

René WEIS, *The real Traviata: the song of Marie Duplessis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), xv + 400 p.

This new biography of the Parisian courtesan Marie Duplessis (Alphonsine Plessis) offers a comprehensive portrait of her life, from her troubled childhood to her brief celebrity as one of the epoch's most noted courtesans before her early death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-three in 1847. The final third of the book examines the way in which versions of those fateful last months of Duplessis' life were woven into the cultural fabric of the period by first Alexandre Dumas *fils* in his novel *La dame aux camélias* in 1848, followed by his drama of 1852, and then by Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave in *La traviata* a year later.

It is through the filter of those fictional images that Duplessis is best known today, and yet this book serves to emphasise the distorting effect of that process. Verdi's opera, for example, implies that Duplessis' counterpart Violetta had an element of choice in her lifestyle: her double aria at the end of Act One ("Ah, fors'è lui") concludes with a cabaletta ("Sempre libera") that celebrates the giddy freedoms open to her as a courtesan, providing a viable alternative to notions of romantic love. The account of Duplessis' actual life, however, reveals the true limitations of her existence. The child of an alcoholic pedlar (Marin Plessis) and a shopkeeper (Marie Deshayes), Duplessis was born into a violent marriage that culminated in her mother's frantic departure. The four-year old Alphonsine and her older sister Delphine were abandoned to relatives whilst their mother fled into hiding: they did not see her again before her death a couple of years later. The sisters were subsequently split up. Left alone with impoverished relatives who eventually stopped feeding her, Alphonsine led an almost feral and increasingly sexualised existence until she was returned to her father at the age of thirteen. He first pandered her to an elderly friend, and then (according to village rumour) repeatedly raped her himself; her subsequent career as a prostitute was all but inevitable within the social milieu of the day. Not choice but a child's blind, grasping instinct for survival thus determined Alphonsine's emergence as Marie Duplessis in the Parisian *demi-monde*.

This, then, is a biography not only of Duplessis but all her various personas: as first an abused child (Alphonsine Plessis), then a courtesan (Marie Duplessis), then the heroine of Dumas' novel and subsequent play, *La dame aux camélias* (Marguerite Gautier) and finally the protagonist of Verdi's opera, *La traviata* (Violetta Valéry). Yet amidst these differ-

ent manifestations, where is the real woman? Although this new volume is well-researched, meticulously sifting the claims and counter-claims of previous biographers such as Romain Vienne (1888) and Johannès Gros (1929), little documentary evidence exists to support an understanding of much of Alphonsine's life. Just a few letters have survived in which her own voice can be heard, albeit one that was clearly carefully modulating its tones to the needs of the moment. For all the recollections and reminiscences of her short life that thread through the nineteenth century — undoubtedly spurred by the popularity of her fictional selves — Alphonsine herself remains a cipher: a pair of enigmatic, heavy-lidded dark eyes gazing out from Édouard Vienot's famous portrait.

Rather, her alter-egos Marguerite Gautier and Violetta Valéry provide more calculable and finite entities for exploration. As the book's title reveals, it was the eloquence of her operatic incarnation that inspired Weiss' research, and his discussion is marked by a profound enthusiasm and sentiment for Verdi's music. Verdi himself, of course, while fully aware of *La traviata's* effectiveness as music-theatre, was sometimes frustrated that the arguably greater merits of some of his other operas received much less attention. Yet for all those similarly enchanted with Violetta, this book will provide an intriguing glimpse of the poignant and often bitter realities that spawned her.

Susan Rutherford