“La storia mia è breve”

Reading Puccini’s *La Bohème* beyond the obvious

A Comparative Literature Honors Project by

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“La storia mia è breve”: reading Puccini’s La Bohème beyond the obvious

Puccini’s La Bohème thrives in the opera world today as a long-standing favorite: good for couples, good for families, good for first time opera-goers. Loved in the opera house for its commercial viability, it serves the role of the gateway opera, intended for the uninitiated. The seasoned opera goer has no business attending Bohème; he attends Shostakovich’s Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. The Met’s most popular production, an “unforgettable tale of love, youth, and tragic loss,” Bohème saw its 1,274th performance at the company this 2014-15 season. According to OperaBase statistics, in the past five seasons, Bohème has been performed around the world 2,921 times. Italian opera is not dying: there were fewer days in the past six years than there were Bohème performances. “Take your boyfriend or girlfriend to see La Bohème!” Renee Fleming implores you in a Met commercial selling the “date night opera.” It is no wonder that Bohème is every opera company’s cash cow, Puccini’s innocent love story between a poor poet and the young seamstress next door is so universal that it is accessible to all.

Scholarly work on the opera and on Puccini in general, on the other hand, does not reflect this unwavering popularity in the commercial sphere. One finds it difficult to source “the latest” in Puccini research, for there is hardly any. The greatest frequency of scholarly texts published on Puccini peaked in the late 1980s (in the works of Ashbrook, Groos, Parker, Carner, Budden, and others) and tapering off soon after as academia turned to other pursuits. Richard Wagner on the other hand, whose entire operatic output is performed at a frequency completely dwarfed by Puccini’s, never stops receiving scholarly attention: the Oberlin Conservatory Library purchased at least fifty new scholarly books on
Wagner since 2010, while Puccini has received two. It is perhaps the seemingly simple plot and artistic premise of Puccini operas that marks his work as a subject not worth scholarly consideration. The operas, especially *Bohème*, seem plain and understandable enough in the first viewing that further inquiry therefore was not an immediate need (compare this to Wagner constantly publishing book-length essays to illuminate the philosophy behind his book-length operas.) Catherine Clément characterizes well this rather austere essence of *La Bohème* in her description of its heroine, Mimi: “She does not do anything. She waters her flowers at the window, she embroiders silk and satin for other people, that is all. She loves everything. She breathes roses and the world is beautiful” (Clément 84).

What most of the attendants of *Bohème*’s 2,921 performances in the past half-decade might not have realized, however, is that this seemingly simple *Bohème* is as much a total artwork as any other Wagnerian opera, intricately constructed and layered with meaning. There are hidden depths lurking underneath the shallow waters of Mimi and Rodolfo’s relationship as understood by many opera goers and scholars alike. Puccini has created a work so accessible and approachable that its genre-defying qualities go unnoted. This is because *Bohème*, Puccini himself admits, is an opera “delle piccole cose,” a text to be read in its small details (Fisher 17). “*La Bohème* involved a shrinking of the aesthetic distance from something as remote as the primeval banks of the Rhine to a smaller scale world populated by characters one might encounter on the streets of any city” (Ashbrook 7). Not only is *Bohème* contained in a smaller dramatic situation, its deeper meanings are also contained in its smaller details.
When the dramatic concern shrinks from a world-consuming fire to an unlit woodstove, it is easy to miss out the specific details. When these smaller meanings are revealed and understood, however, audiences will realize that *La Bohème* is very much an opera that at the same time allows the shallowest interpretation as well as the most complex considerations. In this sense, it does not conform to the typical mode of operatic interpretation, a genre which usually operates at either end of the spectrum of complexity. “*La Bohème* confronts the social problems of its time not through essays and proclamations, like Wagner, but through subtle implications within the opera” (DiGaetani 103). In this paper we shall embark on a project to destabilize this straightforward understanding of *Bohème* as a simple love story of innocent love and youth, to read *Bohème* beyond its current role as the popular “gateway opera,” and to create possibilities for interpretation that do not deny the opera its artistic depths and nuances.

The following three chapters each complexifies the existing portrait of *La Bohème* in different ways, and through them the depths of Puccini’s operatic innovations will be detailed so that we understand *Bohème* as “the first Italian opera in which the artificialities of the medium is so little felt” (Budden 180). The first chapter will undermine *Bohème*’s reading as a typical romance – the straightforward “boy meets girl” scenario typical to Italian opera, an understanding that only manages to encompass the most shallow nuances of Rodolfo and Mimi’s relationship, and reveal an underlying cynicism that tinges their interaction from the start. The second chapter will explore how *Bohème* refuses to operate in the typical gender expectations of the Italian operatic convention, resisting the sexual frame utilized as a narrative device in virtually every other Italian opera in the standard repertoire. The third chapter will explore how these realizations can be read, when viewed
in light of the advances it has made since Verdi’s *La Traviata*, as a new model for how opera can be used to gain a redemptive understanding of death and disease.

*Bohème* is very much constructed to be a volatile text, yet in today’s performance practice is presented in a streamlined, simplified, and standardized form that devalues the many genre-defying innovations that Puccini has imbedded in the opera. In this sense, interpreting *Bohème* becomes a task suitable for the field of Comparative Literature, for in any moment, any of the aspects of Puccini’s *opera d’arte totale* (to coin an Italian equivalent of the Wagnerian innovation) could prevail as the key to understanding its hidden depths, while at other times recede into the background.
“Perche’ son io il poeta, essa la poesia”: locating a cynical undercurrent in *La Bohème*

In stark contrast to the remainder of the standard operatic repertoire, instead of babies thrown into fires, sons in love with their mother-in-law, mystical rings of fire, head-cutting, suicide, self-sacrifice, or spontaneous expiration through excess of emotion, Puccini’s *La Bohème* presents us with an opera where a sick girl gets sicker and dies. “No one is evil; it is the opera of innocence... as if there were no responsibility, as if nothing happened other than this great cold, freezing them all, which one of them, a woman, cannot withstand” (Clément 83). More simply put, *Bohème*’s plot is “boy meets girl, girl dies” (Berger 109).

This understanding of *Bohème* as a simple love story of innocent love, friendship, and loss, a display of “the glorious potential of the human spirit in the face of suffering” pervades into the mainstream media, and this is evident in the promotional material that surrounds the ever-famous opera (Edwards 73). “*La Bohème* is the dream for everybody, even if we are rich or poor, we want to have this love,” says Angela Gheorghiu, a seasoned international *Bohème* performer of over 25 years. “A lost key and an accidental touch of cold hands in the dark – so begins one of the greatest romances of all opera,” writes the Royal Opera House in its promotional material. Renee Fleming calls this the perfect “date night opera... you take your boyfriend or girlfriend to see *Bohème!*” “A timeless romance,” says the Metropolitan Opera, “the ultra-romantic blockbuster,” says Opera Philadelphia. In the eyes of today’s popular culture, there is nothing more romantic than seeing Rodolfo and Mimi express their blossoming tender love in the face of disease and poverty in an opera completely devoid of complex plots and ridiculous deus ex machina.
It is to no surprise then that the typical educational material released to further inform the general audience about *La Bohème* often involves details that reinforce this understanding of the Bohemian gang as a group of unruly youngsters whose kindness, goodness, and maturity are brought out in the face of utterly tragic loss. Take for example, a PBS special from 2001 narrated by Beverly Sills that aimed to illuminate the philosopher Colline’s selfless act of pawning his winter coat: “I wondered just exactly how much money Colline was able to get for such a shabby coat, but obviously, he managed somehow to get enough to bring back medicine for the dying Mimi.” What Sills and her editors at PBS neglected to consider is the tiny detail presented at the very end of the opera that contradicts their reading of Colline’s actions. It is made plain and clear in the text that Colline actually returns with the money, unused, and sets it on a table next to Musetta, telling her “for you.”

“Colline loved his coat... how easy it would be for him to rationalize keeping this thing he loves so much, knowing that giving it up will serve no practical use... The money he gets from selling the coat means nothing... it’s the gesture that matters” (Arnesen 96). This
correction complicates Sills’ straightforward misconception of the situation, overlooking the true meaning in Colline’s gesture. He returns not with medicine for Mimi, knowing full well she would not last the hour, but rather with money to help the generous Musetta. Puccini himself famously said that *Bohème* is an opera “delle piccole cose” (Fisher 17). It is in the smallest of details, not the grand gestures, that we locate the opera’s hidden meanings. The mainstream media makes a lot of generalizations about *Bohème*, but often falls short when it tries to support its claim with textual evidence. In contrast to this popular reading of *Bohème* as the perfect love story, I question if this method of looking the other way at troublesome details truly justifies the essence of the opera, or if, rather, we are trying to make of this romance between Rodolfo and Mimi not as it truly is, but as our own “whitewashed” (to use Mosco Carner’s wording) understanding of their relationship, packaged, commercialized, and simplified for mass consumption. I argue for a less idealistic reading of *Bohème*, where instead of a romantic narrative of perfect love torn apart by nature, disease, and death, I will draw upon the original spirit of Henri Murger’s novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* (1851) to clarify and illuminate the details that are left half-said or only hinted at in Puccini’s opera, pinpointing the underlying narrative of carelessness and youthful cynicism hidden in Puccini’s masterful construction.

A cynical portrait of Rodolfo is perhaps not easily painted in Puccini’s opera, which occurs in a much smaller timeframe and lacks an omniscient narrator. Fortunately this witty and observant narrator is available in Murger’s novel. In the concluding chapter of the novel, the young Bohemian pals can be seen shedding their trademark lifestyle, “a year after Mimi’s death, Rudolph and Marcel, who had not left each other, celebrated their entrance into the professional world with a party” (Murger 301). What we do not see in
Puccini is Rodolfo’s life after Mimi’s departure, we do not see him “giving up Bohemia to give parties with music and cake” (302). In the opera, however, we do have Mimi’s plain explanation of her intention for life without Rodolfo, “torna sola Mimi al solitario nido. Ritorna un’altra volta a intesser finti fior” (Mimi returns alone to the solitary nest. She returns once more to weave false flowers). Mimi’s life without Rodolfo stays the same, “as she had never known pleasure, she never once desired it,” while Rodolfo’s life without Mimi becomes steeped in professional comfort, “I no longer like anything but what is good” (Murger 203 and 306). For Mimi, Rodolfo remains forever her love, her entire life, “sei mio amore, e tutta la mia vita.” In a verismo opera that thrives on its conversational tone and the absence of repetition, Mimi had the urge to say those lines twice in succession. Rodolfo never says anything close to that. “Che m’ami di,” he commands Mimi to say she loves him. “Io t’amo,” she replies con abbandono. To the jealous Rodolfo, Mimi is a “civetta,” an owl, and a euphemism for a flirt; to the loving Rodolfo, Mimi is a “rondine,” a swallow: migratory, temporary, she is not expected to stay. These little details and more amount to a reading of Rodolfo that does not give in as much into this relationship as does Mimi.

Let us further explore the characterization of Rodolfo-as-poet, both in the novel and in the opera. It is obvious in both texts that Rodolfo is not exactly a profound poet; rather he is a boy playing the part of the poet, one who revels in the declaration of a flamboyant set of rhyming couplets. The novel constantly reminds us of this, “during a day when he had dined badly but spoken cleverly, more proudly did he walk the streets” (150). The opera too, echoes this sentiment (Mimi is an owl, Mimi is a swallow) opening with Rodolfo’s first line “nei cieli bigi guardo fumar dai mille comingoli Parigi” (In the grey skies I see the smoke from a thousand Parisian chimneys). As early as 1912, contemporaneous critics like
Torrefranca have remarked on “the colorless figure” of Rodolfo as a poet, one whose commonplace poetry is delivered through uninspired melodies “like scraps of meat squeezed into a sausage skin” (Groos 131). Torrefranca urges his readers to switch the lyrics for “nei cieli bigi” with “per questa sera vorrei dei maccheroni” (for tonight I would like some macaroni) and daring them to admit that the new words “go equally well” with the original melody. This ridicule continues to the present day in the *Simpsons* episode “Homer of Seville” where Homer, in his newfound career as an opera singer, mixes up some of the lyrics for “nei cieli bigi” with “fart.” Rodolfo is not the kind of poet who is a wellspring of eloquence, he is a recycler: at the beginning of Act I he complains that his woodstove sits idle in the winter “come un gran signore,” at the end of Act I, he boasts to Mimi that he sits in his content poverty throwing hymns and rhymes around “come un gran signore.”

What further observations can we make of this Rodolfo who “throws around” (figuratively, and literally, into the burning woodstove) his poetry like a great lord? The connection becomes plainer when understood in light of Puccini’s most crucial recharacterization of Mimi: the Bohemian community’s comparison of her to poetry. In this Bohemian world of art and hardship, it is art that comes in abundance, a poetry that can be given up in an instant for an escape from poverty. To keep warm, the gang would rather burn a manuscript than a chair, for the chair is solid, permanent, essential, while art is free, ever flowing, ephemeral. It is through this function of dispensable poetry that Mimi enters the world of the Bohemians. When the boys learn that Rodolfo is late to come downstairs because he is with a girl, Marcello shouts “trovò la poesia!” (he has found poetry!) This conflation of Mimi into poetry will recur through the opera, but in the smallest moments. There is no outcry: “But Mimi, you are my poetry!” from Rodolfo when the two part from
each other. There is, however, the casual remark at Café Momus: “Questa e’ Mimi, gaia fioraia. Il suo venir complete la bella compagnia, perche’ son io il poeta, essa la poesia” (This is Mimi, happy flower maker. Her presence completes the happy company, because I am the poet, and she is poetry). In *La Bohème*, the opera of small things, it is not in the grand gestures that meaning is located, but rather in the small objects, tiny details. It is in the witty, pretty remarks, where Rodolfo acts the role of the poet to his buddies, that Mimi is framed as poetry.

The effect of this Mimi-as-poetry construction is further emphasized and fully realized at the ending of the opera. Colline, philosopher of the Bohemian gang, sells his old coat for a handful of small change (which, as we have seen previously, is not intended for purchasing medicine for Mimi, but rather to reimburse Musetta, who gave up her cash and her earrings to purchase for Mimi both medicine and a warm muff). His coat aria is not only a structural curiosity (*Act IV of Bohème*, like *Act II of Tosca*, would be entirely seamless but for the interjection of a full-fledged aria) but also a thematic one: a seemingly new melody is introduced in the orchestra, marked *grave*, at the end of the aria, the same theme that will eventually repeat to finish the opera. For over a century, scholars have been proposing potential interpretations of the last few seconds of *La Bohème*, the recurrence of the theme that ends Colline’s coat aria “Vecchia zimmara senti”:

![Musical notation for “Vecchia zimmara senti”](image)
Carolyn Abbate calls this the “famous motivic problem” and resolves it by labeling it as a gestural feature (420). Instead of a “semantic identification” where the sadness of Colline giving up his coat and Rodolfo’s losing Mimi is equated or echoed, the theme serves as a gesture that first signals then confirms the conclusion of the opera. “Indeed it maybe the absence of semantic connection that makes the recurrence so telling” (Abbate 421). William Berger proposes a different analysis in asking for a separation of “acoustical impression from syntactical meaning,” recognizing that a bass’s syllabic monotone could stand in for “a priest saying prayers for the dying.” In this way, Puccini creates meaning that is beyond what can be expressed literally, and hides it behind a tattered old coat. “It isn’t about an overcoat at all, any more than Proust’s madeleines are about cookies.”

What both of these explanations do not address is the fact that it is rather uncharacteristic of Puccini to insert a thematic recurrence devoid of semantic identification, considering that other main themes in Bohème find plainly suitable references throughout the opera. In Bohème, important characters and objects have musical semantic markers, and their repetition shed light to the dramatic situation unfurling onstage, they never serve as commentary external to the drama. A thematic gesture that performs outside of the framework of the opera’s dramatic situation, then, seems out of place. Critics of the opera as early as the first Italian reviews in 1896 are quick to point out that Act IV, from Mimi’s entrance onwards, with the exception of “Vecchia zimmarra” and “Sono andati,” is built entirely from existing musical material already presented earlier in the opera, a sort of “recollection” ending where melodies are relived. Since every presented theme is a reference to a previously seen episode in the opera, it is strange then to see this new theme presented at the end of “Vecchia zimmarra” and used to
conclude the opera, when at first look, and after several dozen looks, this theme still sounds like new material that is inserted awkwardly in the final moments.

Remember now that *Bohème* is an opera “of small things.” If we look carefully at Mimi’s aria of self-declaration, “Si, mi chiamano Mimi,” in addition to lilies, roses, and springtime, we find the only instance she ever mentions poetry in the opera:

![Musical notation](image)

Note how at the bar marked *a tempo* we locate the source of the troublesome theme. The final notes that end the opera do not originate from “Vecchia zimmarra,” both of these instances originate as inversions from a small detail in the orchestration during Mimi’s aria, a gentle swelling to underline Mimi’s mention of “poesia,” a detail so subtle that most seasoned listeners would never have noticed. This poesia theme acts as confirmation to Rodolfo’s cynical treatment of Mimi-as-poetry. The poet who “squanders and throws around” his rhymes, one who commands Mimi to say she loves him, but will never say it himself, squanders his love for Mimi in the same careless manner. Poetry, this dispensable plaything that arrives so easily it can be tossed into the woodstove for a fleeting moment of
warmth, turns inside out. Like its inverted melody line, poetry has its head in the ground, upside down, at Mimi’s death.

In this light then we clearly see Puccini’s masterful construction which retains the sense of Scènes de la vie de Bohème’s original spirit of a squandering Rodolfo. We are not presented with an opera that “whitewashed” an intricate relationship into a simplified, straightforward understanding. Instead, we face this complex interweaving of themes and motives, reminding us of the narrative power of the veristic orchestra, one that gives subtle messages about the drama that only through attentive reviewing and rehearing can an audience fully comprehend. Bohème, when considered in its small details, is not Gheorghiu’s “perfect love we all want to have” after all. This is what perhaps solidifies La Bohème so strongly within the operatic repertoire of today: a seemingly simple love story with glimpses of hidden depths. After more than a hundred years of continuous popularity, there is still significant material left hidden in the opera to be discovered. In a genre where love stories are fixed, plain, obvious, instantaneous, and squarely defined, Puccini presents us with a relationship that is constructed with dynamism, one whose multifaceted complexity is revealed in snippets and wholly integrated between the opera’s music and narrative. It is only when the literature and the music is brought together do we fully understand the significance of his hidden constructions.
"L’umo è fascina e la donna è l’alare": Recasting Gender and Genre in La Bohème

Jane Marsh, Artistic Program Consultant at the Metropolitan Opera Guild, will be the first to tell you either in casual conversation or in one of her lectures at the Guild that there exist on this earth two kinds of people: one that considers Bohème to be a verismo opera, and one that does not. Unlike the operas that typify the verismo genre, namely Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci, La Bohème seems to lack the intense murder scenes considered by some to be requisite of verismo. It instead falls into the category of a tame, murderless non-comic Italian opera where it shares few peers, if any. Abbate and Parker state in the introduction to A History of Opera that “narrative wildness... exaggerated coincidence, obscure motivations, and multiple deaths” (12) seem to typify the majority of the operatic repertoire we have come to love today (of these stereotypes, middle Verdi operas like Trovatore spring to mind). Bohème, on the other hand, seems to rely on the simplest of coincidence: Mimi just happens to knock on Rodolfo’s door that fateful night (compare this to Azucena mistakenly killing her own baby as opposed to her rival’s); the motivations are down to earth: food, warmth, merry youth (again in comparison to Trovatore, Bohème’s plot does not involve decades of intricately plotting a murder-revenge); and the death is singular (so, who doesn’t die at the end of Trovatore?) Carner, too, notes this peculiarly tame plot: “the sequence of acts is loose, there is no strong dramatic motive to propel the action, nor do the characters develop, but remain passive figures to whom things just happen” (364). Indeed, if a viewer considers the distinct hallmark of a verismo opera like Cavalleria Rusticana to be its everyday-wretched realism (jealous knife fight among Sicilian peasants), the same would consider Bohème (friends go to dinner, joke around until one of them dies) to be simply mundane.
To understand *Bohème* in this sense, however, is to fault it for what is intentionally lacking, and to judge its nonconformity to operatic conventions as Puccini’s incapability is rather unfair and reductive. *Bohème* resists scholarly study not because it is plain and simple, a transparent work, but because the way it operates runs counter to much of the framework conventionally used to create Italian opera. Through exploring the ways *Bohème* consciously resists the violent plot conventions of verismo operas, the gendered dramatic framework of Italian operas, the feminine subject position theory, and the star power system of today’s opera houses, we will understand *Bohème*’s mundanity, its lack of gypsy baby killings, not as Puccini’s failure to create drama, but rather as his resistance to the excesses of operatic convention. When *Bohème* is viewed in this light, we will see its strangeness not as a deficiency, but rather an innovation, a testament to Puccini’s creation of “the first Italian opera in which the artificialities of the medium is so little felt” (Budden 180).

It is very easy to associate the verismo genre with violent killings. Both *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890) and *I Pagliacci* (1892), two early verismo operas that come to define the genre, feature bloody endings that capitalize on the shock effect of romantic betrayals that end in enraged stabbings. To locate *Bohème*’s sense of verismo against these operas then is to find little commonality. All three operas present the plight of the poor and utilize contemporaneous musical techniques, but Mimi’s tame death does not go hand in hand with Alfio’s knife fight with Turiddu or Canio’s murder spree. We should instead trace *Bohème*’s roots in the verismo movement not to its Italian origins, but to the veristic source of the movement itself in French Naturalism. It is important to note that both *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* locate their source texts firmly within an Italian origin: *Cavalleria* is based on
a novella by Giovanni Verga, while *Pagliacci* is a semiautobiographical work by Leoncavallo himself. *La Bohème*, on the other hand, takes its source material from Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, and its stage adaptation by Theodore Barriere, with Murger’s assistance. Considering the difference in these source texts, *Bohème* aligns itself more towards its French roots rather than the Italian one, indeed tracing its veristic element not to the jealous stabbings of the Italian countryside, but rather the original Realist essence of French Naturalism, the movement that initially inspired the verismo cause in Italy in the first place.

Think about the paintings of the Naturalist painters Courbet, Millet, or Daumier, for example, where one can definitely locate this original root of everyday timidity that can be found in *Bohème*. Look at the women sitting in trains in Daumier’s painting, the viewer may easily imagine many of them as seamstresses who could very easily say “la storia mia e’ breve, a tela o a seta ricamo in casa e fuori” (My story is brief, I embroider silk or linen, at home and outside). Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Bohème’s* famous Café Momus, setting of Act II, is the very spot in Paris where Gustav Courbet and Henri Murger themselves spent a large part of their youth (Byam 116). Courbet’s portrait of a “Sleeping Spinner” or Millet’s “The Seamstress” are exact representations of Mimi’s colleagues in profession. One only needs to add the frailty of disease to her frame to imagine her as Mimi.

Furthermore, Puccini’s rejection of Italian veristic violence as the basis for his new opera is evident in his decision to reject Giovanni Verga’s *La Lupa* as a potential source text. Until 1892, Puccini worked on *La Lupa* alongside *La Bohème*, two concurrent projects drawing separately from both the Italian verismo and French Naturalism. Only after
visiting Sicily and conversing with Verga is he convinced that *Bohème* was the more suitable text, and scrapped the working libretto for *La Lupa* (Groos 34). In this sense, *Bohème* is a verismo opera that draws its character straight from the source of verismo itself, French Naturalism, far removed the Italian essence of violence as developed by Verga and musicalized by Mascagni and Leoncavallo.

But *Bohème*'s refusal to be Italian does not stop here. In addition to its nonconformity to the expectations of a verismo plot, it also fails to adhere to the expectations of gendered roles in the Italian tradition. Catherine Clément in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* points at a trait that unites the beloved Italian repertoire from the bel canto all the way through Verdi into Puccini: in every Italian opera, “from the moment women leave their familiar and ornamental function, they are to end up punished” (7). For Clément, Italian opera structures its drama through representation of male authority asserting force over feminine deviation. Susan McClary confirms this theory of masculine domination over feminine excess in musicological terms in *Feminine Endings*, “the soprano is a figure of excess, contained by masculine rationality and often subject to narrative death... the tenor hero is the representative of all that frames the soprano's excess” (81). An audience will immediately notice that *Bohème*, an opera where characters “remain passive figures to whom things just happen” does not operate off of these theories of operatic narrative construction (Carner 364).

It is interesting to note here that with the sole exception of *Bohème*, the totality of Puccini’s operatic output reflects the gendered theories of Clément and McClary. Take a look at the rest of Puccini’s popular output: *Tosca* dares to defy police authority and
disobeys her man, her excess is suppressed by police authority, she therefore has to die; Butterfly dares to love an American man, she too is pressured into suicide; Magda is a courtesan who dares to seek true love, and again, with male punishment looming over her, she too succumbs to suicide; Giorgetta dares to have an affair with a young dock worker and finds that she is punished by male authority, in this case her jealous husband, with a fate worse than death; Liu the slave girl dares to love her master, a noble prince, and dies from suicide. The opposite case, where the feminine works herself out of this wretched system, is also true: Turandot dares to defy masculine authority in the princes who try to claim her, and is initially ruined by it. Only when she relents and gives into the male kiss does she triumph, accepted back into the fold of her community as reigning princess. Calaf’s kiss forced upon Turandot cleanses her of feminine excess, stuns her into submission to the masculine, she is put in her place, becomes acceptable, controllable.

In *Bohème* however, we could hardly fault Mimi for enjoying flowers, springtime, and looking at the sun. Nor can we blame her for leaving a man from whom she is dismissed, and, by loving a poor poet, she does not offend an unacceptable crossing of social classes either. This places *Bohème* in a unique position within the popular Italian repertoire as the opera where the woman’s excess is not suppressed by the man, its drama is not constructed around the injustices done to Mimi by the men who surround her. Verdi’s *Traviata*, almost equally popular in today’s opera houses as *Bohème*, presents a compelling comparison where the heroine too is dying from tuberculosis, but in this case disease acts merely as a backdrop, a result of Giorgio Germont’s masculine framing of Violetta’s sexual excess. Mimi and Rodolfo’s love is forbidden, in contrast, not by a figure of masculine authority, but by something simpler, something more natural, disease. Puccini’s
innovation here is a restructuring of the way drama is presented in Italian opera, where instead of an overtly melodramatic plot, he presents in *Bohème* a passive narrative of love and disease.

Because of this curiously unblamable heroine phenomenon, lacking in both feminine excess and a masculine framing, nothing gloriously dramatic seems to happen to Mimi. Since there is no male authority looming upon her, trying to control her excess, there is seemingly little conflict to drive Mimi as a dramatic character. These moments of feminine resistance are indeed the kernel of the most intense dramatic constructions in the majority of popular Italian operas throughout the nineteenth century: “Non tremare” and “In mia man” in *Norma*, “Giudici ad Anna” in *Anna Bolena*, “Orsu, Tosca parlate” in *Tosca*, Lucia’s mad scene, Leonora’s scena in *Trovatore*, the riddle scene in *Turandot*, “Voi lo sapete” in *Cavalleria*, and the intense final scene of *Pagliacci* are but the first examples that come to mind where intense emotions are created in the feminine through a disapproving masculine. Mitchell Morris in *Reading as an Opera Queen* theorizes that the audience, particularly from the standpoint of opera queens, consumes these intense kernels of drama through the alignment of subject position to the heroine in plight (Morris 188). For Morris, opera viewing involves placing oneself into the shoes of the heroine suffering on stage, to experience the betrayal of Bolena or Norma, the frantic outbursts of Tosca or Lucia, from the subject position of the soprano. On a more cynical note, Susan McClary calls this occurrence “the illusion of authentic communion” (Clément XV). Ivan Martinson confirms this in “How to Be an Opera Queen”: “at the opera we hear our most extreme feelings take over and work themselves out to just the melodramatic catharsis we can but fantasize in real life, and liberate us, somewhat, from the miasma of reality... Next *Don Giovanni* you go
to, identify yourself with Donna Elvira and picture a recent flame as the callous Don” (18). So what does an opera queen do with La Bohème then, if nothing as exciting as the situations mentioned above really happens to Mimi? One finds it hard to locate that feminine excess in Mimi, but finds it instead in Rodolfo.

Wayne Koestenbaum in his pocketbook to operatic moments suggests that the subject position of Bohème, especially in the final scene, can be acquired from the frantic onlooker in Rodolfo. Unlike every other operatic heroine detailed in the pocketbook, Mimi is characterized by the sheer lack of excess. She, taking control of her own dying moments, instead acts as a framing for the excessive and delirious Rodolfo. Koestenbaum recommends an access point through Rodolfo instead of the solidly inexcessive Mimi. If for Clément, operatic women “expose themselves to the gaze of those who come to take pleasure in their agonies” then Rodolfo here is the woman, not Mimi, for Mimi does not let us into her agony (11). In her dying moments she claims authority over her disease, even taking control of Rodolfo’s theme, becoming the masculine framing itself, repeating “che gelida manina” in her own voice towards the final scene of the opera. This breaks Morris’s rule that “the subject position of the heroine – never the hero - is the locus of investment” (190). Not only does Mimi defy the expectations of gender roles in Italian opera, but by feminizing Rodolfo, she also turns her gendered expectation upside down. Puccini creates here an operatic heroine in the position of dramatic agency, able to choose where and when she dies, absolving herself of a frantic, excessive death, and putting the weight of dramatic subject position instead on Rodolfo. While Mimi in the end does not escape death, she escapes what the operatic convention expects of her as a woman.
Another consequence of Mimi’s lack of dramatic excess reveals itself in *Bohème’s* refusal to operate in the operatic star power system of today’s opera houses. While indeed McClary has proven that “musical devices in opera work to uphold the rectitude and fortitude of men and masculinity, and to suppress the misbehavior of its women,” Freya Jarman continues McClary’s research by pointing out that while the tenor does indeed triumph over the soprano in terms of situational plot power, in terms of musical, artistic power, it is always the soprano who wins out (Jarman 60). Although the masculine character exists to frame feminine excess, it is in the drama of the feminine in plight that exemplifies operatic art. Nobody is going to swoon over Scarpia’s intensity in his negotiation with Tosca, and it is Santuzza’s torment that we focus on, not Alfio’s. The opera queen does not inhabit the mind of Germont when he realizes he has wronged Violetta, the opera queen’s subject position is Violetta, the forgiving saint that pardons the masculine authority that has misjudged her. Jarman notes that since the popularity of early opera in the 18th century, operatic star power has rested initially with castrati, star of the baroque operatic repertoire, handed over to travesti singers at the end of the castrati era, and finally resting since the early 1800s at its current power position in the soprano voice (60).

Indeed, the current star power system does not operate in favor of the masculine. Morris confirms this from the opera queen perspective: “male artists are admired... but primary allegiances and identifications are always with the ladies. There is no male opera singer who has commanded the legions of gay male fans that framed the careers of Zinka Milanov, Renata Tebaldi, Joan Sutherland, and Maria Callas” (187). Because Mimi does not provide her audience with an intense kernel of feminine drama, unable to grant us access into her subject position, *Bohème* too contributes its strangeness in its inability to operate within
the operatic star system. Despite being consistently among the top-performed operas each
group during the current century (www.operabase.com), Bohème is not central to the career, in
most cases not even tangential, of Milanov, Tebaldi, Sutherland, Callas, or any of the star
sopranos prominent in the international industry since then. This incompatibility of
Bohème, its inability to participate in the gendered operatic formula, as well as its star
power system, contradicts its enormous popularity within the standard repertoire. It
operates in these points outside of the verismo as well as the Italian operatic construction,
reflecting again Budden’s claim that Bohème is the “the first Italian opera in which the
artificialities of the medium is so little felt” (Budden 180).

It is interesting to note the contemporary industrial attitude towards these traits of
Bohème, namely as non-participant to the operatic star system. A quick look through Future
Met Wiki (www.futuremet.wikia.com) will reveal that opera productions are planned with
a certain star singer in mind – fans have known since last year that the Met will revive
Turandot in 2015-16 because Lise Lindstrom will be available for the title role. In the same,
way we understand that the Met is planning to revive Il Trittico with Kristine Opalais in
mind for the collection’s triple heroines. The case is not, and never so, for Bohème. For the
2016-17 season predictions, Bohème stands as the only confirmed revival that does not
have secure casting information. This “opera first, singers later” casting policy is reflective
in this 2014-15 season: Bohème’s fourteen performances throughout the season are split
between 6 different pairs of leads, displaying a good mix between new up and coming
singers, house staples, and a rare appearance by a star (Angela Gheorghiu for two
performances). No such casting occurs regularly in any other opera, where within the same
season the casting turnover would be so rapid. *Bohème* in this sense becomes an opera that can sell itself, rather than opera for the sake of selling singers.

What then, are the social implications of this opera that defies tradition and expectations? What can we make of *Bohème’s* unique position in the verismo repertoire, its fixation on and rebuttal of formulaic gender constructions? I must admit that it would be a stretch to uphold Puccini as a feminist, for in his works prior and after *Bohème*, he does utilize the very same gendered constructions detailed by Clément and McClary. What Puccini does achieve, however, is the creation of a deviant space to develop the character that, he says, “instead of Mimi could very well take the name ‘Ideal’” (Edwards 62). By rejecting the standard dramatic conventions of Italian opera, Puccini allows for the portrayal of an Ideal who doesn’t let herself be pushed to gendered excesses, isn’t sexualized or let herself be objectified, and who can be appreciated for her own self, her truth, and her motivation, as opposed to the or the gymnastic capabilities of her highly-trained instrument. Mimi becomes the first operatic woman who is able to offer more than merely her femininity. In this sense, Puccini brings out the “verità” of a woman in “verismo” more than Leoncavallo or Mascagni were able to achieve.
“Sto bene. Piangi così perche?”: the innovation of disease narrative in *La Bohème*

When thinking of operas that deal with illness, the two most important works that come to mind are Puccini’s *La Bohème* and Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Of all the operas celebrated in today’s standard repertoire, these are the only two whose dramatic situations are linked so strongly with a decline brought about by disease (indeed, in the [www.operabase.com](http://www.operabase.com) statistics of the fifty top-performed operas in the past five years, these are the only two operas where the plot revolves around illness of any kind. They are also, along with Bizet’s *Carmen*, the top three most performed operas in the world). As operatic women who suffer from tuberculosis, their situations are similar: a frail pallor and flushed rosy cheeks, shortness of breath and spells of coughing, a distraught lover by the bedside, a woman who fusses and attends, other men who watch, all powerless and looming over the consumptive heroine as she performs her death rites. The heroines of Puccini’s *Bohème* and Verdi’s *Traviata* share this curse of disease; Mimi and Violetta are the only two “overtly tubercular women” whose immense presence in the popular operatic repertoire offer ripe ground for comparison to both scholars and opera-goers alike (Hutcheon 38).

Indeed in the works of critics, historians, comparists, and musicologists, it is mere impossible to talk about *Traviata* or *Bohème* without mentioning the other: Hutcheon and Hutcheon write about the features of *Bohème* as a continuation of the tubercular trope, a “typo-Traviata”; Clément offers a feminist reading on the difference in Violetta’s and Mimi’s response to disease; Girardi, Ashbrook, Groos, and Parker all trace Puccini’s constant awareness and influence when writing *Bohème* from “the looming specter of La Traviata”; Carner does a historical comparison of the two operas’ initial critical failure; Koestenbaum
recognizes both operas as models for viewing and discussing AIDS; and Edwards and Edwards explore the bonds between love and death in both heroines. These are but a few examples of scholars finding meaning in one opera by connecting its history to the other. In the realm of operatic scholarship, Mimi and Violetta offer themselves as disease sisters. When we limit the extent of our understanding of these tubercular women as merely sisters, however, we negate our ability to understand Bohème as an advancement of disease narrative after Traviata, and we fail to recognize the extent of Puccini’s work in creating his “Ideale” in relation to the way disease stories are told in Italian opera.

Despite the vast availability of scholarly texts that point to the similarities in their common suffering, there is a distinct difference in the way Violetta and Mimi suffer their disease, not only a physical symptom but also a social one. What distinguishes Violetta and Mimi the most is the way they portray and display their disease, the way they think about their own illness, and the meaning they make of their own suffering and eventual death. This is a relationship of the two texts that is left largely unexplored: the narrative methods that Verdi and Puccini have chosen in order to present the dying of their respective consumptive heroines. What is this difference? In Traviata, Violetta struggles for her disease to be heard, even when she proclaims it outright, her community is not willing to acknowledge and recognize her disease. In Bohème, on the other hand, Mimi faces no narrative problems that prevent her community from understanding her disease. The family of one has known all along, while the family of the other is caught by surprise, only acknowledging illness when it is too late. Even though they are both women forced to leave their true love only to reunite at the moment of death, they are differentiated by societal acknowledgement of their disease, or lack thereof. By looking at the differences in the
dramatic construction of these two death scenes, we can recognize how this seemingly minor difference serves as a catalyst for viewing Violetta’s death as a “tragic and grandiose narrative of sin and repentance” (Wheatley 52) while allowing space for Mimi’s death to be more than a spectacle, rather a redemptive death that “transforms the torment of existence into the majesty of tragic understanding” (Edwards 60). Through this understanding, and through examining other tubercular texts that surround La Traviata and La Bohème, we can then understand Puccini’s dramatic decisions concerning the portrayal of Mimi’s death as deliberate innovations, completely deviating from traditional dramatic representations of tuberculosis. It is precisely these deviations that enable Puccini to create a multifaceted, new kind of redemptive meaning out of such a simple plot as “boy meets girl, girl dies.”

In Verdi’s La Traviata, Violetta is a courtesan who dares to seek true love, “null’uomo ancora t’accendeva – o gioia ch’io non conobbi, esser amata amando” (no man has ever made me fall in love – oh joy I have never known, to love and be loved). Regardless of her true affections for Alfredo, she is persuaded (read: forced) by his father Germont to break their relationship under the pretense that she no longer loves him, in order to salvage the Germont family reputation and pave way for the marriage of Alfredo’s sister. In asking Violetta to leave the love of her life, “lui solo amar volg’io,” Germont is not deterred in any way by Violetta’s admission of illness: “non sapete che colpita d’atro morbo è la mia vita?” (do you not know that my life is afflicted by a terrible disease?) His reply to her confession is dismissive: “coraggio, e il nobile tuo cor vincerà!” (Have courage and your noble heart will win!) Only when her disease is so advanced that she is bed-ridden, abandoned by all who she ever called friend, does Alfredo and Germont return to Violetta, Germont with an apology and Alfredo with renewed words of love, but alas it is all too late,
for Violetta is in her last hour of life. In the presence of a half-delirious, dying Violetta that alternates between screamed laments and saintly calmness, Alfredo and his father regret their actions and swear to weep for her as long as their eyes have tears, “finchē avrà il ciglio lagrime io piangerò per te." She, in more delirium, declares that her health is regained, gets up from her bed, agitated and newly reinvigorated, only to collapse again for the last time.

*La Traviata* in this sense becomes a tragedy of a misunderstood saint, “the bourgeois spectacle of a prostitute’s crucifixion” (Clément 84). How is Violetta being “crucified?” She is a dying woman who is forced to keep her illness to herself, suspended in a whirlwind of a society that uses her only for her body, a “poor woman, alone, abandoned in this populous desert they call Paris.” Despite giving up the one chance she has to true love in order to save the marriage of another woman she has never met, she is treated badly by her entire community for having done so. A courtesan, friendless and kinless, she gives all she possibly can in order to please the only man that comes close to being a father figure to her. Violetta implores Germont to embrace her as his daughter, saying that doing so would grant her the courage to abandon all her remaining happiness, “qual figlia m'abbracciate, forte così sarò.” He does not answer, remaining in silence and changing the topic, not willing to verbalize his acceptance of a prostitute as his daughter. Germont denies Violetta even her own illness: when she confesses the severity of her illness to him, it is ignored. He, like many of the father figures in the tubercular narratives that surround *Traviata* and *Bohème*, never believes that Violetta is actually ill until it is too late.

*Traviata* in this sense comes complete, as McClary suggest, with the masculine framing in the form of Giorgio Germont, a dramatic device that tames and frames her
excess, striving to keep the intrusion of Violetta’s sexuality out of his family. Hutcheon argues that in Verdi’s time, it is believed that tuberculosis was caused by “unrestrained indulgence of the sensual passions” (38). In this regard, Violetta’s decline can be seen as a direct result of her prostitution, a physical manifestation of a deserved moral punishment. Only in her dying moments when she is controllable and disposable does Germont verbalize embracing her as his own daughter. How convenient for him. Her dying instruction is for Alfredo to remarry as he desires, knowing she will be blessing their union from heaven. Violetta’s overt grief, her regrets at “dying so young, when she has suffered so long... so close to happiness” reads as nothing but feminine excess. Her fits of rage, juxtaposed by brief episodes of saintly calmness, represent the feminine hysteria that McClary and Clément recognize as typical methods of creating drama in opera. Recognizing their mistake at having abandoned her, when in truth her soul is so true and pure, the men too lament: “No, non morrai, non dirmelo - dei viver, amor mio” (Ah, you will not die, don’t tell me so - You must live, my love). La Traviata becomes in its end a story of “Oh God! Her situation is awful! If only we had known the truth and could have acted differently!” This is a tubercular text that offers no genuine authentic contact between the dying and the mourning, where the dying is stuck in her state of denial until the very end and comes to no acceptance of her own death narrative. Her story is constructed not to dissipate grief, but for maximum display of dramatic emotion. In the face of so much sadness, regret, misunderstanding, and utter tragic loss, an audience sees Traviata as a spectacle of how things can go very wrong, a model of how not to die.

The same disease but in a different setting, we go forward 40 years in time to Puccini’s La Bohème. Mimi is a poor seamstress who stumbles into Rodolfo’s apartment
because her candle had gone out. A romantic evening among friends, full of amiable
interactions and youthful love, and a relationship ensues. Two months later, Rodolfo
reveals to his friends that Mimi is deathly sick, and that he is going to leave her because he,
with his status as a starving artist, has no means to take care of her. Mimi overhears this
and comes to a realization of the severity of her own illness. She eventually leaves Rodolfo,
only to return on her own will on her dying day to Rodolfo’s apartment, “Voglio morir con
lui!”, she knows she is dying and wants to die near him. Having returned to Rodolfo, she
restates her undying love for him as they reminisce about their early days together. She
soon slips away to death on Rodolfo’s bed, surrounded by people who love her.

What are the crucial differences between these two stories? While Violetta needs to
reaffirm her ill-state again and again, Mimi here is surrounded by friends who recognize
and acknowledge her disease. It is Rodolfo himself who diagnoses Mimi with illness: “Mimi
è tanto malata!” He declares to Marcello. Told in this way, among good friends, there is no
need for the listener to doubt the validity of disease, no family wealth and reputation is at
stake, only true, compassionate friendship. Rodolfo, Marcello, Schunard, Colline, each of
them understands her sickness as Musetta narrates to them in Act IV: “la veggo passar per
via trascinandosi a stento, mi dice: più non reggo. Muoio! lo sento” (I saw her pass on the
street dragging herself with difficulty, she said to me: “I can’t bear it anymore. I am dying! I
feel it”). Constructed as such, Mimi here is absolved of the burden of narrating her own
illness, delegating the responsibility instead to Musetta, a sympathetic onlooker, who can
quickly declaim the situation without invoking self-pity in the dying.
Arthur Frank points out that one of the most inaccessible of illness stories is the chaos narrative: “in the lived chaos there is no mediation, only immediacy. The body is imprisoned in the frustrated needs of the moment... The person living the chaos story has no distance from her life and no reflective grasp on it” (97). Emotions are displayed at an extreme high, there is little narrative, only outbursts of rage that is unreconciled and unprocessed. In this sense it is Violetta who seems to be living in a narrative of chaos, a polarized delirium that displays her rage and regrets one moment and a saintly calm the other. In contrast to Verdi’s treatment of Violetta, Mimi’s death is not a crucifixion, she is not a saint who dies from being misjudged and misunderstood. Mimi doesn’t make the ultimate sacrifice that Violetta brings herself to in order to have her condition acknowledged. Violetta has to scream in pain for her dying to be understood, while Mimi is granted a mediator, a friend on whom narrative burden is delegated while the dying herself gains space to construct her own story devoid of self-pity, fear of death, or acknowledgement of disease. Compare this to Verdi’s Violetta or even “the other Bohème,” Leoncavallo’s Mimi, both of whom bear the burden of narrating their own illness; Leoncavallo’s Mimi even goes to the extent of affectedly declaiming the precise number and location of her hospital bed, milking as much pity as she can out of her listeners: “I remained in hospital a whole month. You know, at St. Louis, Sainte Victoire ward, bed twenty! That’s the whole story.” While this approach elicits much sympathy in the audience, it is to little redemptive effect, but rather utilizing self-pity and victimization, a “I am suffering so much, why me?” approach to narrating disease.

By creating a dying heroine that does not have to fight and struggle for her disease-state to be recognized and validated, Puccini presents a decline and a death that can be
fully embraced and realized for its potential to create meaning. Puccini himself acknowledges that his goal for Mimi’s death is to fill it with redemptive quality: “*Bohème* is a story about a girl who dies less for herself and a little more for the one who loved her” (Groos 51). With this purpose in mind, we can take a look at the dramatic features of Act IV that are deliberately constructed to leave Rodolfo in a position where he can mourn effectively and not end up like Alfredo: vowing to continue to cry for as long as he has tears. Part of this redemptive quality is evident in her great poetic moment, “Sono andati? Fingevo di dormire,” where Mimi displays an uncharacteristic moment of eloquence.

The physical embodiment of poetry herself, Mimi is actually not very good with words: when pressed to churn out witty poetry in Act II, Mimi declares, “Love is sweeter than honey, sweeter than honey!” We find her curiously eloquent though in “Sono andati?”, Mimi’s loving words stand in stark contrast to Violetta’s last moments; instead of a self-wallowing lament, Mimi instead presents an poetic reaffirmation of love: “Sono andati? Fingevo di dormire. Perche volli con te sola restare. Ho tante cose che ti voglio dire, o una sola ma grande come il mare. Come il mare profonda ed infinita. Sei mio amore e tutta la mia vita!” (Have they gone yet? I was pretending to sleep, because I want to be alone with you. I have many things that I want to tell you, or only one but one as large as the sea. Like the sea, profound and infinite. You are my love and my entire life!) While these flowing stanzas can be attributed to something like divine inspiration, it is important to note that Mimi sets up this opportunity to be alone with Rodolfo by pretending to sleep so that all the other Bohemians would leave. With this knowledge, it becomes viable that “Sono andati?” is part of Mimi’s plan, a final declaration of love that is prepared, rehearsed beforehand. Mimi, when pressed to create poetry in a spontaneous setting, achieves poor results, but
when given the time to form and process her thoughts, she achieves articulate eloquence that is clear, free of chaos and uncertainty, and precisely planned. The unchaotic distance she gains from not having to again and again explain her illness creates space for reflection and premeditation, granting Mimi the agency to create a death the way she wants to, to die “less for herself and a little more for the one who loved her.” Verdi’s Violetta and Leoncavallo’s Mimi both claim that their final reunion has come far too late: “tardi giungeste!” Violetta exclaims; “è troppo tardi!” protests Leoncavallo’s Mimi. Puccini’s Mimi on the other hand will never claim that her final reunion with Rodolfo is too late. Having planned it all herself, she knows that their meeting comes at the right time.

Another feature of a tubercular death that Puccini has reoriented for a redemptive purpose is the dying woman’s denial of her own illness. While both women deny their illness on their deathbed, they do so with completely different sentiments. Violetta, newly reunited with Alfredo, declares that they shall all go to church and thank God for their reunion. When Alfredo protests at her health, she sings in reply, with a deceiving trill only to collapse on the ground immediately, drained of strength:

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singing in this case can be interpreted as Violetta feigning a display of false strength: in denying her illness, Violetta makes a pathetic lie to herself. Verdi confirms this sentiment by setting the text to a series of trills. In *La Traviata*, coloratura always characterizes a self-deluding lie. Her denial adds to the effect of *Traviata’s* tragedy. The trilling can also represent her fragile and dying, shrill voice, one she can no longer keep steady. In this case, her disease is finally heard, literally projected through her voice. Alfredo’s immediate reply, “Ah cruda sorte!” (Oh cruel fate!) seems to characterize a reaction to either possibility. This denial of one’s sickness in the height of the disease is common among tubercular texts, both Murger’s original Mimi and Leoncavallo’s Mimi share this trait of illness denial in their final moments of life.

Contrast this to Mimi’s “Piangi? Sto bene. Piangi cosi perche?” (You’re crying? I’m fine. Why do you cry like this?) This is uttered too in short phrases, just like Violetta’s shortness of breath.

The difference is that Mimi’s denial of her illness is not a denial at all, it is made with the full realization of her imminent death: in her penultimate sentence, “I’m fine” becomes not
a direct denial of her health, but rather a declaration of her mental state, her spiritual acceptance of her fate. Not needing to struggle for her disease to be heard and understood like Violetta, Mimi does not carry the burden of being the only one who knows her doomed fate. She is “fine” with her own dying, happy that her last wishes have been fulfilled: to have warm hands and to die near Rodolfo. Note too, the difference in the two women’s tone. Violetta rushes through her phrases, a passage that rushes faster and faster until her physical collapse. Accomplice in her lie, the orchestra assumes a new sonic character of nervous arpeggiation. In contrast, underscoring Mimi’s “denial” of her illness is a theme taken from “Che gelida manina” and “O suave fanciulla,” two crucial moments from Act I, that fateful Christmas eve when Mimi and Rodolfo first met. The original lyrics read “Say that you love me,” to which Mimi replies “I love you.” It is with this sentiment of the initial blossoming of love that Mimi declares “I’m fine.”

Leoncavallo’s *Bohème* tries to achieve a similar sentiment by having his Mimi, too, recall a happier time. Her dying words are “Goodbye Rodolfo. Christmas! Christmas!” This, Atlas argues, is less effective than Puccini’s orchestral quotation because it outright points out the reference Mimi is trying to make, as opposed to having the orchestra wordlessly quoting that exchange of loving words. “Leoncavallo’s Mimi possesses little of her counterpart’s courage and sense of dramatic direction” (60). The Puccini Mimi’s final moment is not this Leoncavallo Mimi’s straight-forward reference, nor is it the nervous rushing of Violetta’s pent up rage, but rather an acceptance of her condition, supported by happy remembrance. It is as if this Mimi, not Violetta, is the one who has taken to heart Germont’s advice to “have courage” in the face of her illness.
Agency to one’s own fate, even when that fate is inevitable, is another distinction in Puccini’s adaptation. Mimi’s suffering, unlike Violetta’s, is a choice. *Bohème*’s librettist Illica confirms this in a letter to Ricordi, when reconsidering what to revise in a draft of the libretto: “Think how much greater, how much more moving would be a Mimi who – although she can by this time live with a lover the viscount Paolo who keeps her in silks and velvets – when she feels that tuberculosis is killing her goes to die in the desolate, cold attic, just to die in Rodolfo’s arms” (Girardi 111). She gains agency over her own body and claims the disease as her own. Once Rodolfo admits that he can’t take care of her, she could have immediately left him for the “dandy of a viscount” who would be able to afford to warm and feed her. Instead she carries on with Rodolfo throughout the winter so that he would not have to be “soli d’inverno” (alone in winter). “Staying with Rodolfo, when all he can offer is the heat of his own body, is playing with death. But that is what she decides to do” (Clément 85). This is the difference where Violetta, the wronged saint, waits for her moment of absolution when the Germonts will return to her, repentant. In *Bohème*, it is Rodolfo instead who does the waiting, “O Mimi tu piu non torni?”; it is Mimi herself who has the agency to return. Given the chance to choose, and choosing death (denying the chance to life/the delaying of decline), gives Mimi’s love a noble character that grants meaning to her life through the power of personal agency.

In this sense, Mimi, through the course of the opera, instead of remaining a passive figure “to whom things just happen” as Carner said, evolves as a character, gaining her personal agency through both situational and language control. She, pressured by the existential crisis of impending death, evolves from being unable to create a better metaphor than “love is sweeter than honey” to creating poetry profound and redemptive
beyond Rodolfo’s pretty but empty eloquence. She also utilizes personal agency through scripting her end, she does more for herself than merely wait, like Violetta, to be loved and then be killed. Frank calls this kind of preparation the “quest narrative,” a process that focuses on the “ill person’s perspective and holds chaos at bay” (115). Mimi contributes her personal influence over her disease narrative in a way that Violetta does not. In the space between the penultimate and the final acts of their operas, Mimi has processed and accepted her feelings towards dying, off-stage, in a way Violetta never achieved. Resulting from this unchaotic narrative that has the agency of perspective and planning, Rodolfo is left at the end of the opera with the tools at his disposal to process his grief for Mimi. Kubler-Ross explains this as the stage of acceptance in death preparation: “acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for the final rest before the long journey” (102). It is Violetta who has never reached this stage, running around in delirium before collapsing. It is Mimi who has deliberately planned her rest before the long journey, surrounded by those who love her. Rodolfo mourns effectively, not from having witnessed chaos, but from experiencing Mimi’s deliberate organization of her own death, a quest narrative that reclaims the illness not as something that-inflicts her and degrades her into senselessness, but as something she owns.

But is this breakthrough of a disease narrative with redemptive qualities really an innovation of Puccini’s? Is Verdi simply going for one trick off the playbook of popular 19th century disease stories while Puccini goes for another? In legitimizing this innovation of disease agency, it is useful to look at other tubercular texts that lead to and inspire both of these operas. The chronology and qualities of these texts are outlined in the accompanying
Tubercular Table, and will detail the development of these texts that, over time, go on to inform each other’s dramatic constructions, enabling us a synoptic view of tubercular narratives surrounding these two operatic adaptations across the late nineteenth century.

The first text involved in the genesis of Puccini’s *La Bohème* is Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, an 1845-49 collection of short stories published in the magazine *Le Corsaire*. Note that this edition is a series of short stories without an overarching plot, and its ending does not contain a tubercular ending for Mimi. The collection does not end with Mimi’s consumptive death among Bohemian friends, but instead features a Mimi who disappears from Rodolfo’s life without a trace. It is only in *La Dame aux camélias*, Dumas fils’ novel of 1848, which is the basis of Verdi’s *Traviata*, do we locate the first tubercular death among these texts. *Camélias* features the consumptive courtesan Marguerite and her young lover Armand, the prototypical tubercular couple. With the quick popularity of *Camélias*, it is beyond mere coincidence but more likely blatant plagiarism that in 1849, Murger and Barriere’s adaptation of the original short stories of *Bohème* into a popular stage play would utilize the exact same dramatic construction. In the same way that Armand’s father forbids Marguerite to continue seeing his son, Murger and Barriere’s *Bohème* has Duradin, Rodolfo’s uncle, cast Mimi aside and arranges for Rodolfo a more politically suitable marriage. *Bohème* the play outright borrows the “father who forbids their love” construction from the *Camélias* novel. What it invents, however, is the final reunion trope, where Duradin and Rodolfo are reunited with Mimi, shocked at the tragic mistake they have made (the details of this initial “borrowing” is greatly detailed in Girardi’s “From a feud to a libretto” 103 – 112). An amusing anecdote exists where, in the process of creating this stage adaptation, Murger intends to create a new happy ending where Mimi takes a
trip to Italy and, taking in the fresh Italian air, recovers from her illness. It is Barriere who
convinces Murger to opt instead for the current situation, where Mimi, on her dying day,
unexpectedly arrives at Rodolfo’s garret apartment in order to be with him in her final
moments (Byam 118). At this point we can see the beginnings of the plot points
instrumental in forming La Traviata, but little of the redemptive innovations of Puccini’s
Bohème.

Another amusing exchange of dramatic situations occur in Murger’s adaptation of
the Bohème short stories into a novel in 1851, where he reverts the ending back to a Mimi
who dies alone, without a final reunion with Rodolfo; the couple’s final exchanges instead
are conducted over hand-written letters (a situation, again we can speculate, lifted
blatantly off of Dumas fils’ Camélia novel). The very next year, in Dumas fils’ own 1852
stage adaptation of Camélia, he too changes the ending of the story, having Marguerite
instead be reunited in her final moments with Armand, performing a reverse-stealing from
Murger and Barriere.

The Mimi of Murger’s Bohème at this point exists very closely related to Dumas’
Marguerite and Verdi’s Violetta, she is uninformed of the severity of her illness and is
disillusioned by hopes of impending health: “While I take care of myself you will work to
earn money, and when I am cured I shall come to live with you. I am very optimistic now. I
will become as beautiful as ever... I shall be cured for I certainly will protect myself from
sickness” (Murger 290). This is a Mimi who performs Frank’s restitution narrative,
dwelling on the false hope of regaining health, “attempting to outdistance mortality by
rendering illness transitory” (115). Puccini’s Mimi, instead of imagining a better future,
strives instead to organize her death into meaning. Murger’s Mimi also clings to her vitality in her final moments. Like Violetta, she feels life returning to her and rejoices in that delusion, “Give me the looking glass. Yes, my good color is returning so soon!” (Murger 290). This is a Mimi that denies her fate, one that is afraid of her illness, a far cry from Puccini’s eventual Mimi, who has no misconceptions on the extent of her sickness.

From these whimsical exchanges and borrowings of dramatic situations then, we arrive at 1853 when Verdi and Piave penned La Traviata, using La Dame aux camélias the play as the basis (Verdi having seen the premiere in Paris merely a year before). It is now clear from the stated chronology that Verdi takes the “father who forbids their love” construction from Dumas fils, while taking the “final reunion and death among friends” situation from Murger and Barriere (through Dumas fils’ initial borrowing of Murger/Barriere). In this light, Verdi did little to improve upon the dramatic situation already established for him, opting instead to adapt the drama as-is. His Violetta and Alfredo, while they employ different names, are merely musical adaptations, carrying the same dramatic fate as Murger’s Rodolfo and Mimi, and Dumas’s Marguerite and Armand.

We now see that the very plot features that enable Puccini to create such a redemptive narrative are absent from the source texts that surround and inform his adaptation: that the consumptive woman suffers her disease and owns it without being oppressed into the situation by an overbearing father figure, or having deserved the disease from her sexual excess. Since Puccini clearly draws no direct source for these interpretations, we can assume that they are his own inventions. Notice how in the original Camélias novel, the Camélias play, the Bohème play, and in La Traviata, the disapproving
father figure becomes the central turning point of the dramatic situation, no matter if she is Marguerite, Violetta, or Mimi, she is not good enough in the eyes of her respective masculine frame. Notice too how in the Bohème short story, the Bohème novel, in Leoncavallo's Bohème, and indeed in early stages of Puccini's own Bohème, Mimi's flirty and flighty nature is the source of conflict and dramatic climax in the respective texts. We can locate Puccini's innovation here then in his rejection of both models of creating narrative movement, constructions which would not enable Mimi from being a truly innocent sufferer of disease. “Puccini neither was able nor wanted to be in competition with La Traviata: in the operatic world obvious models had to be avoided” (Girardi 108). Puccini and Illica's biggest dramatic difference compared to La Traviata is coming up with this new death model, one that breaks from the original Dumas, Murger, and Barriere sources without reusing their tried and tired repetitions. Hutcheon here points out the obvious, Puccini's Mimi is “rather different from Violetta's dramatic collapse in her lover's arms, singing “oh joy!” (57). Indeed Girardi points to the short-lived successes of works that “adhere to such stereotyped dramatic formulas” of the original tubercular model in Murger's Bohème as exampled by an overarching sandwich of a timeline in Musset's Mimi Pinson (1854) to Leoncavallo's La Bohème (1897): in four decades of tubercular adaptations, the only lasting one is the one that turns a death of pathetic spectacle into redemptive mourning.

From this chronology we can see too, that Leoncavallo, who was working on his very own Bohème simultaneously alongside Puccini, restricts himself closely to the original novel and short stories. Leoncavallo paints Mimi as a flirt who dances around from lover to lover under Rodolfo's very eyes. It is this very construction, including an act of the opera
where Mimi displays outright her flirtatious nature that prevents Leoncavallo’s *Bohème* from being a redemptive text, for this Mimi falls prey again to Clément and McClary’s theory: her flirtatious nature brings her ruin and therefore she is deserving of her disease. Puccini realizes early on the ineffectiveness of displaying Mimi’s flirting, and he eliminates against the wishes of his librettists a whole act from his final libretto which centered around Mimi flirting with the viscount Paolo.

That Puccini creates a Mimi that merely coughs and faints, downplaying the extreme physical symptoms of tuberculosis liberally exploited in previous tubercular texts, also assists in creating a heroine that is able to wield personal agency over her disease. Leoncavallo’s Mimi is instructed to “hurl herself on a morsel of bread, but let it fall and burst into a flood of tears. Rodolfo rushes to her, also weeping, falls on his knees.” Mimi then sings: “Rodolfo forgive me! Rodolfo forgive me!” This display of Mimi’s frailty invokes a shock in the audience with no intention of redemptive qualities. One cannot imagine Puccini’s Mimi in this state, starving and pathetic, deathly hungry but unable to lift a crumb of bread. Adding to this effect, Leoncavallo’s Mimi suddenly becomes blind in her final moments of life, another feature that degrades Mimi’s disease into shock value. The same is true in other tubercular texts that precede Puccini: Murger’s Mimi takes off her shawl to reveal a figure so drained of muscle it seems inhuman; Dumas’s Marguerite loses the ability to move her limbs; Verdi’s Violetta runs around in delirium; Puccini’s Mimi, as we know, only coughs, faints, and finds it hard to climb stairs. Clément too points to this uniquely whole and clear-headed Mimi: “at the moment of death she does not complain. She does not even have Violetta’s tiny rebellion, her violent lament over dying so young. Everything she sings is as gentle as a caress” (87). In creating a tubercular narrative that refuses to
capitalize on the shock factor of physical degeneration, Puccini’s Mimi is able to transcend from merely being a spectacle of disease and create space for redemptive meaning in her illness.

Having eliminated these shock devices, leaving us instead with an opera with the smallest thread of plot, Puccini gives room for the new effect he intended to create in opera: that of the redemptive death. “A real dramatic conflict is missing, the tragic element is entirely created by Mimi’s illness” (Marggraf 67). Hutcheon and Hutcheon argue that operas like Bohème “allow its consoling message to help spectators face life’s conflicts differently” (Hutcheon Art of Dying 38). Notice another commonality between Murger’s Mimi, Verdi’s Violetta, Leoncavallo’s Mimi, all these tubercular heroines turn to religion in their final moments, either finding comfort in God and heaven or bemoan to Him their plight. “Ah, gran Dio!” the three of them all implore God as part of their dying. Puccini’s Mimi is the sole tubercular woman who does not do this. Her closest to mentioning religion is when she explains herself to Rodolfo back in Act I, “non vado sempre a messa, ma prego assai il signore” (I don’t always go to Mass, but I often pray to God). As early as the turn of the nineteenth century, we can already see divine imploration lose its place of importance in the dying process.

In an age where the doctrines of religion no longer solely govern the ways by which we evaluate and process the act of dying, dramatized ideal deaths create a space where such death contemplation can be made. Instead of Mimi herself imploring God, she has evolved beyond that. We have in her place a futile Musetta who prays to the Virgin Mary in the final moments of the opera, after Mimi has died. Puccini here precisely pinpoints the
ineffectiveness of divine imploration. Mimi herself mentions nothing of being an angel in heaven or seeking comfort in God, as the other tubercular women who precede her seem to do. Puccini’s innovations in this case seems to point to a death model that deals with a redemption not associated with the divine, but rather with those left behind on earth.

“When modern urban life ceases to make time for death, art tries to keep alive an awareness of it” (Hutcheon 113). Because illness is the only problem in this narrative, finding a way to create redemptive meaning beyond that of dramatic martyrdom out of inevitable illness becomes the central tenet to Bohème. This tenet is completely absent in Traviata, where Violetta’s death serve no meaning beyond a display of selfless sacrifice, spurned love, and endless excess of chaotic emotion.

It has always been easy to see Violetta and Mimi as twin sisters, and while their stories have been recognized as similar, their narratives must be acknowledged as different. By differentiating these women’s narratives, sorting for the quest among the chaos, we arrive at Puccini’s triumph in Bohème, the first Italian opera that strives “to hear the quest in narrative stories” (116 Frank). Mimi goes to her final rest in a state of “acceptance, an existence without fear and despair” (Kubler-Ross 107). Through viewing aestheticized dying like Mimi’s death in Bohème, Italian opera audiences for the first time gain a death model from which to orient their understanding of a good way to die.
“Altro di me non le saprei narrare”: moving on with *Bohème*

Puccini is a composer often spurned for his approachability. He is understood by today’s opera houses and opera-going audience as a mass-market artist, a gateway composer for the uninitiated. Having examined the gendered operatic conventions and its disease narrative, we now realize that such a simplified understanding of Puccini is biased and uninformed, born from an unwillingness to read beyond the basic veneer of his masterful writing. Such a reading devalues the veristic narrative of Boheme as entry-level and commercial, choosing to uphold other texts instead for their unapproachable and mystified density. It is this pervasive reading that denies *La Bohème* its true spirit as a truly nuanced and redemptive text, and while today’s opera-producing industry will survive perfectly fine leaving their understanding of *Bohème* at its most shallow level, doing so betrays the potential to display the many facets of Puccini’s masterful and innovative construction.

It is now clear that Puccini has done much more than “boy meets girl, girl dies.” Upon such a simple framework, no need to involve world-consuming fires, Puccini has created an opera that can be read across the spectrum of complexity, and has created in Mimi a breakthrough in operatic philosophy, one as significant as any of Wagner’s. In Mimi, Puccini has invented an Italian heroine whose romance is not two-dimensional but nuanced with taint and misunderstanding, an operatic woman who dies of natural disease and not masculine oppression, and a soprano who can be appreciated and understood for her agency over her own fate, without needing to display her vocal fireworks in order to draw attention.
It is too easy for us, an audience conditioned to read Italian opera for its dramatic excess, to misread Mimi as bland and mundane, a girl who makes silk flowers and stares at the sun. The opera and the industry that surrounds it will survive another three decades of straightforward Bohème productions like Franco Zeffirelli’s at the Metropolitan Opera, but in doing so we lose out the work’s ability to display so much more. Located beneath Bohème’s simplicity is a subtle essence of a very clear headed heroine devoid of feminine hysteria, one that resists masculine domination, taking control of her own fate and ending – a new kind of operatic woman. It is this possibility for us to view Mimi as a woman with personal agency, as opposed to a dramatized caricature of femininity, that is the great social utility of La Bohème. We cannot find that essence of redemptive meaning in Violetta, nor can we in Leoncavallo’s Mimi, for we do not want our final breath to be about regret and delusion. Like Mimi, we want to die clear-headed, in a state of acceptance. This is the best we can achieve of a cultural product: the ability to create new perspectives on our own lives from having viewed and understood it in art, in this case an art of dying that offers a model for what we can look for when we witness death and dying, and for when we ourselves eventually die.
Bibliography


Notes on libretto quotation

All libretto text and musical figures quoted in this paper from Puccini’s *La Bohème*, Verdi’s *La Traviata*, and Leoncavallo’s *La Bohème* are sourced from the following vocal scores from the International Music Score Library Project at www.imslp.org.

All translations from Italian are my own.


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<td>Novel</td>
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<td>Dumas</td>
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<td>Marguerite dies alone</td>
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<td>Play</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>Murger and Barriere</td>
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