The Chrysanthemum and the Butterfly: What, if Anything, Remains of Pierre Loti in the Madame Butterfly Narrative

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From its haunting aria *Un Bel Di* (“One Fine Day,” or sometimes, “Someday He’ll Come Back”) to its young heroine whose ardent devotion to an absent lover ultimately results in her tragic demise, Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly” stands as one of the world’s most beloved operas. The exact origins of the story (what I shall call “the butterfly narrative” from this point on), however, remain a contentious subject of debate. Opera historians generally attribute the butterfly narrative to John Luther-Long, while scholars of French literature attribute it to Pierre Loti.

John Luther-Long (1861-1927) was an American lawyer and aspiring writer whose sister, Jennie Correll, had been serving as a Methodist missionary in Japan during the waning years of the nineteenth century. During this time, Correll supposedly heard an apocryphal tale about a shopkeeper’s love affair with a Japanese woman, which she then recounted to her brother. Luther-Long transcribed his sister’s story, baptizing the Japanese heroine “Cho-Cho san” and publishing it in *Century Magazine* in 1898 under the title “Madame Butterfly” from its eponymous heroine.¹ Luther-Long’s story would later be adapted into a stage play by American dramatist David Belasco. This version of the butterfly narrative’s origin is what is usually printed in the programs accompanying productions of Puccini’s opera.

Pierre Loti (1850-1923) was the pen name of French naval officer Julien-Marie Viaud, a French naval officer-turned writer. From July 8th through August 12th, 1885, Loti was stationed in Nagasaki, during which time he chose to live on-shore rather than remain aboard ship. With the aid of a local go-between (a “marriage broker,” as he calls it), Loti entered a contractual relationship with a paid consort named Kane (rebaptized Kiku, or Chrysanthème in French), who was his constant companion for the duration of his stay in Nagasaki.² The pair lived together in the Jyuzenji neighborhood (now known as Jyuninmachi) nestled high in the hills above Nagasaki.
Nagasaki harbor and away from the foreign concessions where the sailors typically resided. Loti chronicled every detail of this stay in his private journal and published it, virtually unaltered, in 1887 under the title *Madame Chrysanthème*; the book was an immediate success, spurred on in part by the craze for Japanese art that had taken hold in France several years earlier.

Loti’s story predates Correll’s stay in Japan by just under a decade, and although Luther-Long uses the same premise for his short story (that of a foreign sailor living with a Japanese girl) as Loti does for his novel, the story lines are divergent enough to cast doubt on the Loti inspiration hypothesis; however, there are traces of distinctly Gallic influences in Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa’s libretto for Puccini’s opera. These traces likely come from two French *Madame Chrysanthème* adaptations, the first, an 1893 lyric opera by composer André Messager entitled “Madame Chrysanthème” and the second, an 1894 derivative tale by Félix Régamey entitled “The Pink Notebook of Madame Chrysanthème” (“Le Cahier Rose de Madame Chrysanthème”), both of which used Loti’s text as the basis for their adaptations. So in the final product that is the libretto for *Madama Butterfly*, what, if anything, remains of Loti’s novel, and how did these transnational and trans-generic contact points manage to transform what was essentially one man’s private diary into one of the most beloved stories in the history of opera? This essay is an attempt to answer that question by tracing the evolution of the butterfly narrative from its origins in Pierre Loti’s private journal to its eventual end form as the libretto for the Puccini opera. I must point out that my intent here is not to analyze the musical aspects of the opera, as that poses an entirely different set of concerns; my focus is rather, on the narrative aspects of each stage in the metamorphosis from Chrysanthemum to Butterfly. As such, my discussion shall be based on the libretti rather than the musical compositions. With the exception of the Messager version, whose original, French libretto I was unable to locate, all source texts used are in the original language, and, unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

*Madame Chrysanthème* was published in 1887, first in serial form, and then as a book. Written as a series of journal entries, it is not so much a novel as it is an account of one man’s summer in Japan. The story opens with two French sailors on the deck of their ship discussing their upcoming stay in Japanese waters. Loti, the author’s literary doppelganger of the same name, declares his intent to get married to “a little yellow-skinned woman with cat-like eyes and black hair” (“une petite femme à peau jaune,

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à cheveux noirs, à yeux de chat”; (45)) and to live in “a paper house surrounded by verdant gardens” (“une maison de papier[…]au milieu des jardins verts; (45)). Once on Japanese soil, Loti meets a certain Kangorou-san, “interpreter, laundryman and broker for interracial marriages” (“interprète, blanchisseur et agent discret pour croisements de races”; (57)), who takes him to a teahouse where Loti is presented with several potential brides. He selects a girl by the name of Kiku, weds her in the presence of Japanese authorities, then moves into a rented house to begin his life with her.

The relationship is far from conjugal bliss. Loti seems more concerned with taking in the sights and sounds of Nagasaki than he is for the girl’s well being, and treats her less like a fellow human and more like a living doll. Kiku, in turn, maintains an air of aloof disinterest, never showing even the slightest emotion or affection towards her so-called husband. And when the time comes for the pair to part ways, she bids him a wordless farewell while counting the coins Loti had paid for her services. A few days later, when the ship is at open sea, Loti discards the one souvenir of his summer fling, a withered lotus flower plucked from Kiku’s garden, tossing it out the window to a watery grave. In a faux invocation to the Shinto Gods, Loti implores the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, to “purge him of this marriage in the waters of the sacred river Kamo” (“O Ama-Térace-Omi-Kami, lavez-moi bien blanchement de ce petit mariage, dans les eaux de la rivière de Kamo”; (232)).

Although the novel lacks a true plot, Loti’s contribution to the butterfly narrative is substantial. Not only did he establish the basic premise of the story, that of a Western sailor entering a temporary marriage with a Japanese girl, but he created the basic characters that will recur in all subsequent incarnations of the narrative, including Puccini’s opera. Van Rij points out that the characters in Luther-Long’s short story are “clearly inspired by Loti prototypes (2),” and indeed, regardless of the genre or date of the adaptation, every version of the butterfly narrative always features the same core cast of characters: a Western sailor who arrives in the Far East on a tour of duty, a native go-between who arranges the “marriage” and living situation, and a young, native girl who serves as the temporary wife.

Loti also lays the groundwork for the character of Suzuki, Cho-Cho san’s maid, even though no such character is featured in Madame Chrysanthème. Suzuki is very likely a composite of two Loti characters, Oyouki, Kiku’s confidante and best friend, and Madame Prune, proprietor...
of the house where Loti and Kiku live. Oyouki and Kiku are practically inseparable, and Madame Prune can be found “at any given time...on all fours at the entrance to our abode ready to offer us her service” (“à toute heure...à quatre pattes à l’entrée de notre logis pour nous offrir quelque service”; (Loti 101), giving her, as Boyd suggests, a distinctly maid-like trait even though she is not employed as Kiku’s servant (60). And just as Oyouki functions as Kiku’s sounding board, Suzuki is the one who listens to Cho-Cho san’s constant fantasies and ramblings about Pinkerton, though the maid knows full well that the American will likely not return.

Loti is also responsible for the quasi-colonial tone and implied attitude of Western superiority over the East. As Homi Bhaba defines it in “Discourse, Stereotype and the Colonized Other,” “the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction (70).” In order to achieve this end, colonial narrative texts often employ certain leitmotifs and recurring adjectival clauses in order to describe the Other or the Other’s civilization. Such descriptions may involve the use of animalistic metaphors in order to emphasize the Other’s less-than-human status, and Loti makes ample use of this trope. The Japanese are described in sub-human, animalistic terms, including “human hedgehogs” (“hérissons humaines” (Loti 55), “little trained dogs” (“petits chiens savants” (97)), “dragonflies” (“libellules” (108)) and “old toads” (“vieux crapauds” (115)). Loti also dehumanizes Kiku, referring to her with such liberally applied appellations as “little doll” (“petite poupée”) “trinket” (“bibelot”) or “plaything” (“jouet d’enfant”). This dehumanization robs Kiku of the ability to feel emotions, which is in part why Loti can so easily abandon her at the end of the novel.

The enormous success of the novel led to an operatic adaptation in 1893, with music by André Messager and libretto by Georges Hartmann and André Alexandre. The librettists based their adaptation directly on the novel, but the main problem facing them was a lack of dramatic intrigue within the source text. Vercier points out that this lack of intrigue represents a “constant tendency in Loti’s art: to write a work in which practically nothing occurs. Not “a book about nothing,” such as championed by Flaubert, but a book devoid of the traits that typically characterize a novel: fictive characters, dramatic intrigue, multiple plot twists, etc. (“une tendance constant de l’art de Loti: écrire un ouvrage où il ne se passe (presque) rien. Non pas faire « un livre sur rien » selon l’idéal
de Flaubert, mais un livre débarrassé de ce qui d’habitude, caractérise un roman : personnages inventés, intrigue dramatique, péripéties multiples, etc. ” (Vercier 5). Loti himself acknowledges and attempts to justify this lack of intrigue by momentarily interrupting his story to provide the following disclaimer:

Here, I am forced to admit that for those who are reading my story, it must seem to drag a lot…but, in place of intrigue and tragedy, I wanted to transmit a little bit of the essence of the sweet scent of the gardens…a little bit of the sweet warmth of the sun…In place of amorous relations, I wanted to show just a little of the serene tranquility of this far-off neighborhood. (“Ici, je suis forcé de reconnaître que, pour qui lit mon histoire, elle doit trainer beaucoup…A défaut d’intrigue et de choses tragiques, je voudrais au moins savoir y mettre un peu de la bonne odeur des jardins…un peu de la chaleur douce de ce soleil…A défaut d’amour, y mettre quelque chose de la tranquilité reposante de ce faubourg lointain” (104)).

Unfortunately, this writing style does not lend itself well to dramatic adaptation, and Hartmann and Alexandre were forced to make several changes to Loti’s text in order to enable successful adaptation for the stage.

Hartmann and Alexandre keep the storyline and characters from the original novel, as well as the alternance between domestic scenes and scenes in the streets, but there are three changes that become evident early on. First, the librettists refer to the sailor by his given name of Pierre rather than the surname of Loti that had been in use throughout the novel. Second, Hartmann and Alexandre explicitly identify the girl as a geisha rather than a paid consort, an element that would be retained in all future versions of the story. This change in occupation not only elevates the girl’s social status (geishas were often conservatory trained performing artists as opposed to the consorts who were sometimes illiterate), but also sets the story firmly in Japan through the use of an identifiably Japanese motif. Third, Hartmann and Alexandre provide the girl with a back story, creating a character with whose situation the audience members could sympathize. The lack of a back story was not an oversight on Loti’s part, as he knew very little about Kane’s background.³

The back story allows Hartmann and Alexandre to inject an emotional element into the butterfly narrative. Their version of Chrysanthème is not the inanimate knick-knack of the original novel, but rather, a genuine human with genuine feelings; likewise, their Pierre is not

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a cold, disillusioned sailor, but rather, a young man who, despite his seemingly nonchalant demeanor, was actually genuinely concerned for the girl. This inchoate bond is established early on, shortly after the ship arrives in port. Pierre finds himself entranced so by the performance of one of the girls that he inquires of her background.

PIERRE. She is charming, this child/Who speaks so naively and in confidence.../Where do you come from, singer, where were you born?

THE GEISHA. At Yeddo,/Near the Mikado's palace,/There I was born and abandoned./The white "Camellia,"/The little "Jonquille,"/See/How in singing I call my family, my unknown parents.

PIERRE (aside). She is sweet and tiny and so pretty.../She is really good to see...her eyes are innocent.../Brimming with playfulness...

(He reflects an instant)
And since I must marry in this country

.........................

(He looks tenderly and smilingly at the Geisha)

.........................
Like a child entrusted to my care/I would protect her! Really

.........................
What an amusing home we would have, we two!/Neither reproaches, nor tears, nor jealous words. For a wife/I would go far to find a better. (1.3.125-138, 143-144, 147-150; Burden 10).

As envisioned by Hartmann and Alexandre, Pierre and Kiku are much more open about their feelings than are their literary counterparts, but it takes a bout of romantic jealousy for the French sailor to realize his true feelings for the girl. The idea of a romantically jealous Pierre is actually Lotian in origin, and stems from an abandoned premise of an alleged love affair between Yves and Kiku. The confrontation occurs at the beginning of the third act, while the trio is in attendance at a village festival. While Pierre is away at one of the booths, Chrysanthème comments to Yves how she longs to join the other geishas on the stage, as she had done the previous year. When Pierre returns, he catches sight of Chrysanthème and Yves together, at which he displays a marked disdain. His ire increases when he sees Chrysanthème performing on stage as an understudy, at which point he confronts her, accusing her of preferring her old lifestyle over her current one.
[Pierre] traverses the crowd, takes Chrysanthème by the arm and violently leads her forward.
PIERRE. What are you doing here?
CHRYSANTHEMUM. I was singing.../Ah! I beseech you.../Forgive me a moment of folly. / I replaced/The geisha who is absent today.../Forgive me, I lost my head! (3.10.578-583; Burden 36).

At this point, Yves steps in to diffuse the situation:

YVES. What? This anger,/These looks of scorn,/Do I understand aright?/Ah! Brother! Brother! Is it really you?/Are you actually jealous?
PIERRE. Go both of you, go, I say, to the devil!.../You and all/This Japan! (3.10.598-606; Burden 36).

Upon seeing the conflict, Kangorou, the marriage broker, offers Pierre a chance to divorce Kiku, but the Frenchman refuses, suggesting that he has an emotional investment in this relationship and is willing to try to make it work. Later that night, in an attempt to mend his relationship with Chrysanthème, he goes to apologize to her.

(Chrysanthemum has entered and goes spontaneously to Pierre.)
CHRYSANTHEMUM. You are not vexed with me now, my sweet lord?
PIERRE. Why?/It is I who was unjust and rude.
CHRYSANTHEMUM. No, I did wrong, I confess it/A demon urged me...
(She moves towards the bench on which she places a little box).
PIERRE. No more sadness.../Let all be forgotten! You behold me now, so pleased/At seeing again your sweet, fair face! (4.3.667-674; Burden 40).

At this point, Chrysanthème and Pierre realize that their feelings of love are mutual, something their literary counterparts never felt. They kiss and make up, but have little time to enjoy each others’ company, for Yves arrives a few minutes later with the announcement that the ship is to sail with the tide that evening, laying the way for the final emotional parting scene.

The final scene represents the greatest departure from Loti’s text by a French author. We recall that in the end of Madame Chrysanthème, Loti walks in on Kiku and finds her in the midst of counting the money he had paid for her services. Sensing the awkwardness of the moment, Loti promptly takes his leave, saying only that he has some errands to run and

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that he is under orders to return to the ship by 3:00. With that, Loti and Kiku separate without so much as a single word between them; this is the last we ever see or hear of Chrysanthème in her eponymous book. The lack of an emotional connection between Kiku and Loti, due in part to the mercantile nature of their relationship and the subhuman manner in which he viewed her, is one of the reasons that Loti could so easily abandon the girl at the end of the novel. But since Hartmann and Alexandre have established the existence of an emotional bond between the pair, the cold, seemingly heartless parting scene of Loti’s novel can no longer do justice to this new characterization.

At this juncture, the librettists take enormous artistic license with Loti’s work, replacing the awkward, wordless parting scene with a tearful farewell and heartfelt revelation from Kiku. As the other neighbors gather at the waterfront to present the sailors with parting gifts, Pierre and Chrysanthème slip away for a private moment.

(Chrysanthemum and Pierre are alone onstage.)
CHrysanthemum. I know that you are leaving...
Pierre. Come, we must part, my little mousmé. Part good friends without shedding too many tears. My stay in Japan has not wanted for charm. Thanks to your pretty face, smiling, perfumed! You have given me, my poor Chrysanthème, the best of yourself: Your eternal smile, your reverence and your morning songs... I shall always remember you, your sky, Japan, these gardens and the grasshoppers. That chirp forever! Farewell, little woman. To our short lovemaking. Let us ever remember them in our souls.../Farewell!...

(Chrysanthemum silently abandons herself to Pierre’s embrace. He starts to leave her, Chrysanthemum tries to speak; he returns to her.)
CHrysanthemum. (effusively, in a low voice) Not yet...Au Revoir! Before you leave, come and kiss me tonight!

(Pierre kisses her for the last time and tears himself from her arms.)
(4.7.802-818; Burden 46).

Later, when the ship is at sea, Pierre reflects on his experience in Japan, declaring to Yves his belief that Chrysanthème never truly loved him. Yves contradicts Pierre’s assertion, and as proof, hands him a letter that Chrysanthème had penned the night before.

Pierre. (With emotion, takes the letter, unfolds it slowly and reads softly). "...You did not believe in my love! Then it was necessary to burden yourself with a little capricious yielding woman, just as

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they say your European ladies are, and which makes them appear more loving! Forgive me this boldness, I wanted to keep a little corner in your memory...I dare not say in your heart...I know well, alas; that it has never been mine!...You said so; I have been nothing more to you than a doll, a mousmé...But if I could see you go away smiling...I want you to know, when you shall be far away...very far from me...that in Japan there are loving women, women of love...who weep!” (Epilogue.858-863; Burden 50).

Apart from this drastic change in the end, Hartmann and Alexandre’s adaptation does not actually alter Loti’s storyline in the way that the subsequent non-French incarnations would, and at its heart, Messager’s version of “Madame Chrysanthème” remains the story of one man’s summer experiences in Japan. The minor changes, such as the change in the girl’s profession and the addition of a back story, are not enough to alter the storyline, and, to anyone unfamiliar with the original story, could easily be construed as having originated with Loti himself. The decision to alter the characterization of the two main protagonists seems to have resonated well with audiences, and the opera garnered generally positive reviews. A journalist for the review “Piano Soleil” comments that the character of Madame Chrysanthème, “the pretty, but emotionless and soulless doll of the novel” (“la jolie poupée insensible et inconsciente du roman”) had been transformed into “a seductive and intelligent, devoted young woman who is sincerely in love” (“une femme intelligente, séduisante, dévouée et sincèrement amoureuse” (1)).

Six years after its publication, Madame Chrysanthème continued to be a best-seller, spurred on in part by the success of Messager’s opera, but not everyone was enthralled with Loti’s portrayal of Japan and the Japanese. Among Loti’s detractors was Félix Régamey, an artist and Asian scholar who referred to Loti as “the deplorable, ungrateful friend of [Madame] Chrysanthème” (“l’ingrat et déplorable ami de Chrysanthème”;(15)) who wrote a book filled with “misunderstanding, errors of detail [and] optical illusions that turn blue into black” (“l’incompréhension, les erreurs de détail, les illusions d’optique qui font voir noir ce qui est bleu”; (22)). Régamey objected to Loti’s portrayal of Kiku (and by extension, all Japanese women) as a soulless object, and sought to humanize her character by looking into her emotional state during her tenure as Loti’s companion. The Pink Notebook of Madame Chrysanthème (Le Cahier Rose de Madame Chrysanthème) (1894) was published one year after the premier of

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Messager’s opera, but does not give concession to the revisionist version of Loti’s story proposed by Hartmann and Alexandre. For his short story, Régamey returns to the original Loti novel, turns it on its head and retells the entire story from the point-of-view of the heroine. Reed points out that in writing this tale, Régamey “slightly altered some of Loti’s phrases and created a few Loti-ish phrases himself” (91). Indeed, he was able to match Loti’s writing style so accurately (including the diary format) that it is easy to be lulled into thinking that elements contributed by Régamey are Lotian in origin, when, in fact, they are not.

Régamey’s Pink Notebook contributes three important elements that become central in the later versions of the butterfly narrative. Like Hartmann and Alexandre, Régamey provides the girl with a back story. She is the daughter of a former samurai whose services were rendered obsolete as a result of the westernization process. No longer able to serve his master, her father commits ritual suicide, forcing the now orphaned Chrysanthème to become a consort whose sole purpose is to entertain the Westerners who have come to help modernize Japan. This version of her personal history was appropriated by Luther-Long when he mentions that Cho-Cho san commits suicide with her father’s sword.

Régamey also introduces the theme of the waiting woman that will become a key motif in both the Luther-Long story and Puccini’s adaptation of it. Like Cho-Cho san, Kiku waits for a sign from her foreign lover that signals his return and prepares the house every day in the hopes that he might come back.

Five days without seeing him! A kind of numbness has come over. Every morning, automatically, I replaced the flowers in the house. I put on my prettiest dress and did not allow myself to cry, lest he find me too ugly when he returns…I consoled myself by supposing that his duties aboard ship had kept him…(“Cinq jours sans le voir! Une sorte d’engourdissement s’est emparé de mon être. Chaque matin, automatiquement, j’ai renouvelé les fleurs dans la maison; j’ai mis ma plus belle robe et je me suis défendu de pleurer pour qu’il ne me trouve pas trop laide au retour...Je me console en supposant qu’il a été retenu par son service...” (Régamey 41-42)).

Her vigil turns out to have a happier result than Cho-Cho san’s, for not long after completing this entry in her journal, she catches sight of Yves and Pierre coming up the pathway to the house.

Perhaps though, the most important Régamey addition to the butterfly narrative is the idea of the heroine’s suicide. In retelling Loti’s
story from Kiku’s point-of-view, we can gain a better idea of her emotions and her reasons for taking her life.

September 18. Because he is supposed to return today, I have no right to cry yet...and to lull my thoughts to sleep, I sing the sad song of the moneylender, keeping time by tapping a little mallet against the coins he gave me [...]Coming up to me he takes a completely impertinent attitude that I have never seen in him previously [...]Does this miserable man think I care at all for his coins and that I am ringing them to make sure they are not counterfeit? This is the ultimate insult! [...] I bow down on the threshold of the door that he has crossed for the last time, and I stay in this position until the sound of his footsteps has faded. He cannot possibly realize that he has just left a corpse. (“18 septembre. Puisqu’il doit revenir aujourd’hui, je n’ai pas encore le droit de pleurer...et je chante pour endormir ma pensée, la chanson lugubre de l’usurier, accompagnée de coups frappés avec une petite baguette sur les piastres neuves que Pierre m’a laissées [...] Il prend en m’abordant un air tout à fait impertinent que je ne lui ai pas encore vue [...] Est-ce qu’il croit, le malheureux, que je fais le moindre cas de ses piastres et que je les fais tinter pour savoir si elles sont fausses? C’est la suprême insulte! Je me prosterne sur le seuil de la porte qu’il a franchi pour la dernière fois et je reste en cette attitude jusqu’à ce que s’éteigne le bruit de ses pas. Il ne peut se douter que c’est une morte qu’il vient de quitter” (Régamey 47)).

Here, the narrative abruptly ends with the performative utterance, “Here end the notes in the pink notebook” (“Ici s’arrête les notes du cahier rose”; (47)), but on the following page Régamey adds an epilogue that he characterizes as “very Japanese” (“bien japonais” (Régamey 48)). It is here that we learn of the girl’s fate.

The forsaken woman, wanting to end her existence, hurled herself into the sea. Around her neck she had one hundred silver coins tied up in a piece of rare silk. She was saved. The silken envelope was retrieved; it contained only little bits of paper stuck to the wet fabric—the silver had sunk to the bottom of the sea. (“La délaissée voulant en finir avec l’existence, s’est jetée à la mer. Elle avait au cou cent piastres d’argent serrées dans un morceau de soie rare. Elle fut sauvée. On retrouva l’enveloppe de soir, elle ne contenait plus que des petits morceaux de papier adhérants au tissu mouillé—l’argent était resté au fond de l’eau” (48)).

The little sheets of paper turn out to be notes and jottings left behind by Loti, which Chrysanthème had lovingly collected and kept; they
contain his infamous adjectival clauses of “weird” (“bizarre” (Régamey 48)), “strange” (“étrange” (48)), “preposterous” (“saugrénue” (48)) and other less than laudatory statements about the Japanese.

Régamey’s tale can be read as a thinly-veiled commentary in which he airs not only his views about Loti, but also those against the West as a whole and the Japanese government for its push to modernize Japan. Reed comments that read in this manner, Kiku stands as a synecdoche for Japan, suggesting what might come to be the country’s ultimate fate for unquestioningly accepting the ways of the West (27).

Regardless of how one interprets this ending, the heroine’s suicide remains, for better or worse, one of the most memorable points of both Luther-Long’s story and Puccini’s operatic adaptation of it. Pink Notebook, therefore, stands as a critical link in the narrative’s journey from Madame Chrysanthème to “Madame Butterfly.” Unfortunately for Régamey, his skill as a writer seems to have worked somewhat against him, and his role in the narrative’s metamorphosis from Madame Chrysanthème into “Madame Butterfly” is rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

In 1898, four years after the publication of Pink Notebook and five years after the premier of Messager’s opera, Luther-Long published his story “Madame Butterfly” in Century magazine. Apart from saying that he heard the story from his sister, Luther-Long makes no mention of any outside inspiration for his story, and certainly does not mention Pierre Loti. There are, however, enough similarities between Luther-Long’s story and Loti’s Madame Chrysanthème to suggest that Luther-Long did, at some point, come in contact with Loti’s story.⁵

Luther-Long’s “Butterfly” begins in a similar manner to Loti’s Chrysanthème, with two sailors on deck discussing their upcoming tour-of-duty in Japan. The first sailor, identified as Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, opines having been transferred from the Mediterranean to Asian waters. His shipmate, Sayres, a two-time veteran of tours in Asia, reassures Pinkerton that Japan is not so bad, if not slightly boring, and jokingly tells him that “for lack of other amusement, you might get yourself married (Luther-Long 1).” When the ship arrives in Nagasaki, Pinkerton does just that, finding himself a wife and living quarters, complete with a ninety-nine year lease.

At this point, Luther-Long’s story looks to be little more than an American rehash of a best-selling French novel. Indeed, not only do Loti and Pinkerton share the same naval rank, but the author Loti, like Pinkerton, had previously been stationed in the Mediterranean and

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considered his tour-of-duty in the Far East to be akin to exile. Sayres himself also appears to be somewhat of an Yves clone, but while Yves played a prominent role in *Chrysanthème* as Loti’s foil and right-hand-man, Sayres’ appearance is confined to this first chapter and even Pinkerton himself no longer figures in the story after the third chapter.

From this point on, Luther-Long takes the butterfly narrative in his own direction, creating a story that is distinctly American and largely devoid of its Gallic influences. He adds three new characters to the cast—Adelaide, Pinkerton’s American wife; Prince Yamadori, a wealthy suitor who courts Cho-Cho san during Pinkerton’s absence and whose advances Cho-Cho san spurns; and the American consul, Sharpless, whose job it is to break the unfortunate news to Cho-Cho san that she was never really married to Pinkerton according to American law. His version also shifts the action from external and internal settings to a strictly domestic scene, sacrificing Loti’s vivid descriptions of the bustling Nagasaki streets. Why does Luther-Long make this shift? Van Rij suggests that the reason lies in Luther-Long’s motives for writing the story. “This is the essential difference between Loti and [Luther] Long’s works,” he writes, “Loti’s novel faithfully reflects the descriptive diary he kept, but Long’s story had the intent of bringing a moral message to readers” (Van Rij 74).

Luther-Long does, however, retain the quasi-colonialist tones of Loti’s novel, but within a distinctly American framework. Gone are the animalistic terms and the portrayal of the Japanese as subhuman, replaced by a portrayal of a Japanese woman who wants essentially to be a Western woman in a Japanese body. Cho-Cho san insists that “no one shall speak anything but United States’ languages in these [sic] house” (Luther-Long 4) and displays an unusual willingness to renounce her native religion in favor of Pinkerton’s “large American God” (7), going secretly every night to visit the missionary in her neighborhood. She discards the ceremony of Japanese culture and instead adopts an attitude of “artistic abandon” (Luther-Long 3) insisting that she be addressed not by her Japanese name, but as “Missus Ben-ja-meen Frang-a-leen Pikkerton” (6) like a proper Western wife. Luther-Long’s decision to portray the Japanese in this manner can be read as a metaphor for the United States’ role in the modernization process, with Cho-Cho san and Pinkerton representing their respective nations. The majority of the Japanese, however, likely behaved in a manner closer to what Loti portrayed, and as a result, Cho-Cho san can be thought of as not truly representative of a Japanese woman, but rather, an American creation in the form of a Japanese woman, with
her mannerisms representing an American interpretation of how a Japanese woman in her situation should act.

Belasco’s adaptation of Luther-Long’s story seeks to restore a bit of Loti to the narrative by alluding to an element that had been lacking since the Régamey adaptation—the infamous coin counting scene:

LIEUTENANT PINKERTON *(noticing the screened-off part of the room).* Sharpless, I thought when I left this house, the few tears, sobs, little polite regrets, would be over as soon as I crossed the threshold. I started to come back for a minute, but I said to myself: “Don’t do it; by this time she’s ringing your gold pieces to make sure they’re good.” You know that class of Japanese girl and— (28).

Although Puccini is said to have been inspired by Belasco’s play, Illica and Giacosa would not integrate the coin counting element into their libretto; the sole concession to this aspect of Loti’s tale is an offhand comment by Goro (the marriage broker) that Madame Butterfly cost only 100 yen.

Illica and Giacosa’s libretto does, contain fragments of distinctly Lotian motifs. For example, Loti describes his home in Jyuzenji as “made entirely of paper panels that can be dismantled at will” (“toute en panneaux de papier, [qui] se démonte quand on veut (80)”). In the opening lines of the libretto, Goro offers the following description to Pinkerton:

PINKERTON. Both the walls and the ceilings… (E soffitto e pareti)
GORO. Can be easily shifted/and if you want it lifted,/every part of this building/can be changed/to adjust to changing feelings. (Vanno e vengono a prova/a norma che vi giova/nello stesso locale/alternar nuovi aspetti ai consueti. 1.1.1-5; Gutman 1).

The house as a child’s toy metaphor is also reprised, when Pinkerton compares the flimsy-looking living quarters to “a house of cards (“la dimora frivola” 1.1.15; Gutman 1).

Also making a comeback are the animal, plant and object metaphors. In one of the more famous passages from the novel, Loti comments how he knew exactly what Kiku would look like, having seen her image everywhere, “on every fan [and] at the bottom of every teacup (“sur tous les évantails, au fond de toutes les tasses à thé (72))” and “on those ubiquitous paintings on silk and porcelain that clutter our
bazaars” (“sur les peintures sur soie et porcelaine qui encombrent nos bazars (81)).” Illico and Giacosa have Pinkerton describe Cho-Cho san in the following manner:

PINKERTON. Light, like a glass figure spun by a master (Lieve qual tenue vetro soffiato)

.........................

She’s like the maiden seen on a silk screen (Sembra figura da paravento) (1.1.135-6, 139-40; Gutman 3).

He also refers to his bride alternately as “a squirrel” (scojattolo[sic] 1.1.480; Gutman 10), “a toy” (“giocattolo” 1.1.481; Gutman 10) or “a lily” (“giglio” 1.1.493; Gutman 10). Such metaphors, however, no longer figure in the libretto once Pinkerton departs at the end of the first act.

The final product that is Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly” is a mosaic of French criticism, American desire for dominance in the Far East and Italian dramatic sensibility. Each point of contact added not only the author’s national sensibilities to Loti’s story, but personal biases as well, with each author appropriating or deleting aspects of Loti’s story to make the final narrative their own. So to return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, perhaps the question should not be so much “What is left of Loti,” but rather “What aspects of Loti have been reinstated in the final product that is the libretto for Puccini’s opera.”

That still leaves the question of how did Madam Chrysanthème metamorphose into Madama Butterfly? The answer likely lies in act one, scene two of Messager’s opera. We recall that in the initial scene, when the ship arrives in Nagasaki, the sailors are greeted by a group of geishas who perform for them. The geisha whom viewers will come to know as Chrysanthème, performs a song that tells of a hapless butterfly ensnared by a carnivorous plant.

CHRYSANTHEMUM. The mousmé, in her frail fingers/Holds a pretty silver lotus./A flitting butterfly/Touches the flower with its wings./The mousmé smiles and smiles again./Watching the flower, the golden butterfly./On the half-shut flower/See how the butterfly./All in a passion./The golden butterfly settles./The mousmé sees it, the mousmé smiles:/How a lover soon loses courage! [...]//The mousmé smiles and sighs; /How well lovers know how to fib!/ A truce, a truce to words!/ The flower now takes revenge./ On the lying butterfly/It closes its petals./ O mortal kisses, fragile love (1.2.75-86, 91-97).

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Messager composed much of the music for “Madame Chrysanthème” in the summer of 1892 while vacationing at the villa of an Italian friend who often hosted fellow musicians; by sheer coincidence, Puccini was also vacationing at that same villa that summer. While no one can say for certain what ideas the two composers exchanged, it is likely that at this meeting was lain the first stone in the mosaic that would become the opera “Madama Butterfly.”

Loti, however, was not as fortunate. In 1905, a full year after the premiere of Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly,” he published a sequel to Madame Chrysanthème, entitled La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune. In it, Loti reveals what really became of Kiku after his departure in the summer of 1885. By this time, though, the melodramatic ending popularized by Luther-Long and canonized by Puccini’s librettists had eclipsed Loti’s intended ending. The book was also published right after the end of the Russo-Japanese war, further limiting its readership. Loti’s role in the mosaic that is the butterfly narrative (and by extension, the opera “Madama Butterfly”) deserves to be acknowledged, for it was he who really laid the first stone.

Notes

1 The suffix “-san” is an untranslatable, gender neutral Japanese honorific whose closest English equivalent would be “Esteemed Sir” or “Esteemed Madame.” To avoid confusion with the title of the work, the heroine shall be referred to as “Cho-Cho san” and the work itself as “Madame Butterfly.”
2 Again, to avoid confusion with the title of the work, Loti’s heroine shall be referred to as “Kiku” rather than Chrysanthème.
3 The city archives of Nagasaki don’t list much about her background either, although there is record of a woman by the name of Kane divorcing a Frenchman named Pinson in 1902. The divorce document states that the woman was born in Takeda, in Oita prefecture, but offers little else. Whether or not this is the same Kane as Loti’s consort is a question that is likely to remain unanswered for a long time.
4 This incident on which this scene is based does not appear in the novel, but Loti would publish it several years later as a magazine article entitled “Une Page Oubliée de Madame Chrysanthème.”
5 On pp. 87-88 in Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini and the Search for the Real Cho-Cho San (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2001) Van Rij outlines a chart detailing the dramatic genealogy of the butterfly narrative with all its variations.
References


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