

“I only wish I could draw it as fine as it was”: the Romanticization of Baby Doe and Violetta Valéry

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Abstract

The courtesan has been a subject of fascination for thousands of years. Even today, the courtesan is still portrayed in movies like *Pretty Woman* and *Moulin Rouge*. The most famous operatic courtesan is Violetta Valéry from Verdi's *La Traviata*. Operatic standard *La Traviata*, composed in 1853, has a connection to a 20th century American opera heroine, Baby Doe, found in Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

A musical analysis of both *La Traviata* and *The Ballad of Baby Doe* shows that:

1. Both protagonists share similarities in the harmonic structure, as shown in their arias and confrontations scenes.
2. Both characters were inspired by historical figures – Marie Duplessis and Elizabeth “Baby” Doe Tabor inspired the characters Violetta Valéry and Baby Doe. These women have been changed in their operatic portrayals.
3. These portrayals fit the role of the “Romantic courtesan,” a 19th century literary idea which presents a courtesan with redeeming qualities.



Violetta and Alfredo's love theme in Violetta's Act I aria, “E strano...ah fors' è lui...sempre libera”



Miniature of Marie Duplessis

Musical Similarities

Compared arias and confrontation scenes

- Traditional 19th century harmonic progression: tonality with additional notes for color
- Parallel motion of keys/key changes
- Both characters are presented in three note figures in important dramatic points of the operas
 - Shown in time signatures
 - Notes grouped in patterns of three within phrases



Beginning of “Willow Song,” Baby Doe's introductory aria in Act I

Elizabeth Doe Tabor

Elizabeth Doe Tabor was born Elizabeth Bonduel McCourt in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1854. Her parents always emphasized her beauty. She married Harvey Doe on June 27, 1877 and then the two moved to Central City, Colorado, where he tried his hand at mining. Because her husband could not make a living in mining, Elizabeth wore men's overalls and worked next to him in the mines; that was when her moniker of “Baby” was created. In Colorado her life greatly changed: after divorcing her husband, she then moved to Leadville, Colorado, where she met and eventually married Horace Tabor. Elizabeth died an impoverished old woman in a shack on the grounds of the Matchless Mine.



Photograph of Elizabeth Doe Tabor

Marie Duplessis

Marie Duplessis was born as Alphonsine Plessis in 1824 near Lower Normandy. After her mother died, she was placed in an apprenticeship to a blanchisseuse (laundress) and eventually went to live with some of her mother's relatives in Paris. It was in Paris that she took charge of her own destiny, reinvented herself by changing her name, and became a celebrated courtesan. Alphonsine's life inspired the novel *La dame aux camélias*, written by Alexandre Dumas. Dumas had a love affair with Alphonsine for a year, only breaking it off because he could not bear the idea of her taking other lovers. Alphonsine died of consumption at the age of 23, remaining eternally in the flower of her youth.



Baby Doe's Act II confrontation with Augusta Tabor



Violetta's confrontation with Germont in Act II



1935 portrait of Baby Doe

Application

For this project, I:

- Analyzed the music of *La Traviata* and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*
- Selected three sections of the operas to compare:
 1. First entrances of the characters.
 2. First arias of the characters
 3. Confrontation scenes in the operas
- Compiled biographical information of Marie Duplessis and Elizabeth Doe Tabor
- Compared the portrayals of Marie Duplessis and Elizabeth Doe Tabor as Violetta Valéry and Baby Doe in *La Traviata* and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*
- Compared these portrayals with traits of the Romantic courtesan
 - Operas portray the characters in a sympathetic light
 - Companion to men, have redeeming qualities

Traits of the Romantic Courtesan, or “Hooker with a heart of gold”

- Beauty
- Audacity
- Self-confidence
- Expensive taste
- Lightheartedness
- Suffers a tragic ending

Romanticization

- Both Elizabeth Doe Tabor and Marie Duplessis were pious
 - Baby Doe has a firm moral compass, shown in Act I's “Dearest Mama.” Baby Doe does not want to pursue Horace because he is married.
 - Violetta is portrayed as virtuous in Act III's “Addio del passato.” She left Alfredo, whom she loves, for his family's honor.
- Baby Doe lacks the independence of Elizabeth Doe Tabor, but is shrewd and cunning in the opera.
- Violetta's death of consumption is portrayed as beautiful and painless, and ends on a high Bb.



A painting of Marie Duplessis at the theatre

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