figures in early Ancient Greek tragedy, she is clearly less threatening to mention. In such an understanding, all the qualities presented by Violetta, whether chastity or debauchery, are part of the objectification. The imagery of the innocence of a prostitute makes the character at once voluptuous and flattened and reduced under modern scrutiny and deconstruction to a Medea who is neither able to be a demigod nor firm enough.

Although this study is a re-reading of Violetta and *La Traviata* in a relatively modern context. However, with the constant updating of concepts, it also opens up the possibility of different possibilities for the opera to be interpreted in different historical periods. The gender-related theories covered in this paper also remain at a cursory level and do not refer to, for example, physiological anatomy and queer theory related to it. If, in subsequent studies, such a combination occurs, it may be able to bring new inspirations to the subject.

References

- [1] Chusid, M. (1974). *Drama and the Key of Major in La Traviata*. *Drama and the Key of Major in La Traviata*, 89-124.
- [2] Rutherford, S. (2006). *The prima donna and opera, 1815-1930*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] *The Musical World*, London, August 16, 1856.
- [4] De Filippi, S. (2023). *Love, Death, and Rhetoric. Meaningful Textual-Musical and Vocal-Instrumental Relationships in Giuseppe Verdi's La Traviata*. In *Word Art+ Gesture Art= Tone Art: The Relationship Between the Vocal and the Instrumental in Different Arts* (pp. 139-159). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- [5] de Van, G. (1998). *Verdi's Theater*, trans. Gilda Roberts (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press), p. 119.
- [6] Balthazar, S. L. (Ed.). (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi* (Vol. 4). Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Groos, A. (1995). 'TB sheets': Love and disease in *La traviata*. *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 7(3), 233-260.
- [8] Anna G. Piotrowska (2013) 'Gypsy music' as music of the Other in European culture, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 47:4-5, 395-408.
- [9] Biehl, B. (2022). *The Diva, la Traviata, the Gendered Spectacle: Marina Abramović's 7 Deaths of Maria Callas* Composers: Marko Nikodijević, Marina Abramović. *With Music by Marko Nikodijević and scenes of operas by Vincenzo Bellini, Georges Bizet, Gaetano Donizetti, Giacomo Puccini, and Giuseppe Verdi*. World premiere: April 1, 2020, at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich. Berlin Premiere: April 8, 2022, at the Deutsche Oper Berlin. 100 minutes / no interval. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 32(4), 681-685.
- [10] Seta, F. D. (2004). *New currents in the libretto*. *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, 69-87.
- [11] Mercer, C. (2018). *The Philosophical Roots of Western Misogyny*. *Philosophical Topics*, 46(2), 183-208.
- [12] de Van, G. (1998). *Verdi's Theater*, trans. Gilda Roberts (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press), 372.
- [13] "Music and the Drama," *The Literary Gazette: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, May 31, 1856, p. 332.
- [14] "La Traviata," *The Musical Gazette*, July 5, 1856, pp. 285-86 (from the Morning Post).
- [15] Zicari, M. (2016). *A Moral Case: The Outburst of La Traviata (1856)*. In *Verdi in Victorian London* (1st ed., pp. 139-170). Open Book Publishers. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d41d0q.14>
- [16] Ellsmore, C. A., Stoessel, J., Goldsworthy, D., & de Ferranti, H. (2011). *The Siren Subverted: The Role of Violetta Valery in Giuseppe Verdi's 'La traviata' (1853)*.