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Introduction

CAMILLE (*The Lady of the Camellias*) is the story of the incandescent love affair between a conventional young man called Armand Duval and Marguerite Gautier, a ravishingly beautiful courtesan with expensive habits. But if this were all, *Camille* would not have become an icon of Western culture, for a very similar story had been told before, in the Abbé Prévost's classic tale *Manon Lescaut* (1731), in which another "fallen woman," the luxury-loving Manon, destroys the Chevalier Des Grieux, a young nobleman desperately in love with her.

Camille knows that it has to overcome Abbé Prévost's masterpiece in order to impose itself on the world, for right at the beginning, at the auction of the dead Marguerite's possessions, the unnamed narrator, a man who claims that he knew Marguerite only by name and reputation, throws himself into a bidding war precisely over *Manon Lescaut*. In the end he wins out, takes the book home, and discovers that it is inscribed "*Manon to Marguerite: Humility*" (p. 22) and signed Armand Duval.

At a point in the novel when we know only two things about Marguerite—that she was a courtesan, and that she is dead—we learn that she inspires humility in her literary predecessor. The idea, surely, is that just as Marguerite humbles Manon, *Camille* will outshine *Manon Lescaut*. The reason for *Camille's* claim to superiority is not hard to find, for unlike Manon, who sacrifices nothing at all, Marguerite sacrifices her love and

her life for the sake of the hero's innocent young sister. Thus an upscale courtesan is turned into an icon of selfless love, and a new, enduring myth of femininity is born: not simply Madonna, nor simply Whore, but Madonna-Whore seamlessly welded together.

Uniting libertine sexuality with enduring love proved by self-sacrifice, Marguerite Gautier becomes the incarnation of a particularly powerful male fantasy. Sexually free and experienced, desirable and desiring, Marguerite is also truly loving, utterly selfless, ready to sacrifice every interest of her own on the altar of bourgeois family values.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, this titillating mixture of virtue and vice was at once scandalous and comforting, which goes a long way to explain the immense appeal of the story. Conservatives feared that Marguerite's story would encourage respect for prostitutes. Yet they also realized that her heroism served to reaffirm traditional family values. Moreover, at the end of the book, the narrator is careful to claim that, far from being representative of other prostitutes, his heroine is unique: "The story of Marguerite is an exception . . . had it not been an exception, it would not have been worth the trouble of writing it" (p. 254).

Is Marguerite a saint of love? Or is she rather a martyr to the male desire for domination, destroyed in the name of an eroticized fantasy of absolute emotional submission? Before taking a closer look at the text, we need to know something about the astonishing success of this novel, about its transformations into other genres, and about its young author.

Marguerite, Violetta, Camille: Incarnations of an Icon

Alexandre Dumas fils (1824-95) published his second novel, *The Lady of the Camellias*, in Paris in 1848. In that year of revolution, it was not particularly successful, and already in 1849, Dumas, who was deep in debt, turned his novel into a play. Too scandalous for the censors of the French Republic, the play languished unperformed for several years. Finally, after the coup d'état of Napoleon III in December 1851, it was ap-

proved for public performance, and *The Lady of the Camellias* opened at the Vaudeville Theater in Paris on February 2, 1852.

A sensational success, Dumas's play caught the attention of Giuseppe Verdi, who immediately set about turning it into an opera with a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave. Verdi and Piave, incidentally, changed the names of the characters: Armand Duval became Alfredo Germont and the poor Marguerite, whose name means *daisy* in French, was turned into Violetta, which means *violet* in Italian. The title was also changed. In Italian, *traviare* means *to mislead, to lead astray*. This is also the meaning of the English *seduce* and the German *verführen*. These words link the question of sexuality to the question of guidance: *la traviata* is not a threatening *femme fatale*, but a poor misguided woman.

Although *La Traviata* was something of a failure when it first opened on March 6, 1853, in Venice, this was due to poor casting. A year later, the opera reopened in a different theater with a different cast, and this time *La Traviata* was hailed as a masterpiece. Already in 1856 there were productions in both London and New York. The London critics were outraged. "Foul and fulminating in its subject," "public presentation of prostitution," "exhibition of harlotry upon the public stage," the critics raged. The London *Times* even published a special editorial on this disgusting opera: "An unfortunate young person who has acted the part of a public prostitute . . . coughs her way through three acts, and finally expires on the stage in a manner which, however true to nature, ought to be revolting to the feelings of the spectators," fulminated the distinguished paper.

The twentieth century turned *The Lady of the Camellias* into *Camille*, for that is the title of most of the more than forty films based on Dumas's story. Most famous by far is the 1936 *Camille*, directed by George Cukor and with Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor as Marguerite and Armand. But who knew that the very first film version was made in Denmark in 1907? Or that Colin Firth and Greta Scacchi starred in a *Camille* made for TV in 1984?

The Astounding Dumas Men

Alexandre Dumas *fils* was only twenty-four when he published *The Lady of the Camellias*. The story was inspired by his own passionate affair with a courtesan called Marie Duplessis, born plain Alphonsine Plessis (1824–47), who died young from tuberculosis just like Marguerite Gautier. In an essay from 1868, Dumas wrote that he met the enchanting Marie Duplessis in 1844, when they were both twenty, and that she died three years later, after the end of their affair. According to Dumas, Marie never sacrificed anything for him, not because she did not want to, but because he would not let her. The novel does not really try to hide its autobiographical connections. The unnamed narrator, in particular, comes across as a shadowy alter ego to the afflicted Armand Duval, whose initials just happen to be those of the author.

The hero's father is crucial to the action of the novel, for his intervention inspires Marguerite to sacrifice the love of her life. In relation to his father, Armand is at once rebellious and submissive, resentful and accepting. It is likely that this father-son relationship also draws on the author's own experience. Alexandre Dumas *fils* was the illegitimate son of the far more famous Alexandre Dumas *père* (1802–70), author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, and countless other historical adventure stories. His mother, Marie-Catherine-Laure Labaye (1793–1868), was a seamstress, and Alexandre lived with her until he was seven. At that point, his father suddenly decided to acknowledge the boy as his son and whisked him away to boarding school, where he was extremely unhappy.

Alexandre Dumas *père* was the grandson of an African slave. His father, Thomas Alexandre Dumas (1762–1806), was born in Santo Domingo as the illegitimate son of an African slave woman and a French aristocrat. Thomas Alexandre rose to become a general in the French revolutionary army, and was a close associate of Napoleon's until they fell out during the campaign in Egypt.

Dumas *père* was larger than life in every possible way:

he was charming, energetic, utterly unpredictable, a French national monument capable of writing with passion, energy, and flair about any subject in the world. Long after his death, he was still remembered among chefs for his enormous encyclopedia of cookery (*Le grand dictionnaire de cuisine*, published posthumously in 1873). Recent surveys show that Dumas *père* remains the most famous French author in the world, well ahead of his contemporaries Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac.

It cannot have been easy to be the talented son of Alexandre Dumas *père* . Even today an Internet search on the name "Alexandre Dumas" brings up ten times more material on the father than on the son. While there have been many biographies of the father, there are none at all of the son, except in so far as he is included as a lesser member of the amazing Dumas family.

Yet Alexandre Dumas *fils* was the first Dumas man to become a member of the French cultural establishment. After the success of *The Lady of the Camellias*, he specialized in plays, and from the 1850s to the 1890s a new Dumas *fils* play was always a cultural event in France. With the years, he became increasingly conservative. Most of his plays deal with sexuality, illegitimacy, and particularly with female adultery in ways that are deeply marked by the narrow social norms of his time. Adulterous women, for example, are often described as monsters and even as a threat to the nation (see *La Femme de Claude* [*Claude's Wife*] [1873]). Such conservatism may explain why it was the son and not the father who received the highest honor a French writer can achieve, namely membership in the *Académie française*, a prestigious, but hardly radical, institution charged with preserving and protecting French language and culture.

The Novel: Money, Death, and Sex

Camille begins with money: its first scenes are concerned with the auction of Marguerite's possessions (chapters I–IV). Then it moves on to death (chapters V–VI), reaching a grotesque high point in the scene in which Armand has Marguerite exhumed and reburied. The narrator, as usual, shadows Armand's every step

and bears fascinated witness to the spectacle of the dead woman exhumed:

It [the face of Marguerite] was terrible to see, it is horrible to relate. The eyes were nothing but two holes, the lips had disappeared, vanished, and the white teeth were tightly set. The black hair, long and dry, was pressed tightly about the forehead, and half veiled the green hollows of the cheeks; and yet I recognized in this face the joyous white and rose face that I had seen so often. (p. 51)

The grisly scenes of auction and exhumation come first. Only after they have been thoroughly described does the grieving lover Armand settle down to tell the tale of love, sex, and jealousy that led Marguerite to such a sorry end (chapters VII–XXVII). In this way, the very organization of *Camille* conveys a message, namely that the indispensable conditions for the telling of Marguerite's story are her ruin and death.

Right from the beginning, the novel demonstrates that its *raison d'être* is Marguerite's body or, to be more specific, her sex. In chapter I, the narrator enters the dead woman's dressing room, which has been opened to prospective buyers. He finds it full of objects of luxury:

Not being shocked at the sight of a kept woman's dressing-room, I amused myself with examining every detail, and I discovered that these magnificently chiselled objects bore different initials and different coronets. I looked at one after another, each recalling a separate shame, and I said that God had been merciful to the poor child, in not having left her to pay the ordinary penalty, but rather to die in the midst of her beauty and luxury, before the coming of old age, the courtesan's first death. (p. 7)

Every object in the dead woman's rooms is understood to be related to her sex. Her rooms become a vast extension of her sexually fascinating body: when the throngs of buyers and curious onlookers sweep

through them on auction day, they are like vultures picking clean her bones. In the same way, the grieving Armand can get no peace until he has seen Marguerite dead. It is as if Dumas cannot write his story unless he is absolutely certain that the body of the woman who enjoyed so much sexual power over men is truly decomposing.

In chapter II we learn that Marguerite was called the Lady of the Camellias because she was always carrying 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 for this change of colour, which I mention though I can not explain it," the narrator (p. 15) disingenuously declares. The visible and public sign of Marguerite's menstrual cycle, the camellias signify her sex and signal her sexual availability.

Camellias, moreover, are particularly fragile flowers; they quickly turn brown, and for a long time they were not terribly popular. One commentator claims that they were disliked because the flowers drop off intact "like the head of a man decapitated by a sword." Thus the very name "the Lady of the Camellias" reinforces the novel's obsession with the connection between a woman's sex and her death.

There is in this novel a dread of women's sexual power over men that is only partly covered up by the intense tale of love that is its ostensible subject. Marguerite's martyrdom is *required* to obliterate the memory of her tremendous power over Armand. This is surely why *Camille* both begins and ends with her death.

Novel, Play, Opera, Film

"It is all champagne and tears—fresh perversity, fresh credulity, fresh passion, fresh pain," Henry James, who greatly admired the play, once wrote, thus brilliantly capturing the sentimental atmosphere of the most popular versions of *Camille*: Dumas's play, Verdi's opera, and Garbo's 1936 film.

The novel, however, is not well described in this

way. It is far darker and more complex than the play, the opera, and the film. It is impossible to reduce the novel to a simple story of undying love and noble sacrifice. The novel goes to ghoulish extremes (that exhumation!), exhibits its obsessions and fears without disguise, and thus reveals a world where the sexes are locked in deadly combat, where men are frightened of the women they tyrannize to death.

In the novel, Marguerite dies alone, poor, forgotten, and forsaken by all except a faithful woman friend. In the play, the opera, and the film, however, Marguerite/Violetta dies *after* Armand/Alfredo and his father have returned to her. Armand/Alfredo promises eternal love and his father swears that he loves her like a daughter before the heroine expires in the arms of her lover.

The flowers connected with Marguerite/Violetta also undergo strange transformations in the various stage and movie versions, surely because the novel's red and white camellias reek of sex. In the play, we are told that Marguerite only ever carries camellias (which have no scent) because the scent of flowers makes her sick. In *La Traviata* the name Violetta conveys a hint of violets, but the libretto never names the flower she gives to Alfredo. Instead Violetta simply tells him to return when *questa fior* (this flower) has withered. Finally, in Garbo's *Camille*, the camellias only linger as a faint memory in the title, for they have vanished entirely from the script.

One thing, however, remains unchanged in all versions: the role of Armand's father. In every version he persuades Marguerite/Violetta/Camille to sacrifice her love for Armand/Alfredo for the sake of the latter's sister, for rumors of Armand's unruly life threaten to prevent his innocent young sister's marriage. In the novel, Marguerite is described as a "woman who is neither mother, sister, maid, nor wife" (p. 25). Because she exists on the margin of the social order, she becomes a threat to it. All versions want us to believe that this wayward woman wants nothing better than to please the father. Sacrificing herself for the sake of a daughter, sister, and soon-to-be-wife and mother, the

outcast is made to subscribe to the values of the social order that excludes her.

The irony is that when Armand's father—who enters the novel (and the stage) as the stalwart upholder of social values and casts himself as a particularly fervent defender of female purity—asks Marguerite to leave his son, he actually encourages her to return to her old profession, thus saving one woman by prostituting another.

The emotional ambivalence of the son reflects the ideological contradictions of the father. Armand's sublime love for Marguerite is shot through with scenes of distrust and cruelty. At times it is as if he wishes to inflict as much pain as possible on his beloved so as to fend off his own feelings of dependence and persuade himself of his own domination of her. Toward the end, the novel luxuriates in descriptions of Marguerite's humiliation and suffering at his hand. It also finds her sickness sexy: the fact that, for her, their last wild night of love is literally sex to die for is precisely what makes it so erotic to him. *Camille*, in short, is an outstanding example of the nineteenth century's erotic fascination with sick and dying women.

Yet there is another side to all this. For Marguerite Gautier may well be a social outcast, but this very fact is also the source of her power and her freedom. In *La Traviata*, Violetta sings a brilliant aria entitled "*Sempre libera*" ("Always Free"). In the novel, Marguerite tells Armand that she will only permit him to become her lover if she remains free to do as she pleases, without giving him the slightest details of what she does (chapter X). Her lover, she claims, must be confiding, submissive, and discreet. Later on, she confesses that she loves him the way she once loved her dog, because they both seemed to care about her well-being in an unselfish way.

Although Armand agrees to be submissive, he cannot stop trying to dominate her. After Marguerite has fallen in love with him, he crows: "When a creature who has all her past to reproach herself with is taken all at once by a profound, sincere, irresistible love, of which she had never felt herself capable, when she has confessed

her love, how absolutely the man whom she loves dominates her" (p. 110).

Marguerite, then, is doomed by love. Almost against its will, the novel here points to a deeply disturbing idea: A sexually independent woman who earns her own money does not have to account for her behavior to any man. Love is Dumas's answer to the threat posed by the very thought of sexual and economic freedom for women. Let a free woman fall in love, *Camille* declares, and she will gladly submit to her chains. More than one hundred fifty years later, the question is whether this has entirely ceased to be true.

—Toril Moi

Camille