

2015

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Recommended Citation

Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning (2015) "A Note on 'Roderick Hudson' and 'La traviata': Who Has Gone Astray?," *Verdi Forum*: No. 41, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss41/3>

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Keywords

Giuseppe Verdi, Henry James, La traviata, Roderick Hudson

A Note on *Roderick Hudson* and *La traviata*: Who Has Gone Astray?

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe

In this brief essay I propose to look at parallels between the plots of Henry James's novel *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and Verdi's opera *La traviata* (1853) and then to consider the ways in which these works might lead us to reassess our responses to situations more complex than may, at first blush, otherwise seem to be the case. Both works deal with the renunciation of love under parental pressure, and it is possible that James used Verdi's opera as a point of departure to forge a divergent take on the issue in hand.

A brief summary of the novel is in order before I get underway. Rowland Mallet, a New England connoisseur, discovers a young sculptor, Roderick Hudson, and takes him to Europe to refine his craft. Although the sculptor has left a fiancée behind, in Rome he becomes infatuated with Christina Light, a beautiful but unprincipled woman. To save Hudson from Light's wiles, Mallet brings both the sculptor's mother and his betrothed from America. Light, even though she has feelings for the socially unglamorous Hudson, marries an Italian prince at the behest of her father. Knowing his protégé to have a fiancée back in New England, Mallet at one point confronts Christina about her intentions with respect to Hudson, and she observes, "Is there not some novel or some play [. . .] in which a beautiful wicked woman who has ensnared a young man sees his father come to her and beg her to let him go?"¹ The novel (1848) and the play (1852) to which she refers—*La dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils²—also gave birth to *La traviata* (1853), an opera that seems to have exerted a more immediate influence upon James's work than the French literary sources. That James was familiar with Verdi's work can be gleaned from a languid reference in the novelist's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to a "bare, familiar, trivial opera,"³ the composer of which is identified a short while later: "Verdi's music did little to comfort him."⁴ James liked to keep such matters open-ended, but, given the novel's setting in the 1870s, the three masterpieces of Verdi's middle period—*Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*—fit the bill, and the chamber-like qualities of the last come closest to the claim of "bareness"—this apart from the thematic resonance provided by its contrast of innocent rurality and metropolitan corruption.

In *Roderick Hudson*, James managed his allusion less coyly, for Christina's open-ended précis alerts us, subliminally at least, to parallels between the novel and *La traviata*—parallels driven home by fairly close approximations to Piave's libretto. The first of these relates to Mrs. Hudson's journey of reclamation, which resembles that of Giorgio Germont. Just as he comes to Paris from Provence to rescue his son, Alfredo, from what he conceives to be the demi-mondaine wiles of Violetta, so Hudson's mother (unconsciously) travels to

¹ Henry James, *Roderick Hudson*, introduction by Leon Edel (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 191.

² The novel was published, in two volumes, in 1848 by Alexandre Cadot in Paris; the play was written in 1849 but not performed until 1852, at the Théâtre du Vaudeville in Paris.

³ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 298.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Rome from Northampton, Massachusetts, to rescue her son from Christina Light. In the first strophe of his intercession, Germont centers on Alfredo's present grief ("duol") and the restorative power of native (his "natio") sea, soil, and sun:

Di Provenza il mar, il suol
Chi dal cor ti cancellò?
Al natio fulgente sol
Qual destino ti furò?
Oh rammenta pur nel duol
Ch'ivi gioia a te brillò,
E che pace colà sol
Su te splendere ancor può.⁵

[Who has blotted the Provençal sea and sun from your heart? What stroke of destiny has driven you from your brilliant native sun? Oh, remember, as you grieve, the glow of happiness you enjoyed there; remember that there alone will you recover that shining peace.]

In the second strophe, he focuses on parental suffering ("Ah il tuo vecchio genitor / tu non sai quanto soffri") ["You have no idea how much your old father has suffered"]. Mrs Hudson's persuasion turns on identical poles of reference—"When our poor hearts are broken, surely our own dear native land is the place for us"—and "Oh come home, come home [. . .] and we shall all be safe and quiet and happy. My dearest son, come home with your poor little mother."⁶

Later, Mallet meets Light in Switzerland and learns that, having been forced into marrying the Italian prince, she plans to embark on a cynically hedonistic life:

"It seems to me you've a large opportunity for happiness yet," he vaguely remarked, seeming foolish even to himself.

"Happiness? I mean to cultivate delight; I mean to go in for passing my time. You remember I told you that I was in part the world's and the devil's. Now they've taken me all. It was their choice; may they never repent!"⁷

Violetta arrives at a similar crisis, after glimpsing the nobility of Alfredo's love, and comes, for a while, to a similar resolution—a palinode of "happiness" in favor of "delight": "delirio vano è questo!... Povera donna! sola! abbandonata! in questo popoloso deserto che appellano Parigi, che spero or più? che far degg'io? gioire, di voluttà ne' vortici, di voluttà perir!..."

⁵ All libretto text for the opera is transcribed from Giuseppe Verdi, *La traviata. Melodramma in three acts*, ed. Fabrizio Della Seta, The Works of Giuseppe Verdi, series I, volume 19.

⁶ James, *Roderick Hudson*, p. 294 and p. 293, respectively.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

["This is madness without method!... Poor woman that I am! alone! abandoned! in this peopled desert called Paris, what more can I hope for? what should I do? rejoice, in the whirlpools of pleasure; perish in them."]

While parallels obtain between Light and Violetta, the characters are also inverted, as in the criss-crossing lines of a cat's-cradle. Light is prepared, albeit in a self-dramatizing, self-regarding manner, to embrace her Alfredo (Hudson) and reject her Barone Douphol (the Italian prince), but she abandons the resolution when her real father (the Cavaliere) intervenes, all of which subverts the plot of the opera (and those of its Dumasian antecedents) point by point. Her initial plan—to marry Hudson—had in fact brought as much grief to her mother as Violetta's liaison with Alfredo had to Giorgio Germont. Also, Violetta is for a time deflected from self-immolation in the round of pleasure by her impassioned though irregular relationship with Alfredo; Light is driven into hers by a loveless marriage to the prince. Aware of these divergences from the stock situation of the "beautiful wicked woman who has ensnared a young man," we should reconsider (and reappraise) any conventional, Germontesque takes on the Circe topos (that of the disabling enchantress) that *La traviata* might seem on the surface to embody. Certainly there is no malice either in Violetta or in Light, and neither takes the initiative in setting up their "dangerous liaisons." Not only is Violetta passive but she is also "frankly and ingenuously" discouraging when Alfredo makes his first overture. The dynamic of that encounter—careless experience confronted by ardent naivete—anticipates a motif that recurs in many of James's novels: the "interaction of the American mind with the European [from which] James's grand theme is born—the so-called international theme."⁸ The only difference in the case of *La traviata* involves the compression of this motif into regions within a single nation, a provincial Provençal courting a Parisian sophisticate in what amounts to a version of pastoral—that time-honored opposition of country and town. By recasting the stark black and white of the enchantress/victim motif in shades of complex gray, James more forcefully articulated the nuances that were already implicit in the (unspecified) theatrical antecedent that he invoked and from which he then diverged.

The divergence, however, proves anything but stark, for Verdi and Piave had in fact beaten James to a subtler take on the sort of plot already mapped out in the Donizetti/Rossi *Linda di Chamounix* (1842): a rural parent who discovers a child in urban circumstances of (apparent) disgrace. The title of *La traviata* is, on the face of it, the sort of Victorian euphemism that converted "trousers" into "unmentionables," but it also suggests an effort to withhold judgment with the same disinterested charity that had marked the finale of its antepenultimate predecessor, *Stiffelio*. One can try to imagine (while at the same time being able barely to conceive) the public outrage that would have greeted a Teatro la Fenice announcement in 1853 that Verdi's next opera would be *La puttana*—but we should also recall that this was the very slight that the inhabitants of Busseto were wont to cast in the teeth of Giuseppina Strepponi, at least before she married the composer. Verdi therefore knew the plight of Violetta and Alfredo from the inside out, and the tender, exultant music of his opera testifies to that empathy. Julian Budden remarks that "[i]t was not surprising that *La Dame aux camélias* should have appealed to the composer of *Stiffelio*. Both subjects were bold and contemporary; and both combine unorthodoxy with a strong vein of morality, being

⁸ Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 9.

essentially products of the new age of humanism with its growing sympathy for the individual in whatever walk of life.”⁹

Even so, with the plot profile of *Roderick Hudson* at hand to remind us, the “traviamento” isn’t the point in hand with regard to Violetta any more than it is in respect of Light’s conduct. Piave and Verdi give no indication of the circumstances that led to her profession, and the narrative in the opera evolves from the unsolicited passion of the male protagonist. Verdi’s opera, indeed, ought properly to have been called *Il traviato*, for the libretto centers primarily on Alfredo’s irresistible infatuation and secondarily on his callow rush to judgment. It is he whom his father finally arraigns, not for the irregularity of the liaison that had prompted the journey from Provence to Paris in the first place but for the ungenerous public humiliation of Violetta. Giorgio, indeed, comes to recognize the soterial force of her “sacrificio,” the source of the mysterious “choraloid” of the prelude to which I have had occasion to refer elsewhere.¹⁰ Budden tells us that the music portrays “the frail consumptive,”¹¹ but to me it sounds more like an Italianate voluntary or offertorium such as enchanted Verdi to distraction when, as an inattentive altar boy, he (supposedly) received a priestly box on the ears. Even though it has been orchestrated for strings *divisi*, it recalls (and sublimates) the standard *primo ottocento* device of the “organo di dentro,” announcing from the wings that we have arrived at a sacramental moment in the plot—a marriage or espousal that, more often than not, will be subverted by events. We see this, for example, when an organ figures midway through the chorus “Si, quell’ ombra sepolcrale” in Donizetti’s *Maria di Rudenz* (1838), and more especially in *Il trovatore* (1853), where “L’onda de’ suoni mistici” takes form as a descant in quasi-canon to an organ voluntary as solemnly chordal and gravely pedal-pedestalled as the prelude to *La traviata*. One thinks particularly of the latter’s V/V F-sharp pedal near the start, crucially underscored, as often in organ writing, by the auxiliary dip forward to E-sharp and back again. What distinguishes the *Traviata* prelude from its predecessors is its genuinely improvisatory nature (as befits a voluntary), which Verdi achieved by hinting at the phatic line of plainsong. One can almost trace the contour of the first versicle and response of the “Sursum corda” in that crucial double cadence on to the nonce F-sharp tonic, which furthermore disturbs the symmetry of the periods by introducing, as it were, an *ex tempore* phrase extension.¹² One could read this double cadence as an instance of melodic epizeuxis, the immediate repetition of a word or phrase for an effect of yearning, as in Keats’s “Ah, happy, happy boughs” in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or urgent intercession, as in Cranmer’s General Confession for the Anglican (Episcopalian) *Book of Common Prayer*: “Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father.”¹³ And it carries forward into Violetta’s great outpouring of love that comes in its wake, a moment,

⁹ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1973–81), vol. 2, p. 121.

¹⁰ Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, “Blessed Assurance: Some Secular Uses of the Chorale,” *The Musical Times* 151 (2010): 43–54.

¹¹ Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 2, p. 128.

¹² The *divisi* string “choraloid” at the start of the *Lohengrin* (1850) prelude might also have inspired the asymmetry of Verdi’s periods here, though its irregular, breathing outline seems to have its origin less in the movement of the human voice than in the behavior of a bright source of light that slowly and waveringly finds focus in the viewer’s vision.

¹³ John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. H[earthcote] W[illiam] Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 210. *A Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church Together with the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons Set Forth by Authority for Use in the Church of the Province of South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 236.

borrowing and inverting the *Todesverkündigung* (the announcement of death) of *Die Walküre* (Act II), that we could term a *Liebesverkündigung*—a love announcement. This too bears the hallmark of an Italian *preghiera*, but of a kind different from that embodied in the prelude’s “choraloid,” that is, the impassioned, unisonic chorus that drew its strength from popular anthems of the Risorgimento. Just as in “Va, pensiero” (*Nabucco*, 1842) the epizeuxis of impassioned intercession figures in the dotted-sixteenth-note figures subtending “sui clivi, sui colli” (“upon the slopes, upon the hills”), so too, although verbally muted in its orchestral version, the same phrase structure accompanies Violetta’s double-dotted half notes and eighth notes when she cries “Alfredo, quant’io t’amo, quant’io t’amo” (“Alfredo, how much I love you”) in Act II of the opera. Both instances stylize a catch in the voice, a nascent sob of the kind that Verdi often amplified into arcs of falling semitones, as when Amneris laments at intervals during the trial of Radames, or when, to illustrate the superimposition of the “croce” (“cross”) upon the “delizia” (“delight”) of love, Violetta releases fountains of them in the coda to the Act I duet.

All of this has thematic relevance, for it seems to emphasize the crucial, redemptive conversion of eros into agape, and the sacrifice of passion by which that conversion is effected—driven home in Act III with Verdi and Piave’s placement of the dying salvatrix in the midst of Mardi Gras celebrations. This moment recalls the prelude to *La traviata*, where we seem to be standing in the narthex of a church, hearing the sounds of holiness from the further side of a closed door. Then that door bursts open with a raucous fanfare, and we find ourselves not in a prayerful nave but in the midst of a riotous bacchanale. The unprepared collocation, the embodiment of “heterogeneous ideas [. . .] yoked by violence together”¹⁴ (which is how Dr. Johnson defined the Metaphysical conceit) encapsulates the dynamic of the opera, as much about the redemption of the “traviato” as of the “traviata” who, like most operatic sacrificial victims (Norma, for example, and her coeval Anna Bolena), embraces the self-immolation forced upon her instead of resisting it. Half of the opera sets up the stereotype of the questing parent who seeks the redemption of a prodigal son or daughter, a stereotype still potent enough for Bizet’s librettists to have superimposed the figure of Micaela (as mother surrogate) on the austere, unsentimental contours of Merimée’s original narrative. (*Carmen* came to the stage in the same year that *Roderick Hudson* saw the light of day.) But the rest of *La traviata* turns out to be quite as ambivalent about those stereotypes as James would prove in his novel and rotates them for our scrutiny in much the same way that his novel does, and in a way that may well have contributed to its inspiration.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, introduction by L. Archer-Hind, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1925), vol. 1, p. 11.