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# From Literary Page to Operatic Stage: Manon's Tragic Voice of Her Own

by Andrew Miller

THE DESTINY OF THE figure of Manon created by Jules Massenet and his librettists Henri Meilhac and Philippe Gille resembles that of Prévost's titillating heroine on whom she is based.<sup>1</sup> Sent to a convent by her family in order to cure her of her penchant for venal pleasures, Manon flees and engages in a pattern of fatally self-destructive illicit behavior. Massenet, Meilhac, and Gille remain faithful to Prévost's concept of the heroine as an instable figure constantly moving from one perilous adventure to another. Nevertheless, a noteworthy difference emerges between the literary and operatic renderings of Manon's initial trip to the convent due to the changing prominence of the heroine's voice.

In Prévost's *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, first published in 1731, Des Grieux retrospectively relates the heroine's origins to his sympathetic interlocutor, the Marquis de Renoncour. Des Grieux states: "[. . .] c'était malgré elle qu'on l'envoyait au couvent, pour arrêter sans doute son penchant au plaisir [. . .]" (59). The function of Des Grieux's utterance as free indirect discourse renders impossible the task of attributing the statement definitively to Manon.<sup>2</sup> Prévost prevents the reader from determining with certainty whether the utterance emanates from the heroine or from her admirer, whether he is quoting her directly, or whether he is drawing an inference as to her problematic history. More generally the statement typifies an ambiguity that recurs throughout the novel: Manon's inability to speak for herself.<sup>3</sup>

From the corresponding operatic dialogue composed by Meilhac and Gille, however, Manon emerges in a wholly different perspective. The librettists have Manon address Des Grieux:

Je ne suis pas mauvaise, Mais souvent  
On m'accuse dans ma famille  
D'aimer trop le plaisir.  
On me met au couvent  
Tout à l'heure. (Massenet 89)

The heroine herself communicates her situation, which in turn raises broad questions about her vocal autonomy in the opera and how the creators of *Manon* enable her to exploit it. Manon's death in the novel and opera helps explain the changing prominence of her voice from the literary page to the operatic stage.

In the opening pages of the novel, Prévost reveals his heroine's death through Des Grieux. The hero's disclosure sets in motion the narrative of their fatal love affair, which he mediates retrospectively in the first person. Prévost also inserts into his novel a rhetorical frame in the figure of Renoncour, a second male narrator who transcribes verbatim Des Grieux's oral account. With Renoncour, Prévost authenticates Manon's death. It emerges as a factual occurrence in the fictive transcriber's autobiographical memoirs entitled *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité qui s'est retiré du monde*, of which the author publishes *Manon Lescaut* as the seventh and final installment.<sup>4</sup> By authenticating the heroine's death, Prévost greatly enhances her alluring air of mystery.

Prévost presents the heroine's death as real while building suspense and drama around it. Renoncour, by his rank and age, functions as a surrogate father figure in whom the youthful Des Grieux freely confides.<sup>5</sup> The male narrators' alliance further mystifies Manon, whose humble origins alienate her from both men. In addition, Renoncour paradoxically enables the heroine's death at once to precede and follow the story, as Des Grieux relates her demise to him in two separate narrative time zones.<sup>6</sup> The tale of Manon's death, related by the hero to his interlocutor in a series of flashbacks, acquires circularity. Prévost relates the climactic event twice: implicitly in the opening pages through Renoncour's descriptions of Des Grieux's solitude upon returning from New Orleans and explicitly in the closing pages through Des Grieux's account of his traumatizing journey with her to New Orleans. The climactic event marks the conclusion of Des Grieux's story and occurs in the final pages of the novel. It also curiously invites Renoncour, Des Grieux, and the reader to return to the opening of the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

With his frame and the recurrence of Manon's death in the novel, Prévost deprives his heroine of a voice of her own, transforming her into a distant enigma.<sup>8</sup> No such artifice exists in Massenet's opera, in which the heroine's death signals the definitive conclusion to the plot. Her death in the fourth act lends *Manon* an intimacy that its literary source lacks due to its complicated circular structure. Prévost favors Manon's death. *Manon*, however, features first and foremost the living heroine of whom, unlike Prévost, Massenet, Meilhac, and Gille cast Des Grieux as a submissive follower (Branger 261–62). Massenet evokes the intimacy of *Manon*, its prevailing focus on the tragic inner conflict the heroine enacts on stage, in his account of the genesis of his opera.

In his memoirs Massenet recalls feeling inspired to compose *Manon* upon

spying a copy of Prévost's novel in Meilhac's private library, during the autumn of 1881. The following exchange ensued:

- MASSENET. "*Manon!*" m'écria-je, en montrant du doigt le livre à Meilhac.  
 MEILHAC. *Manon Lescaut*, c'est *Manon Lescaut* que vous voulez?  
 MASSENET. Non! *Manon*, *Manon* tout court; *Manon*, c'est *Manon!* (152).<sup>9</sup>

From a linguistic perspective, Massenet's account reveals a preoccupation on the composer's part both with Manon's troubling destiny and with her communication of that destiny. The peculiar coupling of the French possessive "ma" with the negative "non" emerges as the cornerstone of Manon's identity, or its loss, and of Massenet's entire opera. The composer seems to deny everyone, including Manon, the ability to appropriate the heroine. On stage Manon herself loses her vocal autonomy in the finale. Never fully available to Des Grieux because of her passion for worldly pleasures, she deploys and ultimately forfeits her voice, her most potent instrument of self-expression, and then her life. In an enactment of the fatal consequences of female desire, she lives and dies knowing that her passion necessitated her death.

Indeed the creators of *Manon* favor the heroine's live body and her redemptive performance of her death over her death itself and all the troubling gestures of narration with which it is associated in the novel. Resuscitated on the stage of the Opéra-Comique, Manon possesses what Peter Rabinowitz, in a reading of Bizet's *Carmen* that is relevant to *Manon*, surmises to be an ability to speak, think, gesture, and sing for herself (136). From the autonomy of the operatic Manon and of her voice follows an additional question with respect to how many liberties the composer and his librettists allow her to take both from the substantive standpoint of discourse and from the technical standpoint of musical virtuosity. Massenet's heroine, as Rabinowitz argues with respect to *Carmen*, possesses "agency," a natural ability to express herself on her own terms, because of the status of *Manon* as a work of nineteenth-century opera.

Rabinowitz begins with the assumption that nineteenth-century opera is an eminently narrative genre open to the same avenues of literary analysis as Modernist fiction. Quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabinowitz (compares *Carmen* and) might compare *Manon* with Dostoevsky's "polyphonic" novels in which "the self-presentation of various literary characters is, in fact, differentially represented in a text" (136). Massenet's opera would seem to favor for each character, including Manon, "the free self-elucidation of the character's points of view" (Rabinowitz 136). In the words of Rabinowitz, Manon's inherent "free self-elucidation," or "agency," and "what she does with it" constitute separate issues (142).

The circularity of Prévost's novel diminishes the reliability of the heroine's repentance. It hinders the reader from knowing "whether Manon's

taste for pleasure would have been eclipsed in the end by her conversion to virtue" (Miller 70). The operatic heroine's repentance seems reliable, however, because she articulates it herself and because the linearity of the libretto's plot precludes the re-telling of the story. Accordingly, press reviews dating from January 1884 suggest that most critics embraced *Manon* because, for them, the heroine emerged through her singing as a seductive courtesan who understood that she had to die to absolve herself of her venality (Branger 141–60). A close reading of the libretto and score confirms the effect of Manon's voice. It reveals that the creators of *Manon* enable their heroine to convey, tragically, her understanding that her sexuality and her fascination with it necessitate her death.

The figure of the courtesan, fatally debilitated by her desire and absolved eternally in death, dates to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, published in 1780. An important personage in countless French novels and plays, she migrates to Italian opera in *La Traviata*.<sup>10</sup> Massenet attaches great importance to her during his career, as evidenced by works of his that came both before and after *Manon*, including his oratorio *Marie-Magdeleine* and his operas *Eve*, *Hérodiade*, *Thaïs*, and *Le Roi de Lahore*. The subject of *Manon* is steeped in literary and musical traditions that span the nineteenth century, and the heroine herself is no newcomer to the operatic stage.

Eugène Scribe portrayed her as a somewhat flirtatious but essentially innocent victim in his libretto to the 1856 comic opera *Manon Lescaut* by Daniel François-Esprit Auber. Giacomo Puccini and Hans Werner Henze, whose *Manon Lescaut* and *Boulevard Solitude* respectively follow *Manon* in 1893 and 1952, retain many of the themes and characters from Prévost's novel; nevertheless, Puccini's and Henze's aesthetic distance from Massenet situates them in different cultural categories from the French composer. With their depiction of Manon's erotic potential as a courtesan, Massenet, Meilhac, and Gille approach Prévost more closely than their predecessors in all dramatic genres. Their emphasis upon the heroine's guilt simultaneously differentiates *Manon* from subsequent operatic adaptations of the novel. Massenet and his librettists combine a faithfulness to the characters and plot of Prévost's novel with a focus on the heroine's expression of her guilt that, at the time, was new to any musical staging of Prévost's fiction.

Due to their opposition to Manon's lack of a voice in the novel and to their dramatic function as a vehicle for solo voice, the heroine's airs furnish a helpful point of departure from which to consider the impact of her voice in the opera. Of the fifteen airs in the opera, Guillot and Des Grieux's father each sing one, Des Grieux sings two, Lescaut sings four, and Manon sings seven, more than any of the other protagonists individually and almost as many as all of them combined. Five of Manon's airs, according to Jean-Christophe Branger, qualify as airs "de bravoure" and two as "lyriques."<sup>11</sup> In addition to being superior in number of airs vis-à-vis those of the other characters, Manon's airs enable the heroine to communicate

her dilemma both through the power of the words she utters and through the weight of the virtuosity of the music she sings.<sup>12</sup>

With their staging of Manon's first air, "Je suis encor tout étourdie," Meilhac and Gille permit their heroine to express her impossible position freely. Manon en route to a convent makes her entry by alighting from a coach ferrying travelers to and from an inn at Amiens. Situating her in the midst of bustling riders who clamor for their luggage, the librettists present a young girl attempting to locate her identity within a broad, encompassing social scheme that, as the story develops, nearly stifles her persona. Meilhac and Gille stress, as Gérard Condé states, the curiosity of an adolescent "qui découvre le monde" (57).<sup>13</sup> The librettists have the heroine initiate a process of self-discovery that helps precipitate her downfall, as confirmed by the text and by Manon's musical virtuosity in the air.

Meilhac and Gille permit Manon to express her fascination with her surroundings and her relationship to them. She begins with her refrain:

Je suis encor tout étourdie

---

Pardonnez à mon bavardage,  
J'en suis à mon premier voyage! (Massenet, *Manon* 44–45).

Manon conveys a sense of vibrant jubilation at the novelty of her journey, as the composer and his librettists have her explore the limits of her vocal expression. The heroine switches moods and singing easily, accelerating through the refrain and delivering the first verse in a less emotionally charged, more narrative style. In this verse Manon designates in narrative fashion the things and people she observes while riding, evokes the speed with which she races by them, and describes the impact that viewing them exerts upon her:

Le coche s'éloignait à peine,  
Que j'admirais de tous mes yeux,  
Les hameaux, les grands bois, la plaine,  
Les voyageurs jeunes et vieux. (Massenet, *Manon* 45)

Manon revels in her perceptions of the world around her, her gaze slipping from object to object and then to the individuals she views. The heroine embarks on a linguistic train that mimics the rapidly moving coach.

It also accentuates her state of emotional confusion, which she communicates more explicitly in the middle of the second verse. After articulating her initial joy, Manon recalls her instantaneous swings to sadness and back to joy with bursts of laughter, accompanied by changes in tempo:

Puis j'eus un moment de tristesse  
Je pleurais, je ne sais pourquoi.  
L'instant d'après, je le confesse,  
Je riaais, Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! (Massenet, *Manon* 47–48).

Modifications in tempo coincide precisely with changes in the heroine's emotional state, and the use of the simple past with the predicate "eus" reinforces the brevity of the moment. Into revisions to the air he composed for the soprano Sibyl Sanderson, Massenet introduced a technique that enhances Manon's singing (Branger 100-01).<sup>14</sup> This enabled the diva to hold the syllable "ais" in "raïas" to a rapidly and extensively descending series of pitches. Typically, as Branger observes, the airs of gallantry in *Manon* feature participation either from a chorus or from other soloists, "Je suis encor tout étourdie" being the only exception (348). The heroine's speech and singing imply a figure at once attempting to explore her expressiveness and aware of restrictions imposed upon her by societal norms. Prévost's Manon, unable to sing or speak for herself, remains forever in the shadows of the past that the author creates with his literary frame.

The text of the operatic Manon's second air "Voyons, Manon, plus de chimères" illustrates even more explicitly than that of her first air the heroine's inner struggle. Meilhac and Gille divide it into three sections, the first of which dramatizes the heroine's major problem. Responding to her cousin's entreaty that she control herself, the heroine quickly establishes an opposition between her curiosity about the world and herself on the one hand, and her knowledge of the threat her curiosity represents on the other:

Voyons, Manon, plus de chimères,  
Où va ton esprit en rêvant?  
Laisse ces désirs éphémères  
A la porte de ton couvent! (Massenet, *Manon* 77-78).

The above-quoted inner conflict also dominates the text of the second and third sections, in which Manon externalizes the envy she feels upon seeing the elegant clothes and jewelry worn by Guillot's mistresses Pousette, Javotte, and Rosette.

The third section bears consideration due to rhetorical gestures that Meilhac and Gille empower Manon to commit: "Ah! Combien ce doit être amusant/[...] /Voyons, Manon, voyons, Manon, plus de chimères!" (Massenet, *Manon* 79-80). Manon subtly turns the appeal of the mistresses into a tool with which to fashion her own identity. Using the impersonal demonstrative "ce," the heroine displaces the grammatical and dramatic focuses of the text away from the mistresses so that they settle eventually on her. Furthermore, in the conclusion to the air she drops the final line of the first section and, along with it, the allusion to the convent. Manon endeavors to liberate her sensual side as if to assert, as Condé argues, "il n'y est plus question de couvent" (60). She simultaneously dramatizes, however, her impending resistance to that same sensual potential. The composer and his librettists shape Manon in a manner

similar to that of the French novelist Balzac who evokes his redeemed courtesan's "captivating notoriety only the better to annihilate it" later in the story (Bernheimer 40). They establish the prominence of her voice in the beginning of the opera in order to magnify the effect of its disappearance in the finale.

Massenet conveys Manon's struggle musically by maintaining in the first section a slow contemplative tempo, typical of lyrical airs, that permits the heroine's inner conflict to hang heavily in the air. The composer peppers the second section with wide melodic intervals and rapid changes in rhythm to underscore the irrepressibility of her voice. Accompanied in the third section by sharply descending lines in the clarinets, as Condé notes, Manon creates her own personal brand of lyricism, which favors her meditation on herself (60). "Voyons, Manon, plus de chimères" contains little of the virtuosity of Manon's initial air, such as the vocalism composed for Sanderson; however, from a purely musical standpoint it still reinforces her problematic self-discovery. More importantly unlike Massenet, Meilhac, and Gille, Prévost shrouds his Manon in an aura of mystery that prevents her from making any reliable statement as to her own self-worth.

In her second-act air "Adieu, notre petite table" Manon regrets the catastrophic abduction of Des Grieux by Brétigny from the couple's cozy apartment.<sup>15</sup> Apart from her failure to foil Brétigny's plot, she laments her own disingenuousness toward Des Grieux in previous scenes.<sup>16</sup> Meilhac and Gille divide the text of the air into two sections. In the first section they permit the heroine to quote Brétigny who arranges for the abduction:

J'entends cette voix qui m'entraîne  
 Contre ma volonté,  
 "Manon! Manon, tu seras reine,  
 Reine par la beauté." (Massenet, *Manon* 155–56)

The passage above emerges as the rhetorical premise for the concluding section, in which Manon focuses on poeticized memories of her liaison with Des Grieux:

Adieu, notre petite table,  
 Qui nous réunit si souvent!

---

Un même verre était le nôtre,  
 Chacun de nous quand il buvait  
 Y cherchait les lèvres de l'autre  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (Massenet, *Manon* 157–59).

As with Manon's second air, the rhetorical force of "Adieu, notre petite table" resides in the concluding section. The table assumes an active role, as it mediates Manon's union with the hero, and the glass furnishes the

pretext for their loving kiss. The heroine assigns her erotic power to cultural icons that both validate the family values of spectators at the Opéra-Comique and underwrite an attempt on her part to repress her own sexuality.

In their staging of the air at the opera's Paris premiere the composer and his librettists underscored the heroine's repression of her sexuality by having the soprano Marie Heilbronn wear what one journalist described as "une modeste robe de toile bleue peinte" (Toché 79). Additionally, the prop director for the premiere of *Manon* verified that during the performance of the heroine's third air the couple's servant placed only a single glass on the table (Condé 73). Together with Manon's dress, the glass evoked the heroine's endorsement of a more chaste brand of love. The two stage accessories served as visual reminders of her valorization of her physical surroundings over her sexuality.

Nowhere is Manon's fight within herself more apparent than in the passage from the second to the third acts, in which the heroine switches from her mood of grief in the second act back to one of jubilation in the Cours-la-Reine tableau. In terms of erotic appeal the creators of *Manon* allow the heroine to surpass by far Pousette, Javotte, and Rosette, that is, the envied ones. Rather than admire their sexuality as she does in the first act, the heroine actively cultivates her own. Manon enters Cours-la-Reine as a regal figure, "suivie de sa chaise à porteurs, et accompagnée d'un coureur, de deux petits nègres et de porteurs à grande livrée" (*Manon* 78). At the premiere Manon wore a "costume de grande richesse" or elegant costume the appearance of which opposed her diametrically to the far more modest second-act persona (Toché 79). The staging of the scene reinforces the heroine's fascination with her own transformation when, in the initial portion of her air "Je marche sur tous les chemins," she consents to the admiring gazes of Brétigny and the numerous secondary characters surrounding her.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the text of her fourth air, Meilhac and Gille suggest a gradual radiation of the heroine's sexual energy outward, a phenomenon of which Manon appears eminently conscious. The heroine echoes Brétigny's promise to her in the second act as she sings:

Je marche sur tous les chemins  
Aussi bien qu'une souveraine;  
On s'incline, on baise ma main,  
Car par la beauté je suis reine! Je suis reine!

Je suis belle, je suis heureuse! Je suis belle!  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Massenet, *Manon* 205–07).

Manon exhibits an understanding of her sexuality, which a sophisticated French public would associate with courtesans everywhere, and which the heroine ultimately condemns within herself.<sup>18</sup> Her creation of a feminocracy,

which Terry Castle defines as a space “pervaded by female desire, authority, and influence,” underscores her imminent self-effacement (254). In the final lines of the text Manon anticipates her tragic demise with rhetoric that confirms her instability: “Et si Manon devait jamais mourir, / Ce serait dans un éclat de rire” (Massenet, *Manon* 207–08). The unsettling text suggests that Meilhac and Gille never allow Manon to forget her realization of the detrimental effects of her sexuality. Manon, furthermore, articulates vocalisms that Massenet set to the words “reine,” “belle,” and “rire.” As in her initial air, the heroine’s musical virtuosity adds to her inner conflict, for it advertises the sex appeal that emanates from her and that she explicitly condemns in her subsequent airs.

Following “Je marche sur tous les chemins,” Manon sings an air entitled “Gavotte” that Massenet composed specifically for the soprano Marie Roze and that is typically included in contemporary productions.<sup>19</sup> Like with the opening section of the preceding air, the librettists have the heroine urge her onlookers and admirers at Cours-la-Reine to drop their inhibitions and to experience love and life’s other pleasures as carelessly as she does. Nevertheless, with the joy comes regret, and Gille pushes Manon’s articulation of her pleasure and her understanding of its deadly consequences even further in the text he wrote for the “Fabliau—Le Rire de Manon.”<sup>20</sup> The text of the “Fabliau” merits consideration because in it Manon refers to herself revealingly in the third person.

Responding to Bréteign’s designation of her as the queen of love in the middle of the air, she clings to her memory of Des Grieux’s faithful love in the second act and her sorrow over her betrayal of the hero:

Parfois voyant des colombes fidèles  
 Manon les admirait,  
 Et pensait à leurs ailes!  
 Et le soir qui tombait  
 Souvent la retrouvait pensive encor! Manon rêvait. (Massenet, *Manon* 385)

From a musical standpoint, the air seems more appropriate to a concert program than to the opera for which it was composed, due to the artificiality generated by the trills and other elements of virtuosity furnished by the composer (Branger 123). Accordingly in contemporary productions the “Fabliau” is typically dropped in favor of the “Gavotte” in order to maintain the dramatic force of the opera. Musically, however, the quivering instability inscribed into the trill on “ailes” still reinforces Manon’s acceptance of her own transience. The air acquires even greater relevance from a linguistic perspective. Twice Manon refers to herself in the third person, and each time she confirms the inherent conflict surrounding her character by articulating the problematic coupling inscribed into her name.<sup>21</sup> Manon remains permanently inaccessible to Des Grieux due to her impending death. The name “Manon,” when she invokes it, unsettlingly guarantees her fatal inaccessibility to herself.

A similar situation arises with Manon's seventh and final fourth-act air "A nous les amours et les roses!" The heroine urges Des Grieux to gamble, as she embraces the feverish competitiveness of the casino. She sings in rhyming couplets:

La jeunesse se passe,  
La beauté s'efface.

Pour Manon encor  
De l'or! De l'or! Encor! De l'or! (Massenet, *Manon* 320).

Manon's designation of herself, like in the previous air, emerges as her recognition of her own imminent death. Moreover, the heroine's repeated invocation of "or" generates morphologically similar words in French such as "amour" and "mort."

In the opera's finale the composer and his librettists eliminate any confusion as to the ambiguity of the heroine's character. She cites her body as the cause of Des Grieux's and her troubles both musically and discursively.<sup>22</sup> Massenet re-worked the ending to *Manon* in the autumn of 1884, inserting the motif "N'est-ce plus ma main" from her fourth-act duo with Des Grieux (Branger 88–89).<sup>23</sup> Meilhac and Gille furnish revealing lines toward the conclusion of the duo, which serves as a linguistic corollary to Massenet's music. As the finale unfolds, the following words from the fourth-act duo with Des Grieux return to haunt Manon:

Rappelle-toi! N'est-ce plus ma main?  
Ecoute-moi: n'est-ce plus ma voix?  
N'ai-je plus mon nom?  
N'est-ce plus Manon? (Massenet, *Manon* 277–78)

The librettists indicate in the heroine the onset of a mortal identity crisis, as evidenced by the presence of several linguistic markers: "ma main," "mon nom," and "Manon." The markers generate the morphologically related "non" that enables her to erase her own body. Meilhac and Gille confirm the impact of Massenet's music by having the heroine assess her death in her final breath:

Il le faut! Il le faut!  
Et c'est là l'histoire  
De Manon Lescaut. (Massenet, *Manon* 380)

In conclusion, Prévost, making use of literary convention, deprives her of a voice and renders his heroine unknowable. Being a character on the stage of the Opéra-Comique in the nineteenth century, however, Manon possesses an inherent voice of her own, the privileging of which Massenet asserts in tandem with his opera's premiere. In a famous interview in the daily *Le Figaro*, Massenet states that he wrote a musical motif for each of

the characters in *Manon*, with the exception of the heroine, for whom he composed two: "Un personnage, un motif; Manon, seule, dont le type est un mélange de mélancolie et de gaieté, en a deux, pour bien préciser cette alternance."<sup>24</sup> In his commentary Massenet emphasizes the musical privileges Manon enjoys throughout the opera.

Her musical presence corresponds directly to the rhetorical force granted her by Meilhac and Gille who permit the heroine to convey her alternating moods of "mélancolie" and "gaieté" with as much dramatic force as Massenet through his motifs. The press largely valorizes the adaptation undertaken by the composer and his librettists because it conforms to the conventions of Opéra-Comique audiences. In *Manon* Massenet, Meilhac, and Gille ultimately demarcate their heroine from Prévost by according her an almost unprecedented vocal prominence and by depicting her as a figure who understands that she must die for her sinful desire. They also raise profound questions concerning the discursive and musical power exercised by other heroines of nineteenth-century opéra-comique.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For biographical details on Meilhac and Gille, see Branger (31–37).

<sup>2</sup>For a formal definition of free indirect discourse, see Genette (191–92).

<sup>3</sup>Nowhere is the effect of Manon's lack of a voice more apparent than in Des Grieux's withholding of her dying words. The heroine's death, which takes place in Prévost's imaginary desert outside New Orleans, reveals some of the despair the author experienced in his personal life. By the time Prévost (1697–1763) was writing his novel in the early weeks of 1731, he had also endured the deaths of his mother and sister, along with numerous temptations since his initial involvement with the Jesuits around 1715. These experiences all recur in his fiction. In October of 1730, Prévost was forced to flee from England to Holland after seducing the daughter of his protector John Eyles, a loss that Sgard links directly to Des Grieux's loss of Manon. See Sgard, introduction, *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (5). The author's ongoing dilemmas are linked symbolically to the appellation "d'Exiles" that he chose for himself in 1731. See Sgard, *L'Abbé Prévost: labyrinthes de la mémoire* (19–21). For more detailed biographical information on Prévost, see Sgard, *Prévost romancier*.

<sup>4</sup>Renoncour's memoirs reveal Prévost's predilection for a type of journalistic writing that renders his narratives at once suspenseful and seemingly real. See Sgard, "Prévost romancier et journaliste."

<sup>5</sup>Renoncour is fifty-two or fifty-three years old, and Des Grieux is almost twenty, when the two men first meet in 1715. On the dating of events in Prévost's novel, see Sgard, introduction, *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux* (12–14). In 1721, after repudiating family obligations, Prévost broke off contact with his own father permanently. See Sgard, *Prévost romancier* (41).

<sup>6</sup>On narrative time zones in Prévost's novel, see Genette (238–39).

<sup>7</sup>In the closing sentence of the novel, with which Des Grieux concludes his oral account, the hero returns from the site of Manon's death to France, where, in the opening pages, he encounters Renoncour and begins his tale.

<sup>8</sup>Manon's enigmatic status in the novel is well-documented. Frédéric Deloffre and Raymond Picard argue that Prévost's heroine is so mysterious that the task of constructing her identity falls upon each reader. See their introduction to Prévost's novel. On the "occlusion" of Manon's voice and its implications for the narrative, see Fort.

<sup>9</sup>Manon's name bears comparison with that of the sexy heroine Nana, whom Emile Zola introduced to the public a few years earlier. As Charles Bernheimer argues with respect to the name "Nana," "Manon" almost "doubles itself as if in o-nana-istic admiration of its first syllable, a name that invites repetition yet suggests negativity." See Bernheimer (223). For further discussion of recurrences of Des Grieux's novel in nineteenth-century French literature, see James P. Gilroy, *The Romantic Manon and Des Grieux* (Sherbrooke, Québec: Editions Naaman, 1980).

<sup>10</sup>She appears in Victor Hugo's *Marion de Lorme* and in novels by Balzac, Eugène Sue, and Alexandre Dumas fils. Dumas serves as a direct link between Prévost's heroine and her counterparts in opera: Verdi and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave based *La Traviata*, which premiered in 1853, on Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*, first published as a novel in 1848 and then as a play the following year. Decades later Dumas prefaced an edition of Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, which he includes as a major plot element in both versions of *La Dame aux camélias*.

<sup>11</sup>Airs of gallantry tend to have a higher tempo and allow for greater musical virtuosity than lyrical airs. Both, however, serve as dramatic vehicles for solo voice, and both permit the heroine to display her understanding of her debilitating eroticism. For a musicological classification of the airs in *Manon*, see Branger (337–70).

<sup>12</sup>Wayne Koestenbaum evokes the sex appeal of vocal virtuosity in nineteenth-century opera in recalling the association commonly made at the time between trills and femininity. He also quotes a statement made by Massenet (1840–1912) to the soprano Alice Verlet (1873–1934) during a rehearsal of *Manon*: "You have the ideal singer's mouth; it opens naturally!". Massenet's attentiveness to the singer's mouth relates directly to the erotic appeal generated by Manon's vocalisms, trills, and other forms of coloratura. See Koestenbaum (163, 168).

<sup>13</sup>This process of self-discovery constitutes part of Manon's psychological complexity, to which the contemporary diva Catherine Malfitano refers in her assessment of the heroine as a victim at once of her own adolescence and of the immoral society in which she circulates. See Malfitano (132–35).

<sup>14</sup>The first documented evidence of collaboration between Massenet and the American soprano Sibyl Sanderson is a hand-written dedication dated 16 September 1887 on which his revisions to "Je suis encor tout étourdie" are dated 20 November of the same year. Sanderson performed the title role in the Hague, Brussels, and London before starring in the opera's eighty-ninth performance at the Opéra-Comique on 12 October 1891. She enjoyed so much success as Manon that she continued to perform the title role until the opera's two hundredth-and-third performance on 3 November 1893.

<sup>15</sup>United in their modest apartment with Des Grieux before the abduction, Manon approaches the ideal figure of the faithful bourgeois housewife. In the first act Lescaut warns his cousin Manon to respect "l'honneur de la famille." His air, the opening of the second act, and the transformation of Lescaut from the heroine's brother in Prévost's novel to her cousin in Massenet's opera all reveal the importance of bourgeois codes of behavior in *Manon*. Since the 1840s theatrical and operatic productions throughout Paris, such as *Manon* at the Opéra-Comique, were judged against the moral standards of the bourgeois audiences that attended them.

<sup>16</sup>In the stage manual used in rehearsals for the premiere of *Manon*, the stage manager of the Opéra-Comique Charles Ponchard revealingly instructed Marie Heilbronn (1849–1886) and successive sopranos performing the title role to answer Des Grieux's passionate utterances during their initial encounter in the first act "avec une joie enfantine mais déjà malicieuse; on voit sur son visage tout le bonheur qu'elle se promet de ce voyage à Paris;

Manon répond au simple baiser de Des Grieux avec une fausse naïveté." Similarly in the second act, after the couple has moved into their apartment, Manon's promise of her heart to Des Grieux "doit être dite sans aucun accent de sincérité." Heilbronn (1849–1886) performed the title role in *Manon* at the Opéra-Comique from the opera's premiere until its eighty-eighth performance on 16 December 1885.

<sup>17</sup>The scene's dramatic force derives from the visibility of Manon's sex appeal on stage, which is reflected in Massenet's memoirs (156). The composer recounts that his initial selection of Marguerite Vaillant-Couturier (b. 1860) to interpret Manon in the opera's Paris premiere originated with his observation of a girl selling flowers on the Boulevard de Capucines. The girl reminded him of Vaillant-Couturier, whom he claims to have seen in the three-act operetta *Le Cœur et la main*. The anecdote evokes the importance of a visual stimulus in Massenet's conception of his heroine.

<sup>18</sup>The nineteenth-century French courtesan's self-awareness is clear in Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*: "Ainsi parée et vêtue, la courtisane s'installe sur de moelleux coussins, fait ouvrir la porte de sa maison et attend la visite des amoureux qui forment sa cour; ou, visant à de nouvelles conquêtes, elle monte en litière et se rend sur les promenades publiques." See Larousse (4:393). Manon's persona at Cours-la-Reine conforms to this image.

<sup>19</sup>Massenet signed and dated 13 February 1884 an air that he composed specifically for the soprano Marie Roze and that he intended for performances in England. He initially entitled the air "Morceau écrit spécialement pour M<sup>me</sup> Marie Roze." Massenet was already using the title "Gavotte" for the prelude to the third act, which he later dropped in favor of his "Menuet de Manon," composed in January of 1884. See Branger (87–88).

<sup>20</sup>Having composed the "Fabliau – Le Rire de Manon" on the occasion of a new production of his opera for the Opéra-Comique's 1898–1899 season, Massenet intended it as a substitute for the "Gavotte." However, the latter has come to be favored in contemporary productions. For more biographical details on Bréjan-Gravière (b. 1870), see Branger (118–32).

<sup>21</sup>Manon also refers to herself by name in her second air "Voyons, Manon, plus de chimères" but the rhetorical effect of her gesture seems clearer in her fifth, sixth, and seventh airs, in which its recurrence from one air to the next underscores more explicitly her allusion to her inner conflict. For more on Manon's name, see note 9 above.

<sup>22</sup>In the novel Prévost has Des Grieux report Manon's repentance as a direct quote, however, the circularity of the literary frame precludes the reliability of his statements.

<sup>23</sup>Massenet made this revision, typically included in contemporary performances and recordings in time for the publication of the second edition of the orchestral score a few months later.

<sup>24</sup>Emile-Raymond Blavet [Paris, pseudo.], "La Vie parisienne," *Le Figaro*, 19 January 1884.

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