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La Dame aux Camelias' Effect on Society's View of the "Fallen Woman"

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Over the course of history, literature has featured the "fallen woman." Put simply, the "fallen woman" is a woman who has had sexual relations prior to marriage and is thus viewed as beneath a certain moral standard. Many pieces of literature depict her as a "pitiable monster" to convince society that the "fallen woman" resides in a lower caste, making these stories "cautionary tale[s]" (Auerbach, 31). However, Alexandre Dumas' play *La Dame aux Camelias*, or *Camille* as it is known in English, presents Marguerite Gautier, a "fallen woman," as having redeemable qualities which challenged both society's condemnation of the "fallen woman" and led to a more realistic portrayal of life on the stage and in literature as a whole. The controversial portrayal of Marguerite Gautier in *La Dame aux Camelias* altered the public's romanticized view of the "fallen woman" to a more realistic perspective, causing them to recognize the humanity of the "fallen woman," which led to an influence on drama overall.

The responses to Marguerite Gautier revealed the potential for change in society's opinion of the "fallen woman" if she possessed certain qualities. *La Dame aux Camelias* follows Gautier's life as a courtesan, her love affair with Armand, and her death by consumption (Bentley's Miscellany 696). After seeing the play, many of Gautier's fans acted like people in mourning who ran "to touch the mortuary cloth bordered with lace as if it had covered the body of a saint!" ("French" 327). It is important to note that while the novel was published in 1848, the play adaptation that Dumas published a few years later was censored by the government

three times (Rusch 76). In fact, the government only lifted the censor as an attempt to distract the public from the current political strain as a result of Louis Napoleon declaring himself emperor in 1851 (76-77). Gautier's story enthralled the public, but the public's response proved more than a simple compliance with the government's strategy. Indeed, it proved society's ability to alter their negative opinion of the "fallen woman" if the author presented her with certain redeeming qualities. In the case of Marguerite Gautier, her willingness to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of Armand redeems her in the eyes of the public (Rusch 75). Thus, in spite of controversy, the general public's appreciation of Gautier's struggles demonstrated their malleable opinions regarding the "fallen woman."

Furthermore, the negative reviews to *La Dame aux Camelias* revealed the debate surrounding the play, which helped lead to a broader discussion of the "fallen woman". For example, an article by an anonymous author in *Bentley's Miscellany* reiterates the previous observation that many revered Gautier when it says that women "imitate the language, voice and even dress of these creatures" ("Dumas" 347). However, it refers to courtesans, or "fallen women," as a "race" when it states, "In every civilised nation the same race of beings exists ... we can only regard with pity, that the French should have degenerated so far as to hold up such things as the objects of worship" (Bentley's Miscellany 347). This British review graphically reveals how many conservatives still considered the "fallen" woman as a person who had fallen below the rest of the population morally. Thus, while France and Britain were divided against the morality behind how Gautier was received by the public, the controversy between the countries helped prompt the broader, and even more important, discussion of the "fallen woman."

Moreover, Dumas' portrayal of Marguerite Gautier as redeemable contrasts with the plays that had previously depicted the "fallen woman" by challenging the stereotype and creating a

complex character. For example, Victor Hugo depicted his character Marion Delorme, a “fallen woman,” as “wretched and rancorous ... as a villain by the end of the work” (Rusch 82). Thus, Hugo made the idea that the audience would aspire to imitate her inconceivable because of her disturbing attributes and plague on society. In contrast, in *La Dame aux Camelias*, although Gautier dies with no sign of a reformed lifestyle, “she is able to possess a love whose purity surpasses any felt by the more respectable members of her gender” (Rusch 82). Marguerite’s lover, Armand, embodies the public’s judgment of the “fallen woman” as someone whose sole motivation is money when he confesses his belief that all Marguerite cares for are her jewels, carriages, and horses (IV.i.378). However, the audience knows that Marguerite leaves Armand to preserve his family name, which purifies her in the eyes of the audience. Because of Dumas’ variance from the typical depiction of a “fallen woman,” some said that *La Dame aux Camelias* “caused him to diverge from the right path” (“Dumas” 356). However, evidently Dumas’ variance from the norm in his presentation of Gautier provided him with more of a platform to challenge how the “fallen woman” had been presented in the past. Whereas the “fallen woman” had easily fit into a villainous stereotype before *La Dame aux Camelias*, people were forced to examine their views after Dumas’ produced his play. Essentially, *La Dame aux Camelias* draws attention to the contrast between Dumas’ redeemable depiction of the “fallen woman” and previous authors’ portrayal of her as inferior, giving the play even more of a momentous role in the depiction of societal issues as people were encouraged to question the stereotype.

As a result of *La Dame aux Camelias*’ challenging past depictions of the “fallen woman,” playwrights attempted to reinstate the depraved image in an effort to restore some morality to the stage. *The Literary Gazette* lists the main reactionary plays to *La Dame aux Camelias* as *Filles de Marbre*, *Mariage d-Olympe*, *Pere Prodigue*, and even Dumas’ own play, *Demi Monde* (214).

Augier, the author of *Mariage de-Olympe*, said, “the courtesan onstage can do the imaginative work of infiltrating the bourgeois mind and, through that, the real-world bourgeois existence” (Rusch 84). This belief prompted him to publish a play in 1855 with the purpose of returning “real villainy to the prostitute” (83). Additionally, M. Barriere published *Filles de Marbre* in order to “inculcate into the French mind how very improper it was to be touched by the misfortunes of the ‘Dames aux Camelias’” (“Foreign” 214). Since these playwrights believed that theater had the power to mold the public’s opinion, they wrote reactionary plays in an attempt to combat the “mania for Loretism,” meaning the obsessive attitude towards the “fallen woman” many fans of Gautier developed (“Dumas” 351). However, Dumas had already begun a revolution in the public’s opinion of the “fallen woman.” And while some hoped that these new plays that depicted the prostitute as undesirable would replace *La Dame aux Camelias*, the impact of the discussion of the “fallen woman” in society still ran rampant.

In fact, Dumas’ raw portrayal of the courtesan’s life in *La Dame aux Camelias* led to views concerning the “fallen woman” changing and the play’s contribution to realistic drama. As mentioned previously, Dumas’ depiction of Gautier’s life in her “very real-world social situation” contrasted with other plays which romanticized courtesans’ lives (Rusch 88). Dumas’ inclusion of Marguerite’s bedroom and drawing room in the play helps reveal her reality. When Armand and Marguerite run away together, Dumas shifts the setting to a simple “room looking out onto a garden” (III.i.1-2). By changing to a setting that would be similar to the audience’s homes, Dumas develops his character as more than a stereotype and makes her relatable to the audience. Moreover, the “frank language and psychologically complex characters” in *La Dame aux Camelias* add to the play’s realistic elements (Rusch 80). Dumas reveals Marguerite’s complexity when she tells Armand she is in love with another man so that he will move on with

his life, never knowing she was simply trying preserve his family name (IV.i. 411). As a result of *La Dame aux Camelias*' realism, Greenwald, Pomo, Schultz, and Welsh stated that *La Dame aux Camelias* was "the prototype of the 'discussion drama,' 'problem play,' or 'thesis play' ... that Ibsen and his successors would make the cornerstone of the New Drama a quarter century later" (12). Thus, *La Dame aux Camelias*' had a pivotal role in realistic drama and the "problem play," which influenced drama for years following its production and raised questions about societal structures.

However, while prostitution was still rampant as a societal reality, *La Dame aux Camelias* helped turn the perspective from one romanticizing the profession to an accurate understanding of the trade, which led to social reform. As a result of Dumas' contribution to drama in France, "fifty years after the appearance of *Camille*, the best French theater concerned itself primarily with the presentation of social themes of universal concern at the time" ("Alexandre"). These concerns ranged from the "disenfranchised" to the "vulnerability of women and children" ("Alexandre"). Ultimately, authors that began to include major social issues within their plays "helped to galvanize the reformers into making real-world changes in social policy" such as shutting down brothels (Rusch 88). While the shutdown of brothels led to an increase of prostitutes walking the streets instead, "the gilded veneer was wearing off ... [and] its more glamorous trappings had fallen from favor" (88). Essentially, as realistic literature drew attention to the horrors of the trade, people took practical steps to combat the romanticized view of the profession. Thus, the example set by *La Dame aux Camelias* in portraying the "fallen woman" in a realistic light helped lead to social reform because of the shift in the public's perspective on the "fallen woman," testifying to the play's crucial role in society.

The controversy from the publication of *La Dame aux Camelias* caused a pivotal shift in

society's view of the "fallen woman." Dumas' portrayal of a "fallen woman" with redeemable qualities sparked a discussion that had endless repercussions. Not only did the public adore Marguerite Gautier, her story resonated with them because she was depicted as a "fallen woman," but more importantly as a woman in love. Dumas simultaneously removed Gautier from the stereotype of the "fallen woman" and depicted her realistically. This collision sparked reactionary plays which, while challenging Dumas' portrayal, did not dull the influence of the play as a whole. In fact, while authors attempted to force the "fallen woman" back into the stereotype, *La Dame aux Camelias*' impact still ran rampant in society and drama. Finally, amidst the chaos of Dumas' impact on society and drama, people's perspective shifted to a more relatable view of the "fallen woman." People were forced to recognize the humanity of the "fallen woman." Coupled with the social reform that spurred out of realistic drama and discussion surrounding the literature produced, this perspective shift changed people's outlook on life and drama's portrayal of it. Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias* raw portrayal of Marguerite Gautier started a ripple effect which resulted in a more realistic portrayal and understanding of the "fallen woman" in society and drama.

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