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René Weis, *The real Traviata. The Song of Marie Duplessis*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi + 416. Preface, figures, notes, references, picture credits, index. £25.00 UK, \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-870854-4.

Reviewed by Dr Alessandra Palidda, Cardiff University.

Weis's book constitutes the latest and most comprehensive outcome of the interest already surrounding the figure of Marie Duplessis for quite a number of years. As the title suggests, Marie (or, better, Alphonsine) embodies the rather rare case of a real-life character inspiring not only a major writer's work, but also what the author himself considers "probably the best loved opera in the world" (p. 1). In the case of an operatic work that has almost completely displaced its literary sources, the interest towards the real "fallen woman" has already produced quite significant fruits, both in English and, most notably, in French. Weis's book not only operates a comprehensive summary of the existing literature produced around the figure of Duplessis in her links to both Dumas and Verdi (see the extensive bibliography), but also supplements it with what can be considered the most extensive research ever carried out specifically on this figure. The amount and variety of sources used is astonishing, from spa police records in Baden-Baden to cartographical documents of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, from the detailed descriptions of the places visited by Duplessis herself to a varied palette of precious iconographical sources (see also the detailed acknowledgements at the beginning and the references and index at the end). As a result, the richness of detail achieved in reconstructing the story, character, appearance and social function of Marie Duplessis is unrivalled.

Like Dumas's novel (and, partially, Verdi's opera) Weis's book somehow proceeds in a circular chronological order, starting from Marie's death to methodically reconstruct her whole story, from her humble birth to the glamorous Parisian lifestyle, up to her illness and decease. As the book title already suggests, the rather long section tracing her life (sixteen chapters) can be seen as constituting the main (though not the only) focus of the book. Not only does the author provide his readers with minute details regarding the main and/or better-known events of Duplessis's life, but also uncovers quite unexplored episodes, for instance describing in detail Alphonsine's troubled childhood and adolescence long before her celebrated Parisian life. The precise and vivid account of her disastrous family situation and premature sexual exploitation, for instance, provides the reader with a precious insight into the development of her personality and "professionalism," also inspiring deep sympathy. Similarly, quite dark pages of Duplessis's story add depth and complexity to her character, her pregnancy and the death of her infant son being among the most notable examples.

Weis also reaches an unrivalled level of detail in reconstructing Alphonsine's (now Marie's) Parisian life from its very beginning, minutely describing the relentless process that transformed her from a needy working girl to one of the most celebrated courtesans and "kept women" of all times. He does so first of all by methodically disentangling the complex social network that surrounded Duplessis and revealing the names and stories of her lovers, always drawing clear links between persons and facts, and the impact they had on Marie's life, status and character. The description of Marie's social life is complemented by a minute description of coeval locations, the reader being literally immersed in the

actual places where the events described took place. Not only the brilliant, multifaceted Paris of the 1840s and 1850s is vividly evoked, but also other significant locations such as Baden-Baden and Bougival, their connection to the conception and setting(s) of *La Dame aux Camélias* also powerfully revealed. A particularly detailed description is that of Duplessis's most celebrated house at 11, Boulevard de la Madeleine, its physical appearance and atmosphere reconstructed with extraordinary care and, once again, revealing interesting connections to both events and personalities and to the upcoming novel.

Chapter twelve sees the appearance of both Dumas fils (at that point—as Weis himself comments—not more prominent than many others among Marie's lovers) and Verdi, the story of Duplessis and that of the words and music she inspired getting gradually closer. For the sake of truth, Weis denies that the rather magic moment in which the future "traviata" sat during the Paris premiere of *Nabucco*, dreamed by many, ever happened, but surely evokes quite vividly the atmosphere of those days. The following chapter also depicts a particularly intense and traditionally unexplored season of Duplessis's life, from the resurgence of her past through the meeting with Lady Anderson to her affair with Franz Liszt and scandalous friendship with the Jewish actress Judith Bernat. It is also during their meetings that the spectre of consumption starts to creep into Marie's (soon-to-be Comtesse Duplessis) story. Weis reconstructs the events and atmosphere of her last days with minute detail and deep sympathy, making her final chapter one of the most memorable of the entire book.

The story of Marie Duplessis merges seamlessly into that of *La Dame aux Camélias*, the author recovering numerous and detailed facts regarding the circumstances of the novel's conception and writing and using rather unexplored sources including Richard Wallace's recently attributed memoirs *An Englishman in Paris*. A detailed account of the passage from novel to play and, most of all, of the play's premiere at the Vaudeville theatre follows, the author also paying attention to the role music and performers played in its success, and to the circumstances of Verdi's attendance. This leads to the third and last section of the book, dedicated to the genesis and performance of *La traviata*. Once again, Weis pays particular attention to the circumstances that surrounded the opera's conception and composition, also methodically analysing those details of Verdi's biography that could be (and some—indeed—have already been) linked to *La traviata*'s plotline and features. The last chapter, subtitled "The Apotheosis of Marie Duplessis," aptly analyses the thread connecting the music to the "real traviata," and also introduces some interesting visual and sound links that have been often overlooked, effectively linking back to the beginning of the book.

Weis's ability in making this work not only a masterpiece of research, but also a captivating book, is truly admirable. The author operates detailed reconstructions and descriptions of the locations and contexts where the events took place and frequently uses the accounts of eyewitnesses, the abundance of sources always paired up with an expressive and deeply empathic, yet clear and objective tone. Words and textual sources are also constantly accompanied and complemented by a varied palette of images and iconographical sources that often concur in communicating to the reader atmospheres and contexts in a strong, immediate way. Finally, the author operates a continuous, deep contextualization of the story he tells within the wider historical, social and cultural context, tirelessly linking events and details to coeval society, artists and debates, making—in a word—Marie Duplessis a catalyst for many other stories. This book thus appeals with equal strength not only to theatre, opera, society and literature historians, but also to all those who wish to uncover a story that is able like few others to connect facts, personalities and great works of art.

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