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How Do You Solve a Problem Like Cosette? Femininity and the Changing Face of Victor Hugo’s Alouette

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This article opens a new dialogue between French literature, gender studies, and adaptation studies by examining the conception and reception of the character of Cosette from Victor Hugo’s bestseller Les Misérables (1862). Adaptation studies has increasingly theorized the comparative rather than simply evaluative use of fidelity, in part encouraged by the ongoing push beyond the customary adaptive media of film. However, there has been little development of this methodology to ask how the relationship between literary works and their adaptations might help to nuance – if not revise – the masculinist notoriety of canonical male writers such as Hugo. Cosette provides an apt test case. She is the modern face of Les Misérables thanks to the hugely popular Boublil and Schönberg musical version (1985) and its trademark logo, which is based on Émile Bayard’s wistful 1879 illustration of her. Cosette’s poster-child status is deeply problematic but has never been explored. Her objectification as the ingenuous alouette (‘lark’) and her rags-to-riches tale tout a conservatism that is at once in line with Hugo’s patriarchal renown as a grand homme and yet at odds with Les Misérables’s reputation for progressive ideals. I argue that both these clichéd contexts of understanding Hugo’s work are unsettled by Cosette’s changing faces in the novel and across its adaptations. My approach is twofold: it draws on Hugo’s non-categorical poetics to rethink the construction of femininity in his novel as equivocal rather than patriarchal; and it emphasizes the relevance of applying a hermeneutical and intermedial analysis to the source/adaptation relationship by considering a range of different adaptive forms (literary sequels, film, video-gaming, and animation) and contexts (book illustrations, advertising, and fandom) since the musical’s debut. Understood together, these representations of Hugo’s lark cast much-needed light on one of western literature’s most recognizable faces.

Introducing the Problematic Cosette
No character better illustrates Victor Hugo’s apparently patriarchal stance as a writer than Cosette. The alouette or ‘lark’ of Les Misérables (1862) is widely seen by critics and audiences alike to be a prime stereotype of idealized femininity. Filtered through a romanticized lens
as ‘un des plus divins êtres qu’on pût voir’ (III, 155),1 she personifies the eternal feminine: a heaven-sent combination of docility and comeliness whose only purpose is to garland the lives of those around her, especially her surrogate father Jean Valjean and her husband-to-be Marius Pontmercy. Such decorative status has been capitalized upon by the novel's most franchised adaptation, to the point where Cosette has become a trademark of sorts for Hugo’s bestseller and ‘the most famous waif this side of Little Orphan Annie’ (Lincoln). Since the 1980s, when Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg created the mega-musical now known as Les Miz, Cosette has been the face of Les Misérables.

Figure 1: BroadwaySpain, ‘Les Misérables at Queens Theatre, London’ (2017).

1 English quotations from Les Misérables are taken from Julie Rose’s translation: ‘one of the most divine creatures you could ever hope to see’ (125).
Based on Émile Bayard’s 1879 illustration, the musical’s instantly recognizable logo depicts an ingenuous, bare-shouldered girl whose pining eyes and implied vulnerability signal the struggle for redemption and dignity at the story’s heart. Such is the stage show’s international popularity that other adaptations have borrowed this sentimental cue. On posters and covers as on the page and stage, Cosette is used as an abiding and conspicuous object of pathos and longing.

Cosette’s transformation into what Clifford Terry has appropriately nicknamed ‘Miss Miz’ remains curiously unexplored, yet its visibility and, in particular, the quandary that it discloses both warrant discussion. How can Les Misérables promote the ‘ameliorative’ social agenda for which it is renowned (Berman) when its poster child is a conformist symbol of femininity? Does the view from the revolutionary barricade see only one sex truly enfranchised in the future? And to what extent are adaptations bound by Cosette’s implicit gender essentialism when her image now looms so large over the legacy of a novel that has become a ‘global cultural resource’ (Bellos xv)? These questions can be simply rephrased into one by playing on another well-known musical and asking: how do you solve a problem like Cosette?

The need for answers was recently made all the more urgent by the use of the Les Miz showtune ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ at a rally for Donald Trump in Miami in September 2016, when the future US president’s campaign team embraced a slur from rival nominee Hillary Clinton and celebrated ‘Les Deplorables’ of his electoral base. Les Miz’s producer and co-creators had not been asked for permission, and their public statement about how the musical’s ‘universal message’ had been appropriated by the first Bill Clinton and Obama campaigns hinted that such political sympathies were true reverberations of Hugo’s liberal voice (Alberge). But while this universalism renders Les Misérables audible across party lines and national borders, it also incorporates a more tacit soundtrack that helps Trump’s Miami spectacle make more troubling sense. Long before she adorned the musical’s publicity, Cosette was already a poster girl for conservatism. For all its progressive thinking on human rights and social justice, Les Misérables risks touting a suspect agenda through her. Deprived of autonomy and occupying a secondary place in a man’s world, Cosette becomes an ornamental prop for bourgeois paternalism by ending Hugo’s novel as both a well-heeled baroness and a wealthy heiress. The musical’s unauthorized association with Trump, who has notoriously disrespected women and been accused of sexual misconduct, becomes less illicit when rated through the disenfranchisement of femininity that Cosette represents. If the quiet subjugation of the feminine is an inherent aspect of Les Misérables, it might partly (and unnervingly) explain why audiences worldwide have kept returning to Hugo’s story in its many iterations for over 150 years.

Towards a Solution

The answers to these pressing questions first require a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between Hugo’s poetics and gender than is usually conceivable in the fields of nineteenth-century literary history and French studies. At first glance, the ‘problem’ that Cosette represents is made yet more intractable by Hugo’s doubly masculine reputation as France’s premier Romantic and as one of the ‘great men’ of French letters. Such renown has bolstered the widespread impression that his work locks its characters into the tired binary of male subjectivity and female objectivity. Fixed in such ways, Cosette could only ever be ‘la belle petite [qui] donnait envie de mordre dans ses pommes’ (III, 155),² and the other women of Hugo’s oeuvre would forever be trapped between the dehumanized types of either saint or sinner, Mary or Eve, as defined in relation to male desire.

² ‘[She was] so beautiful she made you want to bite into the apples of her cheeks’ (125).
Hugo’s association with Romanticism during the late 1820s has mounted his vast oeuvre within a masculinist frame, given that ‘Romantic works both updated and reinforced the assumption that subjectivity is male, and thus made it difficult to imagine women characters as full-fledged subjects’ (Waller 24). As with Hernani (1830), one of his best-known plays, what can appear at stake in Hugo’s work is ‘the reassertion of male power in both [the personal and political] spheres in response to the cultural dilemmas of the Romantic period in France’ (Moskos 46). Such an affirmation of masculinity later became one of the Third Republic’s key concerns, when French virility looked in need of restoration after the humiliating defeat of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) and a decline in the national birth rate.tres Hugo’s ascendancy as a writer and his conscience as a statesman made for commanding signifiers of French prestige, hence he was memorialized as a national hero through monuments, memorabilia, curricula, and an enormous state funeral in 1885. His defining image as a white-bearded patriarch was quickly imprinted upon the national consciousness. Biographical accounts have since augmented that portrait’s virility. Even though Hugo’s relationship with sexuality is complex and unveils the conflict in his life and work between the purity of love and the physicality of lust (Audinet and Gille), details of his extramarital affairs and dalliances have often risked simplifying his behaviour towards women into brash soundbites about his allegedly unstoppable gallantry.

Yet the grand homme’s own poiesis calls for a less presumptuous, more conceptual scrutiny of gender in his thinking. The implications of how Hugo discerns self-identity as both creative and indeterminate have not been conscientiously pursued in relation to his literary representation of gender and his political support for gender equality. Such critical trajectories invite overdue readings that look past Hugo’s patriarchal notoriety without losing sight of its bearing. From these vantage points, it is possible to recognize the intrinsic importance of Cosette’s oxymoronic stature as ‘la rose [qui] s’aperçoit qu’elle est une machine de guerre’ (V, 72) to how Les Misérables can be understood. As the waif in need of a father for guidance transitions into the wife in need of a husband for purpose, the feminine clichés of passivity, purity, and domesticity are riveted so tightly to the character that they crack. Those fissures grow under the pressure of a narrative environment in which both history and morality are mutable.

As I will argue in the first stage of my analysis, when rereading the novel, spaces open up in which a less neutralized, more self-possessed female character is glimpsed. The fact that such openings appear even within Hugo’s paternalistic gaze towards Cosette testifies to his mind’s irresistibly non-categorical disposition and its often-misapprehended construction of gender. Charting Cosette’s fortunes as ‘Miss Miz’ in my argument’s subsequent sections innovatively reaffirms these two elements of Hugo’s work by taking a comparative and multimedia approach to how his ‘lark’ has been adapted since the late twentieth century. I will analyse Cosette’s representation and reception through the musical, its advertising, and its fandom, as well as in published sequels and different screen media (including live-action film, animation, and video-gaming).

My thinking draws on emergent critical practices in adaptation studies that rehabilitate so-called fidelity criticism as part of a ‘plurality of approaches’ (Kranz and Mellerski 5) and evidence a greater degree of media literacy beyond the usual novel-to-film pairing. Fidelity criticism has been rightly, if obsessively, maligned for its moralistic lexis and linear models of influence, in which literary sources are sacrosanct objects of homage and adaptations are
imitative ancillaries (Johnson 95). An increasing number of voices have, however, tentatively or confidently advocated its more pragmatic applications, through which an adaptation’s proximity to its literary ancestor becomes ‘the subject of study rather than the evaluative criterion’ (Hermansson 154). This qualified use of fidelity returns the concept to the toolkit of adaptation studies, which itself has helped to dismantle the archaic hierarchy of literary texts over other media. As the example of Cosette confirms, the range of forms and contexts available for such levelling is much broader than the customary book-to-film, publisher-to-studio transposition. In her influential theorization, Linda Hutcheon contends that scholars must engage more with ‘the diversity and extent of dissemination’ if they are to account for the assorted media and conditions in which adaptations are produced and distributed (xxvi). Investigations have to become more mindful of either new digital forms (Constandinides) or media that have been overshadowed by live-action film, including – but certainly not limited to – animation (Cavallaro) and print (Newell). In addition, they must assess the importance of publicity and fan cultures in establishing what matters most to different audiences when works are adapted (Blackwell 15).

Such an expansion of the field can also look to prequels, spin-offs, and sequels in these forms. Hutcheon’s theory excludes such follow-ups since they restart or resume a story rather than retell it (170–2), but her definition of adaptation is not conclusive and should not prevent them from being studied for what they reveal about the traffic of stories. Her own recourse to a ‘reception continuum’ blurs the divide between her categories of adaptation and extension. The same can be said of the discourse around a non-reductive theory of adaptation, which might be synopsized as the desire ‘to make adaptation less readily identifiable as an object and more readily identifiable with its subjects and subjectivities’ (Meikle). Where adaptations thrive on the pleasure of sharing and retelling stories, sequels move a story forward, just as prequels and spin-offs chart new storylines out of familiar territory. What was thought complete is reopened through new episodes or prolongations (Genette 162). This opportunity for growth can have reparatory properties, since elements of a story that were found to be either lacking in development or unsatisfactory in resolution are revisited. Sequels can be understood via a Freudian process of secondary revision, arranging dream wishes ‘into an intelligible and apparently consistent scenario’ that gratifies a desire for continuation (Garber 73–4). A similar desire is at work in user-generated content and especially in ‘fix-it’ material, following Jacques Derrida’s ‘archontic’ principle that Abigail De Kosnik usefully applies to fan fiction as an open-ended expansion of text. Borrowing from Derrida, she defines this principle as ‘a range of textual practices which self-consciously build upon but also re-center existing texts’, not just telling again but telling more (64).

Hugo himself implies the need to adopt these kinds of non-partisan attitudes towards the intertextual and intermedial potential of storytelling. Not only did he adapt Walter Scott’s novel Kenilworth for the stage as Amy Robsart (1828) and write the libretto for an 1836 operatic adaptation of his own novel Notre-Dame de Paris (1831), but he also worked across different literary modes and produced several thousand experimental drawings and paintings. His belief that ‘l’art donne des ailes et non des béquilles’ (Théâtre, 31) reinforces the enterprising nature of his thinking that can be deployed to question how identity is at once inscribed and blurred in his work, and how adaptations – broadly understood – both write themselves into and out of pre-existing scripts.6

The resemblances and differences between Cosette’s faces is therefore of significance to how gender studies and adaptation studies can readily complement one another, and here is where my argument develops new methodologies for discussing both Hugo and literary adaptation. While a more gender-oriented reading of canonical male writers has slowly been undertaken

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6 ‘Art gives wings and not crutches.’
since the theorization of ‘queerness’ in the 1990s, Hugo has yet to receive such attention.\(^7\)

Furthermore, there are far fewer examples of comparative readings of a writer’s work and its adaptations being used with these revisionist objectives in mind. Since adaptations bring new dimensions to a literary text’s status as a ‘body of popular cultural-memories and associations’ (Rose 15), they prove to be a useful ‘looking-glass’ in which that work’s interpretive possibilities are mirrored (Elliott 209–15). The reflections they create throw into sharper relief questions about how a text has been perceived, from which angles, and to what ends. In turn, they implicitly point to what the nominal source text itself does with gender and other markers of identity such as ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and disability. Studying adaptations can draw the eyes back to a literary work, not to peddle the tedious assumption that ‘the book is better’, but to take a yet closer look at that book’s cognitive and affective qualities.

Adaptation studies offers numerous examples where gender underpins either the retelling of male-authored works that are known for their gender sensibilities, such as Flaubert’s Madam Bovary (Donaldson-Evans) or Shakespeare’s plays (Drouin), or those male-produced adaptations that underplay the gender ambiguities of a woman’s work, such as Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 film of Frankenstein (Laplace-Sinatra 1998). More recently, gender has served as a less inferred focal point for tracking the cultural politics of adaptation in different national settings, such as Canadian literature (Dickinson), Chinese fiction (Deppman), and Mexican feminisms (Dann Luna), as well as in a number of specific cases like The Wizard of Oz (Burger) and The Woman in Black (Roberts). The idea of adaptation as a possible feminist strategy has also cast starker light on the material and economic conditions faced by women in the film industry, as with the screenings of gender in commercial entertainment (Wood) and the use of film as a tool of Foucauldian ‘counter-memory’ for women to reclaim past material (Lehmann). In these respects, one of Hutcheon’s own examples points to how the representation and frustration of gender can be explored across different adaptations that share a common narrative conceit, and within ‘interpretive communities’ – to recall Stanley Fish’s concept of how a text’s meaning is interpretively constructed through varying cultural assumptions (147–74). Hutcheon’s brief consideration of Prosper Mérimée’s novella Carmen credits the story’s enduring fascination to the stereotypes of the liberated femme fatale and the victimized woman that the heroine represents. The story’s multiple versions in opera and film provide ‘both affirmations and contestations of received notions of gender and ethnicity that constitute the appeal of Carmen’ (Hutcheon 154).\(^8\) This process is multi-layered as different forms and voices construe the same hypotext.

Notwithstanding these interventions, there is still considerable scope for drawing the mutual theoretical interests of gender and adaptation more readily into the study of literature’s ‘great’ (straight) white men. Rather than automatically reinforce the strictures of that pigeon-hole, the results can instead necessitate reappraisals of common wisdom relating to them. The most compelling example can be found in the conclusion to Holly Furneaux’s disavowal of the prudish stereotypes surrounding Dickens’s writing. Her postscript considers adapters who ‘do’ Dickens in ways that reveal ‘the persisting contestation of [his] queer content’ (244), along with the ability of such adaptations to make ‘political interventions’ by recuperating Dickens from ‘conservative appropriators’ (253). Her theoretical impetus in this understandably concise discussion is drawn primarily from her book’s queer discourse and so only touches upon adaptation studies, while the subject matter is limited to film and television. Nevertheless, the use of Dickens’s afterlife to underscore his work’s subversive edges

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7 See, for example, Cusset on the queering of the French literary canon by American theorists, and Strychacz’s reading of performative masculinity in Hemingway’s fiction.

8 For a wide-ranging account of how the character has been appropriated on screen, see Powrie et al.
foregrounds a method for the study of literary history, gender, and adaptation that could be embedded more deeply within all three fields. The formal and ideological epistemologies of adaptation studies are well suited to teasing out the ways in which gender is constructed and unsettled through repeated socio-cultural practice. Such an approach affirms the need to reread figures such as Dickens, whose masculinity remains the object of ‘intense cultural investments’ that can be challenged and redirected (253). The opportunities for new enquiry into writers like Hugo cannot be ignored. An oeuvre as vast in its volume and as global in its afterlife as his would test the limits of a book-length study, let alone those of an extended article. The number of adaptations alone is immense and covers a multitude of forms, from Disney films to Verdi operas. Rather than reach for such a comprehensive perspective here, the significance of the approach I have outlined is demonstrated by concentrating on Cosette.

**Hugo’s Lark**

Cosette’s noticeably idealized femininity in *Les Misérables* overtly instils doubt into the novel’s hopes for new beginnings. Just as Hugo’s faith in progress cannot avoid imagining an inert future happiness, so too must that aspiration for lasting stability reckon with his deep-seated fear of stagnation and monotony. Since Hugo’s vision of a more egalitarian and harmonious society is necessarily indefinite, his desire for a better world is caught between the lure of constancy and the impulse for contravention. His wariness towards this strain manifests itself across his work, be it in the suicidal endpoints of numerous character arcs or in those projects he could not bring to a finish, such as *La Fin de Satan* (in which he was unable to write the Angel Liberty’s intended final victory over human evil). Far from trying to ignore or alleviate this conundrum, *Les Misérables* leaves the reader to wrestle with its vexed questions. As one of the only characters to survive the novel, Cosette’s role in initiating that struggle cannot be underestimated. Her story may conclude with her financial and emotional security within the French bourgeoisie, but this is an openly questionable resolution to a novel that favours garrets, backstreets, and sewers over the social mainstream.

When read within Hugo’s poetics and politics, Cosette cannot be taken for granted as proof of how her creator only valorizes the male subject position. Hugo’s use of archetypes does not automatically direct his work towards a clichéd and reductive way of thinking, since his characters perform what Isabel Roche calls a ‘non-psychological’ function in his epic meditation on life’s meanings. They are devised neither for the sake of socio-historical credibility, nor to serve the generic traditions of romance and melodrama, but rather ‘to convey universal truths’ about an interconnected world (Roche 7–8). Nor is it the case that all Hugo’s female characters stand in a chorus line behind his male figures. Both Fantine and Éponine exhibit greater agency than Cosette and constitute different lines of attack on a social system that Hugo criticizes for being at once sexist and materialist. This critique has been illustrated in astute readings of *Les Misérables* (Gasiglia-Laster, ‘Femme couronnée’; Lewis; Spiquel) and of Hugo’s theatre (Bara; Gasiglia-Laster, ‘Femme du XIXe siècle’). Hugo’s stage is populated by autonomous female characters such as the titular anti-heroine of *Lucrèce Borgia* (1833) and the courtesan Tisbe in *Angelo, tyran de Padoue* (1835), the preface of which targeted male privilege (Naugrette 26). This criticism of masculine domination over women formed part of his public support for the nascent feminist movement, which was recognized in 1882 when he was invited by Léon Richer to become the honorary president of the *Ligue française pour le droit des femmes*.

Cosette’s relative (and conspicuous) absence from these more reparative readings of feminine subjectivity in Hugo’s work can be redressed by applying his thinking on creation – both artistic and natural – to gender. His claim that there can be ‘nulle loi saisissable’ and ‘nul

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9 See both Melka and Ní Riordáin for the feminist aspects of Hugo’s politics.
système possible’ in what he believed to be a free and protean universe (Philosophie II, 94) necessarily troubles the kind of essentialism that powers a categorical gender order.\(^{10}\) He intuited a dual principle of connection and conversion that unites the cosmos and draws opposites into an immeasurable exchange or ‘perpétuelle transfusion’ of creation (Philosophie II, 623). The finite and the infinite, the social and the spiritual, life and death, here and there were all analogous in his mind and interchanged through the reversals of the sublime and the grotesque that he theorized in his preface to *Cromwell* (1827), and which governed the pantheistic visions of his later writing such as *Contemplations* (1856).

Rather than blindly normalize gendered truisms of femininity, *Les Misérables* knowingly renders such platitudes explicit through Cosette in its attempts to express the less formulaic, more mutable truths that it wants to mirror. Hugo’s fashioning of his *alouette* plays on the transition between youth and adulthood. Both junctures – one unconditioned, the other socialized – appeal to his idealistic longing for a world that is at once free from repression and secure against disarray. Such conflict between volition and structure recalls the rift that he wanted to bridge early in his career between the younger generation of Romantics and the older guard of neoclassicism. That dichotomy is staged in *Les Misérables* between Marius’s mother and his aunt: ‘the “romantic” dreamer marries happily but dies young, while the “classical” pragmatist lingers uselessly’, as Kathryn Grossman states, so the novel implies the need for any future society to espouse both inspiration and integration (*Transcendence* 259). As I have underlined elsewhere regarding *Notre-Dame de Paris*, a distinction can thus be drawn in Hugo’s thinking between personal growth (‘grandir’) and growing old (‘vieillir’). The former endorses a maturation that continues into old age as it shapes a cumulative self-awareness, whereas the latter designates seniority to be a terminal decline in which the individual spirit atrophies (Stephens, *Liability* 127). This differentiation is what grants the octogenarian Mabeuf his ‘sérénité d’enfant’ as he endures his destitution before astounding the students with his mettle on the barricade (V, 221); it also imbues the street urchin Gavroche with an emotional intelligence beyond his years and a striking imagination as ‘cette petite grande âme’ (VI, 54).\(^{11}\) It ensures that older characters have incontestable value: they benefit from the experience of history, as in the case of the centenarian Burgraves of Hugo’s 1843 play (*Zenkine* 98–100), provided that they are broadened by experience rather than hardened or constrained by it. As Valjean’s successive crises of conscience clarify, self-development has to be open to questioning prior meanings if it is to advance, whatever the age.

This indeterminate sense of self within an unfixed world pervades Hugo’s reasoning. He believed that his mind would not be able to envision the universe’s limitless creativity unless it saw contradiction as a form of conjunction. The lawful and the unruly work together in an uneasy but indispensable alliance: ‘Toute ma pensée oscille entre ces deux pôles: Civilisation, Révolution. Quand la liberté est en péril, je dis: Civilisation, mais révolution; quand c’est l’ordre qui est en danger, je dis: Révolution, mais civilisation’ (*Actes et paroles* III, 113).\(^{12}\) Such is the unstable paradigm in which Cosette grows from toddler to teenager. As she is pulled into a patriarchal order, first as Valjean’s daughter and then as Marius’s wife, the possibility remains that there lies a defiant and even violent will within her that is steadily curbed but never effaced outright.

The plurality of names that Hugo gives Cosette, much like Valjean’s many identities, disrupts her capacity for coherence as a fictional subject. Three names in particular mark out her problematic position. Her birth name of Euphrasie recalls Euphrasia of Constantinople, a Catholic saint known for her charity and selfless devotion to the Holy Father. Cosette’s

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\(^{10}\) ‘No graspable law; no possible system.’

\(^{11}\) ‘childlike serenity’ (858); ‘that little great soul’ (999).

\(^{12}\) ‘All my thinking oscillates between these two poles: Civilization, Revolution. When liberty is in danger, I say: Civilization, but revolution; when it is order that is in danger, I say: Revolution, but civilization.’
common name reinforces a filial compliance since it plays on ‘chosette’ (‘little thing’), harking back to Hugo’s labelling of her as a doll in his initial plan for the novel (Rosa 31); for English-speakers, this name also implies a need for protection and indulgence, although Hugo’s very limited knowledge of English suggests that he was probably unaware of the verb ‘to cosset’ (translated as ‘mignoter’ or ‘dorloter’). As for her nickname of *alouette*, Montfermeil’s residents give it to her not because of any melodious singing ability but owing to her diminutive stature as the child who is forced into slave labour by the vile Thénardiers. Her guardians verbally and physically abuse her over the five years that she is in their ‘care’ while Fantine, oblivious, desperately works to earn money for her upkeep: ‘ce petit être pas plus gros qu’un oiseau, tremblant, effarouché et frissonnant […] toujours dans la rue ou dans les champs avant l’aube. Seulement la pauvre alouette ne chantait jamais’ (III, 165).

The dutiful daughter; the petite girl labelled a pretty thing; and the defenseless, voiceless bird – all three names send discouraging signals to the reader.

The validation that a name bestows is central to Hugo’s plotting around Cosette and highlights its significance for self-recognition. Because her biological father Tholomyès left her illegitimate by abandoning her mother, she has no legal identity in a patrilineal society. Only when she marries Marius does she take on the family name Pontmercy, in addition to the barony that his father had passed on to him from the Napoleonic Army. For Valjean, ending Cosette’s illegitimacy fulfils his promise to a dying Fantine that he would care for her daughter. Before the wedding, he concocts a family backstory for her using his alias of Fauchelevant, then feigns an injury to his writing hand. Marius’s grandfather Gillenormand must sign the marriage certificate in his place as her surrogate guardian and so spare Valjean from having to falsify his name on a legal document. Valjean then forgoes his own happiness when faced with a terrible choice: ‘Imposer son bagne à ces deux enfants éblouissants, ou consommer lui-même son irrémédiable engloutissement. D’un côté le sacrifice de Cosette, de l’autre le sien propre.’ The revelation of his past would jeopardize Cosette’s newfound standing as Madame la Baronne Pontmercy, hence he takes his leave from her life (VI, 221).

But Cosette’s original sobriquet, assumed first name, and birth name do not neatly foreground this entry into patriarchy. Euphrasie is an ambiguous choice, the other meaning of which works against the notion of subjugation. Yves Gohin points out its derivation from Euphrosyne, one of the three Charites of Greek mythology, who incarnated mirth and was a skilled conversationalist. This etymology sounds another meaning to ‘Cosette’ as a homonym for ‘causette’ (‘chatty’ or ‘talkative’). Framing his understanding of the character within these interpretations, Gohin takes issue with those readings that disparage Cosette by asserting either her lack of consequential voice or her chatterbox nature. Such readings define her as silent or inane, but Gohin notes the numerous instances where her words are heard or reported in the novel, as well as the positive link that Hugo drew between the lively chirps of children and the inventive self-expression of an unrestrained imagination. To substantiate Hugo’s attraction towards playful speech, Gohin looks elsewhere both in the novel (to its other children and to its interest in street slang) and in Hugo’s writing, especially the poem ‘Georges et Jeanne’ about his two grandchildren from *L’Art d’être grand-père* (1877).

What Gohin misses is the connection between each of the positions he reacts against. They both echo demeaning feminine stereotypes: voiceless on the one hand, prattling on the other. Furthermore, Hugo deploys similarly hackneyed but more sovereign clichés through a reminder of his character’s ornithological moniker. When Cosette looks into the moonlit garden at the Rue Plumet to search for what she believes to be an intruder, the reader is

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13 ‘This tiny creature no bigger than a bird, trembling, frightened, and shivering [...] always on the street or in the fields before dawn. Only, this poor Lark never sang’ (133).

14 ‘To impose his jail term on these two dazzling children, or to himself bring about his own irremediable demise. On one side, the sacrifice of Cosette, on the other, of himself’ (1133–4).
told that she would not frighten easily: ‘Il y avait dans ses veines du sang de bohémienne et d’aventurière qui va pieds nus. On s’en souvient, elle était plutôt alouette que colombe. Elle avait un fond farouche et brave’ (my emphasis; V, 106). 15 Denoting the liveliness of daybreak over the quietude of peace, this contrast between the metaphors of lark and dove momentarily grants the teenager both self-determination and courage.

The interpretive ambiguity of Cosette’s names is borne out by her development as both a beauty to behold and a persona that is constrained. During Valjean’s negotiations with the Thénardiers to settle Fantine’s debts, she is commodified by the commercial tone and put on the level of the fabulous new doll that he has purchased for her. She is a thing of great value that must be kept safe. After her convent upbringing, her ‘Papa’s’ pocketbook buys clothes and trinkets that help her become one of Paris’s most splendid girls, whose only purpose appears to be to exude the modest grace and enchanting purity that beguiles Marius. When he sees her in Paris’s Luxembourg Gardens, her charm is itemized through a series of traits that correspond with nature’s splendour and make her an object of sensory pleasure (her chestnut hair, marble skin, rose-petal cheeks, and so on): a tall and beautiful apparition ‘ayant toutes les formes les plus charmantes de la femme à ce moment précis où elles se combinent encore avec toutes les grâces les plus naïves de l’enfant. […] Celle-ci n’avait pas seulement grandi, elle s’était idéalisée’ (IV, 414). 16 Cosette becomes aware of her allure thanks to her housekeeper Toussaint’s flattery, which spurs her to run to her bedroom mirror and admire herself. Her skin is luminous, her hair glistens, and her blue eyes sparkle. ‘Elle redescendit au jardin, se croyant reine, entendant les oiseaux chanter, c’était en hiver, voyant le ciel doré, le soleil dans les arbres, des fleurs dans les buissons, éperdue, folle, dans un ravissement inexprimable’ (V, 72–3). 17 Once again, Hugo vividly, if not garishly, embroiders his descriptions with banalities of femininity: a blossoming winsomeness, harmonized with nature’s instantaneous flourish, taken with its own majesty, and outshining the beauty of language. Like the breaking dawn, Cosette brings warmth and lustre to a cold garden.

Requiring safeguards and radiating wholesomeness, she invokes the sacred memory of Hugo’s beloved eldest daughter. Léopoldine Vacquerie, née Hugo, had drowned alongside her husband in a boating accident in 1843 when she was nineteen years old, two years before her father began his first phase of writing Les Misérables. After Cosette marries at the same age as Léopoldine had done, her wedding night is couched in celestial rather than sensual language: ‘Un lit nuptial fait dans les ténèbres un coin d’aurore’ in which the happy couple might hear ‘un bruissement d’ailes confuses’ (VI, 215). 18 For the writer Mario Vargas Llosa, Cosette’s carnality has been ‘surgically removed’, rendering her ‘completely ethereal’ and making her interactions with Marius the novel’s ‘most artificial moments’ (73). She consequently emerges as an avatar of mythical femininity rather than as a credible portrait of womanhood; a non-existent character, to paraphrase Nicole Savy, who betrays what she, Waller, and others have identified as the wider (male) Romantic predicament of how to represent the feminine (Savy 186). Savy underscores the several-year hiatus at the end of the novel’s second part between Cosette’s childhood and adolescence. The break marks her out as a crudely bisected figure who never intervenes in what happens around her:

15 ‘There was in her veins the blood of the bohemian and the adventurer who goes about barefoot. As you’ll recall, she was more of a lark than a dove. In her heart of hearts, she was wild and brave’ (762).

16 ‘With the full array of womanly charms at that precise moment when these are still combined with all the utterly artless graces of the child. […] This one had not only grown, she had been perfected’ (579–80).

17 ‘She went back down to the garden, feeling like a queen, hearing the birds sing – this was in winter – seeing the sky all golden, the sun in the trees, flowers among the shrubs, bewildered, wild, giddy with inexpressible rapture’ (733–4).

18 ‘A nuptial bed creates a pocket of dawn light in the darkness. […] the muted sound of fluttering wings’ (1129).
Cassée en deux, tirée entre le néant social et la médiocrité de la réussite bourgeoise, entre le plein et le trop-plein mythologiques [...] Cosette accepte tout du destin, les mauvais traitements, les bons, un père, un mari. Héroïne, certes, mais pas sujet: patient et non agent. (179–80)19

Transforming from misérable to bourgeoise, both guises are overlaid with intertextual resemblances that consign her to the function of fairy-tale, including Little Red Riding Hood heading into the woods as a rite of passage and, most obviously, Cinderella overcoming her oppression to receive just reward for her virtue.

Although both Vargas Llosa and Savy tellingly broach the glaring and excessive nature of such characterization, neither ponders the full import of such a conscious narrative strategy on Hugo’s part. To conceive of Cosette as solely a reminder of how his writing can quickly crease under the weight of his idealism is to favour one profile of the lark’s face over another, rather than keep its different aspects in sight. Valérie Lastinger’s reading of the doll episode helps to illuminate Cosette’s intriguingly double-sided nature. She contends that this scene’s imagery subverts the maternal intent of patriarchy, making it difficult to read the image of Cosette and her doll. Lastinger arguably overstates her case when she concludes that ‘Hugo masterfully turned the tables on traditional views of female behavior and destiny’ (26): a more holistic analysis of the novel foils any such resounding conclusions. In spite of their haste, Lastinger’s observations provide a much-needed counterbalance to dismissive appraisals of Cosette’s femininity.

During Valjean’s arrival at their parents’ inn, Éponine and Azelma Thénardier are playing with their own doll while an envious Cosette looks on. Compared to a bird feathering a makeshift nest, Cosette reaches for her little lead sword from the box behind her. She clothes it in rags before cradling it in her arms and softly singing it to sleep as she would a doll of her own. She has already mentioned this blade to Valjean, when she explained to him in the woods that it is her only toy. The narrator adds a brief digression on how dolls prepare girls for motherhood as ‘tout l’avenir de la femme’. A girl without a doll ‘est à peu près aussi malheureuse et tout à fait impossible qu’une femme sans enfants’, hence Cosette — as the narrator re-emphasizes in a single-line paragraph to draw the reader’s eye — ‘s’était donc fait une poupée avec le sabre’ (IV, 108–9).20 Since she has already told Valjean that she uses her sword to slice lettuce and cut the heads off flies, her mothering of this exemplary phallic symbol is an empowering act. As Lastinger points out, the improvised doll gives Cosette access to both food and power, which the Thénardiers otherwise deny her.

After a while, the sharp-edged toy only half satisfies Cosette, at which stage Valjean produces the splendid doll from the village store, but this gift further undermines femininity’s expected codes. Traditionally, the gift of a doll tutors a girl for the responsibility of child-rearing. But Cosette’s doll is a nearly two-foot high adult replica which she refers to not with any juvenile name but with the title of la dame. Her hand is smaller than the doll’s and she is in complete awe, at once fearing that thunder may erupt from her new companion and yet longing to take hold of ‘the lady’ as if it were a parent. Feeling as if she has been crowned queen of France, she also names her doll Catherine. In the shadow of the Napoleonic Wars against Russia which precede the novel, and thanks to the likening of Madame Thénardier to a tsarina just moments earlier, Lastinger gleans an allusion to Catherine the Great. ‘A figure

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19 ‘Broken in two, torn between a social void and the mediocrity of bourgeois achievement, caught between myths that are abundant on the one side and over-abundant on the other [...] Cosette accepts all that fate brings: misfortune, generosity, a father, and a husband. A heroine but in no way a subject, she is forbearing rather than enterprising.’

20 ‘This is the whole future of the woman’; ‘[she] is more or less as miserable and just as impossible as a woman without a child’; ‘[Cosette] had made a doll of the sword’ (338).
not normally associated with maternal devotion’ (25), the Russian Empress was better known to nineteenth-century readers as the modernizer who broke with expectations of women and determinedly encroached upon masculine power. Lastinger might have added that the doll is also mentioned in the novel’s final chapter, when Valjean reminisces about Cosette’s childhood and her regret that they did not manage to take Catherine to the Petit-Picpus convent. It is a momentary but opportune recollection of a highly cryptic figure.

This is not to say that the dissident tenor of Cosette’s characterization simply overpowers the novel’s attractions towards stability. In a jarring interlude, the action unfolding on the barricade during the 1832 Paris insurrection is punctured by the tranquillity of her waking from her slumber in her cozy bed. She is physically and figuratively side-lined from the narrative flow. This exclusion recurs when Cosette tries to insert herself into the conversation between her father and husband shortly after her wedding. Marius pretends that they are discussing how best to invest the amassed fortune that she will inherit from Valjean, as neither wants her to learn the truth that her protector has just confessed about his criminal past and parole violation. ‘On peut bien parler devant moi’, she complains: ‘Vous me trouvez donc bien sotte. C’est donc bien étonnant ce que vous dites! des affaires, placer de l’argent à une banque, voilà grand’chose. Les hommes font les mystérieux pour rien. Je veux rester.’ Neither the mock nor real topic of conversation are deemed suitable for Cosette, however, and she is sent from the salon back to the narrative periphery, where all she can do is pout teasingly and look ‘très jolie ce matin’ (VI, 234).

At the end of the year in which Les Misérables was published, Hugo boldly espoused normative gender roles in a speech that he made at one of his regular dinners for poor children. He told the girls and boys gathered that there were no toy-weapons amongst the presents he had bought for them. Instead, they would receive dolls and boats or trains respectively to prepare them for their family-oriented, work-driven roles in the pacifist utopia of the future.

The specific mention of swords and guns amongst the prohibited toys could justifiably be taken to refer to Cosette’s youthful potential for aggression and to Marius’s pistol-wielding stand on the barricade, qualifying both as undesirable behaviours that each character should learn from and outgrow. Their wedding, after all, celebrates a prosperous future that the failed 1832 insurrection could not give them. Under this spotlight, Cosette stands less as a beacon of revolutionary change than as a muse for a conservative hegemony in which financial and social capital coalesce into a conflict-free order.

But Les Misérables is ultimately not able to hold that lighting steady either, since as a poet Hugo aspired to ‘faire surgir l’ombre’ and peer into any darkness that could lead him towards a liberating unknown (Poésie III, 398). The novel’s conclusion leaves his reader uncertain as to what the future holds with Cosette and Marius at its forefront as they cross the threshold of adulthood (she is in her late teens, he is in his early twenties). The epitaph on Valjean’s gravestone has been effaced over time by the natural elements, once again reminding Hugo’s contemporary reader in 1862 that these events happened thirty years earlier. This reminder of the march of history subtly asks the reader to ponder what the then-young couple would be doing in the narrator’s present day. Given that Valjean had been motivated by their well-being rather than by any specific political programme, would they have taken his legacy of selflessness forward as the basis of meaningful social change? Or, like so many other middle-aged

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21 ‘Surely people can talk in front of me. You must think I’m a real ninny. What you have to say must be pretty astounding! Business, investing money in a bank, that really is something! Men play at being mysterious over nothing. I want to stay’; ‘[I am] very pretty this morning’ (1146).

22 Guernsey’s Priaulx Library presents these dîners des pauvres, which began earlier that year, through several digitized sources, including the Gazette de Guernesey of 27 December 1862, in which his speech was quoted (‘My Little Brothers’).

23 ‘To make the shadows surge’.
bourgeois couples of the period, would they have supported the materialist French Second Empire which Hugo so detested, and which in the 1850s had enjoyed widespread popular support? Their pairing as both a model benevolent couple and a vehicle for bourgeois continuity thwarts any decisive perspective.

It follows that the display-case existence in which Hugo sequesters Cosette is not only blatant but also deliberate, and that the implications of such passivity for how Les Misérables can be read are not as obvious. The novel cannot decide on whether the femininity that Cosette embodies is to be desired to distrusted. There is no denying Hugo’s capacity to conjure a stirring, if profoundly quixotic, idea of the future, but at the same time that overabundant imagination cannot be quelled by the whimsical horizons it perceives. Hugo cannot afford to end his mind’s interplay between the ideal of a homogenized history and the reality of a dynamic world. His leaps between affirmation and negation form a necessarily two-way or polytropic experience in which the only constancy is that of changeover and slippage. Rather than somehow exempt her from this flux, Cosette’s schematic characterization leaves her all the more susceptible to it and confirms a greater narrative value than it might at first suggest. A figure who is at once flat and spirited, she never fully rests on either note. Whatever song the reader tries to make Hugo’s lark sing can only ever be discordant rather than harmonious.

‘Miss Miz’ or Madame Pontmercy?
Cosette’s transformation into the de facto trademark of Les Misérables has not muffled this dissonance. The ubiquitous ‘Miss Miz’ logo may depict the innocent waif rather than the young heiress in a tacit acknowledgement that the former is a less polemical ideal than the latter, but her destiny cannot easily be masked. The symbolic potential of Bayard’s likeness of Cosette speaks to how Boublil and Schönberg, in collaboration with their musical’s successive production teams, favour the novel’s pathos over its politics. They understood that Hugo relied on an emotional resonance to get his audience thinking, hence ‘we did not approach [the novel] from a political point of view’ (qtd. in Burrill). Cosette remains a contested figure, nevertheless. Idealized on the musical’s billboards but disenfranchised on stage, she continues to be a fitful cypher of optimism and conservatism through which neither attitude can be fully normalized.

As Boublil and Schönberg put it, their adaptation has followed the example of Hugo’s worldwide bestseller and been ‘embraced by different nations in different languages all over the world’ (2–3). The longest-running musical in West End history has been seen by more than 70 million people in over fifty countries and has expanded its audience through numerous recordings, amateur performances, and an award-winning Hollywood film (2012). Its songs have been widely appropriated in fan-made content, parodies, political campaigns, and social demonstrations, embedding Hugo’s story yet more deeply within popular culture.²⁴ Cosette brands this commercial property in the same way as the Walt Disney Company’s Mickey Mouse ears or Apple’s ‘bitten’ logo. She is so synonymous with the show that the poster heralding its 2014 Broadway revival proclaimed ‘She’s back!’, with no name required.

In this guise, Cosette reproduces an affective instrumentality that had already been recognized in the years following the publication of Les Misérables. As a catalyst for Valjean’s reinvention from convict to martyr, she featured in the novel’s earliest illustrations. Laurent-Antoine Pagnerre commissioned Gustave Brion to draw twenty-five character portraits after the novel’s first two volumes had swiftly sold out in the spring of 1862. Pagnerre wanted to profit from the ever-growing excitement stoked by the international publicity campaign that had been orchestrated by Hugo’s Belgian publisher Albert Lacroix. Postered across his

²⁴ For the musical’s impact and its similarities to the novel’s success, see Stephens (‘Les Misérables’); for its original development, see Grossman and Stephens (‘From Epic Novel’).
Parisian bookshop’s windows, the sketches Pagnerre had obtained from Brion anticipated the one-sheet character posters of today’s cinematic blockbusters.

**Figure 2:** Gustave Brion, ‘L’alouette’ (1862).
As per Hugo’s descriptions, Brion’s ‘alouette’ depicts a young girl standing in front of a large broom in a domestic workspace. Wearing an apron and with her feet bare in clogs, she strains to carry a large wooden bucket while her downcast gaze evokes her dejection.

Brion’s portraits were so popular that the New York publisher George W. Carleton had them photographed two months later, having hired Charles E. Wilbour to translate the novel. Nearly two decades later, Brion’s series would be reprinted alongside featured works from a host of artists in the first volume of Eugène Hugues’s five-volume French edition (1879), including a lithograph of Bayard’s ‘Cosette balayant’ (‘Cosette sweeping’).

Figure 3: Émile Bayard, ‘Cosette balayant’, charcoal, gouache, pastel (1879).
Bayard created a yet more pathetic figure by glossing the novel’s accounts of Cosette’s treatment by the Thénardiers and the harrowing sight in winter of ‘ce pauvre enfant, qui n’avait pas encore six ans, grelottant sous de vieilles loques de toile trouées, balayer la rue avant le jour avec un énorme balai dans ses petites mains rouges et une larme dans ses grands yeux’ (III, 164–5).\(^{25}\) Bayard’s Cosette stands barefoot in a sodden courtyard, with her unkempt hair blowing in the breeze and her shoulders exposed to the elements as they protrude from her sleeveless rags. The large wooden bucket rests behind her as she sweeps with a broom that Bayard has enlarged to twice her height. She is both more central and smaller in relation to her surroundings than in Brion’s drawing, in order to tighten the focus on her fragility and neglect. Her anguish is completed by her large helpless eyes, which now gaze up to the right at an unseen onlooker. Her look of diffidence conveys both trepidation and expectation to capture her twinned experience of abuse and deliverance.

When Boublil and Schönberg’s original French concept album was released in 1980, Bayard’s full-length black-and-white image was modified for the cover. The original vinyl album credits Boublil and Schönberg for the overall conception, M+1 for the graphic design, and Serge Fenech for the illustrations – although the CD inlay booklet for its 1989 international re-release suggests that Boublil was the driving force behind these design choices, as both he and the artist David Bett are credited. Bayard’s background was removed save for a puddle beneath Cosette’s feet, leaving her small frame and massive broom to stand out against an otherwise blank cover. She was also displaced from the centre to the right as a hint of her marginalization. Against the backdrop of socio-economic uncertainty and musical creativity in the late 1970s, Boublil and Schönberg had been inspired to turn to Hugo and his celebrated defence of society’s underclass. Musicals such as *West Side Story* and *Oliver!*, which themselves adapted Shakespeare and Dickens, had shown them that the genre could captivate an audience with tales of human relationships overcoming prejudice and exploitation. Bayard’s image of Cosette made her the ideal representative for an album of moral conscience and high emotion by mirroring the blend of hardship and hope in Hugo’s profile of society. In addition, the use of a late nineteenth-century typeface with rough contours for each title letter nostalgically mixed the economic privations and literary interventions that epitomize the era of Dickens and Hugo. The musical’s distinctive font is a version of Caslon Antique, a decorative American typeface designed in 1894 to mimic the ‘old-fashioned’ look of early print, whose faces would become worn through repeated use (Coles).

Cosette remained essential to the musical’s publicity when it transferred to the stage in the autumn of 1980 for a full three-month run at the Palais des Sports in Paris, directed by Robert Hossein. Her image went almost unchanged, except for the revolutionary red that was introduced as the colour of her dress. The success of both the album and the Paris production laid the early groundwork for Cameron Mackintosh’s heavily reworked English version of the show, which transformed the French grand spectacle into a West End mega-musical. For this version’s debut in October 1985, Cosette’s melodramatic potential was recognized by Russ Eglin, the creative director of the UK advertising agency Dewynters. Attempts to place Jean Valjean at the heart of the publicity had fallen short, Eglin remembers, since they ‘always looked rather depressing’ (qtd. in Lincoln). The show’s title was left in French, as had been the case for many translations owing to the idiomatic quality of the noun *misérable*, but the production team were anxious not to promote the musical as a ‘miserable’ experience. For Eglin, Bayard’s full-length figure with her twig broom ‘looked too much Cinderella not going to the ball’, so a less downhearted image was needed. In consultation with Mackintosh and the show’s co-director Trevor Nunn, Eglin zoomed in on Cosette’s ‘great, gorgeous face’, ‘which works much better large than it did small’ (qtd.

\(^{25}\) ‘The poor child, who was not yet six, shivering in the scanty castoffs riddled with holes, sweeping the street before daybreak with an enormous broom in her little red hands and a tear in her great big eyes’ (133).
in Terry). As it had done for Brion and Bayard, Hugo’s prose offered a handy lead in describing Cosette’s beautiful eyes as painful to look at, ‘parce que, grands comme ils étaient, il semblait qu’on y vit une plus grande quantité de tristesse’ (III, 164). Eglin cropped the illustration into a close-up reproduction, incorporating the French tricolor into Cosette’s face and hair to reiterate the themes of revolution and freedom. Affixed to buses and taxi cabs, and emblazoned on T-shirts and mugs, the revamped image became the focal point of the show’s advertising and souvenirs in the kind of intense marketing campaign that sold 1980s mega-musicals as unmissable cultural events (Sternfeld 175–224). As the show began to travel the world, Cosette was individualized for different locations – wearing a sombrero for Mexico, sunglasses for Los Angeles, a Viking helmet for Oslo, and even turned upside down for Sydney. Such tweaks aside, Mackintosh and Eglin have insisted that the face itself never change so as not to impair its charm.

The sight of an abused child in need of salvation lends Les Miz a noticeably emotive fervour as a fable of adversity and aspiration. Her fate dramatizes Hugo’s universalizing worldview, in which individual self-interest and social inequality are superseded by human solidarity. Selflessness rather than self-interest leads to true self-fulfilment in both Fantine’s and Valjean’s sacrifices for Cosette, and Hugo insisted that this moral worth forges human destiny more powerfully than material circumstance. In turn, Les Misérables has romanticized social struggles for myriad audiences in a world that, since the debut of Les Miz alone, has seen the collapse of the Soviet Union and growing disillusionment with Western neoliberalism. From Latin America to Asia, Les Misérables has been invoked to stand for popular resistance and collective breakthroughs. The advertising slogan for the musical’s twenty-fifth-anniversary UK tour in 2010 neatly encapsulated such idealistic allure by referencing one of the show’s signature songs and telling audiences to ‘dream the dream’. Placed next to Cosette’s face, this invitation roused ambitions for social as well as personal renewal that are easily translatable.

In equally emotional terms, however, Cosette is also one of the musical’s least admired roles. Fans do not hold her in the kind of esteem that they display towards the other characters, such as her romantic rival, Éponine, whose solo ‘On My Own’ captures the angst of unrequited love, and Gavroche, who is more fondly considered as the musical’s real child star. These other young characters perish at the barricade along with the students, whereas Cosette transitions from rags to riches thanks to her wealthy saviour, Valjean — her own ‘Daddy Warbucks’, to take Lincoln’s parallel with Annie further. Amongst the main cast, her role is the least industrious and her lyrics are the most saccharine as she dreams of her ‘Castle on a Cloud’ or exalts ‘A Heart Full of Love’. The need for a soprano to play the character — the musical’s only such female role — enhances her lightness. Fan postings online unsurprisingly veer from subdued affection to outright resentment regarding her frivolous place:

BrandonMichelle: ‘Oh Cosette, you are a sweet girl but you really have no personality at all. […] You exist solely to be protected and fawned over! […] she does absolutely nothing except look pretty and get married.’ (‘Éponine vs. Cosette’)

mildredprice: ‘I don’t want to say I hated Cosette…but she wasn’t really in the musical […] Cosette was just there for the triangle with Marius.’ (‘Cosette vs. Éponine’)

Beck: ‘Watching little Cosette melted my heart, but once she was grown, she seemed like this perfect little porciln [sic] doll. I felt like “pfft, I don’t fall for her act – too virginal,” you know?’ (‘Cosette vs. Éponine’)

DontDoSadnessxx: ‘She really pisses me off.’ (‘Cosette vs. Éponine’)

26 ‘Because, being so big, they seemed to magnify the sadness she’d been dealt’ (133).
Cosette and her songs do not figure in fan-made material to the same extent as the others. On the Les Misérables Fan Fiction Index (LMFFI), Éponine has nearly three times as many tags as she does (130 compared to 55), and even Javert, the ruthless police inspector, receives double the amount of hits (115).  

The sympathy that the musical’s finale tries to ratchet up for Cosette has failed to endear her to these audiences. The novel’s awkward succession from the cliché of vulnerable purity to that of comfortable domesticity is made all the more apparent in a sung-through production in which nearly twenty years of narrative action is condensed into a songbook with a running time of under three hours. Dressed in their wedding clothes, Cosette and Marius grieve for Valjean at centre-stage as the ensemble gathers for the chorus of ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’; but the new dawn extolled in the final verse (‘When tomorrow comes!’) still brings with it the middle-class monotony that her marriage reifies. The little poster child can easily be imagined as looking ‘somewhere beyond the barricade’ to ‘a world you long to see’, as the lyrics go, but the young bride strikes a less transformative figure at the final curtain. Once ‘Miss Miz’ is revealed as ‘Mrs Marius’, her ostensible longing regresses into latent normativity, perpetuating her fractured and superficial character.

Adapting Cosette

The celebrity that Les Miz has given to Cosette reaffirms her femininity as inescapably troublesome. It would be misleading to think that the musical has replaced the novel as the narrative main-spring for adaptations of Les Misérables, given that adapters have been forthcoming about drawing inspiration from Hugo’s epic. Tom Hooper, the director of the musical’s film version, for example, was open about how he and the cast, as well as the screenwriter William Nicholson, used the novel to transfer the musical to the screen (qtd. in Zakarin). It would be equally erroneous to ignore how the immense popularity of Les Miz now forms a major contingency in which adapters must operate. Over three quarters of the live-action film and television versions of Les Misérables (to take but two media) were produced before the musical’s London debut, but the adaptations that have appeared since then have increasingly had to relate themselves to this global hit.  

Such is the common association between Cosette and Les Misérables that her soulful image has been borrowed by many other iterations since the mid-1980s. She has appeared on the jackets of new translations and on the covers of re-released film versions, video games, and graphic novels.  

Cosette’s ongoing emblematic role cannot, however, disguise her incongruous characterization. As in Hugo’s novel, it is this incongruity, rather than the stale types that it incorporates, which is of the most significance in how she has been represented in different adaptations. The discrepancy between Cosette’s faces generates a productive tautness that accentuates the persistently strained nature of her gender. A comparative analysis of multiple examples is particularly important in this case, as varying approaches have been used for adapting Cosette. These fall along two lines: either the temptation to take her at face value, as it were, and to bracket her as a solely representative figure of feminine types; or the invitation that

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27 Éponine’s popularity amongst teenagers also encouraged the prize-winning writer Susan Fletcher to adopt her perspective for her 2014 young adult novel, while self-published titles by Shilton and Brickl, amongst others, have retold Javert’s story.

28 Even those adapters who dislike the musical have defined themselves in relation to it. Andrew Davies, who wrote the screenplay for the BBC mini-series screened in early 2019, condemned the musical as a ‘shoddy farrago’ and deemed Hugo’s novel to be in need of an alternative ‘champion’ (Furness).

29 The musical’s logo appears on the covers of a popular English translation (Fahnestock and MacAfee), Chung Ki-soo’s Korean translation, and a deluxe 2015 edition of Isabel Hapgood’s 1887 English translation. Variations can be found on the publicity for Fox’s 2012 DVD of the 1935 and 1952 film adaptations and for Anuman Interactive’s 2014 role-playing game for PCs and touchscreen devices, as well as on the covers of manga versions in France (2011), Japan (2013), and the United States (2014). Bayard’s full-length lithograph also reappeared on Julie Rose’s English translation (2008).
the novel offers to feel the friction between those types as a fraught but meaningful encounter with the restrictions that continue to bind female subjectivity.

Moving in the first direction, the perception of Cosette as acquiescent is notably strong in a format that would ordinarily endow her with total power. A product of Japan’s *dōjin* fan culture, *ArmJoe* is a combat ‘beat-‘em-up’ video game made by the developer Takase in 1998, the name of which plays on the Japanese translation of the novel’s title (*Aa Mujō*/*Ah! Misery*). *Dōjin* (or ‘clique’) titles indicate that the development of digital media has enabled audiences to adapt works for themselves in an increasingly participatory culture. *ArmJoe* is typical of how these games are designed more for amusement than for profit or awards. The software and fighter templates are pirated from other games, and the controls have an unsophisticated and temperamental input detection that prevents any strategic gameplay. Players select one of eleven characters for combat, all of whom have a repertoire of fighting skills and special moves. Javert deploys a wave of troops, Marius summons the spirits of his dead friends from the barricade, and Éponine calls forth rainfall to restore her strength. Cosette’s arsenal is, however, dependent on Valjean. As one reviewer reported, ‘Cosette was never a fighter’: ‘When she attacked, Valjean himself would usually swoop in to deliver the blow instead. [...] She had the special move of being able to summon her father, pick him up, and throw him at her opponent’ (Corbett). The game’s tongue-in-cheek experience has been welcomed by various fans, some of whom have written downloadable songs to accompany the gameplay and parody the musical with knowing lines such as ‘Gonna knock you to my castle on a cloud, bitch!’ The misogynistic undertones of such lyrics aside, Cosette’s disempowerment in *ArmJoe* supports the popular consensus that she is an entirely negligible character.

With this triviality in mind, the director of the Groupe Hugo research network, Guy Rosa, acerbically claimed that: ‘If Hugo didn’t write the continuation of *Les Misérables* [...] it’s because Cosette is not very interesting’ (qtd. in Waxman). Rosa was responding to the news that the award-winning American writer Laura Kalpakian had continued Cosette’s story. *Cosette* (1995) was followed six years later by another sequel, entitled *Cosette, ou le temps des illusions* (2001), by the French journalist François Cérésa, which became a bestseller and was translated into English. As sequels, both novels were accused of consumerist motives and were published at times of heightened public interest. When Kalpakian’s *Cosette* appeared, the musical was celebrating its tenth anniversary, and Cérésa’s publication date fell just before the 2002 bicentenary of Hugo’s birth. Kalpakian was criticized by the director of the Maisons de Victor Hugo for cashing in on Hugo’s legacy, while Cérésa’s publisher, Plon, was sued by Hugo’s descendants for violation of intellectual property, primarily owing to his decision to bring the character of Javert back to life.30

Both of the Cosette sequels display an eagerness to rework and remedy prior material by dealing with the unanswered question from *Les Misérables* of what would have happened to Cosette after Valjean’s death. However, they pick up this loose narrative thread only to stitch it back into the facile ideas about female agency that the character already represents. Kalpakian and Cérésa each release frustration towards Cosette and are both preoccupied with what future stories she makes possible. Their novels offer undemanding social observation and heavy-handed drama, making for entertaining if unmemorable reads: ‘a TV miniseries in the making’ in Kalpakian’s case (Ishaghoffme), and an exciting romp worthy of Alexandre Dumas in Cérésa’s (Dufreigne). Both begin by punishing Cosette for being at once perfect and dull. In Kalpakian’s novel, Cosette’s support of Marius’s liberal newspaper *La Lumière* draws her into the collapse of the July Monarchy and the gradual rise of the Second Empire at the nineteenth century’s midpoint, which results in a series of disasters. Marius is seemingly

30 Whereas Hugo’s copyright had long expired in the United States and Kalpakian was not subject to the French law protecting an artist’s ‘moral right’, Cérésa was liable. On his family’s behalf, Pierre Hugo claimed Cérésa had ‘kidnapped’ his great-great-grandfather’s characters and that he would not have wanted his novel’s ending changed (qtd. in Coman). The case was finally dismissed by the French Courts in 2008 (Durand-Souffland).
killed, her personal fortune founders, and her health deteriorates along with her beauty. Furthermore, her daughter Fantine is exiled to England while her son becomes estranged. Jean-Luc Pontmercy is lured to side with the bourgeoisie and their ‘imperial carnival’ (436) by the ‘rat in satin’ Azelma Thénardier (444), who seeks vengeance on his parents for the death of her sister Éponine. In Cérésa’s novel, Cosette’s marriage has not even enjoyed its honeymoon period. Racked with survivor’s guilt after the 1832 insurrection and bored by the tedium of daily life, Marius becomes attracted to the idle indulgences afforded to his class, including gambling and courtesans. Cosette meanwhile frets at home and tends to her roses. Before long, Marius falls into a trap arranged by a returning Thénardier and is sent to a penal colony. Believing him to be dead, Cosette is left alone and pregnant.

The challenges laid before Cosette in both texts establish redemption as their key theme, but this subject takes very different forms as a matter of either feminist idealism or masculinist chivalry. Kalpakian’s Cosette becomes a resilient heroine who proves her worth as Valjean’s daughter by facing her predicament and conquering its adversity. Cérésa, on the other hand, reiterates Cosette’s powerlessness and redeems Javert instead. Back from the dead with the alias ‘Verjat’, Javert comes to Cosette’s rescue and sets out to discover the truth about Marius’s death. The former is a novel about a nascent feminist hero, transforming a girl who was once a waif ‘into a legend’, as the jacket advertises; the latter describes feminine suppression and the salvation of the masculine, as Javert embarks on a quest for his own absolution to make amends for his persecution of Valjean.

Kalpakian’s Cosette assumes responsibility for herself and writes her own destiny. Such a step obliges her to drop her veil of innocence in an erotic rewrite of her wedding night: ‘I know there’s some great mystery here, some secret the world keeps from well-bred girls. Whatever it is […] I want it’ (68). Unsubtle metaphors of thickening snow lacing the windows and cream-colored wax trickling down the candlesticks abound as Cosette makes ‘voyages of discovery on the great galleon’ of her bed with Marius (97). In addition to this new sexual confidence, she demonstrates her parents’ fortitude. She remembers Valjean’s comments that ‘your strength comes from your mother’ and ‘you have a beauty beyond your lovely face, a beauty that comes from strength and grace’ that some will try to convince her is ‘unbecoming on a woman’ (94–5). Later, the narrator adds that, although Cosette had lost her family and money, she had held onto more important assets: ‘She came to understand why Jean Valjean had so cherished freedom and integrity. They did not keep you warm at night, but they kept you upright. The education she had received from Jean Valjean was not lost on her’ (415). When Toussaint tells her that ‘it is the lot of woman, ma petite, to wait and pray, to suffer’, she defiantly responds: ‘Then wait and pray, Toussaint, suffer. I refuse to’ (43–4). Her integrity wins out: she finds Marius and nurses him back to health; she is reunited with her daughter and adopts a new family; she fights the ‘masquerade empire’ (615) in words (through her ongoing journalistic writing) and in deeds (outwitting the conniving police inspector Clerons and seeing an imperial theatre burn to the ground); and, in a triumphant conclusion, while Marius reconciles with their son, she refuses simply to forget Jean-Luc’s past behaviour. She stresses that only actions, not promises, can heal their rift.

Cérésa’s Cosette is forced onto a quite different route. Early in the novel, a submissively blindfolded Cosette is led by Marius back to the house on the rue Plumet which he has bought for her as a surprise, but her reaction is to faint. This impression of a simpering and easily overwhelmed individual is reinforced by repeated allusions to her beauty, such as the opulent crown of her golden hair, the perfect oval of her face, and the bold blossoming of her bosom (73). These references further confine her identity to the prison of the ideal feminine, incarcerated in the rue Plumet’s idyllic garden: ‘Cosette semblait une reine descendue de son palais pour régner sur les roses et les lilas’ (258).31 When Marius falls into danger with his new

31 ‘Cosette looked like a queen who had come down from her palace to reign over the roses and lilacs.’
corrupt friends and is feared dead, her powerless status without a man to guide her is beyond doubt: ‘l’univers commençait et finissait avec Marius. Qu’allait-elle faire sans lui? […] En fait, elle ne songeait plus qu’à mourir’ (306–7). Mired in heartache, she shows none of Valjean’s perseverance, instead entering into a hysterical revolt ‘qui partait dans tous les sens et se traduisait par des sautes d’humeur et des raisonnements sans queue ni tête’ (417). She cuts the heads off her flowers and smashes her windows by throwing stones at them, all the while laughing uncontrollably. She then flirts childishly with Marius’s best friend Amédée while failing to see that this shallow opportunist was central to Marius’s downfall. Hawkish readers might even be surprised that the novel’s title should be Cosette, since she is absent from whole sections, including several early formative chapters and blocks of prose lasting up to as much as thirty pages. A more appropriate title would have been Javert, since the story focuses on the now-Verjat and the second chance that he craves as he learns to ‘live again’ (180).

Neither novel is able to conceive of Cosette as a less contrived female figure. They lock themselves into one of the two fanciful musings on history’s progress that she signifies in Les Misérables: either the romanticized dream of revolutionary progress with Kalpakian, or the conservative desire for stable anchorage with Cérésa. In stark contrast, adapters that have engaged with her lack of substance rather than attempted to resolve that deficiency have produced more involving portraits. In Bille August’s 1998 film adaptation, the casting of Claire Danes strengthened the character’s coltish potential thanks to her previous starring roles in the television drama My So-Called Life (1994) and Baz Luhrmann’s modernized film version of Romeo + Juliet (1996). Known for playing teenagers who yearned for connection and railed against the alienation of adolescence, Danes was a logical choice for Rafael Yglesias’s script, in which Cosette becomes more involved with Marius’s revolutionary activities and more questioning of her father’s secretive past. Remaining ‘charming and likeable’ (Levy), she also managed to be ‘a little more spoilt and brash than other versions’ (Diaz), playing on her character’s predictabilities for a less one-dimensional portrayal. Such an approach has been shown to be possible in the stage musical as well thanks to performers such as Amara Okereke, who was nominated for The Stage Debut Award in 2018. ‘With her intense use of rubato, delivering her lines at a skittering speed to give them an excited, jittery feel, she gets across the sense of being caged’, according to The Stage’s reviewer: ‘there’s a real feeling of youthful energy desperate to break out’ (Bano). Being the first black actor to play the role added further impetus to Cosette’s subversive potential as a figure who is prominently bound by stereotypes.

In a similarly elliptical vein, the 2007 animated series Shōjo Cosette, directed by Hiroaki Sakurai for Nippon Animation’s World Masterpiece Theatre, makes the character’s frustrated subjectivity its main focus. Although not the first adaptation to reframe Hugo’s story around Cosette in order to appeal to a younger audience, its run of fifty-two half-hour episodes concentrates more maturely and more extensively on her plight than its predecessors. Cosette lends herself well to the shōjo (‘girl’) genre, whose target demographic of pre-pubescent and pubescent girls could identify with the pressures of her upbringing, especially as she is a teenager falling in love for the first time and the ward of a circumspect parent. Shōjo titles in anime series and manga comics dramatize the journey from childhood to adulthood as a fretful adjustment whereby the capacity for self-determination increases without necessarily being fully realized. Newcomers to the story will automatically accept Cosette as the main character when the opening episode follows her accompanying Fantine in her search for

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32 ‘The universe began and ended with Marius. What was she to do without him? […] In truth, she now thought only of dying.’

33 ‘Moving all over the place and coming out in mood swings and senseless ideas’.

34 AB Productions’ 1992 animated series and Alain Paraillous’s abridged book are two examples of Cosette being used to package the story for younger audiences. Unlike the 2007 series, the 1992 animation lets Valjean live so as to end with a reunion between father and daughter that smacks of unabashed paternalism.
work. Those familiar with *Les Misérables* will be encouraged to do the same when a hungry Cosette marvels longingly at a loaf of bread in a bakery. The early allusion to Valjean’s own famous moment of hunger enables the daughter to replace the father as the central figure.

Moving into this position, Cosette is afforded more overt verbal and physical action. Her grief for her mother, her love for Valjean, and her romance with Marius are played out across numerous monologues and dialogues in which her uncertain feelings are made tangible thanks to anime’s convention of less fluid character animation, resulting in longer pauses and more deliberate facial movements and bodily gestures. Her abusive past also drives her altruism in her adolescence. She undertakes her own charitable acts rather than simply accompanying Valjean, such as when she reunites an orphan girl with her mother, and social responsibility dominates her conversation with Marius after she sees a man collapse from cholera. When the 1832 insurrection begins, she respectfully chastises Valjean for hiding away: ‘the city is in trouble, so how can we do nothing and stay put in a safe place?’ The morning after the barricade has been stormed, she sneaks out of the house in search of the two men in her life. As the frames cut between the stand-off on the rue de la Chanverie and Cosette racing through the Parisian side-streets, the high-angle shots match each frame’s street lines, implying through this parallel that she is fighting an insurrection of her own against her exclusion from the world of her father and suitor.

Although such moments take creative license with Hugo’s novel and although Cosette exclaims to Valjean that ‘I’m not a child anymore!’, her awkward status retains its ambiguities in the final episode. Once married, she retraces her mother’s journey to Montreuil-sur-Mer and visits her grave to bid Fantine goodbye. Following Valjean’s death, Fantine’s spirit appears to offer reassurance, recalling the musical’s last act. In an epilogue several years later, Cosette and Marius are seen walking with their own daughter, who is identical in looks to Cosette as a toddler. Being visually reminiscent of the start, this climax implies that the adult Cosette has overcome her various sorrows to found a new family. As a whole, the series cannot avoid reproducing the kind of normative patriarchy that constrains Cosette’s womanhood. At the same time, however, it lays bare the character’s verve and accountability in a stroke that reflects *shōjo*’s ability to question hegemonic categories of gender without simply either exploding or embracing those types. The genre’s unstable blend of force and frailty has proven advantageous for Japanese producers in navigating the cultural shifts and emergent feminist discourse of the postwar period (Ogi, Orbaugh, Aoyama). By extension, the scope of Hugo’s own problematic plotting becomes more inviting.

Problem Solved?

Audiences might understandably share the view that ‘it’s a shame that [Hugo] didn’t write Cosette better because […] there was so much more that could have been done with her if she had been written differently’ (Brandon), but her contentious depiction is not an outright defect. Her lack of depth disturbs her stock femininity by working in tandem with the novel’s Romantic drive towards endless conversion. Hugo’s personal desire to exalt and protect (if not control) those women close to him undeniably shapes Cosette, and aspects of his private life pervade her characterization, including his relationship with his eldest daughter and the experiences of convent living related to him by two of his mistresses. Yet Cosette is also subject to how his worldview envisaged indeterminacy as a universal reality, in which opposites invert and the imagination is imbued with creation’s freeing, egalitarian spirit.

Keeping the dynamism of that poetic mind in play is far from straightforward, since it asks Hugo’s readers to remain forever vigilant when gleaning sense from his work. Even incisive voices can occasionally lapse into static ways of thinking about his oeuvre’s dialogue between freedom and order. Although disagreeing with other critics who have accused Hugo of being complicit with bourgeois conservatism, for example, Victor Brombert argues that ‘revolution itself, in Hugo’s private ideology, is made to serve the demands for stability and continuity’
(136). But the ‘dynamics of becoming’ that Brombert so attentively analyses in Hugo’s fiction oblige a simultaneous reversal of those demands, since finality and permanence are likewise forced to yield to transformation and upheaval. Resolution and revolution energize one another in Hugo’s eyes within a reality that is both creative and destructive. Neither Les Misérables nor its ensemble of characters escape this paradox. The novel complicates rather than replicates orthodox readings of themes such as socio-economic progress and spiritual deliverance, allowing its readers to identify with Valjean’s realization that self-knowledge is a matter of constant discovery and not instant determination.

How Les Misérables has been retold demonstrates that the ‘hermeneutic relation’ between adaptations and their sources can be both interpretive — ‘fixing the form and meaning of the prior materials’ — and interrogative — ‘exposing the cultural and social conditions of those materials and of [the adaptation] that has processed them’ (Venuti 41). As a collective group, this network of adaptations has either inadvertently or consciously stimulated the tensions within Cosette’s laboured femininity. Their engagement with her character reflects the varying hold that patriarchal notions of gender exert in different contexts. In this sense, Cosette’s centrality to the modern iconography of Les Misérables makes her disputed character all the more revealing. More particularly, contextualizing her fame as the twenty-first-century face of Les Misérables qualifies the problem of her standing as apposite rather than inconvenient. She is less a predicament to be resolved than a question to be left open. By signifying the dream of impeccable new starts while pointing to a destiny of timeworn gendered stereotypes, the Les Miz logo effectively symbolizes how Hugo’s vision of humanity is at once transgressive and regressive.

Seeing ‘Miss Miz’ in such ambivalent ways makes her a more suitable representative for Les Misérables than she might at first appear. Attempts to disaffiliate the novel from the musical overlook this symbolic potential. The notion that the novel is something to be rediscovered beyond the musical was apparent when Penguin published Christine Donougher’s 2013 English translation. Penguin dropped the previous cover used for a reissue of Norman Denny’s 1976 translation, which had transposed Ignition Creative’s imitation of the Cosette logo from the 2012 film musical’s poster (with the actress Isabelle Allen’s face). It was replaced by Umberto Giovannini’s woodcut of a tilted black-and-white Paris skyline ravaged by revolution. In the foreground, brandishing the red flag of revolution that bleeds outwards, stands a female figure, whose windswept hair recalls Cosette’s but whose defiant posture and muscular body are more reminiscent of Delacroix’s La Liberté guidant le peuple (1830) and the French national emblem of Marianne. The title changed as well, to The Wretched (with the subtitle ‘A new translation of Les Misérables’). These changes distinguish Les Misérables from Les Miz, implying that a new visual and verbal language could be accessed to explore the difference. But Cosette looks to tensions within Les Misérables that are as significant to its enduring legacy as any dramatic emotions or rousing sing-alongs. To turn away from her is no solution to the problems she raises.

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