The Little Red Dress: Performances of Gender in Willy Decker's Production of *La Traviata*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the emblematic use of costume in Willy Decker's production of* La Traviata *for the Salzburg Festival of 2005, subsequently revived by De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam (2009) and The Metropolitan Opera, New York (2010). I argue that on The Met stage both the choristers' (as well as Flora's and the male soloists') standard dressing in black male attire, irrespective of gender, and the use and abuse of a knee-length red dress as iconic of Violetta, construe gender as a 'garment' that can be put on or off at will (or perhaps 'as necessary'), though only by some. Gender is literally performed – in Judith Butler's sense – in this production, and with it so is the stereotyped – courtesan – identity of Violetta.*

Keywords: La Traviata*; Metropolitan Opera; Willy Decker (stage director); gender construction; gender performance (Judith Butler); masculine "sameness unto itself" (Luce Irigaray);*

My deepest thanks to The Met for the free streaming of many of its opera live recordings for slightly over two years during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Met's generosity has enabled me both to remain sane during the lockdown and afterwards and to compare and contrast different productions of many operas to my heart's content, as well as, academically, to share my aesthetic delight with many others.

It is fair to argue that The Metropolitan Opera, New York has recently been hospitable to sometimes unusual productions, in its efforts to revitalise the opera stage and also to welcome new types of spectators, for cultural as well as financial reasons. Gone are the days of (often refurbished) productions whose traditional sets, opulent costumes and the artists' conventionally realistic performance harked back to the opera's nineteenth-century premiere. Now, The Met welcomes anything from minimalism to spectacular opulence,[1] albeit not necessarily of the Zeffirelli sort.

[1] The change precedes the inception of General Manager Peter Gelb's tenure (in Aug. 2006), even as his commitment to "revitaliz[e] opera and connect[] it to a wider audience" is reputed ("Metropolitan Opera: About") – and highly controversial. Amongst his initiatives, as mentioned on The Met's official website, are "*The Met: Live in HD*, a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning series of live performance transmissions shown in high definition in movie theaters" and the "reimagin[ing] [of] the theatrical and dramatic possibilities of opera's canonical works with more than 80 new stagings by some of the world's greatest theater, film,

Why, then, not also modernise the staging of Verdi's *La Traviata* for modern audiences, as German director Willy Decker did? What follows examines one particular Met production of *La Traviata*, Willy Decker's, for the novelty of its outlook on the socially ill-fated love story of Violetta Valéry and Alfredo Germont and its (de)construction of gender.

La Traviata: a chronology

Paris, 1852: Giuseppe Verdi watches Alexandre Dumas fils's theatrical sensation *La Dame aux Camélias*, based on his 1848 semi-biographical novel. Verdi is fascinated by Marguerite Gautier, a see-through representation of the real-life courtesan Marie Duplessis (born Alphonsine Plessis), and on 18 September requests a copy of the play (Fisher 16-19; Della Seta 76). When the Teatro La Fenice in Venice commissions an opera, he offers *La Traviata*, composed to the libretto of Francesco Maria Piave.

Venice, 6 March 1853: the premiere of *La Traviata* turns out to be "the most colossal operatic disaster and fiasco of all time" (Fisher 22). With an uninspired cast and a sensitive *soggetto dell'epoca*, the opera finds little favour with its audience. It will take a decade for another medium, painting, to propose a comparably 'outrageous' subject, or rather protagonist: *Olympia* (1863), which Édouard Manet first exhibited at the 1865 Paris Salon.

Venice, 6 May 1853: the revival of *La Traviata* by the Teatro San Benedetto, demanded by Verdi himself (Roccatagliati 24), is a triumph.

New York, 3 December 1856: *La Traviata* premieres in the US at the New York Academy of Music.

New York, 1883: The Metropolitan Opera's opening season features *La Traviata*, conducted by Auguste Vianesi, with Marcella Sembrich ("Metropolitan Opera Broadcast: *La Traviata*").

Salzburg Festival, 25 July – 31 August 2005: German director Willy Decker's production of *La Traviata* (22–27 Aug.), conducted by Carlo Rizzi, with Anna Netrebko, Rolando Villazón and Thomas Hampson, is "a sensational success" (Greenfield n.p.; see also "Salzburger Festspiele 2005").

Unsurprisingly, in April 2009 De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam revived Willy Decker's staging of *La Traviata*, with Marina Poplavskaya. The Metropolitan Opera followed suit: on 31 December 2010 Decker's production premiered at The Met, with Marina Poplavskaya, Matthew Polenzani and Andrzej Dobber, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda. Decker's production was staged at The Met until 2018, when it was replaced with Michael Mayer's "gaudy production" (Loomis n.p.).

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and opera directors", in a bid "to enhance the theatricality of the Met's productions and complement the company's extraordinary musical standards".

Willy Decker collaborated, for *La Traviata*, with the renowned opera set designer Wolfgang Gussmann, whose "stark set" (Stempleski n.p.) and twenty-first-century costumes (with Susana Mendoza as associate costume designer), created a minimalism unusual in opera. Some reviewers praised Gussmann's "bare and timelessly modern" design (Tommasini n.p.): "Costumes and sets are modern but with an elegantly clean aesthetic that makes the exact period ambiguous" (Keel n.p.). Many, however, faulted the production's "forced", "heavy-handed" symbolism (Tommasini), whose "broad, occasionally overwrought symbols [...] sometimes distance us from the opera" (Keel). An Italian reviewer (De Angelis n.p.) found Decker's production full of "delle più scontate banalità, fatte passare per provocazioni" ("the most obvious banalities, passed off as provocations") in "luoghi comuni veristici" ("veristic clichés"), and completely disapproved of its overall spectacle: "la parte visiva dello spettacolo. Sulla quale esprimiamo la nostra contrarietà" ("about the visual part of the show […] we express our opposition").

When I first watched the HD live recording of the Luisi-Dessay-Polenzani run streamed by The Met in 2020 ("The Met: Live in HD: *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi"), and subsequently also the Salzburg Rizi-Netrebko-Villazón live recording available on YouTube, I was thrilled by Decker and Gussmann's *spectacle*, to which this paper owes its topic. If some reviewers felt the effect of the costumes "visually and dramatically effective", albeit "somewhat disorienting" (Stempleski), such disorientation, I contend, furthered as it was by the minimalist set, owed to the powerful gender questions raised by the production. For me, the ageless – albeit post-war – air exuded by Decker and Gussmann's minimalism in *La Traviata* suggested the timeless predicament of women, trapped as they are by patriarchal mentality in rigid, if at times barely acknowledged, identities and roles. Indeed, Ellen Keel, The Met's senior radio producer, remarked at the time about Decker's production:

> It's been a long time since a Met production of the opera […] was really surprising, capable of changing your perception of the work and its possibilities, reminding you of the elements of its drama – the double binds faced by women; the uneasy, codependent relationships between classes; our fascination with spectacles of suffering – that make it, as much as ever, *un soggetto dell'epoca*. (Keel n.p.)

I fully agree with Keel that Decker's *La Traviata* was "capable of changing your perception of the work and its possibilities". Arguably, among "its possibilities" was precisely that of reassessing women's – and men's – position in society and especially in societally approved interactions. Whether Decker's

take on women could explain why some found the production "bleak, fascinating, controversial", in Levine's (n.p.) summary, or downright rejected its aesthetics, is better left for speculation.

Setting the stage: circularity and minimalism in Willy Decker's *La Traviata*

La Traviata conveyed Willy Decker's view of Verdi's opera in sleek brushstrokes: like the unusually homogenising costumes, the spare set designed by Wolfgang Gussmann, with its apparent circularity, spoke to the opera's circularity. As the German director had confessed, "[w]hen he was searching for what he calls the 'basic form' of the opera, he drew his inspiration from the waltz-time music that pervades the score" (Keel n.p.). The motif of the circle identified by Decker as the opera's underlying rhythm – akin to "the basic form of human life" (qtd. in Keel) – "appear[ed] in different ways throughout the production" (Keel). The huge round clock, with its sometimes erratically fast movement and its versatile uses, and the greyish-white semi-circular corrugated back wall, with its low adjoining bench, immediately spring to mind.

Circularity was often the by-product of the artists' sweeping movements across the acting area. For instance, Violetta provocatively pirouetted waltz-like with Alfredo in Act I, on his introduction to her. Likewise, the choristers often grouped so as to form circular shapes; their movement, too, was often circular such as early in Act I around Violetta when, up on the red settee, she enquired about Alfredo's interest in her during her illness. When, in Act I, they followed her beckoning until Violetta descended from the semi-circular bench and pirouetted her way – in an arc – back to downstage left, the choristers moved from downstage left to upstage centre and, later in the same scene, backwards.

Subtler still, circularity also owed to the echoing of actions. For instance, the new courtesan's triumph in Act III drew, with a difference, on Violetta's in Act I. In Act II, scene 2, the man cross-dressing in a duplicate of Violetta's red dress was lifted in triumph, both in mockery of the early triumph and anticipating Act III's carnivalesque mockery of Violetta. Yet, patriarchy's vicious circle of gender was indicated most prominently by costumes, whose donning or removing onstage (de)constructed gender as a matter of *social performance*, as I will discuss in the next sections.

A different kind of circularity was suggested by the vertical mirroring of action and/or of positions, enabled by the semi-circular back wall with its crescent-looking top, used as the place from where to literally oversee the events, god-like. The zero degree of above-the-wall positions showed the choristers up there just to signify their presence in an adjoining room (according to the libretto) such as in Act I after Alfredo's departure from

Violetta's. Likewise, in Act II, scene 2, during the gambling episode, Alfredo summoned the guests – visible above the wall – and condescendingly acknowledged Violetta's financial support of their elopement, only to pay her back by thrusting into her dress the money won at cards from Baron Douphol. They protested, as the libretto asks, against Alfredo's humiliation of the fallen Violetta – fallen in every sense. Interestingly, being elsewhere (according to the libretto), yet above (according to Decker's layout), could (de)generate (into) unmasked voyeurism – literally and figuratively *unmasked*, for the choristers had removed their masks. Anthony Tommasini perceptively noticed, in his review, that "during crucial scenes groups of choristers lean over the wall like voyeurs, watching the deteriorating relationship between the dying, defiant courtesan Violetta and her smitten lover Alfredo".

However, voyeurism may, arguably, be just one face of the coin, with *surveiller* – an omnipresent component of our contemporary life – as its reverse. *Surveiller* was the self-appointed task of Giorgio Germont, the father-figure whom Fabrizio della Seta aptly regards as the "embodiment of social order" (77). Old Germont watched from above the developments at Flora Bervoix's soirée, in Act II, scene 2, with Violetta living up to her promise to Germont and his son publicly humiliating her for having 'kept' him, her lover.

Other such above-the-wall positions were more ominous still. Towards the end of Act I, during Violetta's aria "Follie, follie", Dr Grenvil – the Death / Father Time figure of much of Decker's staging – watched her reckless drinking with stupefied disapproval.[2] In the latter part of Act II, scene 1, when Violetta had finally consented to break up with Alfredo, Dr Grenvil lurked on top of the wall, as if to indicate that her much vaunted *sacrifizio* called for the true sacrifice ahead: her life lost to tuberculosis, not just to a ruthless society. If anything, the latter scene, in Decker's production, recalls – to me – the image of the cynical gods throwing the dice in the lyrics of ABBA's *The Winner Takes It All*, with the proviso that in Decker the gods were arguably patriarchy incarnate.

Costumes in Willy Decker's *La Traviata*: The "little red dress"

The "refined simplicity" (Stempleski) of the set and costumes could easily earn many a reviewer's praise. With its eye-catching simplicity, Violetta's bright red dress arguably became the role's signature in Decker's production. Furthermore, save the lovers' floral bathrobes, echoed in the settee covers and background projection in Act II, scene 1, her knee-long, form-fitting red dress provided the only spot of colour in Gussmann's black-and-white design and Hans Toelstede's stark lighting design.[3]

[2] Dr Grenvil had confiscated Violetta's glass and champagne bottle during the overture.

[3] Setting and lighting scheme were complicit, in this production, in illuminating what society has often chosen to disregard or gloss over – hence, perhaps, some of the reviewers'

Yet, was "the little red dress", as I will call it henceforth, *Violetta's*? My sobriquet for Gussmann's *Violetta-dress* nods to the "little black dress" of the protagonist of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, in the 1961 film directed by Blake Edwards.[4] To revert to *La Traviata*, in Act II, scene 2, in the party at Flora's, where Violetta and Alfredo met after their break-up, the Violetta-dress appeared on the stage *before* her arrival – severed from the woman. Lowered from above the curved back wall, the little red dress was donned by one of the male revellers – actually, a dancer – to become part of a pantomime ostensibly masquerading Violetta right before the gypsy women entertainment:

> FLORA: Avrem lieta di *maschere* la notte: n'è duce il viscontino. [...]
> TUTTI: Giungono gli amici.
> ZINGARE: Noi siamo zingarelle venute da lontano; d'ognuno sulla mano leggiamo l'avvenir. Se consultiam le stelle null'avvi a noi d'oscuro, e i casi del futuro possiamo altrui predir.
> FLORA: For entertainment this evening, we have *masqueraders*, a gift from the Viscount. [...]
> ALL: Our friends are arriving.
> *Ladies dressed as Gypsies enter*.
> GYPSIES: We are gypsies who have come from afar. We read the future from your hand. When we consult the stars, all of your secrets are revealed so we can predict your future. (Fisher 69)

According to Piave's libretto, the *zingarelle* are but *masqueraders*, impersonators. The episode, as well as the subsequent one, echoes the masques familiar to western European courts in earlier times than those of the opera's authors. For Decker, the scene was ripe with impersonation: the stage-level singers, choristers and dissimulated dancers – all, male and female alike,

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disapproval of the production's ostentatious parading of clichés. Toelstede's "chilly, clinical light" which bathes the "white cyclorama" (Rosenberg n.p.) created by the back wall, may reference *metatheatrically*, I would argue, Decker's dissection of the opera's – and, at one remove, patriarchal society's – use and abuse of women. The cyclorama format, with its single entrance door, not only renders the acting area akin, metatheatrically, to a *dissection room* from which there is no escape for the female protagonist. It also renders the space, in Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim's terms, "a bullfighting ring" which offers "a stark and brooding vision of a woman hounded to death by a cruel mob" (n.p.). Thus, the production pictures opera itself "as blood sport", where "the audience, as the lack of a stage curtain suggests, is every bit as complicit in Violetta's suffering as a spectator placing bets on a cock fight" (Fonseca-Wollheim n.p.).

[4] Ironically, as a socialite looking for a great match, Audrey Hepburn's Holly can be regarded as the mid-twentieth-century avatar of Dumas fils's nineteenth-century courtesan and thus of Piave and Verdi's Violetta.

dressed in black suits at all times – hid their faces behind large, theatrically stylised masks of gypsy women.

It was against this background that the man took off his coat and shirt to don the duplicate red dress, and started dancing provocatively. His was a blatant mockery of cross-dressing, nothing short of monkeying Violetta as a stock character – the courtesan – rather than regarding her as herself. In claiming this, I am drawing on the production's Act III: during the Paris carnival, the choristers irrupted into Violetta's – here bed-less – bedroom and brought in a young woman who put on the little red dress. As Violetta's 'successor', she was entitled, moreover, to being borne up and out, 'mounted' on the upright-turned clock face qua makeshift micro-stage qua temporary plinth. The anonymous young woman's was but a short triumph – in every sense – which faintly echoed Violetta's atop the red leather settee in Act I. This 'replacement' was circumscribed spatiotemporally by the clock/table, with the young woman exhibited and subliminally crucified on it as the next stereotyped courtesan to be consumed – including possibly also by tuberculosis. Accordingly, the episode indicated a timeless (or perhaps unending) patriarchal game, albeit with but a short timeout qua expiry date for the woman involved. Violetta's stereotyped gender-related social identity – the courtesan qua sexual toy for rich men, under a veneer of genteel sociality – is a matter of *performance* (in Judith Butler's sense).[5] In Decker's production, it is, ironically, also a matter of being in good physical shape to be able to perform socially as expected – or else be replaced. Indeed, many reviewers emphasised the production's point about the interchangeability of courtesans, or rather their replaceability. A quasi-anonymous reviewer observed:

> Decker's *Traviata* heightens our awareness that a wealth-and-power driven male dominated society chews up beautiful young women for pleasure but then spits out what's left of them and moves on to the next delicious morsel.* Once discarded, thrown back down to the disadvantaged layers of society, in which living conditions are poor, heat and food scarce, adequate health care denied, they will suffer greatly. […] Somewhat sad and touching is the moment when, in the last scene during the Carnival music, the men and women, formal attire in disarray, masks askew, carry in a new beautiful young woman in a red dress. The ailing Violetta knows the truth. Her time is up. (JRS n.p.)

The footnote to which the original asterisk refers reads, metatheatrically (and for our benefit),

[5] I elaborate on performativity in the next section.

> * Thinking about this more: paradoxically, the Decker production itself chews up beautiful young sopranos for the central role of Violetta. […] The demands of the staging most likely prevent sopranos past a certain age and size from essaying the physical part well on stage. (JRS)

Ironically, Fanny Salvini-Donatelli, the stout, healthy-looking soprano of the La Fenice world premiere could not convince the spectators that she would die of consumption (Fisher 23). Doubly ironically, she would never have left Decker's production in one piece; nor would the dancers lifting her up on the settee, either.

Bullying into gender norm/ality

It is worth examining Flora's soirée, for Decker's Act II, scene 2 featured the chorus as a collective agent in its own right, beyond the libretto requirements. Whilst some of the choristers burst onto the stage already masked as gypsy women, some stood above (or at times leant over) the back wall, wearing male masks for the upcoming matador masque. As throughout the production, the choristers and singers – save Violetta and Alfredo – looked indistinct gender-wise, with costumes, short-cropped wigs (for women), masks and especially attitudes that aggregated them into an amorphous, often menacing, mob.

Amidst the revellers, the male dancer who donned the signature red dress descending from the back wall stood apart through his solo act of defiance of norms of sociality. Not only did he perform a reverse striptease – if after removing his upper-body clothes – in putting on the little red dress (as well as the production's larger-than-life female gypsy mask). His cross-dressing and triumph mocked the early party, in Act I, where Violetta had defied and enticed Alfredo in turn and then had been lifted on the settee in triumph. Such crude masquerade, or perhaps anti-performativity, of femininity-qua-courtesanship, with its carnivalesque undertone anticipatory of Act III's Carnival, soon degenerated into overall aggression. Early in the scene, Alfredo was bullied by his friends, with the gypsy 'women' reading his fortunes in his palm (a coercive transposition of the libretto) and forcing drink down his throat. He appeared no less helpless now than in the subsequent matador masque and than Violetta would be somewhat later at his hands during the gambling episode.

Nor did jeering at Alfredo and miming jabbing at him with their hands end easily. Since Piave's libretto chain-links the *zingarelle* masque with that of the *mattadori*, the perpetrators of aggressiveness moved to and fro between the masques, with bull-like gestures deployed in the gypsy episode, to become Alfredo's "nightmare" (Levine n.p.). Decker's Gastone and his fellow matadors in this second masque did not come from afar, but they (actually, the

dancers) emerged from within the ranks of the party-goers (the choristers) and produced a huge red bull head:

> GASTONE E MATTADORI: Di Madride noi siam mattadori,
> siamo I prodi del circo dè tori,
> testè giunti a godere del chiasso
> che a Parigi si fa pel bue grasso;
> è una storia, se udire vorrete,
> quali amanti noi siamo saprete.
> *Gastone and others arrive, disguised as Spanish Matadors and Picadors.*
> GASTONE and MATADORS: We're from Madrid, and are the pride of the bullring. We've come to Paris to share your enjoyment, and if you would listen, we'll tell you the story of what great lovers we are. (Fisher 70)

Where Decker's production further departed from others of *La Traviata* was in the violent turn of both masques, whose target was Alfredo. The Matador masque(rade) turned sour: the 'Violetta' cross-dresser – assisted by the wearers of female gypsy masks – harassed and cornered Alfredo as if the latter had been the bull, which he soon 'became' by being thrust the bull head mask onto his face. With Alfredo down to the ground, 'Violetta' pulled out the clock hands and stabbed Alfredo to signify vanquishing him. Thus, Act I's protagonists were now either defeated or derided by a male impersonator whose cross-dressing did not emasculate him, but, if anything, rather empowered him to penalise Act I's apparent reversal of the gender agency differential.

This cruel toying with Alfredo, but especially his coerced 'transformation' by turns into an emasculated man (on the verge of feminisation as a passive victim) and a vanquished bull (the image of disempowerment), deconstructed masculinity as unstable, indeed fluid, and especially vulnerable. Insofar as the bully was himself a man whose cross-dressing seemingly reversed gender identity, albeit in a socially sanctioned carnivalesque vein (by the libretto's Act III and by Decker's masked revellers), the visual game highlighted the constructedness of gender traits and their coercive imposition on individuals through normalising socialisation. The episode yielded to deconstruction as a literal hide-and-seek game of 'true' gender behind physicality and behind the mask, which recalls Judith Butler's observation, in *Gender Trouble*, about the non-essentiality of gender. For Butler (163-180), gender is a matter of performance, of systematic, if mostly unconscious, public enactment (or *embodiment*) of society's gender ideas,

rather than, as typically assumed, the hard core that essentially encodes social identity (if my tautology may be excused).

To revert to the foul masques, the defeat of Alfredo cued the entrance of the 'real' Violetta (i.e., Violetta Valéry), alongside Baron Douphol. Shocked to face her 'other' – i.e., the cross-dressed man in the little red dress, who, on seeing her distress at the masquerade, laughed his head off unabashedly – Violetta Valéry was dragged aside forcefully and proprietarily by the baron. As if to add insult to injury, he kissed her, in a thinly veiled suggestion of rape. Violetta-the-woman appeared therefore as but an 'act', a *performance* of the woman-qua-courtesan cliché, rather than as a flesh-and-blood individual in her own right. Granted no agency of her own in Act II, scene 2, unlike spuriously in Act I and definitely in Act II, scene 1, when she kept Alfredo financially, Violetta Valéry was not simply *reified*. Rather, she was thoroughly *de-realised* as but a little-red-dress dummy, an insubstantial icon of subservient, playful womanhood as impersonated by the man in drag. Gender mockery accomplished!

It is amazing indeed how quickly Decker's Alfredo could recover from his early emasculation, only to start himself to bully Violetta – again beyond Piave's libretto. By the end of Act II, scene 2 he had defeated the baron at cards – with the clock as their makeshift gambling table – and, after admitting having been kept by Violetta, he humiliated her publicly. When Alfredo started thrusting the money into her red dress – down into the décolletage and up the skirt – his gesture amounted to a second symbolic rape of Violetta at Flora's soirée, compounded by the suggestion of her crucifixion on the clock face qua gambling table.

Who's afraid of a little red dress?

What neither the cross-dresser nor Alfredo could do to Violetta-the-courtesan was the erasure of her inner self, however vulnerable and prone to collapsing under male duress. If the little red dress could be donned by women as well as, in mockery, by men, the white silk slip could not – and not simply for modesty's sake. However overdone, according to the reviewers, the signature Violetta attire, I argue, used a traditional colour code which visualised the patriarchal dichotomous stereotyping of women whilst – deliberately or not – also blurring it. Red may well signify the prostitute (Violetta the consumptive demi-mondaine) and white the pure soul (thus embodied by the invisible Germont daughter, whose position on the marriage market Alfredo's affair with Violetta allegedly jeopardised). Nonetheless, traditional Marian iconography renders the Virgin's attire – East and West – red for motherhood

and devotion and blue for purity and royalty (Fiore n.p.), rather than white.[6] Thus, the Mount Athos icons known as the "Akathist" Icon of the Mother of God and the "Comfort" or "Consolation" Icon of the Mother of God, both rescued from the iconoclasts' rage, feature the Virgin veiled in red, with the latter icon revealing her blue chemise.[7] Red prevails also in Lorenzo Lotto's *Martinengo Altarpiece* (1513-16), in the Church of San Bartolomeo, Bergamo, even as it is actually the colour of Mary's chemise, with her blue mantle lying on her knees. The latter colour scheme actually owed to other early eastern icons, also in Byzantine style, prominent amongst which stands *The Virgin of Vladimir*, aka *Our Lady of Vladimir* (*c*. 1125). Red chemise and blue mantle feature also in Duccio's *Virgin and Child in Majesty*, the central panel from the *Maestà Altarpiece* (1308-11) and in Sandro Botticelli, *Virgin and Child*, aka *Madonna of the Book* (1480). The chromatic Marian detail must have escaped those reviewers averse to Decker's 'ostentatious', 'cliché-ridden' production.

What's in an outfit and its colour, though? Before I review Violetta's either-red-or-white attire and its mirroring across the acts, a look at the floral print showcased in Act II, scene 1 is in order. Both Violetta's and Alfredo's bathrobes have it, and it is moreover mirrored in the settee spreads and the bright coloured floral décor above the wall. Yet, I would argue, the floral print does more than simply suggest yet another 'cliché', i.e., the *blossoming* of Violetta and her requited love in their haven *in the countryside*. Especially given the cyclorama stage format, the blooming garden thus made visible synecdochically at one remove (i.e., above) is, I would argue, coterminous with – though not necessarily inspired by – the *hortus conclusus* conceit, which regards the Virgin Mary – as a virgin forever – as a garden closed to human presence.[8] Late medieval and Renaissance iconography sometimes featured Mary in a walled garden to imply both (sexual) impenetrability and fertility, and reminiscent of the cloistered life of the religious, who *cultivated* a spiritual life *severed* from the world. The *hortus conclusus* image could at times be conflated with the Annunciation scene (Ross 124), for the Annunciation could be featured either in "a closed, womb-like space" (Scaff 111) – typical for Italian art – or, in the 1300s, near or in a walled garden. Verdi and Piave's Violetta is hardly a projection of the Virgin Mary, of course. Nonetheless, as

[6] Jean Fouquet uses grey or off-white for the Virgin's mantle, in *Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim* (1452), to highlight her royalty in terms of regalia, *ermine* and crown, rather than colours.

[7] Both icons are of the Eleousa (the Virgin of Tenderness) type. A useful iconographic resource for these and other Mount Athos icons is "Icons of the Mother of God" on the website of the Orthodox Church in America.

[8] The Christian metaphor appears to have been inspired by the Song of Songs (4.12-15): "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, / a garden locked, a fountain sealed" (NRSV, Song of Solomon 4.12).

we have seen, the acting area is thus set in Decker's production that it *shows* inescapability: Violetta can't escape her destiny as a consumptive courtesan, just as the Virgin can't escape her chosenness.

In Act I, Violetta-the-courtesan in her heyday wore her signature red dress as if to flash her social role. In Act II, scene 1, she wore a white silk slip qua nightdress, but thinly covered by the floral print bathrobe – with Alfredo comparably (un)dressed – to signify the purity (white) and naturalness (floral print) of both her blossoming love and her private life away from Paris. With her forced renunciation of Alfredo, Violetta returned to her former public (and 'scandalous') life by first donning her little red dress (formerly 'suspended' – in every sense – on a coat hanger in full view). In Act II, scene 2, after her public humiliation by Alfredo, Violetta stripped off her red dress, to remain in her white slip: she thus abjured her public self as a courtesan. In Act III, a consumption-worn Violetta in her white slip (under Annina's dark overcoat) watched horrified how the Paris masqueraders barged into her place, with a young woman in a white slip whom they 'fitted' into Violetta's red dress (discarded on the floor from the previous act). On 'becoming' Violetta, the young woman was confronted with the dying woman (both of them in distress), before being removed in triumph. The only red dress left to Violetta was that of her lungs consumed by phthisis, symbolically embodied by the carnival revellers' red streamers strewn across Violetta's bedroom. It was the kind of attire which no male character ever dons in opera, for men are reserved actively heroic (or treacherous) deaths, not 'passive', consuming ones.

Conclusion

From Act I to Act III, Violetta loses her voice coloratura, in Verdi's score (Fisher 25). She also lost the exuberance of her little red dress, in Decker's production. Just as her vitality wanes and her part waxes dramatic, in the former, so her costume thinned down to a flimsy white slip, in the latter. The bright dress had been discarded as no longer apposite to her persona.

Conversely, the black suit 'uniform' worn by the choristers remained unchanged throughout. Perhaps its stability – suggestive rather of inflexibility – was what made "the crowd look androgynous and threatening" (Tommasini). During Flora's party, with the addition of the stereotyped masks (whether of gypsy women or matadors), such uniform-ity, I argue, started to unveil its ominous ambit. Women and men were rendered indistinguishable, "hard to spot" (Levine), and thus society was rendered seemingly homogeneous as much by outfit and/or social mask as by their 'consensually' shared views, attitudes and games. In Act I, the fe/male costumes indicated a spuriously benign sartorial uniformity, which rendered Flora and the women choristers (themselves fellow courtesans) *indistinguishable* from – or, metatheatrically and morally, in the same boat as – the men. In Act II, scene 2 and in Act III,

the costumes (and masks) pointed to the socio-ideological gender *un-differentiation* of women from men *under patriarchy*. This blurring of gender and individuality alike indicated, to those who would see, the forced construction and/or assumption of a femininity imposed from afar or from above. Such artificial femininity obtained as the (by-)product of the phallogocentric game of masculine "sameness unto itself" theorised by Luce Irigaray (*Speculum* 26, 135), a game of spurious isomorphism, with "its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same*" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 74, original emphasis). Decker's women functioned as the Irigarayan other of the same (i.e., of men): they were non-men, the defective mirror image of men, rather than autonomous women. The multipliable Violetta herself was not the self-standing subject Violetta Valéry, but the spitting – indeed, phthisic – image of men's desire for fallen women (hence, *la traviata*), for women who unquestioningly and obligingly fall into pre-allotted object positions. The operatic genre's specific form of musical communication only better showed, in Decker's production, that women (should) act and speak (or sing) in unison with men, in one phallogocentric voice and with one purpose in mind: to remain watchful – and watch from above – that everyone's demeanour complies with patriarchal norm-ality.

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