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The rented bride: Puccini's Madama Butterfly and the commoditization of women in Opera

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Opera's core repertory includes a number of female characters who are regarded as if they, or at least sexual access to them, were items of commerce. Some are given in marriages as prizes at contests. Others offer their bodies in trade. The most prominent of these is the title character of Puccini's Madama Butterfly, a Japanese geisha rented by a visiting American sailor in a temporary marriage. The depiction of these "bartered brides" conforms to Bateman's Principle, whereby the gender with greater reproductive potential will become the object of competition by the other. This especially applies to women perceived to be of high reproductive potential, such as Butterfly. Combined with the problem of paternal uncertainty, however, this higher valuation leads not to improved status but rather to greater subjugation of women. In many popular operas women characters are subjected to exposure, constraint and mistreatment, often resulting in their undeserved demise.

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Butterfly's Vigil

The aesthetic success of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* is all the more remarkable when we consider the paucity of incident in this extremely popular opera. The plot can be summarized in only a few sentences.

> Pinkerton, a naval officer temporarily stationed in Nagasaki, brokers from Goro a lease for a house and a marriage contract to the 15-year-old Cio-Cio-San, both of which he can easily annul. He tells the American consul Sharpless he later intends to find an American wife. Their wedding is interrupted by her uncle the Bonze, a Buddhist priest irate at her conversion to Pinkerton's Christianity. Pinkerton insults her family and ushers them away. He then escorts her into their bridal chamber.
>
> Act II takes place three years later. Cio-Cio-San and her servant Suzuki continue to wait for the long absent Pinkerton. When Sharpless tells her Pinkerton will not return, she presents their young son. A cannon shot in the harbor announces the return of the USS Lincoln. Cio-Cio-San decorates the house for his arrival. They watch all night long. Pinkerton, however, escorts his American wife, Kate; they have come to claim the boy. Cio-Cio-San sends word that he must come alone; when he does so, she commits ritual suicide.

This slim plot derives from David Belasco's one act play of the same title, yet it suffices to motivate almost two and a half hours of music. Whether there are one or two intermissions—this depends on the division of the second act into two scenes—*Butterfly* easily constitutes a full evening's entertainment. And it does so everywhere operas are staged, including in Japan—an issue we shall return to. From 2008 to

2013 *Butterfly* was the sixth most produced opera in the world (www.operabase.com, August 7, 2013). Obviously a wide range of people like to watch it, again and again.

Our problem only waxes when we take note of the lack of incident and variety in the opera. There is only one set, Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton's house, albeit some productions will revolve the stage in order to give different perspectives. Termed "a very simple story" by Jan van Rij, there are no complicating subplots (van Rij, 2001, 17). Like the Japanese art Puccini and his librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, tried to imitate, *Butterfly* is confident in its simple theme and the means of presenting it. Their several revisions generally pared it down to its core. Puccini wrote at the time that the opera is "a little drama which, once begun, must proceed without interruption to the end" (Puccini, 1974, 158).

A particular case in point is one of the most unusual passages in all of opera, the twelve minute orchestral intermezzo between the two scenes of Act II. Accompanied by a wordless and unique humming chorus, Cio-Cio-San, Suzuki, and the boy watch in the distance for Pinkerton's approach. Their nightlong vigil is often staged with their sitting *tatami*-style facing the back of the stage. If there is a second intermission, it interrupts this passage, which in effect adds to the perceived length of Butterfly's night-long vigil.

Some of the opera's remarkable prominence can be attributed to its beautiful music—*Butterfly* is Puccini's most acclaimed score and there are many recordings. Nevertheless excerpts from the opera, especially its instrumental intermezzo, are rarely performed at concerts or separately recorded. Its attraction relies on its carefully selected dramatic situation. Our question is how this single incident elicits such nearly universal attention. Puccini was especially careful in his selection of material: "I shall never be able to work on a subject, if I am not fully convinced about it first" (Puccini, 1974, 177). Once selected, he and his librettists strived to maintain the dramatic continuity of the developing work. In the case of *Butterfly*, there were three stages of revision after the Milan premiere in 1904. The fourth version, first staged in Paris in 1906, is the basis of most productions today.

Apparently the opera is ultimately based on an actual case, where a Western man contracted a temporary marriage to a Japanese woman in Nagasaki sometime during the last third of the nineteenth century. In 1897 Jennie Conrad related this to her brother, John Luther Long, who used it as the basis for a popular novella the following year[1]. Also drawing on the writings of Pierre Loti, including his novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), David Belasco adapted the story in 1900 for the London stage—where Puccini encountered it[2]. Although the composer's English, by all accounts, was rudimentary, he immediately requested the right to set the play to music. And his favorite moment was that same silent vigil. This is also reflected on the cover ofthe Ricordi score of the opera.

How can it be that a motionless, indeed, wordless, scene can hold our attention for so long? Nothing in its course changes the dramatic situation. Indeed, the same could be said for the preceding fifty minutes of Act II's first scene. Her faith in his affection, in the protection of women per American divorce law, and all her demonstration of her commitment to him, will all be betrayed: Pinkerton never intends to return to Butterfly. Despite the attempts of all who surround her, especially the humane Sharpless, to get her to face this likelihood, she continues to believe in Pinkerton's fidelity—until she sees his American wife.

So the situation barely, if at all, changes. Indeed, the much-watched *Butterfly* repeats a common theme that had fascinated readers of Loti and Long, and Belasco's audiences: only a few steps above a prostitute, Butterfly is a rented bride—and that seems to account for much of her enormous fascination.

Interest and adaptiveness

Attention is somatically expensive, if only due to the costs of evolving and growing the necessary nervous tissue to maintain it. Notably, in one fashion or another, it shared by an enormous range of species; given that this may take many forms, it is difficult to conceive of an exception. The rationale is obvious: if a threat or an opportunity is likely to exert a strong influence on one's inclusive fitness—the prospects for transmitting one's genetic patterns into the next generation—then it would seem wise to at least turn one's mind or nervous system to it. However, because there is such a multitude of phenomena present or pending in most environments, the mind has to choose amongst sensory inputs, focusing on likely threats/opportunities, at the expense of others which are "tuned out." Static input usually leads to habituation.

Whether or not the arts provide adaptive benefit for their consumers, their primary "intent" is to attract and hold attention, even if at some cost to the consumer. Operas provide a convenient test for such positions, inasmuch as the same thirty or so works, including *Butterfly*, are repeatedly staged throughout Europe and the European settled world, while making inroads into Asia. Consequently, in the course of a normal lifespan an operagoer is likely to watch *Butterfly* more than just several times. And happily so. One of the marks of a great classic is that, instead of engendering tedium, it will elicit ever deepened appreciation. This is even the case when the outcome is known in advance—opera programs typically include synopses and the denouement is often forecast in the thematic and harmonic structure. *Butterfly* is no exception.

Few will be surprised that *Butterfly* does not have a happy ending. In her infamous *Opera or the Undoing of Women* Catherine Clément noted all the "signs of death" in the opera; with her eye fixed on *Butterfly*, she complained, with slight exaggeration, "all the women in opera die a death prepared for them by a slow plot, woven by furtive, fleeting heroes, up to their glorious moment: a sung death" (Clément, 1988, 45). Perhaps it should concern us that this formula works so well. John Bell Young is hardly alone in calling *Butterfly* "one of the most moving, communicative, and emotionally cathartic inventions in the history of music and, I dare say, theater, as well" (Young, 2008, 100) Indeed, Young terms it "the most innovative of grand operas," citing the humming chorus as unique in the art form (Young, 2008, 96, 119).

Opera directors typically count on Puccini's operas to attract audiences and benefactors; it is a rare season that does not include one of his masterpieces. They expect that *Butterfly, La Boheme, Tosca*, and *Turandot* will assure them the packed houses and ticket sales that will enable them to stage other works. Furthermore, opera is an expensive medium—whether to attend or to produce—but it is also one that enjoys superior cultural prestige. Lastly, opera is also a limited art; due to its costs opera directors have to choose carefully which works they can afford to produce. Performance of one opera usually means neglect of another. Thus widely recognized successes like *Butterfly* beg for close scrutiny.

As a means of attracting widespread attention, opera narratives typically focus on major threats and opportunities, especially including death and marriage—both of which occur in *Butterfly*. In other words, the stakes have to be substantial. It is a rare crime in opera that does not rise to the level of homicide. Admittedly, mere robbery is depicted in Puccini's next opera, *Girl of the Golden West*, while the title character of his earlier *Manon Lescaut* is exiled for being a card shark. Closer to the norm for the repertory as a whole, two of the three central characters in Tosca are murdered and the third leaps to her death.

The premiere of *Butterfly* at Milan's La Scala was a nearly complete failure. Much of this can be attributed to local opera politics inasmuch as the composer's enemies apparently engineered a hostile reaction. Puccini and his librettists withdrew the work after that disastrous first night and subjected it to substantial revisions before relaunching *Butterfly* in Brescia and, after yet more revisions, in London and then Paris. The Paris version was a triumph and has stayed so ever since. It is interesting to think that in this process he reduced references to West-Asia relations, themselves an emotionally fraught frame, so as to focus on the more stereotypical issue of male-female relations. Arthur Groos observes, "the early conception of the opera [was] as a tragedy of East-West relations, in which the principal characters are agents of impersonal cultural forces that determine their actions" (Groos, 1994, 185). He says the Paris version omitted much of the Japanese local color and Pinkerton's cultural slurs (Groos, 1994, 171). Now generally viewed as the canonical version, it reflects the "revised emphasis of the opera on individual differences rather than on national stereotypes" (Groos, 1994, 189).

We do better to examine Butterfly and Pinkerton as representatives not of their cultures, but rather of their genders, especially the tactics men and women pursue in all patriarchal societies to assure themselves reproductive success (Buss, 1995). Consider the reason for Butterfly's long vigil, whether we have in mind just the final night or all three years of Pinkerton's absence. If he returns to her, Butterfly will be, as she says, "the happiest girl in Japan" (Puccini et al., 1987, 87). If like all the other foreign "husbands" who never returned—so we are informed by Suzuki—he fails to continue their marriage, she will be in a situation she regards as worse than death.

An additional means of increasing dramatic interest is to counterpoise conflicting adaptation strategies. Butterfly and Pinkerton constitute a representative clash of typical male and female sexual ambitions. She seeks a dependable source of emotional and material support in her American husband. As the gender with the more limited reproductive potential, it follows that she would seek a safe investment. Men, who enjoy virtually unlimited potential, have the option of "spreading their seed." Pinkerton, like the prototypical sailor, dreams of having "a girl in every port." Indeed, Pinkerton openly sings of this aim in the first act, adding to this his ambition to then marry a fellow American. Clearly these trajectories are incompatible, as is the stuff of so many narratives that concern "the battle of the sexes."

Opera, however, like most narratives does not focus on the typical and normal, but rather on extremes of behavior. One vehicle for attracting and holding attention is to depict lifestyles at or just beyond the fringe of viability. Certainly we have a morbid interest in marginal, even counterintuitive, tactics, if only as a check on our own actions. According to Joseph Carroll, "the life history of every species forms a reproductive cycle" (Carroll, 2008, 242). As a result we carry an internal model of expectations per species typical behavior, especially with regard to behaviors which pertain to mortality and reproductive success. We use this as a benchmark for evaluating other people, including fictional characters; this is, of course, a model that is conditioned by cultural context and individual experience. We construct expectations as to how people typically pursue inclusive fitness and we quickly calculate, often in a subconscious manner, the degree by which they deviate from those standards. We thus immediately notice, indeed are fascinated by, any deviations to species typical behavior. As Brian Boyd recently argued, this standard is what makes stories possible (Boyd, 2009, 28). For example, Butterfly sells her reproductive potential to Pinkerton for a mere 100 Yen. She is cheap in the literal sense. Notably her cousin refused the same deal from Goro. Given Pinkerton's inclination for philandering, it is obvious to all that their "marriage" is misbegotten and provides a poor basis for raising children. Butterfly thus foolishly sacrifices her inclusive fitness, a goal believed by evolutionary psychologists to be the prime motive for everyone's action. As with prostitutes, one asks: why would she willingly do this?

Bartered brides

One part of that model for all species-typical behavior is expressed by Bateman's Principle. In1948 the British geneticist A. J. Bateman observed much greater variance in reproduction in fruit flies amongst males than females. Since, as he theorized, females have much less than males to gain from having multiple sexual partners, he deduced that the gender with the more limited reproductive potential will more likely be the object of competition by the other sex. Thus in most species, including our own, males will contend, even fight, over reproductively promising females, while the reverse relationship is relatively rare[3]. This pattern so underlies our expectations that we take it for granted. Male sexual competition appears in innumerable narratives, including most operas.

There is no such competition represented in *Butterfly*, but Batemen's Principle helps explain the special attention paid to the title character's reproductive potential, as compared to Pinkerton's. That a sailor may attempt to "spread his seed" generates little anxiety, given that his potential is virtually infinite. But Butterfly, like any woman, has only a very limited possible number of offspring; she is constrained by her supply of gametes and, moreover, yet more by her capacity to care for and raise them to maturity. Thus it matters to us that she squanders it on so unworthy a man. Audiences thus typically tolerate such great asymmetries in the depiction of gender. A similar, no doubt related, asymmetry is witnessed in the common practice of trading brides between social groups, whereas the exchange of grooms is rarely, if ever, encountered.

Since potential female reproductivity is very limited, compared to the vast potential of men, it bears inherent value. This is not necessarily correlated with social status: on the contrary, this increased valuation may motivate their subjugation. Women are often treated as property to be won and held, as we often see in the operas of Richard Wagner, much admired by Puccini. In *Der fliegende Holländer* Daland trades his daughter Senta for the Dutchman's treasure. In *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried wins Brünnhilde for Gunther in exchange for the latter's sister, Gutrüne. Wotan pays for the building of Valhalla with Freia; because she grows the "golden apples" of eternal youth—a convenient expression of Batemen's Principle—he later buys her back with *Das Rhinegold*. Some are given out as prizes. Viet Pogner offers his daughter Eva in marriage to the winner of a singing contest in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. There is a similar outcome in his *Tannhauser*, where the title character wins Elisabeth's hand in a singing contest at the Wärtberg. We see similar patterns with to other composers, Baba the Turk is auctioned with the rest of Tom Rakewell's possessions in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. Puccini used the prize device in Turandot where Princess *Turandot* offers herself to any man of noble rank who can answer her three riddles, all undertaken at the possible price of their heads. That opera begins with the beheading of a failed suitor. We should also mention Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, wherein Max wins Agathe at a shooting contest.

Similar, albeit less direct, transactions are depicted in other operas. The heroine of Puccini's *Tosca* offers her body to Scarpia in a vain attempt to save her lover Cavaradossi. Of course, she never intends to go through with this obscene agreement; rather she uses it as a means to kill the evil baron. A similar deal fails in Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*. Puccini played the same hand in his next opera, where Minnie, his *Fanciulla del West (Girl of the Golden West)*, makes a similar bet with Sherriff Jack Rance for the life of Dick Johnson. The title character in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro)* puts himself up as collateral for a loan from Marcellina. *Figaro* is one of the few exceptions where a male is equated with capital. Another is Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, where Jenik barters himself as a means of having his cake (getting money) and eating it (marrying his beloved). Meanwhile, the central theme of *Figaro* is yet more obscene: the Count Almaviva demands his *right of the first night* from his servant Suzanna, Figaro's bride. Of course, we are relieved to see that all of these are unholy alliances which do not come to pass. Not so *Butterfly*.

Butterfly is an extreme case of this pattern of commoditization for at least two reasons. First of all, Cio-Cio-San literally is a rented wife. In the opening scene we note that Goro brokers both the lease on Pinkerton's house and the arrangement of his marriage to Butterfly. Per the laws of Japan extant at the time, as represented in the opera, both contracts are easily annulled. As a result, Butterfly has no assurance of material aid should she bear a child, an eventuality which comes to pass in the second act where she is running out of money. Had she not gotten pregnant by Pinkerton, his desertion would not be so costly, but now she is burdened with a son. Notably she names him "Dolore" ("Sorrow"), planning to rename him "Goia" ("Joy") when his father returns.

Secondly, Butterfly willingly enters into the bond. Most of the bartered unions mentioned above are viewed as an evil which threatens the positive heroes but usually do not come to pass. In *Das Rheingold* Freia is reclaimed by her family, but not before provoking fatal violence between her captors: the giant Fasolt kills his brother Fafner to claim the gold for himself. Unable to pay off his loan, Figaro is obligated to marry Marcellina, but at the last minute he is discovered to be her long lost son, a most fortuitous and unlikely turn of events. In the case of the contests for women, there is the prospect that someone other than the prize's beloved will prevail and that she will be forced into an unhappy marriage. Fortunately, Walter von Stoltzing wins the singing competition and Eva in *Die Meistersinger* and Elisabeth is gratified to see her beloved Tannhäuser prevail at the Wartburg. Princess Turandot is vexed to see Prince Calaf correctly answer her riddles, but he soon solves her heart and the ending of Puccini's last opera is a happy one, as it is in *Fanciulla* where Minnie holds the winning cards. Suzanna and Figaro outwit Count Almaviva,

thus ending *Figaro* with their marriage. The major exception is Brünnhilde, who plots the murder of her erstwhile lover Siegfried, bringing about the "Twilight of the Gods.".

Female mate value

Butterfly is also a willing, even enthusiastic participant in her union. She repeatedly insists on being addressed as "Mrs. B. F. Pinkerton"[4]. We are told that the day prior to her wedding, Cio-Cio-San visited an American mission to convert to Christianity and thereby share Pinkerton's religion—at the cost of her family disowning her, thus further isolating her. She tries to learn American ways, albeit in a faulty manner. During the ceremony she bows down to kiss Pinkerton's hand, thinking this to be a common Western form of showing respect. When Sharpless visits her in the second act, she appears to mix American and Japanese customs with her polite but strange question, "Are your forefathers and ancestors all well?" (Puccini et al., 1987, 175) Despite her shrinking savings, she offers him American cigarettes. More seriously, she plights her troth to American culture. She debates the consul's assertion that she, due to desertion, is effectively divorced from Pinkerton. Butterfly maintains that in the United States it is more difficult for a man to dispose of his wife. Whereas in Japan, as she puts it, a husband merely has to order his wife to leave, she claims that in America he may be jailed for filing for divorce.

At fifteen and by most accounts beautiful, Butterfly represents a nearly ideal image of female reproductive value. Her alienated relatives claim that her beauty already is failing, but this seems more a case of sour grapes. Nevertheless, now past puberty, her biological clock already is ticking. Nevertheless she is healthy and has all of her childbearing years ahead of her. Pinkerton repeatedly expresses his passion for her. On the other hand, their union borders on pedophilia. Sharpless first guesses that she is ten, then twenty. When he hears the correct answer, fifteen, he remarks, "the age for games," in other words, she is still a child (Puccini et al., 1987, 99). Moreover, she has the diminutive stature of a child. Pinkerton sings to her as "child" and "little plaything" (Puccini et al., 1987, 97, 151).

Many of her qualities are conveyed by her strong, clear, and, as we shall see, tireless soprano singing. Generally speaking, higher voices are associated with youth. Most romantic leads are sopranos (and tenors), with mezzo-sopranos and altos usually representing older, often postmenopausal women. Furthermore, Cio-Cio-San's beauty attracts offers of marriage from Japanese men. Like Penelope, the archetypal faithful wife in Homer's *The Odyssey*, she steadfastly refuses all suitors. Rather than contract a wealthy marriage with a rich suitor like Prince Yamadori, who presses his suit in Act II, she prefers to suffer penury out of loyalty to her wayward American husband.

Another factor, less evident to modern and non-Japanese viewers, is Butterfly's social status. Although her family has fallen into poverty to the point that she briefly worked as a geisha—one source of her considerable grace—she has a servant, the ever-faithful Suzuki. It is with some pride that she cherishes the memory that her samurai father committed suicide upon command of the Mikado. Notably, the ritual sword is the one thing she denies Pinkerton when she displays her meager assets at their wedding. Later, faced with the likelihood of his desertion, she briefly considers returning to being a geisha, singing and dancing for men—what else is unspecified—but immediately prefers death to such a prospect. She knows her own value and respects herself, especially after their wedding.

Butterfly soon proves her reproductive capability by bearing Pinkerton a son. Indeed, it beggars genetic credulity that a blonde-hair, blue-eyed boy is born to a Japanese woman[5]. We should wonder why Puccini's team cheated probability in this respect; evidently they required stronger indicators that Dolore has a Western father. Butterfly thinks these features will endear Pinkerton to his son, obviously because they will increase his confidence in the lad's paternity. Trying to broker her in marriage again, Goro spreads doubt that Pinkerton is the father and points out the social disadvantages of being a bastard son. Nevertheless, Pinkerton comes to their house in the final scene to collect their son to raise him in America. Inasmuch as other characters function as foils to Butterfly's qualities, it is interesting to see how eager Kate Pinkerton is to adopt Butterfly's son; she promises the former geisha, "I shall care for him like a son" (Puccini et al., 1987, 241). This suggests that the American woman so far has been unable to bear children of her own.

Much of the mismatch of Butterfly and Pinkerton derives from the asymmetry of their commitment to their marriage. She makes every effort to show her devotion to him, sitting in wait for him each day of the three years he has been gone. As we have already seen, she gives up her family and her faith for him. When his ship is sighted in Nagasaki harbor, she spends the last of her dwindling resources on decorating their house, then putting on her wedding dress for his arrival. John DiGaetani cites her "complete commitment" to the man she thinks is her husband for life (DiGaetani, 2001, 123). He, meanwhile, sings "I can free myself every month" (Puccini et al., 1987, 79). Although it is possible that Pinkerton pays the rent on their house—the sympathetic Sharpless is a more likely source—he otherwise entirely neglects to see to her welfare. He makes no effort to contact or hear from her. Three years after his departure he only writes to her to inform her that he now has an American wife. Although he asks Sharpless to break the news gently, Pinkerton is afraid to face her himself. He only does so to meet her conditions for giving Dolore up for adoption.

It is interesting to note how *Butterfly*'s many creators fine-tuned a careful balance somewhere between true marriage (the lasting union of two people) and prostitution. For her part, Butterfly feels no shame at having been a geisha, although that role and inevitably, to some extent, her marriage to

Pinkerton were forced on her by her family falling into poverty. Notably, Puccini and his librettists quashed Belasco's notion that she expressly accepted Goro's offer for money (Belasco, 1935, 16). Besides Pinkerton's remarks regarding how such contracts can readily be annulled, there is no religious ceremony such as might strengthen the moral force on both parties to stay together. Rather, as in virtually every other opera where a marriage is depicted, a civil procedure takes place[6]. Nevertheless, the official registrar wishes them many descendants, as does the usually sanguine Goro. And her family is present; so, although such marriages with foreigners had been contracted in Nagasaki since 1630, the family is nevertheless emotionally invested (van Rij, 2001, 18). Butterfly asks them to bow to her groom. However, when they learn that Butterfly secretly converted to Christianity and renounced the cult of her ancestors, they disown her. It does not help that Pinkerton, who clearly wants to hurry on to later stages of their wedding night, insults them and ushers them on their way. The very indefiniteness of the situation in *Butterfly* helps to maintain narrative indecision and therefore tension.

While Cio-Cio-San's every thought is for her husband, he selfishly thinks only of himself. DiGaetani notes that his first question in the opera concerns the location of the marital bed (DiGaetani, 2001, 118). During the love duet he sings of "the fever of a sudden desire" (Puccini et al., 1987, 153)..Arthur Groos reacts to the "crassness" of the sailor's initial ambition to enjoy a multitude of women (Groos, 1994, 189). John Bell Young says he is rendered "unmistakably as a sociopath" (Young, 2008, 104). Iris J. Arnesen notes that he never tells Butterfly that he loves her, and this in a fifteen minute long love duet. (Arnesen, 2009, 139) On the other hand, the opera prospers partly because it fosters some hope for Pinkerton. He genuinely seems smitten with Butterfly during their duet. While the opera is replete with dramatic irony, nothing else but some affection on his part could motivate such an outpouring of sentiment. Since that is the last we see of him for more than an hour, the audience remains almost as much in the dark as she is. Questioned about his fidelity, Butterfly cites the fact that, contrary to Japanese practice, he had locks placed on their house; evidently this indicates he thought there was something there worth protecting. Although we hear his intentions when Sharpless reads the letter to her, hope is only abandoned when he brings Kate onto the stage after the Act II intermezzo. He concludes, "I am contemptible" (Puccini et al., 1987, 239). His cry of despair, "Butterfly, Butterfly!" at the final curtain is as much for himself as it is for her.

Butterfly's exposure

Could it be that mistreatment of women contributes to the continuing popularity of the most commonly performed operas? Susan McClary denounces opera as "an art form that demands the submission or death of the woman for the sake of narrative closure" (McClary 1988, xi). Little happens, for example, in *Butterfly* other than the heroine's marriage, desertion, and suicide, but its thin plot nevertheless suffices to pack opera houses, almost inevitably displacing works with more palatable plotlines. Love matches, female infidelity, and female suicide are the most common themes, greatly outnumbering motifs unrelated to gender. The death of an attractive young woman, usually a soprano, is the subject of many operas. Their prominence poses a reverse image to the patriarchal societies that produce them. In one seventh of these works, the heroine kills herself at the final curtain (Cooke, 2010, 79). Why do audiences prefer these operas?

Opera is designed in order to access the highly emotional reactions of the victims; this may require mistreatment in some cases. Catherine Clèment complains, "on the stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die" (Clèment, 1988, 5). Opera provides a uniquely intimate perspective on how people feel, especially in extreme psychological states. Vocal music can transcend words in gesturing, indeed, imparting hard to describe subjective experiences. Women, like the title character of Donizetti's *Lucia de Lammermoor*, dominate most "mad scenes." Indeed, Butterfly is only one of numerous operas during the "long nineteenth century" (from the French Revolution to World War I) that prominently featured an attractive and highly emotional woman singing on the edge of disaster. We need only cite the titles that bear their names and/or their gender: besides *Lucia* and *Butterfly*, there are *Carmen, Elektra, Norma, Salome, La traviata, Aida, Rusalka, Ariadne auf Naxos, Manon, Manon Lescaut, Die Walkürie, Fanciulla del West*—all repertory favorites. In the twentieth century they were followed by yet more lurid sisters in *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, The Makropulous Case*, and *Lulu*.

The century from *Lucia* (1835) to *Lady Macbeth* (1934) was the era of the prima donna, a period which gave unprecedented prominence to independent women—both the fictional characters and the real life women who were their singers Daniel Snowman says that opera "provided perhaps the most spectacular route of all to any [women] who wished to fly out of the traditional gilded cage of domesticated womanhood" (Snowman, 2009, 233). Clèment boasts that they became the "jewels… the ornament indispensable for every festival. No prima donna, no opera" (Clèment, 1988, 5). On the other hand, they do this largely by exploiting egregious gender and, indeed, sexist stereotypes. Snowman notes that in "many well-loved operas, the principal woman is killed off at the end in a kind of expatiation of sexual guilt" (Snowman, 2009, 235).

Butterfly certainly meets all of the qualifications for such a prima donna during her vigil. On stage for the entire first scene of the second act, more than fifty minutes long, she is exposed to an unprecedented extent. Whereas in earlier operas opportunities to sing were shared amongst the major performers more or less equally, here the female soloist risks exhaustion. Puccini was pressed to provide

more music for his lead tenor, whereupon he added Pinkerton's aria, "*Addio fiorito asil*", to the last scene. Her vigil bears comparison with that of Tristan during the long last act of *Tristan und Isolde*. There is no doubt that Puccini had Wagner in mind. The premiere of *Madama Butterfly* kept Milan's La Scala Theatre from staging *Tristan*--and this contributed to the scandalous reception for his new opera. Like Tristan, who waits for Isolde to come and heal his wound, Butterfly constantly peruses the harbor for sight of Pinkerton's ship. Often cited as the most moving passage in the opera, she imagines the joy of his return: "*Un bel dì*" ("One beautiful day"), which bears comparison with Tristan's delusion that Isolde has finally come to him. However, her vigil epitomizes her nearly consistent passivity. She neither seeks out Pinkerton nor tries to get in touch with him. Instead she meekly waits, when prior to her wedding she actively researched American culture. Only her final action is truly assertive, albeit also reflexive: she stabs herself to death.

Besides the extreme length and exposure of her role, Butterfly expresses a wide variety of emotions. Despite the sheer lyric beauty of her actions and singing, and the devotion she shows to her husband, Butterfly on separate occasions threatens to kill both Goro and Suzuki. These moments, no doubt, give air to the tension she vainly strives to repress, worried whether Pinkerton will ever return. A further example is her abrupt expulsion of Sharpless from her house when he presses his suggestion that she take another husband. She cries in despair at the prospect of losing her son, "They want to take everything from me!" (Puccini et al., 1987, 245) Nevertheless, when Kate approaches in contrition, Butterfly is magnanimous: "May you always be happy" (Puccini et al., 1987, 247). Finally there is the utter devastation that prompts her to take her life in a bloody, but honorable fashion[7].

Joseph Budden observes how Puccini took Belasco's "pathetic but ridiculous puppet" and developed her into "the apotheosis of the frail suffering heroine" (Budden, 2000, 50). The soprano who performs the role has to possess an enormous dramatic range. As DiGaetani argues, "the development of her character from the naïve girl to the trusting wife to the bitter woman becomes the core of the opera's dramatic development" (DiGaetani, 2001, 122). She is the most developed characterization in Puccini's operas.

Furthermore, it is a vulnerable creature who has to undergo all this trajectory. We have already noted her youth and puny stature. At the height of their love duet, Pinkerton sings, "To think that little plaything is my wife" (Puccini et al., 1987, 151). While there is some dispute amongst scholars regarding her independence and assertion, her evident naïveté plays a large role in her demise. Although her given name is Cio-Cio-San, Pinkerton calls her Butterfly, no doubt paying tribute her beauty and grace, but also alluding to her fragility and impermanence. At first she objects to this appellation, having heard that in the United States butterflies are caught and pinned. Similar thinking goes for her association with flowers: both are short-lived.

According to Jan van Rij, Japanese audiences receive her with some embarrassment; notably the first performances of the opera in Japan were abridged; especially those passages that conveyed racist stereotypes. But the core of the opera nevertheless was unsettling top them. As van Rij puts it, "To believe that a woman's love can become a force that will save her from her fate is a totally alien notion in Japan, and to think that this can be done on the basis of a prostitution contract with a foreigner is foolhardy" (van Rij, 2001, 149). The point of all this is clear: despite the efforts by the composer and the librettists to imbue the opera with local color, Butterfly is only superficially Japanese, much as Carmen is hardly a true Gypsy (Clèment, 1988, 49)[8]. *Madame Butterfly* is more an expression of Western illusions, indeed fantasies, than it is valid ethnography.

Conclusions

McClary and Clèment have a point: opera provides a venue for morally suspect fantasies we would normally repress, all at the expense of the women depicted, possibly of women in general. McClary surmises that music causes listeners to suspend their proper moral judgment (McClary, 1988, xiv). Snowman chimes in, saying that the "opera stage was one of the few public locations when normally repressed feelings could be extravagantly and legitimately displayed" (Snowman, 2009, 237).

What is demanded of Butterfly and many of her sisters is rarely, if ever, asked of men. Accepting McClary and Snowman's argument regarding the nullification of repression, we wonder what are the forces driving the sexist structures expressed in classic works such as *Butterfly*. For example, "paternal uncertainty" readily could be argued to be one of the sources for the constraint of women in patriarchal societies. Unable to trace the fatherhood of a woman's offspring with confidence, one option for male domination was to control their behavior with varying degrees of severity, especially with regard to relationships with other men. Notably, many of the prominent roles for prima donnas involve some element of sexual licentiousness, or at least disobedience of male authority. One manifestation this took was the *femme fatale*, a prominent figure especially during the era of the prima donna, including many of the operas we listed above. Threatening male control with the independent behavior of the women they depic,as Snowman observes, these works required "a cathartic sense of moral rectitude to prevail as the frail, pale sinner reaches her deeply romanticized end" (Snowman, 2009, 236). However, this does not explain why the female characters we have described are (mis)treated as items of trade. Here Bateman's Principle helps us to account for the peculiar objectivization, valuation, and consequently commoditization of women in opera.

Endnotes

[1] Long envisaged an American sailor as Butterfly's husband, but van Rij narrowed down the search for Pinkerton's prototype to one of the English merchant Thomas Glover's two brothers (Long, 1972; van Rij, 2001).

[2] André Messager set Loti's Madame Chrysanthème as an operetta by the same title (1893).

[3] There are some exceptions where males constitute a reproductive bottleneck, usually in those species where they provide most parental care, mostly birds and seahorses.

[4] There is, of course, a particularly American ring to Pinkerton's given names, Benjamin Franklin, much as he sails on the USS Abraham Lincoln.

[5] It also stretches credulity that Kate Pinkerton is able to sail to Japan with her husband on an American warship.

[6] Local censorship and church sanctions may well have constrained most composers from depicting religious ceremonies.

[7] Significantly Butterfly's suicide begins with Belasco's play. She is about to kill herself in Long's story, but Pinkerton's American wife finds her house empty; apparently Cio-Cio-San fled with her child (Long, 1972, 86). According to van Rij, the actual prototype, one Ko-Ko-San, survived her suicide attempt (van Rij, 2001, 118).

[8] Cf. Young, 2008, who details the many traditional Japanese melodies weaved into Puccini's score.

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