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Prévost's Manon Lescaut and Her Transition to the Operatic Stage

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Prévost's 1731 novel *L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* was an extremely controversial publication during its time. While the title expresses that it is a story concerning both Des Grieux and Manon, the latter is the character of interest for most readers. Many composers have fallen in love with this dangerous literary figure, and Manon's story has culminated in operas by Massenet, Puccini, Henze, and Auber. What is it about Manon that inspires composers to translate Prévost's written word to the operatic stage? Are these adaptations successful pieces of the operatic repertoire? Does Manon's seemingly fickle nature become a caricature when transferred to the libretto, or do artistic teams successfully interpret this *femme fatale* of the stage? A study of the infatuation artists have with Manon and their commitment to the integrity of Prévost's original Manon in their theatrical renditions of the character will shed light on these questions.

L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut is Prévost's best-known work and was offered to the public as an appendix to *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité* in 1731. Audiences of the time were horrified that it "portrayed 'people of standing' as acting unworthily".[1] The setting for the novel follows the death of Louis XIV, a time of corruption in government. *Manon Lescaut* was considered inferior to classical tragedies, and simply a seductive lie. Prévost's style of writing, however, was popular during the time. It is a narration within a narration that fuses two kinds of contemporary prose, the memoir-novel and the short story. Readers were tired of long

[1] Prévost, Abbé. The Story of the Chevalier Des Grieux and Manon Lescaut. Trans. Angela Scholar. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print, pg viii.

heroic poetry and turned towards true, or at least realist, stories. [2] True or not, the content was both scandalous and enticing to modern readers.

Prévost did not write *Manon Lescaut* with a particular woman in mind, though he met Lenki Eckhard a few months after finishing the novel. They fell passionately in love but, like Manon, she ruined him with extravagances. [3] Similarily to Des Grieux, Prévost was briefly a Benedictine abbé. His reason for joining the order was "the unhappy ending of an engagement *trop tendre* brought me to the grave. That is the name I have given the worthy order where I buried myself."[4] Prévost spent the rest of his life in exile after fleeing the abbey.

Manon Lescaut represents the classical conflict between reason and passion. Primarily told from the perspective of Des Grieux, the story survives due to M. de Renoncour's transcription of the tale. We meet both M. de Renoncour and Des Grieux at the start of the novel from Renoncour's point of view. Manon's tale, however well copied, is nevertheless the interpretation of Manon according to Des Grieux, who is in turn transcribed by Renoncour. There are inconsistencies in even Renoncour's explanation of the tragedy. In his forward to the reader, Renoncour notes that Des Grieux's misfortune becomes 'a terrible example of the power of the passions'. Thus, because he offers two differing opinions, it is up to the reader to either "succumb to the

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[2] Milnes, Rodney. "Manon." Oxford Music Online. 2007. Web. 13 Oct. 2010.

[3] Prévost, pg. ix.

[4] Kestner, Joseph. "Reign of Pleasure: In Manon, Massenet chronicled the sensuality and materialism of the Belle Epoque." Opera News Feb. 1987: 16. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. Web. 16 Oct. 2010.

charm of [the novel's] lucid and compelling eloquence" or one can "read [the novel] dispassionately, noting its contradictions and inconsistencies."[5]

The novel begins with Des Grieux and Manon's initial meeting. Des Grieux falls in love with the young woman who is about to be sent away to the convent, and together they flee from the M. de B (names of wealthy men were kept disclosed from readers to maintain the integrity of the men involved; though the story is fictional, Prévost maintained this tradition to add to the realism of the novel). Eventually, Des Grieux is tricked by M. de B in an attempt to have Manon for himself. Des Grieux is captured and taken home to his father, where he spends six months bemoaning Manon's fickleness and the first of three infidelities. Tiberge, the foil of Manon, and Des Grieux's best friend, encourages Des Grieux to enter seminary school at Saint-Sulpice. Des Grieux finally accepts his new life at seminary when Manon arrives and begs for his love. Des Grieux, unable to say no, abandons his current state and they run away again. Manon's brother, Lescaut, finds them and uses Manon as a means to making money. He suggests the matter to Des Grieux after they lose their only fortune in a fire, but Des Grieux takes up cheating at cards and joins the League of Industry to make money instead. Eventually they are robbed, and Manon abandons Des Grieux for M. de G. M. in order to make money. Des Grieux finds her again, and when M. de G. M. realizes he has been conned by the trio, he sends Manon and Des Grieux to Hôpital and Saint-Lazare, respectively. Des Grieux calls upon Tiberge to send letters to Lescaut, and eventually escapes Saint-Lazare by befriending the Father Superior and one night threatening him with a pistol in order to escape. Des Grieux befriends M. de T., a son of a president of the Hôpital, and

[5] Prévost, pp. ix-xi.

Marcel, Manon's jailkeeper. They free Manon and flee to Chaillot, where Lescaut is shot on the way. Des Grieux again calls upon his resources, Tiberge, his father, and M. de T., to start their life and to please Manon with luxuries.

Part II of the novel shows Des Grieux and Manon happily living in Chaillot. Originally excluded, Prévost inserts an instance in which Manon dupes an Italian Prince in order to show her love and devotion to Des Grieux, as well as her wit. This tranquility does not last long, however. The son of M. de G. M. soon takes interest in Manon and steals her away from Des Grieux, the final infidelity. In an attempt to steal her back, Des Grieux is caught and M. de G. M. junior sends them to Châtelet. Count Des Grieux arrives to free his son from Châtelet using his rank in society, but agrees with M. de G.M. to condemn Manon to America with the rest of the prostitutes. Des Grieux, frantic to keep Manon, leaves his father, gathers guardsmen, and again asks for money from Tiberge and M. de T. to follow Manon from Le Havre. He tries to fight her captors but is unsuccessful, and accepts her fate as his own. When the couple lands in New Orleans, all the prostitutes are distributed to the men by the Governor, but Des Grieux keeps Manon by saying they are married. They are able to start over and become reputable members of the colony. However, when they decide to marry to become official in the eyes of God, the Governor attempts to take Manon away from Des Grieux so that his nephew, Synnelet, can marry her instead. Des Grieux and Manon flee for the British colonies after Des Grieux presumably kills Synnelet, but they barely make it five miles from New Orleans before Manon is overcome with weakness. She dies and Des Grieux hopes to follow her in death, but is found by the colony members, who look for Synnelet's rival

after they find Synnelet wounded outside the colony. Tiberge arrives in New Orleans to bring Des Grieux back to France, where he resolves to live a more virtuous life.

The reader encounters two sides of Des Grieux; the narrator who bemoans his story to Renoncour, and the younger Des Grieux whose misfortune unfolds. Des Grieux constantly refers to fate, and asserts that the fault of the tragedy lies not in either him or Manon, but rather destiny. He assumes the position of a tragic hero, who attempts to do the right thing but inevitably walks the already-established path of destruction. The reader often encounters his input in the midst of the story, which serves as Des Grieux's attempts to justify the events that come to pass:

> "There is no question but that, given my affectionate and constant nature, I could have been happy with Manon my whole life long, if only she had been faithful to me. The more I came to know her, the more new and lovable qualities I discovered. Her mind and heart, her gentleness and beauty, these formed a chain so strong and so enchanting that would have thought it perfect happiness to remain for ever within its bounds. How cruel a reversal! What has brought me to despair could have been my felicity. I have been made the most wretched of men by that very constancy that should have earned me the happiest of fates and love's sweetest rewards."[6]

These interjections often occur after an infidelity, and usually to justify Manon's actions, though at the time Des Grieux did not know that Manon's motives were for love. After the first infidelity, Des Grieux spends six months contemplating Manon and his contradictory feelings towards her and her motives: "It was true that I no longer respected

[6] Prévost, pg. 18.

her: how could I have respected the most fickle, the most perfidious creature in the world? But her image, those enchanting features I carried deep in my heart, persisted there still."[7] Yet Des Grieux's love for her never wanes, even after entering the seminary. Eventually, however, his patience grows thin, and he finally begins to stand up for himself after the third and final infidelity. First, he addresses the young girl Manon sends him:

> "Go back to her; tell her from me to rejoice in her crime, and to rejoice in it, if she can, without remorse. Tell her I abandon her for ever, and that I renounce, at the same time, all other women too, who could never be as fair, but are doubtless as base and deceitful as she… Tell me then, have you consolations to offer one consumed by rage and despair, who intends to die by his own hand, after putting to death two traitors who do not deserve to live?"[8]

Next, he addresses Manon himself, the first and only time he is able to reproach her face to face for her actions, but succumbs again to his passion for her:

> "This is the third time, Manon – I have counted each one: there are things one cannot forget. You must decide this very moment what course you mean to take, for this cruelty is more than my sad heart can bear… It is clearer than ever you are nothing but a deceiving slut. At last I know your wretched character for what it is. Farewell, worthless creature, I continued rising to my feet; I would rather die a thousand deaths than have anything more to do with you. May Heaven punish me in turn, if I ever show the least

[7] Prévost, pg. 25.

[8] Prévost, pp. 97-98.

> regard for you again! Stay with your new lover, love him, detest me, forsake honour, renounce reason; it is all one to me; I no longer care… But I would have had to have lost every human feeling to harden my heart against so many charms. I was so little possessed of such cruel resolution that, finding myself carried all at once to the opposite extreme, I turned, or rather flung myself, without thinking what I was doing, towards her."[9]

Prévost's novel is primarily concerned with Des Grieux's journey and his efforts to reconcile religious and secular, right and wrong, and passion and reason. He summarizes this in his final plea to his father in Châtelet:

> "Love has made me too tender, too passionate, too faithful, and too ready, perhaps, to indulge the desires of a mistress who is all enchantment. These are my crimes. But is any of them so shameful as to bring you into dishonor?... I begged my father instead to excuse this frailty as the word of two violent passions I had been swayed by – vengeance and love."[10]

Des Grieux is the central figure and his progression is the main concern, though the interest of the novel goes to Manon. Though Des Grieux never discloses a hair color, eye color, height, or any distinguishing feature, the reader takes his opinion for truth when he describes her as "a girl with whom the whole world fell in love."[11] We learn very little of Manon's inner thoughts and motives, and any speculation of her motives are colored by Des Grieux's vision of her. Manon's inability to speak for herself adds to her

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[9] Prévost, pp. 101-102.

[10] Prévost, pp. 117-118.

[11] Prévost, pg. 91.

allure and mystery. It is clear, from Des Grieux's point of view, that Manon chooses these infidelities not to please her own taste for luxury, but rather to enable her love for Des Grieux to grow. "Fidelity is a foolish virtue, especially when times are hard, and when what really counts is the fidelity of the heart," [12] she tells Des Grieux, when he asks her what could possibly cause her to leave love for pleasure. After each infidelity, Manon confesses her love for Des Grieux and rationalizes her actions in favor of Des Grieux. Whether Manon really made herself available to these suitors to make life easier for her and Des Grieux is unclear to readers, as this could be what Des Grieux assumed Manon's words to mean in order to justify his faithfulness to her. Her manipulation is still visible in his words after the first infidelity:

> "She confessed, timidly, that her infidelity had given me every reason to hate her; but added that, if it was true that I had ever felt any tenderness for her, then it had been very hard of me to let two years go by without taking the trouble to enquire as to her fate; and it was still harder of me to see the state to which she was reduced in my presence, without saying a word to her. The turmoil in my soul, as I listened, cannot be expressed… I intend to die, she replied, if you will not give me back your heart, for I cannot live without it… She spoke so touchingly of her remorse, she promised with so many vows and protestations to be faithful, that she moved me beyond anything words can say."[13]

Again, we hear Manon's undertones through Des Grieux's reception of her words after the second infidelity:

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[12] Prévost, pg. xix.

[13] Prévost, pp. 31-32.

> "I swear, my dear Chevalier, that you alone are the idol of my heart, and that there is no one in the world I could love as I love you; but can you not see, my poor dear soul, that in the state we are reduced to, fidelity is a foolish virtue? Do you really think one can be truly loving when one is short of bread? Hunger would cause me to make some fatal error; I would one day breathe my last breath, believing it to be a sigh of love. I adore you, of that you may be sure. But leave the management of our fortune to me for a while. And woe betide anyone who gets caught in my net! It is my Chevalier I'm working for, to make him rich and happy. My brother will give you news of your Manon, and will tell you what tears she shed at having to leave you."[14]

And finally after the third infidelity, Manon pleads innocence to Des Grieux's grief when she exclaims, "I must indeed be guilty, she said sadly, since I am the cause of so much grief and anguish. But may Heaven punish me if I believed I was, or had any thought of being so!"[15] Regardless, Des Grieux makes it clear that Manon would have chosen the path she did regardless of her love for Des Grieux: "However faithful and however fond of me she was in times of prosperity, there was no counting on her when times were bad. She was too fond of pleasure and luxury to sacrifice them for me."[16] Their ideas of faithfulness are very different, as Manon exclaimed, "Love is mightier than wealth, mightier than riches and plenty, but it needs their support; and nothing causes the fastidious lover deeper despair than to see himself reduced, through their lack, to the vulgar concerns of baser souls."[17] To both Des Grieux and Manon, Manon is not a *femme*

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[14] Prévost, pp. 47-48.

[15] Prévost, pg. 102.

[16] Prévost, pg. 38.

[17] Prévost, pg. 77.

fatale, but rather a woman who loves luxury and uses her assets to benefit both people; Manon gets to live in luxury, and Des Grieux never really loses her because she is faithful in the heart as long as she is happy. Manon's intentions, when transferred to the stage, become something quite different.

Prévost's witty girl of common birth, streetwise and clever, became a seductress in Massenet's version of the novel. During the Belle Époque (1870-1910), France entered the Golden Age of Courtesans. Massenet used a story set in the past to describe current events. Interestingly, *manon* was slang in the Golden Age of Courtesans for a *fille de joie* (good-time girl), as Manon is called on the first page of Prévost's novel.[18] For Massenet, Manon became a courtesan of the Belle Époque, rather than a common mistress in the post Louis XIV era. Similarily, the Belle Époque was a period of havoc similar to Manon's original time.[19] Thus, Massenet fit Prévost's story into a modern setting that he felt called to represent in his compositions.

In terms of the plot, Meilhac's libretto remains the closest to Prévost's original. The characters of M. de Renoncour and Tiberge are omitted, and the three infidelities are reduced to one with Brétigny. Their downfall is accelerated by a jail sentence after Guillot accuses Des Grieux of cheating at cards. Lescaut, Manon's self-seeking brother in the novel, bribes the guardsmen to leave Manon with Des Grieux as her concerned cousin in Massenet's work. Most significantly, Manon dies in Le Havre, and does not make it across the sea before she meets her fate. The overall plot is understandably simplified, and the shift from Des Grieux's inner struggle to Manon's journey from ingénue to

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[18] Kestner.

[19] Kestner.

ruined woman suits the stage. The story becomes Manon's, and Des Grieux receives an underdeveloped, watered down voice. Manon's progress is easy to follow, as it changes with each act, and most significantly with each aria.

The Manon of Act I introduces herself with the charming '*Je suis encore tout étourdie'*. Here, Manon revels in the beauty surrounding her and switches moods and points of interest quickly. She narrates her feelings and surroundings, something Prévost's Manon is never allotted. In narrative style, Manon ends this declaration with "*Et voila l'histoire de Manon Lescaut*", claiming her right as reporter of her own story. In '*Voyons, Manon*', she solidifies her envy for those who live in luxury and resigns to style herself in the same way in order to achieve the same results. In Act II, we find a deceptive and regretful Manon. She tries her con-woman skills on Des Grieux when he is captured and sent home so she can take advantage of Brétigny's offers of wealth. The sentimental '*Adieu, notre petite table*' shows the first flicker of remorse in her new lifestyle, and here the audience learns that Manon does care for Des Grieux's well-being. Act III finds Manon in a full courtesan state. She sings her '*Je marches sur tous les chemins*' and the Gavotte with the same trills and brilliance of her new lifestyle, and Manon takes center stage from the other courtesans she originally envied in Act I. Finally, Act IV reveals a Manon full of sorrow and repentance. Manon lacks any showcase arias in this act, unlike the previous three. Thus, she loses her singing voice and then her life. Her voice, the vehicle for her progression to courtesan and eventual downfall, must be forfeited in order to achieve repentance.[20] With her last breath, Manon

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[20] Miller, Andrew. "From Literary Page to Operatic Stage: Manon's Tragic Voice of Her Own." French Review 81.4 (2008): 682-95. RILM Abstracts of Music Literature. Web. 16 Oct. 2010, pg. 684.

regains her position as narrator when she exclaims, "Et c'est l'histoire de Manon Lescaut!"[21]

Puccini's Manon came on the heels of Massenet's greatest work. He went through six librettists before reaching a satisfactory adaptation of the novel.[22] The premieres came less than ten years apart. When Ricordi questioned the wisdom of writing another *Manon* so soon, Puccini said that "a woman such as Manon can have two lovers."[23]

Puccini's plot is more simplified than that of Meilhac and Massenet and suffers significant gaps between acts. Des Grieux meets Manon and flees with her in Act I, but then Act II transfers the audience to a Manon of extravagance in Geronte's mansion. Des Grieux comes to claim her, but due to Manon's love for her possessions, they are delayed in their flight from Geronte's men. Des Grieux recounts his attempts to free Manon in the Intermezzo that separates Acts II and III. The roll call of condemned women solidifies Act III, with a nod towards Verdi as "Violetta" is called among the prostitutes. Des Grieux begs the captain to allow him to work on the boat to follow Manon to Louisiana. Act IV finds the lovers in the desolate swamps of Louisiana, where Manon dies in Des Grieux's arms after a final passionate aria.

Many critics consider Act IV a failure. Manon's monologue was reworked many times, heavily cut, and omitted from the score, and finally reinserted years later. Puccini

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[21] Josephs, Herbert. "Manon Lescaut: Literary Shadow and Operatic Form." Ars Lyrica 9 (1998): 33-40. International Index to Music Periodicals. Web. 13 Oct. 2010, pg. 36.

[22] Lalli, Richard. "The Manon Variations." Opera News Mar. 2006: 38. International Index to Music Periodicals. Web. 13 Oct. 2010.

[23] Lalli.

leaves the music solely responsible for the progression of the story to the end.[24] Additionally, Puccini's Manon dies without the repentance of Prévost's or Massenet's Manon. In the novel, Manon journeys from self-absorption to concern for Des Grieux, best displayed in her final moments. Puccini's Manon never reaches this level as she cries out not because of lost love, but because "*No voglio morir*!" (I don't want to die!). The audience, if unfamiliar with the other Manon variations, will barely notice this lack of repentance, as Puccini's version does not visit the moments in which Manon and Des Grieux happily live together in Paris, risk their lives for one another, and spend their days in New Orleans as renewed people who contribute positively to their community.[25] Luckily, Manon's journey is easy to follow in Puccini's work, as her current state always reflects her surroundings (the ecstasy of Act I, the extravagance of Act II, the condemnation of Act III, the barrenness of Act IV). As a stand alone piece, Puccini's Manon has a different, yet easy to follow progress. However, her spiritual growth from Prévost's original is underdeveloped.

Puccini does leave room, however, for Des Grieux to speak of his own journey. Compared to Massenet's Des Grieux, Puccini allots more time for Des Grieux to lament his own situation and contemplate his decisions aloud for the audience to hear. This represents Prévost's hero much more than Massenet's interpretation. In addition to more arias, Des Grieux admits intimate feelings to the audience such as his feelings of degradation of self for Manon: "*Fango nel fango io sono e turpe eroe da bisca m'insozzo,*

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[24] Campana, Alessandra. "Look and Spectatorship in *Manon Lescaut*." Opera Quarterly 24.1-2 (2009): 4-26. Oxford Journals. Web. 13 Oct. 2010, pg. 10.

[25] Rutherford, Susan. ""Non Voglio Morir": Manon's Death." Opera Quarterly 24.1-2 (2008): 36- 50. Oxford Journals. Web. 13 Oct. 2010, pg. 37.

mi vendo… L'onta più vile m'avvichina a te!" ("I, a mud in the mud, ugly and polluted of gaming, sell myself… shame and sorrow bring me close to you!")[26] Des Grieux assumes an equal position to Manon in Puccini's version, versus his secondary status in Massenet's version.

Essentially, neither composer was able to preserve the integrity of Prévost's novel by effectively reproducing it for the stage. Each took their creative liberties to create a Manon that suited their situation, whether the prominent French composer of the Belle Époque or young Italian heir to Verdi. Nevertheless, Massenet comes closest to Prévost's original plot, while Puccini maintains Des Grieux's role as equal to Manon in progress and downfall. As stand alone pieces of art, both maintain their place as beloved pieces of the operatic repertoire for their musical brilliance, theatrical suspense and drama, and timeless characters who are interesting to audiences across the centuries.

[26] Puccini, Giacomo. *Manon Lescaut*. New York: Kalmus, 1970, pp. 200-201.

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