Confessions in Fiction, Opera, and Memoir: Subversive Elements of Courtesan Celebrity in Nineteenth-Century Paris

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CONFESSIONS IN FICTION, OPERA, AND MEMOIR: SUBVERSIVE ELEMENTS OF
COURTESAN CELEBRITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARIS

By

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate various writers of nineteenth-century France whose topic is that of the courtesan, or public woman. The question proposed is: Can a woman ever recover from a fall into prostitution? The rehabilitation of the courtesan assumes a moral framework and therefore the fallen woman can never be redeemed in the nineteenth-century imaginary. The *dame aux camélias* myth elicits the sympathy of the reader but traps the protagonist in the moral framework and her only option is death. To counter the myth, the courtesan’s confessional narrative uses celebrity to free herself from the framework and re-invent herself. The study argues whether a “fallen” woman can ever be truly rehabilitated and if so, how? What are the limitations of rehabilitation?
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Is it ever possible for a woman in the nineteenth-century to recover socially from a “fall” into prostitution? The problem is that the rehabilitation of the courtesan, the grande abandonée, assumes a moral framework because of the social environment of the nineteenth century and therefore the “fallen” woman is likened to the person who falls in battle—she dies in society’s eyes. She can never be redeemed in the nineteenth-century imaginary. The myth of the dame aux camélias stimulates the reader’s sympathy yet it confines the central character in the framework of a moral code which leaves her no other option except death. She becomes the femme fatale creation of French canon literature. Her fate sealed for all eternity. The most advantageous way to thwart the myth is through the courtesan’s confessional narrative which employs celebrity in order that she may free herself from the limitations of the femme fatale myth and re-invent or re-create herself, countering the myth created by society.

In looking at the historical period of the nineteenth century and its move into modernity, the staying power of the public/private divide in women’s lives should be recognized and considered within both spheres while appreciating that many women transgressed this boundary. To forget the lives of domesticated insular sisters in favor of the new types of public woman would be erroneous and akin to isolating the more romanticized urban experience.

The nineteenth-century’s rigid sexual roles prescribed a life centered on the home and family for bourgeois and aristocratic women. The good woman was required to remain in an insular environment, protected by the males of the family from outside influence and corruption. Stephanie Coontz writes in Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage:
Writers on domesticity across Europe and the United States held that women could exert a unique and sorely needed role in the public world through their influence at home. Only a wife could combat the businessman’s tendency to close his ears to “the voices of conscience” as he competed in the struggle for “worldly aggrandizement.” But a wife could do this only if she herself stood apart from the pressures of competitive capitalism. Keeping women in the home guaranteed that someone in the family would uphold the “higher” ideals of life. (Coontz 165)

Keeping women in the domestic sphere was a way of ensuring their morality. Presumably their influence upon children and spouse would safeguard the family from harmful outside assaults.

Coontz adds:

The cult of female purity offered a temporary reconciliation between the egalitarian aspirations raised by the Enlightenment and the fears that equality would overturn the social order. The doctrine of men’s and women’s separate spheres encouraged men to take a more enlightened attitude toward their wives than in the past without giving women the right to rebel. The cult of purity suggested that parental power could be loosened without fear of sexual anarchy, because a “true” woman would never choose the dangerous route of sexual independence. Putting women on a pedestal was a way of forestalling a resurgence of 1790s feminism without returning to traditional patriarchy (Coontz 159-60).

This reverence for female domesticity had its opposite side for women who could not meet the standards or expectations required of sheltered purity. Women who could not remain full-time wives and mothers were repeatedly labeled moral miscreants. This clear-cut distinction between the good woman and her fallen sister left little room even for the traditional tolerance toward sexual relations during a couple’s engagement. Marriageability of a middle-class woman could be compromised forever merely by making one false move or indiscreet act. The courtesan was able to break some of the chains that bound her domestic sister by following her own path, previously trodden by only a few select women who had won the right to own homes, have bank accounts, raise children without a husband (or with), and choose her own hours and lifestyle.

Among those types of public women, and one who soared above all the others with regard to celebrity and success was the courtesan. The Parisian courtesan of the nineteenth century was a variegated class of women. Many came out from the depths of poverty to lift
herself up into a more affluent lifestyle which opened doors to education, refinement, and hope for a more secure future distanced from the wear and tear of the daily working woman. Examples of this are found in the stories of Mogador and Pearl. Their accounts show that often girls lacked the economic opportunities and “fell” into prostitution to secure some level of financial independence for themselves. Their eventual celebrity grew from the “It” that each woman had, her magnetism, or her talent, is what made her celebrity grow.

By capitalizing on the courtesan’s virtues, listed in Susan Griffith’s *The Book of the Courtesans: A Catalogue of Their Virtues*, which include a choice of her timing, capacity to flirt, her beauty, her ability to suggest, her cheek, her faculty to arouse, her brilliance, her facility in seduction, her gaiety, her rapture, her grace, her power to satiate, her charm, and finally her gift of afterglow, the courtesan slowly made ineffective a system built to enclose women in the domestic sphere in order to facilitate the new industrial, capitalistic society.

There were numerous levels of public women which have been categorized nicely by Virginia Rounding in *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans*. She writes:

The words used to denote the various classes of prostitute and courtesan tell us something about the attitudes of those who employed them towards the women thus labelled. Most noticeable is the number of words taking their provenance from the farmyard or the zoo, words which inevitably belittle the women to whom they are applied, lending them the characteristics of birds or animals, dehumanizing and depersonalizing them. At best, the men using these terms are regarding these women as pets, and at worst as ravening beasts. One of the dictionary definitions of *grisette*, for instance, is ‘a species of warbler, lark, duck, weevil and butterfly’; applying this epithet to the young female worker who takes a paying lover emphasizes her triviality and lack of value—she is the little bird or butterfly a middle-class man can amuse himself with for a while. Slightly more substantial than the *grisette* was the *cocotte*, a child’s word for ‘hen’ or for a piece of paper folded to resemble a hen, and applied to a professional courtesan. A frequently used animal word for a courtesan was *biche*, literally ‘doe’ though also used for a small bitch. *Chameau*, literally ‘camel’, colloquially ‘cow’ or ‘bitch’, was used of a heartless woman out to exploit men, in contrast with *camélia* which denoted the loving prostitute of whom Marie Duplessis—or, rather, the fictionalizing of her in *La Dame aux*
camélias—became the prototype. A word which sounds like one of these animal or bird words, but is not, *cocodette*, the feminine version of *cocodè*, a name given in the first instance by the young and dissipated Duke de Gramont-Caderousse to a few of his intimates among the fast set, addicted to gambling, horses, and duels. *Cocodettes*, who often had to be booked far in advance and were valued as an adornment, were sometimes married women who nevertheless had all the luxury and allure of a professional courtesan. Such women who maintained their connections with high society while acquiring some of the habits of the *demi-monde* might also be termed *demi-castors*, a word which originally referred to hats made half of beaver and half of wool. From the mid-1850s courtesans were sometimes disparagingly referred to as *Filles de marbre*, the name of a play by Théodore Barrière and Lambert Thiboust, first performed in the Vaudeville Theater on 17 May 1853. The protagonist of the first act is a sculptor, Phidias, who creates marble statues of the famed courtesans of Ancient Greece, Laïs, Aspasia and Phryne. He subsequently falls in love with his marble creations that remain cold and inert. The women of the uppermost ranks, the most desirable *demi-mondaines*, were also often referred to by the epithets *grandes* or *hautes*. The pseudonymous writer ‘Zed’ refers in his *Le Demi-monde sous le Second Empire* of 1892 to *grandes abandonées* (the great abandoned ones), while Frédéric Loliée in his *Les Femmes du Second Empire* of 1907 uses the term *grandes horizontales* (literally, great horizontal, or women flat on their backs). Collective expressions for the great *demi-mondaines* included *la haute galanterie* (literally high gallantry, chivalry or intrigue, and colloquially the top rank of kept women) and *La Haute Bicherie*. The greatest of the great were also known collectively as *La garde* (properly used to refer to the Imperial Guard). These were the top twelve or so courtesans, the aristocracy of the *demi-monde*. At various stages of their careers, Cora Pearl and La Païva would both have been considered as members of *La garde*. Others included Marie Colombier, Hortense Schneider, Blanche d’Antigny, Léonide Leblanc, Anne Deslion and Marguerite Bellanger (who became one of Napoleon III’s mistresses). Yet even at this exalted level, the pejorative animal vocabulary could not be escaped, for such women were also known as *lionnes* – queens of beasts, certainly, but still beasts (Rounding 18-20).

Many of the lower levels of these women often ended up taking sideline careers as actresses in theater, or singers in opera, operetta, or even cabaret. Some were performers in the Hippodrome circus as equestrians who road or drove horses. They could be found performing as ballet dancers or *Moulin Rouge* dancers. Lenard R. Berlanstein penned in *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* that “representations of theater women merit attention from this perspective because they were significant figures in defining the balance of power between the sexes. Their physical appeal made them quintessential strong women in the French social imagination, and they had to be
contained in one way or another” (Berlanstein 2). Even some of the upper level courtesans of *la Garde* were actresses or singers at some point in their lives.

Cora Pearl tried her hand at singing “Cupid” in the Jacques Offenbach operetta *Orphée aux Enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld) performed at the *Théâtre Bouffes-Parisiens* in 1867. Hortense Schneider enjoyed immense success and created title roles for Offenbach in *La Belle Hélène, La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, and *La Périchole* which were all decisive triumphs. Another of *La Bicherie* to sing was Blanche d’Antigny whose debut catapulted her to celebrity and the occurrences surrounding her initial debut was forever memorialized by Emile Zola in the opening chapters of a later novel—*Nana*. A courtesan’s celebrity was in constant need of refueling, and stage work was a way of re-igniting celebrity. It kept the courtesan in the public eye. However, another way of re-awakening celebrity was through confessional memoir writing.

Mogador and Pearl adapt the model put forth by Jean-Jacques Rousseau to capitalize on their celebrity. Each woman writes her memoir(s) for different reasons. Mogador writes her first memoir to defend herself in several court cases, with the help of her lawyer, M. Demarest. Pearl also takes up writing a memoir, but at the end of her life for financial purposes, since she is in need of money. Some speculation has been made that she had a ghost writer assist her since her French facility was limited. The two courtesans have diverse styles of writing but their Rousseauian approach makes the works highly desirable to the reading public for the possibility of the scandal it may provide. James O’Rourke has composed an interesting comment in *Sex, Lies, and Autobiography: The Ethics of Confession*:

> There is some irony in the fact that the figure who has entered the canon of modern philosophy as the exponent of “natural goodness” used his own autobiography to contest the most optimistic theory of sexuality of his own day, one that imagined that the pleasure of sex could occupy the center of an ideology that would purge the world through its truth, by displaying his own sexuality as a document in which it could be read
that there is nothing, and certainly not the truth of sex, that is outside the most intimate exchanges of power. (O’Rourke 62)

It is no wonder that Mogador and Pearl anticipated that by writing memoirs they might be able to repeat the philosophy of Rousseau with unsurpassed success.

Each woman who fought for anagogical freedom was different and her achievements were dependent only upon the woman’s own courage, self-limitations, and fears. In this study are included works which present several courtesan types. One of these types, the classic, nineteenth-century male stereotypical version of the *dame aux camélias*, will be discussed from various angles. This type can be traced back to the eighteenth-century novel, *Manon Lescaut*, and its *femme fatale* who shares the tragic end of the *dame aux camélias* heroines; but later, a new sort a courtesan, the “modern” courtesan who was first given the name of *une fille de marbre* in a play by Théodore Barrière was created. The work “gained great literary significance solely as a refutation: of Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux Camélias*” (Lee 131).

Some terms used in the study need clarification through definitions. The term courtesan during the Second Empire means a woman, usually from a non-wealthy background who provides charming companionship for a period of time, with little concern for her own feelings or thoughts on the subject. Courtesans were subjected to both social and religious censure and disapproval because the source in which they made their living was primarily that of *courtisanerie*. Many courtesans began their lives as prostitutes, only to be chosen by a protector or benefactor who would take them out of that environment and train them in social manners such as dress, speech, table manners, how to read and write, and often how to dance and play an instrument. They were eventually passed from protector to protector, or would choose to have more than one benefactor, often in a secretive way hiding one from the other. They were viewed in social circles as of a lower rank than their protectors and also of lower rank than of those
higher ranked persons with whom they mingled. If the courtesan was solely dependent upon the protector, on dissolution of the relationship she was made vulnerable. If she was older, that might end her career and she could be forced to return to the streets, but if she was lucky she would make a good marriage.

The concept of confessional medium in the nineteenth century is not limited to memoir, but includes, as will be shown, the literary novel, and the lyric opera. Within these mediums there are various approaches to confession such as Rousseauian confession and confession through a *roman à clef* genre. *Roman à clef* is a novel with a key or a novel about real life overlaid with a veneer of fiction. The fictitious names in the work represent real people and the “key” is the relationship between the fiction and the non-fiction. This format was used when a scandal might be involved where the author could be sued for libel. It was also used so the author could spin the narrative the way he or she would have wanted it to go.

The methodology used for this study is a comparison of two nineteenth-century novels about courtesans and the society surrounding them. The two novels, *Isidora*, written by George Sand, a woman, and the other, *La Dame aux camélias*, written by Alexandre Dumas fils, a man, are representative of two diverse ways to solve the problem presented by the courtesan presence in French society. Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, *La traviata* places the myth created by Dumas in his story of the lady of the camellias in perpetuity and at the same time defends Verdi’s mistress, the courtesan and opera singer, Giuseppina Strepponi. Also included in the study is a comparison of two nineteenth-century courtesan confessional memoirs in the style in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* which present two types of courtesans, Céleste Mogador and Cora Pearl. In each memoir the problem of the “fallen” woman is approached differently. Mogador seeks rehabilitation of herself through the love of a man but ends in self-rehabilitation aided by her
understanding of the social criticisms she invests in her writing, whereas Pearl does not seek any rehabilitation and only wants complete independence. Although Pearl wrote her memoir at the end of her life to re-ignite her fading celebrity and for financial gain, Mogador writes her first memoir to defend herself in court cases and then continues to write two other memoirs in diary form making writing her career. She becomes a woman of letters and a friend and colleague of some of the most famous men in French literature and art.

This study relies on numerous secondary sources to contextualize marriage and courtesanerie, celebrity culture, and confessional memoir. For example, Stephanie Coontz’s *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, which surveys the various human experiences which have encompassed the socially dominant trends with regard to marriage as an institution, was helpful in understanding the reasons why the courtesan sought rehabilitation and social acceptance through a man in marriage. It also lends itself to comprehending how the courtesan subverted the family and marriage institutions of society. One ironical fact is that many courtesans ended their careers by getting married if they found a man who could take care of them in the manner in which they were accustomed and required. In relation to courtesan critical literature, Susan Griffin’s *The Book of the Courtesans: A Catalogue of Their Virtues* looks at the various qualities that can be found in courtesan women and lists these qualities and their vast benefits. Katie Hickman’s *Courtesans* focuses on several of the most infamous or famous of the English courtesans of the eighteenth century and is very useful for its insight into the world of gallantry. Joanna Richardson’s *La Vie Parisienne 1852-1870* is a wealth of knowledge about Second Empire France along with its culture and history, rich in information about that time period. Richardson’s *The Courtesans: The Demi-Monde in 19th Century France* offers chapters dedicated to various famous French courtesans and
Richardson’s portrayals are esteemed and concise in their assessment of each woman. Her knowledge of the Second Empire and specifically of Paris is enlightening. Finally, Virginia Rounding’s *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans* is a vast warehouse of information on the types of courtesans, on the *demi-monde* surrounding them, and on the male aristocracy who cross over nightly.

Since Leo Braudy’s *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* appeared in 1997, academic writing on celebrity has grown exponentially. Texts such as *The Frenzy of Renown* offer an in-depth look at the development of fame and celebrity across the ages from ancient to modern times. His work was groundbreaking on the topic of fame far before celebrity became a topic of such enormous public interest. Leonard Berlanstein’s *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* looks at the public woman on the front lines of the feminist battle for freedom in the public sphere. David Giles *Illusions of Immortality* is a study of the psychology of fame, and it scrutinizes various illusions of immortality which the public person incubates across several levels of performance. Applying some of the observations made by Antoine Lilti in “The Writing of Paranoia: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Paradoxes of Celebrity,” this research project utilizes primary (including novels, essays, poetry, and newspapers) and secondary sources to illustrate and support the concept of celebrity through confession and to investigate other aspects of the Rousseauian confession theory such as the theory of paranoia in confession.

A very important source for this study is Phillipe Lejeune’s *On Autobiography*. His theories on autobiographical writing and the types of literary genres that can be seen as autobiographical (what he refers to as autobiofictional narratives) are thought-provoking and instructive. James O’Rourke’s *Sex, Lies, & Autobiography: The Ethics of Confession* gives an
acute look at Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* as a canonical work in French literature and helps understand Rousseau’s philosophy on confession and the “good man.” In the two courtesan’s memoirs and in the fictional letters of the *dames aux camélias*, the protagonists seek to present themselves in a favorable light to rehabilitate themselves. To come to terms with the degree of success of rehabilitation through confession is one of the driving questions motivating this research.

**Chapter Outline**

This study presents five works: two written by men, and three by women. It is further comprised of the examination of two types of courtesans: *la dame aux camélias* and *la fille de marbre* in relation to the society surrounding them—that of the aristocratic, the *demi-monde*, and the *bourgeoisie*. In the main section of the study, chapter two looks at and compares the works of George Sand’s *Isidora* and Alexandre Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias*, delving into the two authors’ diverse representations of their versions of a “lady of the camellias” based upon their social, cultural, and independent experiences which reflected social restrictions and possible solutions of their day. Sand’s view of the “lady of the camellias” is written in a disjointed manner, in sections, and in several different voices. It is also framed by interpolated comments from the author found in a framework outside the narrative as if it is the author retelling the story. Sand’s personal thoughts and feelings on certain topics are reflected in the various character’s thoughts and feelings. Dumas fils’s novel is also presented in a framework, as if it is the author retelling someone else’s story and both works include letters from the courtesans at the end of the novel. This is typical of courtesan literature. Within the framework of both novels it can be noted that some autobiofictional elements are historically linkable to the authors. Sand liked to present issues in her novels which helped women free themselves from domestic
bondage and social chains and Dumas wrote an epitaphic work as a roman à clef along the lines of the femme fatale genre to honor the courtesan mistress he had loved in real life: Alphonsine Plessis (Countess Marie Duplessis)—known in his novel and drama adaptation as Marguerite Gautier. He romanticized the real story to create a story that he would have preferred had occurred.

The third chapter deals solely with the problem of furthering the original myth of la dame aux camélias through investigating the libretto text of Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, La traviata. Its libretto is based upon Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias. Within that text it is possible to see identifiable autobiofictional links to the real life story of Giuseppina Strepponi, Verdi’s mistress and to their life lived together. This can be substantiated by understanding Verdi’s choice and treatment of the text, and in a knowledge of how he preferred to present new and interesting, even contemporary issues, in his operas in order to tickle and prod the audience into contemplating social issues of the day. La traviata’s courtesan heroine, Violetta Valéry, is Verdi’s cryptic choice of name that substitutes Dumas fils’s cryptic heroine name of Marguerite Gautier. It is a key to the roman à clef. Both authors employ the language of flowers. These two male authors used symbolic flower language to communicate their messages. These symbolic hints would have been readable to some in a nineteenth-century audience.

Part two begins with chapter four concerning the courtesan and writer, Céleste de Chabrillan, alias Mogador. Chabrillan’s memoirs are scrutinized and compared in order to recognize her amazing anagogical path out of poverty and illiteracy through self-rehabilitation. She is the courtesan who embraces rehabilitation and redemption, who seeks to marry, and who desires to be accepted back into society—her lifelong dream. She is a pioneer, on the edge of a societal transformation, who initiates the transformation without benefitting from the eventual
results afforded to the future public woman. Hers was a life just at the edge, bound by prejudice and blind-sided by it throughout her life. The study is a look at her rise from the initial fall into prostitution, and recognizes her contributions to the freedoms of women who came after her. The second chapter in part two, chapter five, investigates the life of a different sort of courtesan—the prototype of the modern celebrity and courtesan: Cora Pearl. Cora is not French but rather English, and as if following the imperial agenda of Victorian England, she refuses to be conquered and conquers all those within her reach. She is not a *dame aux camélias*, nor is she ever rehabilitated. She stands out as the courtesan who did not want either rehabilitation or redemption. She sought only personal freedom and had no regrets in her choice. She is iconic in many ways, representing a personified version of the Second Empire France in all its prodigality.

In the conclusion, this study will summarize the argument for a coherent pattern of the various confessional narratives which enhanced nineteenth-century courtesan celebrity through the media of the day: novel, opera, and memoir. It will also mention other media which was used to boost courtesan publicity such as journals, newspapers, and photography demonstrating how various media was used to promote celebrity at various stages of the courtesan’s lives. The conclusion will suggest avenues of further investigation into celebrity within the psychology of celebrity and confession.
CHAPTER TWO

SAND’S ISIDORA AND DUMAS FILS’S LA DAME AUX CAMÉLIAS

NOVEL AND DRAMA: GIVING THE CELEBRATED COURTESAN

VOICE THROUGH CONFESSION AND REHABILITATION TO

CONSTRUCT SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

_All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster’s autobiography._


Introduction

In this chapter, courtesan protagonists from two “autobiofictional” novels, George Sand’s _Isidora_ and Alexandre Dumas fils’s _La Dame aux camélias_, are compared and contrasted in terms of how the courtesan established celebrity through confession. The courtesan, also known as _la Dame aux camélias_, in all its various treatments, is central to a nineteenth-century debate about the dangers of women’s sexuality in its relationship between society and art—more specifically involving the representations and roles of women. The chapter compares the two novels and argues which have confessional narratives in a Rousseauian tradition and how the narratives present the rehabilitation of the fallen woman. Sand questions the need and effectiveness of rehabilitation whereas Dumas creates a pathetic fallen woman who is passive and redeems herself through love and death.

Pearl and Mogador contrast with the Dumas model, whereas Strepponi is comparable in certain respects. Related to gender for the novels’ courtesan characters is the idea of general celebrity created by confession. Each novel has further complicated layers and connections between the characters’ psychology and historical facts, and the characters’ inner thoughts as related to the author’s own inner life and history. Certain narration techniques are used to express
the complex attitudes toward gender, and the stigmatized position of the courtesan. As a prelude, nineteenth-century European/French attitudes toward women, and especially toward prostitution, must be briefly discussed in order to understand the cultural context of the courtesan novels explored in this chapter.

To begin, nineteenth-century Paris, in opposition to the pre-industrial city which had been perceived as a center of civilization and a pinnacle of refinement, was, because of its great size, looked upon and experienced as a squalid city—a new metropolis, viewed as an inferno. This negative reaction came out of the manner in which normal patriarchal (and class) relationships were disrupted. The city now caught up the anonymous individual in a spider-like web, paralyzing and eating its victims alive. It became something evil that swallowed up the naïve, country neophyte—a terrifyingly promiscuous trap of social alienation and instability. Pictures were painted of the city as female since one of the most disturbing aspects of the metropolis to hordes of men who wrote about it was the way in which female sexuality flooded it, uncontrolled, disordered, and engulfing.

Another important social development was the transmigration of rural women to Paris as part of the industrial revolution. In Elizabeth Wilson’s “Bohemians, Grisettes and Demimondaines,” she points out that “[U]rban life also offered a widening of horizons to women, who came to seek their fortunes or to escape the restrictions of patriarchal peasant life” (25). Women were forced to live the stereotypes of womanhood created by what had become the traditional roles of the woman as imagined by a male dominant society. These roles defined women as “delicate, decorative beings, requiring protection, incapable of managing alone in the natural elements” (Rea 140), thus creating social limitations which were akin to a form of imprisonment in the private sphere. Poor country women flocked to the various cities looking for work from
among the wider options for paid work and the cheap, independent living arrangements which were far more difficult to find in the countryside. Although female artists bonded through associations in Paris, their work was marginalized and they were gradually excluded from professional bodies. Paris offered women new artistic and intellectual opportunities, but the city’s male dominated culture still restricted their self-expression. Often, with no other path lucrative enough to offer a reasonable amount of money for survival, the woman turned to prostitution. If she was exceptional in some way, she could rise to the position of courtesan.

While divisions among Parisian prostitutes at this time were vast, courtesan prostitution still remained hidden. Because of the very great possibility of social stigma which occurred if the courtesan were “outed,” one of a courtesan’s most valued assets was her ability to affect sincerity to facilitate trapping men, an ability she polished to a high sheen. The better she was at this, the more advantages she gave herself. In Paris, at the theatre, opera, or at a masked ball, her presence and her panache added to the mystique and mystery that surrounded the courtesan persona if her true identity remained undisclosed. It was essential that courtesans learn early in their careers to create their own celebrity, through mystery, which made them more desirable to men. Society women also attempted to imitate the courtesan’s sophisticated and cosmopolitan sense of style. Parisian society’s eroticized atmosphere promoted the very occupation of female prostitution, yet at the same time it was socially stigmatized. It promoted solicitation, and generally, when the woman was no longer at her peak of beauty or fashion it promoted the courtesan’s written confessions in memoirs to ensure financial survival. If the courtesan, at the peak of her career had remained mysterious, a later confession would be sought after by those who wanted to know what had been going on behind the scenes.
Nineteenth-century Europe’s obsessive definition and representation of the prostitute grew from the need to understand femininity and women’s social role. The prostitute was opposed to the respectable woman, who was exalted for her familial role as mother, sister, and daughter. For many, the prostitute was a social, spiritual, and physical threat. Because of this pariah status, the prostitute became an inspiration to civil servants, politicians, philosophers, and artists who used her for studies, platforms, philosophical treatments, and visual and literary artistic themes. The social roles of women were separated into good and bad, as society grappled with the notion of the feminine. If the good woman was feminine, what was the prostitute?

The category of the courtesan was both stigmatizing and alluring. These were beautiful and intelligent women who offered themselves as a luxury commodity most often to men who had not only position in society but also the money to accompany that position. Yet, within these strata there were also sub-divisions as can be clearly seen in the range of terms used to refer to and characterize courtesans. As Virginia Rounding defines in her book entitled *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans*, *Grandes Horizontales* could be referred to by the epithets *grandes* [great] or *hautes* [high]. There are many levels and types of *filles de joie* [girls of joy] but examples of the most elite of these are *grandes cocottes, grandes abandonnées*, or *grandes horizontales*. They were often known as *la haute galanterie, la garde*, or *la haute bicherie* (Rounding 20).

In defining the role of mistress there are various levels, of which one was the *grisette*. She was associated with the struggling male artist or student. She was named so for the color of the gray dress which she wore almost as a uniform. She worked as a seamstress in the clothing profession. *Grisettes* were seen delivering goods to her paying needlework customers, and thus
could be viewed by the *flâneurs* [artistic observers] on Paris streets, making them a topic for literary imaginings and artistic creation. Mimi in Henry Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* or Marthe, at one point, in Sand’s *Horace* are good examples of this type of *maîtresse*. These were young women working as seamstresses or embroiderers who offered themselves in exchange for an outing and something to eat (mostly on their Sundays off) to young struggling bohemian artists or young students in the Latin Quarter. In terms of sexual politics, they fell into established roles very popular during the 1830s to late 1840s which encompassed the decade in which Alphonsine Plessis came to Paris and moved from working as a *grisette* into the far more satisfying role of a high-earning *grande abandonnée* or *grande horizontale*.

The original “lady of the camellias,” Marie Duplessis (15 January 1824 – 3 February 1847), was born Rose Alphonsine Plessis in 1824 at Nonant-le-Pin in Normandy, France. Born poor, poverty marred her early years along with abuse, her parent’s separation, and her mother’s death when she was merely six. At barely twelve, her father began marketing her as a prostitute to Plantiers, a seventy-year-old bachelor. After a year, Plantiers sent her back to her father, who now had no more use for her so he then took her to Paris to stay with distant relatives. She worked as a seamstress and a laundress, but when she realized that prominent men would pay her for her company, she capitalized on her beauty and became a courtesan. Her first titled protector, according to René Weis in *The Real Traviata: The Song of Marie Duplessis* was the Duc de Morny. He recognized how special she was, and desiring to show her off in public, set about transforming her into the queen of Parisian courtesans through lessons in reading, writing, elocution, fashion, and finesse. As her celebrity increased she renamed herself Marie Duplessis, and was the hostess of a salon frequented by the stars of the *demi-monde* and the *haute monde* who gathered around the elegant young woman. Between September 1844 and August 1845,
Duplessis was mistress of Alexander Dumas fils. She is also reputed to have had a liaison with his father, Alexandre Dumas, père. That relationship and her early death from consumption at twenty-three produced the inspiration for the character Marguerite Gautier—the main character of the romantic novel, *La Dame aux camélias* [Lady of the Camellias] written by Dumas.

A prostitute called a *camélia* was one who was capable of falling in enduring love with one man. While there are many types of prostitutes in nineteenth-century Paris, this study is concerned with the two novel’s treatments of female protagonists known as “lady of the camellias.” Ève Sourian writes in her Préface to *Isidora*, “Isidora ou la dame aux camélias de George Sand” that Sand originated the first coining of the “lady of the camellias” phrase (Sourian 12).

One element in particular ties the novels *Isidora* and *La Dame aux camélias* together. In Sand’s *Isidora*, the work is introduced with a type of disclaimer. Sand writes in this NOTICE:

À Paris, 1845. C’était une très belle personne, extraordinairement intelligente, et qui vint plusieurs fois verser son coeur à mes pieds, disait-elle. Je vis parfaitement qu’elle posait devant moi et ne pensait pas un mot de ce qu’elle disait la plupart du temps. Elle eût pu être ce qu’elle n’était pas. Aussi n’est-ce pas elle que j’ai dépeinte dans *Isidora*. 
GEORGE SAND
Nohant, 17 janvier 1853

[In Paris, 1845. There was a very beautiful person, extraordinarily intelligent, and who came several times to pour her heart out at my feet, she said. I saw perfectly that she posed in front of me and did not believe a word of what she said most of the time. She could have been what she was not. Also, it is not her that I have depicted in *Isidora*. 
GEORGE SAND Nohant 17 janvier 1853]. (Sand 35 Trans. Sasson)

Starting from the premise that Sand is referring to a specific “lady of the camellias” with whom she was acquainted, the reader can interpret this cryptic disclaimer in various ways, but for the purpose of this section, the following explanation is given in support of the autobiofictional argument purported for the chapter’s argument. Sand lived in Paris at the same time as Marie Duplessis. Sand was friends with Dumas père and Dumas fils. In Ève Sourian’s article “The
Important, Little-Known Friendship of George Sand and Alexandre Dumas fils” she notes that “[b]ecause most of the letters of Alexandre Dumas Fils remain unpublished, the great friendship between him and George Sand is, even today, little recognized” (Sourian in Datlof, Fuchs, and Powell 243). They ran in similar circles. Surely she must have met or certainly knew of ‘the lady of the camellias’. Everyone in Paris knew of her. She was a celebrity. Sand compares her to a polished courtesan and implies that the woman was not what she presented herself to be, but that she could have been able to be this type of person just the same. She is speaking of the duality of this woman. She is speaking of the ‘Janus’ of celebrity. She says she did not depict this person in Isidora. But why this disclaimer if she was not using characteristics of Alphonsine Plessis to depict Isidora? Furthermore, Plessis knew the best friends of Sand, Marie Dorval and Franz Liszt. Those who knew Marie Duplessis could have known that she had been nicknamed “the lady of the camellias” by the flower woman who sold her camellias every day, perhaps even using the same florist, and even though Dumas claims to have given her that nickname in writing, the name had been floating around Paris for some time. The first actual appearance in print is found in Sand’s Isidora with reference to the female courtesan protagonist.

In the Preface of Isidora, Ève Sourian states that Sand evokes a ‘lady of the camellias’ who is far more celebrated than that of Dumas who had published his novel two years after Isidora had appeared. Similarly, Dumas begins his novel with a disclaimer where he confesses that he is not old enough to invent such a story, so he is content to narrate it. He claims the story is true, and that the characters are all living, except the heroine. He says eyewitnesses can confirm the facts, but thanks to a special circumstance, he alone can give the final details to make the story interesting and complete. Sourian suggests that perhaps Dumas admired Sand and that he may have read the work, but in all their correspondence, he never mentions Isidora. He
did say, according to Sourian, that he chose to spell *camélies* with one ‘l’ just as Sand had done, but had no intention of protesting its etymology with his choice of orthography. Dumas wrote: “*j’aime mieux mal écrire avec elle que bien écrire avec d’autres*” [I much prefer to write poorly with her than write well with others] (Dumas in Sourian 7 Trans. Sasson). Sourian continues: “*Tout porte à croire qu’ils eurent le même modèle. Elle s’appelait Alphonsine Plessis. Elle était l’élégance même.*” [Everything supports the idea that they used the same model. Her name was Alphonsine Plessis. She was elegance itself] (Sourian 12 Trans. Sasson). This statement is at the heart of the comparison between the two novels.

Perhaps the authors’ separate definitions of what each one means for the phrase *La Dame aux camélies* needs more explanation. First, Sand’s definition of the camellia flower as representative of the courtesan is given in *Isidora*. In the opera ball scene, the masked *domino* (Isidora in disguise) who has accosted Jacques asks her poor philosopher how he would judge the sinner who has greatly loved. She appears to be prodding him to think about certain ways of measuring love. She asks if his judgment of a sinner who has greatly loved would be below, above, or simply placed next to the virgin who has not yet loved; below, above, or next to the matron, whose virtuous care of home did not allow kindness, and therefore no fullness of emotion, feelings of fulfillment, or intoxication through the love of her man. She wants to know if he would want to dedicate himself to the exclusive worship of a flower which is so dull and without perfume, which vegetates in the shade, and has never experienced sunshine, that it thinks that the sun is the enemy of life. (She is likening the shade-grown, hothouse camellia that has been raised in shade to the courtesan who has never known love). She says she knows he loves the camellia, and so obviously despises the rose. Jacques replies: “*La rose est enivrante mais elle ne vit qu’un instant, dit-il. Je voudrais lui donner la persistance et la durée d’un camélia blanc,*
symbole de pureté.” [The rose is intoxicating but she lives only a moment, he says. I would like to attribute her with the persistence and duration of a white camellia, symbol of purity] (Sand 77–78 Trans. Sasson). Therefore, Sand ironically characterizes courtesans called “lady of the camellias” as women whose love for one man endures with persistence. In reality, this type of courtesan portrayed herself as a warm and loving woman, or even a virgin, but ironically might only be a ploy of her trade.

In comparison, Dumas’s portrayal of Alphonsine’s character, Marguerite, in La Dame aux camélias, begins in a later, more jaded period of her short life. He writes, “Je ne tire pas de ce récit la conclusion que toutes les filles comme Marguerite sont capables de faire ce qu’elle a fait; loin de là, mais j’ai connaissance qu’une d’elles avait éprouvé dans sa vie un amour sérieux, qu’elle en avait souffert et qu’elle en était morte” [I do not draw from this story the conclusion that all women like Marguerite are capable of doing all that she did—far from it; but I have discovered that one of them experienced a serious love in the course of her life, that she suffered for it, and that she died of it] (Dumas 244 and 213). He adds: “L’histoire de Marguerite est une exception, je le répète; mais si c’eût été une généralité, ce n’eût pas été la peine de l’écrire” [The story of Marguerite is an exception, I repeat; had it not been an exception, it would not have been worth the trouble of writing it] (Dumas 244 and 213). The story of Alphonsine, in the guise of Marguerite, is romanticized by Dumas, but there are also clear elements, found through research, of certain autobiofictional accuracies. The initial fall of Alphonsine Plessis was instigated, according to Romain Vienne, by her father leaving her at a very early age with an older man, Plantiers, for money to support himself. Vienne, who claims in his novel that he knew her from their childhood, writes in his novel:

Alphonsine allait, chaque mois, passer une heure, le dimanche, chez son père, à Saint-Germain. Au mois d’aôût, elle y fut comme d’habitude. Le sorcier l’emmena, à Éxmes,
Alphonisne went, every month, to spend one hour, on Sunday, at her father’s, in Saint-German. In August, she went as per usual. The magician took her, to Exmes, to an old bachelor named Plantier, about sixty-five years old, and enjoying, from a moral standpoint, a detestable reputation. In the evening, after a copious dinner, the magician returned alone to his hovel, leaving his daughter at the mercy of the old debaucher. She did not return, to her patroness, until Monday evening, and she remitted the twenty francs which had been given to her by Plantier, with the recommendation of presenting them as if they came from her father. From this moment forward, she developed the habit of leaving, every fortnight, in the morning, and, of late, every Sunday; but she only passed by her father’s. And took herself to Exmes to Plantier’s house who did not return her until Monday evenings, with a five-franc money-piece. (Vienne 17-18 Trans. Sasson)

Due to this early experience, she may have remained psychologically frozen in that childish state. Ellen Bass and Laura Davis wrote about the effects of childhood sexual abuse in children and some of the following psychological results in their groundbreaking book, The Courage to Heal (1988). They write that children who have been sexually abused often repeat the abuse. Many survivors have repeated their victimization. Some have married abusive lovers or had sex with many lovers in contexts that ranged from dangerous to humiliating to dull. Survivors have allowed others unlimited access to their bodies, and have been hurt again and again. . . . When survivors become prostitutes . . . they are repeating an abusive pattern. [They] may feel sex is all [they]’re good for. [They] may reason that now [they]’ll get paid for what was once stolen from [them]. But once again, [they] find [themselves] in a role where [their] value is solely sexual and in which [they] are sexual, not basically for [their] own gratification, but for someone else’s. (Bass and Davis 260-61)

Alphonisne’s “fall” into professional prostitution in Paris may have come from learning so early in life that her childish qualities were highly valued by a certain type of moneyed man. This knowledge of her powers would then have come to the surface in Paris. Traumatized by being forced to move away from Nonant to Paris and forced to work for next to nothing as a seamstress
while living with her aunt and uncle who were basically strangers, she must have realized that she could capitalize on that knowledge. And so, the child survives and flourishes, because a male dominant society has constructed a place for her creation and victimizes that creation. Yet another, more cynical interpretation could be that she was simply intelligent enough to know how to make things work for her, and may have realized that sex work was lucrative in a society that offered few economic options for woman. However, no one can know, except perhaps Romain Vienne who claims she was an innocent:

*Si je me suis décidé à écrire l’histoire de Marie Duplessis, que j’ai connue dès sa plus tendre enfance, et qui était digne d’un meilleur sort, c’est parce qu’elle ne ressemblait en rien aux courtisanes ordinaires, et qu’elle n’a été l’héroïne ni d’aventures extra-romanesques, ni de scandales retentissants, ni de duels insensés; parce qu’elle a brillé d’un éclat éblouissant, dans un monde à part, et qu’elle a su s’y faire une situation exceptionnelle, par un ensemble de qualités supérieures, par sa beauté, par son esprit, sa distinction et sa bienfaisance* [If I decided to write the history of Mary Duplessis, who I have known from her earliest childhood, and who was worthy of a better fate, it is because she in no way resembled ordinary courtesans, and that she was neither the heroine of extra-romantic adventures, nor of resounding scandals, nor of senseless duels; because she shone with a dazzling brightness, in a world apart, and because she knew how to make a situation exceptional, through a combination of superior qualities; by her beauty, by her mind, her classiness and her generosity]. (Vienne 58 Trans. Sasson)

Vienne’s version of the “lady of the camellias” suggests that she was truly victimized and not the victimizer and supports Dumas fils’s idealized “camélia”.

As Sand depicts in many of her novels and as she (from a woman’s point of view) clearly paints in *Isidora*, the dominant male society had conceptualized, constructed, re-instated and re-enforced the idea of a woman’s love as that which needed to be faithful and last forever through all the sacrifice and suffering, making woman a victim of the whim of man. Thus, the work can be autobiofictionally linked to quotes in Sand’s autobiography about her marriage and divorce.

In *Story of My Life*, Sand wrote about divorce with regard to the woman’s lot:

*And if the husband asks for the separation, isn’t his obligation more appalling still? A woman can articulate grounds of incompatibility sufficient to break the bond, without dishonoring the man whose name she bears. So for her to cite the wild living, the*
transports of anger, and the love affairs of her husband, within the marriage, in order to deliver herself from pain resulting from infractions of the rule, is without a doubt too much to ask of her; actually public opinion allows a man to cleanse himself of such blemishes. Indeed, according to the prejudices and customs of our society, the more a man is known for his many conquests, the more he is met with congratulatory smiles. . . . Such is not the position of the woman accused of adultery. One kind of honor alone is attributed to a woman. Unfaithful to her husband, she is stigmatized and vilified, she is dishonored in the eyes of her children; she is liable to the loss of her civil rights—to imprisonment. . . . Therefore, he must invoke adultery, and morally kill the woman who bears his name. Perhaps it is in order to spare him the necessity of this moral murder that the law concedes him the right of real murder against her person. . . . But this is still not the worst of it; the man is invested with many other rights. He may cast aspersions on the honor of his wife, have her put in prison, and then condemn her to return, in subordination to him, to submit to his pardon and caresses. (Sand, *Story of My Life* 1065-66)

Here Sand expresses the inequalities that were so prevalent in the nineteenth century between men and women in marriage. She explains how imprisoned women were in marriages and the manner in which she was treated.

Dumas depicts this idea of the male constructed female love from a male viewpoint in *La Dame aux camélias*. Why the name *La Dame aux camélias*?

It appears that Dumas had a similar opinion about “the lady of the camellias” and in describing his romanticized version of her as the heroine Marguerite in *La Dame aux camélias* he pens:

*On était sûr de l’y voir, avec trois choses qui ne la quittaient jamais, et qui occupaient toujours le devant de sa loge de rez-de-chaussée: sa lorgnette, un sac de bonbons et un bouquet de camélias. Pendant vingt-cinq jours du mois, les camélias étaient blancs, et pendant cinq ils étaient rouges; on n’a jamais su la raison de cette variété de couleurs, que je signale sans pouvoir expliquer, et que les habitués des théâtres où elle allait le plus fréquemment et ses amis avaient remarquée comme moi. On n’avait jamais vu à Marguerite d’autres fleurs que des camélias. Aussi chez Mme Barjon, sa fleuriste, avait on fini par la surnommer la Dame aux Camélias, et ce surnom lui était resté. [She was certain to be seen, and she invariably had three things with her on the ledge of her ground-box: her opera-glass, a bag of sweets, and a bouquet of camellias. For twenty-five days of the month the camellias were white, and for five they were red; no one ever knew the reason of this change of colour which I mention though I cannot explain it; like me, it was noticed both by her friends and by the habitués of the theatres to which she most often went. She was never seen with any flowers but camellias. At the florist Madame*
Barjon’s, she had come to be called the “Lady of the Camellias,” and the name stuck to her. (Dumas 28 and 25)

So, according to Dumas the showy, rose-like white camellia, was Marguerite’s trademark. They filled her richly decorated apartment on the Boulevard de la Madeleine, and she always carried a bouquet to the Opera. Camellias were the most expensive flower, a sign of wealth, not gender. A Monsieur Latour-Mézeray who always wore one in his button-hole and who, over the years must have spent 50,000 francs on his button-holes alone, was called “L’homme aux camélias.” The phrase was actually first used for a man … instead “Roman Vienne claims that she (Alphonsine) was given this sobriquet by a female employee of the Opéra” (Rounding 62). Dumas fils’s faux-naïf remark about not understanding why Marguerite wore red camellias for five days out of every month is meant to create sexual innuendo in the novel. On the other hand, in Verdi’s opera, grandeur and elegance are prevalent as a large element of opera, so the potent sexual symbolism of flowers is more subtly presented when Violetta suggests that Alfredo return when the flower has wilted.

The theater and opera play into both narratives of Isidora and La Dame aux camélias. In the article “Bohemians, Grisettes and Demi-mondaines,” Wilson describes how social life was eroticized by citing an evening spent at the Opéra, during the Second Empire:

It is wonderful what a center of debauchery the theater is. From the stage to the auditorium, from the wings to the stage, from the auditorium to the stage and from one side of the auditorium to the other, invisible threads criss-cross between dancers’ legs, actresses’ smiles and spectators’ opera glasses, presenting an overall picture of Pleasure, Orgy and Intrigue. It would be impossible to gather together in a smaller space a greater number of sexual stimulants, of invitations to copulation. It is like a Stock Exchange dealing in women’s nights. (Wilson 27)

To illustrate this point, there are several painters, Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Mary Cassat (1844-1926), and Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), who represent the connections that went on in the theater, both in front of the stage as well as behind the curtains.
Renoir’s *La Loge* [Theater Box] (1874) is a perfect example of “spectatorism” found within the theater where, both in the woman subject who lowers her opera glasses in order to be seen, and her male companion who is scanning the opera house through his opera glasses, spectatorism is highlighted.

Women’s roles were changing. The public woman had emerged, was now seen at the theater and at other events, and she was often imitated by the private woman who sought to discover new ways to keep herself interesting to her husband. Both the public woman and the domestic (private) woman were open to male scrutiny and therefore open to the criticism of those close to her who moved in a world which was predominantly that of the powerful male hegemonic society. Women had to compete constantly in a world where the man could travel back and forth between the *demi-monde* and *haut monde*. In order to continue to be attractive, the sheltered, domestic female, without ever entering into the *demi-monde* had to find ways to see her competition and imitate the courtesan fashion setter. Her only contact was by viewing these public women at theaters, operas, masked balls, ballet, and races. If she did not do her utmost to see those who were rivals, such as the *grandes horizontales*, and the *cocottes*, it would be impossible to contend. Not having the competitive edge could cause her to become vulnerable and so she could “fall” out of a lack of attention from her own companion.

It is the fear of falling that is so ubiquitous in both the virtuous woman who generally lives in a domestic sphere and the “other” (the courtesan) who lives in the public sphere. The courtesan must maintain the semblance of virtuousness to preserve the small acknowledgment she is given by society. Her celebrity in the *demi-monde* comes with notoriety through word-of-mouth. Her celebrity in society is mostly based upon how she attracts attention through her dress,
jewelry, carriage, horses, and her position at events such as the theater, opera, horse races, restaurants, and balls which was bought with her protector’s money. She is an image-maker.

Celebrity which was synonymous with the courtesan could not be hidden in the domestic/private space because it needed the public space to grow and flourish. Celebrity required recognition. Recognition called for public spaces. The public woman ebbed and flowed into these public spaces, crossing over and back again, seeking notice and the attention of those she wished to attract as marks. The courtesan had to be seen in public spaces in order to become famous, so that she could sell her “wares” for a higher price because her celebrity (notoriety) added to her desirability. She was her own best advertisement.

Appearances in public attracted rich, and even titled men. The richer the man, the more he wanted his mistress to be seen out and about, and enjoying life in an extravagant manner. He bought her parterre boxes at the opera and the theater where she attended a performance every night, so as to be observed or ogled with lorgnettes by all. In the box she was performing her duty for her protector by putting on a show, but as an added advantage, she would undoubtedly attract other men, often young and handsome, with whom she could have clandestine relationships for her own financial benefit or simply to have an amant de coeur [young lover]. A opera ball scene is included in Sand’s Isidora in which the author gives the reader a vibrantly descriptive picture of how easy it was to fall through public exposure and be branded as a prostitute and also how dangerous it would be for the woman who would lose her protector and luxurious lifestyle and become vulnerable to the possibility of living in the streets.

In an early chapter of Sand’s Isidora, at the masked ball, the author describes Isidora costumed as a provocative domino in a black outfit with white knotted roses, (the city’s mandatory, designated costume and identification mark for all courtesans attending a masked
ball). Jacques Laurent’s imagery of the rose as intoxicating, but short-lived, defines the relationship in which Isidora has found herself. By her “escape” in disguise from the Count’s restricted garden space to hunt at the opera masquerade, Isidora defines herself as a “rose” with the proof substantiated by her own escapist actions. She is not in love with, nor is she true to the count. She is the “rose,” not the “camellia.” It is her desperate search for a deep, true, and enduring love that haunts her. She is caught up in a web of her own making—hungry for something that she cannot have as long as she continues to live the way she lives. This is not a mature consciousness that Isidora possesses yet. She is in denial of her own character flaws.

Sand’s Isidora

The famous French female novelist of the mid-century, George Sand, had the double advantage of being an aristocrat and a woman of letters. Even so, she adopted a male pseudonym and masculine clothes to play the role of the eccentric. Sand’s mark on literature was great, and she can definitely be interpreted as a female novelist who used gender bending strategies to express her own autobiographical experiences, rendering a thin line between novel and autobiography. But for a woman who struggles against restrictive gender roles, it is no surprise that she adopted literary techniques and “performed” gender identities to undermine the strict role adherences of her historical epoch.

In Your Life as Story, Tristine Rainer notes that in the twentieth century a new type of autobiography, referred to as “new autobiography” developed. New Autobiography was a twentieth-century development of the novel “to create of autobiography an amphibious creature, neither fish nor fowl, neither autobiography nor novel, but a New Autobiography” (Rainier 28). A more recent term for this genre is “autobiofictional.” Though Sand and Dumas fit squarely in
the genre of the Romantic representation of the courtesan reborn through love, their ideas on voicing are innovative and can be construed as autobiofictional in today’s terminology.

The notion of the autobiofictional is complicated when we understand the confessional element and its emergence in the context of Paris’ courtesan culture. This is where the confessional narratives in a Rousseauian tradition will be investigated to determine how they aid in the rehabilitation of the fallen woman, and fit, if possible, into the genre used by each author. First however, we need to establish the summary of the Isidora narrative plot.

Although Sand’s Isidora is not about profit, the very presentation of this novel as a sequel in a journal suggests that its topic of courtesan celebrities held a strong attraction to the Parisian reading public. Consequently, this worked well for Sand who surely wanted to get her social ideas about courtesan rehabilitation out to a reading public.

**Isidora’s Plot**

Sand’s novel Isidora was first published in 1845 in a series in the newspaper *La Revue indépendente*, and finally in book form in 1846. Isidora has three parts.

Part one of Isidora begins with a young man, Jacques Laurent, who has moved to Paris from the country for his studies. Poor, he rents a room in the home of an aristocratic woman, Alice de T . . . , where he is working on writing down in a journal his thoughts about women and how they relate to patriarchal society. He is pondering about whether woman is equal to men in design, in the mind of God. He writes, questioning such a logic that would make her so necessary to Man, so capable of governing him, and yet so inferior to him. He is thinking about how to change society for the better by integrating woman into more spaces.

One morning, he sees a woman walking in the garden next door and is taken by her beauty. From this moment he begins to obsess and fantasize about this unnamed mysterious
woman. Concurrently, Jacques has been concerned for an old neighbor who has lost his income and cannot pay for his room. Momentarily, Jacques is unable to help the old man so he decides to write to the woman he saw walking to explain the old neighbor’s problem and ask her to help the old man until he (Jacques) can pay her back. He gets his answer delivered by a little boy who delivers a thousand franc bank note. He is soon invited by the woman (Julie) he has seen walking to come over and is shown the lovely garden. During conversation he becomes enamored with her, fantasizing about her from that point forward. Their conversation moves to Rousseau and his Social Contract when Jacques’s attention toward Julie begins to be too focused. Julie says that Rousseau does not understand women, despite good intentions since he considers them secondary beings in society. She explains that Rousseau did not make the rules for women the same as those for men and that there is another temple and another doctrine for her. She explains that women need the same doctrine and morality as that of men, and that the most spiritual of philosophers was instead the most materialistic on the question of women.

Jacques’s entry into his “Cahiers” after this conversation with Julie is as follows:

“L’homme est un insensé, un scélérat, un lâche, quand il calomnie l’être divin associé à sa destiné. La femme . . .” [Man is a fool, a villain, a coward, when he slanders the divine being who is connected to him by destiny. Woman . . .] (Sand 69 Trans. Sasson). A few nights later he finds himself accosted by a masked woman in front of the Opera house where a masked ball is hosted who begs him to escort her inside to protect her from a man who is following and persecuting her. She is dressed in the obligatory black domino outfit with white rose-shaped knots worn by all courtesans to signify their profession. He is alarmed at her brusque manner that criticizes and teases him. Inside, in conversation, she calls him Jacques. He is surprised to be recognized since he does not recognize her. She hints that she knows he has a botanical passion
and loves camellias. With this, he says that she must be Julie’s maid, but she responds that she is Julie’s intimate friend. He is incredulous and says so. She says that she knows he is in love with the “lady of the camellias.” Along with a compliment, she says they should sometime soon meet without masks at Julie’s. Taking him up to a box, their conversation continues. When he is about to leave, she suggests meeting once more in the loge.

When they again meet, she is still being followed by a man, or rather a dandy, who she says hates her. This man, a former lover, finds them in the loge and calls her the most beautiful woman in Paris but he also insults her. He threatens to make her rendezvous known to his good friend Félix. Jacques threatens the man for insulting a lady. The man replies that Jacques would not want to defend the name and the person of Isidora and be thought the lover of a woman who could be offended in such a manner. Jacques claims not to know this famous Isidora but says that in his village, men protect the women they accompany.

She pulls young Jacques away from the scandal of further argument with the dandy, and tells him that she wants to talk more with him in her home in private. When they arrive at her apartment, she pulls off her mask, and to his shock and despair he discovers that she is Julie. “Not Julie,” says Isidora with bitterness, “but, the woman most despised or even the most miserable of Paris. You loved Julie. Julie did not play a role in front of you. You have learned the present state of her soul.” Jacques has been hurt by her deception. Jacques wants to change her by taking her away to the country for a fresh start. But, she sees only the conditions of love in his offer. These are conditions of working on her rehabilitation. She says it is time to say farewell to the last love of her life because she cannot stand the mute reproach of forgiveness that will follow. She tells Jacques that she is the mistress of Count Felix de S... and that they are at his home where he could arrive at any moment.
Later, she writes him saying that she has chosen not to take his offer for fear of falling back into the misery of her childhood where she was poor and without hope. She confesses the dandy has tattled to Félix about her rendezvous at the Opéra with Jacques, and an argument has occurred. She admits she has calmed the count. Later, she sends yet another note to Jacques saying that she and the Count have left for Italy and that he should not dream anymore of her. She will remain with the Count.

Part two takes place in the home of the Count de S...’s sister, Alice de T... next door to Julie’s garden. She is a gentle aristocratic woman, young and widowed with a son, Félix, whose tutor is Jacques. With the death of her old husband, Alice has found a solitary freedom preferable. Her brother, the count, has recently died in Italy, and his family knows he had married the infamous Isidora before he died. They are up in arms about the transference of his estate to Isidora through marriage. Alice’s uncle tells her if she meets Isidora in her home it will only embarrass the family. Her cousin, Adhémar was the dandy at the masked ball. He tells Alice about his encounter with Jacques and Isidora.

After the family has gone, Alice calls Jacques to her salon. When Alice shares that Isidora has returned to Paris as the wife of Count de S... he is visibly shaken. She asks him about Isidora. Julie, he feels, is victim of her own fear of never finding love. She is two persons struggling within one body against a society that forces her to the only profession available to her. Alice listens carefully and is affected by his observations. Jacques’s description persuades Alice to think about Isidora’s rehabilitation in combination with his admission of love. She tells Jacques that she may help Isidora rehabilitate herself if Isidora has been true to the count. If not, she will distance herself without rudeness.
When Isidora enters, she hands a letter from her husband to his sister to read. The letter asks Alice to accept Isidora. It explains that Isidora had been entirely devoted to him during his illness for the past three years and deserves his sister’s love for she is rehabilitated. Alice hands the letter to Isidora who does not react. Alice is so warm and accepting that Isidora feels for the first time, a hint of hope. She has been accepted by a woman of honor, her sister-in-law, and this gesture makes her want to rehabilitate herself. To Isidora, Alice is a redeemer.

Alice bids Jacques accompany Isidora. During their walk she recognizes him. She seems shocked to realize that he lives in the home of Alice and accuses him of being her lover. He is appalled at this wrongful thought and is repulsed toward Isidora. It is during this conversation that Isidora realizes that Jacques no longer loves her. She attempts to capture him again in her web by explaining why she married the count. She reveals that in marrying the count, if he lived, Jacques would see that she had been rehabilitated. If he died, as has happened, Jacques would still see that her three years of devotion to a sick man equaled a rehabilitation of sorts, and that he might once again want to be with her now that she has the fortune enough for both of them to live well. But her pride cannot be calmed for she senses he loves Alice and that jealousy eats away at her.

She has to know if Alice truly loves Jacques and if that love is reciprocal. In another meeting with Alice, a long confession takes place where Isidora tells all to Alice (all the while observing the reactions). It is a cat-and-mouse game and Alice wins for she does not divulge her true feelings. That she (Isidora) couldn’t love Félix is a huge confession. That she has only been in love once, with Jacques, and that it is that love which might finally put her craving for love to rest is her main confession. Isidora manipulates the scene when she confesses that she told Jacques that she had loved him to the point of suicide during the three years in Italy. She admits
to Alice that she exaggerated this to win him over, but once he had surrendered she was immediately bored because it was too quick a win. The truth is she knew that he did not love her anymore and once again she was, for the last time in her life, not loved. Alice wisely retreats from the threesome love circle, but before leaving Alice tells Isidora to pursue Jacques and be free and happy . . . to truly rehabilitate herself. This is a crucial statement because it demonstrates that Alice’s definition of rehabilitation is for a public, or for that matter, a private woman to find and experience true love with the man she loves. With this they part, and Alice secludes herself away from Jacques and Paris.

Part three reveals that during the period in Paris, Isidora has stolen part of Jacques’s “Cahiers”, read them, and knows that he is in love with Alice, not her. In letters Isidora writes to Alice to return to Paris for she has left for a new life in Italy. She reveals the theft and the cahiers secret. A situation, Isidora writes, unbearable for her. It appears that the “Cahiers” are sent to Alice to read along with the first letter. Isidora, because of her admitted pride, cannot abide the idea that Jacques loves Alice and instead she chooses to retire to the northern Italian lake region and start over. The first two letters speak of the adoption of an orphan girl, Agatha, and of the healthy country life Isidora now leads. It speaks of accepting the inevitable onslaught of ageing and of a sense of becoming whole again through the maternal love of Agatha. She feels that Agatha loves her as a daughter would, too. She can save Agatha from the same fate that came to Isidora and this gives her life purpose. With this reciprocal love, Isidora has found the unconditional love she was seeking. The final three letters speak of the arrival of a young man, Isidora’s brief revivification of her previous ego, but of a final fairytale fantasy that this young man would be a good match for Agatha. When Isidora discovers that the young man is none other than Félix, the son of her sister-in-law, Alice, as well as her own nephew by marriage she
re-evaluates the situation. Upon realizing that the two young people do not seem to be in love with each other, Isidora’s final letter reveals a maturity not present earlier. She is able to laugh at herself and share the imagined marriage fantasy of the two young people to Alice.

**The Analysis of Sand’s *Isidora* and Some Autobiofictional Elements**

For use in the analysis of *Isidora*, and in order to define “autobiofictional”, this study will use terminology and definitions created by Philippe Lejeune. In his theory and history of literature, *On Autobiography*, Lejeune writes:

In the case of the fictitious name (i.e., different from that of the author) given to a character who tells his life story, the reader has reason to think that the story lived by the character is precisely that of the author: by cross-checking with other texts, or by delving into external news items . . . We would have all the reasons in the world to think that the story is exactly the same; nonetheless, the text produced in this way is not an autobiography. The latter supposes first of all an identity claimed at the level of enunciation, and absolutely secondarily, a resemblance produced at the level of the utterance. These texts would therefore fall into the category of “autobiographical novel.” This is how I will refer to all fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and protagonist, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it. So defined, the autobiographical novel includes personal narratives (identity of narrator and protagonist) as well as “impersonal” narratives (protagonists designated in the third person); it is defined at the level of its contents. Unlike autobiography, it involves degrees. The resemblance “assumed by the reader can be anything from a ‘fuzzy family likeness’ between the protagonist and the author, to the quasi-transparency that makes us say that he is the ‘spitting image.’” (Lejeune 12-13)

Lejeune’s term “autobiographical novel” is what this study will use to define the new term “autobiofictional” where the author, or author’s philosophies or beliefs can be identified through delving into historical facts, letters, and ‘external news items’ which reflect the author’s life or thoughts but have been masked as those of a certain character or within the words of multiple characters in the work. In the study, *Isidora* will be termed as an autobiofictional novel since the novel reflects Sand’s unconventional views on women, marriage, and morality.

The actual plot of *Isidora* is fictional, but many of the character’s thoughts or words are similar in concept to those found elsewhere as belonging to Sand. *Isidora* exhibits various voices
to create its complex narrative structure thereby masking Sand’s unconventional views. This study shows that this technique is applied by Sand in order to share philosophies and ideas which are socially unacceptable at the time, but which Sand is determined to promote to the public reader. Sand was never a courtesan, but through the character’s views on courtesan character she shares societal and personal views on women. Using a novel to convey her thoughts is a somewhat subtle way because the author remains sheltered behind the character(s).

The novel uses a complex narrative structure with multiple points of view to force the reader to think critically about courtesan’s status in society. Sand’s *Isidora* is divided into three parts using different voice styles: diary/journal, novel, and epistolary. Part one of *Isidora*, entitled *Journal d’un solitaire à Paris*, begins with a paragraph by the narrator and directed at the reader-friends in which the narrator uses first person plural to address the reader as is typical of Sand. The narrative voice’s treatment of Jacques, a young man searching for love and for answers to philosophical questions, undermines the all-knowing masculine position (unlike Dumas who upholds repressive patriarchal society in the father figure). She writes about how “we” came in possession of the manuscripts of Jacques Laurent entitled “Travail” and “Journal” which had been left in the country, at his mother’s house. In the narrator’s introductory paragraph, she undermines patriarchal power by stating: “*Beaucoup des manuscrits de Jacques Laurent avaient déjà servi à faire des sacs pour le raisin, et c’était peut-être la première fois qu’ils étaient bons à quelque chose.*” [Many of Jacques’s manuscripts had served to make grape sacks, and that was perhaps the first time they were good for something] (Sand 39 Trans. Sasson). By Lejeune’s terms, she refers to herself in the first person plural voice. The use of “nous” is a common literary technique used by George Sand. For the purpose of this analysis this study will suggest that Sand uses the first person plural “nous” form to denote her two persons:
Aurore Dupin and George Sand—the woman aristocrat and the pseudonym for her masqueraded male self—as the inner voice presence of Alice and the inner voice of the George Sand narrator. This sets up a frame narrative that Sand uses to give some unity to the diverse narrative techniques in which Isidora is written. The frame narrative is found at the beginning of part one, at the end of part two, at the beginning of part three to introduce the lost pages of Jacques’s “Cahiers,” and at the end of the discovered “Cahiers” pages. The first narrative structural point of view is found in part one in Jacques’s “Cahiers.” It is within Jacques’s “Cahiers” that the reader is introduced to Julie/Isidora through Jacques’s eyes, and the narrative of their meeting is paired with philosophical reflections on the dual nature of woman. These are Jacques’s thoughts revealed in both the “Travail” which is a collection of philosophical works, (aka J.J. Rousseau), and the second part called “Journal” which is an examination of heart and emotions. It interjects and frames Isidora in the narrator’s first person plural voice. Comments made in Laurent’s “Cahiers” on the differences between men’s and women’s education give the impression Sand is depicting socially accepted dominant male attitudes from Jacques’s viewpoint. (She has already undermined the male philosophical viewpoint in the narrator’s initial framework). The use of first person plural “nous” is, in a manner of speaking, a cloaking technique used to introduce the three parts of the novel and also to give a contemporary framework to the work. Jacques Laurent writes:

_Mais la femme! Où en prendrai-je la notion psychologique? Qui me révèlera cet être mystérieux qui se présente à l’homme comme maître ou comme esclave, toujours en lutte contre lui? Et je suis assez insensé pour demander si c’est un être différent de l’homme! Quelle logique divine aurait donc présidé à la création d’un être si nécessaire à l’homme, si capable de le gouverner, et pourtant inférieur à lui?_ [But woman! Where can I get a psychological understanding of her? Who will reveal to me this mysterious being who comes to the man as master or as slave, always struggling against him? And I am truly without a mind to ask if it is a being different from man! . . . What divine logic would therefore have governed in the creation of a being so necessary to man, so able to govern him, and yet inferior to him?]. (Sand 46-47 Trans. Sasson)
Annabelle M. Rea writes “that male education was essential to the improvement of the woman’s state” (Rea 148). Rea thinks that Sand came to some realizations after writing *Isidora*. One of those realizations, according to Rea was that men had to be re-educated. The secondary level of the analysis of *Isidora* looks at the Rousseauian aspects of Isidora’s story which are crucial to the argument. In part one, Sand’s Isidora presents the narrator with the male voice as “Jacques Laurent” (not Jean-Jacques, as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but nonetheless two given Christian names as opposed to a Christian and a family last name) and he is characterized as a philosopher/writer. For the purposes of this study, the fact that Jacques Laurent has two Christian names will be read to suggest that Sand wanted him to represent Rousseau’s philosophy in *The Social Contract*. That is to say that for Rousseau the woman’s public persona did not count for much. The choice of Jacques’s name is certainly a hint given by Sand as to how the reader might begin to look at Sand’s characterizations in the novel. She even places one of Rousseau’s works, *The Social Contract* in the hands of the courtesan character and through Isidora’s comments underlines Rousseau’s lack of understanding of women. It is in that dialogue that Isidora points out some of the restrictions and foibles of Rousseau’s social contract theory.

Rousseau’s theory of an ideal republic suggests that citizens are not forced into any community but instead they consent to become a community for mutual benefit. It might even be possible for Rousseau to argue the ancient Greek and Roman citizens chose to get involved politically and socially which made them competent in building what no other society has come close to re-building since that time. The unification of community spirit did not supersede their individuality, but rather gave their individuality an outlet in which it could express itself to the fullest.
One response to Rousseau (other than pointing out that those societies relied on slavery and exploitation) might be to suggest that the world of Rousseau’s time had changed since then. Looking at the distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere of social theorist Jurgen Habermas it might be suggested that Rousseau does not give careful enough attention to the latter. Although Rousseau did give permission to citizens to act as they pleased as long as it did not interfere with public interests, the philosopher still seemed to presume that human personality was, one way or the other, public. He did not seem to recognize a difference between who people were in public and what they were in private. With his insistence on such active citizenship, he required that people’s public persona take precedence over their private self.

That philosophy, of course, did not take account of a woman’s public persona. As Sand points out with her depiction of both Alice and Isidora in the first chapters, women were still imprisoned in the domestic sphere, or in Isidora’s case, the conservatory garden of urban Paris. Isidora’s comments to Jacques call attention to the fact that Rousseau had not taken into consideration that the woman’s temple was the home. Whereas the public persona of men might incorporate the freedom to dally sexually outside the home, for women this was forbidden. The female doctrine was therefore built on the idea of the private sphere and domestic slavery. Her individuality was suffocated. Her morality had to be unquestionably pure and untouched. Therefore, a woman who possessed a public persona had stepped out of the unspoken but accepted “temple” and “doctrine” for women, and was immediately judged as immoral. Furthermore, Isidora suggests that Rousseau’s understanding of women had not considered a woman’s soul, her essence, her spirit, her mind, only her physical body. As she later explains, these public women are searching desperately for a real and true love, but are continually
disappointed by the shallow and feeling-less love they are promised with slanderous lies.

Isidora’s depth of thought is noted by Jacques, and is appreciated for its philosophical acumen.

Perhaps it might be said that the more philosophical character of the novel is the courtesan, Isidora, not Jacques, suggesting, albeit subtly, the very real possibility that a woman can be a just as valid a philosopher as Rousseau. Sand is presenting this idea because in Plato’s philosophy, which Sand studied with her tutor, Jean-François Deschartres, on her Grandmother’s estate in Nohant, women were not considered viable as philosophers or even citizens. Since Rousseau does not consider the public woman in his Social Contract then Sand is pressing the idea that a woman can have philosophical ideas and she wants to stress that for the betterment of the gender. (Sand was herself something of a philosopher and had studied Rousseau with her tutor, because her grandmother was a free-thinker and had also studied several of the philosophes of her day).

As Isidora unfolds, Laurent’s voice disappears entirely and the only first person voice left belongs to the courtesan Isidora. Each voice application shows a different viewpoint of the courtesan character, and delivers examples of how society has socially constructed the courtesan. A series of voice switching is brought into play in this unusually disjointed novel which can only lead to a conclusion that mixed narrative techniques were used deliberately.

In the novel’s second part, Alice, the narrative voice changes to third person. The narrator reveals the story in this section through the voice of Jacques as taken from some papers retrieved from Laurent’s mother. Part two has a complex plot in which the courtesan, Isidora, has returned as a widow from Italy and carries a letter from Alice’s dead brother for her to read. The reading of the letter by Alice, and the subsequent reading of it by Isidora causes an explosion of confessions from Isidora to Alice. Within the narrative structure, the inner workings of Isidora’s
mind are revealed to show her to be a manipulative creature who is trying to coax Alice to reveal her feelings about Jacques. This is her proud and dominant character: her Medusa-like quality which is how courtesans were imaged in the male dominant society of Paris. It has to do with the power of beauty. Medusa was originally a queen-like woman of great beauty who was pursued by many suitors but whose beauty the cause of her terrible fate. Courtesans were thought to be similar. But Alice outwits the courtesan and instead maneuvers her. Because of Isidora’s own confessions Alice wants Isidora to attempt rehabilitation through a relationship with Jacques. Alice’s role as set by Sand is to enable Isidora’s rehabilitation. Both women express concerns about the institution of marriage and the social order which is made clear in the manner in which Alice circumvents her family’s exclusion of Isidora.

Alice’s role effectively rewrites the confessional récit used by Dumas or Abbé Prévost in Manon Lescaut in which the courtesan is a femme fatale who is punished and dies as it must be from a male dominant social viewpoint. Instead, Alice takes the place of the male confessor who is representative of the male dominant society thereby upsetting the social contract to create a power structure for the private, domestic, and aristocratic woman to deal with socially questionable issues. The dominant male’s position in the femme fatale genre is that the courtesan can only be saved through death because only then can she finally be purified and faithful to one man alone as a woman redeemed through her suffering and death who now abides in Heaven. Alice, the aristocratic woman saves the courtesan out of compassion and the courtesan does not die, making this novel a re-write of the male confessional récit and creating a new literary genre. Alice retreats to the country and leaves the two to their own devices. Isidora cannot change so soon, and her true proud self, her insatiable orgueil [insatiable pride] (Sand 160) rises up again when she steals some of Jacques’s “Cahiers” and finds that he is in love with Alice. This causes
her to leave Paris and start a solitary life. “Only then does she begin her journey toward
“rehabilitation” by leaving alone for Italy without informing anyone before her departure” (Rea
144). Then, part two ends with another first person plural voice (the woman aristocrat’s /fictional
narrator’s) stating “nous ne connaissions pas bien les pensées de Jacques Laurent” [we do not
know Laurent’s thoughts very well yet] (Sand 197). Part two has not really clarified Jacques’s
feelings, but rather it has clouded them. He has once again been seduced by Isidora, but we the
reader know that he has strong feelings of love for Alice.

In this first section of part three, Jacques’s stolen “Cahiers” notes appear with his
confession of his true feelings for Alice. It is in part three that the novel allows the courtesan to
speak in her own voice by including Isidora’s letters there. There is a sincerity that is felt by the
reader when evaluating Isidora’s letters. Sincerity is a Rousseauian element applicable in this
novel. As Aimée Boutin penned in her article “La ‘comédie de la rehabilitation’ ou la
transparence et l’obstacle dans Isidora”: Je me concentrerai pour ma part sur les
représentations de la sincérité, thème rousseauiste par excellence, dans les dialogues, la trame
narrative et la construction des personnages” [“The ‘comedy of the rehabilitation’ or
transparency and obstacle in Isidora”: I shall concentrate for my part on the representations of
sincerity, a Rousseauist theme par excellence, in the dialogues, the narrative, and the characters’
development] (Boutin 1). The reader is then presented with five confessional letters from Isidora
to Alice, written again in the courtesan’s first person voice; Isidora makes confessions about her
life, her redemption, and her self-rehabilitation. The reader experiences Isidora’s maturity as a
person in these earnest letters and that is the goal. The protagonist self-rehabilitates and matures
into a person who contributes to society.
One of the narrative techniques used by Sand is the epistolary form of narrative as a way to establish a clearly confessional element in her novel. It is through the confessions that Isidora begins her journey of rebirth and transformation. Her rehabilitation begins only after she has left for Italy. Her rebirth is through her self-isolation, away from Paris, in the beautiful lake region of northern Italy. She has cocooned herself, giving time for reflection and change. In the case of Isidora, Sand has five letters that Isidora writes to her sister-in-law, Alice, that enlighten the reader on the changes she has made within herself and her life, and of her path for self-rehabilitation and redemption by writing the first letter. Each letter reports her new day to day life and her struggles on route to a mature self-understanding. In her second letter, she shares that she is no longer young and she questions why she should continue to confound her heart by imagining things: “It is not of Jacques that I am cured, it’s of love!” (Sand 216). By this she is speaking of the love of a man. This admission in a letter to Alice is the beginnings of her rebirth. Ageing is a courtesan’s worst fear and Isidora is obsessed with it. She eventually concludes that old age is inevitable and she shares that she has put her mind to the task of securing the best pathway to take when the freshness of youth is gone. When Isidora comes to grips with her fear of ageing, she is ready to insert herself back into society. She writes:

Non, je ne suis plus jeune! Si mes traits disent le contraire, ils mentent. C’est dans l’âme que les années marquent leur passage et laissent leur empreinte. C’est notre coeur, c’est notre imagination qui vieillissent promptement ou résistent avec vaillance. . . . Avec quelle terreur j’avais toujours pensé à la vieillesse! . . . La vieille femme! Eh bien, oui, c’est une autre femme, un autre moi qui commence, et dont je n’ai pas encore à me plaindre . . . Je trouve la vieillesse bonne et acceptable, mais elle m’arrive sérieuse et recueillie, non folâtre et remuante. [No, I am not young anymore! If my looks are contrary, they lie. It is in the soul that years mark their passage and leave their footprint; it is our heart, it is our imagination that gets old quickly or resist with bravery. . . . With what terror I had always thought of old age! . . . The old woman! Oh well, yes, it is another woman, another me who comes into existence, and therefore I don’t yet have a reason to feel sorry for myself . . . I find old age good and acceptable, but it looms over me serious and gathered, instead of playfully and stirring]. (Sand 217-20 Trans. Sasson)
Sand uses a metaphor for youth and old age. Youth, Isidora writes, is like a walk in the Alps, all power and grandeur; but old age is like a well planted garden, a little cold to look at, but still great for a long promenade. You can still see the flowers, but they are cultivated, not wild. With this statement, Isidora reveals her Achilles heel—her weakness—fear of ageing. But she claims she has accepted it gracefully.

Through the letters to Alice, Isidora reveals herself as the woman who has begun a new life as the single woman, the woman alone reconstructing her self-worth. In this letter “Sand explores the autonomy allowed to the widow under nineteenth-century law. This is important for it is proof of Sand’s political engagement in Isidora. In the last letters, Sand’s focus presents a middle-aged woman struggling to find her footing in a new life, wrestling with her inner self, her past thoughts and habits, and facing previously unexplored horizons found when she adopts a daughter and learns the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship” (Rea 140). Isidora further shares that she adopted a young Italian girl, Agatha, in order to save her from the same fate that took place in Julie’s life. In adopting Agatha, Isidora has completed her transformation from a single woman afraid of ageing and losing her beauty and power, to a matron and mother who shares her life and helps a young girl take the right path in life. She discusses her healthy new life in the country, recalling her suffocating life in Paris. On the subject of adoption Rea adds interesting critical ideas in “L’Adoption: George Sand contre le règne de la famille bourgeoise”:

Dans ‘Isidora,’ publié en 1846, Sand explore différents aspects de la maternité ‘illégitime’ et cela, malgré le fait qu’il ne s’agit ni d’une courtisane, ni d’une ‘fille mère.’ A quarante-cinq ans, après un long processus de réflexion, le personnage éponyme, ancienne courtisane, est arrivé à une maturité paisible et joyeuse. À la suite d’une existence de dépendance et d’enfermement, symbolisée par les grands murs du jardin parisien où elle vivait en femme entretenue, Isidora, devenue finalement veuve et riche, se trouve en Lombardie dans un magnifique paysage immense et ouvert. Une jeune orpheline de seize ans, très pauvre, qui vient travailler chez elle gagne l’estime d’Isidora par sa modestie, son calme, sa distinction, sa culture et son efficacité. La veuve, pourvue donc du maximum d’autonomie pour une femme, selon le Code Civil, décide, à quarante-
cinq ans et sans avoir souhaité devenir mère, d’adopter la jeune Agathe. Cette adoption sauverait Agathe du sort d’Isidora; en effet, c’était à seize ans que, fort pauvre elle aussi, Isidora était devenue courtisane, ayant choisi d’exploiter sa beauté pour réaliser ses ambitions. Dans la réalité, une telle adoption était parfaitement illégale. [In ‘Isidora,’ published in 1846, Sand explores different aspects of ‘illicit’ motherhood and such, in spite of the fact that it is neither about a courtesan, nor about an ‘unwed mother.’ At forty-five, after a long process of cogitation, the eponymous figure, former courtesan, arrived at a gentle and cheerful adulthood. Following an existence of dependency and imprisonment, represented by the big walls of the Parisian garden where she lived as a kept woman, Isidora, finally widowed and a rich woman, is in Lombardy in a splendidly huge and open landscape. A young sixteen-year-old, destitute orphan, who comes to work for her earns the respect of Isidora through her modesty, her calmness, her distinction, her culture and her effectiveness. The widow, endowed therefore with the maximum of self-government for a woman, according to the Civil code, decides, at forty-five, and without having wished to become mother, to adopt young Agatha. This adoption would save Agatha from the fate of Isidora; in effect, she was sixteen years old when, also very poor, Isidora had become a courtesan, having chosen to exploit her beauty to realize her ambitions. In reality, such adoption was perfectly illegal]. (Rea in McCall-Saint-Saëns 84 Trans. Sasson)

Rea questions whether Isidora adopted Agathe illegally on purpose, with ulterior motives in mind, or if she adopted her merely for the purpose of saving the girl from a similar end as she had had. It seems that if Isidora’s word concerning why she adopted Agathe is taken for truth, then the reader will most likely have some doubts when the reader recalls Isidora’s numerous Machiavellian maneuvers in the confession scene in Paris with Alice, and the seduction scene with Jacques. It is left to the reader to decide for what reason Isidora adopted Agathe based upon the many indications in Sand’s writings of her support of women’s interests, and of her obvious belief in downcast women as having the ability to change their lives so as to be more able to contribute to society in a positive way. The reader should, I think, take Sand’s course of defense, since it is Sand who wrote most often that she supported women. The book was therefore written in support of women’s causes. Isidora was a femme fatale/Medusa, but she changes with age and maturity and becomes something better in the country. She becomes loving and is therefore loved for herself. Most of her ego has fallen away. It is only the presence of a man which briefly brings the medusa back again.
Isidora falls a bit back into her egoistic self, briefly fancying herself pursued by a younger man who has arrived in Italy. “Ce jeune homme m’avait servi de miroir pour me dire que j’étais belle encore.” [This young man had served me as a mirror so I could say to myself that I was still beautiful] (Sand 242 Trans. Sasson). She is momentarily attracted and re-invigorated by his presence, yet she soon recognizes that this disguised young man, who eventually reveals himself as Alice’s son, Félix, is more appropriate for Agatha, the orphan girl Isidora explains in earlier letters that she had adopted. Eventually, the new Isidora comes to the realization that Félix, as her sister-in-law’s son, is her nephew by marriage, and while she fantasizes that Agatha and Charles de Verrières would love each other and marry, she writes to Alice that it was her “old-lady mind”… which had built this story. This final confession is one of self-assuredness for she laughs at herself and her imagined scenarios.

She has reevaluated her self-worth and matured. In truth, she is now firmly ensconced in middle age. Country life has brought with it a mellowness and maturity not previously painted by Sand in Isidora’s inner psychology. Even this depiction has an echo of the future Sand which we recognize as the writer in her home in the country. This Isidora mirrors the Sand who would leave the Bohemian life and return to the peace and quiet of a healthier country life. Sand not only paints various genders and classes in this work, but she also paints diverse degrees of age.

Sand causes the reader to think about the value of a courtesan who has had a change of heart and Alice’s experiences in part two of the novel reflect Sand’s views on marriage. Alice also is forgiving of Isidora’s past. This forgiving characteristic mirrors Sand’s nonjudgmental opinion toward women with a past—a theme running throughout her novels.

In a letter to her son Maurice, Sand writes:

Marriage without love; that is life imprisonment. . . .I understood you to say not long ago that you did not think yourself capable of loving forever, and that you could not answer
for yourself ever being faithful in marriage. Do not get married in that frame of mind, for you will be cuckolded and you will have deserved it. You will have at your side a brutalized victim, or else a jealous fury, or a fool you will despise. When we are in love, we are convinced that we will be faithful. We can easily be mistaken but we believe it, we make vows in good faith, and we are happy as long as we persist with it. If exclusive love is impossible for life (which has not been proved to me) at least let there be some beautiful years when we think it possible . . . The day when I see you sure of yourself, I will be content . . . (Sand in John 128)

In the last section of Sand’s autobiography, she also reveals her feelings about marriage and divorce.

Marriage is beautiful for lovers and useful for saints. Outside of saints and lovers, there are a great many souls and peaceable hearts who are unfamiliar with love and who have no wish for sainthood. Marriage is the ultimate goal of love. If love is no longer, or never was, a part of it, what remains is sacrifice. All well and good for those who understand the terms of sacrifice. It requires a measure of courage and degree of intelligence that do not grow on trees. There are compensations for sacrifice which the ordinary mind can appreciate: the world’s approbation, the sweet security of routine, a tranquil and sensible little devotion which does not require excitement, possibly even money. . . . There is perhaps no middle ground between the power of great souls who attain sainthood and the comfortable stupor of small minds who attain insensibility.” (Sand, Story of My Life 854-55).

Sand expresses the sacrifices that are endured in a marriage without love in it and how that situation causes either a numbness compensated with material things for the smaller souled persons, and a sainthood which develops in the great souls. This relates to both Alice and Isidora in Isidora.

Alice had already suffered in a loveless marriage. It is clear that she does not want to risk that emptiness once again. She leaves Jacques to Isidora, most likely because her own fear of being hurt has overwhelmed her and pushes her to retreat without a fight.

The reader knows Jacques’s feelings about Alice. Here, Sand demonstrates the bourgeois dominant male attitudes toward women. Jacques is smitten with Julie the Madonna side of the dichotomy of Madonna/whore. In the novel, when the reader experiences a direct confession to Jacques from Isidora/Julie in which Isidora reveals that she is also the Julie from next door, his
reaction is typically chauvinistic, but it is also self-protective and balanced. Her confession exemplifies the virgin/whore dualism that structured women’s social roles. At first contact, Jacques was repulsed by Isidora, and the knowledge that she is both Isidora and Julie destroys his fantasies and feelings for Julie.

Sand’s autobiography, *Story of My Life*, reveals her opinions on women’s roles and reflects what she felt during her divorce. Examples from her autobiography mirror some of the social ideas found in *Isidora* are numerous. About the plights of nineteenth-century women she wrote:

> If they are ignorant, they are despised, if learned, mocked. In love they are reduced to the status of courtesan. As wives they are treated more as servants than as companions. Men do not love them: they make use of them, they exploit them and expect, in that way, to make them subject to the law of fidelity. (*Almanach de Mois, “La Fauvette du Doctor*” Nov. 1844)

Sand wrote in her autobiography about the mistreatment of women and made it her quest to assist the woman’s plight in the nineteenth century through her writings and Isidora is an example of that endeavor.

Sand gives another type of example of a way to make a social change through Alice’s actions toward Isidora. Alice, the noble woman forgives Isidora, the courtesan: this sets precedent in literature. The noble Alice allows the courtesan to come into her home (a social *taboo*). Like Sand, Alice abhors the idea of classes among people. The proof that Alice’s character presents Sand’s inner thoughts and feelings on this topic is linked to Sand’s autobiography. Sand’s lower class mother married her high-born father. The negative reaction of her grandmother to this union left quite an impression on Sand, who developed very modern and progressive views toward marriage.
Application: Rousseauian Confessional Aspects of *Isidora*

Before analyzing the Rousseauian confessional aspects in *Isidora*, the study will look at Sand’s true ideas about Rousseau’s autobiography: *Les Confessions*. She recognizes and presents early in her own autobiography that there is a vast difference between Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* and Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*. Saint Augustine wrote his work to pinpoint the source of his suffering and to recognize what saved him. It is meant as a guideline to rescue Christians to come. In contrast she writes that Rousseau’s autobiography appears more personal and thus less serious or useful. His self-accusations are purely to clear himself. About Rousseau’s autobiography Sand writes in *Story of My Life*:

He accuses himself in order to clear himself, he reveals his private crimes for the right to reject public slander. Furthermore, his is a monumental confusion of pride and humility, which sometimes repels us by its affectation and sometimes touches us by its sincerity. As pervasively flawed and occasionally blameworthy as this famous work may be, it carries with it serious lessons, and the more the martyr abases himself and wanders from the pursuit of his ideal, the more the same ideal beckons to us. (Sand 74)

Her observations of Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* are acutely accurate and she employs some of his philosophy in *Isidora* in the confession scenes and Isidora’s letters. The mixture of pride and humility are found in the character of Isidora and develop throughout the novel.

It is recognized by many critics that in Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*, he creates the modern form of the confessional narrative. Sand wrote thoughts in a letter on Rousseau. In Sand’s *Quelques réflexions sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* she quotes from *Les Confessions* of Rousseau and then interprets the quote:

*Jusque-là j’avais été bon: dès-lors je devins vertueux, ou du moins enivré de la vertu. Cette ivresse avait commencé dans ma tête, mais elle avait passé dans mon coeur. Le plus noble orgueil y germa sur les débris de la vanité déracinée. Je ne jouai rien: je devins en effet tel que je parus; et pendant quatre ans au moins que dura cette effervescence dans toute sa force, rien de grand et de beau ne peut entrer dans un cœur d’homme dont je ne fusse capable entre le ciel et moi. Voilà d’où naquit ma subite éloquence: voilà d’où se répandit dans mes premiers livres ce feu vraiment céleste qui m’embrasait, et donc pendant quarante ans il n’était pas échappé la moindre étincelle,*
parce qu’il n’était pas encore allumé [Until then I had been good: from then I became virtuous, or at least intoxicated with virtue. This drunkenness had begun in my head, but it had passed in my heart. The most noble arrogance germinated on the rubbish of uprooted vainglory there. I played nothing: I became in effect what I appeared; and during the four years at least while this effervescence in all its force lasted, nothing big and nice could enter man's heart of which I should not be capable between Heaven and me (in my heart). Here is from where my sudden eloquence was born: here is from where this really celestial fire spread in my first books which set ablaze me, and therefore throughout the forty years not even the slightest spark escaped, because it was not lit yet].

(Sand on Rousseau’s Les Confessions, seconde partie, livre IX, 1756. 157)

Sand interprets this quote of Rousseau thusly:

Certes, ce n'est pas là un homme qui se farde ou qui se drape: c'est un homme, un homme véritable, non pas tel que les hommes célèbres enivrés de leur supériorité consentent à se montrer, mais tel que Dieu les fait et nous les envoie. C'est un être sujet à toutes les faiblesses, capable de tous les héroïsmes: c'est l'être ondoyant et divers de Montaigne, sensitive divine qui subit les influences délétères ou vivifiantes du milieu où elle s'élève, qui se crispe sous le vent et s'épanouit sous le soleil. Enfin c'est l'homme vrai, tel que la philosophie chrétienne l'avait en partie découvert et défini, toujours en butte au mal, toujours accessible au bien, libre et flottant entre les deux principes allégoriques d'un bon et d'un sauvage ange [Certainly, this is not a man who lies about or who hides himself: this is a man, a true man, not like the famous men who, intoxicated by their superiority, agree to show themselves, but rather as God makes them and sends them to us. He is a being subject to all weaknesses, capable of all heroisms: It is the rippling and various being of Montaigne, the sensitive divine one who is subjected to noxious or exhilarating influences in the middle from which he rises up, who gets nervous from (a persistent) wind and blooms under the sun. Finally, it is a real man that the offensive philosophy has in part discovered and defined, always on the edge of evil, always accessible to good, free and floating between both allegorical principles of a good and a wild angel]. (Sand 158 Trans. Sasson)

Though rarely the subject of academic criticism, a philosophy of truth animating Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s broader philosophical system is possible to determine. His philosophy of truth was unique in its era just as the whole of Rousseau’s thought was—in its stress on:

[F]eeling over reason, the heart over the mind, the simple over the sophisticated, the useful over the demonstrable, the personal over the systematic. Rousseau's philosophy of truth might be more accurately called a ‘philosophy of truthseeking’ or an ‘ethics of truthseeking,’ because its focus is on the pursuit and acquisition of truth rather than on the nature of truth itself. What is needed, Rousseau believed, is a guide back to the simple truths of human happiness, truths that were immediately apparent to us in our natural state but have become opaque in society. (Neidleman 1)
In this passage Sand observes that Rousseau describes himself in a candidly truthful way painting himself as a flesh-and-blood creature, with all the strengths and weaknesses given him by God. This Rousseauian definition is precisely that which Sand uses to format the character of her courtesan in *Isidora*, and as Sand states through the character of Isidora, gives her a flesh-and-blood presence with all the shortcomings and virtues God gives all Humanity. Isidora herself points out that in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* the philosopher does not consider that a woman could have similar characteristics to those given Man by his God. In picking apart Rousseau’s works Sand has shown, between her comments on Rousseau from a letter written in 1841 and her later comments in *Isidora* on Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, that the philosopher allows himself human strengths and weaknesses, but does not even discuss women in the same breath as having similar strengths and weakness. It is as if Woman is not allowed human weakness, but must always maintain her virtues.

In *Les Confessions*, Rousseau constructs a narrative line which begins with innocent childhood:

*Personne autre que moi n'était entré dans la chambre. On m'interroge: je nie d'avoir touché le peigne. M. et mademoiselle Lambercier se réunissent, m'exhortent, me pressent, me menacent: je persiste avec opiniâtreté; mais la conviction était trop forte elle l'emporta sur toutes mes protestations, quoique ce fût la première fois qu'on m'eût trouvé tant d'audace à mentir. La chose fut prise au sérieux; elle méritait de l'être. La méchanceté, le mensonge, l'obstination, parurent également dignes de punition . . . Mon pauvre cousin était chargé d'un autre délit non moins grave; nous fûmes enveloppés dans la même exécution. Elle fut terrible . . . Qu'on ne me demande pas comment ce dégât se fit. . . . c'est que j'en étais innocent. . . . Là fut le terme de la sérénité de ma vie enfantine. Des ce moment je cessai de jouir d'un Bonheur pur, et je sens aujourd'hui même que le souvenir des charmes de mon enfance s'arrête là. Nous y fumes comme on nous représente le premier homme encore dans le paradis terrestre, mais ayant cessé d'en jouir.* [No one had gone into the room. I denied having touched the comb . . . they exhorted me, pressed me, threatened me; I persisted stubbornly in my denials, but the case against me was too strong and it prevailed over all my protestations, even though this was the first time I had been thought capable of so barefaced a lie. It was regarded as a serious matter, and rightly so. The misdemeanor, the lie, the obstinacy, all seemed to merit punishment . . . My poor cousin was accused of another no less serious offence. We
were subjected to the same chastisement. It was terrible. . . . Do not ask me how the damage was done . . . what I do know is that I was innocent. . . . This is where the serene days of my childhood ended. Never again did I enjoy happiness, and even today I sense that my memories of childhood enchantment stop short at this moment . . . We lived there as we are told the first man did, when he was still in his earthly paradise but had ceased to enjoy it]. (Rousseau 15-18 and 18-20)

This is the “fall of innocence” which occurs in the philosopher’s narrative line. It is the disaster that causes the man of nature to become unhappy in his life. Before this point, Rousseau, in his early youth, is both happy and entirely innocent, just as God made him. It is the contact with the surrounding society which changes him forever and causes a break in trust. He writes: “We were still pupils, but were no longer attached to our guardians by bonds of affection, respect, intimacy, confidence; we no longer looked upon them as gods who could see into our hearts; we were less afraid of doing wrong and more afraid of being found out; we began to dissemble, to rebel, to lie” (Rousseau 20). Rousseau does not narrate his story, unburdening his whole self, with all his frailties, failings, and desires, from childhood through his youth to adulthood as an act of mere humble self-deprecation. Instead, he chooses to do it in a way that says that even with all of his weaknesses, he is really an honest and good being. This narrative technique is used in many courtesan memoirs and is used as a pattern for the two Sand and Dumas novels examined in this study.

In *Isidora*, we do not immediately meet the child as we did in Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*. Instead, we are presented with two sides of the same person, Julie/Isidora. This dichotomy, which is a common duality of the courtesan celebrity, is what is explained by Sand’s character developments. It is the Madonna/whore or the angel/devil duality which has defined women in the West since the beginning of Christianity. There is a public and a private person in the courtesan depicted in *Isidora*. Her own fall is explained to Alice in a confessional scene in part two:
Je me rappelle un dicton populaire que j’entendais répéter autour de moi dans mon enfance: ‘Elle a des yeux à la perdition de son âme,’ disaient les commères du voisinage, en me prenant des mains de ma mère pour m’embrasser. Ah! que j’ai bien compris, depuis, cette naïve et sinistre prédiction! C’est que la beauté et la misère forment un assemblage si monstrueux! La misère laide, sale, cruelle, le travail implacable, dévorant, les privation obstinées, le froid, la faim, l’isolement, la honte, les haillons, tout cela est si sûrement mortel pour la beauté! Et la beauté est ambitieuse; elle sent qu’elle est une puissance, qu’un règne lui serait dévolu si nous vivions selon les desseins de Dieu; elle sent qu’elle attire et commande l’amour, qu’elle peut élever une mendiante au-dessus d’une reine dans le cœur des hommes; elle souffre et s’indigne du néant et des fers de la pauvreté. Elle ne veut pas servir, mais commander; elle veut monter, et non disparaître; elle veut connaître et posséder; mais, hélas! à quel prix la société lui accorde-t-elle ce règne funeste et cette ivresse d’un jour! [I remember a popular saying which I heard repeated around me in my childhood: ‘she has eyes which will cause her to lose her soul’, said the gossips of the neighborhood, and they took me from the hands of my mother to embrace me. Ah! that I had really understood, from the time of this innocent and sinister prediction! It is because beauty and misery form such a monstrous assemblage! Cruel, ugly, dirty misery, implacable, a voracious job, persistent deprivation, cold, hunger, isolation, shame, tatters; all that is so surely lethal for beauty! And beauty is ambitious; it devolves if we live according to God’s plans; she feels that she has power, that to reign would be what can bring a beggar above a queen in the heart of men; Beauty suffers and is indignant about nothingness and the chains of poverty. She does not want to serve, but command; she wants to rise, not disappear; she wants to know and possess; but at what price society accords her this funereal reign and this winter of a single day]. (Sand 175 Trans. Sasson)

Sand’s version of the male confessional récit presents the femme fatale character of Isidora who blames her fall on her beauty, giving Beauty such a power and personality that she presents it as controlling the person who is endowed with it. She compares the qualities God gave her, this virtue, with the same qualities she admits she has. She wants to reign, but she has found slavery and pride. Isidora says that her mother told her that her ambition is what got her lost, after those of her first faults. She claims to know nothing but to want to be loved and asks Alice if she is a criminal for not finding love, for not having known that it does not exist. Alice enables Isidora to rehabilitate by retreating from the trilogy of Jacques/Alice/Isidora.

Another explanation of Rousseau’s narrative techniques is found in James O’Rourke’s 

*Sex, Lies, and Autobiography*:
In the modern form of the confessional autobiography initiated by Rousseau, the split structure of legitimating and counternarratives is stark. In the legitimating narrative, I, Rousseau, am a good person. The shadow narrative tells the story of acts and events in which, with something less than deliberate malice, I somehow—unconsciously, unintentionally, unwittingly, accidentally, carelessly, possibly negligently—harmed other people. (O’Rourke 6)

In this quote O’Rourke breaks down types of narratives, such as that of the legitimating, the counternarratives, and the shadow narrative. Various narratives are utilized in Sand’s *Isidora* especially that of the shadow or nonlinear narrative where events are portrayed, for example, out of chronological order, or in other ways where the narrative does not follow the direct causality pattern of the events featured. (It is often used to mimic the structure and recall of human memory). In *Isidora*, the shadow narrative interrupts the legitimating narratives of third and first person and is comprised of the narrator’s comments which frame the entire work’s three parts. Sand uses the “breaking the fourth wall” narrative where the author addresses the audience directly but that narrative line breaks up the story.

When reading Sand’s *Isidora* Sand does not make her intentions transparent, nor does she make the consequences for the characters predictable. It is as if she were forcing the reader to come to ethical and moral conclusions on his or her own. She sets up the frame narrative almost intentionally as confusing with her reference to a “we” as narrators. The reader must discern who the “we” is. As to any consequences for actions of the characters, we do not find those predictable either. Isidora manipulates the Count, Félix, and Jacques, playing them one against the other, but in the end she reigns and commands, just as she says she prefers to do, by getting Félix to wed her just prior to his death. As Boutin writes in “La ‘comédie de la rehabilitation’ ou la transparence et l’obstacle dans *Isidora*”:

*Aucun personnage ne me semble tout à fait sincère dans le roman Isidora. Ils jouent tous la comédie, même si tous aspirent à se défaire des masques, à braver la dissimulation, à laisser transparaître leurs véritables sentiments. Si le roman met en place l’idéal d’une communication parfaite des sentiments et des idées, il critique en même temps cette*
transparence en montrant son impossibilité et peut-être même ses dangers. La dissimulation, l’obstacle, le secret, le silence ont également leurs mérites. La réflexion philosophique et morale autour du thème de la sincérité et de la transparence fait du roman une “fable morale” en dialogue avec la pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, comme le rappelle Aline Alquier, (19) [No character seems to me completely sincere in the novel Isidora. They all play roles, even if all desire to be rid of masks, to brave dissimulation, and to let their true feelings show through. If the novel sets up the ideal of a perfect communication of feelings and of ideas, it criticizes this transparence at the same time by showing its impossibility and perhaps even its dangers. Dissimulation, obstacle, secrecy, silence also have their merit. The philosophical and moral thought surrounding the topic of sincerity and transparency makes the novel a “moral fable” in dialogue with the thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as Aline Alquier reminds us] (19). (Boutin 1)

Isidora’s clearly thought out manipulations which are used on Alice during the confessional scenes block any obstructions that might arrive from Alice with regard to Jacques. Isidora practically admits to manipulating people with her intelligence. “Mais le plus grand malheur qui puisse échoir à une femme comme moi, c’est de n’être pas stupide. Une courtisane intelligente, douée d’un esprit sérieux et d’un cœur aimant! mais c’est une monstruosité!” [But the biggest misfortune which can fall to a woman such as me, is not to be stupid. [To be] A clever courtesan, gifted with a serious mind and with a loving heart! She is a monstrosity (Sand 176). Like in Rousseau, Sand is building the courtesan character by candidly confessing precisely what she is doing at that same moment—that is an example of Isidora’s cheekiness!

By playing her cards just so, she has set up a tripartite between Alice, Jacques and herself for failure. Isidora’s hopes are that Alice will back down if she has any real interest in Jacques and clear the path for her return.

Although Alice does not reveal her intentions, she does step away from the situation as Isidora had hoped. The difference is that Alice steps away on her own, not because of any of Isidora’s manipulations. In this manner Alice puts into motion her own plan to rehabilitate Isidora. At the same time Isidora has a clear path back to Jacques and she can once again
instigate a relationship with him. Although Isidora suspects Jacques and Alice of loving each other, she cannot entice Alice into confessing it. The only obstruction she eventually discovers is that of Jacques’s secret love for Alice which is something Isidora cannot tolerate. She must be loved entirely and faithfully by him or not at all. (That level of quality devotion was something she was not able to give Félix). Isidora’s “coming clean” in this confessional scene is the actual foundation of her rehabilitation which she finishes on her own when she leaves Paris and moves to northern Italy.

Another important confession to Alice is that she did not love the count, Félix, Alice’s brother. She says she owes her patrician’s name and title of countess, to the stubborn love of a man who she could not love and who she often tricked, insatiable as she was for an instant of love and of happiness impossible to find. Sand presents Isidora as the fallen woman who is finally admitting her faults and showing herself as she truly is, exactly in the pattern of the narrative theme in Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*, she presents her weaknesses, only to later show her strengths in the part three confessional epistolary section.

When Isidora steals some of Jacques’s “Cahiers” there are no consequences, except perhaps those self-imposed. Her decision to flee Paris and begin a new life in northern Italy is the only punishment suffered. Alice’s decision to leave Paris after Isidora’s confessional scene, leave Jacques to Isidora which, consequently, is just what Isidora thought she wanted. We cannot even be sure that Alice and Jacques do not end up together after all. Isidora seems trapped by her own manipulations.

The more predictable consequence for a traditional confessional *récit* would be for the courtesan to die, leaving her redeemer, her lover, to mourn her death, but gaining the calming knowledge that she is faithful to him now in Heaven. Contrarily, Isidora ends up induced by the
aristocratic Alice into rehabilitating herself by accepting her old age gracefully and living happily ever after in the country of her choice in a life full of love from her adopted family. Instead of the courtesan’s death in this confessional récit, we have the death of the male protector—the death of the husband. The possible, intended lover: Jacques literally disappears and dies, far from Paris, leaving his papers in his mother’s possession in Switzerland. Sand literally kills the voice of the bourgeois male just as she kills the character of the aristocratic male (her ex-husband, Casimir Dudevant?) who never has a voice in the narrative. In Sand’s courtesan confessional récit, only the voices of the females remain at the end of the novel.

In review, similar to Rousseau’s narrative techniques in Confessions, Sand sets a narrative arc for the story of Isidora’s life which begins with the tale of the childhood innocence, noting character flaws and her eventual loss of innocence. Both Rousseau and Isidora open themselves to the reader through confession without shame for who they are or what they have committed. The tale proceeds with her proud, aggressive, and determined reach for fame through her beauty. This is fueled by her strong desire for luxury and material goods, but even more for her extreme hunger to be loved and to love. As the arc rises, Isidora’s celebrity is established, crests, and then is tarnished by her inevitable character flaws which are noted in society. A common theme in all courtesan stories is the creation of a new identity. Rehabilitation in Sand’s story does not come through a Redeemer Man where the courtesan falls in love and lives happily ever after with her knight in shining armor.

Sand depicts Isidora as tired of searching for a love that does not exist. This prompts her to isolate herself, reflect, and then take a new and different path in the mature years into old age. She does this by adopting a young girl so she may finally have someone to love who loves her.
Whereas Rousseau bizarrely abandons his children in an orphanage, Sand’s Isidora adopts a girl. Sand must not have been able to tolerate Rousseau’s abandonment of his own children. She was herself a reasonably loving and attentive mother. Sand’s character of Isidora is in conflict directly and criticizes Rousseau’s characterization of himself. Rousseau self-rehabilitates, supposedly by telling his story truthfully. Isidora self-rehabilitates by literally starting anew. Rousseau becomes paranoid. Isidora becomes more balanced. Both accept old age and its consequences, but after Isidora’s isolation from Paris, she makes contact through confessional letters, she surrounds herself with a daughter, and new friends, and she finds an appreciation for the finer things in her life instead of worrying about what others think of her as does Rousseau. She is, in many ways, Sand herself at her home in Nohant in her later years.

**Alexandre Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* Plot**

To preface, this analysis and comparison of Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux camélias* will, on occasion speculate about the author’s intent (backed with historical links), and although this is not currently a fashionable approach, it works well within the context of analyzing autobiographical fiction.

*La Dame aux camélias* tells the story of Armand Duval, a young man who, at the opening of the novel, is racked with remorse over his treatment of a young woman, Marguerite Gautier, who has recently died. Armand, (like Alexandre Dumas), was away from Paris at the time of the death, and learning of it has come as a horrible shock. The narrator, also a young man who had known Marguerite, at least by sight, (because every young man knows the young courtesan) attends the sale of her effects and buys a copy of Abbé Prévost’s novel *Manon Lescaut*, belonging to Marguerite and inscribed by Armand Duval with the words “*Manon à Marguerite,*
“Humilité” [Manon to Marguerite, Humility] (Dumas 35 and 21). Armand discovers on his return to Paris that the young man has bought this book and he comes to ask if he may have it back.

Thus the stage is set for the telling of Armand’s story, which he begins by giving the author a letter to read. In this letter, which is from the dying Marguerite, she regrets that she will never see Armand again and directs him to go upon his return to her friend Julie Duprat. There he will receive a journal which Marguerite has been writing and which will explain certain past events to him. There follows a gruesome scene in which the narrator accompanies Armand to the exhumation of Marguerite’s body, which is in the first stages of putrefaction.

Armand subsequently falls ill, but during his convalescence he starts to tell the narrator his story, beginning with his first encounter with Marguerite Gautier, which replicates Alexandre’s own first encounter with Marie Duplessis, at the Théâtre des Variétés with a friend. Armand is fascinated by the vivacious and restless young woman with her multiplicity of lovers who is already exhibiting symptoms of the disease which will kill her, and he becomes her amant de Coeur (a role he finds no easier than Alexandre himself did). This relationship, however, soon develops into a more overwhelming love than Dumas ever seems to have enjoyed with Marie, and Marguerite begins to abandon her other, paying lovers for him. She even gives up the elderly duke who has been paying most of her bills, and she and Armand retreat to a country house at Bougival.

For a time they live there without concerning themselves for the future, but then Armand discovers that Marguerite has been selling off her jewelry and other luxury items in order to maintain their way of life, now that he has become her exclusive lover. She tells Armand that she never wants to return to her former life as a courtesan and that her plan is to sell off all the material goods she has accumulated over the last few years, settle all her debts and use the
surplus to buy an apartment in which she and Armand can live. He agrees to her plan and then, unknown to her, visits his lawyer to request that arrangements can be made to transfer his income to her.

Meanwhile Armand has been avoiding communicating with his father and his sister, aware that they would be disturbed by the course his life has taken. The lawyer having warned Monsieur Duval senior of the way events seem to be progressing causes the father, who cannot believe that Marguerite’s motives in the affair are other than venal, to come to Paris to remonstrate with his son. Armand refuses to give up Marguerite. His father’s next line of attack is to appeal directly to Marguerite herself, and he arrives in Bougival one day when he has ensured that Armand will be away in Paris. He persuades Marguerite that if she really loves Armand she will give him up, both for the sake of his own future and for that of his sister, who is engaged to be married but whose fiancé will call the wedding off unless his future brother-in-law stops being a cause of scandal for living with a courtesan, even if she wants to be an ex-courtesan.

Marguerite, who longs to be able to perform a redeeming act which will bring her the respect of people like Monsieur Duval and his virtuous daughter, agrees. She realizes that Armand loves her too much to ever leave her voluntarily and so, for love of him, she resolves to make him hate her, and she does this by returning to her life as a courtesan and her former lovers. Her ploy works so well that Armand does indeed come to hate her and, whenever he happens to meet her in Paris, he is spiteful and contemptuous towards her. The pain this gives her contributes to the downward path of her health, and she becomes progressively sicker.

The couple has one final night of passion, on the occasion of Marguerite visiting Armand to ask him to stop tormenting her (she never explains to him why she left, knowing that this
would make him abandon his father and sister and return to her) and in that night they make love
with a fever and a depth they have never before attained. On the next day, overcome by jealousy
at the thought of Marguerite with other men, Armand commits his cruelest act toward her by
leaving some money at her house to pay her for the night before. He never sees her again. He
departs on his travels, and while he is away she dies. The journal which she writes during her last
days has explained everything to him, and he is overcome with remorse at having misunderstood,
mistrusted and hurt this girl who had loved him so much that she sacrificed all her chances of
happiness, and even life itself, for what she believed to be his own good.

The original plot of Dumas fils’s novel differs much from the libretto plot of Verdi’s La
traviata. Where Dumas becomes the narrator in a story told him by someone else (Armand
Duval) and begins with the death of the beautiful courtesan, the Prelude of Verdi’s La traviata
sets the mood and informs the audience of events to come by echoing her life, her sweet
character, and her death while constructing the entire opera as a musical flashback. It is as if the
Prelude recounts Dumas’s roman à clef before the opera presents it—starting with the heroine’s
death. The libretto plot of act 1 begins at her house during a dinner party with dancing after she
has returned to health. Her doctor attends, along with all her demi-monde friends and several of
her aristocrat acquaintances. This all takes place in act 1 where, at the end she closes with an aria
which becomes as aside to the audience, giving the listener access to her innermost thoughts and
feelings. (Verdi builds her character in this manner). Verdi’s act 2 takes place in the country in
Bougival where the two young lovers, Violetta, have gone for the summer at the expense of the
duke. Alfredo’s father shows up when he is gone to persuade Violetta to leave Alfredo for his
own good. In scene 2 of act 2 she has returned to Paris and attends a gambling party at her friend,
Flora’s home. There she is attended by the duke and she meets Alfredo who arrives there, too. A
heated discussion ensues and she is publically embarrassed by Alfredo who pays her for her services in front of everyone. Act 3 is back in her apartment where she is dying from consumption and does. Alfredo arrives too late and his father is there to tell the audience that he made a terrible mistake in separating the couple.

Differences are many between the novel and the opera. The opera will be discussed in the following chapter.

**The Analysis of Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* and Autobiofictional Elements**

Dumas utilized certain well-known aspects and facts of the life and character of Marie Duplessis in his design of Marguerite Gautier, while at the same time changing certain other aspects, or even inventing some aspects. His novel, and later on his play, became popular so quickly that it was soon impossible to disentangle the fact from the fiction and the myth of the “lady of the camellias” was established. The truth will never be known as to whether her thick hair was long and black, or if, as is described on her passport, it was light-brown. Was she a prostitute capable of loving one man, or is this a romantic fictional technique (a confessional récit) invented to appease those men who had loved her and lost her to consumption? In *The Real Traviata: The Song of Marie Duplessis* René Weis writes that Dumas is telling the story of Marie Duplessis’s husband, Count de Perrégaux who abandoned her soon after marriage. Weis weaves the Dumas affair with Marie together with facts of the Perrégaux relationship detailing where Dumas did exactly the same. Weis points out that Dumas intimated to those future persons that the *amant de coeur* was indeed Dumas himself (236-37). Weis, who researched her life traces the truths of her story.

Like Sand’s use of autobiofiction as a literary technique, we see that the Dumas novel shares a similar usage of personal information masked behind characters and plotlines. Before
writing *La Dame aux camélias*, Dumas tells us first through a poem entitled *Élégie* from his collection of poems entitled *Péchés de jeunesse* (Sins of Youth) of his love for Marie Duplessis. We do not know just what characteristics made him fall in love with Marie because he does not describe her character in the poem. However, through some letters written by one of Marie’s lovers, Franz Liszt, to Marie d’Agoult in which he talked about Marie Duplessis and his feelings for her a poignant description of her was left behind. In one such letter from Iassy in 1847 he wrote: “If by chance I had been in Paris while la Duplessis was ill, I would have done my Des Grieux act for fifteen minutes and would have tried to save her at any price, for hers was truly an exquisite nature, and what is generally described (perhaps accurately) as corruption, never touched her heart” (Liszt in John 228).

Liszt sees himself as a literary figure and he also envisions Marie Duplessis as the charming Manon Lescaut who is so vulnerably attracted to luxury and who is therefore drawn into a world of vice. Liszt helps establish through this letter what made Marie different from most courtesans. A heart which lacked obvious corruption, coupled with an “exquisite nature” is part of why she was considered childlike and exceptional to those who loved her. In the case of Dumas, a link to the letter informing her that he is leaving her is established through his *Élégie* poem about courtesan Marie Duplessis.

As Virginia Rounding writes in *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans*, Alexandre Dumas fils’s love relationship with Marie Duplessis is well documented:

He went back to Paris in time to attend the sale in the apartment where he had previously been received as a lover, and immediately afterward she wrote the eighty-eight lines of verse which became the last poem in his collection *Péchés de jeunesse* (Sins of Youth). The poem was preceded by a blank page bearing only the initials “M.D.” It begins with a recollection of the ending of his affair with Marie – “We quarreled; I can’t remember why” – and goes on to lament the fact that he can now never make up the quarrel. He
alludes to having revisited the apartment where he had previously spent such happy hours with Marie, and he remembers their love-making, in which the feverish heat generated by illness mingles with sexual ardor. (Rounding 58-59)

The confessional element of Dumas fils’s poetry can be found even in the titles. This is a clue to the poem’s addressee since Marie Duplessis had written a letter to Dumas during the time that he began to distance himself from her.

Dumas was jealous of her “moneyed protectors” and they fought frequently. Marie sent a short note that demonstrates her wish to maintain a relationship. It is veiled in a courtesan’s sensible frame of mind for attempting to keep a young amant de coeur. She addresses him by his initials of “AD:”

Dear AD, why haven’t you told me how you are and why don’t you write frankly to me? I think you should treat me like a friend. So I hope for a word from you and I kiss you fondly, like a mistress or like a friend, whichever you prefer. In any case I will always be devoted to you. (Rounding 45)

We could read the double initials “AD”, which reflect each other’s true identities, as verifying at minimum their intimacy and friendship. The contents of her note could also indicate more than just friendship—dare it be suggested an amant de coeur? We know that Marie (Alphonsine) had a rich Russian diplomat who was her octogenarian protector who thought of her as if she were his daughter who had recently died of consumption. We know that Dumas was young and that he loved her by the fact that he wrote the novel and adopted it into a drama for stage as a sort of epitaph in her memory, so the study concludes that he was a lover. These initials she used hint at the initials in the novel which stood for Alexandre Dumas but also functioned as a mask by standing for the initials of the male protagonist—Alexandre Duval.

*Sins of Youth,* the title of Dumas fils’s poetry collection suggests that Dumas may have strategized to play into the current social curiosity concerning forbidden sexual topics, anticipating Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal.* Like Baudelaire, Dumas felt the sting of the
censors. It took three years for the drama, adapted from his novel, *La Dame aux camélias* to be released so it could be staged in public with the much needed help of the powerful Duc de Morny, the illegitimate half-brother of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte and the first titled protector of Alphonsine Plessis, alias Marie Duplessis. Certainly Dumas was using his poetry as a means of cathartic confession. Was this carried out with the underlying goal of success in poetry writing and publication? If so, it was not a successful endeavor. Although his poems are charming and lovely, they made him no money and money was considered the measure of success for those who wrote in capitalistic Paris in the nineteenth century. His published collection did not sell well. According to his biographer, Stanley Schwarz, “the edition was never reprinted and copies of the volume have become rare” (Schwarz 11). Dumas fils’ “Elegy” was forgotten; its single publication was financed by his father, Alexandre Dumas, père, in 1847, and every edition of the one hundred copies, except for the fourteen that had been sold, was used as wrapping paper.

While not successful, the poem, dedicated to “M. D.”, inspired a novel and a play. From the initial poem came “his first novel *La Dame aux camélias*, in 1848, which made little impression, and the play of 1849, which was banned for three years, but which became a sensational success in 1852 and started Dumas on the way to fame and wealth” (Taylor 13). The play opened at the Vaudeville Theatre on 2 February 1852 once the censure was lifted. The poem served as an introduction to the novel.

The apartment Marie Duplessis lived in during their affair which is mentioned in the poem was in the rue d’Antin, whereas the apartment in which the auction following her death was held was the last apartment in which she lived located on the boulevard de la Madeleine. Here we see historic facts altered, suggesting that Dumas, like Sand, used a masquerading technique common among the *demi-monde*. A main similarity to the argument is that here we see
historic facts altered, suggesting that Dumas, like Sand, used a masquerading technique common among the demi-monde, a word invented by Dumas as the title of one of his stage dramas.

One way La Dame aux camélias is fundamentally different from Isidora is in the way that the novel begins at the death of the celebrated courtesan. Marguerite is already a fallen woman, whereas Julie is first presented as honorable as seen through Jacques Laurent’s naive eyes. Armand is introduced to Marguerite, knowing full well that she is a beautiful and highly sought after courtesan.

The narrative of “Elegy” is also the scenario for the beginning of the embellished story that is ‘confessed’ to the narrator by Armand Duval in La Dame aux camélias. This supports an interpretation that the narrator, Alexandre Dumas uses autobiographical details to create his character, Armand Duval. The reader lives the Dumas romanticized fantasy of his love affair with Marie Duplessis through the story of Armand’s love for Marguerite Gautier. The author’s technique of telling his story through the protagonist gave Dumas protection against social prejudices that would damage his father’s reputation. It also allowed him to defend Marie’s social position as a socially outcaste courtesan. Although he might have written the novel as if it had been a memoir left by the woman, Dumas chose to remain attached to the storytelling as the narrator, which is reflective of the Sand novel about another “lady of the camellias”—Isidora. (The link between the two novels is the fact that Dumas does spell the word “camélias” as Sand did for Isidora, and says that he did just that on purpose). Dumas’s novel added posthumously to Duplessis’s already established celebrity.

The novel can be interpreted as an embellished confessional autobiofiction, shifting between a first person “I” and a third person “he/she” voice as described in Lejeune’s On Autobiography. One of the similarities between Sand’s Isidora and Dumas fils’s La Dame aux
camélia is the inclusion of Marguerite’s letters to Armand to reflect Duplessis’s confessional thoughts and feelings in entries she made in a diary meant for Duval—as they actually were or as he wanted them to be. (Perhaps these details were even reported to him by Count de Perrégaux). Therein lays the beginning of her “myth”. The novel is also his confession in third person told in a romanticized version under the guise of the protagonist, Armand Duval, with comments from the novelist (Dumas) in first person singular. He cleverly intertwines parts of the story of Duplessis’s actual husband, the Count de Perrégaux, who separated from Alphonsine just after the marriage, and went to North Africa as was his habit for a yearly winter exodus from Paris toward sunshine and warmth. Dumas was in Spain with his father when she died. Dumas may have known or speculated that her husband may have shared some of his own heartrending feelings toward Duplessis regarding her death. Both the first and third person writing reflects Dumas fils’s innermost thoughts and feelings, even if fictionally romanticized. The work is a clever roman à clef that leaves the reader wondering.

In her article, “Our Lady of the Flowers,” Naomi Segal states that Dumas fils’s novel fits into a sub-genre of romantic prose in French literature and opera, the confessional récit, which relies on the femme fatale trope: “In almost all récits the woman dies and the man tells the tale” (Segal in John 163). Segal refers to the male protagonist’s confession which is what gives the novel its dominant male society view of Marguerite. The novel focuses for the most part on how Duval suffered in the relationship. Only at the end, after reading Marguerite’s confessional letters and entries, is her suffering even considered in retrospect. The Dumas novel, the adaption as a drama, and the production occurred after Duplessis’s death which took place at three o’clock on the morning of Wednesday, 3 February 1847 at the age of twenty-three. Her funeral, writes Virginia Rounding, “took place two days later at the church of the Madeleine a few hundred
yards from her apartment.” Many knew Duplessis and Dumas were lovers from September 1844 to August 1845, and so Dumas fils’s novel could have been read through that sensationalizing lens. Whether or not, it was a very popular novel.

Below is the first of several excerpts from letters used by Dumas to suggest Marguerite Gautier’s inner thought (if it is a real letter from her to the author). It reveals how he wanted her to be perceived. The letter is created by Dumas to build the case for her forgiveness and eventual redemption through death. (From Dumas fils’s viewpoint, her sacrifice for love redeemed her in a Christ-like manner). The letter creates a sense of sympathy toward her; she is the redeemed Mary Magdalene of the Bible, a prostitute who begs forgiveness weeping at Jesus’s feet. Her sins of lust and greed are forgiven. Like Christ’s forgiveness of Mary Magdalene, Dumas hoped that the stubborn and inflexible Catholic Parisian society might withdraw its earlier opinion and forgive his courtesan lover. But more importantly, Dumas says that he has presented an exception to the rule about courtesans with Marie for she was truly rare. He wants her to be remembered as a good person through this eulogy he has written in her memory.

Dumas continues Marguerite’s redemption through letters sent to the protagonist, Armand. In a later letter Marguerite writes:

Je n’avais pu résister au désir de vous donner l’explication de ma conduite, et je vous avais écrit une lettre; mais écrit par une fille comme moi, une pareille lettre peut être regardée comme un mensonge, à moins que la mort ne la sanctifie de son autorité, et qu’au lieu d’être une lettre, elle ne soit une confession . . . Marguerite Gautier. [I cannot help wanting to explain all my conduct to you, and I have written you a letter; but, written by a girl like me, such a letter might seem to be a lie, unless death had sanctified it by its authority, and, instead of a letter, it were a confession . . . Marguerite Gautier].

(Dumas 221 and 192)

Marguerite confesses that Armand Duval’s father asked her to sacrifice her happiness for his son’s honor and that of his sister. This is why she had left him without any explanation and returned to her previous courtesan lifestyle. She further adds that she became a body without a
soul, a thing without a thought. Her heart was not in her actions. She had loved Armand, and her final and ultimate sacrifice would be her death as indeed it is. This sacrifice and death is her redemption. In psychological terminology, she had to dissociate from herself to go back to her previous life. There was no love put into her profession and no renewed pleasure in that old life. In the male dominant world of Parisian life, to be redeemed, the courtesan would have to die, loving her lover. Through death she is restored to him as pure; and in death she can have no other men. Rehabilitation will come in Heaven. Marguerite will have no rebirth or transformation, at least not in this life. In a thoroughly romanticized approach, unlike Isidora, Marguerite’s redemption would have to come too late, with the confession of Armand’s father. It would be played out in heaven in the minds and hearts of those who saw her sacrifice as great and who love her. There will be no time to mature or rehabilitate. Diversely, Sand’s courtesan character, Isidora, gives herself a second life in Italy. This is through her own self-rehabilitation. She transforms herself with the money she inherited by marrying Alice’s brother, putting it to good use which shows that she has truly had a metamorphosis.

Through Marguerite’s letters, Dumas creates a myth of the repentant Magdalene, the prostitute with a kind and good heart who is willing to sacrifice her love for him. Marguerite’s ‘suicidal’ end was easily realized though simply hastening the inevitable. She was already doomed to die from consumption. She says that she did not want to live without her lover. The letter shows depth of thought and character, and the motives behind her actions, along with her explanation provide ample reason for forgiveness.

Marguerite explains her sacrifice further. His insults make her hope someday he will know why she left him. Those insults, she confesses to him, are suffered as a joyful martyrdom, because they are proof that he still loves her. The more she suffers his persecution, the larger she
will be in his eyes when he learns the truth. She shares that she had Prudence (a mutual friend) tell him of all the parties, balls, and orgies Marguerite attended. She confesses that she was killing herself rapidly through excess. What was once her joy, partying and all night lovemaking, is now her martyrdom because she is killing herself to save him from disgrace. She has not yet lost hope of his return to her when he learns of her sacrifice. As the days continue, her illness gets more pronounced, and soon she is alone at home in bed with a high fever. She confesses that she waits for a letter from him, which she knows will never arrive. She recalls how he came to ask of her health every morning once long ago, when she was very ill, even though she had teased him badly when they first met.

The letters could be read in several ways. First, it could appear that Marguerite is manipulating Armand. But, Dumas fils’s choice concerning what the letters contain and, more importantly what is shown as the reactions of both Armand Duval and the narrator in the novel suggest that the letters are taken as candid and honest. The plot reveals from the start that her death was a sacrifice for Armand’s own good. The narrator frequently refers to Armand’s copious tears, and to his illness brought about by Marguerite’s death. He writes that he does not condone her behavior, but that this woman, Marguerite Gautier, was indeed exceptional, and merits her post-mortem public redemption.

In a letter from 4 January she tells him of the letter from his father:

_Madame, J’aprends à l’instant que vous êtes malade. Si j’étais à Paris, j’irais moi-même savoir de vos nouvelles; si mon fils était auprès de moi, je lui dirais d’aller en chercher, mais je ne puis quitter C . . . ., et Armand est à six ou sept cents lieues d’ici; permettez-moi donc simplement de vous écrire, madame, combien je suis peiné de cette maladie, et croyez aux voeux sincères que je fais pour votre prompt rétablissement. Un de mes bons amis, M. H. . . . , se présentera chez vous, veuillez le recevoir. Il est chargé par moi d’une commission dont j’attends impatiemment le résultat. Veuillez agréer, Madame, l’assurance de mes sentiments les plus distingués. M. Duval_

[MADAME: I have just learned that you are ill. If I were at Paris, I would come and ask after you myself; if my son were here I would send him; but I can not leave C., and Armand is six or seven hundred leagues from here; permit me, simply to write you,
Marguerite explains that this is the letter Armand’s father sent to her. She says that his father has a noble heart, and asks Armand to love him, for there are few men so worthy of being loved. She confesses that this letter has done her more good than all the doctor’s prescriptions. This renews her hope that Armand will soon return to her arms, but Marguerite later writes to Armand that her journal will be left with Julie Duprat who has directions to give it to him when he returns from Algiers. She knows she is nearing death’s door. On 4 February 1847 she writes that she received a letter from Armand. While dreaming for him to arrive she succumbs to her terrible suffering. Julie wrote him Marguerite died on 20 February 1847 and was buried on 22 February 1847.

**Application: Rousseauian Confessional Aspects of Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias***

This study is comparing these two novels because they represent two contrasting models of courtesan rehabilitation, and it looks at both works for their autobiofictional elements. However, both works do not use the Rousseau confessional narrative—only the Sand work. Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* is fundamentally different from the Rousseau confessional narrative line. Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* follows a rise from birth to early childhood to a fall around eleven when Rousseau states he lost his innocence during a disciplinary action where he was falsely accused and suffered consequences which affected his personality for the rest of his life. In *Les Confessions*, the end of Rousseau’s life is a self-rehabilitation through the truthful telling of all the events of his life, covering nothing, hiding nothing, and asking acceptance of who he is even though some incidents are pretty raw. He says that he did not do any of these
with the idea of hurting another person, but that if he hurt someone they should nonetheless understand that he really is a good and natural man who wishes not to have to alter his *amour de soi* philosophy in order to comply with society’s rules.

Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* begins with the birth and childhood of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and innocence whereas Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* commences with the auction at the home of a dead woman. Marguerite starts off as fallen, not innocent. Instead of a timeline based upon the child’s earliest memories, in *La Dame aux camélias*, the first scene is a framing of the plot of the novel where the narrator is recounting all the possessions that were to be auctioned in the house of the kept woman. Upon that day, even the most virtuous of women could enter even her bedroom for her “la mort avait purifié l’air de ce cloaque splendide” [death had purified the air of this abode of splendid foulness] (Dumas 20 and 8). The virtuous women searched for some sign of what had been sold during her life, but found only what was being sold after her death. The narrator comments upon the mercy of a God who would allow her to die in the midst of her beauty and luxury, before the coming of old age, which he notes is the courtesan’s first death. In an aside, the narrator remarks that there must be nothing sadder in the world than the old age of vice, especially in woman, for she preserves no dignity, she inspires no interest. (This is a further difference from Sand’s *Isidora* where her courtesan self-rehabilitates by retiring herself to country living in Italy. Isidora spares herself the indignity of old age as a courtesan in a male dominant society).

Dumas, who is really the narrator, remembers how pretty Marguerite was and how often he had met her in the Bois. He notes with the reader that he had noticed “en elle une distinction peu commune à ses semblables, distinction que rehaussait encore une beauté vraiment exceptionnelle” [in her a distinction quite apart from other women of her kind, a distinction
which was enhanced by a really exceptional beauty] (Dumas 26 and 13). He questions “comment sa vie ardente laissait au visage de Marguerite l’expression virginale, enfantine même qui le caractérisait” [how it was that her ardent life had left on Marguerite’s face the virginal, almost childlike expression which characterized it] (Dumas 27 and 15). A parallel could be drawn here to the idea of Rousseau as a child and the narrator storyteller expressing the fact that Marguerite looked childlike. Her story from the start is one of vice, whereas Rousseau turns to vice only after his reported fall. On the sixteenth, when the auction takes place, the narrator bids on a book, Manon Lescaut, an important intertext about a fallen woman and a most appropriate bid for the son of a famous writer in Paris, Alexandre Dumas, père. It is here that the narrator first learns of Armand Duval, the kept woman’s secret, young lover. It is Dumas who offers a reason for writing this novel. He informs the reader:

Les penseurs et les poètes de tous les temps ont apporté à la courtesane l’offrande de leur miséricorde, et quelquefois un grand homme les a réhabilitées de son amour et même de son nom. Si j’insiste ainsi sur ce point, c’est que parmi ceux qui vont me lire, beaucoup peuvent-être sont déjà prêts à rejeter ce livre, dans lequel ils craignent de ne voir qu’une apologie du vice et de la prostitution, et l’âge de l’auteur contribue sans doute encore à motiver cette crainte. Que ceux qui penseraient ainsi se détrompent, et qu’ils continuent, si cette crainte seule les retenait. [The thinkers and poets of all time have brought to the courtesan the offering of their pity, and at times a great man has rehabilitated them with his love and even with his name. If I insist on this point, it is because many among those who have begun to read me will be ready to throw down a book in which they will fear to find an apology for vice and prostitution; and the author’s age will do something, no doubt, to increase this fear. Let me undeceive those who think thus, and let them go on reading, if nothing but such a fear hinders them]. (Dumas 36 and 23)

Dumas asks why society makes itself stricter than Christ who said to Mary Magdalene: “Il te sera beaucoup remis parce que tu as beaucoup aimé.” [Much shall be forgiven thee because thou hast loved much] (Dumas 37 and 23). He notes: “Puisque le ciel est plus en joie pour le repentir d’un pécheur que pour cent justes qui n’ont jamais péché, essayons de réjouir le ciel.” [Since “there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine persons that need no repentance,” let us give joy in heaven (Dumas 38 and 24). In Rousseau’s Les
*Confessions*, there is some concern as to what is good or evil, but the main focus is that Rousseau does not judge himself for his errors, but instead gives laud to himself because he is doing his utmost to convey the truth about his life, even though he candidly includes some unpleasant situations and actions which occurred.

Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* is built upon the premise that man is born “good” and that it is his contact with society that causes him to go “bad.” In similar fashion it could be said that Dumas makes a notable effort to clarify that he believes Marguerite (Marie) to be an exceptional woman who ‘fell’ into the profession of courtesan and although he defends her, he would not defend others of her profession. In this Rousseau and Dumas are similar. Both believe that their protagonist is basically good. Where the two authors differ is Rousseau’s insistence that the basis for his *Les Confessions* is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Dumas creates a fictional work of mythological proportions from the start even though the story paints a picture of a girl whose heart is pure and who has remained uncorrupted even as she was surrounded by corruption. Yet, even Marguerite thinks people would only believe a girl like her if death made her pay its price. Both authors appear to wish to exonerate the protagonist: Rousseau, himself; and Dumas, his female protagonist Marguerite Gautier, who represents Alphonsine Plessis, alias Countess Marie Duplessis. Rousseau does not seem at all concerned about how his autobiography will be regarded by the Church—he does not sacrifice himself. His only sacrifice is that of his children to an orphanage, but that he does for his own benefit. Dumas gives Marguerite redemption through her sacrifice which gives her the essential parallel with Christ who sacrifices Himself for mankind. She sacrifices herself for the one she loves.
Sand and Dumas fils: A Comparison

To begin, Sand and Dumas both use the courtesan trope in their writing, and both address themes of self-redemption and rehabilitation. While Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias is a confessional récit according to Naomi Segal’s definition where the man tells the story, Sand’s Isidora does not fall under that term. This courtesan’s story is told in three different narrative voices to show the various social views of the fallen woman. It has an entirely distinctive plot line. Unlike Marguerite in the Dumas novel, Isidora does not physically die. However there is a type of death—ageing. Isidora’s symbolic death is her passing into middle age. She meets it by isolating herself from society. In Dumas fils’s novel, Marguerite is forced by Armand’s father to return to her previous life as a courtesan in order to shield Armand from any disgrace through association with her. The only death Isidora feared was getting old because that would be the end of her “career.” By distancing herself from society she had successfully removed herself from temptation and had given herself the time to heal and mature into middle age. She is helped by the inheritance left her by her husband, Count Félix de S... , Alice’s brother. The laws concerning widowhood grant women more liberty of choice and it is that freedom which gives Isidora a chance at a new lifestyle. This removal from society is Isidora’s first step toward rebirth and transformation.

While Sand’s protagonist is self-rehabilitated and her redeemer is a woman, Alice, Dumas fils’s protagonist must be redeemed by her love for one man and her sacrificial death for his sake. Rehabilitation comes in heaven. Uniquely, the two nineteenth-century authors wrote about courtesans and thus inadvertently began to change Parisian society’s public repression of women, and the stigmatization of the very public, and independent, courtesan. These authors incited and intensified society’s reactions to the courtesan issue simply by writing about her,
giving voice to her inner thoughts and motivations. While Dumas grappled with his relationship to the fallen woman, George Sand, a woman herself, likened herself to the “Spartacus” of women in a letter to Frédéric Girard of 1837—a clear indication that she considered some women to be enslaved to men:

> People think it very natural and pardonable to trifle with what is most sacred when dealing with woman: women do not count in the social or the moral order. I solemnly vow—and this is the first glimmer of courage and ambition in my life!—that I shall raise woman from her abject position, both through my self and my writings. God will help me! . . . let female slavery also have its Spartacus. That shall I be, or perish in the attempt. (Sand in Winegarten 161).

Sand wrote about the courtesan to liberate social notions of women’s proper roles during her time. Certainly Sand’s and Dumas fils’s two female courtesan protagonists are different, yet similarly they are trapped within the Madonna/whore duplicity that shaped Parisian cultural attitudes. Both protagonists combine this duplicity in one character. Sand sketches a peculiar plot here because the ‘lost woman’ is accepted by a woman of means and position. This sets a precedent for this literary genre. The redeemer is a woman of a noble family. Whereas the family members are completely appalled at the thought of having the courtesan/mistress, Isidora, as a bearer of their noble name through her marriage to the Count, Alice welcomes Isidora’s friendship.

> Both Sand and Dumas employ the epistolary literary form at the end of their respective novels. It is here, in the letters that the reader is allowed to see the interior of the courtesan and learns of her weakness. In Marguerite’s case, she is aware that she is dying and wants forgiveness in order to reach a peaceful sense of redemption. In the case of Isidora, her weakness is a fear of old age, and it is in her retreat to the country that she is able to come to terms with age and make peace with herself, leaving behind her urban career as courtesan and taking up a healthier life in the country by adopting a young Italian girl and becoming maternal.
Conclusion

Sand and Dumas use their courtesan protagonist’s confessions to demonstrate how two courtesans attempt to exonerate themselves from their past errors. Marguerite’s last wish was to free herself from the sorrow of leaving behind an unfinished love relationship and to confess the truth of her actions to Armand. Isidora’s intentions are less clear due to Sand’s notice which implies that the courtesan may have had other intentions rather than clarifying her actions, or clearing her conscience. (The notice was discussed previously). It is truly left to the reader to decide. However, one might discern that by Alice sending her only son to Italy to live with and marry Isidora’s ward, Agatha, perhaps Isidora should be considered rehabilitated and redeemed because Alice seems to have faith in Isidora—faith enough to send her only son, Félix to Italy. In Dumas fils’s case, the novel is a true story embellished in a romantic style as a sort of epitaph to Marie Duplessis. He fictionalizes much in the telling of the story. He wishes her to be remembered for all eternity as an exception: the good courtesan who has had a change of heart.

Both novels demonstrate authors whose intentions are to present two courtesans as women who have had changes of heart, even if for different reasons, and who have shown themselves changed. Marie Duplessis (Marguerite) transformed because of her love for a man and her subsequent sacrifice for his future. Her self-rehabilitation comes with the act of her sacrifice. Her redemption does not come in this life, but instead after death, in heaven. On earth, her redemption comes through the forgiveness of her lover which is presented in La Dame aux camélias. Dumas is calling for society to forgive Marguerite by presenting her surrender to Germont’s request as the ultimate example of love for another—Christ-like sacrifice with death as the only final outcome. Sand’s Julie (Isidora) is altered by her eventual understanding that she must acknowledge her ageing as a kind of death of her courtesan career and accept the inevitable
with grace, but at the same time give birth to another woman. Rehabilitation is self-made and redemption comes through forgiveness of her past by Alice, her sister-in-law. These two French authors enlighten the reader through the confessions of the courtesan protagonists and reveal them as redeemed courtesans in their novels. In essence, both authors have created novels that celebrate the rehabilitation of two differently presented types of *dames aux camélias* whereas Sand that of the philosophical Rousseauian “true man” who shows all sides of his real self, Dumas treats the religious myth of the human who becomes Christ-like.

Finally, each novel uses a masking narrative technique which attempts to conceal that the authors are telling a story which is in some ways close, if not directly, to autobiographical. Both use the employment of socially changing concepts which can be linked in some way to the life of the author or to his/her thoughts on certain topics as divulged in other writings.
CHAPTER THREE

GIVING VOICE TO VERDI’S REAL TRAVIATA

_Donna son io signore, ed in mia casa . . . [I am a lady, sir, and in my own house . . .]_

_La traviata_, act 2 (Francesco Maria Piave)

_**Introduction**_

There are various sorts of courtesans. Most come from a poor background and happen simply to become fortunate somewhere in their young lives when they are taken under the wing of a male protector and taught the ways of higher society. Some like Giuseppina Strepponi, the courtesan topic of this chapter, are born into the working class and have a talent which can be cultivated and fostered to grow into a marketable product.

Strepponi was the daughter of a gifted composer, her father Feliciano Strepponi, who taught her to play the clavichord from an early age. Strepponi had natural musical talent and eventually developed into a fine musician. Her musical ability as a clavichordist was good, yet her singing voice was far superior to any expectations previously thought. So, her father decided that she should train to become an opera singer and enrolled her in the Milan Conservatory for study as a classical singer and a clavichordist. Eventually she was able to begin a professional career which ended in supporting her immediate family, since her father died suddenly from encephalitis and left the family destitute. This talent was Strepponi’s saving grace and her skill at it was key to her freedom. It was also her family’s key to survival. Unfortunately, although her talent was her saving grace, the environment required for capitalizing on her voice was also her downfall. She entered the opera world very early, around nineteen, where she was surrounded by men... it was a male work environment—completely dominated by men. Without protection, advantage was taken of her, and she was soon a mother several times. Nineteenth century society
would look the other way for illicit love affairs, but when pregnancy occurred and no marriage followed, the woman was considered damaged goods and labeled unmarriageable. Stephanie Coontz writes in her classic book on the change of social attitude, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (2005):

> The beginning of the nineteenth century, however, saw a new emphasis on woman’s sexual purity... This cult of female purity encouraged women to internalize limits on the sexual behavior that sixteenth and seventeenth [century] authorities had imposed by force... The emphasis on women’s purity was unique to the nineteenth century. Its result was an extraordinary desexualization of women—or at least of good women, the kind of woman a man would want to marry and the kind of woman a good girl would wish to be... The cult of female purity offered a temporary reconciliation between the egalitarian aspirations raised by the Enlightenment and the fears that equality would overrun the social order. (Coontz 159)

In Strepponi’s case, her pregnancies would become very public and she was labeled a courtesan because of her standing as an famous, talented opera celebrity living and working unprotected in a public world.

> By the early nineteenth century some regions in Europe had higher rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing than the United States and Western Europe were to have at the end of the twentieth. But because unwed mothers and their children in this earlier era had few of the legal protections in place by the end of the twentieth century, there was a surge in the number of women who turned to prostitution to support themselves and their children or abandoned their babies. (Coontz 157)

Similarly, Gaia Servadio writes in *The Real Traviata: The life of Giuseppina Strepponi, wife of Giuseppe Verdi* on the social stigma of unwanted children by singers and the social problem it caused:

> The hypocrisy of the century turned a blind eye to carnal love; it was tolerated until it resulted in swollen bellies. One could ignore and forgive all kinds of love, even make them the subject of scurrilous poems—so long as they bore no embarrassing and visible fruits. Which of course they did—all too often. The singers left a trail of foundlings in orphanages all over the country, and both the children and the unmarried parents were a target for contempt; so much so that the considerable number of abandoned children became a major social problem. (Servadio 41)
The core of this argument about *La traviata* (the fallen) is about Strepponi’s waning celebrity as an opera singer and the social prejudices it incurred. Her pregnancies had much to do with her eventual fall because they destroyed her vocal capital which constitutes much of her celebrity. Strepponi’s celebrity rises but it also must fall. Celebrity is ephemeral just as the freshness and beauty of flowers. There are two arguments at work in this chapter: one is that celebrity is cast in a moral framework and the other is that it is ephemeral. Strepponi’s celebrity lost its freshness when her voice was damaged by overwork and multiple pregnancies and the loss of her reputation caused notoriety and society labeled her immoral. The rise and fall of Strepponi’s celebrity mirrors the ephemeral flower.

Before beginning the chapter analysis, which will attempt to prove the theory that Giuseppina Strepponi identified with *la dame aux camélias* and she was Verdi’s real *traviata* [lost one] who he cryptically defended in the opera *La traviata*, there are subtle differences between the novel, drama, and the libretto which need to be addressed. One difference is the name of the heroine. Marguerite Gautier, the name of Dumas fils’s protagonist, is not the name of the person who inspired Dumas to write his confessional *récit*. The *roman à clef* genre format gave Dumas the opportunity to turn the narrative the way he would like it to have gone while portraying personal, autobiographical experiences without having to expose himself in public as a previous lover of Duplessis and risk his reputation. That woman was Alphonsine Plessis, better known during her time in Paris as the Countess Marie Duplessis. On the other hand, the female protagonist’s name in Verdi’s *La traviata* is Violetta Valéry. Significantly, the original title for the opera was to have been *Violetta*, yet when it was first proposed to the Venice Theater the title given was *Amore e morte*. The Venetian censures, who at the time were Austrian, insisted upon an inclusion of religion so Piave and Verdi inserted a reference sung by Violetta in act 3 to a
priest having come to comfort her. Censures also insisted upon a title name change, and in the letter of 1 January 1853 to De Sanctis, Verdi wrote: “A Venezia faccio la Dame aux Camélias che avrà per titolo forse, Traviata [In Venice, I am doing the Lady of the Camellias that will have as a title, maybe, The Lost One] (Budden 128). Yet a woman with the name of Violetta is not who inspired Verdi to write his opera. That woman’s name was Giuseppina Strepponi. So, why are the protagonists’ names in both works names of flowers? Since the libretto was based upon a French roman à clef, was Verdi mirroring that idea to create a type of Italian opera à clef?

Marguerite, means a type of daisy, which in the language of flowers stands for innocence (Latour 414). Marguerite is the French name for the oxeye daisy. But the novel and the adapted drama by Dumas are entitled La Dame aux camélias and it tells the story of une fille de joie. Camellias signified sumptuous luxury because they were the most expensive flower in Paris in the early 1800s. Their cost was connected to the fact that the camellia had become popular with many royal families of Europe. That was because the flower had to be imported from the East (Japan), then cultivated and properly pollinated, and that required much cost and care. Among camellia enthusiasts was Abbé Berlèse, an Italian who went to Paris as a chaplain. He brought together one of the largest collections of camellias, studied them, wrote about them, and was highly regarded by nurserymen for his many contributions assisting the flower’s cultivation. From 18-24 March 1846, a camellia show was presented in the grand gallery of the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris, an important event which attracted growers from all over. Because the camellia was at the height of popularity it also attracted the elite society of Paris. Abbé Bernèse was expected to exhibit his wonderful collection, considered one of the finest in Paris, but he had sold his entire collection to the proprietors of the Champs Elysée winter garden (Dhaeze-Van Ryssel 4-5). This prohibited anyone from enjoying his collection at the show. Daisies were as
commonplace in the 1800s as they are today, and a courtesan is not a person one would think of as innocent, who could give loyal love, or would be considered pure. Camille is the name used for girls that represents the camellia flower, which in flower language stands for excellence in woman or perfected loveliness (McCabe 16). It is interesting to note that the meaning for the camellia in Latour’s *Le Langage des Fleurs* is not listed since the work came out in 1834 and camellia’s became popular around 1840. Courtesans were always considered perfectly lovely by the men who desired them. Camellia is the flower used in the title of the novel, *La Dame aux camélias*, the title of Dumas fils’s novel and drama, which leads us to think that Camille might be more appropriate for the protagonist’s name, but Dumas chose Marguerite.

The fact that Dumas used the camellia flower in the title has to do with Duplessis herself. Camellias were an important sign of wealth for a courtesan who wished to attract moneyed men to her salon. (You have to give the appearance of being rich to attract the rich). Marie Duplessis spent fortunes to attract fortunes. By the 1840s, the camellia was at the height of its fashion as the luxury flower. Daily purchases of fresh camellias were essential for her image, and she had made them her signature flower. Additionally, her home region of Brittany became famous for an outdoor cultivation of the camellia in the early nineteenth century because Henri Favre, the mayor of Nantes, discovered that the flower could survive outside the greenhouse in the favorable Breton climate. Duplessis signaled her lovers with the camellias she carried to the theater. The signal was based on the color of the flower, white or red, indicating whether she could be active sexually or not. So, in that case then, why would Dumas have chosen Marguerite as her name instead of Camille? Dumas wrote in his novel:

_Cette femme avait des étonnements d’enfant pour les moindres choses. Il y avait des jours où elle courait dans le jardin, comme une fille de dix ans, après un papillon ou une demoiselle. Cette courtisane, qui avait fait dépenser en bouquets plus d’argent qu’il n’en faudrait pour faire vivre dans la joie une famille entière, s’asseyait quelquefois sur la_
pelouse, pendant une heure, pour examiner la simple fleur dont elle portait le nom. [Her delight in the smallest things was like that of a child. There were days when she ran in the garden, like a child of ten, after a butterfly or a dragon-fly. This courtesan who had cost more money in bouquets than would have kept a whole family in comfort, would sometimes sit on the grass for an hour, examining the simple flower whose name she bore]. (Dumas 162-162 and 137)

As suggested, daisies were Marguerite’s favorite flowers when residing in the country and the country played a vital role in the brief happiness experienced by the two protagonist lovers. It represents how the author saw his mistress as a person, or how he wanted the reader to perceive her, when he wrote the novel—innocent, discreet, pure, loyal, fresh, and beautiful, so he let the character of Armand voice this for him.

Strangely though, in Verdi’s opera the courtesan’s name is Violetta Valéry instead of Marguerite. Most likely Verdi balked at calling his protagonist Marguerite because his first wife’s name was Margherita. So why did Verdi name his protagonist in the opera Violetta Valéry? Well, first of all, the violet had taken the place of the camellia in popularity by the middle 1840s.

At the start of the nineteenth century; the Parma violet was grown by the Empress, Josephine Bonaparte, in her Malmaison garden in Paris. By 1830 the violet was grown in small numbers in Parisian greenhouses and sold, and by the 1840s the Parma violet (the pale blue-mauve version) was available. “During the Second Empire (1852–70), bouquets of Parma violets became fashionable at evening receptions, balls, and the opera” (Mendonça de Carvahlo et al 138). Since Verdi was from near Parma and Strepponi from Lodi, both must have been familiar with the Parma violet. Also, since the start of a more serious friendship between Verdi and Strepponi appears to have occurred in Parma, the Parma violet is only fitting. In fact, they spent time together in Parma during the theater’s rehearsals and performances of Nabuccodonosor. As further proof, violets were extremely expensive during the period of Second Empire France, so
much so that the famous Parisian courtesan Cora Pearl spent fifteen hundred francs to have Parma violets cover her dining room table at a single dinner party. Cora wrote in her memoir:

*L'hiver, je donnais des soupers avec quinze cents francs de violettes de Parme, au lieu de mousse autour des fruits. Je ne crois pas que mes hôtes aient eu à me reprocher un manque d'attentions. Je me suis toujours piquée de remplir avec honneur mes devoirs de maîtresse de maison* [In the winter at my suppers I used to have the fruit brought to the table embedded, instead of moss, in Parma violets which cost me fifteen hundred francs. I believe no guest of mine can reproach me with any lack of attention. I always made it a point of honour to faithfully fulfill my duties as mistress of the house]. (Pearl 102–3 and 51)

Violets, in the language of flowers, stand for modesty, (Latour 345). What do these meanings have to do with the name of an operatic character taken from a book where the name had already been designated as Marguerite? Or, more importantly, what do these meanings have to do with Giuseppe Verdi and his companion, Strepponi? For one, it is a fact that Strepponi, Verdi’s mistress and a famous opera singer, had suggested he name his protagonist soprano Violetta. Servadio comments in her biography on Strepponi about the origins of the name for the libretto’s protagonist:

Throughout 1886 she was always hoping that, ‘my constant catarrh will leave me when the violets blossom again’. The violet was the opposite to the *traviata’s* camellias, the flower of Marguerite Gautier and of Violetta Valéry; the timid violet had been the name which Giuseppina had suggested to Verdi and Piave in order to describe the inner purity of a *traviata*. It remained a symbol which would be with her until her dying day. It represented a characteristic of nineteenth-century sentiment, of the romanticism of the time translated in the language of flowers. (Servadio 251)

They agreed upon it, and Francesco Maria Piave, Verdi’s librettist, gave the female protagonist that name.

Could the name Violetta exist because the musical rhythm Verdi was seeking required a certain syllabic meter for the music he intended to write? Perhaps. But there are other possibilities. Violets were the most popular flower when Verdi and Strepponi were in Paris. Violets were the singer’s favorite flower. As proof, years later Verdi found some violets growing
strangely in November in the garden of their farm at Sant’Agata in Reggio Emilia province and brought them in to her while she lie sick in bed about to die.

They were about to leave Sant’Agata to return to Genoa. On the evening of 11 November, Giuseppina fell ill with a severe pain in her side. The doctor was called and acute pneumonia diagnosed. The fever disappeared on the evening of the following day and her pain ceased so that she began to feel relatively well and to speak again. But by the morning of the 14th things had deteriorated and she knew that the end was near. She exchanged a few whispered words with Verdi who gave her the last violets of the season which he had picked from the garden. ‘Smell them,’ he said to her. ‘Thank you, but I cannot smell anything because I have a slight cold.’ She died at 4:30 p.m. (Servadio 255)

Verdi’s last gesture to Strepponi was to bring her a bouquet of violets—her favorite.

Another consideration from deeper analysis is the rhythm of the name and the syllabication which is important in setting words to music: Violetta Valéry matches that of Strepponi syllabically. Just as daisies were the favorite flower of Al-phon-sine Ples-sis (Mar-gue-rite Gau-tier), violets were the favorite flowers of Giu-sep-pi-na Strep-po-ni (Vi-o-let-ta Va-lé-ry). In fact there is another key to the mystery of the name Violetta in La traviata. (There is a drawing of Giuseppina Strepponi from around 1840 which exists today in Busseto in the Villa Verdi drawn by Bello in which she holds a nosegay of violets, as if to show us who Violetta Valéry represents placing the answer right there for all those who have eyes to see). Syllabically and rhythmically, each fictionalized name mimics the actual person’s name and a favorite flower of each woman is used in the character’s name. This does not have to do so much with Verdi using the language of flowers to name the opera (Violetta) which was the original title of the work as it does the symbology of using a name that represents each woman through a flower’s name, rather than use her actual name. Therefore, Strepponi is represented as Valéry just as Plessis is represented by Gautier. Verdi’s Violetta Valéry was Giuseppina Strepponi, therefore Verdi’s traviata is Strepponi.
Which persons around the Verdi’s would have known that Strepponi loved violets and therefore would have recognized that *La traviata*’s Violetta Valéry was really Giuseppina Strepponi to Verdi? Only those closest to them, his family and his first wife’s family would know that her favorite flower was violets and were plentifully planted in the Sant’Agata gardens where the family members had been guests. Verdi’s publisher, Ricordi, and a few close friends would have known this as well since they were among the few chosen who were allowed to frequent Verdi’s country villa.

Symbolic language was commonplace in classical compositions as far back as Antonio Vivaldi, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and was often types of anagrams or *gematria* (numerology). Verdi, who as a child played Vivaldi, Bach and Mozart on the organ in the Busseto cathedral would have been taught this information which was still common knowledge during his era. Verdi preferred to use syllabic rhythms which match the syllabic rhythms of names. With this premise this study suggests that Verdi’s *traviata* was Strepponi. Even the name of Alfredo Germont, rather than Armand Duval, can be interpreted as representative of Giuseppe Verdi (Al-fre-do Ger-mont = Giu-sep-pe Ver-di). Therefore it is feasible that Verdi memorialized his Strepponi in musical terms—a language spoken by both.

Strepponi had retired for the rest of her life from singing publicly in exchange for living in Verdi’s shadow. Obviously, both must have liked the Dumas drama they saw in Paris in February 1852 and Verdi had been looking for a contemporary subject to which he could set music. According to Phillips-Matz:

While in Paris, he and Strepponi did go to the theater. The tradition in the Carrara-Verdi family is that the couple attended a performance of Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux camélias*, which opened at the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Paris on 2 February 1852 with Eugénie Doche as Marguerite Gautier and Charles Fechter as Armand Duval. Verdi himself was said to have told Filomena Maria Verdi that he began to compose the music for what would later become *La traviata* immediately after seeing the play, without either a
scenario or a libretto. She, in turn, passed this information on to her son, who repeated it to his children, the present heirs. The composer had a copy of La Dame aux camélias sent to him sometime in late summer of early autumn of 1852 and thanked Marie Escudier for sending it. (Phillips-Matz 303–04)

Just as parallels can be drawn between them and the couple in the Dumas novel, they had to have recognized some similarities to what had been going on in their lives embedded within the theater work, for the themes were contemporaneous. Verdi had just received a scathing letter from Barezzi, his dead first wife’s father to which he had answered an equally sharp response which will be addressed later in the chapter. Strepponi’s Verdi was “a man of contradictory emotional impulses” (Conati xxii) and a man “whose character was indomitable, volatile . . . who acquired culture reluctantly, shy of educated acquaintances and withdrawn in his stubborn spiritual isolation” (xxiii). Verdi was not at the start very socially oriented, and had retained some of his country-raised personality traits which had an intuitively entrenched, commonsensical quality.

Verdi and Strepponi were treated badly while they were in his hometown of Busseto. The bussetani had found her wanting because of her past and did not tolerate her past immorality since it went against the social norms of the era. From 1849, for the following sixteen years, Verdi had been the center of what he called “an investigation or, better, an inquisition” conducted by the people of Busseto (Notes transcribed by Strepponi from Verdi’s conversation [Strepponi, Letter-books – July 1863] in Phillips-Matz, 486). Verdi is described in testimonies in the Conati biography Encounters with Verdi:

[T]he testimonies in this anthology depict a man with antennae perpetually in motion, ready to catch any vibration of change in the society where he lived and worked, a man whose culture (if we understand it not as something merely decorative, literary, superficial, but rather as a means of relating to reality and acquiring the tools to transform it was a vital necessity, and whose unwillingness to flaunt it derived precisely from cultural savoir-faire. (xxiii-xxiv)
As a result of these factors it was necessary that, “with Verdi’s help, Strepponi set out to destroy that now unseemly past, which they both felt was not befitting to the dignity of a famous composer” (Servadio 9).

Viewed one dimensionally without knowing the truth of her life before Verdi and the exceptionality of his choice to rehabilitate her and marry her, with time this buried information was all but lost through biographers helping to maintain the venerable nineteenth-century iconic protection the couple had worked so hard to create for the maestro. Carlo Gatti and Arthur Pougin are examples of biographers who venerated Verdi as was the fashion of the nineteenth century in Italy. This version of them is what later historians and biographers trusted and repeated, and since Verdi, who was a highly private man was so incredibly famous by the end of his life, all of their less socially acceptable truths were hidden in the distant past and forgotten. Yet, even with all that secrecy, Strepponi never felt accepted into society and to Verdi, who knew his worth, high society’s opinions never seemed to matter very much. He remained the gentleman farmer and cloistered composer. This is the same illusory image still revered today worldwide and diminishes their dimensionality as a couple by masking much of what they were forced to suffer due to the moral standards of the day.

Servadio has written one of the three biographies on Giuseppina Strepponi. In her biography on Strepponi much research was accomplished which follows the rise to celebrity and Strepponi’s fall into notoriety. Her work then follows Strepponi’s transition from opera star to voice teacher, then mistress, and eventual wife of Giuseppe Verdi. Servadio is detailed and interesting in her approach to this story about a courtesan turned wife. She underlines the essence of Strepponi’s desire to be accepted into society and her desire to be the wife Verdi wanted her to become in order to make a reputable marriage. Servadio also underscores many of the less
known facts about the couple. She contributes much to the dimensionality of these individuals. Another biography, *Giuseppina Strepponi* (Lodi, 1984) by Elena Cazzulani is useful in that it presents Strepponi’s life from her side and less from Verdi’s. Critically, it is less precise than others, more poetic in its approach, following some of the misinformation that had preceded her biography by taking information from earlier biographers, but it has a flowery charm about it. Several articles from the collection by Nicholas John in *Violetta and her Sisters-The Lady of the Camellias: Responses to the Myth* have been used as critical support. Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, one of the foremost experts of Verdi today, wrote a fine critical article included in the John collection on Giuseppina Strepponi entitled “Art and Reality: the *Traviata* of Verdi’s Private Life” in which she outlines Strepponi’s celebrity and fall, and discusses of the effect her notoriety had upon her relationship with Verdi during their first period together back in his hometown of Busseto. She proposes the idea that the harsh letter received from Antonio Barezzi in Paris and Verdi’s famous reply, both “sowed the seeds of the idea that Verdi had lived through a ‘real’ *La traviata* in his personal life and that Barezzi was the ‘real’ Father Germont of the story” (Phillips-Matz 225). This is the basis for some of this chapter’s discourse and are the roots upon which the idea of the bourgeois familial and societal prejudices suffered by Strepponi are based. Additionally, Phillips-Matz wrote one of the best modern biographies: *Verdi: A Biography* (1993) which shows her close contact with Verdi’s heirs and insider information that only she was able to gather and share which adds to previous information gathered on Strepponi’s children and shines light on the Verdi’s and Strepponi’s quietest and deepest corners. Another article in John by Martin Segalen, “Myth of Reality?” briefly outlines the path of a girl like Marguerite Gautier/Violetta Valéry from her arrival in Paris to her rise and fall as a courtesan and questions the myth. It is useful to this chapter in understanding how Verdi’s opera
is the reason that Alphonsine’s myth lives worldwide yet today. Yet another article in John by Naomi Segal, entitled “Our Lady of the Flowers” discusses the meaning and inner workings of the idea of the femme fatale sub-genre of romantic prose in literature where she defines the three most famous works in French in which the woman dies and the man tells the tale, as per example Abbé Prévost’s Manon Lescaut, Prosper Mérimée’s Carmen, and Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias. Her analysis narrows down how each woman is considered threatening and uncontrolled by the narrator—Manon implicitly and Carmen directly. Both of these characters represent the dark-lady demon which opposes the duality on the other side of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. Both are healthy and must be murdered, whereas “Our Lady of the Camellias, alone amongst the fatal women, fades away out of sheer selflessness” (Segal 163). Lynda Nead’s contribution to John’s collection is her article “Traviata-ism and the Great Social Evil” where she expounds upon the reason both La Dame aux camélias and La traviata were considered so revolutionary. It brought prostitution off the street and into the theater directly in front of an upper and middle class audience that protected its women socially from what was considered obscenity and aberration. Marcello Conati’s Encounters with Verdi gives impressions from people who interviewed Verdi and describes their impressions of him in detail. Francis Toye’s work, Giuseppe Verdi: His Life and Works sheds more light on previous romantic ideas about the Verdi’s life and clarifies some of the misinformation that had been perpetuated for so many years. When this biography came out in 1931 its research, done on the period and countries in which Verdi lived and worked, was exceptional. It is full of insight into Verdi’s works and his life and is useful for its vast knowledge of Verdi’s numerous works, styles, and musical periods. His focus is on Verdi, but he does include some information pertinent to Strepponi.
One of the most recent books on the topic of the lady of the camellias is *The Real Traviata: The Song of Marie Duplessis* (2015) by René Weis. His research is absolutely astonishing and the footwork he did to find answers is undeniably remarkable. He has new insights into the story of Alphonsine Plessis that have been very enlightening for this study. He helps understand the mixtures of reality and fiction that are entwined in Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* clarifying some of the mysteries that had not previously been revealed. His work was especially helpful with regard to Duplessis’s husband, Count Édouard de Perrégaux whose story about his liaison with Duplessis appears to have been used for much of Armand Duval’s tale in the novel.

There is splendid information on Strepponi in Frank Walker’s excellent biographical work *The Man Verdi* (London, 1962) which is remarkable in its detail. Walker compares earlier works by Carlo Gatti, Franco Abbiati, Aldo Oberdorfer, and Arthur Pougin, and disputes many points made by those authors, correcting misinformation through re-discovered Strepponi letters to her impresario, Lanari. He points out that much of Abbiati and Pougin’s works were based upon Gatti’s work which Walker says was a romanticized version of the Verdi’s lives, and very imprecise. Even Oberdorfer makes some personal comments which are not precise although his compiling of Verdi and Strepponi’s letters is well presented.

Walker’s work from 1962 paved the way for future biographers and historians to re-assess Verdi’s and Strepponi’s lives. Most interesting is that Walker re-discovered a cache of Strepponi’s early letters which helped Walker deduce through investigation and logic the identity of the father of her children, the history of her singing career, and the time periods of her confinements and her illnesses. It puts much into perspective concerning her early life as a celebrated opera singer. It is very useful to this chapter because of his three long chapters in
which he focuses on Verdi and Strepponi during in the early, middle, and late period of their liaison. Carlo Gatti’s *Verdi* (Milan, 1930) is useful in its view of the impression many of Verdi’s works had on audiences of the period. Massimo Mila writes much on Giuseppina Strepponi in his biography *La giovinezza di Verdi* [Verdi’s Youth] (1974) but his work comes after Walker’s and seems based on much of Walker’s research, and the *Autobiografia epistolare* [Epistolary Autobiography] (Naples, 1941) of Aldo Oberdorfer is very enlightening with regard to some letters to Verdi from Strepponi, but some of his personal comments are incorrect assumptions because he did not know of Strepponi’s early letters to Lanari which are housed in the Florence Library. In regards to Gaia Servadio’s biography, the work was groundbreaking concerning the research on Strepponi.

In the “Introduction” of *The Real Traviata: The life of Giuseppina Strepponi, wife of Giuseppe Verdi* Servadio writes:

But this is the story of a different Giuseppina, a kind of Violetta Valéry, a *traviata* who does not die of consumption but who is redeemed and lives on to the mature age of eighty-two. In one sense, this Giuseppina-Violetta, who made a name for herself in the musical world, who struggled to attain a position of her own, does die because she gives up the stage to become a different woman, Signora Verdi. It is the drama of women of the nineteenth century – and not only in that century. A Violetta, not Marguerite Gautier and not even an Emma Bovary – although Giuseppina Strepponi is a kind of emblem of the nineteenth century in Europe. Thus this story is typical of a certain European milieu of the last century. (Servadio 3)

Servadio researched for years to uncover the truth about this woman who ended up overlooked or demeaned in other versions of Verdi’s life stories, such as by Gatti who wrote that “the loneliness of genius, an unhappy youth, and the disillusionments of a singer’s life had exaggerated her natural pessimism” (Gatti 106-07). Instead Servadio writes as a woman, about a woman:

‘Peppina’ herself certainly added to my difficulties. Giuseppina Strepponi did all she could to cover her traces, to blot out certain events of her life – those events that were not in keeping with the image of respectability she managed to create . . . Some of the musicologists who have guided me were indignant about the obstinacy with which Giuseppina managed to conceal elements of her past. (Servadio xi)
Despite this obstacle, her work is thorough and enlightening and this section of the study agrees with her findings, but goes a step further to attempt to prove that *La traviata* defends the courtesan cause of rehabilitation and redemption inadvertently subverting social attitudes by presenting in the theater and on stage in front of an aristocratic and bourgeois society a fallen woman who redeems herself through self-sacrifice in death. In order to delve into this topic, the chapter must establish an understanding of nineteenth-century society’s views concerning courtesan celebrity.

Like flowers, these women bloom and die in the enchantment of the evergreen garden which is love. Camellias flower in that garden. White as snow, ethereal as the soul. But are the souls of women truly white? Apart from colour, how many attributes do they have? (Moretti in John 165)

This study is examining the life of a real woman, a real *traviata*. Giuseppina Strepponi found a way out of her traumatic life through the rehabilitating love of one man who kept her by his side until the day she died, fading away like the flowers for which she is remembered. Strepponi fulfilled her desire to marry respectably, but at the same time, we are also imagining the stories of the lives of many nineteenth-century women as those stories played out in the social customs and biases of nineteenth-century Europe. Strepponi’s life was not in most ways typical of the nineteenth-century woman since her celebrity as an Italian opera singer gave her opportunities that other women never enjoyed. Forced to choose because of some life lessons, her intelligent choices helped change her life.

Lastly, history plays a part in autobiofictionality and those links between the real narrative of the Verdi’s and the fictional narrative of the opera as based upon the Dumas novel are what must be connected to demonstrate the similarities and the dissimilarities between the two stories. This can be accomplished by connecting the celebrity of the courtesans, the echoing of facts between Verdi and Strepponi vs. Germont/Duval (Dumas) and Valéry/Gautier.
(Duplessis). The fiction comes so much more alive when the roman à clef versions of each creator are considered and the realities observed.

**Strepponi: Celebrity Opera Singer and Courtesan**

Giuseppina Strepponi was one of the most celebrated sopranos of her time. Her celebrity as a public woman posed a hindrance in her relationship with Verdi due to social norms of the day. An important cultural and social practice based upon a moral code of the period existed and must be presented in order to understand the reasons for this hindrance. Women outside the protected family environment who performed on stage or worked independently were seen as public women and regarded as courtesans at best—prostitutes at worst.

Both Strepponi and Duplessis were looked upon as celebrated courtesans. Mary Jane Phillips-Matz writes about this connection between the two women:

Paris in the summer of 1846 was journey’s end for two women whose names were later connected because of the odd circumstances of their lives. Marie Duplessis, the Lady of the Camellias, and Giuseppina Strepponi an Italian soprano, would never have been mentioned in the same sentence had Giuseppe Verdi not written *La Traviata*. He, then, is the catalyst both for Duplessis, who is now remembered chiefly as the heroine of his opera, and for Strepponi, who was his mistress and later his wife. (Phillips-Matz in Johns 218)

The Dumas tale of Duplessis's short life shows the renown of the celebrated courtesan in *La Dame aux camélias* who is reincarnated and reflected in *La traviata* in a veiled and masked manner. The framework of Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias* presents publicly compromised celebrity as a moral problem. In “Art and Reality: the Traviata of Verdi’s Private Life” Phillips-Matz suggests that Strepponi and Verdi had situations in their life together that link to some of the circumstances portrayed by Dumas in *La Dame aux camélias*. Although built under different circumstances the two courtesan’s celebrities, and their eventual falls from celebrity through illness and abuse, have certain similarities.
In Strepponi’s case, vocal talent and artistic mastery bestowed fame and celebrity but her bohemian lifestyle, love affairs, and pregnancies caused notoriety, and eventually the ruination of her voice bringing about her fall from popular celebrity. This section of the chapter will follow her celebrity and her eventual fall from popularity and culminate in examining the death of her career which led to her re-birth, first as a vocal instructor in Paris, and then to her rehabilitation as the mistress and eventual wife of her redeemer, Giuseppe Verdi.

Strepponi’s rise began just out of the Milan Conservatory when she debuted with an aria from *L’Elisir d’amore* accompanied by a full orchestra in her home town of Lodi showing great vocal talent. She received good reviews by Cleto Porro, a collaborator of the *Lodi-Crema Gazzette* who wrote that “la sig. Strepponi riscosse universali acclamazioni giustamente tributate ai vari pregi di natura [Strepponi received universal cheers rightly bestowed on various qualities of nature] (Cazzulani 25). Both Cazzulani and Servadio construct her rise to celebrity and her fall from popularity in their biographies about the singer. In nine years’ time, she sang over thirty-five operas in all the major opera houses in Italy.

Frank Walker, in *The Man Verdi* (1962) included several chapters in which much was revealed about Strepponi’s artistic mastery. His great contribution to her hidden past is his careful investigation of and re-construction of all of her performances from 1834 to 1842 during which she sang over 50 different operas, many of which she premiered for their first time. Among those were works by Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Gioacchino Rossini, Egisto Vignozzi, Luigi Ricci, Saverio Mercadante, Antonio Buzzola, Daniel Auber, Francesco Gnecco, Giuseppe Lillo, Fabio Campana, Giulio Alary (Alari), Józef Michal Poniatowski, Federico Ricci, Giovanni Pacini, and Giuseppe Verdi (Walker 52-56). Her incredible repertoire, her musicality, her ability to memorize and perform all these works thrilled audiences of her day and helped her
become famous quickly. This cataloguing led to an understanding of the periods in which she gave birth as recognized by her absences from performances.

   Additionally, she was lovely as a young woman which gave her more capital with her fans. Paintings reveal that Strepponi was extremely pretty with an oval face, a sloping neck emerging from a fine décolleté, fine white shoulders, sparkling wide-set dark eyes which resonated intellectual promise. One in particular found in the Museo Teatrale alla Scala from around 1845 shows Strepponi dressed in a black décolleté dress while seated at the piano wearing beautiful, long gold earrings, a large cameo pendant pin, and a bracelet with a chain connected to a ring on her right hand. Her long neck and oval face seems accentuated in the painting by the dark hair, dress, and pale skin so that the painting envisions the ideal Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres woman for that time period in her looks. (This work is found on the cover of Gaia Servadio’s biography of Strepponi). Comparatively, this same sort of beauty was also found in the famous Parisian courtesan Alphonsine Plessis (Marie Duplessis) who was the model for Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias. Women opera singers were idolized not only for the beauty of their voice and their skill as a singer, but also for their physical beauty just like famous courtesans. Strepponi was short, but she was also “the incarnation of the Bellinian diaphanous heroine, a romantic damsel in melancholy distress and at the same time the agility of her trills and her verve gave her a potentiality for comic roles as well” (Servadio 33).

   She would become the focus of dreams for huge audiences just as the Grisi sisters, Maria Malibran, and Isabella Colbran. According to Frank Walker in his biography, a writer in the newspaper Il Gondoliere states for 11 November 1835 critique of Strepponi’s performance of Bellini’s La Sonnambula:

   A real treasure, a dear young singer, la Strepponi, who at the dawn of her career treads the stage in masterly fashion and who from the first performance, or rather from the first
instant in which, from the wings, we saw her open her angelic lips to intone that melancholy romance, awakened in us the keenest delight and obtained universal tributes of applause. A limpid, penetrating smooth voice, seemly action, lovely figure; and to Nature’s liberal endowments she adds an excellent technique, which will soon cause her to shine among the brightest stars of the Italian theater. (Walker 58-59)

According to Walker the same writer criticized her overly long trills and fiorature (embellishments) in La Sonnabula, but Bellini’s opera was chosen for her benefit performance. Walker reports that on that occasion sonnets were written and portraits were published, a common occurrence for celebrity. Merely one year later, her fame was established and her singing was already very much in demand. Strepponi’s star had risen.

Her status as a superstar of the day is demonstrated in the following quote. It is from an early performance period of Strepponi and comes from an important man: Temistocle Solera, who was the well-known future librettist of Nabucco. Written by him, the quote below appeared in la Strenna teatrale europea:

The finest gifts of nature, which continual training has raised to the level of greatness; thus in both serious roles and comic ones, she made one forget many famous singers who had preceded her. Gifted with an extremely sensitive soul she knows how to insinuate herself into the audience’s ear with both her singing and her expression . . . Milan is yearning to hear her again. (Solera in Servadio 65)

She would indeed sing again in Milan at La Scala and that would be in the very work for which Solera had written the libretto—Giuseppe Verdi’s Nabucco.

Moreover, Strepponi’s formidable talent was recognized and celebrated not only in Italy but also in Austria and France. Strepponi’s celebrity was so vast that Gaetano Donizetti, the leading composer of Italian opera of the era dedicated Adelia to her. This gesture was a very special mark of favor and further supports the power of her celebrated fame. She was such a celebrated primadonna that her opinion was a highly valued and a powerful one.

Unfortunately, Strepponi’s celebrity was beginning to wane as her voice weakened due to incessant singing over seven years straight and multiple serial pregnancies. Even so, her
Florentine impresario Lanari called her *La Generalina*. He recognized that although she was in vocal disrepair she still had good qualities for she knew the opera business, she had the contacts, she was free and financially independent, and she was used to travelling on tour. Lanari selfishly continued to push her to sing a minimum of four times per week. He seemed to want to get as much work out of her as possible based upon the scheduling he did. She had also learned to negotiate good business contracts for herself which made her even more valuable to him.

Lanari’s problem with Strepponi was her inconsistent health which caused her to take long periods to rest. Around 1842 she writes him:

> If you have occasion to see the despicable M. . . . . kindly remind him of the *important* sum of money that through your offices he agreed to pay. You, who are my friend and know all about my troubles, and my actual and future situation, will see that I cannot disregard even a small claim, having so many expenses to meet. In truth it’s enough to drive one crazy, thinking of my misfortunes—but God is just and no one is beyond his reach! You who, I repeat, have shown a certain interest in my troubles—it would cost you nothing to be more careful and strict about article seven of the cession agreement. Woe when one must allow oneself to be seized by the throat, as in the present contract made at Verona, which makes me shudder every time I read it! Enough about that—a year at this pace and perhaps I shall be no more, and all claims upon one, all conflicts, end beyond the tomb. My poor children! My poor family! (Walker 77)

This demonstrates that she was in need of money and had to work incessantly to earn. It also shows that one particular person could help her by paying the sum in the cession agreement.

Walker discovers who that person is.

According to Walker, Rodolfo Paoli wrote an article “La prima maniera della Peppina” in *La Scala* for February and March 1854 where he includes some extracts from Giuseppina’s letters to Lanari which are, Walker says, even more extensive than those published by Eugenio Gara in the *Corriere della Sera* on 27 January 1851. Walker’s point is that both these journalists identify “the despicable M” as Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario of La Scala who had hired Strepponi on several occasions. Walker’s research brought him to a very different conclusion than the journalists. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth according to him (89).
Walker says that the new research shows differently. Strepponi encounters a celebrated tenor at Bologna in April 1837, and a relationship develops between them. The result is her first pregnancy with Camillino who is born about February 1838. Phillips-Matz concurs with Walker stating that the boy was born in Turin in January 1838 and entered in the civil registers as “Sterponi” (Phillips-Matz 292). Walker feels that the agent, Camillo Cirelli, who was consistently helpful to Strepponi during this period and who many biographers thought was the father of Camillino, was instead actually his godfather and had given him his Christian name at the baptism on 16 January 1838 (Walker 66). Walker claims Alessandro Lanari brings Strepponi back together with the tenor who was the father of her child again in Lucia di Lammermoor in Florence and by July she is again pregnant, but this ends in a miscarriage of a second child in February 1839. Phillips-Matz, instead, contradicts Walker’s chronology of Giuseppa Faustina’s birth saying that a second child was born on 9 February 1839 in Florence just six hours after singing Il giuramento at the Teatro Alfieri, and after nursing her for three weeks was put in the turnstile for abandoned infants of the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence on 28 February at 11:45 p.m. under the false name of “Sinforosa Cirelli” (Phillips-Matz 121). She became a statistic in the registers of the hospital and orphanage, where she was classified in the lowest rank as esposti, society’s trash, who had been “exposed” in the turnstile (121-22). After this, she realizes the futility of the relationship. According to Phillips-Matz, Strepponi is again pregnant in 1840. The third child was a girl, stillborn “in her parish of Santa Maria della Passione in Milan in 22 March 1840 to parents who abandoned her, [and] would fit into such a pattern” (122). Walker’s stillborn date of (1839) and Phillips-Matz’s stillborn date of (1840) contradict one another and remain a mystery. This tenor and Strepponi had separated for a short time because Strepponi had accepted to marry “M. of Verona” (the fiancé Monti) but she dismisses this
admirer because she was unable love him. During the Carnival season in Verona 1841, Lanari brings the two singers back together once again. Lanari persuades the tenor to make some amends to Strepponi which arrives in a compensation sum: part paid, part left outstanding. One last time Lanari brings them together again on the stage in Florence in March and she conceives another surviving child, a third, born in November or December at Trieste or Venice . . . a female child left with a couple in Trieste. Lanari tries to get the tenor to finish paying the remainder and give something more for this last child. Strepponi is finally disillusioned, depressed, out of money, and ill.

Strepponi’s life is forever changed due to the births and death of the first four children which she is forced to abandon, or bury. Consequently, she suffers a catastrophic breakdown at Milan in 1842 likely brought on by post-partum depression. This depression would hasten her fall as a celebrity. Later in the season she sings Belisario to a warm audience in Milan at La Scala according to Gatti, but the truth is different based on a letter from Donizetti that mentions the fact that she received no applause for his Belisario. Several doctors’ reports appear and letters from Merelli to Lanari explain her poor health issues. One is below:

Cirelli has arrived and this morning he told me in confidence about Peppina’s condition. He said you had suggested that he should confide in me and that I should find some way of having a legally valid certificate made out. I shall try to arrange everything, but would like to have the order from you, and to know what you want me to do and have done. (Merelli in Walker 65)

Lanari’s, Cirelli’s, and Merelli’s plans to get several doctors to write a viable certificate with the reasons why Strepponi could not sing for a brief period would create a cover for her since she had not been able to get her voice back into usable shape.

Her inability to sing well was rumored to have been due to consecutive pregnancies. The La Scala audience was well aware of the rumors. The bohemian world of the theater was regarded as a sinful one, and women were deemed whores and courtesans, and judged as such
which made them socially notorious. No longer singing well, her past indiscretions were now openly talked about by both the public and those in power because the La Scala environment in Milan is a closed one and lends itself to *chiacchiere* [gossip]. Those who worked in the theater, lived in or near Milano. They took the gossip home. Those at home took the gossip to the neighbors. Many of those same people frequented the standing room in the *seconda galleria* at La Scala. Gossip had labelled Strepponi a courtesan. Unscrupulous impresarios who needed her to sing so they could make money had placed her in front of the public during her pregnancy. Public recognition of her condition by audiences who had observed and heard of her pregnancies damaged her reputation (This poor reputation followed her as is later seen from the reaction given Verdi and Strepponi by many in his home town, including his first wife’s family and his father-in-law, Barezzi, when he brought her to live with him in Busseto).

Sexual relationships among the singers took place with blind eyes turned, except if the relationship became public through a pregnancy, and marriage did not follow, the woman was looked upon as ruined and her reputation destroyed. This is what happened to Strepponi. She had been thrown into the operatic world at nineteen with no protection, and she had been very vulnerable to those with little to no scruples. Only her first son was recognized and raised by one of her agents, Cirelli who had been thought to be the father by Verdi’s and Strepponi’s biographers until Frank Walker discovered the true identity of her children’s father. Through detailed research of letters he rediscovered in the Florence Library written from Strepponi to Lanari, and research he did of her performances and breaks from performing, the biographer was able to discern the true identity of the father of the first two living children. Walker writes:

We are in search, then, of a famous singer, with a name of six or seven letters, the first two of which were ‘Mo’, a married man, the father of a family, with a cadaverous face, who had business relations with Lanari and who was at Bologna or Faenza in May or June 1837, at Verona during the Carnival season of 1841, at Florence in March or April
of that year, at Turin in January of 1842—where he had less success than usual—and in Vienna in the spring of 1842. (Walker 88)

It was none other than the tenor Napoleone Moriani, known as “il tenore della bella morte” who fathered the children. He was thin with a cadaverous-shaped facial bone structure. Of the next two pregnancies, one miscarried and the other, a daughter, was farmed out. There may also have been a fourth child, a daughter who was left on an orphanage doorstep but little information is given about this pregnancy by any of her biographers except Mary Jane Phillips-Matz.

The purpose of discerning who really fathered those children is just this—Strepponi was basically with one man, a colleague and tenor who fathered her children, but who would not take responsibility for his children, because he was already married and had a family. This is important, because it clears up the idea that these children were fathered by different men and the society of the time would have judged her as immoral but even more so as a degenerate. She was with one man and obviously one who she was fascinated by and who she most likely loved enough to fall into despair after the cessation agreement. (This fact would be common knowledge in the tightly knit theater family of lyric opera in Italy). These years of overwork, pregnancies, and stress strained her voice eventually causing the loss of the velvety vocal luster she used to possess in the earlier part of her career. The damage could be easily discerned during rehearsals and performances by all the workers in La Scala who were Milanese folk. Her fame was losing its footing due to these factors.

Biographers Cazzulani, Walker, and Servadio are in agreement that she sang in Palermo during the next season, but she did not have success for the voice was a shadow of its former self. She fought depression and lingered on the brink of consumption which took its toll on what was left of her voice. Doctors recommended she quit singing forever or risk consumption and the inevitable result. Doctors Moro, Vandoni, and Ciceri signed a letter stating:
Strepponi’s lost popularity with the public as a celebrity because of her vocal problems.

Her agent and impresarios had to do something. She needed a reason to leave the theater gracefully otherwise everyone’s reputations would be damaged. The doctors’ letter continues:

Ritornata al R. Teatro alla Scala nella corrente Quaresima, la di lei voce un tempo bella a sonora fu trovata anche dal pubblico debole, velata, insufficiente, ancorché emessa con istrarordinario sforzo; [Having returned to La Scala in the current Quarter, there her voice once beautiful and sonorous was found also by the public, weak, veiled, insufficient, and still emitted with extraordinary force]. (Cazzulani 50 Trans. Sasson)

With the destabilization of her career and the loss of her voice which was the death of her singing career, Strepponi was forced to think about finding a different career in order to continue maintaining her family and her children. After a period of reflection in Milan, the soprano rose out of the ashes like a phoenix with plans to give birth to her new career as a vocal instructor in Paris.

There is in courtesan literature a constant theme of death and/or re-birth—the symbol being the phoenix. Just as ageing is a death for the courtesan’s career as was discussed in Sand’s Isidora, the opera singer suffers a type of death with the loss of the instrument. The death of the singer’s voice brought only bad reviews which added salt to Strepponi’s wounds. Servadio uses
two examples of Strepponi’s vocal demise as criticized in reviews. She writes that in the Palermo newspaper *La fata galante* Strepponi’s performance in *Linda di Chamonix* was reviewed:

> The brilliant star that presided over her theatrical fortunes now seems to be on the point of fading and thus emits only the feeblest glow: this dimness must be seen as the reason for her poor performance. Let her rest on the laurels she has won, no-one will ever forget that she sang excellently and was the pride of Italy. (96)

And *Il Figaro* wrote of her performance of Elvira in *Ernani* (30 December 1842):

> We no longer recognize Strepponi in Strepponi, that celebrated singer whom we heard elsewhere not so many years ago, always (may it come true again) overwhelmed by a tempest of applause and celebration. (98)

Eventually Strepponi decided to leave the stage forever and elected to teach voice in Paris. The medical diagnosis along with the bad reviews finalized it for Strepponi and her ensuing decision prompted Verdi to write a letter of recommendation for her to Léon Escudier, an acquaintance and editor in Paris of the newspaper, *La France Musicale*. Since “Paris had already affirmed itself as the European centre of creativity; wisely the city opened its arms to artistic exiles of all kinds, people such as Liszt, Chopin, Cherubini and Rossini” (Servadio 107), it was the city most likely to prove lucrative. Strepponi had to break with her past.

> Strepponi exiled herself from her past, from Italy, and from the rumors. Her failures were a long way from Paris and could remain unknown by remaining hidden in the more provincial Italy and Sicily. Strepponi moved and set up in a stylish Parisian apartment as a vocal instructor. She was already a celebrity in Paris and so she was welcomed and encouraged which made Paris ideal for her new career as a voice teacher. Escudier announced her arrival and publicized the following announcement to promote her:

> Era stato infatti il giornale degli Escudier “La France Musicale”, ad annunciare l’arrivo a Parigi, nell’ottobre 1846, e a pubblicare, il 15 novembre, l’annuncio del “Cours de chant de Madame G. Strepponi”, fattasi conoscere in due concerti. “Depuis la Ungher et Duprez, qui ont fait consacrer en Italie l’école de la déclamation lyrique, il n’y a pas eu d’interprète plus intelligente de cette école que la Strepponi”. [It was in fact the newspaper of Escudier, *La France Musicale*, that announced the arrival in Paris, in
October 1846, and published, on 15 November, the announcement of the “Cours de chant de Madame G. Strepponi” which would be demonstrated through two concerts. “Before Ungher and Duprez, (who made sacred the opera declamation school of Italy here), there was none other than the most intelligent of interpreters from that school except Strepponi.” (Mila 314-15 Trans. Sasson)

Verdi’s letter of recommendation helped her obtain a fresh start in Paris as well as introduce her to an editor who would take care of presenting her new venture to society where she might find wealthy female students from good Parisian families who would pay a handsome fee to study with Strepponi. According to Servadio:

Signora Strepponi, through her teaching, will propagate in Parisian society a style and a method that are in harmony with our taste and our organization. We are convinced that this winter this eminent artist will be the arbiter of fashion in the great Parisian world; her courses will be held at her house, twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday, from three to five. There will be eight courses a month at the price of 40 francs. For three months 100 francs. (Servadio 102-3)

There could be no better publicity. She gave Parisian concerts that introduced the new Italian style of singing which was to become lo stile Verdiano. She had success and laud from two concerts given at the Salle Henri Herz which was frequented by such “eminent figures as Hugo, Lamartine, Delacroix, Auber, René de Chateaubriand, Théophile Gautier, Charles Sainte-Beuve, Ingres, Dumas père, George Sand and Alfred de Musset” (Servadio 103). She was well received and her reviews, set up by Verdi’s French editor friend, were done so as to assist her in attracting daughters of wealthy French families for students.

Strepponi’s move to Paris was done specifically so that she could re-create herself as a vocal instructor. She had left behind her insane schedules that sustained her bohemian lifestyle. It had taken its toll and she had also been socially stigmatized as a result. This is a similarity she has in common with la vrai dame aux camélias which is perpetuated in the fictional works. Both the real lady of the camellias and the fictional persona portrayed in Dumas fils’s work and eventually in Verdi’s opera lived whirlwind lives, and kept daunting schedules. Violetta Valéry
sings of her choice to live a “crazy” life—*follia, follia!* [folly, folly]—always free. This is
Violetta’s promise to herself which stems from her knowledge of impending death by
suffocation (consumption is just that). But Strepponi does not yet have consumption, whereas
Marguerite/Violetta is already doomed to die from the disease. Alphonsine/Marie Duplessis was
also condemned to die from the consumption.

Likewise, the courtesan Alphonsine/Marie Duplessis similarly “burned the candle at both
ends” in order to live as full a life as possible before her impending death. The real life
Alphonsine/Marie Duplessis did not stop to “contemplate” the camellia flowers because she
knew her time was short upon this earth and she lived it as fast as she could in the little time she
had.

Her death was immortalized in Dumas *fils*’s novel and drama which became a sort of
epitaph to her uniqueness. Reflecting Dumas *fils*’s desire to have Alphonsine live again in his
roman à clef version of the truth, Dumas *fils*’s Marguerite Gautier wants to live once she realizes
that Armand Duval loves her and wants to take care of her. It is the bourgeois father who
suppresses that dream and forces Marguerite back into the life of a courtesan. (This narrative is
the same thread that will run through Verdi’s and Strepponi’s lives) and is a reaction to
intrusiveness. The heroine, Marguerite, returns to a luxurious lifestyle sacrificing her own
happiness in lieu of his and his sister’s happinesses. This move kills her because her
consumption is re-activated. The fictional hero, Alexandre Duval, does not return in time in the
novel or drama, but in Verdi’s version, Alfredo Germont does return in time to hold his beloved
in his arms as she dies. (Verdi’s opera has to have a concise conclusion in order for the work to
end as the standard period Italian opera model dictates). In the Dumas *fils*’s version, the corpse is
dug up so he can identify her one final time, and have her re-buried. (The actual grave of Alphonsine Plessis is in the Cimetière de Montmartre, Plot Division 15).

In reality, Dumas was not at Alphonsine’s death or funeral but he may have gotten to the auction of her things for he writes of it in his poetry book—Pêchés de jeunesse. The poem “M. D.” is the last work in the collection, written in February 1847 and mentions the name Marie. Those who knew her recognized that the poem was about her death. The book of poems places Dumas in Spain and tells the story of Dumas fils’s return to Paris to learn of Marie’s earlier death. In the poem “M. D.” he goes to visit the apartment reminiscing of the joyous hours they spent together there; at the door, near the now silent piano, and in the bedroom with the unaffected clock that ticks on. It is terribly morbid.

The poem brings him to write the novel which he completes a year later in 1848. His choice of genre, roman à clef, allows Dumas to re-write the story like he would have preferred it had occurred. More romantic, but mixed with some of the realisms of the actual narrative, Dumas creates a sensational work which forces society to place a face and feelings to a courtesan they had left to die abandoned and forsaken. (The poem had told the story of one man alone who closed her eyes and only two friends at her burial).

Alphonsine died in real life, as did her fictional counterpart. Violetta in Verdi’s La traviata dies as well, but Giuseppina Strepponi does not die until the advanced age of eighty-two—yet an early death of sorts she did suffer—that of her singing career. Both real courtesans were on a fast track to death. Strepponi changed her lifestyle, sacrificed her career, and saved her physical self while Duplessis was unable to stop living the luxurious life or arrest her disease and eventually succumbed to it.
Another important theme in this narrative is sacrifice and plays an important part in the moral of Dumas fils’s story. The femme fatale must die and Marguerite’s sacrifice of her own happiness and life for that of Armand’s is key to this myth. Both the real and the fictional characters were pushed by forces and circumstances beyond their control. Alphonsine’s celebrated beauty burned like a falling star and the fictional counterparts echoed her demise. Giuseppina Strepponi’s sacrifice will prove beneficial for her in the end. She does not suffer the tribulations and early death of the Parisian courtesan character—either real or fictional. Verdi’s opera is a warning to those who would demand he not rehabilitate Strepponi. Verdi becomes Strepponi’s rescuer. She is saved through love.

The two real traviatas, Marie Duplessis and Giuseppina Strepponi, are celebrated in death as each has a grave that is visited by many who want to pay tribute to their memory. Alphonsine Plessis’s grave has flowers put on it daily by the Camellia Club, and often by other groups or those who wish to remember her myth. Giuseppina Strepponi Verdi is buried next to Giuseppe Verdi in the courtyard of the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti in Milan, a senior citizen’s home for poor musicians who have nowhere else to retire to after their careers are finished. Verdi built this retirement home specifically for them, leaving much of his money to take care of fellow musicians. Joining them is also Margherita Barezzi Verdi. The conclusion is that even in death there are those who are venerated and honored, immortalizing the myth even today.

**Verdi and Strepponi Liaison**

Strepponi did not meet Verdi for the first time during the Nabucco rehearsals. She had met him several years earlier when he had presented Oberto to her in a piano hearing at her apartment in Milan. Upon learning Verdi’s music, she came to like it and had spoken favorably about it, as Verdi later recalled. She was apparently overheard by Merelli, the La Scala
impresario, while talking to Ronconi backstage at La Scala about the good music Verdi had written. Even so, she stopped rehearsing *Oberto* because she thought she was being exploited by both Merelli and Lanari and therefore did not sing its world première. Verdi writes:

_Finita la stagione un bel mattino venne un servitore del Teatro dicendomi che Merelli volva parlargi. Io non aveva mai parlato a Merelli e credeva vi fosse sbaglio nell’invito, nonstante andai. Merelli mi disse queste precise parole: “Ho sentito parlare bene dalla Strepponi a da Ronconi della vostra opera, se volete adattarla per la Marini, Salvi, ecc... io ve la faro eseguire senza nissuna vostra spesa. Se l’opera piacerà la venderemo e divideremo il ricavato, se non piacerà tanto peggio per voi e per me!” [One fine morning, after the end of the season, a messenger from the theatre came to say that Merelli wanted to speak to me. I had never spoken to Merelli and believed the invitation was a mistake. Nevertheless I went. Merelli said these very words: ‘I have heard la Strepponi and Ronconi speak well of your opera. If you want to adapt it for la Marini, Salvi, etc., I will have it performed without any expense to you. If the opera is successful, we will sell it and share the receipts; if it fails, so much the worse for you and for me!’] (Verdi in Oberdorfer 23-24 Trans. Sasson)

In a way, in was Strepponi who discovered Verdi and Merelli who profited.

Concerning the soprano’s première in Verdi’s *Nabucco*, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz writes:

“Because of the stars’ reputations, expectations ran high for that season at la Scala, where it seemed that Verdi’s promise was about to be fulfilled” (89). At that point Strepponi, even though no longer singing at her peak quality, was still a celebrated soprano and it was that lingering celebrity that sold tickets. So, by the time she was scheduled to sing Verdi’s *Nabucco* at La Scala, it was hoped that her vocal problems had been solved and she would return “to the boards” in working shape. Notwithstanding the risk, Merelli, the general manager, knew that he could bank on her celebrity to bring in ticket purchases just as is still done today at La Scala. By the time she started to work with Verdi in rehearsals for *Nabucco*, she was considered famous, but her voice had been overworked for years. She was in possession of a failing instrument and her fall had begun. Her public had judged her lacking.

The Madonna/Whore duality is applicable because of the moral framework in which her celebrity is cast, but in Strepponi’s case there appears to be no use of deception. She is honest in
her letters to Lanari about her depression and her situation, and perhaps only Cirelli is deceived somewhat with one child, but even this is not made clear in any letters. It is mostly conjecture on the parts of biographers. Nonetheless it is Cirelli who continues to be a supportive friend and helps her obtain some much needed certificates from doctors via Merelli as requested by Lanari.

Due to the several back-to-back pregnancies and deliveries as well as one miscarriage Strepponi was financially and emotionally exhausted. Depression had mounted for her due to the decision to abandon several of her infant children in order to keep her promise to perform a certain number of operas per week for Lanari, Merelli, or Cirelli. Her insistence on singing the Nabucco rehearsals and performances so she could keep earning money (even though she was suffering from extreme vocal fatigue) caused the complete collapse of the voice. The main concern which hung over the rehearsals was the strain that Strepponi’s voice clearly bore in singing Abigaille in Nabucco. Although the voice did not fail her during the première, it came close to doing just that. It is a certainty that singing the role of Abigaille contributed to the destruction of her voice.

It is at the lowest ebb of her fortunes and at the very moment that led to Verdi’s first great triumph that inaugurated the beginning of their working seriously together. Strepponi was reduced almost to despair and her celebrity was extinguishing. Yet their collaboration portends well for both of them. Verdi and Strepponi strike up a strong friendship during the rehearsals of Nabuccodonosor at La Scala. As a seasoned opera singer her knowledge in contract dealing helps Verdi when he is offered an “open” contract requesting that he compose another opera for the next season at La Scala. Her suggestions help him obtain a high paying contract and likely cement the friendship. Pougin wrote on Strepponi’s contribution:

La sera della rappresentazione, Merelli lo fece chiamare nel proprio ufficio e gli comunicò che l’amministrazione della Scala aveva deciso di affidare a lui
The fact that Verdi asked for Strepponi’s advice on a contractual matter gives further proof of Verdi’s political reliance on Strepponi and the influential power of her celebrity. Strepponi did sing all eight performances of Verdi’s Nabucco despite her poor vocal health but after the première she did not sing well. Her star had all but extinguished.

Strepponi’s importance to Verdi was for political reasons, but their friendship was built upon his rise and her fall. His compassion for the loss of her voice which is caused by her need to sing in order to continue the upkeep of her family and children was also due to her loyalty and insistence in singing the role of Abigaille in Nabucco for Verdi. “Strepponi had been singing almost steadily for seven years, taking time off only for the births of three (or four) children. . . . Ill—indeed, on the brink of collapse—she faced an exceedingly taxing leading role, Abigaille, at a time when it was by no means certain that she could get through it” (Phillips-Matz 115).

After Nabucco went to Vienna for performances with another soprano, Verdi returned to Italy wanting Strepponi to perform it in the Nouvo Teatro Ducale di Parma. However, he needed
to be sure that she could sing well, so even after a full year’s rest, he recommended she be seen by his doctor, Tommasini. As Servadio notes, Strepponi wrote, criticizing the recommended doctor of Verdi: “Gargling helped to give a tonic to the upper part of the throat . . . but it brought no relief to the area where I obstinately feel weakness and hoarseness. . . .” (89). Nonetheless, she must have had reasonable success with the cure because her health did improve enough for her to sing Abigaille again, but then toward the end of the ‘continuation’ she was once again having some difficulties vocally.

Strepponi’s voice did eventually give out from overwork and abuse and she made the decision to relocate to Paris with Verdi’s letter of recommendation in hand to initiate a new career as a vocal instructor. This move was the right one for her since it put a difficult past behind her and opened new doors with ripe financial opportunities to assist her in the care of her family and children. The move took her from a more provincial city, Milan, to a great metropolis, Paris where her international and cosmopolitan experiences could prove beneficial to her future.

There is, in both Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias and consequently in Verdi’s La traviata a definite demarcation between the many differences of urban and rural life and this theme carries significant weight in the telling of the narratives. Furthermore, it links the Verdi story autobiofictionally to the two narratives. Urban Paris represented a whirlwind life of parties, plays, operas, ballets, balls, masquerades, casino gambling, and dinners at restaurants, and men from the upper echelons of society crossed back and forth into the demi-monde. All of these endless possibilities of choice embraced late night hours and carousing until dawn. Urban life was that life from which most courtesans eventually ran away because at the end of their careers, if they had survived that lifestyle, they sought a place, either in the country or even in a foreign
country, where they could retire and live a quiet life without being recognized or persecuted as takes place in Sand’s *Isidora*.

Strepponi ran away from a less cosmopolitan city, Milan, to retreat to a new career in a city where she could sell her skills as a singing teacher—Paris. She was not retiring at all. She was simply switching careers, but she remained in the same field—music. Paris offered her the perfect combination and surroundings to be successful in this new endeavor.

Verdi at the time was the young genius on his way up; Strepponi, the *diva* beginning her slide downward. While she set up her new life, Verdi was writing furiously and giving operas in Milan and throughout Italy. Both were building financial futures and they were tasting success. While Strepponi’s life was strictly urban and firmly ensconced in Paris, Verdi remained firmly attached to his *paesano* roots and his ancestral home town in rural northern Italy even though his work with opera kept him tied to the big cities. When Verdi set off for his next engagement, he and Muzio went to London for the rehearsals of *I Masnadieri*, an opera commissioned for the London season. “*Che caos che è Londra! Che confusione! Parigi è un nulla in paragone. Gente che grida, poveri che piangono, vapori che volano, uomini a cavallo, in carrozza, a piedi, e tutti urlano come dannati*” [What chaos is London! What confusion! Paris is nothing in comparison. People who shout, paupers who cry, vapors that fly, men on horseback, in carriage, on foot, and all scream like the damned] (Verdi in Mila 286 Trans. Sasson). After a brief stay in London, a city he loathed for its dirtiness, loud noises, and shouts, as well as for the cultural differences that he did not appreciate, Verdi and Emanuele Muzio left and on 27 July 1846 arrived in Paris. This letter to Luigi Toccagni gives sufficient example of how he felt in urban Paris:

*Che volete che vi dica di me? Che sono sempre lo stesso, sempre malcontento di tutto; quando ho la fortuna propizia la desidero contraria, quando l’ho contraria la voglio propizia, quando sono a Milano vorrei essere a Parigi, ora che sono a Parigi vorrei essere . . . dove?. . . non so . . . nel mondo della luna. Del resto qui godo tutta la libertà*
individuale, che ho sempre desiderato senza poterla mai ottenere. Non vado da nissuno, nissuno mi conosce e non ho il dispetto di vedermi segnato a ditto come nelle città d’Italia [What can I say to you? That I am still the same, still dissatisfied with everything; ... when I am in Milan, I would like to be in Paris. Now that I am in Paris, I would like to be ... where? ... I don’t know ... on the moon. After all, here I enjoy the individual freedom that I have always desired and never been able to attain. I visit no-one, no-one knows me and I do not have the inconvenience of being pointed out, as in so many cities in Italy]. (Verdi in Mila 313 Trans. Sasson)

Verdi talks of aloneness. It is his first reaction to Paris. It is only in a big urban city that feelings of separateness can be experienced one moment and then connectedness the next. One can be caught up in the whirlwind of social commitments, or one can be as alone as a monk in a cell. It is the very anonymous feeling that Paris can afford a person which Verdi expresses in this letter. The same feeling of solitude amid a crowd is reflected in Violetta’s words of the Act 1 soprano aria of La traviata: “sola, abbandonata, in questo popoloso deserto che appellano Parigi ... che spero più ... [Alone, abandoned, in this populated desert they call Paris ... what more can I hope for ...]. (Piave 102-03, Trans. Sasson)

Soon, Verdi meets up with Strepponi. Verdi’s apartment was near Strepponi’s—in fact it was around the corner. “Verdi stayed on, living in an apartment at rue Saint-Georges, around the corner from Strepponi’s apartment” (Phillips-Matz 220) at 13 rue de la Victoire. It seems that his first negative impressions of Paris and his feelings of boredom slowly melt away for before long Strepponi and Verdi were frequenting each other. He sent his copyist, Muzio, back to Milan for business which gave Strepponi and Verdi the opportunity to become closer friends. He appears to take advantage of the freedoms found in being incognito in a large city such as Paris. This must have appealed to him because his visit lasts, off and on from spring of 1848 to summer of 1849. The biographers Mila, Walker, Servadio, and Phillips-Matz all concur with the same timeline.
With Muzio temporarily gone, Strepponi introduced Verdi to her friends, society, theatrical people, and helped him write letters, taking on the role of secretary that Muzio had left empty. By October 1847 he wrote Piave that “life with an intelligent woman such as Giuseppina suited him” (114). Strepponi was cultured, housewifely, and had good taste in literature and music. She was accomplished, connected, and had decorated her apartment with elegance. She dressed and spoke well with a spirited sense of humor, her wit became the ideal remedy for Verdi’s periods of irrational grudges and pouts. They were two ex-patriots in another country whose commonalities were a further bond beyond that of their music.

Verdi wanted to share his cosmopolitan Parisian experiences with his first wife’s father who he loved dearly. He surely also wanted to re-acquaint Barezzi to Strepponi who he had met in Milan during the *Nabucco* performances. It was sometime around this period that Verdi invited his friend and patron of many years in Busseto, to come to Paris for a visit. Barezzi found Strepponi playing the role of the lady of the house who mingled with guests, hosted dinner parties, and introduced him to her friends. Cazzulani writes:

*Barezzi lo raggiunse, alla fine dell'inverno per assistere alla "prima" di Jerusalem e conobbe Giuseppina. Sapeva di lei che era una donna dal passato discusso, che aveva abbandonato più di un figlio per seguire gli amanti e che era partita per la Francia allo scopo di metter fine ad una vita dissoluta. Adesso si era attaccata a Verdi e Barezzi temeva per lui, non immaginava certo di trovare nella Strepponi una donna comportamento signorile e riservato già introdotta nell’ambiente artistico francese nel quale faceva da guida a Verdi.* [Barezzi reached him, at the end of winter to see the 'opening' of *Jerusalem* and met Giuseppina. He knew she was a woman with a discussed past, who had left more than one child to follow lovers and that she left for France in order to put an end to a life of debauchery. Now she was attached to Verdi and Barezzi feared for him, he certainly never imagined to find in Strepponi a gentelwoman’s reserved behavior already introduced into the French artistic ambience in which she acted as guide to Verdi]. (Cazzulani 65-66 Trans. Sasson)

His discovery of Strepponi’s qualities and his suspected surprise is not dissimilar to Germont’s reaction to Violetta’s winning qualities portrayed in act 2 of *La traviata*. Barezzi plays an important role in the real life of Verdi and Strepponi for he was a merchant with bourgeois
morals and attitudes, and his opinions and judgment carried a lot of weight with Verdi. He is not unlike the character of M. Duval in Dumas fils’s *La Dame aux camélias*, at least as far as a substitute father image in Verdi’s mind.

It is the point of this chapter to substantiate that Barezzi acted inadvertently as a catalyst in Verdi’s decision to compose *La traviata*. During his trip to Paris, Barezzi saw how Strepponi surrounded Verdi with useful and interesting people. By now the couple’s two slightly different addresses had become the same and gossip and letters flew in all directions, back and forth from Paris to Milan and Busseto. Cazzulani writes in her biography of Giuseppina Strepponi: “*Gli amici di Milano si stupivano che gli mancasse la voglia di tornare in Italia e infatti, con Giuseppina, Verdi a Parigi stave bene, solo la nostalgia del borgo natìo lo tormentava di tanto in tanto . . .*” [Friends from Milano were shocked that he had no desire to return to Italy and in fact, with Giuseppina, Verdi was fine in Paris, only homesickness for his home town upset him from time to time . . . ](65). The provinciality of *bussetani* could not tolerate the idea of ‘their’ Verdi living with such a woman as Strepponi . . . she was notorious and she clearly must have seduced him and would do him no good. They had already laid a sentence upon her of “guilty as charged” and that likelihood must have ruminated in Verdi’s head.

Verdi had not had a comfortable home since his wife and children had died. While living in Paris, they felt free to be together and they were happy. Moreover, unlike provincial Italy, cosmopolitan Paris gave no mind to their relationship and accepted them as a couple. They frequented the opera and some parties in Paris for with his work in the theater, appearances at parties and opening night gala parties were expected and reaped large rewards through contacts created and maintained. During Verdi’s stay in Paris, Strepponi realized that Verdi needed more peace and quiet for composition. Cazzulani writes:
It was impossible for Verdi to compose in similar conditions, exacerbated by a sweltering heat, so Giuseppina persuaded him to find refuge in the countryside.

She persuaded him to summer in the suburbs of Paris, in Passy. Her solution to his problem was to locate a peaceful place where he could work and compose. That also solved her problem of wanting to get away from society and the reality that she could not live the life of the opera diva ever again, so country life offered her a respite from those reminders and memories. Country life, therefore, suited them both. Servadio also comments on the importance of the country to the couple:

In fact Giuseppina urged him to move to the country, the fresh air would have done him good. ‘Many years ago, loving the country very much,’ Giuseppina recalled, ‘I asked Verdi insistently to leave Paris, to live beneath the pavilion of the open sky and enjoy the healthy air and light that give as much vigour to the body as they do calm and serenity to the mind. Verdi. . . . after much pleading agreed to take a small house not far from Paris. . . .At the end of the month, Verdi had no wish to go back to live in the city; why not stay there?’ For Peppina that would be fatal, who would ever come all the way to Passy for singing lessons? It was a two-hour carriage drive at least. But even so, Giuseppina, tired of the social whirl and the endless stream of visitors, had revealed to him the pleasure of seclusion.

It was good for their health and it served another purpose, it made her irreplaceable to him. The country offered isolation for his composition and for her peace of mind and it also offered an invisibility from society which was more convenient for the now famous Verdi and the once celebrated Strepponi. They went to live in the open country of Passy; it was a situation very similar to that described in the second act of La traviata. They took a place in the shady streets of the Ranelagh, for a whole month; it was then that this love for the countryside was born in Verdi that was never to leave him. The country denoted freedom, the right to solitude, and communication with nature. It was in Passy that Strepponi realized her true goal; she became Verdi’s indispensable companion, his mistress, his secretary, and his friend.
stimulating companion for a person of Verdi’s intelligence. This experience influenced greatly the future for they eventually found it comforting to take up country living. Summering near Bougival, in Passy, like Marguerite and Armand in the *La Dame aux camélias* novel and adapted drama is a link to the Dumas novel—that of city versus country.

The couple summering in the suburbs of Paris has similarities to the country stay described in *La Dame aux camélias* which was so beneficial to Marguerite’s health and to the lover’s relationship. (Summer in Bougival was healthy for both Verdi and Strepponi). Dumas writes about the change Marguerite made while they were together in Bougival:

*Elle avait rompu avec ses amies comme avec ses habitudes, avec son langage comme avec les dépenses d’autrefois. Quand on nous voyait sortir de la maison pour aller faire une promenade dans un charmant petit bateau que j’avais acheté, on n’eût jamais cru que cette femme vêtue d’une robe blanche, couverte d’un grand chapeau de paille, et portant sur son bras la simple pelisse de soie qui devait la garantir de la fraîcheur de l’eau, était cette Marguerite Gauthier qui, quatre mois auparavant, faisait bruit de son luxe et de ses scandales.* [She had broken equally with her friends and with her ways, with her words and with her extravagances. Anyone who had seen us leaving the house to go to the river in the charming little boat which I had bought would never have believed that the woman dressed in white, wearing a straw hat, and carrying on her arm a little silk pelisse to protect her against the damp of the river, was the Marguerite Gautier who, only four months ago, had been the talk of the town for the luxury and scandal of her existence]. (Dumas 162 and 136-37)

While in the country, Armand decides to ask his father’s permission to marry Marguerite and make her a permanent part of his family. The father’s role in the opera and the novel are replacements for conservative bourgeoisie attitudes. *La traviata* looks at the courtesan’s social dilemma because of celebrity from both an insider’s experience (that of the courtesan) and of a specific outsider’s viewpoint, that of the bourgeoisie. The focus of Verdi’s opera points out the condemnatory attitude of the bourgeoisie and the error in that position. Verdi’s opera seeks to point out the hypocrisy and judgmentalism of a bourgeois society which allowed no room for the forgiveness of a fallen or public woman. Dumas *fils’s* novel instead takes the view of a provincial father who is protecting his wayward son from a fall while at the same time working
to protect his family name and fortune. M. Duval’s bourgeois hypocrisy is made clear as he talks about accepting the fact that the son can have and mistress and take care of her, but he must never marry her or give her the family name.

Instead, Verdi’s situation is different. Whereas Armand’s father has been told that his son is transferring his wealth to Marguerite and intervenes, Verdi does not need to ask permission to purchase homes in and near Busseto. Verdi’s independence is a major difference and strongly affects the manner in which he uses the Dumas fils’s text in the creation of La traviata.

In the novel the father’s opinions are voiced to Armand, not Marguerite. (The reader finds out that M. Duval visited Marguerite in the country, but we are never privy to the actual conversation. We only have the fact of his visit and the result of her choice to leave Armand expressed in a letter written in her journal at the end of the novel, which is left for Armand to read if he should arrive after her death) In Verdi’s opera, the father’s opinions are voiced directly to Violetta. The audience listens to their dialogue, making his affront far more Machiavellian. How could Violetta deny his request? If she had, it would show her as a hard-hearted, grasping courtesan. By accepting M. Duval’s request to give Armand up, Marguerite is demonstrating her love for Armand. She is sacrificing herself, literally, for she will die when she takes up the courtesan profession again. That sacrifice is the essence of the Violetta that Verdi wants to portray as a reflection of the rehabilitated and redeemed courtesan. Verdi’s courtesan is his mistress, Giuseppina. That is why Verdi allows the audience to here the dialogue vis-à-vis the singing, so that the audience can experience Germont’s (Duval’s) manipulation. He is stressing the bourgeois need for propriety and family values, but with the final result being a marriage where reputations are maintained.
Sometime during this period, Verdi purchased, via Barezzi’s assistance at home, a small rural farm near Piacenza where he placed his parents as caretakers. He also purchased a palazzo in the heart of the little, rural country town of Busseto with the money he had earned from his work and set to work renovating with money he had borrowed. He was wisely investing his hard-earned money in land—his peasant blood pushing him back to his origins. Owning land to Verdi meant something tangible, just as it did to any country peasant.

The opposition between rural and urban represents, in spatial terms, the opposition between traditional and progressive values, or the rural is represented at least as a place where progressive values can be practiced without traditional criticisms. Life in Passy influenced Verdi so much so that he decided to move to the townhouse in provincial Busseto where he wanted them to take up residence. Strepponi sacrificed all that she had built in Paris to follow him at his request to Busseto. When the renovation was complete they returned to Italy to take up residence and live. Compared to Paris, Busseto was country living. It was also like bringing home the woman to meet the parents… the bussetani taking on the role of the parents. Verdi had not counted on the town’s reaction to his new companion. Servadio writes that “at night, the arcades of Busseto echoed with the insults directed at Giuseppina; all the town’s malice was devoted to mocking and ostracizing her, with the thought of getting rid of her” (129). Verdi was accused of being an atheist based upon reactions left from a previous disagreement with the town priest at a young age. Walker writes:

At Busseto, Verdi had enthusiastic followers and well-wishers, but also enemies. The clerical party had not forgotten their discomfiture in the past. Verdi’s action in living openly with Giuseppina now gave them new grounds for umbrage, and genuinely shocked and distressed many pious and narrow-minded people. Even among the well-wishers there were those who considered Verdi insufficiently recognizant towards Busseto and the Bussetani who had ‘made’ him, as they liked to think. Giuseppina’s identity could not long be concealed. A woman of the theater, about whom rumour had been rife, come to live among them—it was too much. Giuseppina was made aware of
their hostility when she went out. In the church she was left alone on her bench, shunned as though she had the plague. Verdi could treat the Bussetani with contempt, but Giuseppina . . . suffered greatly. (Walker 197-98)

Insults were shouted directly at them while they were walking in the Busseto streets by those who were offended at their open love relationship. His own parents and his in-laws were also a part of this abuse.

It was around this time that an anonymous publication appeared, recounting the story of Peppina’s various children; it was on sale in the Duchy of Parma. Almost every night vulgar songs resounded in the bars, stones were flung at their windows, together with wounding insults. Busseto was an inferno. Apart from Muzio and occasionally Piave, they saw no-one, not even Verdi’s parents: Carlo Verdi who had been hostile towards Peppina, was considered a leader of the ‘enemy’ faction. (Servadio 133)

Isolation and invisibility are two themes that occur over and over in courtesan narrative. In Strepponi’s case, her self-removal from Italy to Paris was a way of isolating herself and becoming invisible to those in Italy who were aware of her bad choices and difficult situations, (not dissimilar to Isidora’s retreat from Paris to Italy in retirement). When Verdi brought her back to Italy, he could not have foreseen the horrible reaction his own townsfolk had against their living arrangements. He also could not have imagined that his family and his adopted family, the Barezzis would have such poor reactions to his choice in a companion. Verdi, the reactionary, who had learned by frequenting the Countess Clara Maffei’s salon in Milano that his works could incite strong reactions in the La Scala audience, tried to find a suitable subject to use which would work for the topic of progressive, liberal love which was sweeping Europe and was a current fad countering the conservative bourgeois viewpoint on marriage.

Budden writes:

_Si ricorderà come, in una lettera del 1851 a Cammarano, Verdi parlassi di ‘un altro soggetto semplice e affetuoso’ che poteva sostituire Il Trovatore se questo non fosse piaciuto al librettista... Per gli anni Cinquanta, la vicenda di Margherita Gautier era assai più ardire a scandalosa che non ‘tenera a affetuosa’, e possiamo essere certi che avrebbe gettato Cammarano nel panico. [One will remember, in a letter from 1851 to Cammarano, Verdi spoke of another simple and affectionate subject that could substitute_
Il Trovatore if this one did not please the librettist... For the 1850s, the event of Marguerite Gautier was so much more daring and scandalous, and we can be certain that it would have thrown Cammarano into a panic]. (Budden 127)

In using La Dame aux camélias for his next opera text Verdi was countering, through the medium of opera, the extreme bias that the couple had endured from his hometown citizens while living in the Palazzo Cavalli in Busseto on Via Roma, (originally known as Palazzo Dordoni and now known as Palazzo Orlandi). Composing La traviata was yet a further proof that Verdi would wish to champion absolution of stigma in the singer/courtesan, and therefore Strepponi, with his decision to set La Dame aux camélias to music. Cazzulani writes:

Videro poi la carrozza fermarsi davanti a palazzo Dordoni a il maestro spingere in fretta davanti a sé la misteriosa signora e il portone chiudersi alle loro spalle . . . In breve il paese fu al corrente: quella signora era una cantante dalla vita sregolata che aveva irretito il maestro, forse per denaro. Si mossero tutti amici e nemici: Verdi era il figlio prediletto della loro terra, a questa sua imprudente e disinvolta condotta era una sfida all’ambiente e alle tradizioni in cui continuavano a credere, nonostante la diffusa vocazione aniti-clericale. Certamente Verdi e Giuseppina non avevano misurato abbastanza l’abissale distanza fra l’ambiente di Parigi che permetteva qualsiasi tipo di rapporto, e l’intolleranza di un piccolo centro in cui la curiosità diventava ossessione e il pettegolezzo maldicenza. [Then they saw the carriage stop in front of the palace Dordoni and the maestro hurriedly push ahead the mysterious lady and the door shut behind them . . . In short, the country was aware: that lady was a singer from the demi-monde who had ensnared the maestro, perhaps for money. They moved, friends and enemies alike: Verdi was the favorite son of their region, and his reckless and uninhibited behavior was a challenge to the environment and the traditions in which they continued to believe, despite the widespread anti-church work. Certainly Verdi and Giuseppina had not measured the abysmal distance between the Paris environment that allowed any kind of relationship, and the intolerance of a small town where curiosity became obsession and gossip backbiting]. (69 Trans. Sasson)

Strepponi was stigmatized and then demonized from the very moment she arrived in Busseto. So was Verdi. After suffering persecution from his fellow bussetani, Verdi left his townhome and retired himself and Strepponi to the farm, Sant’Agata to avoid public reaction and isolate themselves from further abuses in the beginning of 1851. It is during this time that Phillips-Matz suggests something extraordinary.
According to Phillips-Matz, on 14 April 1851 a fourth child, “a baby girl was born to unidentified parents who had her delivered at nine-thirty that same night to the turnstile for abandoned babies at the Ospedale Maggiore in Cremona” (Phillips-Matz 289) would come to be named Santa Streppini, who was at first a ward of the Congragazione della Carità in Cremona, but assigned a false name of Santa Stropellini (290). Phillips-Matz suggests that the paperwork on this child hints at the possibility that she was Streponni’s and Verdi’s. She lived with the Uggeri’s (Marco Uggeri and Luigia Bassini) who were her foster parents and small landowners living on the farm called “La Rabbiosa” and some of the Bassinis lived only a few doors away from Verdi at Sant’Agata . . . a Bassani later worked in his garden. Phillips-Matz writes that Santa was assigned and lived with the Uggeris until she was fifteen. In 1865 the Uggeri’s daughter, Brigida, married Antonio Zilioli who had been brought up with the composer’s Verdi and Uttini cousins in Cerro. Santa was assigned to Brigida Uggeri and Zilioli. They continued to live at La Rabbiosa on the family land just at the edge of Verdi’s fields. Phillips-Matz further speculates that if Strepponi was pregnant, this could have been the cause of the upheaval in Verdi’s family life in 1850 and 1851 which shattered previously well established relationships and forced the composer to become estranged from the Barezzis. Her other children would have required clearances before marriage, and if they had wanted to marry, issues would be raised about where her children were, who was providing for them, and who “held the patria potestà over them” (291). Verdi’s profession fed off of gossip more than on pasta, and Verdi could not have risked a scandal that opened a door on Strepponi’s past and reflected on him. If they had wed, he would have to become her children’s step-father by the laws of the time. This was fertile ground for blackmail and as proof that Strepponi was possibly already being blackmailed, for previous indiscretions, Phillips-Matz states that the Zanobinis and Paglias in Florence sent letters
which triggered payments from her, as she remarked years after she had been sending them payments and favors for decades.

As for marriage, it was merely a question of Verdi’s freedom. As a wife, she would be entitled to go anywhere with him, but as a mistress she could be told to stay home as was often done. His refusal was a matter of dispute between them, and letters from Strepponi compare him to Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. “parmi potresti essere più carino e rinunziare alla parte di Dionigi, tiranno di Siracusa, perché già tu sei troppo generoso per segnare replicate sentenze d’esilio!” [It seems you could be kinder and renounce the part of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, because you are already too generous to sign repeated sentences of exile] (Strepponi in Oberdofer 42 Trans. Sasson). At Sant’Agata Strepponi was practically invisible, cloistered and hidden away like a nun. Even when she went out, getting in and out of carriages was done in an enclosed courtyard of Palazzo Cavalli and Sant’Agata. She road with the blinds closed like most did at that time. As long as she remained inside the house, and was not seen out in public in Busseto, Verdi was safe, cloistered behind his four walls. She would end in designating these years as prison years and Verdi would call them his galley years. Verdi’s rehabilitation of Strepponi to re-create Peppina, re-building her new image from the ashes of the previous courtesan singer into the mistress and eventual wife of Verdi demanded sacrifice—a sacrifice made from love. This sacrifice was not unlike the sacrifice made by the fictional courtesan in La Dame aux camélias and the other fictional courtesan of Verdi’s own La traviata.

Male dominant society saw celebrity as a problem and the bourgeois social class had in place a sex-gender system of social and economic convention. The new and progressive look at male/female relationships based upon love rather than economic security was being put forth by the romantic and bohemian movement in Paris. The courtesan was in herself an implicit critique
of the bourgeois sex-gender system that existed for the *demi-monde* often despised this system as an oppressive system. If society pledged traditional values and familial institutions, then the courtesan would advocate untraditional values and *anti*-institutions and often did. Verdi had lived the conventional familial life and had lost both children and his wife to illness and death. He was undoubtedly fearful of such a devastating loss again and commitment to Strepponi was a difficult thing for him for many years. Living the untraditional, modern and progressive life of the bohemian musician proved to be less difficult for him to endure and he relished the idea of continuing along those lines. The negative experiences he had to endure in Busseto sculpted in stone his reaction against marriage for many years. The *busetani* and Verdi’s family pushed the stubborn Verdi closer to Strepponi—just what they had hoped not to do.

This part of their history happened during a great upheaval in the lives of Verdi, Strepponi, and the Barezzis falling between December 1850 and the end of 1851. Phillips-Matz writes that “it is not surprising that the composer felt as if he had been drained of half his blood, as he confided to Piave just twenty days before Santa Strepponi was left in the turnstile of the Cremona hospital” (294). She found a letter written 25 March 1851 in the Morgan Library in which Verdi wrote to his librettist about the “dreadful fork in the road just one day after the baby was abandoned”.

Hypocrisy found within the family circle is another narrative thread found in *La Dame aux camélias*, *La traviata*, and Verdi’s and Strepponi’s real lives. Their reactions to hypocrisy ties strongly into the city vs. country theme found in *La Dame aux camélias* and later in *La traviata* in its representation of escape from social intolerance. Verdi was not a man who took lightly to people nosing around in his business as he states here:

*Ella vive in un paese che ha il malvezzo di intricarsi spesso degli affari altrui, e disapprovare tutto quello che non è conforme alle sue idee; io ho per abitudine di non*
This segment of a letter written in response to one from Barezzi clearly indicates that Verdi did not like intrusive people. Furthermore, they wanted to continue the life they had begun together in Paris, but unfortunately, Verdi’s own townsmen had thwarted their combined dreams. The meddlesome family and friends from Busseto had an enormous influence upon the relationship between Verdi and Strepponi, pushing him to defend her, and causing them much grief. Because living at Palazzo Dordoni had become unbearable, Verdi moved them to Sant’Agata for a brief period before they decided to return to Paris. In moving back to Paris, Verdi sacrificed his love of farming. Strepponi once wrote of Verdi’s country gusto to Léon Escudier:

Il suo amore per la campagna è diventato mania, follia, furore, tutto ciò che volete di più esagerato. Si alza all’alba per andare ad esaminare il grano, il mais, la vigna ecc. Per fortuna i nostri gusti per questo tipo di vita coincidono, eccetto in materia di alba, che egli ama vedere alzato e vestito ed io dal mio letto [His love of the countryside has become mania, madness, fury, all that is most exaggerated. He gets up at dawn to go examine the wheat, the corn, the vineyard etc. Thankfully our tastes for this kind of life are the same, except in matters of dawn, which he likes to see when up and dressed and I from my bed]. (Cazzulani 84 Trans. Sasson)

Even with this craze Verdi had for the country life and farming, something forced the couple to flee Sant’Agata for Paris. They had only returned from Busseto to Paris for a few weeks, having sneaked off without telling anyone of their departure, when Verdi received a cold and scathing letter from his father-in-law, Barezzi. This letter is an incentive for Verdi that causes him, along with the experience of seeing the Dumas drama of La Dame aux camélia, to begin composing the music of the opera La traviata.
That letter from Barezzi to Verdi is lost, but Verdi’s response was kept for posterity at Sant’ Agata where it can be seen today. The letter from Barezzi is the stimulus for La traviata to be composed and there is strong link to the act 2 baritone/soprano duet and bourgeois respectability. In Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias the reaction of Armand’s father to the revelation that his son is living with and marrying Marguerite mirrors the presumed theme of the letter which came to Giuseppe Verdi from his ex-father-in-law, Barezzi, as is represented in the response in Verdi’s letter in defense of Strepponi. Here is a segment of that letter:

Ciò le ha svelato le mie opinioni, le mie azioni, la mia volontà, la mia vita, quasi direi, pubblica, e poiché siamo in via di fare rivelazioni non ho difficoltà alcuna alzare la cortina che vela i misteri racchiusi fra quattro mura, e dirle della mia vita di casa. Io non ho nulla da nascondere. In casa mia vive una Signora libera, indipendente, amante come me della vita solitaria, con una fortuna che la mette al coperto di ogni bisogno. Né io, né Lei a chiedere conto delle nostre azioni; ma d’altronde chi sa quali rapporti esistano tra noi? Quali gli affari? Quali i legami? Quali i diritti che io ho su Lei, ed Ella su di me? Chi sa s’Ella è o non è mia moglie? Ed in questo caso chi sa quali sono i motivi particolari, quali le idee da tacerne la pubblicazione? Chi sa se ciò sia bene o male? Perché non potrebbe anche essere un bene? E fosse anche un male, che ha il diritto di scagliarci l’anatema? Bensì io dirò che a Lei, in mia casa, si deve pari anzi maggior rispetto che non si deve a me, e che a nessuno è permesso mancarvi sotto qualsiasi titolo; che infine Ella ne ha tutto il diritto, e pel suo contegno, e pel suo spirito, e pel riguardi speciali a cui non manca mai verso gli altri. [Here I have revealed to you my views, my actions, my wishes, my public life—I might say. And since we are now revealing things, I have no difficulty whatever in raising the curtain that hides the mysteries shut behind my four walls, and telling you about my private life. I have nothing to hide. In my house, there lives a free, independent lady, a lover (as I am) of the solitary life, who has means that cover her every need. Neither she nor I owe any explanation for our actions to anyone at all; but on the other hand, who knows what relationship exists between us? What business connections? What ties? What rights I have over she, and she over me? Who knows whether she is or is not my wife? And if she were, who knows what particular motives, what reasons we have for not making that public? Who knows whether it is good or bad? And if it were bad, who has the right to hurl curses at us? But I will say that in my house she must command equal or even greater respect that I myself, and that no one is allowed to fall short in that for any reason whatsoever; that she really had every right [to that respect] because of her conduct, her spirit, and because of the special concern that she never fails to show others]. (Oberdorfer 118-19 Trans. Sasson)
It is this letter that was so full of both passion and self-defense that eventually persuaded Barezzi to reconcile with Strepponi. In analyzing this response, the reader can see that Verdi is defending Strepponi. When he writes: “In casa mia vive una Signora libera, indipendente, amante come me della vita solitaria, con una fortuna che la mette al coperto di ogni bisogno. Né io, né Lei a chichessia conto delle nostre azioni” [In my house, there lives a free, independent lady, a lover (as I am) of the solitary life, who has means that cover her every need. Neither she nor I owe any explanation for our actions to anyone at all] (Verdi in Oberdorfer, 118 Trans. Sasson). This phrase might ring familiarly to those who have seen La traviata for in the beginning of the act 2 baritone/soprano duet Violetta responds to an insult directed at her by Giorgio Germont after he has invaded her home uninvited. She sings: “Donna son io, signore, ed in mia casa, ch’io vi lasci assentite, più per voi, che per me” [I am a woman, sir, and in my own home. Please excuse me, more for your sake than for mine] (Piave in La traviata 133-134).

The couple had run away from the anguish and persecution they found hurled at them in Busseto by both friends and family and fled to Paris. This anguished family conflict was the backdrop against which Strepponi and Verdi saw Dumas fils’s play La Dame aux camélias which had premiered at the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Paris on 2 February 1852. They must have seen it during the month of February. It had only been two weeks since Verdi had written to his father-in-law with that scathing letter. According to Phillips-Matz: “It is a family tradition among the Verdi heirs that Verdi himself told his foster daughter (and heir) Maria Filomena that he began to write the music for what later became La traviata as soon as he left the theatre that night, without ever having seen either the novel or the printed drama” (Phillips-Matz in John 226).
Most of Verdi’s biographers, including Franco Abbiati, Julian Budden, Marcello Conati, Carlo Gatti, Aldo Oberdorfer, Gaia Servadio, Francis Toye, and Frank Walker have concluded that the letter to Barezzi signified an important moment in Verdi’s life, and La traviata is the culmination of that moment for it is the most intimate of Verdi’s operas. It is more like chamber music in quality than operatic in many regards as Budden remarks:

_In questa melodia dall’espressività così intimistica, con gli intervalli ravvicinati e la semplice scansione sillabica in cui ad ogni dilatazione si accompagna una ripetizione verbale, emerge in pieno, per la prima volta, la “tinta” o il “colorito” della Traviata. È il linguaggio tipico delle “composizioni da camera”, come notò Basevi cui si ricollegarono diversi studiosi successive che, in modo fuorviante, definirono La Traviata un “opera da camera”_ [In this melody of such intimate expressiveness, with its close intervals and the simple syllabic format in which each expansion is accompanied by a verbal repetition, the “tint” or “color” of Traviata emerges in full for the first time. It is the typical language of “chamber compositions,” as noted Basevi who along with several subsequent scholars, misleadingly, called La Traviata a “chamber opera”] (Budden 144-45).

Although Budden does not agree with Basevi in his conclusion about La traviata’s chamber music qualities, the opera, nonetheless in the most intimate of all Verdi’s operas, both before and after its creation. This quality gives the opera it’s romantic, yet realistic, quality which is so appealing to audiences over the centuries and its intimacy has allowed the work to become the vehicle for the myth promoting its perpetuity.

_Questa della Dame aux camélias era una scelta ardita ma molto azzeccata. Occorrerebbe ricordare che Wagner riteneva che i miti fossero i soggetti migliori per il drama musicale. La trama del romanzo di Dumas è essenzialmente un mito, universale benché moderno e benché abbia ricevuto dalla mediocrità la sua forma definitive, e nonostante affondi le proprie radici nell’esperienza personale._ [That of the Lady of the Camellias was a bold choice but very apt. It should be remembered that Wagner believed that myths were the best subjects for the musical drama. The plot of the Dumas novel is essentially a myth, universal though modern, even though it had received from mediocrity its definitive form, and in spite of sinking its roots in personal experience]. (Budden 129)

Obviously, the Dumas drama reached deep inside of Verdi and touched something that had been brewing which we know from Verdi’s scathing response from Paris on 21 January 1852 to Barezzi’s letter because Verdi’s descendants know he began planning musical motifs that same
night and musical creation is an outlet for emotions. Verdi, the genius, would have felt the connections between what he experienced when he saw _La Dame aux camélias_ in the Variety Theater and his own real life drama in Busseto. He had never wanted to. Budden writes:

> Verdi avrebbe potuto ricordare che dieci anni prima egli stesso rifiutato di musciar Marion Delorme di Hugo perché non gli piaceva l’idea di portare delle prostitute in scena. I tempi erano certamente mutate. [Verdi could have remembered that ten years before he himself had refused to put music to Hugo’s _Marion Delorme_ because he did not like the idea of bringing prostitutes to the stage. Times had certainly changed]. (Budden 129)

So why bring prostitutes to the stage now? What had changed? The final piece of this argument comes when we read the monologue, written by Dumas in which M. Duval paints a very narrow picture of “gentlemanly” conduct toward prostitutes while he attempts to persuade his son, Armand, to enjoy her company, even pay her what is owed from a man like him who frequents her, but not to marry her and give her all of his small inheritance.

The content of the M. Duval/Armand dialogue which Dumas wrote in chapter 25 of _La Dame aux camélias_ reverberates with what was most likely written in Barezzi’s letter to Verdi which prompted Verdi’s scathing response. Dumas portrays a hypocritical picture of how bourgeois society viewed the courtesan:

M. DUVAL. Je vais vous les expliquer. Que vous ayez une maîtresse, c’est fort bien; que vous la payiez comme un galant homme doit payer l’amour d’une fille entretenu, c’est on ne peut mieux; mais que vous oubliez les choses les plus saintes pour elle, que vous permettiez que le bruit de votre vie scandaleuse arrive jusqu’au fond de ma province et jette l’ombre d’une tache sur le nom honorable que je vous ai donné, voilà ce qui ne sera pas.

ARMAND. Permettez-moi de vous dire, mon père, que ceux qui vous ont ainsi renseigné sur mon compte étaient mal informés. Je suis l’amant de Mlle. Gautier, je vis avec elle, c’est la chose du monde le plus simple. Je ne donne pas à Mlle. Gautier le nom que j’ai reçu de vous, je dépense pour elle ce que mes moyens me permettent de dépenser, je n’ai pas fait une dette, et je ne me suis trouvé enfin dans aucune de ces positions qui autorisent un père à dire à son fils ce que vous venez de me dire . . .

M. DUVAL. Eh! Croyez-vous donc, monsieur, que la mission d’un homme d’honneur soit de convertir des courtisanes? Croyez-vous donc que Dieu ait donné ce but grotesque à la vie, et que le cœur ne doive pas avoir un autre enthousiasme que celui-là? Quelle sera la conclusion de cette cure merveilleuse, et que penserez-vous de ce que vous dites
aujourd’hui, quand vous aurez quarante ans? Vous rirez de votre amour, s’il vous est permis d’en rire encore, s’il n’a pas laissé de traces trop profondes dans votre passé. Que seriez-vous à cette heure, si votre père avait eu vos idées, et avait abandonné sa vie à tous ces souffles d’amour, au lieu de l’établir inébranlablement sur une pensée d’honneur et de loyauté? Réfléchissez, Armand, et ne dites plus de pareilles sottises. Voyons, vous quitterez cette femme, votre père vous en supplie.

[M. DUVAL. I will explain it to you. Have a mistress if you will; pay her as a man of honour is bound to pay the woman whom he keeps, by all means; but that you should come to forget the most sacred things for her, that you should let the report of your scandalous life reach my quiet countryside and set a blot on the honourable name that I have given you, it can not, it shall not be.

ARMAND. Permit me to tell you, father, that those who have given you information about me have been ill informed. I am the lover of Mlle. Gautier; I live with her; it is the most natural thing in the world. I do not give Mlle. Gautier the name you have given me; I spend on her account what my means allow me to spend; I have no debts; and, in short, I am not in a position which authorizes a father to say to his son what you have said to me . . .

M. DUVAL. Do you think, then, sir, that the mission of a man of honour is to go about converting lost women? Do you think that God has given such a grotesque aim in life, and that the heart should have any room for enthusiasm of that kind? What will be the end of this marvelous cure, and what will you think of what you are saying to-day by the time you are forty? You will laugh at this love of yours, if you can still laugh, and if it has not left too serious a trace in your past. What would you be now if your father had had your ideas and had given up his life to every impulse of this kind, instead of rooting himself firmly in convictions of honour and steadfastness? Think it over, Armand, and do not talk any more such absurdities. Come, leave this woman; your father entreats you].

(Dumas 180-83 and 154-56)

There is one main difference between the Dumas monologue and Verdi’s letter in response to Barezzi’s letter content. Verdi did not say that he had not married Strepponi and he spends no money on her. He wrote “Who knows whether she is or she is not my wife.” He implies that it is no one else’s business because they are hurting no one whereas Armand states that he has not given the name that his father gave him to Marguerite. He has not married her but spends on her.

Giuseppe Verdi is not like Armand, who was weak in the novel and adapted play. Where Armand was not yet financially independent from his family, Verdi was, or soon would be. Verdi was also rather fixed in his ideas about religion and society, whereas Armand was essentially a young and naive bourgeois man at heart and followed the idealistic status quo. Verdi had lost his first love to death and now that he had found love again, he was not about to lose it because of
the prejudices of others. Verdi was also a rustic who had experienced more of life than his fellow bussetani due to his many travels and he could not tolerate hypocrisy. By choosing to compose an opera on the subject of a contemporary courtesan, and choosing to have it set in modern times with modern costumes, the composer was certainly making a poignant social statement. In fact, he was setting a precedent.

However, even though Verdi was more liberal than many of the contemporary men of the time, his liberal view toward sexuality was still reliant on notions of supplicatory women held economically dependent. Furthermore, his strong sense of privacy and discretion must have played largely in the concealment of Strepponi’s past which makes it challenging to argue for any defense with regard to her reputation. He burned many of her letters written before 1848. However, if the idea that Santa was his child and the couple gave her up for proprieties sake, then the massive cover-up becomes far more understandable.

Strepponi had had an unseemly past, and the fact that they worked so hard to hide it from society corroborates the necessity of concealing her past if they intended to live in society. The idea that Verdi wrote the opera to defend Strepponi is what this part of the study is suggesting. In order for that to be successful and lead to her being able to live unscathed in society, this opera had to stir up social traditions and cause a change. At first, it might seem contradictory to all the work they did to hide her past, but Verdi’s letter above to Barezzi in defense of Verdi’s life speaks of Strepponi deserving to be treated with the greatest of respect while under his roof indicating that he was very serious about championing her.

Several parallels can be made that prove the topic of the fallen woman was close to Verdi’s heart and one that he wanted to present publicly through his very powerful medium of opera, apparently with the hope of changing social reaction to the public woman. La traviata had
not been his first attempt to present a contemporary issue in an opera . . . *Stiffelio* was also about the contemporary issue, but one of infidelity in a marriage, and *Stiffelio* had been written only a few years earlier. It had not been well received by the public. *La traviata* took the issue to a new level. It presented illness and infidelity outside the marriage . . . and touched upon the effects this could have upon families’ reputations and well-being. *Stiffelio* supports the idea that this topic was on Verdi’s mind for a while, and that he was trying to find ways to bring the subject in front of audiences in order to confront society with the problem a fallen woman presented. When Verdi saw Dumas’s *La Dame aux camélias* in Paris that winter, he immediately saw the potential of its message.

The similarities and differences between Dumas *fils*’s work and Verdi’s work are just a few. First off, it begins after the death of the courtesan, at the auction where her things are being sold. The narrator (Dumas), outside of the event (just like in *Manon Lescaut*) narrates during real time in the novel, telling the reader about one who he says he had met. (He is referring to Armand Duval). The occasion of this meeting was at an auction of the property of the protagonist, where the author had purchased a novel, *Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost, which was dedicated: “Manon à Marguerite– humilité.” In a key moment in the work, the protagonist recalls a book left open by Margherita. His eyes fall on these lines:

*Je te jure, mon cher Chevalier, que tu es l'idole de mon cœur et qu'il n'y a que toi au monde que je puisse aimer de la façon dont je t'aime; mais ne vois-tu pas, ma pauvre chère âme, que, dans l'état où nous sommes réduits, c'est une sotte vertu que la fidélité? Crois-tu qu'on puisse être bien tendre lorsqu'on manque de pain? La faim me causerait quelque méprise fatale: je rendrais quelque jour le dernier soupir, en croyant en pousser un d'amour. Je t'adore, compte là-dessus; mais laisse-moi, pour quelque temps, le ménagement de notre fortune. Malheur à qui va tomber dans mes filets! Je travaille pour rendre mon Chevalier riche et heureux. Mon frère t'apprendra des nouvelles de ta Manon, et qu'elle a pleuré de la nécessité de te quitter. [I protest to you, dearest chevalier, that you are the idol of my heart, and that you are the only being on earth whom I can truly love; but do you not see, my own poor dear chevalier, that in the situation to which we are now reduced, fidelity would be worse than madness? Do you*
think tenderness possibly compatible with starvation? For my part, hunger would be sure to drive me to some fatal end. Heaving some day a sigh for love, I should find it was my last. I adore you, rely upon that; but leave to me, for a short while, the management of our fortunes. God help the man who falls into my hands. My only wish is to render my chevalier rich and happy. My brother will tell you about me; he can vouch for my grief in yielding to the necessity of parting from you]. (Prévost 40-41)

*Manon Lescaut* is an important element in the novel since in his work Dumas continually uses that of Prévost as a point of reference. The subject here is also suggestive: it is narrated by a youth devoid of moral sense who tells the story of a girl sincerely in love with a man who can not offer the good life which she cannot give up. The format used by Dumas in *La dame aux camélias* is also the same used in Abbé Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut*, that of a *femme fatale*. To create the libretto for the opera, Piave had to tighten the plot so it could fit into the strict Italian opera model. Other than the character’s names and title differences, the main difference is Verdi’s placement of M. Germont at Marguerite’s death. The text, guiltily sung by M. Germont clearly suggest that he has recognized the error of his actions toward Marguerite. This is Verdi’s way of defending Strepponi against those who are against their *liaison*. Instead, in the Dumas novel, Armand does not get back in time to be with Marguerite before she dies. He has her exhumed to prove to himself that she is indeed dead. In Verdi’s work, he has to comply with the rules of Italian opera and his timeline must have a closing finish that functions with the art of opera. His Alfredo makes it back in time to see Violetta and his father arrives in time to apologize and regret his manipulatively destructive actions toward her in the act 2 duet. All loose ends to the narrative thread are conveniently tied up before she expires. Alfredo’s redeclaration of love and Germont’s regret and self-condemnation are the two components which bring the opera to a close. These actions also defend the courtesan, and thus defend Strepponi.

This brings us to the idea of autobiofictionality which is a literary approach that has parallels to the *roman à clef* genre application in Dumas and to the study’s proposal that Verdi
imitated the *roman à clef* idea, as much as was possible, within a musical work by finding a way to hide the names of characters within syllabic musical renderings through usage of renaming the heroine with the clever name of her favorite flower.

The period of time in which Verdi composed *La traviata* at Villa Sant’Agata was short, around a month, but during most of that time Strepponi was ill with headaches.

23 February 1853
Dear Magician,
I promised, I am writing to tell you that I am neither better nor worse than Sunday: but Frignani assures me that with the powders he gave me today I will improve noticeably and quickly. . . . You cannot imagine how much I suffered over the last few days, seeing you, my poor Magician, slaving away like a black and moreover having to put up with my ill health! Because I will get better and I will try with my good-humour to make you forget the trouble you have been through. You are so good to your poor old Bore. . . .

(Strepponi in Servadio 152)

This segment of one of her letters to Verdi shows that she is not well. Servadio writes that “at thirty-six she [Strepponi] was relatively old, menopause arrived at around thirty-five to forty” (148).

Someone as sensitive as Strepponi must have had thoughts going through her head as Verdi put words to music haunting her with the similarities of her past, otherwise she could not have been lauded as such a fine singer and actress. The arias of Violetta in act 1 and act 3 of *La traviata* written so well by the Piave/Verdi duo could reflect the inner feelings and fears of many public women of the times. Strepponi was ageing and ageing is the greatest fear of a courtesan. The ageing factor is the main thrust of Signor Germont’s argument to Violetta in the act 2 baritone/soprano duet. He successfully frightens Violetta into giving Alfredo up thereby sacrificing her life to consumption which she knows will recur when she returns to the life of a courtesan.

First, however, this study will look briefly at the act 1 aria of Violetta in *La traviata.* A deeper analysis will take place for the act 3 aria because of its epistolary nature. In between the
two arias a thorough analysis of the act 2 baritone/soprano duet will ensue because that is the
crux of the argument—bourgeois social standards vs. the new Victorian romantic ideas that had
begun to permeate across borders and into other countries social rituals.

The act 1 scene and aria, È strano! È strano! In core scolpiti ho quegli accenti! . . . [It’s
odd! It’s odd! These inflexions are sculpted in my heart] (La traviata 95). This scene is a piece
that runs the gamut of a courtesan’s inner feelings. Verdi uses the work to develop the inner
character of the heroine and it is sung to herself, but is actually an aside which the audience is
privileged to hear. The audience can be considered a social collective conscience. In this aria and
in the act 3 aria, the audience for Verdi’s La traviata becomes likened to her confessor as
Violetta shares her innermost thoughts and fears. Left alone, she thinks of the strange young man
who has entered in her life and this scene is one of the most celebrated of Italian opera.

Saria per me sventura un serio amore? Che risolvi, o turbata anima mia? Null’uomo
ancora t’accendeva... Oh gioja ch’io non conobbi esser amata amando! E sdengarla
poss’io per l’aride follie del viver mio? [Would a real love be a misadventure? Oh
troubled soul, what will be your final resolve? No man has aroused yet in you . . . Oh joy
that I have yet to know to be loved while loving! And could I despise it for the dry folly
of my life?]. (La traviata 97-98)

It has very little relation with the theatrical text and even less with the novel where Marguerite is
rendered far more outwardly. (What is closer textually to the drama is found in the duet of the
second act). The Marguerite of Dumas takes the initiative… she acts with her eyes open. Verdi’s
Violetta is caught in a net without even knowing it, refusing even to admit to herself the
possibility of real love and therefore falls right into it. This is the psychological touch that has a
subtleness which is not found in any page of Dumas . . . either the novel or the drama. In the
aria’s recitative, she questions whether or not she could have a serious love with an amant de
Coeur and wonders what it could feel like to love and be loved simultaneously. She claims that
she has never felt any stirrings of love from any man before. The Andante “Ah, fors’è lui” [Ah,
perhaps it is he] presents a simple major/minor design which is refreshingly clear. Even if
Violetta is not yet cognizant, the love “croce e delizia” [cross and delight] would have more
significance for her than for Alfredo. In the aria she asks if he could be the one . . . someone
modest and caring who could arouse in her feelings of real love. Could she hate her frivolous life
and try a serious approach? But she determines that it would just be folly . . . a vain delirium. She
has already admitted to the audience in the recitative that she questions herself—her value as a
person! She asks: Who am I to dream of love? Her answer, Budden sums up the libretto: “una
povera ragazza sparduta nella grande Parigi, senza un amico che l’aiuti. Perché non dovrebbe
abbandonarsi alle gioie passeggere? E scioglie un inno alla ‘dolce vita’ con la cabaletta
“Sempre libera degg’io” [a poor girl lost in grand Paris, without a friend to help her. Why should
she not abandon herself to passing joys? And it melts into a hymn to the ‘sweet life’ with the
cabaletta “I shall always be free”] (Budden 147-48). Violetta is weighing her options, thinking
about the short life she has, and trying to decide if she can take any time to be serious about
someone, or if she must live life to the maximum before it is too late. Her character is laid bare to
the audience who can begin to understand the dilemma this young girl must suffer with the short
time she has to live. She describes herself as a poor woman, alone, abandoned in the desert called
Paris. She asks what is to be done, and determines that she must seek out pleasure while she
may, by always being free to enjoy only thoughts of pleasure and happiness. Violetta knows she
is dying, and that she has a short time. She does not want to waste any time on serious love
which could turn into a sad chapter near the end of her time. She wants to enjoy life and avoid
life’s heavinesses. While talking out loud to herself she is sharing her innermost feelings and
doubts with the La traviata audience. It is an intimate and extraordinary moment in operatic
history where the composer is able to connect the performer so sublimely with the listening
audience . . . the collective consciousness of the current society. Only Verdi, in Italian opera up to this point, was able to achieve such a feat. It is only through listening to Verdi’s sublime music that this feat occurs. The intimacy of this character confessing her innermost fears and thoughts to the audience has not been seen before on the operatic stage. Words could never explain what music does for the spirit. Strepponi could live with music surrounding her life by remaining Verdi’s companion.

Strepponi had many similar situations during her early life, and they are comparable to those presented within the Dumas work. For example, a courtesan would risk her finances by taking a young lover as is mused about in the act I aria, and to what end? Likely abandonment. Strepponi took a young lover . . . Moriani. What occurred? She was abandoned. Second, there is M. Monti who was briefly in her life as a fiancé but who she soon rejected because she was unable to love him. What happens? Strepponi is eventually abandoned by all and left to resolve her own troubles: financial, physical, and emotional. Additionally, the act 3 aria speaks regretfully of leaving the past…and leaving life itself. Strepponi had considered suicide. The sacrifice of leaving Alfredo Germont is presented by Alfredo’s father as what Violetta must do for Alfredo’s own good. In connection with this idea, when Verdi and Strepponi had such problems in Busseto with his family and the Barezzis, she must have felt that she was the case of his troubles. A letter to Verdi in 1851 reflects this idea.

I beg you with both hands clasped not to force me into any intimacy with your heirs, and it is not out of malice that I ask this, I swear, but because it would be impossible for me to endure further worries of the kind that I had to bear for almost two years. Human nature appeared so foul in recent events that it is better for us to take every precaution that the veil which you managed to drape over it shall not be lifted again. Addio, my Magician. I will not waste words trying to express myself, waiting to do so with kisses on my return. Farewell! Farewell! (Strepponi in Servadio 139).

We cannot come to the conclusion that Strepponi identified with the lady of the camellias because there are no letters in her words to that effect. We can, however, surmise that the
troubles Strepponi and Verdi had with the family of his first wife were difficult and were at best about money, and at worst about the child mentioned above if her comment about the “veil” concerns the child, Santa Streppini, left at the turnstile at the Ospedale Maggiore in Cremona on 14 April 1851 mentioned earlier. What we can say is that Strepponi was a courtesan and lived a life similar to the life of the lady of the camellias, during her years as a celebrity opera singer. She was venerated and worshipped for her presence on stage, just as Duplessis was venerated and worshipped for her presence in public. So, in some ways Strepponi had to face herself in La traviata. The sacrifice to lead a quiet life which Strepponi chose is presented in the thought process of Violetta’s act 1 aria talked about above. The novel and play present celebrity, notoriety, and social prejudice which are major narrative threads examined along with career sacrifice, self-sacrifice, and rehabilitation through the love of one man. All these elements are also found throughout Strepponi’s life. If Stepponi did not identify with the lady of the camellias, she should have. We can certainly link them through their similarities. Strepponi was recognized as intelligent by many, and her liaison with Verdi proves that her intelligence could not have been anything less than exceptional, so it stands to reason that she must have seen the similarities between herself and Duplessis. Also, Verdi presents his Violetta as an exceptional character, who rehabilitates through loving Alfredo and who sacrifices everything for his happiness at the request of his father.

The next segment of the chapter will now look at the concept of utilizing rural escape to reconstruct a new life and how this links Strepponi with the lady of the camellias. As for notorious celebrity, bourgeois disapproval is emphasized during the act 2 baritone/soprano duet by the tenor’s father, Giorgio Germont. La traviata’s act two baritone/soprano duet is a focal point for the opera and creates the framework this chapter makes about Verdi’s encrypted
defense of Strepponi. It is likely that Strepponi self-identified with the Dumas protagonist-made-heroine that populated the minds of Parisian audiences even though there is no direct proof.

The bourgeois conservative attitudes are personified in the act 2 duet of Verdi’s *La traviata* through Giorgio Germont, the male protagonist’s father, who approaches Violetta with a manipulative request, asking her to abandon her love for his son, Alfredo, and return to her courtesan profession. Her celebrity, he quips is notorious and will ruin Alfredo. To maneuver Violetta and accomplish his objective Germont reasons with her saying:

*Sia pure—ma volubile sovente è l’uom—….un di, quando le veneri il tempo avrà fugate, fia presto il tedio a sorgere—che sarà allor? Pensate—per voi non avran balsam i più soave affetti, poiché dal ciel non furono tai nodi benedetti. [That may well be—but men are often fickle. One day, when time will have dispelled what we worship, then what? Think about it—Even the deepest feelings will bring you no solace, since this bond was never blessed by heaven].* (Piave in *La traviata*, 147-49, Trans. Sasson)

Piave, via Germont’s words intends to subtly suggest that her beauty, which is part of her trade, will fade with time and when she ages, Alfredo, who is only a mere man, will not want her anymore. He further insinuates that living together outside matrimony means that the union is not blessed by God. Germont is saying without actually putting it into words, that her past will always be there, in arguments, hanging over her head. This is a reflection of the social standards of that era and certainly something of which Violetta and Giuseppina are aware. A courtesan’s greatest fear is ageing; her beauty is her greatest commodity. Germont is attempting to sway her by attacking her weakness. However, in Violetta’s case, the opera reveals that she knows she will not live long. Living a healthy life in the country under Alfredo’s care had been her only hope to be cured, maintain her youth and beauty, and live a longer life. She had, according to Germont’s viewpoint, only lived in a fantasy—not the reality of the situation which she now comes to understand. When Violetta agrees to sacrifice herself for Alfredo’s and his sister’s futures at
Germont’s request to leave his son, she is signing her own death certificate by taking up her previous courtesan lifestyle of a celebrity:

*Dite alla giovine, sì bella e pura ch’avvi una vittima della sventura, cui resta un’unico, un’unico raggio di bene...che a lei sacrifica e che morrà, e morrà e morrà* [Oh, tell your daughter, so lovely and pure, that there was a victim of misadventure, in whom remained a single ray of good – Which she sacrificed for her – and then died!]. (Piave in *La traviata* 155 Trans. Sasson)

This passage, both in word and music, reflects the measure of what Verdi meant to express about his “lady of the camellias.” Verdi meant to express her ability to sacrifice unselfishly and *in extremis* for the love of one man. This action redeems her and saves her in heaven in Verdi’s version, whereas those in society who exploit or manipulatively abuse her will, as personified in Giorgio Germont in Verdi’s version, shall forever regret their actions.

Dumas restrained the manner in which he depicted bourgeois social attitudes in his novel, perhaps for the sake of propriety. There is, however, no question that Dumas intended to depict male social abuse along with his solution based on the hegemonic masculinity that dominated his society. In reality, in the case of the male exploitation that occurred with regard to the actual ‘ladies of the camellias’—Strepponi and Duplessis, society judged all stained women far more severely than they judged those who exploited them. Again, in the case of the Dumas work, the father is depicted carefully with literary gallantry for proprieties’ sake. He does not condemn or judge M. Duval’s bourgeoisification. This is clearly a premeditated effort to buffer the shock of the very biased societal reaction which was projected to occur when the work presented the ‘great social evil of prostitution’ in a public theater.

Verdi’s *La traviata* presents a clear ‘twist’ to Dumas *fils*’s ending and solution. Verdi’s and Piave’s libretto make the provincial bourgeois father into more of an antihero. His initially judgmental attitude in Verdi’s opera exemplifies the hypocritically condemning self-righteous middle-class attitude. By emphasizing this Machiavellian trait of Germont upon his initial
appearance in the central musical section of his opera, Verdi is forcing the issue of social bias
toward public women, resolved only with Germont’s remorse in act 3. Verdi condemns the
bourgeois father with eternal remorse. This is Verdi’s defense of the rehabilitated and redeemed
courtesan with a good heart and by proxy, Giuseppina Strepponi.

Verdi attempts to subvert the traditionally ensconced societal bias of the time toward the
courtesan by making the opera a subversive cultural social tool. The crux of the chapter is just
this point: Verdi pits the conservative bourgeois attitudes against the more progressive liberal
attitudes of falling in love for love’s sake.

The people who took idealization of love and intimacy to new heights during the
nineteenth century did not intend to shake up marriage or unleash a new preoccupation
with sexual gratification. They meant to strengthen marriage by encouraging husbands
and wives to weave new emotional bonds. . . . During the nineteenth century, however,
young people started to believe that love was far more sublime and far less reasoned than
mutual esteem. (Coontz 178)

This movement which included the Romantic Movement began with certain questions.

These questions were becoming more pressing as the aspirations for intimacy raised by
the cult of married love came up against the rigid barriers of gender segregation . . . but in
fact the new sentimentalization of married love in the Victorian period was a radical
social experiment. The Victorians were the first people in history to try to make a
marriage the pivotal experience in people’s lives and married love the principal focus of
the era. Victorian marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal
fulfillment, and mutual happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently
during the early twentieth century. (Coontz 176)

Strepponi and Verdi were taking part in the new cult which promoted “romantic love, intimacy,
personal fulfillment, and mutual happiness.” Verdi must demonize the conservative attitudes in
order to heighten the progressive liberal beliefs. This “twist” in the text and plot depicted this
personification of middle-class prejudice and demonized it in the father figure. The Dumas
version, on the other hand, has no villain, and thus no demonization of the bourgeois.

Concerning the “twist” that Verdi and Piave have added to the *La Dame aux camélias* plot
adapted to *La traviata*, Servadio writes:
The theme of sacrifice, of unjust – but justified – moral condemnation, was of course central to *La Dame aux camélias*. Seeing the play in the theatre had been reliving her own life: Giuseppina’s past and Marguerite Gautier’s had a great deal in common. Verdi had wanted a libretto dealing with contemporary issues which would impress his public and confront them with their own hypocrisy. Not surprisingly it was blocked by the censors and the drama had to be presented as having been in an earlier age. (Servadio 150-151)

This study agrees with Servadio’s observations and conclusions and although Servadio assumes that Strepponi was reliving her life, we can only guess that to be true. However, we have listed the parallels and similarities between the two women.

Verdi’s “twist” put social hypocrisy up front where it had to be confronted. Since Verdi was not a man to mince words, the plot “twist” which made Giorgio Germont be present at Violetta’s death, claiming responsibility and remorse at the end of the opera for her death in place of using the Dumas plotline where M. Duval is not present at her death and therefore not held to any reaction, is read as a musical *sfida* [challenge] by his audience, challenging social and cultural norms.

Dumas was being careful in depicting relationships between people who lived in both high society and the *demi-monde* in which the courtesan lived to masquerade his actual intent—this attitude would fit into the silent code of gallantry. More than likely though, it was because his father had had an affair with Marie Duplessis . . . . the Marguerite Gautier of the novel and play.

In *La dame aux camélias* Dumas is sympathetic toward his courtesan heroine: therein lies the greatest difference between this play and the latter two (*Le Demi-monde* of 1855 and *Un Père prodigue* of 1859.). In the latter, the courtesan characters are scheming, heartless women, using those around them for their own material gain. Dumas found his role as a writer of *pièces à thèse* and *comédies de moeurs*, in which he became a moralizer. (Lee 38)

Perhaps it could be stated that his approach also had to do with how impropriety would reflect upon the reputation of the author, the author’s father, or even upon the world of gallantry in
which Dumas had gained access and belonged. It also needed to be presented in the theater with care. Piave and Verdi, on the other hand, could hide behind the more emotional level of opera to accuse Alfredo’s father, Giorgio Germont, blaming Violetta’s death on him. He is portrayed as repentant at the end of the opera when he recognizes, at Violetta’s death, the wrong he has done to her. Clearly, the opera takes a critical stance by representing negatively the conservative bourgeois attitudes identifiable with Barezzi and the bussetani. Germont sings:

*Di più non lacerarmi troppo rimorso l’alma mi divora…quasi fulmin m’atterra ogni suo detto! Ah malcauto vegliardo! il mal ch’io feci ora sol vedo! Cara, sublime vittima d’un diserato amore, perdonami lo strazio recato al tuo bel cor. Finché avrà il ciglio lacrime io piangerò per te; Vola a’ beati spiriti, Iddio ti chiama a sé.* [Don’t torture me any longer; My soul is already devoured by remorse. Every word she speaks is a thunderbolt. Oh, rash old man! Only now do I see the harm I have done…Dear noble victim of a hopeless love, forgive me for having made your heart suffer. As long as my eyes have tears, So long shall I weep for you, Fly to the realm of the blessed, God calls you unto Him. (Piave in *La traviata* 374-83 Trans. Sasson)]

The vast difference in the ends of the two works of Dumas and Verdi distinctly show that the Piave/Verdi affiliation had a very precise message in mind that included a moral to the story: judging others can have unforeseen consequences. Death is Violetta’s salvation. She dies repentant, loving one man, so she ascends to Heaven while Giorgio Germont, her bourgeois nemesis, must live in his earthly purgatory in remorseful tears. Dumas had positioned his protagonist at the end so that the Duplessis double (Marguerite) could be celebrated by society for her goodness and Verdi concurred with this idea in his operatic version. Dumas deified the real lady of the camellias, Duplessis, by writing the novel and drama. In the Dumas novel and drama version, Marguerite’s death cleanses her and he does not hold society responsible for her death, only perhaps for its superficiality or collective apathy toward death. Her love for one man has made her an exception among that sort of woman, as Dumas states in his last chapter, but Verdi goes a step beyond and transforms his heroine into an international phenomenon. Martine Segalen writes:
Marguerite Gautier and Violetta Valéry are exceptions to the ordinary, and their destinies can be fulfilled only in fiction, whether novel, play or opera…The class gap between the real-life Marguerites and the women of fiction is considerable; and therein lies the huge success of the novel, play and the opera. (Segalen in John 76-77).

The opera however more than the novel or play makes Duplessis the first lady of the camellias. The phenomenon she is today is because of its popularity and the fact that it is performed as repertoire worldwide year after year.

There is just an insinuation of celebrity that Dumas is making that can be recognized in the sacrifice Alphonsine Duplessis made through her death, only because it was the underlying reason why he wrote *La Dame aux camélias* and later adapted the novel into a drama. He intended to make her famously celebrated—a legend—because her sacrifice was unique among this sort of women. Dumas ended the novel saying:

> Je ne tire pas de ce récit la conclusion que toutes les filles comme Marguerite sont capables de faire ce qu’elle a fait; loin de là, mais j’ai connaissance qu’une d’elles avait éprouvé dans sa vie un amour sérieux, qu’elle en avait souffert et qu’elle en était morte. J’ai raconté au lecteur ce que j’avais appris. C’était un devoir. Je ne suis pas l’apôtre du vice, mais je me ferai l’écho du malheur noble partout où je l’entendrai prier. [I do not draw from this story the conclusion that all women like Marguerite are capable of doing all that she did—far from it; but I have discovered that one of them experienced a serious love in the course of her life, that she suffered for it, and that she died of it. I have told the reader all that I learned. It was my duty. I am not the apostle of vice, but I would gladly be the echo of noble sorrow wherever I bear its voice in prayer. The story of Marguerite is an exception, I repeat; had it not been an exception, it would not have been worth the trouble of writing it]. (Dumas 244 and 213)

So, people not only were “subjected to the spectacle of street prostitution on their way to the theater” (Nead in John 249) but they were witnessing the deification through death of a celebrated courtesan in the theater, and this study shows both women are still glorified inasmuch as their graves are visited with respect.

However, the deification of a dead celebrated courtesan was not the only problem because in the opera the courtesan seemed glamorized. Opera was the film of today and was much glamorized because of the surroundings in the theater itself and the people who frequented
the opera in the first ring boxes. Others went to gawk and observe the glamour found in those rings. Verdi was glamorizing celebrity and his initial attempt helped make it the phenomenon of today. “By turning the lowest form of life into the highest form of art, the opera made the prostitute temporarily acceptable, even respectable” (250). This is because opera and art exhibition were acceptable forms of entertainment for public consumption where middle and upper class folks could see their social and cultural identities emphasized. Verdi’s *La traviata* crossed the boundaries of propriety with its attempt to seduce audiences into accepting immorality. That insinuation was difficult for Strepponi who was a very religious person for all of her life, and as she got older her feelings for her religion became more rooted. Strepponi writes:

> I believe in God, the first, unknown, unique, omnipotent source of all creation. I feel within me that spark, that atom, emanation of the Divine Spirit, which gives life and movement to the universe and which we call the soul. Thought, conscience, the heart—mysterious powers that move me, approve of me, condemn me—are superior things and will survive my body, destined to die. Death!! The science, the sophisms, the metaphysical subtleties of the theologians and the learned of all the religions of all the ages, strike vainly against this mystery of death, as against that of life, and have nothing to say, just as they have never been able to say, believing it and proving it: God does not exist! Even the skeptical Rabelais in his last moments exclaimed: *Je vais quérir le Grand Peut-être*. So he had laughed all his life, to die with doubt in his heart. Other sceptics, or sophists, lie even as they die, saying, out of pride and not conviction: I am favouring you with my ideas, my convictions about religions. If you have managed to read me up to this point I admire your patience and indulgence for my boldness. (Strepponi in Walker 281)

Not only was she religious, but she was also highly intelligent and opera was spectacle and entertainment, not education. From her viewpoint this was entertainment without education. It was pushing sensual pleasure with no moral edification. She foresaw the moral panic that it would bring. This work, when it was first performed, could not be made to seem distant or romantic with costumes because it spoke of contemporary fears and anxieties.

*La traviata* is, without question, a testimony to nineteenth-century sexual double standards. Yet strangely it is a woman’s opera; Verdi reserves the most notable music for his
heroine. It can be demonstrated that Verdi’s compassionate presentation of the human condition in *La traviata* was in defense of his mistress’s celebrity, the opera soprano, Giuseppina Strepponi and that the work contains recognizable links to the couple’s life story which are similar to the plot in the Dumas novel. The opera paints aspects about celebrity and notoriety. More liberal political persons would see the message that criticizes the conservative bourgeois attitudes which were already being challenged by the Victorian liberal cult of marriage.

In the subsequent Epistolary Section, the study looks at how Strepponi identifies herself with the “lady of the camellias” through letters. In act 3 of Verdi’s *La traviata* the composer utilized the letter which is so important in courtesan literature to express the sense of abandonment, isolation, and death which would set the mood for the finale of the work. Verdi musical depiction of his soprano protagonist, Violetta, paints the text through the orchestration and music as breathless and weak which confirms to the audience that she is indeed dying. Below is Piave’s text to the recitative which Verdi decided would be spoken—a stroke of genius used within the framework of the classical Italian opera format because speaking in Italian opera had been used only by Mozart up until this work:

*Teneste la promessa . . .
la disfida ebbe luogo!*
*
*Il barone fu ferito, Però migliora . . .

Alfredo È in stranio suolo;
il vostro sacrificio io stesso gli ho svelato;
Egli a voi tornerà pel suo perdono; Io pur verrò . . .

*Curatevi . . . mertate un avvenir migliore.*

*Giorgio Germont. . . .
È tardi!*
Here was the truth Violetta had hoped would come earlier. She has been forgiven by Alfredo’s father—the very person who had earlier condemned her. This letter is very important for it is a letter through which the bourgeois Giorgio Germont confesses his mistake. The culmination of the act 2 duet is this letter of act 3. Verdi’s treatment of these words is conventional in that he reverts to a stage reading of the letter rather than have it sung, but the revitalizing is entirely original on his part. By having the letter read, Verdi is emphasizing it through the contrast. The text stands out because it is spoken within a work where the rest of the text is set entirely to music. It is a letter asking pardon from the father, Germont, written to the courtesan, Violetta, who Verdi made a soprano in his opera . . . not a mezzo-soprano, or a contralto. Violetta is a soprano like Strepponi was a soprano, and Violetta is a courtesan just as Strepponi had been considered one. He wanted this letter to stand out from the rest of the work. He brings back the musical theme of Di quell’amor ch’è palpito which, from its first appearance in the act 1 duet, continues to return as the musical representation of the love between Violetta and Alfredo. Although this might seem trite, in reality it is a stroke of genius for it surprising freshness. It is the strongest, most passionate repeating musical motif of the entire opera. It also stands for Verdi’s love for Strepponi. The final musical phrase is interrupted when Violetta reaches Giorgio Germont’s name. The audience hears the spoken words “È tardi!” [It’s too late!]. From the recitativo that follows, the spectators are made aware that she has waited and continues to wait, but to no avail. He has yet to arrive. Looking in the mirror at herself Violetta sings:

(Attendo, attendo, nè a me giungon mai!)  
[(I wait and wait, but they never come to me!)]

Oh, come son mutata!  
Oh, how I have changed!

Ma il dottore a sperar pure m’esorta!..  
But the doctor also urges me to hope!

Ah, con tal morbo ogni speranza è morta  
Ah, with this disease all hope is dead] (Piave 330).
As spectators the audience is now aware that Violetta is aware of her final demise. Verdi launches into one of the most beautiful arias ever written about pasts forever gone. Piave’s text for this aria says good-bye poignantly to the past . . . this could be considered Verdi’s tribute to Strepponi’s farewell to the opera stage. It is a haunting piece, echoing and foreshadowing death. Piave wrote:

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Addio, del passato, bei sogni ridenti,
le rose del volto già sono pallenti,
l’amore d’Alfredo perfino mi manca,
conforto, sostegno dell’anima stanca
conforto, sostegno,
ah! della traviata sorridi al desio,
a lei, deh perdona, tu accoglila, o Dio!
Ah! Tutto, tutto finì, or tutto, tutto finì.
Le gioje, I dolori tra poco avran fine;
La tomba ai mortali di tutto è confine!
Non lacrima o fiore avrà la mia fossa,
non croce col nome che copra quest’ossa!
Non croce non fior
ah! della traviata sorridi al desio,
a lei, deh perdona, tu accoglila, o Dio!
Ah! Tutto, tutto, finì, or tutto, tutto finì . . .
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“Addio del passato” is a good-bye to past dreams of happiness. The entire aria is a reflection on her life overheard by the audience. It delineates the status of Violetta’s spirit and paints a clear picture of her mental state. Her words reveal the fact of the matter. Her aria is a plea to God for forgiveness for she knows she is dying of consumption. It is as if the stellar, yet frivolous character of Violetta still shines through in the voice of the accompaniment even in her sadness and loss. Verdi has written in the accompaniment the weakness of body and breath that is
overtaking Violetta. Verdi paints Violetta’s gasping, reeling, and staggering with remarkable brilliance. The final phrases are composed giving a sense of Violetta’s resignation, the music mirroring the text while the voice spins with un fil di voce at the close of the aria which ends with a loudly accented acute chord. At the end of the aria this same minor chord is repeated an octave lower on each of the next six beats with a pianissimo direction to close the piece. It is as if the stage directions within the libretto where Verdi wrote: “sits down” and which occurs on the loud and acute downbeat chord accentuates her exhaustion, and the final chords echo a foreshadowing of the last heartbeats she will sustain. It is as if Verdi is showing the audience a human personification of a violet . . . dying, having been cut off from love.

**Epistolary Section**

There are not very many letters that are available today, according to the biographers of both Giuseppina Strepponi and Giuseppe Verdi which are written from her to the composer from before 1848. Verdi’s heirs tell the story of a great bonfire at Villa Sant’Agata following her death where Verdi burned many letters that could perhaps become compromising in some way to his contemporary and imminent reputation. Servadio mentions a bonfire in her biography on Strepponi when she wrote about a separation that the couple had following the Parma *Nabucco* and during the soprano’s Palermo tour: “The separation, which she perhaps believed to be final (no letters between them from this period have been found, although it is possible that Verdi burnt them in a final bonfire at Sant’Agata) provoked another fit of depression which proved to be disastrous for her” (96). It is strange that there is no communication during the pre-Parma and Palermo period even though Verdi spent about six months with her in Parma just prior to her ruinous six month tour in Palermo.
Once Verdi and Strepponi were officially a couple, from their Paris period forward they were rarely separated. When Verdi needed to travel to Naples for *Il Trovatore* rehearsals, he left her in a hotel in Livorno when he had to be at rehearsals for the operas he wrote during that time period. Two letters from her to him while he was in Naples for the *Il Trovatore* rehearsals remain for researchers to peruse. From Livorno, where she felt exiled, is an excerpt from the letter Strepponi wrote Verdi:

3 January 1853

My dearest,

I’ve received your second letter and I thank you for thinking of me on the first day of the New Year and the eleventh year of our acquaintance! but you can imagine how much I desire you and I will desire you on the first and every day of every year of the rest of your life! (May God grant it that you close my eyes!) . . . My dear Verdi, I confess my weakness to you, but this separation has been more painful to me than many others. Without you, I am a body without a soul. I am (and so I think you are) different from...
many other people who need frequent separations to revive their affections. I would stay with you for years and years without feeling either bored or satiated; indeed after such a long time together, without being separated for a moment, I feel this separation even more keenly, even though you promised me that it will be short . . . Now that I have—thank God—disappeared from society and after all these years of solitary, almost primitive life together, my identity feels as though it is floundering when I have to go to one place or another in the inhabited and civilized world . . . Do you see? We have lived out most of our lives, and you would be mad if, instead of enjoying the fruits of your labour in peace, you were to sweat to accumulate money and to humour those who in dreaded Death, see the moment when their infamous wishes come true in the wicked word inheritance! . . . Don’t you see? You don’t have your nagging Bore [Giuseppina’s nickname for herself, Livello, means something tedious or boring in the dialect of Lodi] in the corner of the room curled up in an arm-chair, telling you ‘this is good, my Magician, this isn’t, stop. Play that again, this is original, stop. Now without your old Bore, God is punishing you, slowing you down and making you rack your brain, before opening up the compartments of your mind to release your magnificent musical ideas. (Servadio 147)

In this selection from Strepponi’s letter to Verdi, the reader learns that it is eleven years that they have known each other which puts their encounter during the *Nabucco* period at La Scala.

Strepponi is expressing her desire to be together with Verdi which has some sexual connotations. The reader learns from the letter that Strepponi feels her attachment to Verdi keenly and expresses a morbid desire to have him close her eyes when she breathes her last. Strepponi voices her feelings of utter emptiness which she conveys to him by revealing that she feels like a “body without a soul.” Strepponi cannot conceive of an identity that isn’t dependent on Verdi. She speaks of herself as someone needing redemption as if she perceives her story as a novel—this contrasts with the way Isidora realized that the only way to rehabilitate is for her to save herself. Strepponi’s language of confession, of forgiveness, redemption, and self-deprecation is demonstrating how she is less than positive about herself. She does how a certain importance in her comments to Verdi, in the way she helps him with his composing. She is delicately refined in her complaint of feeling deserted in Livorno during his rehearsals in Naples of *Il Trovatore*. In another excerpt from her letter to him of 3 January 1853, the reader could interpret some words as having at the source a sense of fear of abandonment. About these two women’s feelings (one a
fictional character and one an actual person) the reader learns that they both recognize the fickleness of a society that is cruel, false, and capable of forsaking and deserting a celebrity in an instant.

Within *La Dame aux camélias* novel is a letter from Marguerite to Armand (probably written by Dumas, but possibly created from an actual letter left him in a journal by Alphonsine). The color of the letter is one of desperation and loneliness so the flavor is not unlike the letter to Verdi from Strepponi. Both express the sensation of being a body without a soul. In this passage from Marguerite’s morbid letter we also get a sense of her fragility. Dumas describes the loneliness and abandonment felt by Marguerite as she ran toward her end:

> Je passai à l’état de corps sans âme, de chose sans pensée; je vécus pendant quelque temps de cette vie automatique, puis je revins à Paris et je demandai après vous; j’appris alors que vous étiez parti pour un long voyage. Rien ne me soutenait plus. Mon existence redevint ce qu’elle avait été deux ans avant que je vous connusse. [I became a body without a soul, a thing without a thought; I lived for some time in that automatic way; then I returned to Paris, and asked after you; I heard then that you were gone on a long voyage. There was nothing left to hold me to life. My existence became what it had been two years before I knew you]. (Marguerite Gautier in Dumas *fils* 230-31 and 200-01)

Within this selection Marguerite is expressing her sense of desolation and loneliness, and even her overwhelming feelings of abandonment with her lover who is currently off in Algiers.

Strepponi’s personal letters are limited because many were lost in a bonfire. As for private letters, there are a few which can be found in the Oberdorfer *Autobiografia epistolare* collection. Public letters can be found at Sant’Agata. Strepponi began keeping the first of her Letter-books in 1860. Phillips-Matz writes:

> All five of which have entries written by her, entries by her which Verdi corrected, and entered entirely in his own hand. These volumes are invaluable because of what they tell us about both the composer and his wife, are especially important because of the large gap in Verdi’s *Copialettere*, which runs from October 1858 to September 1867. (Phillips-Matz 418)
These letters are those written by Strepponi for Verdi for business. The first entry is to Ricordi, Verdi’s publisher, and it is a reproach for not having taken sufficient care with the score of Un ballo in maschera which was still being sent out with errors that Verdi had brought to the attention of the publisher a year earlier.

Strepponi also kept a diary which is revealing, and a few of the entries are mentioned in the Phillips-Matz biography on Verdi. These few quoted entries seem to focus upon her reactions to Verdi’s treatment of her. For example, she writes as quoted:

As December wore on, Verdi’s mood deteriorated, provoking Strepponi to sit down on Christmas Eve and write in her diary: ‘Dinner at Mr. Du Locle’s. We were not there because of Verdi’s sore throat. Discussions about the furniture for Genoa. It is curious to see that every year at Christmas and during the big holidays, when all men act better toward their wives, Verdi who is always kind, becomes difficult.’ (Strepponi is Phillips-Matz 517)

Another entry says:

I have just got out of bed after having slept for the first time in [Verdi’s] future home: the enchanting Palazzo Sauli [on the hill] in Carignano. What a happy coincidence! Last night Rigoletto opened at the Carlo Felice, with such a triumph as I have never seen in this theatre. You can imagine how happy I was to be able to walk into the winter nest of Maestro Verdi for the first time. (Strepponi in Phillips-Matz 517)

Apparently Miriani, a friend and conductor of many of Verdi’s operas, slept in the apartment he was preparing for Verdi. Strepponi kept very close records of much of Verdi’s goings on and recorded her reactions in relation to him. Her dependency on him and keeping Verdi happy is clearly the sum total of her life’s work. It shows that she has been successfully rehabilitated and is the perfect wife and companion that Verdi had wanted in her.

So what are the limitations to Strepponi’s celebrity and rehabilitation? It is dependent on Verdi, she does not self-rehabilitate like Isidora even when Strepponi moves to the rural retreat. She never escapes the judgement of society and the identity she seeks depends on society’s
approval (3 January 1853 letter). She does not die as does Marguerite but she says she is a body without a soul.

**Conclusion**

This chapter touches upon the relinquishment of celebrity as recognized in the loss of a career. The courtesan singer, Giuseppina Strepponi lost her voice due to a bohemian lifestyle that was not conducive to a professional opera singing career. She found herself in an unprotected public environment with men who simply did not have her best interests at heart.

Strepponi has lost all that is important to her . . . her voice, her career, and she has had to abandon her children in order to maintain her mother, sister, and brother, as well as the first two children she had birthed. Rehabilitation becomes her life quest and she begins this journey by moving away from Italy and leaving all the troubles behind her to make a new career as a vocal instructor in the city of Paris. With the arrival of Giuseppe Verdi in Paris a few years later, Strepponi has the opportunity, thanks to Verdi’s desire to rehabilitate her to re-invent herself once again and become his mistress and eventual wife.

This chapter also has shown that Verdi and Strepponi had, in their combined lives, numerous links to the themes within the Dumas *La Dame aux camélias*. The theme of celebrity is found in the Dumas *La Dame aux camélias* as well as in Verdi’s *La traviata* where it is a signifier of Giuseppina Strepponi. Numerous examples have been presented and supported in order to prove the point that Giuseppina Strepponi could self-identify with the protagonist in both the Dumas novel and drama. It is also argued that Verdi saw these connections and decided to compose *La traviata* to defend Giuseppina Strepponi and himself from the tremendous criticisms they had received concerning their lifestyle together from fellow *bussetani* who consisted also of family and friends. The themes of rural and urban life are also present in the
Dumas works, and they are also present in Piave’s and Verdi’s *La traviata*. These dualities represent the conservative spaces of the small cities versus the more progressive spaces where personal freedom and the ability to become invisible are easier to achieve. It is even possible in the epistolary segment to see similarities of thought and feeling between Giuseppina Strepponi and Dumas fils’s Marguerite Gautier (who was really his version of Alphonsine Duplessis). Through letters, quotes, and text examples from the libretto those links are made clearer. Similar elements and historical facts link much of the emotional content presented in *La traviata* with the Verdi’s lives.

Verdi’s compassionate presentation of the human condition is worthy of the change it eventually brought, for with the social subversion taken by Dumas and advanced by Verdi’s opera, attitudes about public women began to alter. An eventual transformation took place in society and women were able to take the first steps toward a public life that is currently so enjoyed. Since the original Dumas drama was in many ways autobiofictional, the idea of an opera, whether intentionally duplicating the autobiofictional aspects of the Dumas novel and drama, or not, is nonetheless clearly meant to have been read by the audiences of the day as putting forth ideas for social re-construction. Things that audiences of today would not understand, both in the music and in the text were then meant to provoke, at minimum, some sort of reaction. At best, Verdi hoped to promote thought and change in the current social culture.

This study has attempted to prove that *La traviata* had a cryptic message for those who were able to understand its personal links to the Verdis, and its creation was meant to defend a celebrated opera singer and exonerate her. Although the exact story written by Dumas and reincarnated in *La traviata* is not the exact story of Strepponi nonetheless the human condition of
Alfredo/Armand and Violetta/Marguerite parallels situations suffered by the Giuseppe/Giuseppina.

From the evening of its successful reception forward, this celebrated opera story has been in every opera house in the world as standard repertoire. The story of *La Dame aux camélias* has, through Verdi’s endeavor become an international phenomenon and facilitated society’s acceptance of the independent and public woman. Thanks to Verdi’s continuation of Dumas’ efforts, the public woman in all her variations would eventually not be as stigmatized and Verdi’s secret immortalization of Strepponi can be revealed.

So what are the limitations to Strepponi’s celebrity and rehabilitation? It is dependent on Verdi, she doesn’t self-rehabilitate like Isidora even when Strepponi moves to the rural retreat. She never escapes the judgement of society and the identity she seeks depends on society’s approval (Jan 3 1853 letter). She doesn’t die as does Marguerite but she says she’s a body without a soul.
CHAPTER FOUR
COUNTESS CÉLESTE DE CHABRILLAN’S QUEST FOR SOCIAL EXCULPATION THROUGH MEMOIR CONFESSION

“What I love in you is not Mogador, but another woman who is trying to escape from her."

Lionel de Chabrillan to Céleste Mogador

Introduction: Mogador to Chabrillan

In this chapter the confessional retrospective narrative of the memoirs of Élizabeth-Céleste Vénard (Mogador) contrast with the Dumas fils confessional narrative that is intended to suggest that the rescue and rehabilitation of the fallen woman could be attained through her choice of loving self-sacrifice by dying for a man’s honor. Instead Mogador’s retrospective narrative in her first memoir puts forth a scenario of a woman, a courtesan who falls in love with one man. Throughout her three memoirs she seeks to ennoble herself through self-re-creation, to rehabilitate through self-education, and to strive for rescue and redemption through her love of the honest man who marries her. Following the count’s early demise, his countess widow keeps her promise to him to represent herself with dignity in honoring the name given her.

Mogador is no “dame aux camélias” per se. Her memoirs do not tell the romantic story of a courtesan who is saved by her redeeming love for one man at the cost of her life, as in Dumas’s novel. They do not follow the femme fatale genre wherein the fallen woman appeases her lover by dying because her past would become too much for him to accept. The memoirs do not entirely exonerate the courtesan from her past mistakes nor do they show her completely redeemed by charitable actions and fully integrated into a new social environment, as in George Sand’s Isidora. Her three memoirs recount the difficult road to rehabilitation, re-creation, and social respectability as she searches for social exculpation through writing. Her struggle to
overcome the numerous obstacles she encountered, including the insurmountable social barriers she faced, also shows the extent to which she slowly came to terms with her own responsibility in her fall into disrepute.

This chapter will be an analysis and comparison of her three memoirs with a focus on the Rousseauian confessional aspects of *amour de soi* that move the narrative from her feelings of shame, victimization, and blame toward Mogador’s desire for social exculpation through her writing. Through her works she strives, perhaps subconsciously, to right wrongs and this action brings about her inevitable maturity and growth through self-rehabilitation. This chapter looks briefly at the manner in which she shapes her story to tell a narrative of rehabilitation while providing a brief overview of her progression toward self-rehabilitation and social exculpation within the other memoirs.

Élizabeth-Céleste Vénard, also known as Mogador and later as Countess de Chabrillan, published two memoirs over the course of her life. A third memoir constructed by three enthusiastic courtesan theorists from lost and found notebook diaries was posthumously published as recently as 2015. Mogador, the Countess de Chabrillan, lived to be eighty-five and she continued to make entries into her diary until two years before her death. With her three memoirs, Parisian life, from the point of view of a courtesan, can be viewed for the better part of an entire century and the reader can come to understand, though her life’s changes and her challenges, the woman who wrote them from several retrospective and reminiscent viewpoints—that of unbridled youth, adult adventuress and survivor, and finally, the ageing might-have-been. Whereas Mogador’s memoirs span her lifetime and reveal the stages of her self-rehabilitation, Cora Pearl writes only one memoir and succeeds in publishing it just prior to her death. It is her last chance effort to portray a unified image of her celebrity. Unlike Pearl who never seeks social
exculpation, Mogador’s first attempts to explain her early life and fall into prostitution at the age of sixteen are made in the initial memoir in order to present herself in the best light for social acquittal in several court suits against her. It appeared in 1854, and exists since 2001 in a translation by Monique Fleury Nagem, as *Memoirs of a Courtesan in Nineteenth-Century Paris (Adieux au monde, mémoires de Céleste Mogador)*. Her journey encompasses mistreatment as a child, poverty, and a lack of education along with a near miss from sexual abuse by her stepfather. She suffers a sort of kidnapping and induction into prostitution. The sixteen-year-old Céleste Vénard becomes *inscrite* into the official register of the *prefecture de police* in Paris, later becoming a *pensionnaire* in a Parisian brothel, with her mother’s resigned permission. She gains celebrity as a dancer at the *Bal Mabille*, as an actress, as a circus rider, and finally as a successful courtesan. The *soubriquet* of Mogador is given her by her dancing partner, Brididi. The memoir was published as a part of a legal strategy proposed by her lawyer when Mogador was sued by the various creditors looking to pinch from her what they were unable to collect from Lionel.

The second memoir was written in Australia, published in France in 1877 as *Un Deuil au bout du monde, suite des mémoires de Céleste Mogador* and translated into English in 1997 by Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen as *The French Consul’s Wife: Memoirs of Céleste de Chabrillan in Gold-Rush Australia*. Clancy and Allen state that although Céleste de Chabrillan grovels to get her first memoir’s manuscript back, all of her struggles are fruitless as her publishers recognize a probable best-seller when they see one. In the final pages of the initial memoir she confesses that she has not yet told Lionel about their imminent publication. She writes: “If my memoirs appear after my departure, Lionel will not know about it since we shall
be at sea for four months. In the course of this long crossing, I am going to tempt the mercy of
the one who judges us all. Only God condemns on the ocean” (Mogador 316 Trans. Nagem).

With that cloud hanging over her, Mogador departs onboard the Croesus for Australia as
Countess Céleste de Chabrillan believing that her first memoir will never reach such distant
shores and that Count Lionel de Chabrillan shall never learn of them. Be that as it may, Clancy
and Allen explain the memoirs do get to Melbourne, just before the arrival of the Croesus.
Rather than making a fresh start of things, she finds that her life in Paris has followed her there
and influences every aspect of her new life in Victoria. In the second memoir she represents
herself as the rehabilitated wife of the consul yet victimized for her past indiscretions by a stiff
Victoria society. In her desperation, Clancy and Allen mention, she turns to bettering her writing
abilities by making “copious entries in her diary, commenting on the country, people, places,
events and gossip that make up the life in the colony, as well as expressing her own personal
thoughts and feelings” (Mogador 2 Trans. Clancy and Allen). The translators point out
Mogador’s acute ability of observation and description and give us a look into the adventuress
side of this brave woman during her international travels. Ultimately, it is through her writing,
the translators comment, that she has her revenge upon the Melbourne snobs with the publication
of the novel written in Australia – The Gold Robbers [Les Voleurs d’or] which is turned into a
successful play in Paris years later. That which is perhaps most important about Clancy’s and
Allen’s commentary on this memoir is their work in verifying many of the dates and events
which are described by Chabrillan. The translator’s research finds that several of the dates are
not correct, but they comment that since the memoir comes from diary entries, mix-ups are
possible and erratic notation, especially during 1854, is commonplace. Another characteristic in
Chabrillan’s writing, according to Clancy and Allen, is her “…exaggeration, fabrication and
omission [with regard to] when Chabrillan is describing the role that she and Lionel played in certain events. There is a seemingly conscious effort on her part to attribute a greater importance to their public lives in Melbourne than was actually the case” (Clancy and Allan 12). Their research makes it easier to reason that some of the same may occur during the writing of the first memoir where Mogador represents herself as a naïve victim who has the courage to retaliate against a cruel society.

The third memoir based on the edited version of her diaries in the later part of her life was only recently made available to the public in an edition entitled Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul’s Wife translated and annotated by Jana Verhoeven, Alan Willey, and Jeanne Allen. The diaries which comprise the years from 1859 to the end of Chabrillan’s life had been mentioned in the courtesan’s biography by Françoise Moser, but then the documents disappeared. After Verhoeven rediscovered the final lost notebook diaries, she, Willey, and Allen translated, compiled and edited them in combination with missing sections summarized by Moser, into Chabrillan’s third and final memoir. The last findings in the final notebooks of course change some of the speculation in both the first and second memoirs as Chabrillan explains and reveals herself and her motives a bit more in her last years in relation to occurrences from the earlier periods. Verhoeven entitles the last section of her introduction “What Céleste Does not Tell.” She states that it is “clear that her writing cannot always be taken at face value” (Verhoeven 17) and that she omits certain elements in order to often make herself appear in a better light. Verhoeven writes that “She might have skipped over other events to preserve the image of the grieving widow that she wanted to project” (17) in her later years. For Verhoeven, Chabrillan is self-aggrandizing. Furthermore, Verhoeven writes that “her correspondence with Bourdillat, the publisher of her infamous first set of memoirs, casts
some doubt on her claim that she was manipulated into gaining this kind of notoriety. In the letters we find that she takes an active role in subsequent editions of the scandalous memoir—they were reprinted in 1858, and again in 1876” (18), but there is also the fact that by then she needed money to live. Chabrillan’s writing is key to her transformation, yet it will become both a source of good fortune and a curse. Even though she publishes around a dozen novels and writes more plays that any other French woman in the nineteenth century, she is unable to achieve the financial haven she dreams of because the initial scandal of the first memoir will plague her for the remainder of her life. Its fallout will block her from being fully accepted as a member of the writing guild and from being considered a respectable widow. The countess’s respectability is never totally recognized due to the obstacle put into place at the very first publication of her first memoir. She will never overcome the stigma of the scandal brought on by its publication and the reaction of the nobility and of Lionel’s family which will prevent her from achieving her dreams of acceptance into the *haute monde*.

The first two memoirs have received significant attention. Commentators highlight that Mogador’s memoirs offer a “commentary on Parisian society in all its splendor and all its misery [and] add a new perspective to the way in which we consider the Second Empire and the Third Republic today” (Verhoeven 19). Certainly the memoirs provide a rare glimpse into what it meant to be a single, ageing, and penniless woman in *fin-de siècle* Paris. In her introduction to the first memoir, Monique Nagem discusses the issues facing the prostitute and courtesan. She points out that Mogador’s memoir has a notable significance in its “disclosure of a specific class of nineteenth-century French society from the point of view of one of its members” (Nagem xv). Nagem writes that although the life of nineteenth-century Parisian courtesans “sparkled with glamour, splendor, and excitement” (ix) the reality of their situation is anything but secure and
charmed. Indeed a double standard prevailed; as she explains while men relished the freedom to navigate between a life of respectability, possibly including marriage, and a nightlife of promiscuity and revelry, without the condemnation of society, some courtesans are constantly reminded of their past as prostitutes by having to turn up periodically before the prefect to re-register and are unable to emerge in respectable company without risking public insult. Nagem’s translation made available to the English reading public a self-representation of “Mogador’s personality and intelligence, her fortuitous escape from the tyranny of prostitution and dependency on various men for her livelihood to a proper marriage to an aristocrat, and a long life as a reasonably respected woman of letters” (x).

As Claire Marrone has emphasized, what is distinctive about Mogador’s journey toward personal freedom and her search for a new sense of self is less the window it opens onto representations of society than the picture of the “exceptional” nineteenth-century heroine, a woman who is more gifted, capable, and intelligent than the vast majority (Marrone 335). In Writing With a Vengeance: The Countess de Chabrillan’s Rise from Prostitution, Carol Mossman notes that it is not the astonishing life or the versatility that makes Mogador extraordinary, “but rather her sheer determination to enter the ranks of respectability, cost what it may” (4).

Many courtesans have written memoirs and led colorful and exciting lives, but Mossman notes that it would be very difficult to find another person anywhere “who rose from what was surely the deepest circle of social hell and contempt by teaching herself to write and then embarking on a career as a playwright and novelist” (4). Mogador’s prolific productivity in writing from 1857 to 1885 generated twenty-six known plays, ten novels, several operetta librettos, and a second installment of her memoirs. It is Mogador (the whore) who tells us what
she is doing by writing all those works: she is righting her own “wrongs.” – but it is Mossman who suggests that La Mogador is really righting the “myriad of wrongs which the society of nineteenth-century France perpetuated on so many of the impoverished and the vulnerable” (4). This brings us to the aim of Mossman’s – *Writing with a Vengeance*, which is to study Chabrillan’s novelistic production “paying particular attention to the opportunities to reconfigure identity afforded through the complex mediation of the writing process itself” (4). Mossman considers much of Chabrillan’s novel writing “vengeance fantasy” which allows the courtesan novelist to work through her difficult past and cope with the ostracism from which she suffered after she registered herself as a prostitute—“If the justice sought by Céleste de Chabrillan in the course of her lifetime with respect to the social conditions leading to her own prostitution remains elusive, she can at least mete it out in fiction” (Mossman113).

While Mogador’s literary production of both novels and dramas came after she had written two of her memoirs, it is the memoirs which are the focus of this study, and it is through her first memoir that the reader first catches glimpses of the inner Chabrillan deeply embedded in the outer Mogador. That duality mentioned in the initial epigraph by Lionel is also found in her writing. A woman of substance, Mogador searches for her inner quality through her writing and it is in her memoirs that her true nature is candidly revealed in a Rousseauian retrospective confessional narrative.

**Rousseauian Narrative in the *Memoirs* and Lejeune on Retrospective Narrative Structure**

Whereas Mogador’s initial *Memoirs* are written in a retrospective confessional narrative style, her second memoir and her mid-to-late-life memoir are written in a diary/journal format which tends to recall present or recently passed events. The first memoir is recognizably Rousseauian in its confessional style of a retrospective narrative, yet it varies from Rousseau’s
pattern of *amour de soi* [self-growth] with an inevitable peppering of female guilt expressed through an *amour propre* [reputation]. The narrative must be looked at through the lens of nineteenth-century society’s repression of women through the construction of social limitations which were akin to a form of imprisonment in the private sphere rendering women of the public sphere as socially unacceptable. Mogador tells us she is sincere and aims to present herself in the best possible light; however the research of Clancy, Willey, Allen, and Verhoeven suggests that she does not tell all—so it is how she shapes her story in her defense narrative of her first memoir that is most important with regard to her Rousseauian confessional narrative. We find her shaping the tale within a process of shame, victimization, and blame owing to her inner sense of *amour de soi* as she travels the path to maturity and growth during the righting of wrongs all framed in her outer sense of *amour propre*. This adds a complexity to the Madonna/whore duality in which Mogador is ensconced. There are numerous examples of people recognizing her Rousseauian style over the years and a few examples follow. To define the concepts of *amour de soi* and *amour propre*: *Amour de soi* represents the instinctive desire for self-preservation, combined with the power of reason. In contrast, *amour propre* is false and emboldens one to compare oneself to others through the creation of a needless fear which compels oneself to take pleasure in the pain or weakness of others.

It is after reading Mogador’s first memoir that Alexandre Dumas père tells Prince Napoléon, whom he was trying to persuade to block the publication of the work just before Mogador marries Count de Chabrillan: “they are a kind of confession in the style of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—quite captivating—and they can harm no one but herself” (Dumas in Clancy and Allen 18). Verhoeven, Willey, and Allen include Mogador’s own *Foreword*, which was written for an eventual publication of her final diary memoirs, in the re-discovered diary notebooks in
Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul’s Wife. In this Foreword she mentions that Madame de Girardin had written that “after having read my memoirs and those of Rousseau, it was impossible to do better” (Chabrillan in Verhoeven, Willey, and Allen 22).

Mogador writes that her first memoir manuscript had been split into eight parts, published one after the other for five francs each volume, and sold like hot cakes. In the same fashion as Rousseau’s Les Confessions, Mogador’s initial memoir commences with her childhood and it presents a young person, an innocent victim, who goes astray. Marrone notes that Mogador, like many of the female writers of her time, veils her ambitious propensities with humility. Marrone says that Mogador’s story is a confession in the tradition of Rousseau in which she justifies her life, explaining her past without making it an occasion for self-glorification. She confesses even the scandalous details of her past to her readers… “Everything I have not dared say out loud, I am going to put down on paper. I do not plan to transform my life into a novel, and I do not intend to try to clear my name to pretend to be a heroine. As I describe what I have suffered, what ill or good I might have done, I shall tell all without holding back and you will see that I need a great courage to face my past” (Mogador 1 Trans. Nagem).

Mogador’s journey from adolescence into the world of prostitution followed by her emergence as a courtesan is told in a retrospective narrative whose aim is to acknowledge her fall and seek the readers’ forgiveness in a confession that shares features of Rousseau’s memoirs. In understanding Rousseau, Lejeune says that he paints his past (the Rousseau of 1728) with an almost contradictory double effort in 1764 because he is remembering his past through an adult lens in association with his childhood past, memory being fallible, meanwhile attempting to tell the past with the “intention of changing nothing therein” (Lejeune 26) which is impossible. For
example, early in *Les Confessions*, Rousseau writes about one incident which he considers important and concerns a specific personal character flaw. He says, “I took away with me the enduring memory of a crime and the intolerable burden of remorse, with which even now, after forty years my conscience is still weighed down, and whose bitter knowledge, far from fading, becomes more painful with the years (Rousseau 82). Rousseau is speaking of something that he considers a terrible deed—that of stealing a little ribbon, silver, rose-colored, and quite old. The “evil” deed is not just in the stealing, but rather in the lie to cover that fact to his employer, and the false accusation of a young girl servant, Marion, to avoid dismissal. However, both he and Marion are dismissed since it could not be proven who stole the ribbon. Forty years later, Rousseau wonders if by that lie he may have caused the girl worse damage in her future since finding a job would have likely proven more difficult, if not impossible. He is tortured by the idea that she may have had to take a worse route in life. The cruel memory and the distress it still brings Rousseau, so he writes, still keeps him awake at night. His guilt in this act of many years earlier helps Rousseau recognize that the young man who acted in self-interest at the expense of the girl was not whom he wanted to be. His adult justification of an act and the seemingly overwhelming remembrance of it help him recognize himself through *amour de soi* [self-growth] which he defines as an in depth understanding entirety of the “self.” Mogador’s three memoirs reflect a perpetual in-depth study of self, coupled with considerations of society’s effects upon self (*amour propre* [reputation]).

Mogador tells us that she narrates her story and presents herself in her first memoir, to the best of her ability, in the truest possible light. The reader must presume that the resemblance is sincere. Lejeune explains the author’s signature acts as an “autobiographical pact” which demonstrates the “intention to honor his/her signature” (Lejeune 14) and leads the reader to
expect sincerity. Upon first look, Mogador’s narrative is Rousseauian in style yet there are important differences to be considered. Mogador’s memoir is written in first person singular (autodiegetic) just as Rousseau’s autobiography. In the first editions however, Vénard signs her name as Céleste Mogador in each memoir, thereby not using her actual surname. Here is the first major inconsistency from Rousseau who signs his own renowned name. Rousseau is famous whereas Mogador is only a notorious celebrity: a social outcast. According to Mossman, the “highly condensed form, the four volumes, comprising the first set of memoirs (1854/58) and the second single-volume instalment (1877) entitled Un Deuil au bout du monde, suite des mémoires de Céleste Mogador signed, significantly, the Countess de Chabrillan” (36) is misleading since it misses Mogador’s signature. Mossman’s suggestions, based upon her research, state that “whereas the first series is signed by a demi-mondaine, the author of the later installment, the Countess of Chabrillan, has taken distance from her prostitutional identity by situating herself on the ‘right’ side of respectability, almost as if she were writing about her earlier self from the position of an alter-ego of sorts” (36).

When Writing with a Vengeance was published, Mossman’s only source of information for the missing diary notebooks from 1877 to 1907 was the Moser biography of 1930 where she learned that the sixteen notebooks and 1200 pages carried the revealing title of “Les deux noms” (The Two Names). Some of Mossman’s deductions may be incorrect and she may have missed some dates and information since the Bibliography of Patricia Clancy and Jeanne Allen in their 1998 translation of The French Consul’s Wife: Memoirs of Céleste de Chabrillan in Gold-Rush Australia gives different information. According to them, the 1854 five-volume first edition, the four-volume second edition of 1858, and the two-volume third edition of 1876 were all signed with Céleste Mogador as well as the initial publication in 1877 of Un Deuil au bout du monde,
suite des mémoires de Céleste Mogador. It is the translators of the 1877 memoir, Clancy and Allen, who decide to change the signature within the title to read Céleste de Chabrillan. It must be noted that Mogador’s memoirs, all originally signed Céleste Mogador with a pseudonymous signature do not strictly follow Rousseau’s precedent to use his own name in Les Confessions making them to some degree deceitful from conception.

Vénard’s choice of signature hints to the savvy reader since by signing with her adopted name of Céleste Mogador she makes the “autobiographical pact” a fiction from inception. Vénard’s use of her nom de guerre in place of her actual surname may be because she signed her real name in the police registry and had worked diligently to remain anonymous in the eyes of the police with regard to her “stage” name. A further reason may have to do with the very real fact that once famous under a nom de guerre, it is that signature which gives the work more value. The Mémoires would have sold many more with her celebrity soubriquet than with her given name. Yet a third reason may well have to do with Lionel’s family which not only objected to Céleste’s use of the family surname, but took an injunction out against her usage of it which was strongly supported in France due to their powerful political ties. It is the translators of the second memoir who change her choice of signature from Mogador to Chabrillan, most likely because she was known as the Countess of Chabrillan in Australia. In like manner, in note 6 of Verhoeven’s “Introduction”, Verhoeven states that the title for the third memoir, Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul’s Wife is given by the translators and annotators, but that Mogador called the first part of the manuscript Les deux noms (The Two Names) and the second part Petit journal de la fin de ma vie (Little Diary of the End of my Life) thus their choice to circumvent a clear signature in support of her duality.
Returning to an analysis of her initial memoir, Mogador is telling her story from her beginnings, thus the narrative is retrospective. The first memoir is the most retrospective since it recalls the first thirty years of her life and takes place at the height of her celebrity. This is similar to the format of Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*. This retrospective aspect is framed in a confessional narrative and Mogador uses this to defend her actions, pointing out how the fault lies more in social victimization than in any true character flaw of hers. At the start of the narrative, the reader is not aware that the reason for writing the memoir was to defend herself in court….that knowledge comes later in the memoir, in the chapter “The Law Lesson” with an explanation that her lawyer recommended she write it for her a trial defense. Mogador is not yet a polished writer, in fact it is her lawyer who helps her put her memories into words (information that the reader learns of in “The Law Lesson” chapter), and so there is a vast difference between her text and that of Rousseau who is a writer of the highest caliber.

Unlike Rousseau, whose style is forceful and eloquent, her style is direct, with numerous short sentences often joined by colons and semi-colons, as if dictating memories. There is a great deal of reported speech which enlivens the work. There is, however, no elegance to the style. A few parts strive for a more literary effect, and her natural melodramatic style expresses some feelings to heighten the effect. One commonality to Rousseau is that he introduced what would eventually become recognized as the characteristic idea of Romanticism which Mogador’s text mirrors to some extent—namely the art of free expression of a creative spirit.

Both Rousseau and Mogador also have in common the fact that significant works were censored, each enduring different effects upon their respective lives. Rousseau was innovative and revolutionary in *Les Confessions*; Mogador was simply frank in her first *Mémoires*. Although Mogador presents herself in a candid and simple manner, in her portrayal of herself she
comes across as an extraordinary person full of other positive traits: passion, generosity, intelligence, and compassion whereas parts of Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* can begin to appear paranoid, as Starobinski’s and Lilti’s readings of Rousseau have both pointed out.

Lilti points out that “what is intriguing is Rousseau’s ambivalent feeling of anguish about celebrity” (Lilti 55) He hypothesizes that “Rousseau experienced in a particularly sharp manner the paradoxes of celebrity, to which he was exposed more than others because he became, during his own lifetime, such a famous person and such a successful author” that the image the “public reflected back to him he could neither accept nor escape” (55). In blurring “the distinction between intimacy and publicity he was making his private life public matter and a literary topic.” (56)

Mogador does not have paranoid qualities but like Rousseau, she does suffer from the paradoxes of celebrity. She would try to free herself of these paradoxes through novel writing which, as Mossman argues, Mogador uses as a kind of therapy to justify her feelings prompted by her rejection from society.

Mogador has another singular quality that branches out from the Rousseauian idea of autobiography. In Mogador’s candor, the reader can recognize that she is attracted to glamor and the theater, and her writing reflects an undeniable theatricality. She is exceptionally courageous to be able to depict her person in such a vivid self-portrait. She is said to possess “a photographic memory, unusual descriptive powers, acute observation of people and places, a genius for dialogue, and—especially in a woman of her profession and era—an astonishing desire to learn; a passion for study” (Haldane 10). This is a useful ability especially in court proceedings and one her mentor lawyer surely appreciated. (It must also have come in handy in remembering what one had said previously so as not to contradict oneself).
In comparing Mogador’s three memoirs that span her lifetime, the framework constructed within those works casts celebrity as a problem. Rousseau does not concern himself much with his the development of his own celebrity, just with his critics whom he sadly had thought were his friends, but it is the paradox of his life that his celebrity would cause him so much anguish and an obsession with persecution. Mogador is also persecuted because of her celebrity by her husband’s family, but her fighting spirit will not allow her to become paranoid. Mogador’s writing from the start has a moral framework based upon the social standards of the time. It is clear nonetheless that she wants to fit into society. Mogador wants to be rehabilitated and redeemed in society’s eyes.

The difficulty in Mogador’s case with her celebrity lies in the fact that she is well-known as a public woman, has a reputation which she herself has confessed to in public in her four court cases, using her rise out of poverty and her ignorance of what celebrity entails as an example of how she has improved herself as a woman. And still this impedes her from ever being accepted into polite society and especially into Lionel’s aristocratic family circle. Although her works are written with more depth than many courtesan memoirs, she does not demonstrate the intellectual or social capital necessary to attain a place in the intellectual world, whereas Rousseau is known as a philosopher and his social capital and fame continued to grow after his death.

Where Mogador may have worked to rehabilitate herself and pull herself out of the depths of her previously low social status, the line between the “fallen” and the outstanding can never be crossed in nineteenth-century Parisian society.
The beginning section of her initial memoir includes “the fall” and the way Mogador constructs her character as an innocent victim who falls unwittingly into prostitution. She divulges in her narrative that she comes from a poor background, is illiterate and uneducated: “by the time I was ten, I still did not know how to read” (Mogador 1). She is however pretty: “everyone loved me and thought I was beautiful” (3). Although she finishes an apprenticeship as a seamstress which her mother had obtained for her, the young girl admits that “the plays I had been taken to when I was very young had spoiled my mind and inflamed my nature” (33) and she pictures herself rich, happy, and loved in her daydreams instead of as a working class girl.

There are several ways that Mogador uses the typical courtesan themes to tell her story, but her story has twists. Mogador’s story follows a trajectory that is typical of courtesan memoir – one wherein she presents herself as disadvantaged in certain aspects and so unable to survive in Paris on her own when she begins the journey to her “fall” at sixteen. (This trajectory is found time and again in both fiction and memoir. It is seen in George Sand’s *Isidora*, in the story of Marguerite in *La Dame aux camélias*, and in the real narratives of Marie Duplessis and Cora Pearl). Second, she comes from a violent environment where her current step-father attempts to rape her—“give yourself willingly, or I shall have you by force” (38) and Mogador writes that her mother refused to believe her side of the story, enabling the man’s actions. This too is a common element in courtesan confessional memoirs… some sort of early sexual abuse. Next, Mogador voluntarily agrees to work in a high class brothel about which she has been told by her older friend Denise whom she met in a criminal detention prison. Mogador finds herself held in prison after being picked up in the company of the registered prostitute, Thérèse, whom she met by accident when she had run away from home, sleeping at night in a hay barn, and walking the streets by day. Thérèse seeks to help her escape her step-father’s unprovoked sexual attack by
attempting to hide her in her flat. They are caught together on the street several days later and since fraternization with minors is forbidden for registered prostitutes, the young Mogador is taken away to the woman’s detention prison of Saint-Lazare. A month later her mother comes to assist her in getting released.

Once out, she waits for her sixteenth birthday and inscribes herself in the police registry for prostitutes. It is she who voluntarily chooses to “fall.” (The text is contradictory in the manner in which she chooses to “fall” and the fact that soon after, she sees herself as victimized. This is due to her signing the police registry with no idea what that really entails. Mogador’s initial gesture boxes her into a life of white slavery. The answer is in the fact that her innocence at the time of her incarceration does not allow her to comprehend the world she is about to enter. It is also proof that she is still very naïve.

Atypical of courtesan memoir is her confession to the reader that her “fall” was her own choice. She is admitting the error of her ways. It is a calculated risk because the reason for writing the memoir is to defend herself in a courtroom. This gesture is an example of Rousseau’s amour de soi [self-worth] through the admittance of such a fall, but the courtesan, Mogador, hedges her bets by tempering her confession with the explanation that it was brought about by her step-father’s improper sexual advances and her mother’s enablement. She leaves home at sixteen to escape her step-father’s advances, forcing her mother to go with her to the police prefecture where Céleste signs her name into the book of prostitute’s registered names “…my name was inscribed in this vile book and nothing can erase it, not even my death!” (Mogador 71 Trans. Nagem). The enabling mother agrees to let her daughter do this in order to keep the man she loves at home and end family strife. As Mogador sees it, her mother prefers her own lover to her daughter. Mogador is ashamed of her mistake and although she feels guilty and will self-
vilify for years, she blames her mother and society for allowing a sixteen-year-old the right to sell her body. She writes: “The next day I would have given half my life to take back the step I had taken, but there are ladders we can never go back up… It is impossible to be more humble than I have been . . . than I still am, before the sacred quality of the virtues I did not have the strength to exercise” (67). This statement is one of several Mogador includes in her narrative which has the quality of a “teaching moment” meant to dissuade others from taking her path. The reader is made to understand that she bitterly regrets having made the decision to sign her “X”.

The girl turned woman who begins life as Céleste, then Mogador, and finally Countess de Chabrillan has only two regrets during her life—a thread which runs through all her memoir narratives. One of her regrets is signing the prefecture’s prostitute registry and the second is writing her first scandalous memoir which causes her to lose any chance to ever be accepted into “polite” society.

The young girl soon realizes the mistake she has made after joining Denise in the high class brothel as an inscrite. She immediately seeks a way out of that situation. Accidentally, she meets a young man who comes to the brothel one evening. In Mogador’s narrative, she is ill and a young man kindly pays her debt, thereby buying her freedom. (Her version of her “escape” from the brothel also induces sympathy). He takes her home to get her medical attention from his personal family doctor. However, there is a twist to her story. What is atypical about this part of her story is that while ill she overhears the doctor say she has smallpox and express his concern if she should die in the young man’s home. She furtively runs away so as not to be a concern and goes to Saint-Louis Hospital where she is cured.

It is noticeable very early on in Mogador’s memoirs that she often paints herself in a good light: by nature a good person at heart (to employ Rousseau’s philosophy). In this vignette
she depicts herself as thoughtful enough not to remain in the young man’s home and risk causing him any discomfort or problems if she should die. She is also confessing that she does not want to take advantage of this man or abuse his hospitality. Her natural independence is also highlighted in this story as she takes herself to the hospital which was used for isolation and is situated just outside Paris walls.

If however, Mogador’s “fall” from innocence is taken as an example and compared to Rousseau’s “fall” from innocence, differences as well as similarities can be seen. Mogador writes: “I am dealing with an atrocious event and a dreadful day in my life… But having reached this point, I realize that if there are some horrible memories, by the same token there are some things that are very difficult to confess. I do not know how public these pages will be, but even if they have only one reader, I do not want that person to be able to accuse me of having concealed a single shameful act of my life” (67). Mogador describes her sixteenth birthday as the day she left home together with her mother to go down to the police precinct and sign her name into their “vile” book of prostitution registry. Upon thinking back, twelve years earlier, she asks herself why she took the step that ruined her and for which she paid so dearly later, and she can attest to the fact that the thought of depravity had nothing to do with her decision. She criticizes the “superior minds and generous hearts that have protested in the name of humanity against the black slave trade” (70) and suggests that they do something about the white slave trade. She admits that her “fall” was intentional. Paradoxically, her act was intentional in that she wanted to sign the police registry for prostitution, yet unintentional in that she did not know into what sort of life she was inscribing herself. She further suggests that it would never be possible in the current social atmosphere for anyone to believe in the sincerity of her repentance because “the world is not unhuman, just incredulous” (75). Mogador is concerned about image, yet confesses
openly to help herself win her court cases—a precarious venture. Mogador’s construction of her narrative takes its form from the fact that she blames what happened to her on her mother, her step-father, Thérèse, Denise, and even society’s white slavery, but she is accepting responsibility so that she can win the court’s respect.

The constant self-deprecation and lack of self-respect is multiplied because of the difficult start in life that Mogador underwent. As a young prostitute in a brothel she has little chance to escape. “The two days I spent hidden in this house were for me the most awful torture. The fevered enthusiasm that had sustained me had waned and in my heart was left only remorse. Discouragement, and a great loathing for myself and the life I had embraced” (Mogador 70). She confesses that “sometimes, tired of self-reproach, I would blame society. I would tell myself that it is barbaric to allow a sixteen-year-old child to enter into such a despicable contract… The law, which does not allow her to manage her property until she is twenty-one, lets a sixteen-year-old girl sell her body” (75). Mogador does not have a good self-image and has let herself get into some bad situations, but she recognizes that telling her story just as it is has its benefits.

Another time she writes of debt dependency and the toll she felt concerning her financial burden with the brothel. “The best method the women who run these types of establishments use to govern is the heavy debts they burden these unfortunate victims with. There was an accounting each week: I already owed eleven hundred francs. I was so sad that Madame allowed me to go out with Denise” (72).

Concerning her personal freedom she states, “When we came home, it seemed to me I hated my bondage even more than before going out because we were allowed to go only once a month” (72). With this self-criticism she is also dissuading others from taking a similar path in life. She writes about her guilt, yet at the same time lays some of it at society’s door. She pens:
I know that an elegant life of vice is still a life of vice, but I always thought that, even when a woman is wicked, it is to her advantage to seek the company of cultivated men. The ideal would be to be good, but, when that is not possible, it is preferable to be the mistress of a man of good taste rather than a boor, of a witty man rather than a dullard. This discrimination has allowed me, in spite of my moral decadence, to enjoy the pleasures of the mind, the refinements of art, and to form among the upper echelons of each social group propitious connections and durable friendships. (Mogador 106)

Mogador’s lack of self-respect is shown through her self-deprecating remarks in her memoir, but she has an innate sense of what culture is and pursues that knowledge and experience in art and literature.

The self-guilt felt by Mogador and expressed in her memoir is not unlike that felt by Rousseau, but he only talks out about society’s opinion of him near the end of Les Confessions. It is not an overwhelming theme in the work. He is more interested in the idea of amour de soi [self-worth] as opposed to amour propre [reputation]. The former is as absolute and fulfilling as the latter is relative and disfiguring. So, the main difference between Mogador’s memoirs and those of Rousseau is that the recovery of self as Rousseau sees it involves the removal of social pressures which by their nature generate not true self-affirmation but, rather, a competitive and anxious amour propre [reputation]. Mogador wants to be involved within a social setting, even accepted by society, and so amour propre [reputation] is interpolated into her style of memoir, while Rousseau alienates himself more and more from society in his effort to understand and love himself completely, purporting his new philosophy of amour de soi [self-worth].

An example of Mogador’s need to be accepted in a social setting at the expense of her own self-worth, her amour propre, is expressed in the following vignette from her first memoir: Mogador pens that she accompanied Count de Chabrillan, her lover, to his chateau at his request. She thought that she would enjoy country life. He loved riding and hunting and he would go on expeditions with friends weekly. Mogador goes along for the company, but she does not care for the country. Her narrative clearly expresses a wish to fit in to his surroundings but her needs are
being ignored. She suggests he stay home in the chateau more often to save money and avoid his family’s disapproval in money matters. His answer is to admonish her by asking her why she stays if she does not enjoy the country. Hunting is his great passion, he expounds, and if she does not enjoy it, he states, she can leave. (His total disregard for her needs and feelings had already made her question her self-worth when he had suddenly left Paris without word and remained away for weeks, leaving her to wonder what she had done wrong. She attempted suicide). He states he would tolerate no admonitions from anyone. This is a clear slap in her face and a denigration of her worth as a friend and woman. (A gentleman did not treat a woman in that way. It was against the code of gallantry). Mogador writes that she left the living room for her bedroom shocked since he had never addressed her in that manner, and began packing her trunks. He asks her why she is really going and accuses her of lying, sure that she is meeting a man. The way she fashions her frank narrative here as told in her memoir gives credence to her courtroom audience and supports the argument that she had to put up with ill treatment from this man who had left his debt in her hands and escaped his debtors by leaving Paris for foreign lands.

She does not mask her own character flaws in her memoir, but reveals them to her readers in a typically Rousseauian reflexive narrative manner. In the vignette she reveals her need to be where she can be herself, vivacious and Parisian. She shares her individual needs in writing without embarrassment. Idealistically, it might be said that her writings stand for the rights of the individual in a ruthless and materialistic society and she continues to beat upon the closed doors of society’s homes to awaken those hidden inside to a sense of humanity, empathy, and right-doing. Her strength is in her independence and her powerful sense of social justice. Her future novels will mirror those qualities.
Mogador paints herself like many other courtesans as an illiterate who comes from a poor working class background, yet atypically she is a fiercely independent, defiant, headstrong, and rebelliously natured young woman who is not manipulative, nor is she a lady of the camellias. Actually, she does not exactly fit into a courtesan type. Her brilliance and creativity are what save her. Perhaps one could say she began poorly, but eventually wrote her way out of the back streets of Paris.

Another character flaw she shares with her reader audience is that at the beginning of her early life she is exceedingly ambitious with a temperament and a “tongue” that is akin to a loose cannon. In her first work, *Memoirs of a Courtesan*, she tells of an evening out following an attempted suicide when she admits that her state of mind did not produce an even temperament saying, “My health had been acutely affected by my suicide attempt. . . . Such a state of mind did not produce an even temperament. . . What increased my bad mood was that I was seated next to a very handsome man who was quite pleased with his own person; … Things got off to a bad start, I had not opened my mouth yet and I already had two enemies” (165-66). Although Mogador wants to fit into these elegant surroundings, her temperament gets in her way. At this moment she is still that young woman, full of contradictions who, although she wants to be accepted into society, cannot control herself enough to truly mimic the people and surroundings. She is still emerging from her past life and has yet to acquire the finesse to become like the “other”—the socially adroit in *savoir faire*. Mogador is willing to put into print what she recognizes as her own character flaws from the very start of her writing yet in this first memoir while she is still very young she blames others for her own flaws.

The subsequent section looks at the chapter within the initial memoir entitled “The Law Lesson” and examines the mixture of blame and manipulation of facts found there. Comparing
those elements to findings in the recently published third memoir concerning Mogador’s longstanding relationship with her lawyer, M. Desmarest, reveals several findings which support aspects of her rehabilitation and maturity. In the third memoir, she blames Desmarest, who suggested the first memoir’s composition as a defense in her court cases as a means to induce sympathy from the court. At that time, Mogador is in her late twenties and has already been enjoying a full career as a courtesan for some time. As her life changes, that memoir will return to haunt her.

“The Law Lesson”: Manipulating Public Opinion and Unintended Future Results

Each of Mogador’s memoirs presents a different perspective ranging from the full bloom of carefree youth to old age. Mogador is in her twenties when she writes her first memoir. M. Desmarest is a lawyer who is recommended by both Lionel and her current lawyer in Paris, M. Picard; in Châteauroux, her lawyer is M. Berton-Pourriat. She has four proceedings with which she must deal. She writes that as she expected, “my apartment on rue Joubert, my carriages on rue de la Chaussée-d’Antin, and my house in Berry were seized, and there was opposition to the mortgage Lionel had left in payment for the money I had lent him” (Mogador 287). All his possessions were divided up, and Mogador was being sued everywhere. Mogador has made a celebrated reputation for herself by this time and she is thought to be far richer than she actually is: “My life depended on a double lie: a financial lie and a moral lie and the ground under my feet was mined. It was thought that I was more wicked than ever, and my soul was worth more than my life” (288). Her reflexive narrative here is Rousseauian. She tells the truth yet tempers it with a social criticism of self. In this chapter entitled “The Law Lesson”, Mogador explains to her readers just how much effort she put into learning about the law, about writing, and about courtroom proceedings. She takes her future very seriously. It is because of her great regard for
amour propre [reputation] that she will choose to work hard to self-rehabilitate. She knows how society regards her. Mogador knows that in order to win her cases and also save Lionel’s reputation, she must do as her lawyer recommends—write a memoir telling her life’s story up until that point so as to win the sympathy of the court. She undertakes writing her first memoir with the assistance of M. Desmarest, who helps her with editing, spelling, and structure. Her memoir has to be written in a manner to induce sympathy within the court. Its purpose is to sway the court to exonerate Mogador in any responsibility for Lionel’s debt. She must appear innocent in her initial fall into prostitution for the police registry records work against her. Her memoir musts prove that she “fell” into prostitution accidentally because she was enticed by the idea of becoming rich yet had no idea what prostitution necessitated. It was an important part of her defense since during the trials she is at the height of her courtesan career and the two facts appear contradictory.

During the entire pre-trial period, Mogador asks to have her rights explained to her. She researches the code of laws, she listens, and she asks questions. She is by nature, so she herself explains, defiant so she asks for clarification in order to be sure that the moneymen are not taking advantage of her. She tells the reader that she spends her life in “bailiff offices, attorney offices, in magistrate offices” (Mogador 288). Her comments in the narrative have a depth dissimilar to Pearl’s memoir which, as will be observed, is almost never reflective. Her first win concerns her furniture from her previous apartment on the rue Joubert which had been given to her by an English lover, Richard. What the reader gets from this is her first sense of confidence in the entire judicial affair. Her feeling of self-confidence is the start of her metamorphosis into a more mature woman. She beats an unethical system which was arranged underhandedly to ensure a
desired outcome against her, and at the same time she is able to save face for Lionel. For the first
time in her life she feels worthy as a woman—valued for who she really is.

In her representation from this period of her life, Mogador depicts herself as a public
woman who has to fight in court for the right to retain the lifestyle she has earned. She must
explain that the furniture the creditors are attempting to take away from her apartment was not
given to her by Lionel, but instead by a previous lover, Richard, and therefore belongs to her.
She must allow herself to be victimized by the very court proceedings which force her into
confessing her private life in public in order to make her case so she can win and survive. In fact,
she has to explain in public every detail about her life in order to prove that she is not a proxy for
Lionel, and also that she has loaned him money in order to help him during the financial
difficulties that occurred just before his public bankruptcy. The creditors are trying to hold her
responsible for his losses and bankruptcy and get out of her what money they cannot get out of
him in repayment for his debts. Their pursuit is because Lionel signed over his apartment to her
in exchange for her loan to him, so that she would have some security while he was away in
Australia panning for gold. It is because of an illegal entrance and search, and the theft of
numerous letters and papers that belonged to Lionel which were being kept in her home that the
judge in one case, when presented with this information, sentences the bailiff to one month
suspension and expenses.

This was enough to frighten these gentlemen and they ask her to withdraw her complaint.
Thanks to their error, and to Desmarest’s defense strategy, Mogador liberates herself from the
financial responsibility she was carrying. She is even able to insist that the jeweler annul the debt
of a young male friend for which Lionel de Chabrilan had vouched. Thanks to her work as an
actress during this episode, Mogador is able to pay on his behalf the entire twenty thousand
francs to cover that debt. She makes good on everything Lionel owes and is left without a stain upon her name with regard to finances. Her explanation of the facts ensures that she comes out the winner. A transformation is taking place within Mogador. Yet, the reader is left to wonder about the sincerity of some of Mogador’s actions for she says she must perpetrate a financial and a moral lie. “My life depended on a double lie: a financial lie and a moral lie” (Mogador 288). Verhoeven comments in the “Introduction” to the final memoir that “as a woman, displaying a tendency to self-interest and, occasionally, dishonesty, she leaves us with mixed feelings” (18). In her court proceedings the reader might choose to question her sincerity.

The sincerity in the initial memoir which could be questioned by the reader is arguably clarified by Mogador’s behavior as Lionel’s wife in the second memoir. Reason being, her first memoir was manufactured in cooperation with her defense lawyer in a court case specifically to persuade the judges of her innocent entry into her corruption. After it had served its purpose, she found another use for it. It had monetary value as a celebrity memoir, so she decided to get it published. However, that was also a huge mistake for what she had shared about her life before meeting Lionel and of their life together was to follow her in a new life with him in Australia and cause her, once again, to regret making their life in Paris public knowledge. (An unintended future result which comes out of this period of collaboration with the lawyer Desmarest will be discussed in the brief examination of the third memoir).

Clancy and Allen: Some Findings in *The French Consul’s Wife*

During the chapter entitled “Law Lesson” which is obviously written in connection with the court cases and their judgments, Mogador portrays herself as a more confident winner, a woman who has fought the odds against her and won, and a woman who has saved her lover from the embarrassment of insurmountable debt. She describes herself as a woman who has
learned much about the legal system and law, and who is able to live more humbly, and is willing to humble herself in order to save Lionel. She has already portrayed herself as a caring person with regard to other’s problems.

In fact, throughout this initial memoir, the reader has examples of Mogador’s generosity and warm, caring heart. She visits her dancer friend and rival Lise (Queen Pomaré) who has been suffering from consumption for a long while. Over a period of many months Lise’s consumption worsens until she is abandoned by her lover and all her friends except Mogador who stays with her to the end. It is Mogador who cries when her friend dies. She remarks that all others around her had dry eyes. Mogador describes how she closed her friend’s eyes, kissed her forehead, and buries her the following day with only two other mourners and the coachman. It is Mogador who orders a metal enclosure and a marble tombstone with the words: “Here lies Lise…born 22 February 1825, deceased 8 December 1846. Her friend, Céleste” (Mogador 163). Even Lise’s mother who has inherited fifteen thousand francs, after paying off her daughter’s debts, does nothing for the daughter’s tomb.

The young Mogador’s encounter with death is once again tested when her maid, Caroline, becomes sick with cholera and dies. She leaves a small, fragile girl child whom the doctor hands to Mogador stating that Caroline will never live. The child’s father is present and asks Mogador to hold the little girl at the baptismal font the next day. She brings the child who has been left in her care the previous night, naming her Solange after a young woman she had known in Berry. Although the infant is afterwards left in a hospice overnight, the following day Mogador returns to ask after the child. Her wet nurse has not yet arrived and Mogador sees death all around the room. People are dying of cholera and she observes a child who will not nurse
upon its sick mother’s breast. Leaving five francs for the mother, she removes Solange and takes her away.

As godmother, she raises the child, even taking her to Australia when she leaves France with Lionel. These incidents demonstrate the generosity of spirit and compassionate nature of Mogador which, along with several other incidents narrated in the memoir add to the presentation of her good and natural character for the court cases. Generosity and compassion are common characteristics in courtesans often coupled with a childlike view of life. This is again a use of the Rousseauian approach to retrospective reflexive memoir.

This section looks at the second memoir written in Australia when Mogador is now Lionel’s wife and he has taken up the job of French Consul to Melbourne, Australia. Even though her reputation is marred by the first memoir that preceded her arrival there, she works to re-build her life in a new world, in a new way. By now she is married and has the title of Countess de Chabrillan, but since her reputation followed her to Australia, for the purposes of this study on courtesans, she will continue to be referred to as Mogador even though the translators refer to her as the Countess of Chabrillan.

The translators of this second memoir have discovered some different character traits than those portrayed in the first memoir. Her translators have unmasked some of her character anomalies. Where in her initial memoir she must portray herself as telling complete truth in order to win her court cases, we find in the second and third memoirs that some things in the first memoir could be questioned only because she is not what she portrays herself to be in the second and third memoirs. Mogador tries to portray herself as an upright and good wife, who works to maintain a respectable reputation even though she has to fight against her past reputation which preceded her entrance into Australian Victorian society. She does charitable work toward fellow
Frenchmen in difficulty in Australia, helps in her husband’s charities, and takes serious steps toward learning English. She also improves her French by keeping a diary and writing her first novel, *Les Voleurs d’or*. According to her translators, Clancy and Allen, Mogador attempts to make herself appear more important through their combined actions and appearances than might have actually been true. Writing about their life together with the idea of publishing an autobiography may be what Mogador had in mind since she exaggerates to make them look good. The reader can surmise that, on the one hand, she must fight for her position and reputation in a new city, but on the other, she is working against her past transgressions. She is fighting without knowledge of a new language, and so her ability to understand is limited. It is also likely that her social contacts are limited to those who speak French or those who are tolerant of her past. Clancy and Allen talk of some anomalies in her explanation of historical events that they were able to verify with research. It is likely a combination of finding herself in a foreign land, a stranger without the language, and at a disadvantage because of the arrival of her scandalous memoir before she set foot on the ground. How could she understand the hostility other than through a glare or a raised eyebrow? The translators believe that she overstated the hostility she found there.

Céleste presents herself as an innocent who has the courage to fight back against a cruel society. We can conjecture that she probably overstates the hostility that she encountered in Melbourne in an attempt to impress upon the reader her strength of character in enduring such painful social ostracism. Against the backdrop of a dissolute society, Céleste projects herself and her husband as models of rectitude. (Clancy and Allen 13)

According to their research, Mogador appears to have manipulated the reader audience in order to project change to re-work her reputation and behavior. This memoir presents another side of Mogador, to some extent different from the one she depicts in her first memoir, but the reader might recall her mentioning her temperament in the earlier memoir. Some examples of her attempts to manipulate the reader are found in her exaggeration about the length of her outbound
voyage on the Croesus. She claims that in Melbourne there was much concern for the ship’s fate, “with all the newspapers concluding that it had been lost at sea” (12). No articles could be found by the translators. Another example is Mogador’s manipulation through exaggeration is her referral to the “attention paid her in the press, with many newspaper articles giving details of her past and questioning Lionel’s wisdom in his choice of a wife” (12). Clancy and Allen could find no such reports in any of the major Melbourne papers; “even the Melbourne Punch, notorious for its lampoonery, made no mention of her. Indeed, the lack of interest shown in her by the press is quite surprising” (12). Finally, Mogador writes of visiting the Ballarat goldfields where, according to Mogador, “the miners gave them a grand welcome and many spectators expressed admiration when she descended into a mine. It was during this same time that the governor and his wife, Sir Charles and Lady Hotham, made an inspection of the mines. A number of newspaper articles mention the great impression that Lady Hotham made upon the miners” (12). Clancy adds that it was not at all uncommon for immigrants-turned-writers to stretch the truth occasionally and mix a little fiction with genuine experience. Did her ideas come from the newspaper articles about Lady Hotham?

She had been acting on stage in Paris and this skill also weighs into the analysis of the second memoir. Her sincerity had not aided her as she explained in her first novel since she admits that she was never able to persuade her tormentors Théodore de Lesseps and her brother-in-law Théodose de Chabrillan, that she was worthy to carry the title of comtesse. She will try to persuade people for the rest of her life that she is a good person and worthy of respect. It is this initial resistance which sets the stage for the dominating theme which resonates throughout the rest of her life in Australia and in Paris: “an honest upright widow, alone in the world, who is
subjected to the prejudices of society” (Verhoeven 8). She will spend a lifetime trying to be respected.

**Verhoeven: Findings in the Third Memoir—Courtesan and Countess**

In *Courtesan and Countess: The Lost and Found Memoirs of the French Consul’s Wife* the sincerity is far more questionable. We see her merely posing in the mask of the righteous widow in her self-characterization. For example, in the *Introduction*, Verhoeven points out that Mogador’s continued relationship with Desmarest could not be more ambiguous. On the one hand, she repeats her disdain and dislike for the ambitious and intelligent lawyer whom she had known at the height of her courtesan celebrity and who had talked her into writing her initial memoirs. By the third memoir, she has judged him the cause of all her sorrows and difficulties in her endeavor to claim respectability, yet on the other hand she admits accepting his generosity and the reader is “left wondering if their arrangements and interactions are as simple and straightforward as she claims them to be” (Verhoeven 8). She does not reveal everything here. Desmarest is eager to support her intellectual and artistic development and it is known that he provides the infrastructure for Mogador’s mobile field-hospital project during the Franco-Prussian War. One questions just how deep their relationship goes. In addition, it is well known that she had an ongoing friendship with Georges Bizet which is well documented and it is easy to understand her sense of privilege to have known this musical genius prior to his fame as well as her pride at the amorous advances from a younger man. Beyond these relationships, no matter what type they are, she has a strong friendship with Gabriel Ranvier, a political dissident and puritan revolutionary, and later with the septuagenarian, Comte de Naurois, about which, as Verhoeven states: “one can never completely shake off the impression that Mogador entertains this friendship because she profits from it” (10). Clearly, a single woman without a regular
income could find a sense of security in a protector who was moreover a respected aristocrat. And finally, there is the clear friendship between Mogador and Dumas père who helps her more than anyone else. He promoted her first novel and later re-worked it into a “compelling play, even renouncing his rights as an author” (11). Finally, the reader, having read all three memoirs, can review Mogador’s life from beginning to end and more clearly see her growth as well as her innately human character flaws when viewed with careful observation.

In her final memoir she is still blaming M. Desmarest for the social vilification from which Mogador is never able to recover even in her final diaries at the end of her life. It takes her many years to realize that by her agreeing to write those memoirs he had caused irreparable damage to her reputation which could never be resuscitated socially. Mogador is never able to take the blame for that error and instead blames Desmarest for her public shame due to the revelations in her first memoir. In 1866 she writes, “I received a visit from Maître Desmarest…..” “Are you glad to see me?” “Not really, because you completely misled me a long time ago. Do you know all the horrible things I’ve had to put up with because I followed your advice?” (Mogador in Verhoeven, Willey, and Allen 91). Desmarest’s response to her accusation is a typical response of one who is male and privileged and one who lives in both the demi-monde by night and the tout-monde by day. In fact, Maître Desmarest, as Mogador refers to him, is part of the ‘rank and file’ with regard to the haute monde. He suggests that her experience is the fate of all who seek to rise above mere mortals by means of their own willpower and that she is someone now because of him. He further adds that for someone who began life so far below the social scale, to have reached the heights that she has, without being smashed by all the obstructions that she has had to triumph, she should instead count herself grateful and lucky rather than complain about it. He represents the male social hegemony yet alive in the second
half of the nineteenth century. Mogador responds, “But I have received nothing but reproaches from those who want to prevent me from earning a decent living by means of the very profession of a writer that you imposed on me” (Mogador in Verhoeven, Willey, and Allen 92).

It is in the third memoir that an avid reader of Mogador is able to comprehend the long-lasting effects that the penning of her initial memoir had on her entire life and the manner in which celebrity posed a problem in the life of a woman because of its framing in the context of a male dominant society standard which had corralled women into a domestic life or no life at all. (We will continue to refer to her with her courtesan soubriquet of Mogador rather than Countess de Chabrillan which is her name in the title of the work). Even after all her efforts to self-rehabilitate and redeem herself through her improvements in her education, her talent for writing, and her many charitable works, she was never able to wash away the initial impression her celebrity had made upon a society still imprisoned in its own rigid framework. Society will continue to view her as the femme fatale: only Count de Chabrillan will see her completely. As he says in the quote at the start of this chapter: “What I love in you is not Mogador, but another woman who is trying to escape from her,” Lionel sees both “the femme/satan and the uplifting femme vertueuse/bien aimée at the same time” (Marrone 343). In reality, he was her redeemer.

**Epistolary Section**

Letters are included in courtesan memoir to verify that the persons to whom the author refers are in fact friends or even lovers. The letters from Lionel to Mogador play a very essential part in the confessional narrative since they are produced in order to demonstrate and uphold the narrator’s story. She makes the reader aware that she knows that she must provide sincere proof of what she writes about her life where she is able. As Marrone suggests, women live through their relationships: “[T]ypical of women’s texts, the protagonist’s development is nurtured and
shaped by her connection with others; Céleste’s self-discovery will be intertwined with the psychological evolution of her lover” (Marrone 335). So Mogador must prove that Lionel loves her—first to show that she is a changed woman—matured—and second to be the heroine of her *bildungsroman*.

In her first memoir, Mogador includes numerous letters to and from Lionel. The letters function as multi-purposed. They provide proof of the story she is relaying to the reader, they also give insight into the character of the relationship between Lionel and Mogador, and they offer an understanding of the inner and outer journey that Lionel and Mogador take to becoming adults and contributing members of society. Beyond the reasons given above, the letters also have a large role in Mogador’s rehabilitation since they are the catalyst for her inner journey of growth that culminates in a loving, dedicated woman who discovers that she is in love with only one man. As shall be seen in the Cora Pearl chapter, Cora’s letters do not show a psychological journey but instead seem merely circumstantial and sensational, presenting only letters from the highest ranks of men in her life. The physical and psychological journey illuminated through his letters parallels the same journey that Mogador takes in her self-rehabilitation. His love does not rehabilitate her, she rehabilitates herself, but his love will provide a safe place for her in which to find her better self. It could be said that both are protagonists in her memoir and each one has a quest journey to experience in their lives that depicts inner growth from outer experience. This idea is purported by Claire Marrone in “Male and Female *Bildung: The Mémoires de Céleste Mogador*”. As she explains it “the embedded male quest for selfhood parallels that of the main character and highlights the gender prejudices of nineteenth-century French society” (Marrone 335). In addition, through Lionel’s letters to Mogador during their tempestuous courtship, the reader can identify his anxiety in his confusion with the feelings he bears for her He is confused.
about his love for a woman whom he desires but cannot admire. In the dichotomy that opposes
the virgin to the whore the latter are despised and devalued, while the former are idealized and
loved platonically.

The first letters in Memoirs of a Courtesan in Nineteenth-Century Paris (Adieux au
monde, mémoires de Céleste Mogador) are a series of back-and-forth letters that correspond to
the couple’s tumultuous break-ups and get-togethers. The count disappears without explanation
due to his father’s death. She is beside herself. Angry, Mogador explains her motivation for
certain actions. “‘To bring him back at my feet,’ I told myself, ‘there is only one way: to torment
him. And since I loved him very much, I was merciless’” (Mogador 192). She writes such
coquettish letters that Lionel is more smitten than ever. A week later, he writes: “My dear child, I
am coming to Paris for two days. I shall be at the Hôtel Chatam” (192). He is caught in her web.
Mogador is at her height as a courtesan and plays her social power within the male hegemonic
rules to gain and maintain access.

After his father’s death, Lionel is consequently pushed to marry for money by friends and
family. He receives and hides numbers of letters sent to the apartment of which Mogador learns.
Her suspicions get hold of her and while he is out of the apartment she gets the key to his desk
and opens it. Inside are letters which speak of a marriage to a certain Mademoiselle de B—who
is concerned that Lionel has been seen speaking to Mogador in the streets of Paris. Another
separation between them only brings reconciliation. He invites her to his chateau in the country
only for it to end in boredom and another separation. It is during this period that she begins
seeing another man in Paris—Richard. However, the relationship remains a secret to Lionel until
she finally admits that Richard has offered her forty thousand francs and has asked her to marry
him. His reaction seems one of a typical gad-about-town, but upon her return back home she is handed a letter from Lionel:

When one loves a woman unworthy of oneself and one feels too weak to leave her, one becomes deaf and blind, as I should have been. The heart of a girl like you is like a disreputable inn. The honest wayfarer who inadvertently enters endures the sneers of the regular guests. You say that I have not loved you. But the love I have had for you is my only excuse. Your fake love, however, began with a caress and ended with a price. I am not rich enough. You are free. –Lionel (252)

This letter is included in the Memoirs for the purpose of the court to confess that she left him being not attached to his money. It is similar to the letter sent to Marie Duplessis from Alexandre Duval (alias Alexandre Dumas fils) in La Dame aux camélias:

MY DEAR MARGUERITE: I hope that your indisposition yesterday was not serious. I came, at eleven at night, to ask after you, and that you had not come in. M. de G. was more fortunate, for he presented himself shortly afterward, and at four in the morning he had not left…. Good-bye, my dear Marguerite. I am not rich enough to love you as I would, nor poor enough to love you as you would. Let us then forget, you a name which must be indifferent enough to you, I a happiness which has become impossible (Dumas fils 108-9)

This comparison demonstrates the similarities of the two letters in both works. During the youthful period of both couples at the start of each respective work there is an immaturity that is played out in the letters. The journey to maturity for Mogador is experienced in the progressive journey through her memoirs along with her journey to redemption as in the novel by Dumas fils.

In spite of this similarity, the differences between the works appear as the two diverse genres progress. In La Dame aux camélias Dumas fils has written a romantic femme fatale genre, whereas Mogador’s memoirs have a clear bildungsroman footprint. Since this study has defined the epistolary section as a sort of bildungsroman, it can be said that its footprint exaggerates the Madonna/ whore dichotomy which is the burden Lionel bears and which must be overcome as he matures though the progress of Mogador’s first two memoirs. Mogador’s parallel burden is her desire to titillate and capture which is at the heart of the courtesan power game. Her maturity
arrives in tandem with her self-rehabilitation in the second memoir through the righting of social wrongs within her various works.

One final set of letters during the early period of the couples’ immature relationship must be examined. After a significant separation Mogador suddenly receives the following letter from Lionel:

Céleste, I cannot live this way. I relied too much on my strength; cannot live without you. Do you know what it is like to love as I love you? It is madness! I am insane: I am offering you my fortune, I am offering you my life, my name, my home. I am going to liquidate what I own. In a few days I am selling my lands; we can be happy far from here. Do not refuse me; answer me. (274)

Lionel confesses that he is willing to give up everything for his love of Mogador. Her response to his letter is an example of one of the first signs of maturity in Mogador:

My dear Lionel, I am returning this letter, of which, I am not worthy and which cannot be addressed to a woman like me. Your crown of nobility would be my crown of thorns. I would not be able to look at these poor outcasts I have lived with, and I would never have the right to look at an honest woman. There are two paths; yours and mine. Let me be Mogador, you continue being Lionel de C—. Get out of this frame of mind. I shall always be your friend. (275)

There is no sign of a desire to rehabilitate or to love only him. The constant teeter-tottering in the relationship has procured a complete reversal of the feeling previously felt by the other. There is a brief role reversal. The game for power between the sexes is being played very seriously. Where she once loved him and he not so much, now he loves her and she is pretending not to love him. Her insincerity is her downfall. She has not yet matured nor is she willing to take steps toward rehabilitation.

In the next chapter of her memoir entitled “To the Antipodes,” Mogador begins by stating that six days later she receives another letter from Lionel which gives her a shock from which she does not recover for a long time. He explains that he is ruined. He has refused Mogador’s vain attempts to guide him into curbing his spending. His ruination comes by means of a
businessman to whom he had given the power to sell his estate during his absence and, abusing his trust, has sold it for half of its value. He continues, “All I have left is a life of poverty and isolation…. When I sold my possessions I had my papers and my family portraits sent to your house…. Sell them… I am leaving for Africa. … The way I feel about you is an enigma to everyone, even to me. To love, there must be respect, and I despise you…. Do not write me anymore” (276). Once again there is a reversal of feelings. Mentioned by Dumas in the guise of the narrator in La Dame aux camélias he repeats the words Armand Duval tells him he is feeling upon Marguerite’s suggestion to get financing from her protector for a summer place in Bougival for the two of them. He confesses: “Je ne pus m’empêcher de rougir à ce mot de bénéfices; je me rappelai Manon Lescaut mangeant avec Desgrieux l’argent de M. de B.” [I could not help flushing at the word benefits; I thought of Manon Lescaut squandering with Desgrieux the money of M. de B.] (Dumas 104). It is a literary element of the typical courtesan story to include that of the financially ruined aristocrat or bourgeois man who, if he does not commit suicide, will go to another country in search of fortune.

The last chapters of the first memoir focus on letters received from Lionel on his trip by sea, first to London, and then to Australia in search of gold. A later chapter presents letters written to her during his gold digging period, similar to the end of Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias wherein Marguerite’s letters to Armand tell a story. In the Dumas novel they are the confessions of Marguerite who is dying while she awaits the arrival of Armand from afar. They are the most significant revelation of her inner character development and maturity, but the reader can never know if they are Dumas fils’s invention of what he would like Marguerite to be, or if the letters actually are letters from Marie Duplessis to Alexandre Dumas fils re-figured into the novel. His novel is in itself a sort of romantic version of reality and a personal confession
hidden behind the invented characters of his creative and fantastical young mind mixed and tempered with truths of Duplessis’s husband, Count de Perrégaux. Mogador’s letters hold quite a different significance.

The letters presented in Mogador’s memoir are those that are actually sent while Lionel is on the ocean trip to Australia and which mirror the transformation Lionel experiences during his adventure outside France. We must believe that they are real for no Parisian courtesan woman could make up these sorts of stories if she has not lived them. When it is possible, the letters are sent along with ships met during the voyage: the first series of letters is from the initial trip to Australia. As he writes the reader is able to see the changes that take place in him because of the suffering and the incidents that he encounters and survives which by the end of his journey transform him into a mature man. In his initial letter from London, the immature Lionel insults her as he writes: “You can be such a beautiful courtesan when you want to! One who knows how to devour, shred, trample a destiny like mine. Mogador, for whom this poor Lionel sacrificed everything...! Well she must be quite a beauty! Lionel, who overcame his prejudices, who escorted her before all of Paris! Since I have met you I have not had a single thought for another woman…” (279). He insults the part of the virgin/whore dichotomy which he is unable to love honorably.

And the very next letter has elements of mixed emotions: “You will see on the ring that I am sending you the date of 15 May… That is the day that everything ended for me... This ring that I am sending you, as well as my portrait, will allow you to increase your value and demand a higher price for your personal assets… Today as I am leaving, I realize it was not you, Mogador, I loved, but a dream… God will damn you, you are such a heartless and soulless woman” (280). The reader is to understand the suffering Lionel is going through dealing with his disdain for the
part of her dual personage that is embodied by the whore. Moreover, he immaturely blames all of his bad luck on Mogador being unable to take responsibility for his own financial failures. She has already explained how she has, in the past, warned Lionel of his reckless spending and his thoughtlessness in throwing away good money after bad. It is from this deep hole that Lionel will arise like a phoenix with each following letter becoming an increasingly mature man until his return to her in Paris. Again on July 27, he writes: “Yesterday I found among my belongings a little box you gave me two years ago. My whole fortune is made up of your portrait, my horseshoe pin, this box, and four letters from you. Those are the only things I cherish. Even though your letters are nothing but lies, I re-read them every day” (Mogador 285). Lionel’s feelings are still flagellating with regard to Mogador. In his mind his concept of her is migrating to the Madonna half from the whore half of that dichotomy. He is holding onto his blame. On September 20 from Sydney, Australia he writes her for what he thinks might be the last time saying, “Céleste, I do not want to begin my journey without sending you my last adieus, you who have been the only love of my life and whose memory will leave my thoughts only when my life ends. It seems that my love for you has increased in proportion to the pain you have caused me. I love you as I have always loved you” (Mogador 286). Absence does make the heart grow fonder… Mogador includes Lionel’s letters in her Memoir to reveal to the court both Lionel’s mixed messages of blame, his confusion, and his desperate love for her. The mixed messages help bolster Mogador’s case to show why she broke off the affair with Lionel… it had simply become too difficult a relationship to sustain. The letters show that he is gone from Paris. No one in Paris is aware that Lionel is returning on a ship at the very moment near the end of the court cases.
The male quest for selfhood is seen in these few quotes from early letters. We can see progression, development, and identity in these autobiographical letters. His psychological evolution fluctuates in each letter. He has not yet found stability. We have not yet seen in Lionel’s wanderings and escapades the shift of blame to self, nor have we seen him become a “contributing member of society” (Marrone 336) as he will when he takes on the role of French Consul in Melbourne, Australia. This transformation can be recognized in his next letters from the goldmine fields which are shared in Mogador’s memoir after she tells us of her own experiences in the four court proceedings which bring an internal growth of character and self-confidence in her. Her development is shaped almost entirely through her efforts connected with saving Lionel and herself from bankruptcy and disgrace. These actions are accomplished in order to save both Lionel’s and her reputations. It is the eternal story of the woman who lives for her man. The problem with this path is that there cannot be any true rehabilitation, partly because society’s rules will not allow it. Mogador’s rehabilitation does not come through her love for Lionel, nor would Marguerite’s rehabilitation come from her love of Armand. Actual rehabilitation must come only with a removal from the society in which the people are known and recognized, followed by a complete inner re-creation through self-transformation and this can never be accomplished because of or by another person. It must come from within. This is the pure self-rehabilitation that is presented in George Sand’s Isidora. Although a couple does grow individually while together, it is only through self-alteration that any rehabilitation can occur. This is an essential point of all self-modification – it only comes from within. Although their paths to maturity are intertwined within these several chapters, and continue in the second memoir, their personal growth is found only when they are separated and alone.
In the chapter “A Miner’s Diary” every experience Lionel describes contributes to his journey toward maturity. It is through those trials and tribulations that he will develop an inner strength and he can put into perspective the troubles he left behind. He sends a packet back to Mogador in Paris which includes a summary of the dairy he has written during his brief experience as a gold miner. His encounters are terrifying as he is removed from his previously sheltered life into real world experiences. This is paralleled by the real world events entailed in the law suits and bankruptcy with which Mogador is faced.

Mogador gives titles. In the next letter entitled “Céleste, What Have You Driven Me To?” He writes about the difficult road, the torrential rains, and how difficult it is to find a claim. He has not the money to purchase one. At the end of the letter he cries out the above words. Lionel is still ensconced in the rich, spoiled boy that left Paris. Now that he has to make his own way, he has no idea how to go about it without money. He blames her for his destitution and is entrenched in his bitterness toward her. Each encounter proves to be a trial and a tribulation for which Lionel is unprepared. The futility of his situation and the destitution Lionel experiences causes him to falter and breakdown. He writes: “I send her the little bit of gold I collected along with some heather picked for her in the forest during the trip from Sydney to Bathurst. My memory of her and her face never leave me, even in sleep. God, have pity on me! Let me forget or give me the courage to commit suicide. No! I am a coward. I hope to see her again. Lionel de C—” (308).

In his short diary we see a progression, development, and change in his identity. Lionel is shedding his youthful ways through the experiences he has during his wanderings and escapades and the reader begins to see him in a different light—that of a more forgiving and mature man making him a contributing member of society. By the end of his travels, he recognizes the
Priorities that have importance in life. He recognizes that loving someone despite their flaws is what matters in the end. Concurrently, Mogador has received all his letters and writes back. Her letter is worth quoting in full:

My poor Lionel, I just received such a sad letter from you that right now I feel so downhearted, so guilty, it is impossible to find the words to express my sorrow, my remorse. You repeatedly accuse me being ungrateful, and yet I live only for you and through my memories of you! You may be far away, but my soul belongs to you; my thoughts and my love embrace you. Believe me I have suffered much, but I shall not seek comfort or consolation anymore; I shall live through my tears as a punishment doubting you. I feel that my soul will be lost until it is reunited with yours. I have told you, I believe in you and I have hoped in God; only He could have given you the strength to endure this misery. I am sending you some heather from France. I love you with the purest part of my heart; reserve another tear, another kiss for me. (Mogador 309)

Within her letter to him, the reader experiences her change and her depth of maturity because she is no longer playing courtesan games. She realizes that she has made mistakes and says that she is punishing herself for doubting his love. Although it cannot yet be discerned in the memoir if Mogador is sincere, her reaction to his return to Paris secures the assurance that she meant every word. In the memoir it is unclear exactly how long Lionel has been away, but upon his return and their initial meeting, she describes him at her apartment door like a beggar. She depicts him as having “let his beard grow; his face was thin and darker, his eyes were lifeless, his brow was pale. Pain was written all over him” (312). He excuses the interruption, for she has guests, but asks her to follow him to his hotel to talk business.

The significance of his request is understood immediately. His return from Australia indicates his journey to re-creation has come to its end. He is a changed person. His confesses to her about how he sacrificed four months of cold nights onboard ship without a blanket so the darling little birds of all colors he brought back with him for her could be protected from the wind. His transformation indicates a self-rehabilitation, too. He is willing to sacrifice for her. Matching his sacrifices, Mogador then sells off everything without telling him so she can take a
little place near him (shades of act 2 La traviata). She had bought back everything that Lionel’s creditors had put up for sale: paintings, belongings, pistols. She explains to the reader that she could not dispose of her house at Poinçonnet because the Châteauroux magistrates would know, but Bourges? She says she summarizes these Mémoires in court, and Lionel has written a note. For three days the jury deliberates and the judgment is due in two weeks. One week after the proceedings in Bourges the lawsuit at the commercial court in Paris occurs. It concerns forty thousand francs that Lionel owes her and for which he has written bills of exchange. The court declares the bills of exchange no more than bills of kindness which could not be looked upon seriously. Bourges rules in her favor and it is a great day of triumph. In Paris she turns around the decision in an appeal and wins. But Lionel still has a stain upon his name and is rejected by everyone which makes it impossible for him to remain in Paris. He must return to Australia. Lionel asks her to follow him to Australia.

The point of the inclusion of the above information is to show that at the end of her memoir, she is asked to follow Lionel to Australia and she has triumphed and won her cases making it the classic bildungsroman. Both the male and female protagonist have taken their respective journeys towards freedom and maturity. Mogador’s journey and “quest for a new sense of self constitutes a portrait of the ‘exceptional’ nineteenth-century heroine, one who is more gifted and intelligent than most” (Marrone 337). She has presented herself as the quintessential public woman in her own classic bildungsroman.

**Mogador: Re-creation and the Search for Redemption through Writing**

Mogador’s writing is both succinct and scholarly in comparison with other courtesan novels written during the same era. Mossman discusses how Mogador’s approach is more “writerly” and more constructed than the typical courtesan memoir. Mossman’s theory is that
Mogador uses her writings to rehabilitate herself thereby healing her personal wounds by pointing out societies’ prejudices. She does this throughout her novels and her plays according to Mossman, and the reader can find this trait in her memoirs as well. Mossman does not analyze the second and third memoirs, only the first.

Mogador’s second memoir shows the Australian Victorian society through the eyes of a French Parisian woman. The culture shock has to have been immense coming from the cosmopolitan city of Paris to the outback of Australia on the far southeastern end of the continent. At the time Melbourne is still a city of unpaved, mud streets, tents and shacks on the Yarra River when the Chabrillan’s arrive there in 1854. The gold rush has just erupted at the beginning of the 1850s and there are not yet pipes laid to bring water into homes. At first, the Chabrillan’s do not enjoy the luxury of running water. Once their home is built, they have an easier life than when they first lived in the old rented wooden shack on the outskirts of town. It is unimaginable the difficulties Mogador must suffer trying to adjust to such a different life, with no comforts or luxuries of the Parisian lifestyle she has previous lived and loved. Her experience of isolation in Australia provides the perfect climate for the auto-didactic dedication and concentration which enables her writing.

Celebrity and notoriety are a problem which Mogador spends her life trying to overcome. It also illustrates the *amour propre* [reputation] with its fixation on society and its reactions. The next story from the second memoir exemplifies the Rousseauian *amour de soi* [self-worth] within a moral framework. In this memoir, Mogador presents herself in a re-creation of self as a woman dedicated to doing charitable deeds as she attempts to become a wife of the utmost respectability. Two particular charitable incidents stand out in this memoir. This study looks at only one—a ball given by the French Consulate for charity. It is framed by a comparison with a
ball given by the Melbourne governor. She compares the ball that she organizes to the Governor’s Ball given earlier. The Governor’s Ball is the talk of the town. Everyone wants to attend. Seven hundred invitations are sent out, and the French Consul is invited, but no mention of his wife. It is for him alone. Mogador considers it an affront, but of little consequence except for the women friends who arrive to talk about the splendid affair. She has to explain that she has not been invited. Her friends explain that the “governor receives a civil list which obliges him to entertain Melbourne society once or twice a year, of which at least one third of this society is made up of convicts who have served their terms or even escaped from the Sydney penal colony” (Mogador in Clancy and Allen132). It turns into a fiasco because it rains, the ball room is not large enough to accommodate all the guests invited, many ball gowns and shoes are ruined while people wait all evening out in the rain, and numerous guests are never able to get inside, nor partake of the food and drink offered. Sadly, it is discovered, the drink is nothing more than a keg of colonial “beer.” Because she is not invited to the Governor’s Ball, this story exemplifies the moral framework that Mogador uses to tell her story.

Since Mogador believes the next event illustrates a success because of her participation, this shows her amour de soi. The Count de Chabrillan organizes a subscription ball for the French wounded in the Crimea after the ‘riflemans’ ball on the twelfth of July. Lionel names her the Grand Master of Ceremonies. She says that she is “allotted the Crystal Palace Room for the 16th, which should be quite a new attraction for the ball” (138). Mogador decides to hold a tombola for the ladies. She donates “dresses cut out but not made up, two fans, two little gold bracelets, laces and ribbons, music albums, a writing set and a needlework set” (138) because she is not wealthy enough to buy the prizes. She writes, “There will be twenty-five winning numbers. I am delighted to donate these things, for I know that they will tempt the ladies, who only pay ten
shillings, but they don’t come unaccompanied, and the gentlemen pay two pounds. I would be so happy if we could send several thousand francs to France” (139). In this story Mogador sets up a clear depiction of her attempt at being a good wife for the French Consul and she also paints a picture of an interesting and generous woman by describing her many personal items she intends to use as prizes for *tombola*. She writes of her delight in feeling so happy about doing something good for France. Her *tombola* is all the rage and her husband is the most gallant of men … for it goes that her name is never mentioned in connection with the little gifts she supplies from her cabin trunks, for their appeal would be lost. The ball raises 30,000 francs which they send off through the bank.

Another part of Mogador’s re-creation comes from her work in becoming a *femme de lettres*. Her novels criticize society and moralize from the point of view of a person rehabilitated yet shunned and kept outside society. Writing is also her way of countering the heavy burden her notorious celebrity costs her by allowing her to express her feelings and frustrations. In Australia she concentrates on teaching herself how to write better in order to deflect the depression felt from being ignored and shunned by society. As with all her endeavors, she dedicates herself completely to her writing work. “Over the course of her career, she blazed the trail for courtesan writers and thus set the standards for the courtesan sub-genre” (Sullivan 17).

A further example of her re-creation is in her choice of company to counter her notoriety. Once back in Paris, Mogador prefers the company of intellectuals among her friends and counts their approval as intellectual capital because she loves learning and has chosen to surround herself with a literary crowd. One might wonder if there may have also been a bit of pandering going on in search of approval from the literary celebrities she needed to help promote her novel. Examples of persons she frequents are Madame and Monsieur de Girardin. Mme Delphine de
Girardin holds a literary salon frequented by men such as Alfred de Musset, Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas, and Victor Hugo and she holds much personal influence on the nineteenth-century literary society. Mogador is introduced to some of these literary men. Dumas père becomes perhaps one of her closest and most supportive literary friends.

When she returns to Paris after two years in Melbourne, it is for her health. She has some sort of liver illness and needs a milder, less hot climate with good doctors if she is to recuperate. Before she had departed from Melbourne, Lionel had speculated in flour bought cheaply in Chile since it is reported that there is certain to be a food shortage and there is a fortune to be made at the prices it will be sold in Australia. However, he is swindled and loses all his savings. Mogador returns with little money in her pockets. To survive financially in Paris, she publishes her novel Les Voleurs d’or. Favorable critiques are received from the following newspapers: Nestor Roqueplan in the La Presse, J. Huban in the Le Figaro, Alexandre Dumas in his Monte-Cristo, Laurent Pichat in La Revue de Paris, and Jules Janin in the Almanach de la littérature. These critiques are included in her second memoir as proof of her literary capital and her talent. For this study only one is included: that of the great adventure writer Alexandre Dumas père who wrote in the Monte-Cristo:

Firstly, Madame Bovary, a novel by Flaubert. Another work of a quite opposite kind, but most extraordinary, has just been published by the same firm. It is The Gold Robbers by Madame de Chabrillan. She is a courageous soul, Madame de Chabrillan: one of those creatures that God has destined for dedication and struggle. Her stay in Melbourne was both of these at the same time. During the four years when she was 5,000 leagues away from France, by dint of enormous sacrifice and relentless application, she took up her education again, or rather she undertook her whole education from the beginning. Not only did she learn English, but she also relearned French, which was, in our opinion, a far more difficult thing. In the end, she returned to France with four or five novels, making twelve or fifteen normal-sized volumes. The first of these novels—if a book so excitingly realistic that you would think the author had witnessed every scene can really be called a novel—the first of these novels has just been published under the title of The Gold Robbers. Our praise can be expressed in these two lines: it took us only two nights to devour this volume of 5,000 pages. For two nights I saw the dawn come up while I was
still reading *The Gold Robbers*. I felt I was reading a novel by poor Ferry, *The Trapper* or *Castal the Indian*, the same energy in the characterization, the same life in the characters, the same feverish activity in the plot. Both writers have been eye-witnesses, and being able to see is a tremendous thing when one is a gifted observer. In *The Gold Robbers* there is an unusual combination of the fearsome and the graceful. There is nothing more fearsome than the characters of the cut-throat and Max, nothing more graceful that the silhouettes of Mélinda, Emeraude and Louisa. The first two women are English vignettes; the third a drawing by Greuze. In the midst of all this, there is a mare and a dog that become as interesting to the reader as human beings. I nearly forgot a little girl who comes into the world in mid-ocean. She is called Jewel and is worthy of her name, should the name Jewel be translated as pearl or diamond. If you are among those who like fast-moving descriptions, deep and soul-searing emotions, read *The Gold Robbers*. Ah! when women decide to get involved. (Dumas in Mogador, Trans. Clancy and Allen 182)

Dumas editorializes such a fine review to promote his friend in her endeavor that Mogador includes it in her memoirs. It typifies their relationship throughout the course of all three memoirs representing her entire life—most of the nineteenth century. She includes examples in her memoir of Dumas père offering assistance, specifically when she is living in Berry after her return from Australia to help her recover from illness, and because she has little money. While reading a letter from Henry Murger she writes, a M. Dumas is announced. It is Dumas père who has stopped in to ask when she will be returning to Paris. He says “my house, my person, and my advice are entirely at your service” (205). At the very end of the first memoir, she boasts that her memoirs were read by M. Dumas and mentioned to everyone. “He even included a few lines liable to pique the curiosity and interest of his numerous friends in his paper, *Le Mousquetaire*” (316). On numerous occasions Mogador uses her literary capital to bolster herself to her readers.

Others persons of intellectual value that Mogador mentions are Dumas fils, Murger, and Sand. They become part of her literary capital. She also shares that the son of Alexandre Dumas has written her a letter in which he affectionately and encouragingly gives a “charming analysis of my book to prove that he had read it with interest” (183). Meanwhile, Murger gives her assurance that her “lack of erudition will be a great advantage to me” (183). Of George Sand Mogador writes in her first memoir that she is reading her books and is “rejoicing in the idea of
visiting the countryside she had described. I was going to see the Devil’s Pond” (216). Mogador also named one of the characters of her play La Sapho after Sand’s eponymous heroine Lélia whose sister Pulchérie is a prostitute in the novel (Mossman 114). This is significant because it verifies that she read Sand, and so she may have read Isidora when it was serialized in the newspaper prior to the publication of the Mémoires, although there is no proof to substantiate this fact.

As a further illustration of her cashing in upon her intellectual and literary capital, in her first memoir she writes that during the period in which she is acting on the stage, following Lionel’s departure, she is introduced in the green room to a “short gentleman, wearing an odd, shapeless cardigan. He was very short and rather stout” (Mogador 310). It is Thomas Couture, the painter and he offers to do a drawing of her similar to the one he has done of Sand and Béranger. Her comment about this is truly telling. Mogador writes that “because it is signed by a great artist, this drawing is probably the only thing of me that will endure” (310) which tells the reader of her desire to have a legacy and a sort of immortality. It also lets the reader know that Mogador is still self-flagellating. Her low self-esteem is felt through some of her overly ripe humility. It is during the same time period that she wins a proceeding. She writes that she has given a party where her portrait is a great success and Couture receives many compliments. That evening, the person attending the party whom she most recalls is Alexandre Dumas, fils. She describes him as distant, with a skeptical, discerning mind that could be mean, “but if he paid you a compliment, you could believe it because he never gave them readily” (310). She writes that he had attended the premiere of The 1852 Revue in which she performed and that he had told several people that “She sang, played, and recited divinely; if she is willing to really work, she will have a true talent” (311). She writes, “I would have loved to move amidst such superior
minds, but of course I had no right to so single an honor. It is only in passing that I had the opportunity to appreciate Dumas père, Méry, Augier, Murger, Théophile Gautier, Camille Doucet, M. de Girardin, and Nestor Roqueplan” (311). As time evolves, her dream eventually materializes and she frequents many of those superior minds. It is her metamorphosis into a *femme de lettres* which permits self-rehabilitation. She is able to frequent the society of these literary folk and becomes quite good friends with several of them—Murger and Dumas père among them.

**Conclusion**

This chapter purports to show that a courtesan could self-rehabilitate and change herself into becoming a contributing and productive person in society despite the numerous obstacles she encounters. It demonstrates the heroine’s pathway to personal maturity throughout the three memoirs which comes in the guise of re-creating herself inside by changing her own levels of confidence and maturity. Mogador wins the four cases against her through writing an initial memoir to convince four courts that she has been a victim of social injustice and as Mossman suggests Mogador is living for her man in these actions—she is fighting to wipe the stain off his reputation. The chance for Mogador to self-rehabilitate unfolds when it is suggested that she accompany Lionel to Australia. The isolation she undergoes presents the opportunity to concentrate on learning English, re-learning French, and teaching herself to write better. Her own talent and skills make this a time in which she blossoms into the *femme de lettres* that will become her future identity. This is a quest into which she submerges herself and she eventually makes it her life’s quest after Lionel’s death. Mogador’s total rehabilitation never transpires because she is never able to extricate herself from society’s choke hold, yet she does succeed in transforming herself in her mind’s eye through her writing, by infusing it with personal
experience in her own voice, and underscoring the brutal gender prejudices of nineteenth-century French society. Is it not how one eventually perceives oneself that matters in the end anyway, and not how society sees us? We are the masters of our own fate. Mogador saw herself as a writer and a writer she was regardless of whatever others thought. Hers was a society that had a limited and different expectation of all women and Mogador crossed the line through her adventurous nature, her exceptional intellect, and her outstanding courage. Although she is never fully accepted into a society which has limited women to promote family, her ideas are heard through her literary and theatrical works and in time she does evolve, changing herself into a contributing and productive person, although not at the level she would have preferred since her search for social exculpation through her writing never brings about the reactive adjustment to which she had aspired. Nonetheless, her achievements are not futile because she is a trailblazer who conveys beyond her own lifespan a future of open possibilities to women who make lives in public life.
CHAPTER FIVE

CORA PEARL, AN ENGLISH FRANCOPHILE IN SECOND EMPIRE

PARIS: BUILDING CELEBRITY THROUGH UNABASHED VISIBILITY, FASHION, AND CLATTER

*I like restraint, if it doesn't go too far.*

Mae West (Griffin 79)

Introduction: Paris as the Setting and Courtesan Celebrity

In part one of this discussion an argument is set up about how the George Sand and the Alexandre Dumas fils novels develop confessional narratives in a Rousseauian tradition that intend to portray the rehabilitation of a fallen woman. On the one hand, Sand questions the need and effectiveness of rehabilitation solely through a man’s love by instead creating a protagonist who, encouraged by a noble woman, self-rehabilitates thereby going against traditional male hegemonic social boundaries. Sand’s concept follows a unique idea that a woman of noble birth could assist in the rescue of a fallen woman. On the other hand, Dumas creates a pathetic fallen woman who is traditionally passive and sacrifices herself for the love of one man, redeeming herself in the eyes of male hegemonic society only by her death.

In part two of this discourse the memoirs of two courtesans contrast with the Dumas model. In this chapter Cora Pearl contrasts with the Dumas confessional narrative that is intended to suggest that the rescue and rehabilitation of the fallen woman can be attained through her choice of a loving self-sacrifice for a man’s honor through death. The fact is Pearl contrasts completely with this scenario of the Dumas courtesan who falls in love with one man. She also contrasts with the other courtesan, Mogador, presented in the first chapter of part two in an important way. While both maintain their independence to varying degrees, Mogador marries her
man for love and has to remain independent as a matter of necessity, Pearl never loves any man, and her insistence on her independence is blatantly impudent toward society due to its implementation. Mogador’s celebrity hinders social recognition as a reputable woman and enables success as a writer; Mogador wants a life based on established social norms—wants to fit in. In that she is not unlike Strepponi but Mogador and Strepponi’s celebrity raised the argument that celebrity was incompatible with nineteenth-century decorum. Pearl is modern in so far as she seeks independence and is willing to forgo respectability and social acceptance. Pearl also contrasts with Sand’s Isidora who like Mogador marries, wants to love and be loved, and wants social acceptance rather than celebrity. This chapter aims to explore the relationship and differences between rehabilitation and celebrity. It poses the question of whether or not the courtesan could be considered by modern day standards fully rehabilitated once she attains celebrity. This chapter is an analysis of her celebrity as a modern phenomenon at odds with the narratives of rehabilitation previously shown to operate in Dumas, Strepponi, and to some extent Mogador. Pearl’s celebrity type which is the fille de marbre, comes from the Romantic commitment of living for the passions, whether it be for love or money. Fred Inglis suggests in A Short History of Celebrity that:

   The rise of urban democracy, the two-hundred-year expansion of its media of communication, together with the radical individualism of the modern sensibility made fame a much more transitory reward and changed public acclaim from an expansion of devotion into one of celebrity. (Inglis 5)

It all began here with Pearl whose radical individualization of the modern sensibility which became the “sine qua non of the emergence of celebrity. This chapter will present examples to demonstrate that Pearl’s retrospective confessional narrative does not involve self-sacrifice in any way for any man, nor does it focus at all on rehabilitation. It focuses on reminding the reader of her once stupendous celebrity. In fact, she dies single and unrepentant of any wrongs she
claims to have inadvertently committed, (recalling Rousseau who embarks upon an enterprise of
presenting a self-portrait that is true to nature and that hides nothing, even the socially
questionable abandonment of his children in an orphanage). Pearl is, therefore, the prototype of a
fille de marbre or the new and modern courtesan.

According to Betsy Prioleau in her book Seductress: Women Who Ravished the World
and Their Lost Art of Love, Pearl dies without fear of the other side and confident of forgiveness
(266). This idea is more in line with the Rousseauian example of amour de soi. She does not
allow society’s judgments to affect her choices for she believes that her choices in life are
forgivable—that individuality is achieved through the independence acquired from her celebrity
which releases her psychologically from any sense of societal victimization. Pearl writes that
“honneur et justice sont satisfaits. Je n'ai jamais trompé personne, car je n'ai jamais été à
personne” [honor and justice are satisfied, because I had never deceived anybody, since I never
belonged to anybody] (Pearl 356 and 188). She claims that her independence is her entire
fortune.

Pearl is bold and brazen at times, impertinent and insolent to perfection, often
disrespectful to the rich and noble of society, sometimes impolite, often thought to be
presumptuous, considered by some ill-mannered and crude, and definitely cheeky. She has a love
of ostentation. In fact, as ostentatious as that era in France’s history is recognized to have been,
Pearl matches it to perfection. As dramatic as the Emperor wishes Paris to appear to visitors
during the World Expositions, Pearl equals that drama through ostentation. Pearl has a great
sense of timing and humor and she uses these qualities in her relationship with French male
society because, “as her 1930s biographer, Baroness von Hutten so aptly puts it: She knew how
to make bored men laugh” (Hutton in Rounding 205). Pearl’s ostentation and impudence gives
her visibility and she becomes the talk of the town. As one of the dozen courtesans who are known as *la garde*, she is a queen of her profession. She becomes an “*expertes ès sciences galantes,*” considers her beauty as her capital, and makes it pay breathtaking dividends” (Richardson 69). She is a patrician of gallantry. Needless to say, she thinks only of the present, for she is impudent enough to believe her future will take care of itself.

The fact is nobody during the Second Empire is thinking about the future. Morals are very lax. Audebrand writes: “*Le sybaritisme, venant de haut lieu, était à la mode et chacun renvoyait à plus tard le soin des affaires*” [Sybaritism which came from above was the fashion of the times, and therefore everyone put their serious business aside] (Audebrand in Richardson 29). The Second Empire is the golden age of courtesans and Cora Pearl is the epitome of the *nouveaux riches parvenus* and a poster child for the courtesan of the French Second Empire. All of Paris flies to see the newest spectacle, whatever that might be, and Pearl makes a spectacle of herself as often as possible. She knows instinctively what she has to do to get noticed.

In other words, Pearl embodies all that the Second Empire propagates and perpetuates. She mimics its opulence and innovation, its speculation and capitalism, and the qualities of extravagance that make up this brief period in French and Parisian history. It is the illusion that this English lower-middle-class woman presents which attracts the top political and financial male European figures to her and is a tool this able courtesan uses to get noticed. The illusion of opulence writes Joanna Richardson in *La Vie Parisienne* that is created in Paris is the design of Emperor Napoleon III. The Emperor, perhaps more than all the city’s previous political leaders, makes Paris, and France, the most opulent, innovatively and industrially productive, successfully wealthy, and enviously magnificent of all her politically shifting periods. His court protocol is theatrical, and so Paris is therefore made theatrical. One might say that Paris is herself made
something of the courtesan. And indeed, Paris is dressed up in the Second Empire just as a
courtesan would outfit herself—in the case of the city it is to attract as many foreigners as
possible to the Exhibition Fairs. A courtesan’s independence is enhanced by her prerogative to
choose who may accompany her and therefore she creates her own setting.

Like Paris which needs to attract visitors for the World Fairs, Pearl, in order to become a
courtesan, creates her own setting where she can be notable. She does this with her dresses,
accessories, her carriages, horses, livery, homes, her personality and choosing specific men.
These are her “props.” She gives dinner parties, goes to balls, the theater, the opera, and horse
races. She is center stage, yet cannot be alone…as a woman she must be accompanied. Her
power is in how she draws men to her. She is not hidden. She is surrounded by shimmering
activity. She inhabits the demi-monde which is an alternate society with a certain sophistication.
Her signifier is high visibility which is the core of her celebrity. The setting around her is the
framework within which her visibility is enhanced.

However, due to the sybaritism and to a lax acceptance of that type of life, there is a sort
of hypocrisy among society, or le monde. Richardson quotes the anonymous author of Life in
Paris before the War and during the Seige who wrote that strangely, “no respectable society
woman would receive an actress or singer” and “no public woman whatever could be admitted
into good French company” (67). Double standards prevail: while singers and actresses remain
banned from high society, high society shows off their liaisons. Emperor Napoléon III makes his
love affairs no secret; the Duke of Morny has open affairs; Prince Napoléon does as well. Many
of these affairs are with performers in theater, opera, and ballet. Parading yourself and your
wealth is à la mode, and Pearl likes to create a theatrical spectacle so flaunting herself is a large
part of her visibility. She makes a spectacle of herself wherever she is permitted to do so in Paris, and the works of Baron George-Eugène Haussmann made it easy to parade oneself in Paris.

The Essence of Pearl and Rousseauian Retrospective Narrative

Pearl re-invents herself in a complete overhaul from a backstreet London prostitute to: First a Parisian lorette. Second a full-fledged modern courtesan. Pearl’s retrospective narrative is Rousseauian in its presentation. Rousseau “sets out in the Confessions to tell his own story, to exonerate himself by telling the absolute truth rather than apologizing” (Braudy 375). Essentially, Pearl tells her story without apologizing, but not always truthfully. Like Mogador, Pearl uses a soubriquet for her memoir rather than her original given name of Eliza Emma Crouch. Cora Pearl sounds so much better, and by the time she writes her memoir, the woman known by that name is a well-known celebrity. Her celebrity will sell her memoir far more than her real name ever could. Pearl, unlike Rousseau, is selling her celebrity under a false name and so her story begins with that deceit in addition to a falsification of her age. Like Rousseau whose commitment or hostility to traditional values needs to accommodate to the new audience, Pearl is less accommodating than others writing in her time. Braudy writes that “Diderot distinguishes the actor from the man of sensibility, but Rousseau is the actor as a man of sensibility, creating a social space for behavior that had precisely characterized society as a maze of unavoidable hypocrisies” (Braudy 376) so in certain ways Pearl is more like Rousseau. This section will depict several examples of Rousseauian reflective writing found in Pearl’s Memoirs, talk about the format of the work, and suggest characteristics of Pearl’s writing. To begin, the format is chronological and commences at birth, proceeds through her life, and ends near the end of her days. While Cora does re-arrange some facts chronologically, and elaborates upon others, what is special about her tale is that she peppers it with her inimitable wit and panache. Her style is not
very “writerly” nor is it literary. It is simple. Pearl makes no excuses for her capitalistic and
businesslike views of her profession and she proposes that her story is the truth and nothing but
the truth, even though some stories are questionable. She writes early in the memoir:

Si je publie ces Mémoires, c'est que je pense qu'ils seront intéressants, parce qu'ils
mettent en scène la société du Second Empire. Je ne crois pas beaucoup aux cris de la
morale outragée et j'estime que je puis bien dire les choses que d'autres ont eu du plaisir
à faire. Il va sans dire que je ne mets pas les véritables noms. Ceux qui lèveront le
masque, et devineront dessous, tant mieux pour eux. Ce n'est pas moi qui leur dirai s'ils
ont vu juste ou non. Ce que j'affirme, c'est que je dis la vérité, n'ayant aucune raison de
m'en cacher; et la preuve, c'est que je débute par une chose que bien peu de femmes
consentiraient à faire, par mon acte de naissance [I publish these memoirs because I
think they will be interesting, and because they will put once more before the eyes of the
world the society of the Second Empire. It of course goes without saying I shall not put
real names in my book. It is for those who can raise the masks or can guess, so much the
better for them! I shall not tell them whether they have guessed aright; what I affirm is
that I speak the truth, having no reason to hide it; the proof is that I begin by my date of
birth, a thing that very few women would consent to reveal]. (Pearl 1–2 and 1–2)

Pearl presents herself in her Memoirs as a sort of social historian. The fact that she claims she
has no need to hide the truth indicates that she is not ashamed of anything she has done, although
contradictorily, her version of her life is told with pseudonyms replacing the real names of her
lovers and the bending of certain verifiable facts such as her true age. Still, near the end of her
life, a woman no longer in fashion and an aged courtesan, she chooses to write in a manner to
present herself as the good person, sabotaging the sale of her memoir at least with regard to any
sizable profit through public interest. The French public wants to read about the naughty Pearl,
but Pearl writes of scandal without sordidness. (It is Holden who suggests that the public will
only purchase her memoir to see the pseudonyms in order to figure out who they represent). In
fact, W. H. Holden notes in the Preface to his biography, The Pearl from Plymouth (Cora Pearl)
that “she is believed to have raised money by sending parts of the manuscript to prominent
people mentioned therein, and accepting payment from them to suppress their names” (Holden
13–14). Even so, as she writes, no actual names are mentioned because the characters are given
pseudonyms. Holden’s biography contains a list at the back of the biography of the disguised names of people and places of those he was able to readily discern through research. He claims not to have been able to raise the mask in every instance, however, he has appended “the results in those cases where he has succeeded” (151). It could be said that her memoir is a sort of roman à clef, where the female protagonist is identified, but the male protagonists remain unidentified except to those with the “key”.

In another Rousseauian confessional example, Pearl affirms that she is no victim:

Je suis loin de me poser en victime; j'aurais mauvaise grâce. J'aurais pu faire des économies: mais la chose n'est pas facile dans le tourbillon où j'ai dû vivre.... Je ne me plains pas: je n'ai que ce que je mérite. Il n'en est pas moins vrai que j'attends la publication de ce volume pour avoir quelques billets de banque et essayer de vivre. [I am far from posing as a victim; it would be ungrateful of me to do so. I ought to have saved, but saving is not easy in such a whirl of excitement as that in which I have lived…. I do not complain: I have only had what I deserved. It is none the less true that I am awaiting the publication of this book in order to get some bank-notes to enable me to attempt to live]. (Pearl 2 and 2)

She indicates with this statement that she needs no approval from society to bolster herself concerning her choices in life. Pearl has chosen individual independence in lieu of victimization. This is her version of self-rehabilitation. This frank admission is in line with the Rousseauian confessional construct though Pearl is attractively candid in her choice not to wallow in self-pity even when it comes to her decline, and this ability to be frank is also a quality that makes her attractive to a certain type of man.

As Pearl tells her story, she writes that when she arrives in Paris, “Je quittais Londres sans emporter d'autres regrets que celui d'y être revenue, après mes cinq années de pensionnat. Toutes les maisons m'y paraissaient des tavernes, toutes les boissons des narcotiques, tous les hommes des marchands de diamants” [I left London without taking other regrets than that to have come back, after my five years of boarding school here. The houses there appeared to be taverns; all the drinks narcotics; all the men diamond merchants] (Pearl 32 and 15-16). She is not
apologetic about leaving behind family, friends, or home, and being non-apologetic is an element of Rousseau’s *amour de soi* [self-worth] (I feel what I feel—and it is alright to feel that way).

As happened she explains is what happened to many other children and young women in Victorian London, she claims she was raped by an older man who doped her. The French version of her *Memoirs* names the man but the English does not. In another example she says: “*Je n’ai plus revu le loup de mon histoire, un marchand de diamants, paraîît-il, qu’on nommait Saunders*” [I never saw the wolf of my story again; it seems he was a diamond merchant, by the name of Saunders] (Pearl 26 Trans. Sasson). It is from this point forward that Pearl admits she takes the five pound note the man is alleged to have given her, rents a room, and never returns home. Pearl, similar to Rousseau, is not concerned with social contempt and openly tells a story that would be considered outside existing social acceptability. Sex-trafficking is extensive at the time and innocence is readily targeted by predatory opportunists of all sorts. One thing for certain can be believed—she says she hates all men for the rest of her life. Henceforward, writes Joanna Richardson, “She held them spellbound, used them, fleeced them, hurt them, and, almost invariably, left them” (Richardson 26).

Throughout her life Pearl could not connect with her feelings when it came to men. She tells one early lover, Williams Bluckel (Blinkwell or Bignell): "*Moi, je lui répondais que je ne voulais pas me marier, que je détestais trop les hommes pour jamais obéir à l’un d’eux.*" [I replied that I never wished to marry, for I detested men too much ever to obey one of them] (Pearl 30–31 and 15). She could be fond of someone, but she swears that she is never able to fall in love with anyone. She holds nothing back with regard to letting her reader audience know exactly how she feels about men. To be sure, she follows the Rousseauian retrospective
confessional construct in that she wishes to portray herself as a good person at heart who is
telling about herself in a manner that is as true to nature as possible, hiding almost nothing.

Pearl includes a chapter in her memoir about the subsequent devastating incident which
brings her celebrity crashing down, expediting the end of her career. It is the “Duval Affair
Incident” where a young bourgeois lover shoots himself for love inside her apartment in Paris.
His family, specifically his mother, insists that charges be brought against Pearl. She claims he
wanted to shoot her. Pearl comments on her own behavior during this incident. In a long and
important confession, worth quoting fully here, she reveals the ensuing straightforward feelings:

Je puis dire que je n'ai jamais eu d'amant de cœur. Cela s'explique par le sentiment même
qui m'a toujours inspiré une horreur instinctive pour le sexe fort. Ce n'est pas que je ne
sois tout aussi sensible qu'une autre, que les délicatesse, les prévenances, les procédés
obligeants me laissent indifférente. Loin de là. Maintes fois il m'est arrivé de sacrifier
dans une large proportion l'intérêt à la reconnaissance ou à l'amitié. Mais pour ce qu'on
est convenu d'appeler les passions aveugles, les entraînements fatals, non! Je ne les ai
pas connus pour mon repos et mon bonheur. J'ai toujours regardé l'amant de cœur
comme un racontar, un mot creux. Parmi les femmes que j'ai fréquentées, et elles sont
nombreuses, j'en ai vu des masses qui s'abusaient étrangement sur la matière. Elles
finissaient par croire à l'amant de cœur, par leur seul désir d'y croire, confondant le
masque avec le visage, le singe avec l'homme, Clichy-la-Garenne avec une forêt vierge
du nouveau monde. Un homme beau, jeune, aimable, qui m'a loyalement offert son bras,
son amour, son argent, a tout droit de se croire et de se dire vraiment "mon amant de
cœur," mon amant pour une heure, mon cavalier pour un mois, mon ami forever! Voilà
comme je comprends la chose. D'ailleurs mon tempérament n'est pas aux ardeurs
immodérées. On m'a reproché ma froideur et mon mépris profond. Eh bien, de glace
pour l'espèce j'ai fait souvent exception pour l'individu. Un très petit nombre, -mais pour
moi cela suffit,- sait bien que je ne mens pas; et que, disparue aujourd'hui de la scène,
puisque c'est une scène comme une autre je garde en moi une inéffacable tendresse pour
qui sut me procurer, dans des rapports éphémères, ce charme qui ne meurt pas la
délicatesse de bon ton [I may say I have never had a preferred lover. This is explained by
the very feelings which have ever inspired me with an instinctive horror of the stronger
sex. Not that I am not as sensitive as any other woman, or that delicacy, kind attentions
and behaviour leave me indifferent—far from it. Many a time I have sacrificed to a great
extent personal interest to gratitude or friendship. But as regards what is conventionally
termed blind passion and fatal attraction, no! Luckily for my peace of mind and
happiness, I have never known either. I have always looked upon the favorite lover as a
myth, or an empty word. Among the women I have associated with – and they are
numerous – I have seen a mass of them who strangely deceived themselves on the
subject; they ended by believing in the preferred lover out of a sheer wish to believe in

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him, mistaking the mask for the face, the monkey for the man, Clichy-la-Garenne for a primeval forest of the New World. A handsome, young, and amiable man who has loyally offered me his arm, his love, and his money, has every right to think and call himself my “favourite lover,” my lover for an hour, my escort for a month, and my friend forever. That is how I understand the business. Besides, my nature is not inclined to immoderate ardour. My coldness and utter contempt have often been thrown up in my face. Well, of course for the species; I have often made an exception in favour of the individual! A select few—enough for me—know well that I speak the truth, and that I have disappeared from the stage considering it a stage like any other—I cherish within me an ineradicable tenderness for him who, in a transient connection, was able to inspire me with that charm that never dies: delicacy of good breeding]. (Pearl 299–300)

This is a very important segment in the analysis of Pearl’s Memoirs because it is the most true to her nature and the most Rousseauian confession in the entire work. It is the very essence of her frankness here that epitomizes the Rousseauian confessional technique. In these paragraphs she reveals herself. Not the external Pearl, but the internal Pearl. Her detachment and her self-confidence are part of what attracts a certain type of man to her. She explains how she creates competition among her lovers in the first few lines. Pearl informs her reader that she has no “preferred lover” and explains that it is because of an innate horror of men. (She maintains this throughout her Memoirs). In the middle section Pearl discloses that she has feelings just as other women and that she is attracted to good manners and lovely attention from a man, but that she has never been struck by lightning with regard to falling in love with one man (i.e. she is not the dame aux camélias type). For her, loving one man is nothing more than a myth because she has seen women delude themselves concerning a man, even talk themselves into believing that a man is “the one”, but she confesses that she sees the man in front of her for who he really is and does not blind herself with mistaken ideas about him. She does not create a romantic version of the man she finds in front of her; rather she unmasks him and sees him as he is with all his faults and better qualities. She holds him there with her for a short time and that, she confesses, is the manner in which she regards the business. In the ending section, she admits that there are a choice few who are special to her, and that they know who they are, and know she speaks the
truth about her feelings. She confesses that the only type of man to whom she is attracted is that man who has a “delicacy of good breeding”. This final statement seems almost a disclaimer caveat which protects her with regard to those men who might read the work and think of themselves as well bred. However, she leaves the understanding of who those select few are to those who choose to recognize themselves in relation to her comment. It could be suggested that even in that comment, she is keeping to her type—*une fille de marbre* by aloofly hinting those sorts of men are the cherished few in her favor.

It is important for a moment to veer from this section’s topic to differentiate between courtesan and mistress. Pearl is a courtesan; she is not a mere mistress. The distinction that has to be made between a courtesan and a kept woman is that the former is a personage. “Friends to kings, regents, emperors, statesmen, financiers, famous writers and painters, they were the constant subject of columns printed in weekly journals, gossip about their romances, what they wore and what they did providing continual fodder for public curiosity” (Griffin 4). Griffin continues writing that “Not only were these woman remarkable in their accomplishments, they were exceptional among the already exceptional” (5). Perhaps Pearl’s extra-exceptionality is her absolute desire for independence. Pearl considers a fixed relationship with a man, chained through love, imprisonment. Marketing independence, being unattainable, is attractive to the rich and powerful... no strings attached.

To summarize, Pearl’s memoir is just that—a courtesan memoir. It is chronological like Rousseau’s *Confessions* but she re-arranged some facts, unlike Rousseau, who claims to tell the truth about his life as much as is possible. Although Pearl also claims to tell the truth, she is clearly pulling the wool over her reader’s eyes when it comes to her age. Pearl’s desire is to focus on her heyday during the zenith of the Second Empire—a reminiscent look at the good old
days. Like Rousseau, Pearl is not ashamed of anything she has done. Her life’s tale leans toward the Romantic commitment to live for the passions—both love and money, whereas Rousseau is focused on the concept of individual freedom in the Classical sense. Therefore, Pearl takes celebrity and individualism into a modern mode of expression, using money, sex, media, and the re-creation of her image to become one of the most sought after celebrities of the French Second Empire—Cora Pearl.

**Pearl’s Memoirs: Tales to Construct Celebrity, Tales Obfuscated, or Left Out**

Definitions are in order to set the scene for examining the construction of “modern” celebrity. In the “Introduction: Celebrity Rites” Joseph A. Boone and Nancy J Vickers give an interesting definition of both celebrity and fame. They write that “…celebrity derives from the Latin nouns *celebritas* and *celebratio*, both of which signify the presence of a multitude, a large assembly to gathering, a crowd” (903). They explain that these, and terms related to them also indicate a specific attribute (that of being famous or renowned) of the person whose presence causes the crowd to form. The crowd feeds upon the mystery of “It”—that certain something that draws people to one another. Therefore, the combination of the person who has “It” and the participants in celebrity worship make up the entirety of celebrity. It is “the ritualistic essence of the *celebratio*—that gives the star an otherworldly aura of intimate proximity yet untouchable distance” Boone and Vickers (904).

All courtesans have to have “It”. The “It” could be anything that attracts a certain sort of man. The “It” during the nineteenth century could be a specific feature such as the eyes, the neck, the breasts, the hands, or even dainty feet. It could be her wit, her charm, her timing, her intelligence, her innate sense of style, her gentleness, her sweetness, her cheekiness, or even her sense of humor. Pearl was said by her contemporaries to have beautiful hands and breasts. One
of Pearl’s greatest attributes in her personality is her ability to get bored men to relax and have fun. Her timing and sense of humor play a large role in how she achieves attracting men. This is a fascinating part of her personality in the atmosphere of nineteenth-century Parisian high society. One such ‘virtue’ as Susan Griffin entitles “It” is Pearl’s capacity to create “clatter.” She is skilled at making clatter (getting noticed) at significant moments which in turn enhances her celebrity through gossip. As Boone and Vickers say, “Seen in this light, gossip and rumor are neither ancillary to the system of renown nor sullying by-products that follow in the wake of the object of the fans’ adoration; rather, gossip and rumor are the very bedrock of renown’s formation and existence” (904).

By the time Pearl writes her memoir, she is near the end of her life. In the English version of The Memoirs of Cora Pearl she is still rebuilding, but in fact she re-invents herself even then, creating future clatter (gossip) through write-ups and critiques. One important example of how Pearl re-creates herself in her memoir to enhance her celebrity is a forged birth certificate which was still in the twentieth century being scrutinized by biographers and critics. Her first page has a copy of her birth certificate which she uses as proof that she speaks “the truth, having no reason to hide it” (Pearl 5). The certificate states that she was born in 1842. Katie Hickman, who did some research in the matter, states that rather than 1842, Pearl, whose real name was Eliza Emma Crouch, was born instead in 1835 in Plymouth in Devonshire. She writes that: “The woman who rose to become one of the dozen or so most de luxe courtesans of the most luxurious demi-monde that the world has ever known was in fact the creation of a young, lower-middle-class Englishwomen called Eliza Emma Crouch” (Hickman 219).

Hickman read W. H. Holden’s biography which notes the forgery in his Preface: “Cora attempted to give the book the appearance of complete veracity by having inserted in each copy,
as a kind of front piece, a facsimile of her birth certificate. I shall prove, however, that this
document was an impudent forgery, designed to take seven years off her real age” (Holden 14).
According to Holden, the reason for the forgery may stem from a comment Pearl makes to one of
her first important lovers, Duke Achille Murat, when he asks her where she has learned to ride so
well. Pearl responds that she has never had a lesson in her life and that riding comes naturally
and must be in her blood. Because Pearl bragged about her innate riding ability, jealous rivals
spread a vicious rumor that she was the daughter of a groom. It is this self-inflicted rumor which
causes the need for a forged birth certificate. The fact that her competitor courtesans might be
laughing at her must have infuriated Pearl so much that she produces a birth certificate proving
that she is the true daughter of the composer, Frederick Nicholls Crouch. At the time of her
birth, certificates were not known in England. Since something has to been done about the
rumor, Holden suggests that Pearl obtains from Somerset House the birth certificate of her
younger sister, Louisa. She alters Louisa’s birthdate of 1841 to 1842, changes Louisa Elizabeth
to Emma Elizabeth, and creates a birth certificate that removes seven years from her real age.
The actual forgery is blatantly and clumsily accomplished, but apparently it is believed all the
same. Changing her birthdates to appear younger is all part of her re-invention of the woman
living in Paris who leaves behind the damaged child from London noise. She tells her reader
audience from where she got the predilection to pull noisy pranks in order to create gossip. She
says her father was a composer whose only claim to fame was his famous song “Kathleen
Mavoureen,” composed somewhere between 1835 and 1838. Her mother, grandmother, and
sisters were all singers. In addition, she reports that the little house was nicknamed “la boîte à
musique. J'étais née pour entendre beaucoup de bruit, sinon pour en faire. Il y a une
prédétermination au tapage” [The music box. I was born to hear a great deal of noise, if not to
make it; there was in my case a kind of predestination to clatter] (Pearl 11 and 5). Clatter is something at which Pearl becomes very good, for throughout her life she surrounds herself with it like a noisy setting. Clatter enhances visibility through sound; therefore clatter creates celebrity through the fact of being noticed because of it. She builds her celebrity on clatter of various sorts.

By now, in her decline, Pearl knows that she must write a memoir in order to re-capture the gaze that celebrity demands. Unlike Mogador whose memoir was first published at the height of her celebrity in 1854, Pearl’s memoir comes at the end of her career and is published in 1886. She is no longer young, no longer rich, no longer framed in the opulence of the Second Empire and its whirlwind time capsule. The Second Empire is dead. It has died with the Franco-Prussian War. She admits “I have disappeared from the stage—considering it a stage like any other” (Pearl 300). All life is a stage to Pearl for she is the actor as a person of sensibility. A memoir is her final opportunity to leave behind something lasting of herself—to gain a sort of immortality. In so doing, Pearl lets the reader know that she wants her celebrity to be remembered for all time and that she also wants the Second Empire to never be forgotten.

In framing the story of her fall, she must tell about her childhood and family. In truth, her father was not only prodigal in music. He deserted them when she was twelve. Pearl obfuscates the truth, especially much of her early London childhood. Pearl’s version of his disappearance is quite different from reality. She writes in her memoir that “he loved us well, but he made the money fly so that very little was ever seen for long in our house. When he died he had squandered two fortunes. I was only five years old. I have often regretted my father’s death; he died so soon I hardly knew him, and I have hardly known my mother” (Pearl 5). One might
wonder if this was a Rousseauian attempt to adjust what really occurred in order to maintain the image (and the time frame) she is re-creating in the memoir.

In truth, the man is so overwhelmed with debt and a large family that he deserts his family and immigrates to America. He probably goes to New York to escape his creditors and an impending lawsuit due to bigamy and two bankruptcies. Pearl’s mother may have lied to her children about what actually happened to their father telling her children their father died. At any rate, her mother took a lover, a “step-father” whom Pearl detested (Richardson 25), but rather than blame her mother for remarrying she instead makes the excuse that “Il fallait un soutien pour les enfants du passé, un père pour ceux de l’avenir” [It was necessary for her to have a supporter for the children of the past, and a father for those of the future] (Pearl 12 and 6). She tells about her father’s disappearance and the arrival of her “step-father” in the memoir only to set up the fall.

For some unknown reason, she says in building to the confession of the fall that she “detested her step-father cordially” and this may have been the reason why she is sent to a boarding-school in Boulogne for a few years until she is thirteen. (Later in her Memoirs she mentions she was sent for five years). In examining the facts though, Pearl’s father leaves his first family in 1847 writes Virginia Rounding (196). By Pearl’s account of her birth date she would have been two years old, not five. The discrepancy of years is notable. Yet a further fact is brought out in the Hickman chapter on Pearl:

After her death in 1886, a friend of the Crouch family, who had been to school with the younger girls, wrote a letter to the Daily News claiming she had known Cora around this time (1854–1855), when she “was about seventeen” (in fact she would have been nineteen), and was apprenticed to a milliner in Regent Street. “From hence she disappeared,” wrote the anonymous friend, “and was never heard of by her mother until about a year be-fore the fall of the empire.” (Hickman 220)
In 1854 she would have been older than fourteen according to her real birth year of 1835. From the calculations of the family friend, and her purported birth date in 1842 when she says her father left, she would have been twelve when she went to Boulogne and when she returned she would have been seventeen. Her obfuscation of the facts may have to do with a dislike of her step-father, or something darker, such as abuse, but that is never to be affirmed.

Pearl writes in her *Memoirs* that she never congratulates herself on having to deal with honest people; these two words have nothing in them to please her. “Honest people” are, according to her, generally ready to perpetrate all kinds of petty infamies; and she further adds that she is never more on her guard than when she has something to do with men and women thus called. Of course, she is talking about people who others consider honest. It seems that Pearl is telling the reader not to be credulous. Hickman suggests that “From the start, Emma is poking fun at her readers and at all those who were taken in by her—but also, and more engagingly, at herself” (198). The fact is Pearl re-invents herself through deceit. Whether she is pulling her reader’s leg by deceiving them in a playful way cannot be ascertained. Pearl chooses carefully what she does tell, and what she leaves out of her story. The absence of certain facts mostly pertains to how she becomes aware of fashion and how this preemptive awakening is then utilized later to further her celebrity in Paris. For example, one of her biographer’s, Polly Binder, surmises that “[t]here was one part of her life of which she ever felt ashamed and which she deliberately excluded from her memoirs. . . . This part of Emma’s life which she regarded as too humiliating to include in her memoirs, was her apprenticeship to a fashionable millinery emporium in Regent Street” (19-20). This part of her life does not project the image she works so hard to present to the world, however, it may be that while working there Pearl gets the idea of an image, and begins to study how to create it. It is in the Emporium that Pearl probably decides
to become someone else: a woman, just like her father had suggested whose charm and vivacity “were going to carry her to the top of fashionable London society” (Binder 20). Working in that fashionable part of town gives her the opportunity to meet great ladies and their titled husbands. She takes the opportunity seriously for she clearly studies “their clothes, their accents, their conversation, their behavior – everything” (Binder 20). Her sense of style may have blossomed while she is learning her trade at the Emporium. As an apprentice Pearl would first start by unpicking black linings from endless black mourning bonnets; graduate to assemble the pretty bonnets with all their lovely accoutrements and fru-frous which she must have wanted to sport for herself; end by composing the awesome caps made for haughty dowagers (20).

The Emporium is not only frequented by the rich and titled. There are also the gay, young cockney girls who paint their faces and sport extravagant dresses paid for by the protectors or paramours who accompany them. It is not uncommon with women who work in the clothing or millenary business to be approached by people whose intentions may not be clearly readable. This is one possibility. She may well have gotten the idea to take up her chosen career from them. Virginia Rounding clarifies how Pearl writes about herself, leaving out significant elements of her past and her real age that do not support the elegant courtesan she had created:

Much of what we know—or think we know—about Emma Crouch comes from her own memoirs, which were published in French shortly before her death and translated into English in the same year. We are thus presented with the picture of her which she wanted us to see, as well as with her view of contemporaries – in particular, of her numerous lovers. At times the Memoirs are more obfuscating than enlightening. Details are given in non-chronological order and names are disguised – frequently, though not always, transparently. And, throughout, the author maintains the fiction that she was born in 1842, making herself about seven years younger than she actually was. (197)

Pearl is always determined to project her image. She knows that to attract attention there has to be clatter. Clatter makes gossip and gossip makes celebrity. She did not want anyone to know that she had worked as a level one apprentice for a milliner or that it was there that she learned
It is a part of her life she leaves out of her narrative. But it may have been worth omitting since it helps with the cover-up, because it is Pearl’s true age that is lost at her disappearance from Regency Street.

Her disappearance from home is documented, but why it occurs is a mystery. Whether or not Pearl was raped by a big-bad wolf diamond-merchant who got her drunk and drugged her, “something happened to turn Emma from either her grandmother’s companion or an apprentice milliner into a prostitute—for this is what ‘renting a room’ is a euphemism for here—and to explain why she never returned home” (Rounding 202). Rape incidents similar to her description might have been told to her, or she could have read about one and made the story hers. It is also not uncommon for a family to disown a daughter who has fallen, even if it is not her fault.

Moreover, Pearl’s choice to begin an independent life for herself does seem sudden. As Rounding says, “there is clearly much fictionalizing going on here and a condensing of the narrative than can be appreciated” (202). Rounding further suggests the possibility of something darker. Since she had such hard feelings toward her stepfather, his figure could be that of an abusive, distrusted stepfather – with sexual abuse connotations. There is no way to know whether he may have played a part in the events which culminated in her choice to engage in a life of prostitution (202).

In fact, the story about a young girl who is sent away from home after her mother has acquired a new lover and who then does not want to return to the house when he is present, along with the fact that she tells a “fanciful narrative of a rape scene by a man who might or might not have been called Saunders together with the total abandonment of and by her family – are very suspicious” (Rounding 203). Pearl states that she prefers the boarding school to her family which only further corroborates the above ideas. To perpetuate her story of innocence, she claims that
as inexperienced as she is, she feels that being independent is better than either going home or back to school. Rounding suggests that a dislike of her stepfather continues to be significant in determining her actions (though the following is not included in the English version).

Je n'avais pas quatorze ans; je portais une robe courte et une natte de pensionnaire. J'étais assez gentille, et pas trop timide. J'avais le teint excessivement frais. D'ordinaire, l'office terminé, je rentrais chez maman. Quelquefois je revenais chez madame Watts. Cela dépendait un peu des dispositions de mon beau-père. Quand il était absent, je restais tout le jour avec mes sœurs [I was not yet fourteen; I was still in a short dress and wore my hair in schoolgirl plaits. I was quite a good girl, and not overly shy. I had an extremely clear complexion. I usually went back to Mummy’s after the service. Sometimes I went back to Mrs. Watts’. It depended a bit on my stepfathers’ mood. When he was out, I stayed all day with my sisters]. (Pearl 16 Trans. Sasson)

Pearl’s story of the diamond merchant, although believable, is also questionable. There could have been a diamond merchant, but it could have just as easily been an abusive stepfather that pushes her into the streets of London. About men, following this experience, she writes:

"Je n'ai jamais pardonné aux hommes, ni à lui, ni aux autres, qui ne sont pas responsables du fait" [I have never pardoned men, neither this one nor the others who are not responsible for his act] (Pearl 20 and 10).

Pearl states that she uses the five pounds that the diamond merchant has given her for his night spent with her to rent a simple room and purchase some second hand clothes. (She may just as likely have saved the five pounds from her millinery work). She says that she looked her situation squarely in the face and took her fate into her own hands. She chooses to go into prostitution although her fall, as told by her, is not of her own making. Even though her room has only a bed, a table, and a cupboard she says that she does not feel alone since the other lodgers have the same full cognizance as she. “Je ne pouvais plus compter que sur moi-même: je le savais” [I could not count upon anybody but myself, I knew that] (Pearl 26 and 13). It is from this point forward that the memoirs turn to the beginning stages of the transformation of Eliza Emma Crouch, alias Emma Elizabeth Crouch, into Cora Pearl.
The first admirer she writes about appears in her *Memoirs* as Bill Blinkwell, who Hickman says is the William Bluckel in the French edition, but who W. H. Holden, her biographer, actually identifies as Robert Bignell. Bignell is the proprietor of the Argyle Dance Rooms (the Albrecht Rooms in Pearl’s *Memoirs*). Cora, “… avai[t] pris le nom de Cora Pearl, sans aucune raison particulière, mais par pure fantaisie” […] had taken the name of Cora Pearl from no particular reason, but purely from fancy] (Pearl 29 and 14). She had found herself an admirer. Cora confesses to her reader audience that she chooses her *nom de guerre* quite by accident, but that it later takes on a more personal, hidden significance. It is in this very moment that Eliza Emma Crouch dies; long live Cora Pearl. To re-create her celebrity later in her life, it is also from here onward that her memoir lists her conquests which contribute, through their reputations, their names, and the gifts they give her, inextricably to her growing celebrity. By reliving the Second Empire days in print, she is reminding her readers of the visibility she, and hopefully her readers, once enjoyed.

As an aside, Pearl probably took up prostitution, given her ensuing career, to stay afloat financially. She must have frequented the Argyle Rooms and because of a certain sense of style is noticed. It may have been within those rooms that she begins to understand just how a true courtesan must present herself. The Argyle is still frequented by a few, celebrated *filles de joie* who dress in full ball dress holding court, surrounded by numerous sorts of admirers who gape at the dresses and jewels. Pearl surely observes how these women handle their “business” and this would have an enormous impact upon a girl fighting to make her way alone financially, and it probably did influence Pearl to consider becoming a courtesan when the time is right.

Whatever causes Pearl’s career choice, Paris is the city in which she perfects her profession. She arrives in Paris sometime near the end of the 1850s. Hickman writes, “She did
this with the most spectacular success” (228). Pearl knows instinctively what to do to get noticed. Her vocabulary does not include words such as discretion, or unobtrusiveness. Pearl does not suffer from any fear concerning *amour propre* [reputation]. She writes in her memoirs:

*Il y a des femmes qui envient notre sort; hôtel, diamants, voitures!... Quels rêves dorés! J'ai eu la vie heureuse. J'ai gaspillé énormément d'argent... Si les louis sont faits pour rouler, les diamants pour briller, on ne saura me reprocher d'avoir détourné de leur destination ces nobles choses: j'ai brillé avec les unes, j'ai roulé avec les autres. C'était dans l'ordre, et je n'ai péché que par un trop grand amour de l'ordre, rendant à la circulation ce qui était à César, et à mes créanciers ce qui avait cessé d'être à moi.*

[Here are women who envy our lot: mansion diamonds, carriages!...What gilded dreams!...I have had a happy life: I have squandered money enormously...If louis are made to roll, and diamonds to glitter, I cannot be reproached with having perverted from their normal uses these noble things. With the latter I glittered, the former I set rolling. It was according to the rule, and all my sin has been a too great respect for the rule, rendering to currency what belonged to Caesar, and to my creditors that which had ceased to belong to me]. (Pearl 1–2/355–56 and 1–2/188)

During her career, Pearl accrues all the luxury that could be desired. She says that she did not consider all of the luxuries and money given her as her greatest triumph. As she looks back on her life, she discloses in her *Epilogue* that what she thinks is her most important victory is none of the material things: “*Honneur et justice sont satisfaits. Je n'ai jamais trompé personne, car je n'ai jamais été à personne. Mon indépendance fut toute ma fortune: je n'ai pas connu d'autre bonheur. Et c'est encore le lien qui m'attache à la vie.*” [Honor and justice are satisfied. I have never deceived anybody, because I have never belonged to anybody. My independence was all my fortune, and I have known no other happiness; and it is still what attaches me to life] (Pearl 356 and 188). This is a recognizably Rousseauian comment. Nearing the end of her life, Pearl may have wanted to defend herself by leaving a better impression than that which had been created through all the gossip, but on her terms. By doing so she presents, in a Rousseauian style, a better side to her readers than the rumors which float around about her from earlier times. Her values concerning the maintenance of her independence and her own code of honor, which is to never fake loving someone in order to dupe them, are reiterated in her *Epilogue*. (Her code of
honor is hers alone, and does not fit into any code of honor which society holds dear). She does not fear for her reputation so much as she fears for her loss of independence and so her story is told with the Rousseauian philosophical view of amour de soi. In reality, Pearl lives a luxurious life as a courtesan, constantly the center of attention, and with that notorious label comes the eventual and inevitable social criticism—yet Pearl mostly shrugs her shoulders at social opinion in her Memoirs. Celebrity is free from morality in Pearl’s view.

Visibility and the Construction of Celebrity through Fashion and Glamor

During the Second Empire high society women pass mornings receiving various suppliers. She rarely, if ever, goes into a milliner’s or a couturier’s. The work is all done in her apartment or hôtel. So does the courtesan. The elegant woman almost never walks, and if she does take a few steps down the boulevard she is always followed discreetly by her footman. Social calls for society women are made in the afternoon, and the courtesan is called upon as well at that time. Next comes the rite of the carriage-drive in the Bois de Boulogne. The tour of the lake is taken by Society every fine day in the afternoon when the weather is good. There are crowds of eager spectators crowded along the paths on either side to view the various types of carriages and their owners. It is a Parisian ritual. Once the drive is ended those same carriages hurry home in time to dress for dinner at seven o’clock. Evenings in Paris, from December to May, consist of an animated social life that occurs in the elegant quarters of the city for the greater part of the night. All of this is what Pearl takes in while she is visiting Paris with her London protector, this is what she covets, and this is what she eventually obtains. When Pearl comes to Paris with her first protector, Bill Blinkwell (Robert Bignell), he has obtained a passport for himself which states that he is travelling with his wife. She says they would often
speak French together and that he had a way of saying “Ma chère Cora” [My darling Cora] (Pearl 29 and 14).

Pearl talks as if this name is the first to come to her head, and perhaps that is true, but her choice to take a new name in London suggests that she wants to hide. Perhaps she wanted to leave her past behind. This would have included her family, and the choice of a name entirely different from her birth name helps her cover her traces quite well. Later, she jokes about the play on words, saying that she is the chain upon which is strung twelve lockets with portraits of her lovers. It is her Parisian necklace that is made of the most precious metal – gold. By now she has already begun to re-image herself by choosing a new name – a name that has much more *panache* than her true name. Her new name brings the gem of Venus to mind. Once in Paris, Pearl leaves Bill as he must return to London and she chooses to remain in Paris. He is not included on her “golden chain.”

Some years later a British journalist announces that she had a necklace which is a handsome record of achievement. “From a massive gold chain depend twelve lockets of most exquisite workmanship, emblazoned with the devices of the best and oldest families of France. A central locket bears the arms of the lady herself, with this appropriate motto, “Honi soit qui mal y pense. Within the lockets are twelve portraits of…” (Bingham 60–61). “Evil be to him who evil thinks” which is the English re-interpretation of that Latin phrase and is also the motto surrounding the shield of the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom. One can suppose that they belong to the numerous noble lovers she has had as protectors and identify in her memoirs. Society women would crave knowledge of whose lockets suspended from that chain. Their cravings are fuel for Pearl’s celebrity.
It is at this point that we are able to recognize how Pearl begins early to carefully select her lovers in order to enable her to rise to the top of her profession, to cultivate her celebrity and ensure her financial viability. In light of her now widening social horizons, she is introduced to Lasséma [Victor Masséna]. It is this important liaison that brings her the arrival in society that she has desired. In her memoir she states that Masséna was “unquestionably one of the first links in my gold chain” (Pearl 15). Victor Masséna is the grandson of Napoleon’s great marshal, the third Duke de Rivoli, and later the fifth Prince of Essling. Victor Masséna is Pearl’s first important lover and buys all the outward signs of wealth that she requests of him.

Pearl acts quickly to capitalize on her growing success and notoriety. Pearl uses her first lover’s generosity to create her image through fashion and glamor as a means to develop her celebrity. Masséna buys her dresses by Worth and Laferrière and jewels from the rue de la Paix. Framing herself in beautiful clothes and jewels, carriages, and all such outward signs of wealth cultivates her celebrity. It makes her ever more visible. It attracts the all-important gaze. Pearl knows that success creates success. In fact, she has a personal system worked out with that goal in mind.

One such way of promoting an image is through photography which is part of the new culture of visibility and a part of nineteenth-century mass media. Photography was invented in France in 1816 by Nicéphore Niépce who used paper coated with silver chloride thereby creating the first negatives. It is actually Louis Daguerre who refines the process and is able, through a better exposure process to yield a higher quality image. When this process becomes commercialized others decide to become photographers. One such person was André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri who is a daguerreotypist but becomes more famous for his patented version of the carte de visite which is a card with a person’s image mounted on it. Disdéri is the
photographer of Cora Pearl, at least for many of the photos which are still available of her today. These photos signed by Disdéri are proof that Pearl uses photos of herself as calling cards to promote her celebrity. It is even a habit for many courtesans to place these photos in windows of famous couturier’s shops to add to their celebrity. Using photography is another way to draw the gaze of society along with that of important men.

Pearl uses fashion and glamour as a means to develop her celebrity, once again utilizing the new form of mass media to her advantage by drawing the attention of the gaze to self-advertise. As Susan Griffin tells us in *The Book of Courtesans: A Catalogue of Their Virtues*:

Charles Worth, who inaugurated the tradition of *haute couture*, was eager to design dresses for women who were courtesans. His clientele included not only the Empress Eugénie and the most prestigious families of France, but Cora Pearl, Païva, and the Countess de Castiglione. The notoriety of these clients made his designs even more notable…what the *grandes horizontales* wore was news; columnists who wrote weekly about their exploits included detailed descriptions of their wardrobes. And there was another reason for their popularity among designers…as outsiders they could take more risks, a bravado that allowed couturiers to be more creative. (44)

A courtesan’s outfit is designed not simply to please the eye, but to be read for meaning. The colors chosen would either be colors that complimented her skin tones, or she makes sure to wear the favorite color of her benefactor. The size of the crinoline which for Pearl is daring since she is the first to use the huge crinolines created by Worth, emphasizes the size of her hips (or, read another way, her libido). The material, silk or satin, serves to remind everyone who gazes in her direction of her wealth as well as the way she makes it. The glitter and shininess of it all reflects the powers she possesses to attract and fascinate. “A feather in her hat? On the one hand a bird, wildness itself, the voluptuousness of nature, and on the other, the hunt—the urge to capture, ravish, possess” (41). The readers are not just men. Society women read the courtesan’s fashion and copy it whenever they see it at operas, theaters, balls, or the races. Pearl is a
trendsetter. Her every move is observed by all, but with that social responsibility is attached envy.

By wearing her wealth, Pearl also shows herself as a winner of men’s favor among women. All her finery, her silks and cashmere, satins, feathers, and jewels are what the courtesan utilizes to meet the “old class distinctions in a waning social system. These barriers were not only challenged, but they were seriously compromised” (45). They are kept by husbands and sons of women with pedigree. Their full regalia of luxurious materials, in luminous bright colors, their scintillating jewelry draw the gaze of every person, especially the women who, despite their disapproval at the fact that these women dress better than the high society ladies, they nonetheless study and imitate the courtesans’ apparel thus giving the courtesans the power to dictate fashion for the coming season. Pearl took advantage of this power to be visible and draw everyone’s gaze for one of her virtues is her timing. Trends had to be timed to be successful.

Mass media includes print and anything in print creates celebrity and soon Pearl draws the scrutiny of Count de Maugny who writes gossip pamphlets. The Count de Maugny, a frequent guest at her home discovers that Pearl has plenty of system and he writes about a discovery with regard to that system. Richardson writes that in Maugny’s book on the demi-monde of the Second Empire the Count, writing under the pseudonym of Zed, evidences that he found an astonishing register at Pearl’s. This journal is divided into three columns. The names of clients populate one (most of them famous, and friends of his); the second row has the dates of their visits; and in the third are the amounts given by the visitors for the welcome they had received. There is also another column reserved for Pearl’s observations. This column, Zed notes, is not nice about everyone, nor is it publishable (Richardson 34). This must have created quite a clatter among the men on that list. Zed’s observations found in his book on the Second
Empire demi-monde are a good example of how Pearl’s ever expanding celebrity is perpetuated through gossip columns and the many “Visitors Guides in Paris for Men.”

Another author, Philbert Audebrand wrote in his *Petits Mémoires d’une stalle d’orchestre* the following: “La Phryné britannique a été l’une des étoiles qui ont le plus brillé dans le firmament du second Empire. D’un aveu unanime on a fait d’elle, durant vingt-cinq ans, le prototype de la courtisane moderne” [The British Phryné was one of the most brilliant stars in the Second Empire firmament. A unanimous vote has made her, during the last twenty-five years, the prototype of the modern courtesan] (Audebrand 220, Trans. Sasson).

Because celebrity depends on visibility, Pearl lives her life as much as possible in the public eye. She puts herself on display at the Bois, at balls, and on the stage. She practices conspicuous consumption to use consumerism as a further means to associate her name and money. She is expert at dressing to attract attention and what Pearl wears makes news, just as what Pearl does makes news, what Pearl says makes news, and who Pearl is currently with makes news. Pearl knows that the courtesans of yesterday still sell copy and that is why she has chosen to write a memoir. Still, all of her current success with regard to her memoirs depends upon three main elements: confession of her lovers’ generosity, advertisement of her own talents, and personal incidents to exploit herself and upon which to capitalize.

Yet another way Pearl sets a higher standard for fashion and visibility is by the use of wigs and make-up. Glamour concerns one’s look and the ever innovative, trendsetting Pearl, coming from a performer family, knew that a look included wigs and make-up. She is the first woman to make her hair blond, to wear wigs, to paint her eye-lashes, and to color her complexion with various tints such as silver, pearl, milk-color, sunset, and even orange. Holden suspects that she lost her red hair early in life, because when her effects are sold at auction after
her departure, there are lots auctioned off that include an unusual amount of false hair and a blond wig which brings in twenty francs. According to Pearl’s biographer, W. H. Holden, there is also a paragraph in La Scie, from the 5th of January, 1873, which states that Pearl was completely bald—a fact discovered by prying neighbors around the Rue de Pontieu, who frequently view her hanging wigs out to dry in the sun (68). Even if she were bald, she is brilliant at making herself appear far younger than her real age, and compliments on her youth pleased her very much. Pearl’s use of wigs brings the desired gaze along with it criticism in print. On May 1866 an article in The Speculator adds to discussions on the morality of wigs.

Are wigs immoral?—because if not, one scarcely perceives a reason why the newspaper moralists who are so fond of describing Anonyma and Cora Pearl with a kind of reprehensive voluptuousness of detail, should waste so much moral strength in denouncing the practice of using hair dyes. It is not much wicked, one would think, in itself, than wearing false teeth, or scattering powder, or padding, and all those sins have hitherto escaped with very lenient censure from the newspaper pulpit. (The Spectator 574)

Pearl’s wig wearing is commented upon from a moral point of view indicating the moral prejudices of certain newspaper writers of the day specifically with regard to her habits. At the height of the Second Empire morality newspapers were writing about Pearl and her wigs and hair dyes and as seen here, some newspapers take the opposite approach in defense, both which perpetuate “clatter”—that gossip which makes for good publicity and creates celebrity.

It is with Masséna that Pearl’s celebrity blossoms. The clatter she makes with her pranks and tricks; her incredibly sumptuous dinners paid for by the Duke which never have less than fifteen guests; her expensive dresses and jewels; the carriage and horses; and the fine house she buys when she can afford it at 61 rue Ponthieu which she shares with another courtesan, Caroline Hassé, all adds to her growing celebrity.

Her relationship with Masséna is a happy one for the next six years. Hickman writes that it was “over this period Pearl learned from him everything that she needed to transform herself
from an unknown English dolly mop into one of the most luxurious courtesans in Paris. Masséna obtained a mistress of genius. Not only did she own an innate sensuality, but she also had one other exceptional talent: she was able to convert having a good time into an art form” (230). Not only can Pearl lay a table correctly for a dinner party, but she can make herself up to appear more beautiful than she actually is. Unlike some courtesans who have to work to learn such things as are needed in their trade, Pearl is one of the few whose knowledge of such things is almost entirely instinctive. Pearl has “It” and she knows how to use it.

In order to live in the world in which she lives, she practices conspicuous consumption to associate her name with money which ignites envy. One of the first things she does is hire a great chef for her dinner parties. His name: Salé. He is not just a chef; she says he is a culinary genius on par with the mythical Vatel. Furthermore, it was Masséna’s money that “maintained her servants, including the brilliant and profligate chef, Salé” (Rounding 206). Pearl has little to lose. Not only does Salé prepare all the food, but he does all the marketing and keeps account of what he spends….more or less. She was suspicious of the perfectly rounded off numbers at every accounting. He had been known to have spent more than thirty thousand francs in a two week period in Vichy to keep Cora’s guests in awe. Salé’s great meals add to Pearl’s celebrity, and once she knows what he could produce, she exploits it to her benefit. Undoubtedly, journalists and literary men are invited to these affairs most likely to ensure publicity.

Pearl tells a story about going out somewhere with Masséna one day when she decides to first visit the kitchen. She finds it full of food:

La première chose qui frappe nos regards est une rangée de cinq poulets de toute beauté, plus d’énormes quartiers de bœuf tout cuit, tout un étalage de viandes froides. Une véritable boutique de rôtisseur. Et de fait, je ne crois pas user de simple comparaison. “Pour qui donc tout cela?” demandai-je à Salé. Il me répondit imperturbablement: “Pour M. le duc” [The first thing we saw was a line of five enormous pullets, huge quarters of beef, all cooked, a perfect exhibition of cold victuals. It was like the shop of
This sort of excess is typical for the rich Parisians during the Second Empire since gourmet extravagances were in vogue, blue-printed from the Imperial state dinners given by the Emperor and Empress which filter down to the nobility who imitate the same excess. The newly rich bourgeoisie also try at minimum to give the impression of keeping up with appearances to subdue their envy. As one of the nouveaux riches parvenus, Pearl makes sure her luxurious dinners are talked about and reported. This habit of extravagance is taken with Parisians when they go away from the city during the summer as well. Once or twice per year, it was fashionable to escape the city. “Everyone of any import left for a week in the spring for a country visit, and then again around July or August there was the mass exodus for the spas and casinos to take the waters and rest. It was imperative to recuperate from the winter’s extreme dissipations in order to replenish oneself for the upcoming winter season.” (Richardson 78). This exodus for the rich is a ritual also enjoyed by their pampered cocottes without whom they could not do. Masséna is no different.

While Masséna, the Duke de Rivoli was frequenting Pearl, he went to Baden-Baden, which was a fashionable summer spa and casino and she followed him. Along with her she had “un train étourdissant un wagon de bagages, six chevaux, un personnel monstre” [a tremendous train; a baggage wagon, six horses, many servants] (Pearl 59 and 30). She finds that she is denied access to the premise and she is asked to leave. When she asks the reason why she is banned from losing her money like everyone else, she is told that it is by order of the Queen. To console herself, she goes to the races and there, among friends, she is brought a card by someone’s servant: “Dépêche-toi de finir ton dîner, je t’offre le bras pour rentrer dans le salon. Moray” [Make haste, finish your dinner. I offer you my arm upon which you can enter the salon. Moray
Pearl had obviously already met the Duke, either at some party, since he frequented the demi-monde, or she may have already made his acquaintance at the ice-skating rink (a story that will be brought up later). His protection for Pearl in Baden is representative of his gentlemanly gallantry. Thus, the note to Pearl in Baden-Baden.

To create celebrity through visibility in Baden-Baden, consumerism and self-display play a large part and Pearl capitalizes on both with extravagant parties, raucous pranks, and visibly magnificent (to the point of gaudy) apparel. Pearl’s residence at Baden-Baden is visited nightly by never less than fifteen guests for dinner. Immediately after dinner, they all go to the salon to gamble. One of the many pranks that are pulled by Masséna’s friends is to throw firecrackers. People scream and run in all directions. She tells various stories of the sorts of tricks and pranks that are played in Baden-Baden by Masséna’s boisterous entourage of friends.

In Vichy, l’hôtel du Lion d’Or, du Cheval Blanc became their residence for the summer. She pays for everything and over thirty thousand francs is spent in a two week period on food. She admits: “S’il m’est arrivé de me passer des fantaisies coûteuses, je puis dire que Vichy a été, à cet égard, l’un des principaux théâtres de mes exploits” [If at any time in my life I was really extravagant, I can honestly say that it was at Vichy that my money flew] (Pearl 73 and 35–6). However, Pearl knows exactly what she was doing, she is capitalizing on her growing success and notoriety.

Cora, with all her chameleon skills of transformation, was able not only to fit herself effortlessly into Masséna’s boisterous circle, but soon found that she could beat them at their own game. “My desire to please my guests sometimes led me to eccentricities more or less amusing.” (Hickman 234)

This is the period in her life when the legends about her are first born… those that live after her death. Even the strangely voluptuous and extravagant tricks such as when Prince Napoléon sends
her an entire truckload of orchids, she promptly throws them all on the floor and dances a can-can on them in front of her guests.

It is Pearl’s own extravagance, her ‘byzantine taste’ for luxurious display, which is so damaging to her finances. During the winter months she has fresh fruit brought to the table embedded in Parma violets. The violets alone are a ruinous 1500 francs.

*L'hiver, je donnais des soupers avec quinze cents francs de violettes de Parme, au lieu de mousse autour des fruits. Je ne crois pas que mes hôtes aient eu à me reprocher un manque d'attentions. Je me suis toujours piquée de remplir avec honneur mes devoirs de maîtresse de maison* [In the winter at my suppers I used to have the fruit brought to the table embedded, instead of moss, in Parma violets which cost me fifteen hundred francs. I believe no guest of mine can reproach me with any lack of attention. I always made it a point of honour to faithfully fulfill my duties as mistress of the house]. (Pearl 102–3 and 51)

This is another way of obtaining visibility to bolster celebrity because her guests will talk about their experiences at her home. To make a guest feel comfortable, she never spared expenses.

Pearl even breaks four of her favorite, expensive liqueur crystal glasses on purpose to make a guest feel less guilty for having accidentally broken one of them.

*Un soir on prend le café. Un monsieur casse un petit verre et paraît très vexé. J'ai la maladresse cherchée, d'en casser quatre. Et notez que je tenais beaucoup à ce service. Je ne pouvais moins faire pour un galant homme, et je n'aurais voulu pour rien au monde le laisser partir, avec l'arrière-pensée qu'il m'eût contrarié en quelque chose* [One evening when we were taking coffee, a gentleman broke one of the liqueur glasses and appeared very much vexed with himself. I, by an “accident” apparently, but really by design, broke four to put him at his ease. I took much pride in my set of glasses. But for that very reason I did not wish that my guest should go away with the idea that he had offended me by an action that was unintentional]. (Pearl 103 and 51)

In the Victorian version of Pearl’s *Memoirs* the chapter with this tale is entitled “True Politeness”. What can be taken from her actions is her extreme desire to please her guests which again translates to positive gossip and more visibility through any print that might come out of that gossip.
Pearl is infamous for her outrageous behavior. Some liked it, some not so much. In the beginning of her career, she limits herself to shocking behavior mostly outside of Paris. William Osgood Field, who knew her well and appreciated her, wrote that “Cora delighted in the most wild and reckless extravagance and no doubt she was quite right, for in her special profession it is more than half the battle to keep in the limelight, and have all the drums incessantly beating” (Richardson 33). Concerning this specific behavioral characteristic the boulevardier, Zed, writes in his *Le Demi-monde sous le Second Empire—souvenirs d’un sybarite*:

> Un autre pilier du cabinet infernal c’était l’inexplicable Cora Pearl (en langage vulgaire Emma Chruch). J’avoue humblement que c’est là un succès que je n’ai pas compris qu’il faut bien constater, puis qu’il a existé, mais que rien ne justifie. Pour moi, elle fait tache dans le groupe éclatant, raffiné et aristocratique, à tout prendre, des femmes galantes de son époque, dont elle différait absolument sous tous les rapports. Ce fut une individualité à part, un specimen d’une autre race, un phénomène bizarre étonnant. Et c’est, peut-être ce qui explique sa notoriété, ce qui a été cause de son prestige [Another pillar of the hellish congress was the inexplicable Cora Pearl (in vulgar language Emma Chruch). I humbly confess that that is a success which I do not understand though it is necessary to note, that it existed, but that nothing justifies it. For me, she stained the scintillating, refined and upper-class group, all in all, loose women of its epoch, from which she differed absolutely in every respect. Hers was a separate individuality, a specimen of another breed, an amazing strange phenomenon. And it is, perhaps what explains her notoriety, that which was the cause of her prestige. (Zed 52–53 Trans. Sasson)]

Publicity in newspapers, gossip columns, and male *boulevardiers* memoirs were an important element in the construction of Pearl’s celebrity and Zed, Loliée, and Delau contributed significantly to Pearl’s celebrity as is noted in this study.

Frédéric Loliée, on the other hand was not enamored with Pearl. He wrote several books on the Second Empire. In *Les Femmes du Second Empire: La Fête impériale*, Loliée mentions Cora Pearl on numerous occasions, but not always in the best light. Loliée was not the only person to write pejoratively about Pearl. In the July 22, 1886 edition of *Le Figaro*, an article entitled “L’Horizontalerie” by Caliban disparaged her thus:
Que voulez-vous, la courtisane contemporaine, la bonne, la vraie, celle que nos mœurs scientifiques ont produite, et dont Cora Pearl est le type, ne trouve pas le chemin de ma pitié sociale. Je regrette l’autre, celle du vieux jeu, Manon par exemple [That one please, the contemporary courtesan, the good, the true, the one that our scientific morals produced, and the type of which Cora Pearl is, does not get my social pity. I feel sorry for the other type, that one of the old-fashioned type, Manon for example]. (Le Figaro 1 Trans. Sasson)

The difference between Manon (fille de joie) and Pearl (fille de marbre) is profoundly commented upon above. Now, since Dumas fils’ La Dame aux camélias, society may find some sympathy for a Manon, but none for a Pearl. There is a link between Manon and La Dame aux camélias. The novel, Manon Lescaut, is the first gift that Armand Duval gives Marie Duplessis and which she reads many times over. It is mentioned several time in the novel by Dumas fils himself who, posing as the narrator says he purchased the book at Marguerite Gautier’s auction after her death. His re-reading that night brings him to compare Manon’s death in the desert in her lover’s arms to Marguerite’s death in a soft bed, in no one’s arms—that being the desert in which Marguerite died—a desert of the heart, vaster, more barren, and pitiless than the desert in which Manon died. This is why Dumas fils says he pities Marguerite and this is why society may have sympathy for her. By the time Caliban writes this comment, Zola has made his imprint upon society with the novel Nana (1880) with regard to a voracious fille de marbre courtesan and Pearl is categorized as the Nana type. (The future “Duval Affair Incident” would label her as heartless in society’s eyes and be her downfall). It is the pinnacle of her acting out. But with the end of the Second Empire, reality became fashion and Pearl’s theatrics, her calculated morals [mœurs scientifiques], were out of fashion. However, that end is still years down the road.

As Pearl grows more confident in her abilities, she begins to be less shy about ‘acting out’ when back in Paris. She writes that she once smashed a cane over the head of Prince Paul Demidoff because he would take off his hat at the Maison d’Or restaurant simply to irritate her.
She later says she regretted having done it because it was a very fine cane: "Je ne cache pas pourtant que j’eus ensuite quelque regret. La canne était très jolie et portait sur sa pomme un chiffre pour lequel j’avais la plus sincere estime" [I regretted the affair afterwards, however, for the cane was a handsome one and bore the monogram of a person for whom I had a sincere esteem] (Pearl 96 and 48). When Demidoff claims that her pearls are not real, she rips the necklace from around her neck and the pearls scatter and roll on the floor. Recovering herself, Pearl says: "Ramassez les perles, mon cher. Pour vous prouver qu'elles sont vraies, je vous en laisse une pour votre cravate. Médusé, Danilooff ne bougea pas" [Pick up my pearls, my dear, I’ll prove that they are real, I will leave you one for your cravat. –Medusa! (Danilooff did not budge)] (Pearl 97 and 49). Daniloff (Demidoff) sat transfixed, for the nobility at the Maison d’Or drop to their hands and knees to look for pearls. Pearl’s title for this chapter is: "COMMENT ON S’Y PREND POUR SE FAIRE SALUER - DANILOFF ET LE COLLIER DE PERLES" [HOW A MAN WAS MADE TO BOW – DANILOFF AND THE PEARL NECKLACE] (Pearl 95 and 47). Pearl’s sense of humor and her wit is shown brilliantly in this chapter title.

Money begets money and Pearl’s conspicuous consumerism and extravagance triggered outrageous extravagance in others. She writes of having been presented with such gifts as a gigantic silver horse filled with gold coinage and jewels, which is brought to her home by two porters; several vanloads of expensive orchids; a priceless necklace of huge black pearls; a box of marrons glacés with each marron wrapped separately in a thousand-franc note; an entire book which she threw to the ground, but later discovers that every page was a one thousand franc note. She had been given several homes that amounted to thousands of francs each, and once, an Arabian horse from the Duke de Morny. Khadil Bey [Khalil Bey] sent her, as a surprise, an expensive, delicately-carved ivory box just because she got upset with herself when, while she
was playing a game of ninepins on his carpeted floor, he entered and the ball hit his leg. She thought he would be offended but he instead sends the box as a gift (Pearl 48–49). Money begets money.

By now, Pearl is one of the most celebrated of the *demi-mondaines* who only moves in the highest male social circles. Holden writes that “according to M. Paul d’Ariste, such ladies were priced according to where they lived” (45). If she lives in the Rue de Grammont, writes Holden, her protector must expect to pay three hundred francs per month; in Rue du Helder, four hundred francs a month, and a groom; Rue St. Lazare or Rue de la Chaussée –d’Antin, five hundred francs a month, with a horse and carriage. For a mistress who lives in Faubourg St. Honoré, she has to have a protector who is at minimum a Count, or preferably a Duke, who would guarantee an allowance of two thousand francs per month, a pavillon in a hotel, two carriages, two horses, a footman, and a chef (45). Pearl’s address in Rue de Pontieu added to her celebrity because it is there that she is able to stable her numerous horses and equine accoutrements.

In order to bolster her visibility, she takes up riding and becomes a very fine equestrienne. Pearl’s visibility is greatly enhanced by her equestrienne abilities and her Englishness in relation to her horses and livery. It is during the same time that Pearl was in a relationship with Masséna that another protector, Marut (Prince Achille Murat) gives her a present of her first horse. He had heard of her riding on a velocipede at Maison Lafitte where she has a country place. From this point on, Pearl became a consummate horsewoman, unsurpassed in skill and style. Her equestrian abilities are well attested by those who knew her. Nestor Roqueplan who was the director of the Opéra and the Chatelet theaters also wrote for *Le Figaro* that she was “a centauress and the originator of the amazon.” “She rides with peerless distinction
and skill.” He continued, “and the most refined people have taken her carriages as models of line and colour” (Roqueplan in Hickman 236). From that first horse, she soon collected as many as sixty fine saddle and carriage horses in the stables at her 61, rue de Pontieu address between 1863 and 1868. It was rumored that she spent over 90,000 francs which in today’s dollars would be around $560,000 with one horse dealer alone. She capitalizes on her Englishness through the daily presentation of her carriage for a drive in the Bois de Boulogne. She creates a show for the Parisians with her magnificent caramel colored horses, her elegant and splendid carriages, and her po-faced English grooms. They are dressed in English jockey silks in her signature bright yellow colors. This is a subtle way of emphasizing that all things British in equine matters are superior. Thanks to Masséna and others money, the “men who never smile” become incorporated into the Cora Pearl myth.

There is no better way to attract the much needed gaze which acknowledges her wealth than by riding her horses, driving or being driven in her magnificent carriages. Although it was the Empress and the ladies of the court who begin the fashion of taking a drive in the Bois de Boulogne as a daily constitutional, it is Pearl who starts the fashion among the most improper Parisian courtesans. This daily drive in the Bois de Boulogne is considered an important social statement which has weighty value. It depends on what sort of carriage is used, and the amount of crinolines that are stuffed into the carriage. There are strict rules of etiquette governing the correct procedures for driving out to the Bois de Boulogne. It is fine to sit alone in a carriage made for one person, but to sit alone in a carriage made for two is considered a faux pas. Strangely, given such unbelievably delicate sensibilities, it is considered perfectly respectable for a woman to drive herself. The only important point is that she needs to drive very quickly.
Because celebrity depends upon visibility, Pearl lives her life in the public eye. The fact that Pearl is at the head of her fellow Cyprians with regard to equestrian matters greatly enhances her celebrity. In France, when it comes to horses, everything English is especially stylish and makes her visibility even more valuable since she is recognized as British. She confesses that she is an excellent horsewoman and that it appears that her seat is graceful, for the Duke de Morny, who was a distinguished member of the Jockey Club, complimented her upon her skill, and asked who had been her riding instructor. His compliments were weighty because of his position as the creator of the coup d’état that brought his half-brother to power, thus giving him power by association. In The Gilded Beauties of the Second Empire, Loliée comments on Pearl’s daily drives in the Bois:

Les attelages de Cora et les speeders de Mme. Skittels excitaient l’admiration publique. Les yeux ne voudraient pas la quitter, si la fringante Cora Pearl ne s’était révélée dans toute sa gloire avec la tenue sans égale de ses harnais, de sa livrée et de ses gens. Armée de sa belle impertinence, elle a croisé tout à l’heure l’équipage à la daumont de la baronne de Rotschild et l’attelage renommé de la maréchale Serrano. La voilà, donc, cette centauresse! [Eyes would not turn, if energetic Cora Pearl did not show herself in all her glory with her harnesses, livery, and servants kept without equal. Armed with her alluring impertinence, she quickly outdid the crew in the daumont of the baroness of Rothschild and the renowned harnessing of the marshal's wife Serrano. There she is, this centauresse!]. (Loliée 225 and 227 Trans. Sasson)

Pearl instinctively knows that in outdoing the Parisian grandes dames she would create envy and envy would create duplication. It was a way to make visual “clatter” resonate. Pearl’s conspicuous consumerism is fanned by her insouciance. Pearl practices conspicuous consumption to associate her name and money and she makes sure that her spending does not go unnoticed. She also puts herself on display at balls, casinos, races, and on stage. With regard to her comment about making louis roll and diamonds being made to glitter (Pearl 356 and 188), Cora Pearl is iconical. Diamonds and money make her visibility glitter and attract even more attention. For Pearl horses represent not just a mere luxury, but an art. More than an art, it is a
business. She spends such enormous amounts on her stables that it could only be considered a “rational form of insanity” (Holden 47). Although Countesses attended the Baden races, none could drive their carriage into the Enclosure, yet Pearl is one of the two who are allowed in along with Hortense Schneider, the famous Offenbach singer.

Admittedly Pearl’s most deadly rival, Marie Colombier, said that Pearl’s horsemanship was superb and copied her liveries, harness, and upholstery. Colombier spread the rumor that Pearl was “bowlegged, drank heavily, and used make-up to improve the appearance of her breasts” (48). Although, Marie contradicted herself later when she stated that Pearl “c’était surtout une femme de sport, montant à cheval comme un jockey, faisant siffler sa cravache avec cranerie….son buste était irréprochable, sa gorge merveilleuse et digne d’être moulée par quelque illustre artiste de l’antiquité” [was essentially a sportswoman, who rode like a jockey, and liked to swank by cracking her whip . . . her bust was irreproachable, her marvelous neck, worthy of having been carved by some Old Master” (Colombier 306 Trans. Sasson). Surprisingly, even her most deadly rival unknowingly added to Pearl’s celebrity by writing about Cora Pearl in her memoirs.

Pearl cultivates associations only with the most rich and powerful men in France. Pearl is among others in the sixties who are invited as guests at supper parties given by Khalil Bey, the Duke de Gramont-Caderousse, the Duke of Hamilton, and Edward Prince of Wales, the future king of England, continues Holden (49). Pearl fraternized with Dukes and Princes, and she offered hospitality to as many of their wives who cared to accept it.

Paramount to Pearl’s manner of propagandizing her own celebrity is the instigation of situations that demonstrate her extreme power of appeal to rich and powerful men. In 1867, Prince Achille Murat fought a victorious duel with the Marquis de Gallifet. Whether or not Pearl
is mixed up in this is not known. But in “an earlier celebrated affair of honour in which Achille figured in 1865, Pearl was certainly not blameless” (Holden 43). A horse-dealer had begun an action against Pearl for several thousand francs, with which Pearl disagreed and then refused to pay. Since Murat is completely taken with Pearl, he is unable to refuse her whims. When asked to sign a certificate saying that the money has been paid in full, he makes a very foolish mistake to satisfy his mistress. Apparently he did not think that the fake certificate would end up leading to any trouble, but he had not figured in Henri Rochfort, who is the “staunchest of Republican journalists as well as a bitter enemy of Napoléon III, his dynasty and Empire” (43) and had highly criticized the Bonapartes. This fraud added fuel for his fire. Achille challenges him to a duel. The duel takes place at the riding-school at St. Germain. Rochefort is slightly wounded in the thigh, but what caused him to worry more is a tale that spread around Paris that he had fought Murat over Cora Pearl. Further rumors spread about Rochefort’s cowardice and Murat’s heroic swordsmanship by the Murats. Princess Caroline Murat, the sister of Achille, told everyone that Rochefort had turned his back to Achille’s attacks “and received his wound where the toe of a boot is the more usual weapon” (Holden 44). Of all the courtesans discussed in this study, only Cora Pearl has the honor of being dueled over by two important men. The rumors that come out of this duel further her celebrity and multiply her financial worth. Another locket on her golden chain is William, Prince of Orange. Following six years as the mistress of Masséna, Pearl then accepts as her next protector the eldest son and heir to the King of Holland. In her Mémoires she calls him “Duc Citron”. That is actually his nickname among his close friends. Pearl states that he was modest and amiable which is harmless enough, and that he had admitted to being tired of his life of pleasure. Pearl does not mention much about him accept that he stayed a long time, and more importantly, he gave her a magnificent necklace of huge black pearls which are forever
visible for posterity in one of her photographs. Her *Memoirs* reproduce some of the Citron’s letters in which he admits to the boredom of his life at the Hague, and of his yearning to return to Paris for a get together with his old friends. He was a large boon to the lengthening “golden chain” of Cora Pearl’s celebrity. Pearl continued to clamor for more and more from Orange and until he had to retreat. She confesses to the reader that she next meets up with the Emperor’s half-brother while ice-skating in the Bois one December day. The Duke de Morny [Moray] has had his eye on Pearl for some time and with his ever present nonchalance and his truly regal promiscuity, his self-assured first words to her were: *Cora sur la glace? me dit-il, quelle antithèse. Eh bien, fis-je, puisque la glace est rompue, offrez-moi un cordial. C’est tout mon désir.* [“Cora on the ice!” said he. “What an antithesis, thou hot one!” “Well,” said I, “since the ice is now broken, won’t you offer me something warm to drink?” “That is exactly what I wanted to do,” said he] (Pearl 49 and 26).

Nothing could have pleased Pearl more. M. le Duc de Morny is in the upper echelon of society and she has been “picked up” by him. (He invited her to his country home outside of Paris). Over that drink, the Duke invites her to his residence. When she arrives, she notes that he has an anti-room full of every type of Frenchman. Pearl promptly passes them right by and goes directly to the Duke asking him for her own key to a private door which she receives. From that time forward she enters through the private entrance. As a token of his appreciation, Morny gives her a white Arab horse which is one of her favorites and which she says she often rode afterward.

To be chosen by this Duc means advancement in celebrity and Pearl makes sure that her new conquest is soon public information through high visibility. Since she already has added to her Golden Chain a Duke, a Prince, and a millionaire heir to the throne, she was on the lookout for someone even better, and who should just happen to glide effortlessly into her life but the
Emperor’s half-brother. Of all her lovers perhaps Moray (Morny) was the most suited to Pearl.

Voilà! . . . Another coat of arms on her golden chain! Pearl writes of the Duke:

_Mon hôte réalisait le type du parfait gentilhomme. Parfois il semblait s’abandonner, mais il se retrouvait toujours. Nul mieux que lui ne tournit un compliment; mais ses compliments n’étaient jamais fades: il avait horreur de la banalité. Il savait mettre de l’obligance jusque dans le reproche; et il y avait plaisir à être grondée par lui. Il était de ceux qui ne vieillissent pas, et qui demeurent toujours vivant dans le souvenir._ [My host was a perfect gentleman. Occasionally he seemed to be carried away with his feelings; but his compliments were never overdrawn. He had a horror of stupidity. He knew how to speak with taste even when he was reproachful; it was a pleasure to be scolded by him. He was one of those who never grows old, and who lives always in the memory of their friends]. (Pearl 52 and 28)

It would appear that the Duc de Morny was indeed one of Pearl’s special men—one with very fine manners and upbringing. Perhaps more importantly, he was both rich and generous. His name offers her even more celebrity since he is positioned so high in the politics of the day both by blood and by power.

Celebrity is enhanced by the courtesan’s address. Pearl’s addresses are exceptionally notable and she was very house proud and lavished much attention on her home. As mistress to the Emperor’s brother, Pearl now sets her sights on renting a suitable country house. (This home would be the envy of all). The mistress of the Emperor’s brother could not be expected to remain in the capital when the season is over. It is just as unthinkable that such an important person as herself should not own a week-end residence. She finds the perfect chateau, the attractive little Château Beauséjour just south of Orléans. It is located in some “wooded grounds on the banks of the Loiret at Olivet and it has a small estate of four and a half hectares of land, enclosed by a wall” (Holden 59). She had a passion for cleanliness, and her home is constantly cleaned from top to bottom. The brass rails are polished to a fine sheen, the parquet floors are washed weekly and the Wilton carpets re-placed on the floors and before every door is placed a mat which says “Wipe Your Feet”. The home has stained glass windows and Cora’s monogram, three C’s
intertwined, is seen in several memorable places. A large bronze bath cast by Chevalier of Paris is also engraved with Cora’s monogram (Richardson 29). Her sense of order and cleanliness is another celebrated quality appreciated by men who have armies cleaning and maintaining their chateau.

Her country gatherings greatly enhance her popularity, notoriety and celebrity which is precisely what she desires… something positive that could make print. In order to attract the rich and powerful, Pearl creates a life at the Château that is light-hearted and gay. Her Parisian friends are treated very hospitably and pass their days in practical jokes which bring them much laughter. This *chatelaine* invites them in clusters just as is the fashion established by the Emperor and Empress at Compiègne. There are hunts of all sorts which take place on the grounds. Since the parties which take place at Pearl’s are carefully orchestrated to have a happy atmosphere, Pearl mixes and matches persons so that wit and good conversation are never lacking. Her friendship with Morny eventually leads her to her most important protector. Sadly the Duke de Morny dies early, at the age of fifty-three due to deterioration in his health. Morny is one of the biggest links in her golden chain of lovers before his cousin, Prince Napoléon.

Without any doubt, her most important protector was His Imperial Highness Prince Napoléon, the cousin to the Emperor and the Duke de Morny. She writes that she met him while on a hunt at Meudon, accompanied by Prince Achille Murat. Murat’s horse dropped dead, and since Pearl had had enough of hunting for one day, she offered her groom’s horse so Murat could finish the hunt. When Prince Napoléon saw the dead horse, he asked what had happened. When told the story, had made the comment, “*Ah! Les dames! . . . Toujours bonnes!* . . .” [Ah, so; women are always kind.] (Pearl 111 and 56). Plon-Plon is the prince’s soubriquet (Duke Jean or
Jean-Jean as Pearl calls him in her memoir). That chance meeting is soon followed by various secret meetings. Plon-Plon fell desperately in love with Pearl. About him she said:

*Mon impression première ne s’est pas modifiée. Cet homme est un ange, pour ceux qui lui plaisent. Son de voix agréable, rire franc, conversation spirituelle, un besoin badine;—ange, je le répète, pour ceux qui lui plaisent: démon, roué, emporté, insolent pour les autres, ne se gênant jamais* [My first impression concerning the Duke has never been modified. This man was an angel to those who pleased him. His voice was agreeable, his laughter frank, his conversation witty, and at need playful; angel, I repeat, to those who pleased him; demon, roué, madman, unhesitating insulter to others]. (Pearl 114–15 and 59)

About herself Pearl writes:

*Le duc n’aimait pas les choses qui n’ont ni queue ni tête. Je suis comme lui, sur ce chapitre, et si je suis restée de mon pays, c’est uniquement par mon amour du bons sens. Mais, entendons-nous bien du bon sens: dans le choix des mots; il ne s’agit pas de cet autre bon sens qui vous empêche de faire des folies...Oh! Non! Malheureusement...* [The duke did not like conversations which have neither head nor tail. In that particular I am like him, and I have remained of my own country solely from my love of good sense. My good sense has taught me the choice of words; but, alas! has not been of that kind which prevents foolish actions]. (Pearl 114 and 58)

Pearl seemed to have the ability to be frank and candid about herself, and, according to her, to have the ability to recognize what to say and when.

She becomes his mistress with no questions asked, and is quickly housed at 101 rue de Chaillot. This home is splendid and she furnishes it magnificently. She has reached the pinnacle of political liaisons with the Prince and this house in Paris confirms it and finalizes her celebrated position. Pearl writes that the informality of her home is much appreciated by the prince and that he often says he dislikes the stiff formality of the Tuileries. However, sometimes Pearl’s coarseness to which she admits, bothers the Prince’s finer susceptibilities. He is rightly upset that at first she plays two men at once with him. This story is told in the English version and it has some differences from the version published in French. In chapter 17, the English version tells of her continuing an affair with a certain de Rouvray after she has begun her affair with Plon-Plon (Prince Napoléon). She writes that the Prince saw her in a carriage on the
Champs-Élysées with de Rouvray. The French publication cleverly leaves out this detail, probably so her denials of that situation could never be unveiled or verified if the prince should happen to read the memoir.

As previously mentioned, publicity in newspapers is an important element in the construction of Pearl’s celebrity. Whether the publicity is good, or not, it creates celebrity. An incident which aids to her celebrity is when she prosecutes her milliner, complaining to the Court that a bill for 9,500 francs for part of a year is excessive. The trimmings and the hats are produced, along with numerous undergarments disclosing the extravagances of modern Paris. The defendant was Mme Roux des Florins, who deals in lingerie, and produces several items and their boosted prices. (Certainly, no one knows that the young Pearl had worked as a milliner’s apprentice in London’s Regency Street and that she must have known the going prices for stock). Still, Pearl only wins her case in part. She gained a moral victory, for 1,000 francs is knocked off the account. Holden quotes from the findings. . . . “an Englishwoman, by name of Pearl, who lives here in royal luxury with one coachman for day and another by night” and notes that with this she obtains some welcome publicity (Holden 58) and she continues to build her celebrity.

Celebrity is also built upon the personality of the courtesan of that certain something called *It*. Many of her contemporaries affirm that she possessed a certain cryptic charm, some sort of mystifying love elixir, which had the ability to attract men like flies to honey. They were tireless in their pursuit of understanding the problem that a woman who is not beautiful manages to steal the husbands and lovers of the most beautiful women in France. For example, as previously quoted, the Count Albert de Maugny, self-appointed expert that he was, was only able to propose that she was “*un spécimen d’une autre race, un phénomène bizarre étonnant. Et c’est, peut-être ce qui explique sa notoriété, ce qui a été cause de son prestige*” [a specimen of another
race, an appearance both bizarre and astounding. And perhaps that explains her notoriety and the cause of her prestige] (Zed 53). Baron de Gondremark was equally at a loss to explain her mysterious attraction that “she was not really pretty; she had the head of a clown and the body of a Diane de Poitiers” (Gondremark in Holden 68). Gondremark was referring to the mistress of Henri II of France who was said to have the body of the goddess for which she was named.

As mentioned above, Pearl builds her celebrity by attending all the important balls. She always shows up either smothered both in diamonds and jewelry, and in as little attire as possible. It is well known through the newspapers of the day, that at the fancy dress ball at the Trois Frères Provençaux which took place early in 1866, she stated that she came dressed as the original “Eve”. The ball was so famous that news of it spread across the Channel, and London’s Baily’s Magazine announced that Pearl “looked very well, and her form and figure were not concealed by any more garments than were worn by the original apple-eaters (Baily 209-10).

Holden, who says he discovered that “she was even accorded obituary notices in papers like the Daily News and Truth” (Holden 13) even though her death took place during the forty-ninth year of the reign of pious Queen Victoria. Holden was fascinated with these anomalies and he wanted to know what contemporaries and intimates of hers had written about this English girl from Plymouth. He wrote a biography and researched her lovers and worked to uncover their identities faithfully. Holden writes that:

Cora was ever popular with the journalists, for she provided them with valuable copy, and she herself welcomed the publicity. Although their paragraphs were not always complimentary, she considered a bad Press infinitely preferable to no Press at all, and notices which in England would be considered as highly malicious and libelous were in France thought mildly humorous. (84)

Her ability to self-advertise was exceptional, and she rarely missed a chance at it.

Nothing could boost celebrity like a premiere on stage with the courtesan as the star attraction. Pearl tells the story that the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens was owned by composer M.
Hector Jonathan Crémieux (Nestor Crémillot in Pearl’s Memoir). He had known success there with such works as Offenbach’s operetta Orphée aux Enfers. Now, in 1866, the current play was causing problems. She says that he would have to do something or else the Bouffes would end up a failure. Upon looking out at the house, he saw no one of importance except Pearl and her gentleman, Prince Achille Murat. He entered the box and took up a conversation with them:


Pearl writes that later in the conversation he mentioned that he would need a Cupid for the revival. During the third act, he asked her if she could sing. Laughingly she responded that she was singing in her cradle. He asked her if she would sing the part of Cupid. (Pearl could not sing, but who was she to say “No”).

When Pearl tells about her part, she exaggerates a bit. In truth, the part consists of a short song in act 1; a few brief lines and another short song in act 3 followed by the gallop infernal with the complete company. Pearl writes: “C’en était fait. J’étais bombardée artiste dramatique, pour faire en public ‘l’Amour’, rôle délicat s’il en fût, au théâtre, et devant lequel avait reculé plus d’une femme du métier” [It was all settled then and there. I was pitch forked into the position of a dramatic artist to play in public the part of "Love," as ticklish a one as ever was on the stage, and from which many a real actress would have shrunk] (Pearl 294 and 160). Once again, Pearl exaggerates and embellishes to hear herself talk.

The evening arrived: Saturday, January 26, 1867. Everyone who was anyone was there. The cast consisted of all the well-known favorites, but it was Pearl’s name that brought the great crowd. There is still a record in the revue written by Jules Valentin of who attended that Monday.
night in the January 28, 1867 edition of *Le Figaro*. Among the men who were there was: Prince Napoléon, the Princes Achille Murat, Narischkine, Troubetskoy; the Dukes of Hamilton, Mouchy, Richelieu, and Brisac; Khalil Bey, the Marquis de Caux, the Hon, Denis Bingham, Comte de Laferrière, Duc de Rivoli, Mustapha Pasha, M. Émile Augier, Prince de Sagan, and numerous others. From the sisterhood of courtesans were present many of the most famous such as Adèle Courtois, Anna Deslion, Caroline Letessier, Giulia Barucci, Constance Rèzuche, Armande Rèzuche, Lucille Mangin, Marguerite Bellanger, Marie Colombier, and Émilie Williams. (*Le Figaro* 3-4).

According to her biographer, Holden, her entrance caused them to gasp… her costume was sparkling with a mass of diamonds (Holden 91). Her head had a crown of roses; she carried a bow and quiver of arrows; a diamond arrow held the crown of roses on her head; her dress was held together with diamond buttons; and huge diamonds acted as buttons on her buskins. Although she does not say anything about her costume and shoes encrusted with diamonds, it is the newspapers that record these details. Perhaps in writing her memoir that memory of such extravagance and carelessness is painful to a woman who has nothing much left monetarily. *Le Figaro* reported afterwards that: “On devinait qu’il y avait un nuage devant son regard, et que son coeur faisait tic-tac à briser son corset” [One guessed that she was conscious of a haze before her eyes, and that her heart beat fast enough to burst her stays]. Pearl’s celebrity became immortalized for Parisians and even Zola used this scene to introduce Nana.

To celebrate, Nestor Roqueplan wrote a sonnet in her honor; a Count offered fifty thousand francs for the boots she had worn on the first night which were encrusted with diamonds. And, she could not have had a better review from *Baily’s Magazine*:

... the adorable—the irrepressible—the nude! We know that “Beauty” when unadorned is adorned the best. There is no doubt as to her beauty—by the way, the portraits of her
which are stuck up in the streets are exactly like George Gordon, Lord Byron, who once or twice wrote a poem, as you may remember. There is no doubt as to her being “unadorned,” and it is clear that Paris thinks she is quite adorned enough for them. But we have had a great time at the little theatre of the Bouffes Parisien. Our pearl has come out of its shell. The world of Paris shelled out in return, giving twelve pounds for a box, and two pounds (takers) for a stall. Mdle. Cora—it is no business of mine, but she is the best figure in France—appeared as Cupid, in Offenbach's operetta of “Orpheus aux Enfers.” We remember to have heard, in our youth—happy, but extravagant and, alas! departed season—that “C'est l'amour, l'amour, l'amour, Qui fait le monde à la ronde,” and certainly Cupid gave them a turn the other night. More clever acting I have never witnessed; more pretty costumes were never invented. The ‘world’—by which, oh reader of ‘Baily,’ I mean your world and mine, not the world of all—the world sat (not still) and admired; and it was admitted that Lais was as good as Melpomene; that the goddess of the Bois de Boulogne may now aspire to a niche in the temple of burlesque-dramatic fame! The ‘Belle Hélène’ is still running, and run after. “Paris aimes bien les ‘épaules;’ and though it sees a good many of them, does not seem to tire; indeed it likes ‘les jambes’ also, I conclude, from the rush for stalls. (364).

It can be supposed that everyone was pleased with the results because Offenbach and Crémieux had great publicity, the critics wrote until their hands cramped up, the newspapers sold like crazy, the top echelon of male society enjoyed the opening night as well as the courtesans who were present, and the students had a night never to forget. But there was a claque and it was not friendly to the foreigner who had made a notorious career in Paris. Georges Cavalier, their mob leader and a revolutionary, led them to attack her on the twelfth night of production. He and his cronies hissed, booed, and groaned as she appeared on stage. The coup de grâce arrived when the entire audience joined in, and one man showed Pearl a bunch of keys. It was reported that she replied with an extremely guttersnipe gesture. It was also reported that she lay down, put her feet in the air, and waved them back and forth showing that “the soles of her shoes were one mass of diamonds” (Richardson 278). Pearl had had enough and walking off stage, she never returned. At her retirement from the stage Baily’s Magazine wrote: “Mdllle. Pearl, getting weary of the rehearsals, and of having to be punctually at a certain place at a certain hour, has retired from that small stage which as the ‘God of Love,’ she so well set off, and has retired to private life; her boots, I believe, bought in!” (Volume XIII 1867 42–43). Pearl writes nothing about this
experience on stage except the following: “Je jouai douze fois de suite. La bande applaudit à tout casser. A la fin je fus sifflée. [Je] quittai les planches sans regret, comme son désir d’y remonter. Ce que c’est que la gloire” [I played twelve nights running. The lot of friends applauded enough to bring the house down. I was hissed at last, however; and I left the boards without regret or the wish to return to them again. Such is glory] (Pearl 295 and 160).

Pearl’s celebrity had, without a doubt, filtered down, into the streets, where she was made immortal through the everyday barker’s calls. For months after, the gamins of Paris, writes Holden, bawled the latest jingle:

\[
\text{Comme l’Hélène des Troyens que, / grâce à Paris, / on renomme hier aux Bouffes-Parisiens / Cora Pearl a reçu la pomme. [Like Helen of Troy that, thanks to Paris, they reappointed yesterday at the Bouffes-Parisiens, Cora Pearl accepted the apple]. (Holden 93 Trans. Sasson)}
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With this last ditch effort to bolster an already magnificent celebrity, she retired, only to be immortalized in Paris through a street vendors song. Celebrity does have its rewards.

**War and Peace: The Aftermath and Letters Contained in her Memoirs for Proof**

1870. War broke out between France and Prussia. By September 2, all was lost for France. Pearl, however, remained. Her first thought at the siege of Paris were for her horses. She did not want them exposed to shell-fire and maimed so she was able to successfully smuggle out eight under the pretext of exercising them.

Pearl’s behavior during the Franco-Prussian war was exemplary. “Plus tard, ma maison de la rue de Chaillot était convertie en ambulance. Le pavillon anglais n’a jamais flotté sur ma porte rien que le drapeau de Genève” [Later, my home on rue de Chaillot was converted to a hospital. The English ‘pavillon’ never flew on its door anything but the flag of Geneva] (Pearl 317 and 117). She comforted the dying and paid all the expenses out of her own money. Her own fine linen was used to wrap the dead. A doctor who attended said that she saw to it that the
wounded were well clothed and fed. She did not ask for any reward, but while others were repaid by the city, Pearl’s request for compensation was refused. Obviously, her Prince had to escape from Paris and went into exile. The two met after the siege of Paris several times. Pearl writes that after 1870 they met in London where they spent some time together. She had booked a suite at the Grosvenor Hotel, but they turned her away because she was recognized as “that scandalous woman.” They instead rented a cottage on the edge of London which Pearl preferred because she said she could join in the hunts.

The worst chapter in Pearl’s career occurred after the war and during her estrangement from Prince Napoléon. She had to survive and since she had spent all her money on the wounded soldiers during the war and the siege, she was forced to take up with a suitor. She calls him Baron de Burnel, but he is really Alexandre Duval. She writes carefully on the Duval Affair. She hints at some shady business deals in which the family is involved. She writes about how difficult it was to rid herself of this admirer. She succeeds in sending him on business to Spain where he was scouting a mining business and while away he got himself married. Upon his return he barges into her home and smashes some precious articles. Pearl writes that he pulled an insane prank which left the man wounded. “On comprendra que je n’insiste pas sur ce déplorable incident de ma vie. Le héros de l’aventure étant actuellement marié, et à la tête d’une importante maison” [It may be easily understood that I do not insist upon this dull incident of my life, the hero being now married, and the head of a great firm] (Pearl 228-29 and 128-29). Pearl cleverly includes numerous letters from this Burnel which are badly written and the spelling is horrendous. She makes fun of them. It is her subtle revenge.

During this time she maintained a long distant friendship with the Prince. He wrote her often and numerous letters are published in her memoirs. (These published letters may have been
a means of blackmailing the prince to pay to keep his name out of the book, or they may have been used to verify the truth about their relationship). It was not until 1874 that the Prince had to give up his ‘beloved’ Cora. More than likely he thought he might have a chance at the throne, but even with the untimely death of the Crown Prince in the Zululand Wars on 1879, Prince Napoléon was never able to retake France and make her an Empire once again. He is to become ever known as un César déclassé.

Printed in the last chapter in her Mémoires are letters, poems, and songs from various sources. In fact, the memoir is salted with letters from such leading names as Prince Napoléon (Jean-Jean), the Duke of Orange (Duc Citron), Alexandre Duval (De Burnel), the sculpture Auguste Clésinger, Mustafa, and Prince Achille Murat. All these letters are addressed to her, and seem to have been printed in the Memoir as proof that she had actually had these men as protectors. Below are four taken from the many…First from the Duke of Orange:

2 décembre 1884.
Je vous suis bien reconnaissante, ma chère Cora, pour votre aimable proposition, vous êtes bien bonne de vous apitoyer sur un naufragé qui a besoin de sympathie. Je pars pour Caen samedi soir et j'y resterai jusqu'à lundi, après les courses, mais je ne reviens à Paris qu'après les courses de Deauville qui se terminent le 20 août. Si, après cette époque, vous êtes encore dans les mêmes dispositions et que vous veuillez encore m'offrir l'hospitalité, je serais bien heureux d'aller chez vous. Décidément je suis encore plus pris que je ne le croyais moi-même, car, au bout de trois jours, de ne pas avoir vu qui vous savez, je suis encore plus...qu'avant. Mille amitiés. CITRON

(I am very grateful to you, my dear Cora, for your kind proposal. You are very good to have pity upon a poor shipwrecked fellow who has need of sympathy. I start for Caen on Saturday evening, and I shall until Monday, after the races; but I only return to Paris after the races at Deauville, which end on the 20th of August. If, after that time, you are still disposed, as you now are, and will offer me hospitality, I shall be very happy to go to your apartment. Decidedly, I am more taken than I should have believed myself; for at the end of three days, during which have not seen you know whom, I find myself more smitten than formerly. A thousand good wishes, CITRON.

(Duke of Orange in Pearl 44–45 and 17)

Looking at how Pearl uses letters in her memoir in comparison to the manner in which Mogador uses her letters in her memoir demonstrates several interesting factors. Pearl’s memoir was
written after Mogador had published her memoir and clearly Pearl is a creature of the Second Empire with all of its flamboyances and exaggerations. Her letters are for show, meaning she has included them in order to demonstrate clearly that she was a courtesan of the highest caliber—she had lovers of the highest ranks. She has explained that she will not use the actual names of the men, but her soubriquets are so transparent as to lead those who can guess the person to whom she is referring no doubts. Pearl wants her life and her escapades known in order to re-create the clatter (gossip) she needs to sell many copies of her memoir for money. Mogador, on the other hand, writes her memoir at a time when she did not really need money, (she was doing alright as an actress) and her memoir was written as a defense in court cases that she needed to win both for herself and for her count. Her letters are to and from the count (Lionel). She is attempting to demonstrate that they had separated, that he was at first angry with her, and then entirely lost without her in Australia. She had second thoughts about publishing the memoir after she learned of the count’s return to Paris because they were to marry and begin a new life in Australia together. Both the periods are utterly different and the situations in which these two women find themselves is also distinct.

The last two are one of the first letters and the last letter from Prince Napoléon (Plon-Plon) and are included in her memoir to show that a man of the highest caliber truly loved her:

_Vendredi, 3 heures._

_Je t'adore, tu le sais, tu ne peux en douter et c'est bien vrai; mais ta conduite, ma Pearl chérie, est fatale. Tu ne sauras jamais par où j'ai passé dans ces dernières heures. De voir pour te perdre encore est au-dessus de mes forces, et nous mènera à quelque extrémité. Tu veux venir pour me quitter une heure après et nous retrouver dans une situation impossible. Hier je suis rentré derrière toi. C'est une bêtise de mes valets de chambre qui n'ont pas trouvé la clef. Eh bien, pense un peu à moi aussi. Viens, si tu es décidée, quand tu voudras. Mais jusque-là, je t'en prie, ne continuons pas une situation humiliante, presque ridicule pour tous. Je t'aime et t'attends quand tu le voudras bien._
You wish to come, and then to leave me again in an hour, and thus to put us in an impossible situation. Yesterday, I came in after you had. It was through the stupidity of my valet, who had not found the key. Consider my situation. Come, if you have made up your mind; when you will; but until then I beg you not to continue a state of affairs which is humiliating and almost ridiculous for all. I love you, and wait for your decision.

(Prince Napoléon in Pearl 122-123 and 31-32)

And:

1874.

En face du devoir il n'y a pas à hésiter! Je me décide contre toi, contre moi, pour ce qui est nécessaire. Mes motifs, tu les comprends. J'ai une vie de travail, qui ne doit pas dégénérer par la dissipation, ni se laisser dominer par le plaisir. Tu as toujours été charmante, et tu me plais beaucoup, mais avec le temps tu sentiras que je ne puis agir autrement. Je t'envoie un dernier cadeau, qui pourra t'être utile. Je ne te verrai pas de quelques jours, mais plus tard, je te serrerais la main et t'embrasserai avec grande joie si tu veux, ma chère Cora [In the face of duty, no hesitation is possible! I make up my mind against you, and against myself for what is necessary. You understand my motives. I have a life of labour which must not be frittered away in dissipation, nor be under the sway of pleasure. You have always been charming, and you please me much; but with time, you will feel I could not act otherwise. I send you a last present which may be useful to you. I shall not see you for a few days; but later I shall shake you by the hand, and kiss you with great joy if you like, my dear Cora. (Prince Napoléon in Pearl 178 and 46)

These two letters, from the man who had the longest relationship (nine years) with her, Prince Napoléon are included in her memoir, first to confirm the length and depth of their friendship.

Plon-Plon gave her four houses and a stipend fit for a princess. The first letter shows just how smitten the prince was with Pearl (She was carrying on with another man at the same time and the first letter is Plon-Plon’s reaction to the discovery). He was serious about the liaison and warned her that she could her fatal consequences, implying perhaps that she might get expelled from France. These two letters are closer to Mogador’s reasons for publishing the count’s and her letters. They were likely in defense of Pearl’s exile from Paris after the Duval affair, and meant to indicate the power she had before the Franco-Prussian War. Second, she may also have included them as a sort of blackmail attempt—to see if she could get some money out of the owners of the letters now that she was in financial difficulties. In 1874, Prince Napoléon broke
his liaison with Pearl. He was not able to solve the problems of separation and his difficult financial situation. Pearl was thirty-nine and already she seemed old. She had suffered exile, the humiliation of financial ruin, and by 1880 she was feeling the strain of old age, the courtesan’s death.

**Epitaphs by Others in her Honor**

Obviously, Pearl did not write about her own death, but others did. Her biographer, the Baroness von Hutten reports that Pearl was befriended by a Mr. John Berry, of the Boston Cracker Company. Another good friend was the Count Irisson d’Herrisson, a former officer gay man-about-town under the Empire. It is thought that he assisted her in the writing of her Memoirs. Pearl’s final words in the “Epilogue” are: “Mon indépendance fut toute ma fortune: je n'ai pas connu d'autre bonheur. Et c'est encore le lien qui m'attache à la vie: je le préfère aux colliers les plus riches, j'entends ceux qu'on ne peut vendre parce qu'ils ne vous appartiennent pas” [My independence was all my fortune, and I have known no other happiness; and it is still what attached me to life; I prefer it to the richest necklaces, I mean necklaces which you cannot sell, because they do not belong to you] (Pearl 356 and 83–4). She sold her book to Jules Lévy in 1884, and it was published in either February or March of 1886, just four months before the author’s demise.

Some report that she died in poverty in a squalid room. But in the early eighties she lived in an apartment at 23 avenue des Champs Elysées above the coach maker, Georges Pilon. During her final days and her illness she may have lived in a single room, but the apartments at 8 rue de Bassano are superior residences. Each one contains three bedrooms, a kitchen and two reception halls. She lived there only during the very last months of her life. In July 1885, only twelve months before the end, she was staying in 6 rue Christophe Colomb, and it was not until then that
she had to sell her house and estate at Olivet. *Le Figaro* of July 9, 1886 remarks that “Quelques amis venaient encore la voir, mais ils se faisaient rare de plus en plus.” [A few friends still come to see her, but their visits became more and more rare] (*Le Figaro* 1 Trans. Sasson). Arsène Houssaye wrote that he often saw Pearl in the early eighties “çà et là, au bois, aux courses, au théâtre” [here and there in the Bois, at the theatres, at the races], and one afternoon he stopped in to see her at her apartment over the coachbuilder. He reported that she was overjoyed to see him but stated a bit sadly that “Oui, Cora, mais Cora sans perles” [I am still Cora, but minus the pearls]. “Toujours jolie!” [But you are as pretty as ever,] he told her without conviction. And Cora was not deceived. “Pas de tout; voyez, mes joues sont sillonnées de larmes; ne dites pas ça dans les journaux, car à Paris, on n’aime pas les femmes qui pleurent” [Look at my face, all stained with tears. But don’t put that in the papers; Paris has no use for crying women] (Houssaye in Holden 44-45). Houssaye said she had just asked him to publish a story when the bell rang, and he quickly took up his hat to leave so as to avoid being introduced to the lover who was late.

A literary critique, whose initials are E. L., wrote a review of Pearl’s *Mémoires* found in the Paris *Le Livre*:

*Mlle Cora Pearl a grandement raison dans sa préface de nous annoncer qu’elle ne publie ses Mémoires que pour gagner quelques billets bleus! Elle les gagnera sûrement. Son nom est non moins populaire que sa personne. Mais c’est tout. Séduit par le titre, j’ai lu, j’ai cherché et n’ai rien trouvé. Pas même la saveur que je pouvais attendre des mystères d’alcôve dévoilés. Rien, ni comme intérêt ni comme style. Ce livre intéressera tout au plus les quelques personnes mises en scène sous des pseudonymes dont quelques-uns sont très transparents. —Ce sera un livre à clef à ajouter à tant d’autres. E. L.* [Miss Cora Pearl is very right in her preface to announce to us that she is publishing her *Mémoires* only to earn some blue bills (money)! It will surely earn. Her name is no less popular than her person. But that's all. Enticed by the title, I read, I searched, and found nothing. Not even the taste of the mysteries of alcove for which I held out. Nothing, neither in interest nor in style. This book will interest some persons at the very most for the pseudonyms of which some are very transparent. It will be a book under lock and key to be added to so many others E. L. (*Le Livre* Paris 185 Trans. Sasson)}
Apparently, Pearl’s *Memoirs* were expected to include some “shades of gray” parts, and this reader was disappointed in what he did not find. However, its value lies in the pseudonyms which could easily be deciphered. Those names alone held value with regard to celebrity. Both Mogador’s and Pearl’s chapters are about the *roman à clef*, and that element ties them in with the Dumas *La Dame aux camélia*, as well as Verdi’s manner of indicating by means of floral names and syllabification the characters names in *La traviata* to create a sort of operatic *roman à clef*.

Pearl was at this time very ill and rarely left her apartment. She got a lovely surprise when, in April she was given an unexpected tribute, which would help her failing courage during her last weeks alive. That month the first publication of a new paper, *Les Femmes de Jour* was printed. It contained a cartoon of the lady of the day. The text was a biography of that lady. The first to appear in the first print was none other than Cora Pearl. The cartoon depicted Pearl with her foot resting on a book, her leg wearing a blue stocking, and a quill in her hand. Blue stocking is the name given to women who devote themselves too enthusiastically to intellectual pursuits and the quill signifies the writer. This was an allusion to her new book. On the table behind her are an eagle and a pistol. These are allusions to her relationship with Prince Napoléon and the Duval affair. It was an excellent advertisement for the *Mémoires*. The anonymous author, Zi-Zim was very flattering and courteous. He admired her figure and her gaiety as *comme il faut*. He said that as a literary figure she could be considered valid, and that she was not at fault for the Duval affair. Mostly, he mentioned her generous and good behavior during the siege of Paris. He wrote:

> We shall forgive her much, because she did so much to help our wounded during the siege… And with what devotion she herself nursed our unhappy militiamen…We honour her, remembering the good in her and forgetting the bad…You women, humble yourselves and look at this shadow passing by; it is the pale and trembling ghost of the Imperial Debauch… always laughing kindly, and without care. Slowly, without regrets
and also without remorse, she treads that road of sadness and meekness towards the Salpêtrière. (Zi-Zim in Holden 127)

Zi-Zim is a boulevardier and most likely a member of the Jockey’s Club, or at least had ties to that prestigious club. The club defended Pearl and this kind gesture is typical of the gentlemanly behavior that is born of that male society.

Cora Pearl died in her last apartment, in 8 rue de Bassano on July 8, 1886 of intestinal cancer. Her death was reported in obituaries in the London Daily News, Truth, and the London Figaro. There even appeared a short paragraph in the aristocratic World. Notably in Paris, news of her death appeared in Le Matin, Le Figaro, and Le Monde Illustré. All of the obituaries found in the above newspapers are mentioned in Holden’s biography. On July 9, 1886 Le Figaro wrote: Grandeur et décadence des courtisanes, comme dirait M. Prudhomme. L’une de celles qui ont fait le plus de bruit, qui ont été le plus adulées, qui ont manié le plus d’argent, Cora Pearl, est morte la nuit dernière, dans une misère complète, 8, rue Bassano [Courtesan grandeur and decadence, as Monsieur Prudhomme said. One of those who made the most noise, who was the most adored, who handled the most money, Cora Pearl, died last night, in complete misery, 8, Bassano Street].

The Daily News had a report from its Paris correspondent that about twenty people were present; that the funeral cost 32 pounds and that it was paid for by some of her former admirers; that fifty francs came from the secretary of “a very great personage” to buy a five years’ grave; and that “a Protestant clergyman officiated out of charity” (128). She is buried at the Batignolles Cemetery, in the name of Emma Elizabeth Crouch, according to W. H. Holden who investigated it. He says he found proof in the cemetery Register for the year 1886, page 21, No. 506. She was buried on July 10, 1886, in Grave No. 10, row 4. Verification of this date and burial plot are found on the Batignolles archive Website.
Others Opinions and Conclusion

The fact that Cora Pearl has three very significant biographies written about her by W. H. Holden, Polly Binder, and the Baroness von Hutton is important. These show her prominence as a Second Empire courtesan and they demonstrate how her unique celebrity made her a character that could be easily examined and investigated. Some of that significant interest in her is found in writing about her in newspapers and boulevardier pamphlets but she supplied most about herself in her Memoirs. The fact that all the leading courtesan experts, Joanna Richardson, Katie Hickman, Virginia Rounding, and Susan Griffin have written chapters on Pearl makes her an important personality of the French Second Empire, despite being English. It is interesting that Cora’s celebrity was still notable as late as the 1980s as is demonstrated in the publishing of a possible hoax version of her memoirs supposedly written by William Blatchford. He said he wrote the erotic version to fool the Granada Publishing House. Lastly, Katie Hickman has a video clip on You Tube that shows the Grosvenor Hotel, London’s “Courtesan’s Boudoir – The Cora Pearl Suite”

Pearl had made herself into a celebrity. She was theatrical and innovative. She made clatter when there was none. She made bored men laugh and she is the epitome of what the French Second Empire was itself—overdone, outrageous, fun-loving, spectacularly theatrical, magnificent, innovative, and extreme. She embodied its culture of excess. She mirrored the grandeur of the French Second Empire for she was a Francophile and at heart, a true Parisian. As Betsy Prioleau writes:

Of these arrogant commandas, one outrivaled the rest in hype and glamour: The ‘Queen of Outrage,’ Cora Pearl. She dyed her dogs to match her gowns, wore nothing to a costume party, dueled a rival in the Bois de Boulogne, caned a Russian count, and pitched Prince Napoleon’s vanload of orchids on the floor and danced a can-can on them. Parisians repeated her mots and drank a cocktail called the Tears of Cora. She devastated men. Every New Year’s they lined up at her door and
presented her with Gift offerings like a high priestess. One prince said he’d “try to pilfer the sun if that would satisfy a whim of hers.” (264)

Pearl, most likely not consciously uses the Rousseauian idea of confession not to expiate herself but simply to demonstrate that she is telling the truth (which she was not always doing). Pearl uses her Memoirs as a way to confess in order to bolster her failing celebrity, a calculated morality. We can say that she succeeds when we consider that the first issue of Les Femmes de Jour was dedicated to her biography. It is complimentary about her memoir. We can also say that Pearl never gave up trying….that she always found another way to promote herself….that her desire for renown was exceptional.

Her celebrity is an example of a new type of courtesan as noted by contemporaries and it is also a modern phenomenon, brought about through the newly implemented mass media of the day. Her celebrity is at odds with the narrative of rehabilitation belonging to other women examined in the study. One way it is modern is its rejection of the idea of the fallen woman whose rehabilitation depends on social recognition through reputation, honor, marriage, and on a moral framework, a dominant male social construct. Another way her celebrity is modern is in the manner in which she presents herself in public (wearing wigs, make-up, and the most innovative dresses of the day, with her horses and dogs) to entice the gaze. Her exploitation of the new culture of visibility made possible by mass media, especially print media, fashion, gossip, stage presence, and photography inspired envy and fascination for her private life (wigs, interiors, sex life) and these feelings fueled her visibility. Perhaps it could be said of Pearl that she defines modern celebrity because she seeks to be famous for its own sake (not to rehabilitate). She is no “lady of the camellias”. She is more a “lady of the vanload of orchids” just for a night. Unlike the other courtesans, Strepponi, and to some extent, Mogador, who are seeking redemption through rehabilitation and want to fit into social norms, Pearl has no
intention of fitting in. She does not die for any of her lovers like Marie Duplessis in Dumas fils’ novel. She wants to live fully, have much fun, and draw looks. Pearl never apologizes for the fact that she is not interested in rehabilitation, nor does she ever consider redemption a necessity.

Pearl learned what humanity was capable of at an early age and determined not to present herself as a victim in her memoirs, and yet she does not seem revengeful. She attracted the upper echelons of male society because she had that “je ne sais quoi.” Pearl was capable of good acts as her actions during the Paris siege demonstrate, but she failed at becoming an icon of Frenchness despite her humanitarian works. She wrote several endearing letters to people that are reprinted in Holden’s biography and she did have a heart, but she did not give it away to anyone. She saved it for moments when it could truly help in a humanitarian way.

With all her independence, she was never financially secure, due to her extravagant nature. Her celebrity died along with the death of the Second Empire after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. It was tied to the speculation and money that flowed in Paris during that Empire. When her protectors were forced into exile, her finances waned and she could not self-sustain. She had a short-lived celebrity, unlike Mogador whose celebrity lives on in her writings. No man saved her because she felt she did not need to be saved. Cora Pearl epitomizes the courtesan who was driven by a deep need for fame and personal freedom. Today she would be a celebrity icon.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

What was and is so compelling about Verdi’s *demi-mondaine* is what I would call the transfiguration motif. (Not to be confused with that old chestnut, the redemption motif. Because Violetta chooses to live with Alfredo for love rather than for money she is transformed from *courtesan* to *companion*. She is simultaneously up and downgraded to mistress (able to enter the world of George Sand and Marie d’Agoult on their terms). Illicit love minus the money factor becomes romantic. Unmarried love can even demand the right to be happy. (Comini in John 16)

In her transformation motif Comini is defining what happens when a courtesan falls in love with one man and sacrifices her independence for that love. The courtesan changes status and becomes a *companion*. Her celebrity status is thus risked or even obliterated over time. She is transformed, or is she? If the couple marries... perhaps the answer is yes, she transforms.

In this study there is various courtesan women with an array of life experiences presented. In chapter two the study examines Sand’s *Isidora*, in which the fictional protagonist of the same name marries her protector just prior to his dying. His gesture gives her legitimate status as his wife. Yet, is she transformed? No, not yet, and certainly not simply because he married her. The stigma and prejudices which faced her before marriage are still very much alive after marriage. The only exception is the treatment given her by Alice, Isidora’s aristocratic sister-in-law, who is generously supportive in Isidora’s rehabilitation. Isidora cannot completely transform herself inside the closed, urban Parisian environment with its many temptations, and her age will soon cause her to be put out of her career as a courtesan. She will always be recognized in that light for what she was . . . a courtesan. She will always be tainted in society’s eyes and she is forced to remain within the confines of her boundaries and act accordingly because society demands it. Therefore, in order to escape those societal confines Isidora self-rehabilitates through her choice to retire to the country—country being the optimal word.
Isolation and invisibility separating her from her past are the essential ingredients for a successful rehabilitation. She was married in the lake region of Italy and has returned there to begin a new and different life pointed toward retirement. Isidora realizes that she must leave Paris forever to live a wholesome lifestyle. Isidora had confessed in Paris to Alice, the aristocratic woman who is the sister of Isidora’s husband, but her confessions were manipulated and obfuscated—even Machiavellian because she is still Isidora—not Julie. Once she has moved to the lake region in Italy, she then writes a series of letters sharing her new life experiences and confessing various feelings. Her self-exile from Paris allows her rehabilitation to be completed.

Each of the characters in Sand’s Isidora voice thoughts that are linkable to Sand’s thought on various topics of her interest such as children’s education, social subversion, and even marriage and women’s independence, giving this work some autobiofictional elements linkable to other Sand works. Even Sand is transformed by country life where she goes to isolate herself from Paris life.

Next, chapter two looks at another courtesan . . . the celebrated, Marguerite Gautier, the protagonist in Alexandre Dumas fils’s La Dame aux camélias, a fictionalized version of a real courtesan, Dumas fils’s own lover, the famous and celebrated Parisian courtesan, Alphonsine Plessis, aka Marie Duplessis.

The Dumas version of fallen woman is that of a camélia—a prostitute who falls in love with one special man. Dumas creates a myth centered on the femme fatale which encompasses the self-sacrifice and death of the protagonist courtesan. The myth implied a moral framework that punished the fallen woman and exonerated her lover; at the same time it idealized romantic love and elicited sympathy for the prostitute with a heart of gold. The myth took shape in a
confessional *récit* in which the male protagonists confess their own guilt, and in the process, the voice of the courtesan is only heard second hand.

The Dumas *La Dame aux camélias* is blanketed with the literary device known as *roman à clef*, a common element in courtesan fiction where it is overlaid with veiled references to real people; this relation to real life is part of what makes the fiction titillating. Dumas banks on the excitement that the parallels between Marguerite and Alphonsine Duplessis generate, but Verdi uses the *roman à clef* to promote the public rehabilitation of his companion Giuseppina Strepponi.

The first chapter contrasted the two fictional courtesans, Dumas fils’s Marguerite Gautier and George Sand’s *Isidora*, in order to question the treatment of the *femme fatale*. One of the questions surrounding the *femme fatale* in this comparison is that of death vs. life. Does the courtesan have to die to be rehabilitated? In the case of this study, the answer depends upon the gender of the author. For Dumas, the courtesan rehabilitates only at the hands of a male redeemer. Instead, for Sand, she is rehabilitated by a woman, and one that is aristocratic as well. Sand’s subverts the male *femme fatale* trope by placing the rehabilitation of the courtesan in the hands of an aristocratic woman. In fact, the male voice dies out completely in *Isidora*, leaving only the voice of the courtesan.

Although Isidora’s rehabilitation is begun with the help of a woman, it becomes a self-rehabilitation when Isidora moves the northern lake region of Italy and removes herself from the urban environment of Paris with its temptations and gossip. Isidora’s self-rehabilitation is a transformation which she fulfills of her own accord.

With the rigidity of bourgeois morals, is social transformation possible? In the two novels the study finds that while it is not possible in Dumas fils’s and Verdi’s fictional works, Sand
imagines that social transformation is possible but only under certain limited conditions. Isidora must leave Paris and attains a life of respectability in the lake region country of northern Italy. In the real situation of Verdi and Strepponi their move to rural Busseto, a small provincial town, fails to secure respectability, but their following isolation at the villa of Sant’Agata has some success. That success, however, is only because it is a controlled environment where they are the masters of their own fate.

Is marriage a way out of the social stigma placed upon the fallen woman? The study reveals that Mogador does marry Count de Chabrillan, but the memoir she had written before the marriage took place, and which was printed despite her request to withdraw it from publication, ended up published, and with that publication came more celebrity and gossip. The love Count de Chabrillan bore for Mogador and she for him was the single thing that made their marriage worthwhile. Marriage certainly brought neither of them any relief from social ostracism. Only their political move to Australia gives the Count some respite. In the case of Verdi and Strepponi, their marriage after eleven years of living together made little difference, because they kept themselves and their matters very much to themselves. Their marriage was done in secret, far away in an isolated town where only two strangers were witnesses. Therefore, in conclusion, marriage is not a path to respectability for every fallen woman. Perhaps the only way out of the stigmatization felt by the courtesan is to leave the familiar environment (often urban) and go to an unknown environment (often rural) where a new life can begin. Certainly, retiring or exiling oneself to another country is helpful for it offer a sense of incognito.

How can a researcher locate and uncover the voice of the courtesan? Most of the time that path to follow is to search and analyze the courtesan’s own words written in letters placed within fictional novels. The epistolary sections of novels provide an easy way for the author to
reveal the protagonist’s innermost thoughts and they also help the reader see inner character development. In Verdi’s opera, the voice of the courtesan protagonist, Violetta, is revealed through her arias which are the moments when her most innige [inner] thoughts and fears are openly spoken to the audience as she sings to herself about her concerns. One case in particular, which is troubling with regard to finding the “courtesan” voice, is that of the real courtesan, Giuseppina Strepponi. Finding Strepponi’s voice is especially difficult because so many of her letters written during the period when she was a famous opera singer and courtesan, before 1848, are presumed destroyed. Perhaps it might be said that her voice can be heard through the words and music of La traviata. The reader might conclude that Verdi was giving her voice through his musical version of the roman à clef locked away in Dumas fils’s La dame aux camélias.

It is far easier to get at the thoughts and feelings of real courtesans such as Mogador and Pearl. Their memoirs provide a window into their thoughts and also shine a light upon their characters. In comparing Strepponi, Mogador, and Pearl the study has come to the conclusion that because Strepponi did not write a memoir, her inner voice remains silent except for the voice Verdi gives her through the fictional character of Violetta in La traviata. The real inner person of Strepponi, in many ways, must remain a mystery. Other letters and transcriptions of both her letters and Verdi’s letters are available at Villa Sant’Agata but that may be some future research project. Mogador and Pearl, on the other hand, did write memoirs which gave insight into the courtesan’s stories from their own point of view rather than through the récit that portrays the femme fatale as the object of male fantasies. They employ the Rousseauian confessional model to tell their stories as frankly as was possible for their era.

Rousseau’s confessional model presents two opposing tendencies; one is toward emphasis on self-worth, and the other, reputation. Whereas Mogador is concerned with
reputation, Pearl is convinced of her self-worth so reputation does figure into the equation. Little is known of Strepponi, but the few letters that she did write which survived the bonfire ignited by Verdi at Sant’Agata uncover a somewhat self-deprecating spirit lacking confidence. For example, she refers to herself as the Old Bore.

Mogador’s and Pearl’s memoirs invite reflection on social factors that lead poor young women to become prostitutes: poor families, sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, a need for financial independence, and a lack of professional options for working-class women.

All three women, Strepponi, Mogador, and Pearl are public women with public lives. All three, to one extent or the other, have had careers on stage. Mogador and Pearl have *noms de guerre*. Strepponi, in contrast, does not have a stage name. Her birth name is her stage name making it easy for her to be recognized. She was famous as a *prima donna* singer before she was infamous as a courtesan. Public display demands dissimulation of the true identity, so Pearl and Mogador use *noms de guerre* in their respective memoirs.

In Strepponi, the reader finds a woman who is rehabilitated through her love for one man. Yet she is intelligent and recognized as such and therefore she could be capable of self-rehabilitating and gaining independence from men. The reason she did not continue her self-rehabilitation which began with moving to Paris in order to begin a career in vocal instruction, is because she wished to stay as Verdi’s companion. Her surrender to his will seems necessary in light of the limited choices a courtesan had in the nineteenth century. Strepponi self-transforms by moving from Milan to Paris and taking up teaching voice. She does not self-rehabilitate but is saved by Verdi whom she calls her “redeemer.” Mogador also self-transforms by becoming a writer and self-rehabilitates through a matter of necessity. Her marriage to the count might have been regarded as rehabilitation through the love of one man, but Mogador turns out to be so
much more than a courtesan rehabilitated through marriage. Her memoir shows that Mogador transforms through her writing and it is there that she reflects on the weaknesses in society’s fabric with regard to the poor, the feeble, and the unprotected. Pearl does not rehabilitate, nor does she wish to self-rehabilitate. Pearl is happy with herself as she is. Pearl desires to retain her independence at all costs, therefore she has no need of self-transformation.

Two of the actual courtesans adopt a moral framework in order to understand their own lives. Mogador and Strepponi look to an exclusive relationship with one man. Mogador falls in love with the Count de Chabrillan and eventually he marries her. Strepponi waited eleven years for Verdi to marry her privately in a quiet, secluded town. Both hoped that “being made an honest woman” would change society’s position in regard to their status, but to no avail. Society never accepted these two women who “fell” before they were made legitimate through marriage.

Rousseau’s approach in *Les Confessions* looks at issues of victimization, blame, and the weight of social stigma. When analyzing courtesan’s use of a Rousseauian philosophical concept as a blueprint the researcher has to look at her usage of *amour de soi* (self-worth) versus *amour propre* (reputation). Can a courtesan escape social stigma and re-build a reputation on her own terms? As seen in *Isidora*, Sand re-builds Isidora’s reputation by removing her from the urbanity of Paris to the rural Italian lake country. This is a way of escaping social stigma and Sand makes starting all over again in a new environment a solution. We see how that does not work in Australia for Mogador whose *Memoirs* precedes her arrival. Instead, perhaps we could say that Mogador re-builds her reputation by becoming a woman of letters. Granted, her circle of acceptance is smaller than she might have preferred, but nonetheless, being accepted by major literary giants of the era is nothing at which to scoff. On the other hand, Strepponi, remains
hidden in Verdi’s shadow and never really comes back into the limelight. She seems content to remain by Verdi’s side, as long as no other woman is allowed to usurp her place.

With regard to Pearl we can think about celebrity as social transformation. Pearl becomes an icon of Second Empire France but like the study learns with Strepponi, celebrity is ephemeral—it melts away into oblivion, never to be captured again.

The public woman emerged in Paris in the nineteenth century and she pushed her way into society through her many talents and abilities. She made the stage a place where talent could shine, such as with the courtesan and actress Sarah Bernhardt whose remarkable acting went worldwide in tours. She brought the working woman out of the back rooms and into the front. One example of that sort of working woman was one who was hidden in the back rooms of a sewing shop, but who eventually became a woman who owned her own hat and dress shop—Coco Chanel. Her couture work is still revered today for its handmade production. Chanel further liberated nineteenth-century woman from the corset and layers of clothing and freed her body by creating fluid and loose clothes which allowed the body to create the shape of the clothing not the clothing to create the shape of the body.

So what does this matter? We do not define the celebrated courtesan as a prostitute, but as the liberated mistress. She is an example of a woman who sought a life outside the domestic sphere before it was possible to make a living in the public sphere in retail, entertainment, business, and even in media. Her insistence and courage forged new paths for women. In societies today which allow the woman to flourish she has contributed enormously through her intellect, her creativity, and her fortitude to that very society which affords her the freedom to be what her spirit can dream. Women do not have to sell their bodies in order to make something of
themselves. She can capitalize upon her abilities and her talent and that is respectable and acceptable today in much of the world.

What would the courtesan/mistress be today if she existed? She would be anything she wanted to be, and her employment of the various media capabilities such as radio, TV, and social media would give her an international mobility of immense proportions. This chapter suggests that there is an excellent opportunity to look at celebrity through confession in all the various media capabilities available today which could be an interesting addition to the academic study of celebrity in the future.

It took the nineteenth-century public woman’s talent, courage, strength, and intellect to forge the initial paths for modern day woman to become who they are and even who they can be. In many ways the public woman became the modern woman’s mentor. Not the mythical succuba Lilith, but instead the biblical rule breaker Eve who fell from grace through curiosity and the desire for betterment, tempted by evil to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Her “fall” became the modern woman’s ascent to conquer and put to rest the original myth about Woman.
ENDNOTES


2. For information on Verdi’s letter to Piave, see *Verdi, a Biography* 826.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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(Fall 2009)  Studies in Romantic Literature
(Summer 2009) HUM: Core Pedagogy
(Summer 2009) DIS in Readings for Examination
(Summer 2009) DIS in German Romantic Texts
(Spring 2009) Visual Space of the Book
(Spring 2009) Hum: Traditional Modern Literature
(Spring 2009) 19th Century Paris – Literature and Art
(Fall 2008)  DIS in Contemporary Solo Vocal Literature
(Fall 2008) 19th Century Music History
(Fall 2008) HUM: Medieval and Baroque Literature and History
(Summer 2008) DIS in Literary Theory
(Spring 2008) DIS in French Melodie
(Spring 2008) Graduate Survey in French Vocal Literature
(Spring 2008) Text to Image
(Spring 2008) HUM: Greek and Roman Literature and History
(Fall 2007) Music History Research
(Fall 2007) Graduate Survey in Music History
(Fall 2007) Latin American Film
(Fall 2007) Critical Theory Non-English Literature
(Summer 2007) HUM: Multicultural Film Pedagogy
(Spring 2007) 19th and 20th Century Readings
(Spring 2007) Directed Reading
(Fall 2006) Trecento Writers
(Fall 2006) Italian Culture & Civilization
(Summer 2006) Readings in Modern & Continental Literature
(Summer 2006) Readings in Italian Culture
(Spring 2006) Dante’s Inferno
(Spring 2006) 18th & 19th Century Italian Literature
(Spring 2006) Italian Renaissance Literature
(Fall 2005) America in Italian Literature
(Fall 2005) Italian Language and Literature
(Fall 1977) Dante’s Divine Comedy

Education History:
• Ph.D. in Philosophy (Interdisciplinary Humanities) – Florida State University, 2017
• Doctoral candidate, ABD - Florida State University, 2010-2016
• M.A. Italian Studies, Florida State University, 2007
• M.A. Music, (Voice) Manhattan School of Music, 1977
• B.A. Music, (Voice) North Carolina School of the Arts, 1974
Positions and Employment:
(2014-2015) Adjunct Instructor: Italian Instructor at TCC, Tallahassee, Florida
(2011-2014) Adjunct Instructor: Humanities at TCC, Tallahassee, Florida
(2011-2012) Adjunct Tutor: Italian Language at TCC, Tallahassee, Florida
(2007-2011) Graduate Instructor: Humanities and Multicultural Film at FSU, Tallahassee.
(2007) Adjunct Instructor: Italian Language
(2005-2007) Graduate Instructor: Italian Language at FSU, Tallahassee, FL.
(2007) Adjunct Instructor: Italian Language
(1986-1992) ESL at Lip Service American English School in Agrate Brianza, Italy (MI)

International Experience:
Retired Opera Singer, sung in major and minor opera houses. Performed in United States, England, Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Austria, Spain, Greece, Israel, and Africa.
Have sung in English, Latin, Italian, French, German, Spanish, Czechoslovakian, and Russian. Have performed in operas, oratorios, vocal recitals, broadway shows, and musical revues. Have also performed straight plays.

Awards, Merits, Certifications:
(1976) Helena Rubinstein Foundation Grant
(1977) Apprentice in Opera at the Chautauqua Summer Festival
(1978) Winner of New Jersey State Opera Competition
(1975 - 1981) Puccini Foundation Vocal Award
(1982) Recital - Casa di Verdi (Special Invitation)
(1982) Finalist of International Verdi Competition-Medal
(1985) Cayman Island Music Club
(1986) Bergamo Amici della Lirica
(1987) Mirabola Amici della Lirica
(1987) Vobarno Amici della Lirica
(1988) Köln Freunde der Musik

Skills and Qualifications:
Fluent in French and Italian. Read and Write Spanish. Some German.
Play pianoforte; classical singer