

WOMEN IN OPERA? A REVOLUTIONARY ADDITION:  
A LOOK INTO THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  
[1789-1799] REVOLUTIONIZED WOMEN'S ROLE IN OPERA

by

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## ABSTRACT

This research document partially presents the extent to which the French Revolution of 1789-1799 impacted opera, with particular emphasis on women's role in the art form. Chapter 1 concentrates on operatic history to provide readers with context to the art medium. This chapter also presents ways in which the art form changed because of the shift in societal dynamics, through the lenses of class and religion, with the loss of the monarchy and the fall of the Castrati. Chapter 2 focuses on my case study of the Beaumarchais Trilogy. The plays included in this trilogy are *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1778), *Le Barbier de Séville* (1773), and *La Mère Coupable* (1791). While all these plays are one part of the same story, only *Le Mariage de Figaro* and *Le Barbier de Séville* were adapted into late 18th, early 19th-century operas, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Mozart, 1786) and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (Rossini, 1813), which is why my case study will exclude *La Mère Coupable* (Milhaud, 1965). The case study will focus on the controversy surrounding Beaumarchais's plays, how the operas differ from Beaumarchais's original plays, and finally, how the operas eased the controversial topics. Finally, the Conclusion will consider how this research is relevant to the art form today by discussing the revolution's long-term effects on how operas present women, how the operatic adaptations of this trilogy shaped the way women's roles would be written until the late 20th century and highlight the areas that need further research to equalize opera for women.

## **1 Introduction**

This thesis examines the extent to which the social and musical changes ensued by the French Revolution (1789-1799) changed opera, specifically exploring women's roles within the medium. While the Revolution created a more class-equal society in France, which would later change the majority of Europe, it forced French women back into a domestic role. The Revolution reinforced sexist ideologies to French society through the revolutionaries, which then sent the nation into a social regression. As a result of this social regression, women were forced back into the strictly domestic life that they had briefly ventured outside of during the decades leading up to the Revolution as seen in with the development of the French Salons. Women were no longer permitted to participate in the public sphere, meaning they could not engage in politics or the performing arts like opera. This social regression for women requires a further discussion into the causes of the Revolution and the effects of Marie-Antoinette's reign; however, this discussion is out of the scope of my research.

This paper explores two areas in further detail. First, the effects of the French Revolution on the Castrati. Next, the changes between the pre-revolutionary texts of Pierre de Beaumarchais's Figaro Trilogy and their operatic adaptations by Mozart and Rossini. The information and research I present in this document is only a surface level analysis of two highly complicated areas of study that encapsulate many moving parts. In the Conclusion, I highlight areas in this document that need further study to better understand how the Revolution of 1789-1799 affected women in opera. Additionally, for this research, "women" is defined as soprano, alto, and contralto voice types. The specific operas that



will be examined throughout this paper are Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1813) and Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786). I chose this operatic duo because they come from the same Trilogy <sup>1</sup> by Pierre de Beaumarchais and were adapted into <sup>2</sup> Italian operas.

During the Revolution, most European countries, excluding France and England, did not have a centralized government, meaning their societies were fragile and continually undergoing changes. As a result of the Revolution, for the first time in 900 years, France was left without a monarchical system or the Catholic Church's power. Due to this sudden loss of leadership, French society changed rapidly. Furthermore, surrounding European nations were influenced by the chaos unfolding in France. Some of the effects of the Revolution on these unstable countries, specifically Italy, will be elaborated on in the section of the Castrati.

With the abolition of the original French monarchy in 1792 with the execution of King Louis XVI, itself and other institutions like the Catholic Church lost control of French society; the power of stable institutions would not be restored until Napoléon Bonaparte's reign in 1815. With the loss of these institutions that systemically used their influence to keep women in a subordinate position to men, French society went through many changes as they tried to determine who they were without an authoritarian government while processing their newfound sexist ideologies. With use of the Castrati also

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<sup>1</sup> The trilogy was a duo at this time because Beaumarchais would not write *La mère coupable* until 1792 while the Revolution was well on its way. It was also not as successful as the predecessors because of its somber tone and unclear plot

<sup>2</sup> Italian in only language. Mozart followed a German style of composing and was supported in this endeavor by the Austrian Imperial Court

came to an end due to the social changes ensued by the Revolution. For this reason, there was a demand for opera singers who could replace the Castrati meaning opera directors had to begin hiring women.

These changes opened a door for women in the operatic world that was previously unopened. Women have been subjected to sexist outbursts and institutionalized sexism in every country, institution, and industry since the dawn of humanity. This sexism also infiltrates the operatic world, collectively hurting women as people and artists. By examining the fall of the Castrati and the operatic adaptations of the Beaumarchais Trilogy, this thesis reflects on the changes caused by the French Revolution that affected women's roles in opera both on stage and in the making of the art. Through this document, I wish to present the progress that has been made regarding women's position in the industry, and how much progress still needs to be made to address the opera's sexist quality.

## **2 WOMEN+OPERA: A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP**

### **2.1 A Brief History of Opera**

Opera is simply defined as the perfect blend of straight theatre with classical music. Opera developed from the 17th-century European citizens' want for a form of stage entertainment that combined complex varying art forms which presented everyday life experiences; though this representation of ordinary life is often exaggerated and artificial in opera. The predecessors of opera were pastoral dramas and madrigals which all include a strong association between the daily societal life of anyone not in the aristocracy with overarching political and religious elements. Opera, like pastoral dramas and madrigals, combines written text set to music; however, operatic composers took this combination one step further to add a previously missing layer: dramatic flair.

In practice, this dramatic flair looks like composers writing for more prominent, more elaborate ensembles, increasing the types of instruments being used and redefining traditional compositional rules. For librettists, this meant ensuring their story included the essentials for Aristotelian literary drama: theme, plot, characters, dialogue, setting, performance, and only when discussing opera, music. Up until opera's creation, other art forms implemented only a few of these elements into their works. For example, the madrigal had music, theme, and performance. However, the characters, dialogue, setting, and plot were not fully developed. Similarly, the pastoral drama had some fully developed elements and others that were underdeveloped. With the development of opera came the increased incorporation of drama in music, and it was the first art form to incorporate all these elements into one piece of music.

Jacopo Peri, a Rome-born composer, flourished as an artist in Florence, the 16th-century hub for artists. Peri had an affluent background which allowed him the financial liberty to invest in his art and the opportunity to relocate to Florence. Peri believed Florence would offer him more significant support than Rome. Additionally, Peri was an official employee for the Medici Court, where he witnessed scandal after scandal that perfectly illustrated the tension that exists in the relationships between love, religion, and politics (Porter and Carter). Peri felt that the existing musical dramas were out of touch, or at least not as entertaining, as the reality he was experiencing. In being forced to contemplate life and its vicissitudes through his time in the Medici Court, Peri was encouraged to write the operas *Euridice* and *Orfeo*.

Though a woman initially and typically performed Euridice's title role, the other roles currently listed as soprano roles (i.e., Dafne and Persefone) were originally cast with male singers. The messenger Dafne is listed today as a female soprano role; however, it was premiered by "boy soprano, Jacopo Giusti, from Lucca" (Porter and Carter). For this opera, Peri drew upon the Greek mythological story of Orpheus going to the underworld. While Greek mythology includes an overwhelming number of stories about women compared to men, as is evident in the stories about Zeus cheating on Hera with many other women (i.e., one man to a plethora of women), the opera *Euridice* is not really about her.

Instead, it is about her husband's perilous journey to Hades to save her soul. The title itself is misleading because the most prominent character in the opera is Orpheus, who

was premiered by Peri himself (Brown). Furthermore, in the articles used to find support for this section, there is no mention of female singers or women in general. The only musicians referenced are men like Perri, Caccini, Giusti, Rinuccini, and there is no reliable record of who first sang the role of Eurydice. There is a claim on Wikipedia that Vittoria Archelei, a friend of the Caccini daughters and employee of the Medici court, premiered the title role as she was a well-known soprano of Florence; however, there is no substantial evidence for this claim.

The exclusion of women's participation throughout the discussion of Peri's *Euridice* relies on two essential assumptions, should the exclusion be considered purposeful. The first is that female singers existed even though they were not frequently seen in the professional music scene. This assumption will be defended in a later section titled "A Brief Introduction to the Castrati's Effect on Women." Catherine Clément defends this point in her book by saying, "opera is not forbidden to women...Women are its jewels, you say, the ornament indispensable for every opera. No prima donna, no opera" (Clément). The second assumption is that women could sing the time's compositions, or more generally, could sing the same operatic repertoire as men. For this paper, this assumption will be held valid and is defended by the fact that the first opera created included a role initially and intentionally written for a female singer. It then seems plausible that the only reason women were excluded from any accreditation for the creation of this opera is that the men in charge of it, such as Peri, Caccini, and Rinuccini, chose not to mention it.

One explanation for why these men purposefully failed to credit the women involved with their production is the fear they would lose support if they did. Traditionally, “dramatic poets treated their male and female characters differently” (Harness) because of the external pressure to do so. Part of the reasoning is that the locations of opera performances were mainly “public venue(s) from which young Florentine women were discouraged” (Harness). If composers who were all men at the time, wanted their works performed, they had to abide by the rules of the city. Additionally, opera is an expensive medium, and composers and librettists are often subject to the will of whoever is funding them. For centuries, institutions like the Vatican and the French monarchy were patrons of the arts. In regards to the Vatican, ““for centuries, popes sponsored the work of artists such as Michelangelo, Raffaello or Bernini, who went on to create some of their masterpieces within the very walls of the Vatican” (Speciale). They were also known for not being adamant defenders of women’s rights for quite some time. There is no doubt that these institution’s financial grip on the artistic community influenced the way these men chose or failed to credit the women for their work.

Classical music critics like Catherine Clément and Susan McClary have written many works attempting to give more credit to the women who were part of opera’s creation. However, we have yet to collectively change the narrative of how we perceive women’s role in opera. Clément states that opera fails to progress and successfully correct our past errors because we do not see opera as inherently sexist. She argues that opera itself, in its most intrinsic form, intentionally “makes you forget the words you sing,” so we often do not realize what is occurring in the plot unless we are actively listening

(Clément). The beautiful music often diminishes the text that is sung, especially if it is in a foreign language for most of the audience.

If we fail to recognize how opera in its musical design masks the “homicidal misogyny” that is often presented in a “disguised or distorted form,” we will never have an honest discussion about opera’s origin since we cannot even see opera as problematic (Clément). In her book *Opera: Or the undoing of women*, Clément says that for operatic companies, the “ideal operatic audience of the future will be disabused of opera's ideological bias, yet still be able to respond to its genuine beauties” (Clément). However, it is unclear to both Clément and operatic critics whether this ideal future comes from intentionally correcting our wrongs or by simply continuing to ignore them.

Being the first item in any category sets a precedent for all subsequent things to either imitate or break. Peri’s *Euridice* was the first opera that has survived to this day. Therefore, this opera has influenced every other opera that was produced after that. Peri, Caccini, and Rinuccini choosing to tell the story of Orpheus while naming the opera after Euridice set a precedent for all future female characters in operas. This precedent is that women only serve as foil characters to the male characters despite how well-known or historically/religiously/mythologically significant these characters are. Creators of opera making women an accessory to men rather than an equal had shaped how operatic dramas were written through the late 20th century before an external societal push to change our narrative.

## **2.2 A Survey of Existing Literature Discussing Women in Opera**

In this section, I will preface my argument by providing previous analyses of women's roles in opera done by other women. The operatic world endured many changes affecting women's parts in the industry due to the societal and political changes of the 1960s-late 1970s. For example, women across Europe and North America received the right to vote, to own property, and to open a bank account in their name. Two critics of opera's lack of acceptance of female equality in the workplace are Catherine Clément and Kathleen Kelly. Catherine Clément is a French philosopher, writer, feminist, and literary critic who published a critique during the late 20th century about opera as an art form. Clément authored her book *Opera: Or the Undoing of Women* in 1979, criticizing the medium for its treatment of women despite female singers an essential part of the medium. What makes Clément's criticism so intriguing, especially to those of us in the industry, is that she criticized opera from an outside perspective. She is not an opera singer, nor is she a musician of any form, "Clément identifies herself as a literary critic rather than a musicologist, for the literary community gives her institutional grounding necessary for the undertaking of this project" (Clément). Her disapproval of opera can, therefore, be studied through the lens of French philosophy.

In her book, Clément theorizes that while there is much need to change the operatic industry regarding how women are treated (i.e., sexual harassment allegations, equal pay, equal audition standards), the most daunting issue is the literature itself. The art we choose to repeatedly present to the world is riddled with implicit and explicit sexism, continuing to taint opera's potential beauty (Clément). Throughout her book, Clément



questions why opera, in direct comparison to other forms of classical music and staged entertainment, seems to have the most challenging time removing itself from primarily sexist narratives that portray women as “bitches,” the damsels-in-distress, or old-maids (Clément). There are two significant criticisms Clément presents. The first is the evident exploitation of female singers for their voices to fulfill the roles the operas being produced need without these women receiving space for their voices to be heard as equal members in the industry, “and when the curtain closes to let the singers rake the last bow, there are the women kneeling in a curtsy...and there, beside them, the producer, the conductor, the set designer. Occasionally, a... But you wouldn’t know how to say it” (Clément).

The second major criticism is more extensive to unpack as it relates to opera’s origin and writing itself. Clément states, “Opera concerns women. No, there is no feminist version; no, there is no liberation. Quite the contrary: they suffer, they cry, they die” (Clément). In this, Clément also discusses the role of the spectator, “You are there to demonstrate, with a splendor that is done for, the woman who is in front of the men’s mirror” (Clément). The top ten operas performed globally in 2019 were all written before the 20th century (Kelly and Cresswell). It is then often easier to excuse the blatant sexism in these stories compared to something written in the 21st century because we know they were written in a different time. However, as Clément states, we have then collectively refused to progress as a musical community by creating new works that do not portray women in this light. Opera sustains its “timeless charm,” almost exclusively, from pro-

ducing operas from 200+ years ago without significant attempts to reconfigure sexist narratives.

In some instances, however, such is the case in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), the sexist narrative was not a part of the original script but added in the final operatic production to better fit the society they were being performed for. The plays by Beaumarchais present proto-feminist ideas through the characters of Marcellina, Rosina, and Susanna. This inclusion of proto-feminist sentiments by Beaumarchais was revolutionary for his time. However, this narrative was removed by da Ponte before the opera was allowed on stage.

The top 10 operas performed world-wide in 2019 were:

*La Traviata* (Verdi, 1853)

*Carmen* (Bizet, 1875)

*La Bohème* (Puccini, 1895)

*Don Giovanni* (Mozart, 1787)

*Rigoletto* (Verdi, 1851)

***Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (Rossini, 1812)**

*Die Zauberflöte* (Mozart, 1791)

*Madama Butterfly* (Puccini, 1904)

***Le Nozze di Figaro* (Mozart, 1786)**

*Tosca* (Puccini, 1899)

In their study, Kathleen Kelly and Jennifer Cresswell scrutinized these operas to determine how women were represented in each through the lenses of assault, harassment, trafficking, and exploitation:

Top 10 Opera by Theme

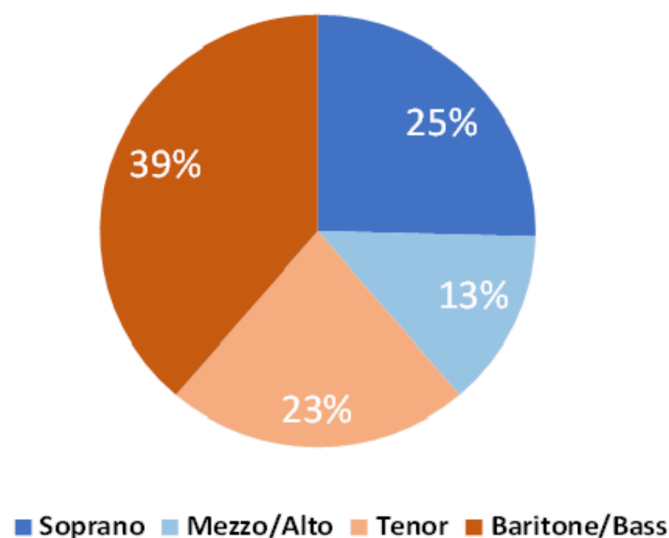
Key Theme	La Traviata	Carmen	La Bohème	Don Giovanni	Rigoletto	Il barbiere di Siviglia	Die Zauberflöte	Madama Butterfly	Le nozze di Figaro	Tosca
Human trafficking	✗							✗		
Sex demanded as payment for something else				✗					✗	✗
Rape or attempted rape/assault, kidnapping		✗		✗	✗		✗			✗
Characters experiencing lower status due to race		✗					✗	✗		
Characters experiencing lower status due to disability					✗					
Depiction of rigid class system	✗	✗		✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	
Attempted sequestering of woman in house to control sexual activity					✗	✗	✗			
Secret Pregnancy								✗	✗	
Physical violence against women	✗	✗		✗	✗		✗	✗		✗
Suicide								✗		✗

As is evident in the graph above, there is only one opera out of the top ten (Puccini's *La Bohème*) that does not in some way depict a form of sexual harassment, abuse, violence, or coercion (Kelly). Furthermore, “seven of the top ten operas depict violence against women, and half depict attempted rape or kidnapping of a woman” (Kelly). Something not included in the graph is the mention of rape and assault in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786). The Count, the embodiment of the aristocratic class that viewed everyone below them as property, explicitly states that he will “deflower” Susanna before Figaro, her fiancé, can. This right to a woman's virginity in engagements is called “le droit de cuissage” in French, and it is rooted in feudalism ideas that partially incited the Revolution (1789-1799). This reference of meditated assault and the domination of an-

other man's property is used to reflect on the nature of Figaro's rebellion in both operas and why he is so adamant in his dislike of the Count.

A final problem regarding women's treatment in the operas companies continually produce is in the role distribution. When the top ten operas were written, composers were more willing to create roles for men. This will be revisited in the section on the Castrati. Despite the inequality in role distribution, potential female singers dominate the education in operatic performance 61% to 39%; in auditions, women dominate 62% to 38% (Finkelstein et al.). Even though more women train and audition for an operatic career, there are more principal roles for men. For principal roles in the top ten operas, 62% are for tenors and basses, while only 38% are for sopranos and mezzos. Again, this reflects the way operatic literature has historically been written to make most roles only for male voices.

**Principal Roles of Top 25 Operas by Voice Type/Gender**



### **2.3 A Brief Introduction to the Castrati's Effect on Women**

Women did not play a role in opera's creation nor foundation because companies, and society, prohibited them from the art form as both a musician and as a member of the creative team (director, technicians, and designers). It was not until the fall of the employment of the Castrati that women even had a chance to be active opera participants because without being able to use Castrati singers, opera directors needed singers who could sing the repertoire for higher voices. A castrato is a person (and a voice type) who has been castrated as a young boy before the age of puberty. Simply put, castration, or orchiectomy, is removing a man's testicles, so the boy's larynx never drops in puberty, so the voice never matures. Castration was used to make "male sopranos" because by removing a man's testicles, his body could no longer produce regular amounts of testosterone.

The use of Castrati grew so popular throughout Europe that in 1589, "a Papal bull was even passed ordering that the young boys and falsetto singers of the choir of St Peter's in Rome be replaced by castrati." (Davis). Charles Burney (1726-1814) observed that in the 1770s, around 4,000 boys per year were castrated to make a musical castrato (Tråvén). As castration left these boys physically emasculated in an era where one's sex determined their ranking in society, the Castrati were often ostracized from their community as they could not get married (Tråvén). The actual operation of castration was illegal in Italy (the location where it was performed). It was "banned under canon law and punishable by ex-communication" from the Holy Catholic Church (Tråvén). However, this ban was not taken seriously even by the Catholic Church who hired many of the Castrati.

Shortly after the advent of the French Revolution in 1789, surrounding countries became motivated to unify themselves under more decisive leadership due to the fall of France's absolute monarchy in 1791. Though they were not unified until 1861, Italy's factions made valiant efforts to solidify themselves to not meet the same fate as King Louis XVI (executed 1792) and Marie-Antoinette (executed 1793). As Italy became the center of Romantic music throughout the 19th century with the rise of composers like Rossini, Verdi, and Puccini, it became their responsibility to adapt to the social changes ensued by the Revolution that affected the European public's view on the use of castration unrelated to punishment. In 1806, the Holy Roman Empire was removed by the last Italian emperor Francis II. What once acted as the unifying force and standard moral compass for the Italian people (the Catholic Church) no longer had the power to enforce its beliefs as it had since 300 B.C.

The loss of the Vatican's power resulted in persisting chaos throughout the nation as Italian citizens lost their traditional moral compass while being heavily influenced by the ideals of the revolution occurring in France; Italian citizens would have to decide for themselves what was right or wrong. The Pope's temporal power<sup>3</sup> lasted for about 900 years; however, the effects of the Revolution were too strong for the Church. Furthermore, France conquered Italy's papal states in 1791, and the Catholic Church would not regain substantial power until 1929. The efforts of the Italian campaigns introduced to the gen-

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<sup>3</sup> Temporal power is the power of a bishop or clergyman, specifically the Pope, regarding societal issues

eral Italian society modern ideas like a representative government as seen in England and France.

After the long Unification process, castration became illegal in Italy because it was mutilation for the sake of art, and Italy was starting to receive significant amounts of backlash for it since it was a practice rooted in unequal treatment of lower-class individuals. Unfortunately, before the churches legitimately instituted a ban on castration, opera companies and the rest of society tolerated it because, to them, altering someone's body part was a more viable option than allowing women on stage. It was the misogyny of European society towards women [that] expressed itself in the mutilation of 1000s of small boys to fill the void" (Chang).

In 1878, Pope Leo XIII made it illegal for the Church to hire castrati for their church choirs. Without the Church's support of the Castrati by hiring them, there was little advantage to sell castrated boys. Castration was officially banned in 1903 when Italy instated a legitimate government. However, women still had no place in public performance even in the late 18th-century, "when Pius X declared 'Whenever it is desirable to employ the high voices of sopranos and contraltos, these parts must be taken by boys, according to the most ancient usage of the Church.'" (Davis). It is unclear exactly where this fear of women on stage came from. However, in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 14:34-35), St. Paul said, "Let your women keep silent in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also says the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husband at home: for

it is a shame for a woman to speak in the Church.'" (Iwamoto). St. Paul's words acted as religious support "to forbid women to sing in the Church" (Iwamoto).

Even during the tumultuous time during the Italian Unification Process, the theatre-going elite used opera to escape from all that was happening during the Risorgimento and used theatre as an escape "for a life dreamt but not lived" (Sadie). Without the presence of a strong government or the Catholic Church, the theatre became a "shared imaginary world of feelings and modes of conduct, and of exemplary ideals (not however to be acted upon)" (Sadie). Furthermore, during the Risorgimento, "*opera lirica* had now become the theatrical locus of a desire for cultural modernity" as the Italians saw in France and England (Sadie). In the hopes of making Italian opera more modern, the use of the Castrati was seen as something too rooted in practice; this is another reason Italian composers of the Romantic era wrote them out of their operas and incorporated women instead.

Since the birth of opera, Castrati were incorporated into opera to play men and women because even the thought of having a woman herself plays the role of a sensual character on stage was deemed inappropriate, and most of the female characters written were "dishonourable." However, the gender of a castrato's character was often masked throughout the opera. This masking of gender was often confusing for the audience, but it served as a prominent example of sexual and gender ambiguity of the 18th century. This ambiguity was influenced partially by the prevailing gender insecurity of the 18th century (Tråvén). In the first opera Peri's *Euridici* (1600), the cast list called for:



“Two castrati men playing women  
Six men (one a castrato) playing men  
One boy playing a woman  
One woman playing a woman” (San Francisco Opera)

As is seen above, the roles for women compared to men were almost non-existent. In Peri's *Euridice*, there are nine male roles compared to the one female role. Furthermore, three of the roles for men had them playing a female character by cross-dressing. In a previous section, I presented a graph demonstrating how uneven roles in opera for women are compared to the roles for men. This unequal representation is rooted in composers' use of the Castrati and their sudden need to take them out of their operatic performances. Even today, in the 21st century, the ratio of female roles compared to male roles is so uneven because the literature we continue to perform was all written before composers began to implement legitimate female roles within their compositions. The only two roles' women were allowed to play were extremely small female roles or the role of a castrato pretending to be a woman (double cross-dressing). The second type of role introduces an opportunity to discuss gender as a performance; Mozart used this type of cross-dressing in his *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) with the character of Cherubino (a mezzo-soprano playing a boy that sometimes dressed as a girl).

Eventually, these early Italian Baroque operas transformed from roles for the Castrati and boy soprano roles into specific parts for women. For example, two of Handel's most well-known operas *Giulio Cesare* and *Sersae*, "were not written for women...(and)

are two examples of leads written for castrati." (Chang, 2017). Mozart is another composer who "composed with the intention of castrati including roles in *Idomeneo* and *La Clemenza di Tito* amongst others." (Chang, 2017). Since the use of the Castrati is illegal today since there are laws set in place by our governments against castration, all the previous roles for the Castrati have been replaced by either mezzo-sopranos or countertenors. A final link between the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the Fall of the Castrati is through the connection between opera buffa and the "Enlightenment ideas about 'the sound,' and 'natural' made the 'unnatural' and 'unsound' voice of the Castrati obsolete" (Trâvén).

Opera companies needed to find a way to replace the Castrati. There were no preexisting male company members who could sing the roles previously written and intended for castrated singers that could sing in higher octaves. Unlike other mediums, opera is rooted in gender differences. Operatic roles are written depending on the intended voice part, which is classified by gender anatomy. This means tenors and basses could not sing the roles originally meant for a castrato because the bodies of the Castrati were physically to mimic a female voice. Though countertenors existed at the time, the timbre of their voices was too different from the Castrati, so companies had to begin hiring female singers.

While the castrati were fading out of the industry, one of the first types of roles introduced for women (i.e., a newly developed role and not one initially written for a castrato) was called a "trouser role." A woman plays a young man or male child on stage in a

trouser role while singing in their proper octave. It is important to note, as Iwamoto states, that the idea of cross-dressing was not a new one; Shakespeare used it throughout his plays (Iwamoto). However, the integration of "trouser roles" into operas changed the way women could participate on stage because composers started valuing the female voice and slowly incorporated them as significant roles in their operatic works. Though women were getting more stage time, they had to fight even harder against the scripts' blatant sexism. For example, *Le Nozze di Figaro* includes two female leads and a trouser role. However, all these roles revolved specifically around the characters' sexuality and sexual relationship with their partner. The devolvement of a woman's role around her sexuality aided the notion that women being sexualized on stage was somehow essential to storytelling.

Though the Castrati were not used in French opera, the fall of castrati came in tandem with the French Revolution (1789-1799) out of growing sentiments for equality across the classes to stop a practice that sustained itself through class<sup>4</sup> inequality. Furthermore, "In the eighteenth century, during the period when harmonious worlds were being constructed in thought, while the monarchic power and the idea of divinity were being shaken, there were architects who passionately devoted themselves to dreaming of operas to correspond to the world in its gestation" (Clément). This eventually granted women access to opera because the art form needed singers to replace the Castrati and sing these roles written for a higher voice type. Women then began acting in a newly cre-

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<sup>4</sup> Class is an anachronistic term for the 18th and 19th centuries as it would not be used in social theory until the late 19th century by Marx and Weber. However, we do not have a specific term in Postmodern English for prejudice against an Estate.

ated "trouser role" in which the singer would play a young boy. Eventually, as opera continued to develop throughout the 18th century, composers began to write roles uniquely written for the female voice. The next chapter will briefly analyze the composition of female roles in the operatic adaptations of the Beaumarchais Trilogy.

### **3 THE BEAUMARCHAIS TRILOGY: HATED BY MANY BUT DISCUSSED BY ALL**

#### **3.1 The Culpable Men**

Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was an 18th century Renaissance man; he was a watchmaker, playwright, spy (allegedly), musician, and much more. The France Beaumarchais lived in was marked by the inciting sentiments and distress of the Revolution, and his literary works were created in the era directly predating the Revolution. Though Beaumarchais cannot truly be considered a revolutionary himself, his works would be extremely popular among revolutionaries because of its blatant criticism of the Estate System in France that practically incited the Revolution. Furthermore, his writings reflected all the sentiments of the Revolution as he spent his entire life supporting various financial coups, which included the trafficking of firearms during the Revolution.

Beaumarchais started writing about twenty years before the start of the French Revolution in 1789. As is evident in his Figaro Trilogy, Beaumarchais was influenced by the tumultuous society he was living in. He was also a member of the Third Estate, most notably remembered as the Estate that had the most grievances against the monarchy and incited the Revolution. Beaumarchais was heavily influenced by other French writers and French philosophers commenting on the social injustices of French society pre-dating the Revolution. Some examples of his influences are Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and playwright Marivaux. Beyond being a brilliant writer Beaumarchais loved classical music and even attempted to write a few operas himself; “Beaumarchais regardait la musique comme la plus précocce et la plus durable” (Lever). Beaumarchais was heavily influenced

by music in his early life as everyone in his family played a musical instrument. In the initial stages of his life, he would go to Spain, and during his stay, he was so moved by the Spanish music that he was inspired to write the play *Le Barbier de Séville* (Lever).

Despite being extremely controversial, Beaumarchais's Figaro Trilogy was immensely popular. It could be argued that the real controversy was that Beaumarchais wrote the most famous work of the 18th century (*Le Mariage de Figaro*) though he was not a lifelong playwright. The popularity and controversy that consumed the Trilogy caught the attention of artists throughout Europe. There were many operatic adaptations of the first play in the Trilogy *Le Barbier*; however, the most successful was Rossini's version written in 1813 despite the opening of this opera being recorded as a "great fiasco" (Oxford Music).

Gioachino Rossini was an Italian composer born in 1792 in Italy to a musically inclined family. However, his childhood was not easy as the end French Revolution (1799) led to the Napoleonic years and the Italian Risorgimento that flooded Italy with French and papal soldiers. Before the French Revolution, Italy was ruled by the Austrian empire. At the time, the monarchical family of the Austrian throne were the Habsburgs; this was also Marie-Antoinette's family. Her marriage was an attempt between King Louis XVI and Joseph II of Austria to secure an allyship since France shared a border with Italy (Britannica). The Austrian control of Italy would also result in Italy's involvement in the French Revolution as King Louis XVI called upon Austria's support when he attempted to flee France in 1791 before his execution. Rossini fell in love with the texts of Beau-

marchais because even though they were citizens of different, opposing countries, they were members of the same “class” and shared a common experience of the terrorizing control of their respective monarchical system. In fact, Rossini had “vociferous enthusiasm for the cause of liberty displeased the papal authorities and resulted in his brief imprisonment in 1800” (Gossett).

Rossini was well-known for how he composed his cabalettas. One of his most famous cabalettas, “Una voce poco fa,” was written for his *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. What makes this specific song impactful to the opera is how Rosina’s song (Rosine) describes certain aspects of her character while the music changes. In his composition of the Beaumarchais play, Rossini set forth the dramatic irony called for by the play regarding the relationship between the ruling class (the Second Estate) and everyone else (the Third Estate) in a way that was palatable to audience members of varying “classes.” Furthermore, Rossini’s scene structure would be later further developed by Puccini and Verdi not only to emphasize musical changes but to depict further the lives of everyday people in brutal circumstances. Rossini’s librettist for *Il Barbiere* was Cesare Sterbini. Sterbini was able to capture in this libretto the comedic aspect of Beaumarchais’s original play. Unfortunately for him, *Il barbiere* was his only success, and the rest of his career is not memorable (Black).

While Rossini adapted the first part of the Beaumarchais trilogy, Mozart took the Beaumarchais trilogy to the operatic stage before Rossini, starting with the trilogy’s second part (*Le mariage de Figaro*). Beyond his musical genius, what made Mozart’s music,

specifically his operas, so attractive to audiences of every generation is that they “abandon artifice in favor of moment-to-moment psychological realism” (Ross). Being the prodigious genius he was, Mozart was unfortunately plagued with the paranoia of people being against him and seeking to end him. This compulsive behaviour is reflected in his operatic characters that sang arias about love in which, “the end of the aria, the ‘throbbing’ figure comes back in the minor mode, and it is reinforced by winds in unison. It ends up sounding obsessive and fearful—a lover’s paranoia creeping in” (Ross). Such characters are featured in three of his most prominent operas, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan Tutte* (1789). Beyond the strategic composition in the characters relating them through psychological realism, they all share the same librettist.

What we know about da Ponte’s life is learned from his *Memoire* collection, which he created as an apology for a life plagued by (often self-induced) misfortune. They present a carefully constructed image of the man and his work” (Carter and Porter). Part of what made his work so notable is the translation skill required; for example, in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, da Ponte translated Beaumarchais’s original French text into Italian while keeping the same humour. Though he was a gifted librettist, da Ponte’s “penchant for liberal politics and married women led to a ban on his teaching in the Veneto and, on 17 December 1779, a 15-year exile from Venice” (Carter and Porter). Da Ponte was well-known for his disdain for authoritative figures in the same way Rossini was. This is partially why he was attracted to the adaptation of the controversial, progressive trilogy of Beaumarchais into an opera.



Beaumarchais, the composers, and the librettist alike all shared two things in common: their clear talent in their respective art medium and their disdain for an absolute monarchy and the aristocracy. The combination of efforts from these five men allowed for the story of the average, non-noble citizen to be seen on stage in a positive light. In the next two subsections, we will discuss the plot of the Beaumarchais Trilogy, how it was controversial, and how the operas addressed this controversy.

### **3.2 The Man, the Myth, the Controversy:**

At the time of the French Revolution, European literature presented women in a way that made them appear dumb, immature, and foolish. There are many reasonings for this that are out of the scope of my study; however, during this time, “French women were largely confined to the private sphere. Domestic duty and family obligation dictated their behavior, and the public life was a man’s domain” (Spiegel). Before Beaumarchais, prominent playwrights like Renard worked to deteriorate the French heroine for their works to be more applicable to society of the time. The first two parts of the trilogy, *Le barbier de Séville* and *Le mariage de Figaro*, contain five principal female 17th-century characters compared to the fourteen male characters. The five main female characters are Rosine, Suzanne, Marceline, and Fanchette.

Despite the ratio of female characters compared to male characters being about half the amount, Beaumarchais writes his female characters just as well as his male charac-

ters. While the writings themselves are not centered enough around the fight for female equality or liberation to be called feminist, the sentiments that the plays introduce certainly foreshadow what feminists of future generations would be fighting for. Beaumarchais wrote his female characters to be representative of what powerful women looked like, and how they could still be respected even if they were unmarried- like Suzanne and Rosine. The writing of his female characters would be heavily influenced by the impact of Marie-Antoinette and the 17th century *Salons*. Furthermore, he created Rosine to be a woman that commands respect and would not fall easily to the first person that admired her. Rosine became a “self-determining subject by ‘freely’ choosing a husband, the Count Almaviva, therefore subverting the commands of a despotic parental figure, Bartholo” (MacArthur). Through Beaumarchais’s writing, it is clear to readers that the only reason she loves Count Almaviva is because he will take her far away from Bartholo; she says, “Je donnerai mon coeur et ma main à celui qui pourra m’arracher de cette horrible prison” (Beaumarchais).

This female strength is also seen in the writing of the characters of Suzanne and Marceline, who both outsmart their romantic interest. In Scene III of Act V in *Le Mariage*, “Beaumarchais gives his hero a far-ranging detailed monologue” (Dudley). Unfortunately, this monologue was replaced by the “vehemently sexist message of ‘Aprite un po’quegli occhi’” which translates to “It’s time you men saw clearly,” referring to women (Dudley). In the play, Scene III Act V begins with Figaro mistaking Susanna with the Countess and thinks Susanna is cheating on him. In a rage, he cries, “Oh, woman, woman, woman! Feeble and deceptive creature!” (Beaumarchais). Shortly after, Figaro

realizes Susanna is in a terrible situation, so he turns his anger towards Susanna “into a bitter indictment of the Count” (Dudley). In this monologue Figaro says (translated by Dudley):

*No, Milord Count, you will not have her, you will not have her!...Because you're a great lord, you consider yourself a fine person...Nobility, fortune, rank, property, all that makes one so proud! What have you done to deserve such a high position? You simply took the trouble to be born-and nothing more. Besides that, you're quite an ordinary man...*

While these plays present powerful, respectable female characters, this was not Beaumarchais's primary goal in writing these plays. Beaumarchais was ahead of his time in the way he wrote his characters; he was very intersectional in how he correlated social hierarchy, gender equality, and the notion of gender itself. This intersectionality of Beaumarchais was guided by the works of playwright Pierre de Marivaux<sup>5</sup>. Beaumarchais wrote these two plays only a few years prior to the fall of Bastille, and the primary concern on everyone's mind was class-equality and destroying the aristocracy. Through the creation of his plot and characters, Beaumarchais created a dialogue that directly referenced everything wrong with French society, specifically with the monarchy and the aristocracy. For example, the entire driving plot of the play (Count Almaviva disguising as a musician named Lindor to ensure Rosine falls in love with him for his character and not his money) centers around the notion of class and wealth variation and not gender divide. In *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the entire moral of the story is that members of the Third Estate

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<sup>5</sup> For reference read Pierre de Marivaux's *Le Dispute* as it swaps heteronormative gender roles.

(Cherubin, Suzanne, Marceline, and Figaro) can outsmart the noble Second Estate (the Count).

Beaumarchais was also one of the first playwright to incorporate the discussion of the newly existing middle-class into his writing. Prior to the French Revolution, classes did not exist in the way they exist today; instead, French society was divided into three estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the rest. Again, the term “class” would not be used until the late 19th century when Karl Marx introduced the term in *Das Kapital* (1867) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Beaumarchais introduces Figaro as a proto-middle-class type, which is a concept that had not previously been developed in entertainment literature. Through Figaro, Beaumarchais presents the hope of the Third Estate that they could one day elevate their social position and have real representation.

Through the discussion of “class,” Beaumarchais uses gender and gender-related issues to highlight this overarching issue. He uses his female characters to “put a big clash between women as sex objects and women as empowered figures” (Pal). This is seen in the dichotomy between the Count (“a character that regularly sexually and verbally abuses women throughout the opera”) and Suzanne (Pal). Furthermore, the notion of sexuality throughout the play regarding which man, the Count or Figaro, has the right to Suzanne’s body is another example of how Beaumarchais used the notion of female sexuality to confront the issue of class division. In the play, Figaro and Suzanne are “seeking, then, is what we now call the right to privacy: their sexuality should be their own affair and not the province of state authority and intrusion” (MacArthur). The entire play

suggests that not only a relationship between rights and responsibilities. Additionally, “the play aroused governmental anger not only by its outright calls for social equality but also for the contempt which persons of noble birth were treated” (Dudley). Beaumarchais raises the point that being born into wealth does not make someone a better person in the plays. Through the stories, Beaumarchais shows how “servants were cleverer and more human than the aristocracy they served” (Dudley).

Beaumarchais was revolutionary in his playwriting because he illuminated very prevalent societal issues in an intersectional fashion that was veiled by comedy to be more palatable for the French public to absorb. Furthermore, by using humour to facilitate a discussion about class and the concept of gender, Beaumarchais found small loopholes to freely produce his art in the highly censored France that existed at the time. After the plays were finally allowed on French stages, the plays gained notoriety with artists in all different mediums for the controversy it created, including opera. The operatic communities around Europe were highly interested in Beaumarchais’s story. However, before they were allowed on the operatic stage, the librettist, Sterbini and da Ponte needed to readapt the story to fit the desired narrative of those funding the operatic adaptations of these revolutionary texts after the French Revolution. In these cases, the patrons of these two operas were Joseph II of Austria (*Le Nozze*) and the Italian nobility (*Le Barbieri*).

### **3.3 The Opera vs the Play: The Representation of Women**

Part of what makes these two operas, Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, so captivating and vital to study is their effect on the music community society. There was an increase in interest for the operatic medium due to Rossini's and Mozart's comedies since they "reached a level of humanity few tragedies have ever achieved" (NPR). An element to consider in the operatic adaptations of Beaumarchais's operas is how the operas were funded; how operas were financed and managed often influenced the subject and thematic matters (Rosselli). Opera relies on many "diverse resources and is correspondingly expensive" as it requires "singers, musicians, sometimes dancers, scenery and costumes, stagehands, front-of-house personnel, as well as a literary and musical creator" (Rosselli). *Il Barbiere* was funded by the Italian nobility who wanted Italian opera to remain prevalent in the rapidly changing European world. Joseph II of Austria commissioned Mozart multiple times because he adored Mozart's compositions so much that he created a new place for Mozart in his court.

As previously discussed, Beaumarchais's Figaro trilogy, while a comedic work of art, also fueled revolutionary sentiments regarding how the aristocracy and the monarchy treated everyone that was not part of that ruling class. Beaumarchais touched on classism, elitism, and sexism in his plays, and all these revolutionary concepts would be toned down by da Ponte and Sterbini in their libretti so that the government's funding opera would be willing to produce such works. Unfortunately, the Revolution was not as intersectional as those of us with a modern view of equality would have liked, meaning revolutionaries fought for the equality of men of all classes and often left women out of the discussion. For example, Mozart and da Ponte wrote *Le Nozze* for the Austrian Imperial

Court. For da Ponte to make Beaumarchais's contemporary drama into an Italian libretto, he had to "delete or significantly de-emphasize the play's controversial aspects to get it past the censors in Vienna " (Dudley). Furthermore, by da Ponte making these cuts, the Opéra de Paris, who usually did not perform any foreign works "took advantage of the immense popularity of the play," as da Ponte had "excised many of those caustic criticisms of the aristocracy" (Dudley).

The opera differs from the original play in many ways; however, two of the most notable tracks represent class tension and how women are presented. In the previous section, I presented a powerful monologue that Beaumarchais wrote for Figaro's character. This monologue is an "impassioned rant against the Count, [a] symbol of decadent nobility" that Beaumarchais wrote to reflect his sentiments towards members of the Second Estate (Dudley). However, a commentary this political and angry would not have been permitted by the Vienna Court censors. For this reason, "da Ponte expanded Figaro's initial condemnation of Susanna into a virulent attack against all women, highlighting their seductive powers to ensnare and destroy men" (Dudley). Unfortunately, this viewpoint would be more widely accepted by the Vienna court censors because it aligned with the 18th-century sentiments towards women. In this aria, da Ponte included insults against women that Beaumarchais never wrote.

Parts of Figaro's aria "Aprite un po' quegli occhi" reads (translated by Opera-Arias):

Oh, Susanna! Susanna! What a great suffering you cost me! With your ingenuous face, with your innocent eyes, who would imagine it? Ah, that it's foul to trust in a woman...Look at these women, look what they are! These you call goddesses

with deceived senses, to whom the weak reason tributes incenses. They are witches who enchant only to make us pain, Sirens who sing to draw us, Owls who attract to take out our feathers. Comets who shine to take our light away, they're thorny roses, they're charming foxes, they're benign bears, malign doves, masters in cheating, friends of worries who pretend, lie, don't feel any love, don't feel any pity...

The changes da Ponte made by cutting Marcelline's monologue in Act III scene 16 of the play, even though it was required of him, "does a serious injustice to Beaumarchais, who gave Marcelline a strong speech in defense of women and their economic and social status" (Dudley). However, da Ponte include Marcellina's Act IV aria "Il capro e la capretta" to potentially blunt the blatant sexism he had to fit in Figaro's "Aprite." He created the text for this aria independently as there is not a match for it in Beaumarchais's text. In this aria, Marcelline "decries the treatment of women by their partners, in contrast to that of mated pairs in the animal kingdom" (Dudley). Furthermore, this aria of da Ponte's own creation incorporates several ideas regarding male/female relationships that are found in [the writings of] Beaumarchais and reinforce Marcellina's roles as a wise and independent thinker" (Dudley).

Cesare Steribini adapted the first part of the Trilogy after da Ponte translated *Le Mariage*. *Le Mariage* was a much more controversial play than *Le Barbier*, which included many more revolutionary sentiments. For this reason, Steribini did not have to change much of Beaumarchais's text for his work to be approved by the court censors. Steribini also adapted *Le Barbier* after the French Revolution during the Napoleonic years, so the political climate was hugely different from that of da Ponte and Mozart directly before



the Revolution. While he was not as apparent with his sexism as da Ponte, Sterbini also adapted the character of Rosine (Rosina) to fit a more acceptable narrative for Italy under Bonaparte's control. An example is a notable change in Rosina's affection towards Count Almaviva. In the play, Rosine uses the Count as an escape from Bartholo. While this is still partially included in the opera, the primary reason Rosina marries the Count is that she genuinely loves him.

#### 4 THE CONCLUSION

Beaumarchais's original intent of the first two plays in his trilogy (also known as the Figaro Plays), *Il Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro*, was to illuminate the sentiments of the impoverished community of French society. This trilogy is a perfect reflection of the feelings and attitudes of French citizens who were neither part of the aristocracy, upper bourgeoisie, nor the clergy that launched the ten-year-long revolution. Throughout the first two plays within the trilogy, Beaumarchais presents issues and severe discussion about class division, anti-capitalism, and feminism. This is only a preliminary discussion into the effects the Figaro Plays had on the Revolution, and the many ways the operas changed the original intentions. A more extensive analysis can be discussed in more depth how the text changed within the operatic adaptations because of translation and how the changes made to the story differ between the opera written for the Austrian population and the opera written for the Italians.

The men that transformed this trilogy into the famous operas they are took Beaumarchais's stories and fashioned them in a way that would appease the patrons who funded opera, enough that they would be willing to allow these stories to be publicly produced. Through the operatic adaptations, Sterbini and da Ponte softened the anti-establishment message of Beaumarchais's work. While the operas' redevelopment of the story allowed for us to currently have the classic operas of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) and Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1813), the specific changes undermined the entire message of the original plays. Though both operas reflect a sentiment of class division as seen through the tense relationships between Figaro and Bartolo and again between Fi-

garo and the Count, neither reflects the feminist narrative of Beaumarchais's original works. Not only was Marceline's character sizably reduced, but the feminist themes and points of the play were removed to appease the men funding the opera's production. Seeing a strong female character on stage made them uncomfortable as it did not align with previous literature that conformed to the notion of the male gaze.

Before the French Revolution, France society progressed to be an equal society in terms of class and gender equality. For reasons not expanded upon in this paper, like the revolutionaries' feelings towards Marie-Antoinette, the French Revolution stimulated a societal regression regarding women's place in the public sphere. For this reason, much of the literature produced after the advent of the Revolution included sexist ideologies that were not present in the decades before 1789. The first two plays of Beaumarchais's trilogy were written before the Revolution. The writing of his female characters reflects the societal changes towards female progression that were still happening. However, these proto-feminist attitudes were not reflected in the Italian libretti because the rest of Europe had not begun to consider female equality. Women would not be represented well in operatic literature until, debatably, mid to late 20th century operas. Women in the operatic literature of the 18th through 19th centuries, including *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, would be written for the sole purpose of illuminating a man's character and as a love interest.

In January 2021, Kathleen Kelly and Jennifer Cresswell published a research article illustrating their findings regarding how the most popular operatic literature today repre-

sents women. They took the top fifty operas produced in the United States between 2010-2019 and ran the Bechdel Test on them. This test is typically reserved for films; however, Kelly and Cresswell applied it to operas. The test is designed to determine whether an opera includes two female characters that have dialogue and names, whether those two women (if they exist in the work) speak to each other, and whether their conversation is about something other than the male character(s) in the work (Kelly and Cresswell). According to their research:

10% of the operas pass no part of the test

14% of the operas pass Bechdel part one

56% of the operas pass Bechdel parts one and two

20% of the operas pass the complete test

This means that within the top fifty operas produced in the United States in the last nine years, only 10 pass the Bechdel Test. As Kelly and Cresswell put it, “opera’s not doing great in having stories involving two women, with their own names, having any conversation that doesn’t center on a man. It’s not a super high bar to clear” (Kelly and Cresswell). They took their research one step further to determine whether companies have more recently chosen to produce less misogynistic operas within the last five years. They restricted their test to “the top fifty most frequently performed operas in the US (United States) from 2016-2019,” and it added eight operas that were not on the first list. The eight operas were:

1. *Moby Dick* (2010, Gene Scheer)
2. *Dead Man Walking* (2000, Jake Heggie)

3. *As One* (2014, Laura Kaminsky<sup>6</sup>)
4. *Das Rheingold* (1869, Richard Wagner)\*
5. *Silent Night* (2011, Kevin Puts)
6. *Maria de Buenos Aires* (1968, Horacio Ferrer)
7. *Rusalka* (1901, Antonín Dvořák) \*
8. *Glory Denied* (2007, Tom Philpott)

Two operas from this list are from the 19th century (*Rusalka* and *Das Rheingold*), and one is from the 20th century. The rest, however, were written in the 21st. Despite six operas on this list being written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only two operas pass the Bechdel test entirely. These two operas are Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* and Dvořák's *Rusalka* (Kelly and Cresswell).

The study done by Kelly and Cresswell highlights the problem this form of female representation creates: if women want a career in opera, they will inevitably have to perform something that does not pass the Bechdel test. Though this is just one test to determine how misogynistic an opera is, it outlines the overarching issue that stories we continually produce do not accurately portray women but instead paint us as sexual beings obsessed with the opinion and attention of men. As argued earlier in this thesis, this is a problem because art, because of efforts during the Enlightenment, is an extension of society's attitudes and beliefs. The operatic art we continue to produce reflects how we collectively view women: as inferior to men and not worth an independent storyline that is not riddled with misogynistic takes or depictions of assault, abuse, or harassment. This blatant sexism is seen in the play's plot and the representation of women regarding their

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<sup>6</sup> Kaminsky is the only female composer on this list

age. Out of the top fifty operas, “slightly less than half of the operas (48%) contain roles for older women at all” despite older men being represented in all of them (Kelly and Cresswell).

Unfortunately, part of the reason opera companies continues to produce these operas in the United States and globally is because they are well-known to society. It would be ridiculous to imagine that the Metropolitan opera could go a season without producing *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *La Bohème* (Puccini), or *Carmen* (Bizet). They cannot, or at least will not, because these are the operas spectators expect and want to see because they know the story well, and they are easy to understand and follow even if one does not speak Italian or French. As Clément theorized, therefore opera, compared to art forms like musical theatre, straight theatre, film, has such a challenging time breaking free from its misogynistic, sexist grip (Clément). Opera has sustained itself for 400+ years because it is a beautiful art form; it would not have survived this long if there was no value in the stories. However, “opera has focused so much energy on preserving past glories, and we hope that these glories continue...but we also want to hear the words and see the stories of our own time, coloured by the emotions and voices and sensibilities of our own world” (Kelly, Cresswell). There is beauty in the stories of the past; however, the world is changing, and art forms that do not respectfully represent women will not survive the changing times; “if opera is truly aimed toward that future, we have reason to take heart” (Kelly, Cresswell).

Opera was not the primary concern of the French Revolution, nor was it at the forefront of the revolutionaries' minds; however, a societal change that big was bound to affect many aspects of society. The first was through the end of the use of the Castrati because of revolutionary ideals that preached equality for classes. Additionally, with the restraint of the unchecked power of the Catholic Church during the Revolution, women were allowed an opportunity to become active participants in opera as they began to replace the Castrati. Companies and composers needed people who could sing the roles previously assigned to the Castrati if they wanted opera to have any chance of survival.

The second way resulted from the loss of the monarchy and the French elite who previously funded opera. For his plays to be produced and adapted into operas by Mozart and Rossini and financed by the Austrian Court and Italian nobles, something had to give. His plays, which once referenced class unity, anti-capitalism, and feminism<sup>7</sup>, became another patriarchal machine that perpetuated sexism in opera. The most obvious change between the plays and the operas is how female characters, such as Rosine (Rosina) and Marceline (Marcellina), were portrayed; instead of remaining independent women as Beaumarchais had once intended, they were adapted to be a male accessory.

Though this change may seem small, in the grand scheme of the operatic world, this specific presentation of women became the prototype for composers and librettists alike. Mozart's three most famous operas, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan*

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<sup>7</sup> "Feminism" is another anachronistic term. It would first be used in France by philosophers DeBeauvoir and Satre in the 1930s. The more proper term I use throughout this paper is "proto-feminist."

*tutte*, alongside Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, set a precedent for operas Romantic era. Post-Modern and Contemporary works cater to this archetype of operatic female characters.

This thesis only briefly discusses one area of study in the tragedy known as women's representation in opera. However, other areas that should be further developed are how female opera singers were instated into the operatic communities of varying countries, how the operas of the 18th-20th centuries affect the Post-Modern works being created today, and how new interpretations of these older works affect women's representation in the industry. In my brief case study, other areas that need further expansion are the tension between the Estates directly before and during the Revolution, how Beaumarchais used "gender" through the role of Cherubin, and the influences of the "précieuse" on Beaumarchais's writing of his female characters. In addition, a continuing study is needed on how the literature we choose to produce reflects not only our industry's treatment of women but also how our society views women. Unfortunately, only a handful of resources illuminate the problem opera has regarding our choice in the literature, such as literature by Catherine Clément and Susan McClary or research by Kathleen Kelly and Jennifer Cresswell.



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