

Variations On the Costumed Embodiment of *Faust's* Marguerite, 1859-1914

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Abstract

One might think that the historical period in which an opera is set naturally and solely dictates costume design. A theater costume must be “un argument,” Roland Barthes wrote in “Les maladies du costume de théâtre” (1964), lamenting the creative extravagances that distance it from the intent of the work. From the creation of Gounod’s *Faust*, sets and costumes have nevertheless been the focus of attention, even arousing the interest of such eminent artists as Ingres (1780–1867) and Delacroix (1798–1863). This paper shows that despite the historicist trend — and its concern for sartorial accuracy — that swept through the visual and performing arts in the nineteenth century, the emblematic costume of the character Marguerite is the result of an array of influences. A historical approach is favored in order to situate Gounod’s work in the artistic context of its time, and the protagonist’s costume in relation to the interpretations of painters and the vernacular clothing of the German working classes in the sixteenth century, the period in which the libretto is set. By focusing on the costumes of a few performers who have left their mark on the role, this text also examines how these and other factors may have interacted to make Marguerite’s costume a recognizable object with changing contours, a shifting composite of fixed references, aesthetic preferences, and histrionic choices that ultimately helped its performers propagate and even subliminate their public image.

Keywords: Gounod’s Marguerite; Operatic Costume; Historicism; Divas; Self-fashioning.

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Of all the heroines in nineteenth-century Romantic opera, Marguerite from Gounod's *Faust* is undoubtedly to this day one of the most memorable. In addition to the famous arias and the powerful dramatic dynamics that mark the character, it is its iconic costume that contributed to engrave it into memories and elevate it to the pantheon of the musical world. Drawing on its origins and many of its incarnations over the decades, this essay explores how art, fashion, and some mechanisms of a new celebrity culture interacted to define this distinctive sartorial creation. It ultimately illustrates how a costume can serve as a powerful self-fashioning tool in the crafting of larger-than-life public personas.

From Goethe to Gounod: Adapting a Literary Myth

Premiered on March 19, 1859, at the Théâtre-Lyrique in Paris, Charles Gounod's (1818–1893) *Faust* was one of the most frequently performed operas until World War I¹ and remains one of the pillars of the repertoire to this day. This *opéra-comique*, inspired by what would become a founding Western myth, and later crystallized in the format of *grand opera* after the addition of recitatives and a ballet, would take the stages of Europe, Great Britain, the Americas, Russia, the Middle East, South Africa, and even Australia by storm in less than ten years.² At the heart of this “lyrical drama”³ lies the tragic fate of the young and pure Marguerite, the romantic heroine *par excellence*. From the work's creation until the early decades of the twentieth century, an impressive number of prima donnas would embody the protagonist, such was the success of the Faustian opera and the proliferation of performances around the world.

It all began with the text by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). We are familiar with the broad outlines of this famous verse play, allegedly inspired by a certain Faustus, a German doctor who lived in the sixteenth century, and published in two volumes in 1808 and 1832. The subject matter of the first part, which is essentially philosophical, is based on the moral and existential torment of a disillusioned old scholar (Faust). Convinced of the futility of his knowledge, Faust renounces suicide and signs a pact with the devil (Mephistopheles), which allows him to regain his youth and indulge in earthly pleasures. In the process, he deceives and dishonors the modest and pious ingénue (Margarete or Gretchen, our Marguerite) whom his diabolical companion has just brought into his life. Left to fend for herself, the unfortunate girl is accused of murdering the child born of this conquest, ostracized by her brother (Valentin), who perishes at the hands of her lover in a duel, and thrown into a cell. Refusing to flee with Faust, who, filled with remorse, has joined her in prison, Marguerite briefly loses her mind, implores divine mercy, and finally ascends to heaven, redeemed by her distress, her intrinsic virtue, and her faith.⁴ Faust himself will also meet a heavenly fate, but in Goethe's second volume.

In France, Madame de Staël (1766–1817) translated short passages from Goethe's *Faust* and summarized the work in 1814 in her book *De l'Allemagne*. Albert Stapfer (1766–1840) produced the first complete French translation in the collection *Œuvres dramatiques de Goethe* in 1823, and in the same year, Louis de Saint-Aulaire (1778–1854) offered a partial translation in an anthology of *Chefs-d'œuvre des théâtres étrangers*. In 1828, the poet Gérard de Nerval (1808–1855) published his third translation in four years.⁵ Faust quickly became a leading figure,⁶ stimulating French literary and artistic production.

1. Vincent Giroud, “The Genesis, Transformations, Sources, and Style of Gounod's *Faust*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Faust in Music*, eds. Lorna Fitzsimmons and Charles McKnight (England: Oxford Academic, 2019), 270, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935185.013.4>.

2. Giroud, 270.

3. Unless specified, all translations from French are the author's.

4. Voir Claude Paul, “Le *Faust* de Goethe entre stéréotypes nationaux et (re)lecture mythique,” *Revue germanique internationale*, Vol. 39 (2024): 69–98, par. 1–19, accessed December 2, 2025, <http://journals.openedition.org/rgi/4985>.

5. Amélie de Chaisemartin, “Faust et le type de l'artiste dans les récits des années 1830 en France,” *Revue germanique internationale*, Vol. 39 (2024): 99–124, par. 6, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.4000/123f4>.

6. Evangelia Stead, “Le voyage des images du *Faust I* de Goethe. Lecture, réception et iconographie extensive et intensive au XIX^e siècle,” in *L'image à la lettre*, eds. Nathalie Preiss and Joëlle Raineau (Paris: Éditions des cendres/Paris-Musées, 2005), 145.

For example, artists' books and other illustrated books based on the story followed one after another, including those by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) in 1828, Pierre-Édouard Frère (1819–1886) in 1851 or 1852, and Pierre-Gaston Jourdain (1843–1886) in 1904.⁷

On stage, the play *Faust, drame en trois actes, imité de Goethe* drew crowds to the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in 1828. The hugely popular romantic actress Marie Dorval (1798–1849) created a magnified heroine who monopolized the audience's attention, thereby imposing a "Marguerite-ization" that would also be found in Gounod's *Faust*.⁸ Contrary to what has long been believed, the latter opera was not directly based on Goethe's text. As Vincent Giroud points out, it was rather derived from a three-act, four-scene "fantastic drama" by Michel Carré (1821–1872) entitled *Faust et Marguerite*,⁹ which was staged at the Théâtre du Gymnase Dramatique in 1850.

It was Carré who teamed up with Jules Barbier (1825–1901) to write the libretto for Gounod's *Faust*. While retaining essential elements from the first volume of Goethe's story, translated by Gérard de Nerval, the librettists largely dismissed the philosophical dimension and focused the plot on the ambiguous romantic relationship between Marguerite and Faust. The young girl thus became the emotional center of the story and, struck by disgrace, joined the ranks of female victims typical of the romantic opera genre, whom Catherine Clément famously described as "fallen women"¹⁰ in a 1979 essay that proved as sensational as controversial.¹¹ Gounod reserved for Marguerite some of the most original and moving arias he ever composed, for which talented performers would have the difficult task of combining vocal brilliance with dramatic intensity. A precursor to Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), Jules Massenet's (1842–1912) *Manon* (1884) and Claude Debussy's (1862–1918) *Mélisande* (1902), Marguerite became one of the most important female roles in the French opera repertoire, especially after the work was performed at the Opéra de Paris in 1869.¹²

From Image to the Stage: Artistic Visions of a Costume

Goethe's original tragedy was a polymorphic poetic and philosophical mosaic of songs, monologues in verse, dialogues in prose, choirs and phantasmagorical scenes, light years away from the traditional unities of action, time, and place in the theater.¹³ The iconography that developed after the publication of Goethe's poem has been an essential foundation for the reception and interpretation of the Faust myth, given the hermetic nature of the work.¹⁴ The concrete and evocative images created by artists have also been a fundamental element in the costume design of its characters, particularly Marguerite's. At the time, the conception of costumes for an opera production was often entrusted to visual artists, mostly painters.¹⁵ Not surprisingly then, the latter naturally drew inspiration from images created before them by painters and engravers, and widely disseminated thanks to improved techniques and the proliferation of printed publications.

7. Stead, 151.

8. Emilio Sala, "Il Tamtam e la Nuance: il doppio suono del *Faust* di Gounod," in *Faust di Charles Gounod* (Milan: Teatro alla Scala, 2009–2010), 97.

9. Giroud, "The Genesis," 271.

10. Giroud, "The Genesis," 276.

11. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1979]). See also: Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Susan McClary, "Feminine Endings in Retrospect," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), IX–2; Ruth Solie ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexualities in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995 [1993]); Mary Ann Smart ed., "Introduction," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–16.

12. Giroud, "The Genesis," par. 277.

13. Paul, "Le *Faust* de Goethe," par. 7–10, par. 37.

14. Stead, "Le voyage des images," 161.

15. Martine Kahane, *Opéra côté costume* (Paris: Éditions Plume/Opéra national de Paris, 1995), 8.

Between 1808 and 1812, Nazarene artist Peter von Cornelius (1783–1867) created a dozen pen-and-ink drawings illustrating the Faustian myth, which were published between 1816 and 1824. The artist placed the characters in a Gothic setting and dressed them in medieval costumes reminiscent of the paintings and engravings of Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528),¹⁶ whose works were enjoying growing interest at the time,¹⁷ and in a style that he deliberately chose to be Germanic — an allusion to the story's setting in time and place that Goethe himself found appealing.¹⁸ In 1816, Moritz Retzsch (1779–1857) of Dresden issued an album of 26 outline drawings with Cotta, Goethe's publisher, a "synoptic substitute"¹⁹ that became hugely successful in Europe and led to a large number of re-engravings and reproductions (Fig. 1). Retzsch simplified not only the contours and composition, but also Goethe's philosophical message, thereby emphasizing "the melodrama of the innocent Marguerite."²⁰ His "sets and costumes contribute[d] to the characterization of the protagonists, who then bec[a]me de-individualized types (the scholar, the innocent young girl)."²¹ This imagery proliferated, giving rise to multiple pictorial reinterpretations, an "intensive iconography"²² visible in numerous theatrical productions in London, Paris, and Germany. Costume and set designers, directors, and actors drew inspiration from it to facilitate the transition to the stage of a play reputed to be unperformable because, as previously mentioned, of its free and complex dramaturgical structure. The costumes based on Retzsch's designs worn by the actors in the phantasmagorical *Faustus* performed at Drury Lane in 1825 made a vivid impression on Delacroix.²³ After seeing the version at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, in which Marie Dorval shone, Count Reinhard (1761–1837) reported to Goethe: "Marguerite's arrival and Mephistopheles' laughter faithfully follow Retzsch's drawings."²⁴

Delacroix would complete four paintings on the Faustian theme, including *Marguerite à l'église*, exhibited at the Salon des Beaux-Arts in 1846.²⁵ But it is his collection of seventeen lithographs, published in 1828 in a luxurious reissue of Stapfer's translation, that will here be the focus of our attention. Despite its initial commercial failure, the series left a lasting mark on Faustian imagery (Fig. 2). In the words of specialist Evanghelia Stead, Delacroix produced an "intensive iconography" which, while drawing inspiration from Retzsch's scenes, reinterpreted them and "intensified" their dramatic potential.²⁶ Rather sketchy in Retzsch's work, Marguerite's clothes here show greater attention to detail and are a relatively faithful interpretation of sixteenth-century women's costume. Ary Scheffer (1795–1858), a French artist of Dutch origin and master of Romantic painting, produced several striking oil paintings from 1825 onwards, focusing on the Faustian female protagonist. His *Marguerite au rouet* (exhibited at the Salon in 1831),²⁷ *Marguerite sortant de l'église* (1838) (Fig. 3), and *Marguerite et Faust dans le jardin* (1846) — perhaps the best-known scene in this group — undoubtedly depict a candid and virtuous heroine, dressed in stylized historical clothing, stripped of artifice and, above all, virginal white. This striking representation undoubtedly gave rise to one of the main sartorial incarnations that would soon be adopted by some of the most memorable Marguerites on stage. The images by Scheffer, a friend of

16. Paul, "Le *Faust* de Goethe," par. 44.

17. Paul, par. 44–5.

18. "Twelve Illustrations to Goethe's *Faust* by Peter Cornelius (Bilder zu Goethe's *Faust* von P. Cornelius): Plate VI, The Walk in the Garden (Der Spazierung im Garten)," Smart Museum of Art The University of Chicago, accessed December 16, 2025, <https://smartcollection.uchicago.edu/objects/1371/twelve-illustrations-to-goethes-faust-by-peter-cornelius-b>.

19. Stead, "Le voyage des images," 139.

20. Stead, 140.

21. Paul, "Le *Faust* de Goethe," par. 36.

22. Stead, "Le voyage des images," 150.

23. Stead, 151.

24. Quoted in Stead, "Le voyage des images," 146.

25. Paul, "Le *Faust* de Goethe," par. 54.

26. Stead, "Le voyage des images," 152.

27. De Chaisemartin, "Faust et le type de l'artiste," par. 6.

Gounod,²⁸ could incidentally explain the sober and discreet outfit donned by Marguerite on the poster for the first *Faust* at the Théâtre-Lyrique. Some even go so far as to claim that Scheffer's Marguerite influenced Gounod's music itself.²⁹ Many artists from the Romantic, Realist, Pre-Raphaelite, and other schools would offer their own versions of the Faustian theme in the decades that followed. But the images of Cornelius, Retzsch, Delacroix, and Scheffer undoubtedly remain among the most powerful in the collective imagination since the nineteenth century, particularly with regard to the embodiment of Marguerite.

When Gounod's *Faust* premiered at the Théâtre-Lyrique, the costumes, like the sets designed by Charles Cambon (1802–1875) and Joseph Thierry (1812–1866), required meticulous work. Léon Carvalho (1825–1897), director of the theater, sought the advice of artists such as Ingres, Delacroix, Horace Vernet (1789–1863), Gustave Doré (1832–1883), and Édouard Louis Dubufe (1819–1883). Carvalho summed up his undertaking in 1894, on the occasion of the thousandth performance of *Faust*:

No one had told the public... that the costumes had been the subject of careful attention. That their creation had required five months of hard work; that it had been necessary to search libraries, visit museums, look for tapestries, and collect engravings; that Albrecht Dürer, with his wonderful *Triumph of Maximilian*, had given us the reiters and lansquenets; Hans Holbein, the bourgeois women and their skirts with pleats forming rolls, a real headache for modern cutters; that Burgkmair and Lucas Cranach had been called upon. What patience it took to give the wonderfully picturesque clothing of that era the form and grace indicated by the examples we had before our eyes!³⁰

This demonstrates a genuine quest for historical accuracy. According to the director, the main source of inspiration for the costume designers and tailors was the detailed works of German masters from the late Middle Ages, dating from the period covered by the libretto. Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497–1543), for example, had produced studies of women's costumes during his lifetime.³¹ Examination of these images, as well as certain engravings by Dürer (Fig. 4), reveals some typical features of sixteenth century German style, such as tight decorated bodices filled in with a chemise, sleeves with horizontal bands and puffed areas, gathered skirts, aprons.³² However, neither Doré nor Delacroix were excluded from the creative process. Close to the artists and intellectuals who gravitated around Carvalho, the painter Émile Giraud (1825–1892) declared: "It is rare... for authors and a director to have Delacroix and Ingres as collaborators and costume designers."³³ Doré provided the director with around a hundred drawings, which were later lost in a fire. And the series of illustrations of *Faust* published by Delacroix in 1828 also inspired the sets for the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1859, as well as those for the Opéra de Paris ten years later.³⁴

28. Giroud, "The Genesis," 276.

29. Giroud, 276.

30. *Le Matin*, 1^{er} décembre 1894, quoted in Mathias Auclair and Pauline Girard, "Les décors de Faust à l'Opéra de Paris (1869–1908)," in *Les colloques de l'opéra comique. L'interprétation lyrique de la fin du XIX^e siècle au début du XX^e siècle: du livret à la mise en scène*, eds. Alexandre Dratwicki and Agnès Terrier (2011), 12, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.bruzanemediabase.com/node/2865>.

31. Arthur B. Chamberlain, *Hans Holbein the Younger* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913), accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64208/64208-h/64208-h.htm#r356>, par. 158, 160.

32. See Phyllis G. Tortora and Sara B. Marcketti eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 7th edition (New York and London: Fairchild Books, 2021), 152.

33. Quoted in Auclair and Girard, "Les décors de Faust," 13.

34. Auclair and Girard, 13.



Figure 1: Jean-Baptiste Muret, lithographe, Moritz Retzsch, dessinateur du modèle, *Faust. Marguerite dans sa chambre. Planche 9. / lithographié par Muret; d'après le dessin de Moritz Retzsch*, 1830, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, Estampes Scènes Faust, Wikimedia Commons

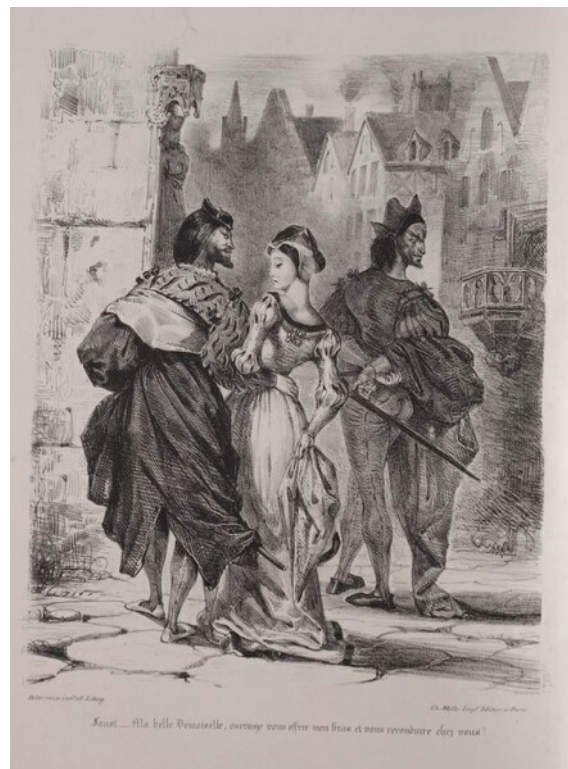


Figure 2: Eugène Delacroix, *Faust: Tragédie de M. de Goethe, translated into French by Albert Stapfer.: Illustrations for Faust: Faust seeks to allure Marguerite*, 1828, Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Print Club of Cleveland, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 3: Ary Scheffer, *Marguerite Leaving Church*, 1838, Detroit Institute of Art, Creative Commons



Figure 4: Albrecht Dürer, *Promenade*, c. 1498, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Wikimedia Commons

From One Diva to Another: Marguerite's Raiment

Two illustrations by Louis Maleuvre (1785–?) preserved at the Musée Carnavalet and the Bibliothèque nationale de France show Marie Dorval, who first played the Faustian heroine on stage in 1828, in her Marguerite costume. Her silhouette faithfully reflects that of the Romantic period and the fashion of the late 1820s, with her pointed bodice over a rather short pleated bell skirt decorated with horizontal bands at the bottom, her bare shoulders, and her upper puffed sleeves surmounting diaphanous long sleeves. The high hairstyle made of a scaffolding of braids is also in keeping with the fashion of the day. Only the subtle lacing pattern, small flowers on the sleeves, and girdle are possible nods to late medieval Germany. It is likely that the star wanted to look her best and position herself at the cutting edge of fashion trends.

In the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, Pierre Larousse described the “diva” in 1870 as follows: “The Italian word *diva* means *goddess* or *divine*, and has been used for many years by fanatical dilettanti from beyond the Alps to refer to the singer in vogue, who causes *furor*, *fanatismo*.”³⁵ The woman who set the standard on stage for Marguerite’s both lyricism and aesthetics, and left an indelible mark on the role in the nineteenth century, was undoubtedly the superdiva³⁶ Caroline Miolan-Carvalho (1827–1895), a virtuoso coloratura soprano. Not to be overlooked is the fact that Miolan-Carvalho was the wife of the director of the Théâtre-Lyrique, where Gounod’s *Faust* was premiered, and its “unofficial ‘directrice,’ ”³⁷ which enabled her to secure the role promised to Delphine Ugalde (1829–1910) for herself instead. Thanks to her “dazzling” vocal “pyrotechnics,”³⁸ creative authority, and dramatic characterization imbued with naivety and passion, the French singer delivered such an iconic performance that she was considered “the embodiment of Ary Scheffer’s Marguerite in the artist’s popular paintings.”³⁹ While, as critics of the time suggested, a sense of innocence and purity characterized her performance, the same cannot always be said of her costume, which, at least in its early incarnations, sometimes deviated from Scheffer’s minimalist stylization. It is reasonable to imagine that the “heightened artistic agency”⁴⁰ Miolan-Carvalho demonstrated in her art also allowed her to influence her aesthetic, despite the valiant efforts of the designers who, as we have seen, presided over its conception.

Operatic divas’ agency in matters of costume was nothing new. At the Opéra, for example, the 1776 Regulations dictated that leading singers and dancers should not change anything in the costumes “ordered by the designer... even on the pretext of paying for them.”⁴¹ However, numerous reminders had to be issued in the following years. Henri Duponchel (1794–1868), director of the Opéra from 1835 to 1839, insisted on historical authenticity, without glitter or tinsel.⁴² But a few decades later, leading songstresses commonly displayed their personal costumes, made in the Opera’s workshops or by their own dressmakers or tailors.⁴³

The haute couture industry, which emerged in the 1850s, photography, and a burgeoning women’s and arts press now converged to give rise to a culture of celebrity and an idea of glamour in tune with a flourishing star system. Since the eighteenth century, actresses, through their visibility, had been trend-

35. Quoted in Sergio Segalini, *Divas: Parcours d’un mythe* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1986), 14.

36. Sean M. Parr, “Caroline Carvalho and nineteenth-century coloratura,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 23, no. 1/2 (March–July 2011), 83, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41494575>. See also: Susan Rutherford, “Superdivas and superwomen,” in *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 58–89.

37. Parr, “Caroline Carvalho,” 91.

38. Parr, 83.

39. Parr, 107.

40. Parr, 116.

41. Quoted in Kahane, *Opéra côté costume*, 48.

42. Kahane, 45.

43. Martine Kahane and Delphine Pinasa, *Habiller l’Opéra: Costumes et ateliers de l’Opéra de Paris* (Milan/Moulins-sur Allier: Silvana Editoriale/Centre national du costume de scène, 2019), 19.

setters,⁴⁴ and in both Europe and America, the stage became a formidable showcase for fashion design.⁴⁵ The soprano Jenny Lind (1820–1887) was the first opera diva to set off fashion trends, such as the triple-layered skirt, which she is credited with popularizing in the early 1850s.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the very identity of an actress or singer and her public persona were closely linked to her mastery of fashion codes, which meant she had to wear the latest styles in all circumstances.⁴⁷ Over time, many opera divas became true style icons, often associated with a renowned couturier, both on stage and off, and sometimes endorsing fashion or beauty products in advertisements.⁴⁸ Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895), known as the inventor of haute couture, was a master in the art of reconciling historical accuracy with the whims of female singers, who wanted to shine brightly on stage in order to reinforce their status as prima donnas.⁴⁹

During the “historical authenticity” period, Anne Hollander explains, “costume signals indicating periods in history are similar to other kinds of isolated stage conventions: they were originally established by association with a popular star and copied by successors and imitators hoping to catch some reflected glory.”⁵⁰ With Miolan-Carvalho, elements of costume already seen in the works of Holbein, Cornelius, Delacroix, Scheffer, and others began to crystallize. These would become highly emblematic of the character of Marguerite and would be adopted, in whole or in part, by diva after diva: the dress of the working or lower-middle classes of the late Middle Ages, and above all, the long braids symbolizing the youth and innocence of the protagonist; the leather or fabric bag called an *aumônière* and worn slung across the skirt to offer alms to the poor; the missal and rosary, as signs of religious fervor (Fig. 5). In addition, in the costumed images used to promote the singers, the Marguerites often appeared at their spinning wheels or with the opulent small casket diabolically left by Mephistopheles, and evoking the mythical “Jewel Song,” the bravura piece of the score. For actresses and singers, the highly prized photographic media of the *carte-de-visite* — in the small format of a calling card — and the following larger cabinet card were part of a complex commercial network for the dissemination and promotion of both the show and their own careers. Due to poor lighting in theaters, photographs of performances did not appear until the 1890s. In each city where the artist performed, a session with the local photographer served to rekindle the flame of admiration. Actresses and prima donnas posed in both stage costumes and urban clothing, and the inclusion of a songstress in a poster featuring several opera stars was considered a mark of distinction.⁵¹ Through the combined effect of artistic, theatrical, and photographic embodiments, the costume representations of Miolan-Carvalho and her followers became so evocative that *The Art Amateur* magazine, for example, suggested that its readers dress their models as blonde Marguerites at the spinning wheel when they aimed at working on the rendering of costumes.⁵²

Although *Faust* is set in Leipzig and the Harz Mountains in northern Germany,⁵³ the costume worn

44. Michele Majer et al., *Staging Fashion, 1880-1920: Jane Hading, Lily Elsie, Billie Burke* (New York and New Haven: Bard Graduate Center and Yale University Press), 28.

45. See Nancy J. Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2003); Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

46. Daniel Cole and Nancy Deihl, “Jenny Lind.” In *The History of Modern Fashion* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015), 16.

47. Majer, *Staging Fashion*, 29.

48. See Daniel James Cole, *Divas of the Gilded Age* (New York: The National Opera Center America/Fashion Institute of Technology, 2015).

49. See Diana de Marly, “Leading Ladies,” in *Worth: Father of Haute Couture* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1990), 171–186.

50. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: 1993 [1978]), 304.

51. David Mayer, “The actress as photographic icon: from early photography to film,” in eds. Gale, Maggie and John Stokes, *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88; David Mayer, “‘Quote the words to prompt the attitudes’: The Victorian performer, the photographer, and the photograph,” *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 43, no. 2 (2002), 238–9.

52. Charlotte Adams, “The Costume Class,” *The Art Amateur*, Vol. 17, no. 2 (July 1887), 34, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25628605>.

53. Paul, “Le *Faust* de Goethe,” par. 11.



Figure 5: *M.me Miolan, rôle de Marguerite, dans Faust [de Charles Gounod], Théâtre Lyrique / F. C. [sig.], 1859*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, C-261 (25,820), Wikimedia Commons

by Miolan-Carvalho from 1859 onwards also emphasized certain features — the lacing of the bodice and the treatment of the sleeves in particular — that are characteristic of the *tracht* or *dirndl*, the traditional women's costume of southern Germany and Austria. A fashion trend may explain this choice. At Emperor Franz Joseph I (1830–1916)'s instigation, this distinctive garment, once considered simple peasant attire, gained favor among the European aristocracy.⁵⁴ A great advocate of regional styles of dress, the fashionable Empress Elisabeth of Austria caught the eye when she wore the national costume during a stay in Tyrol.⁵⁵ The shape of Miolan-Carvalho's crinoline skirt however corresponds to the style in vogue at the turn of the 1860s. Thus defined, albeit with certain variations in color and silhouette, this stage aesthetic would characterize Marguerites for decades to come, beginning with the great Christina Nilsson (1843–1921), who took on the role at the Paris Opera in 1869. The fact that the scenography did not change much between the Théâtre-Lyrique and the Opéra⁵⁶ could in part explain why Nilsson's costume was similar to that of the character's creator.

Following in this costume tradition were, among others, the Spanish-Italian Adelina Patti (1843–1919) in 1863–1864, the English Helen Lemmens-Sherrington (1834–1906) in 1864, the Austrian Pauline Lucca in the same year, the Swedish Signe Hebbe in 1865 (1837–1925), the American Lillian Nordica (1857–1914) in the 1880s, and the Italian Rosina Storchio (1872–1945) at La Scala in Milan in 1904. Nevertheless, the influences of the diva, often responsible for her stage aesthetic, and some opera costume designer seemed to intersect and influence each other. Several sketches by Charles Bianchini (1859–1905), who worked at the Opéra de Paris from 1883 to 1905, were in fact part of this same stylistic move, as did those from 1908 by Attilio Comelli (1858–1925), master costume designer at Covent Garden from the 1890s to the First World War. The impact of this typical costume would ultimately be so enduring that it would reappear in the opening scene of Martin Scorsese's (1942–) film *The Age of Innocence* (1993), based on the famous novel by Edith Wharton (1862–1937), and the first episode of Season 2 of the popular HBO television series *The Gilded Age* (2023). These two sequences recreated Nilsson's performances as Marguerite, namely the garden scene with *Faust*, and the legendary "Jewel Song."

Miolan-Carvalho then developed a more sober style, perhaps closer to Scheffer's *Marguerite sortant de l'église*. Francisque Sarcey wrote in *Le Journal illustré* on May 9, 1869: "The regulars at the Opera... greeted her with long and unanimous applause as soon as they saw her reappear in Marguerite's *white dress*."⁵⁷ (the author's emphasis) Later photographs confirmed this new tangent. This time, the contrasting bands and strong colors disappeared, the bodice was refined to match the *princesse* line or cuirass style, and the crinoline gave way to the bustle, in keeping with the fashion of the 1870s and then the 1880s. And once again, the aesthetic seduced a line of Marguerites ranging from Canadian Emma Albani (1847–1930) to American Geraldine Farrar (1882–1967), the French Adèle Isaac (1854–1915) and Rose Caron (1857–1930), and the Finnish Aino Ackté (1876–1944) (Fig. 6), not to mention the diva Nilsson when she inaugurated the new Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1883. Invariably, the character's sartorial identifiers were thus superimposed on a silhouette that evolved with the trends. Proof of this can be seen in Ackté's puffed sleeves, completely in line with the fashion of the years 1890–1895. Finally, research reveals a third costumed personification of Marguerite, which was much less present, however, in the iconography that has come down to us. These are the few images in which the protagonist wears a kind of dressing gown or negligee, a visual code that refers directly to the final episode of the opera, in which Marguerite, terrified, sinks into madness. Miolan-Carvalho, the Belgian Lucy Berthet (1866–1941), and the Moldovan Marguerite-Zinah de Nuovina (1866–19?) were, for example, shown in this garment.

54. Annette Lynch and Mitchell D. Strauss eds., "Dirndl," in *Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), accessed December 7, 2025, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umontreal-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1832685>.

55. Daniel Cole and Nancy Deihl, "Empress Elisabeth of Austria," 36.

56. Auclair and Girard, "Les décors de Faust," 15.

57. Francisque Sarcey, "Théâtre," *Le Journal illustré*, 9 mai 1869, 150, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t51372222q/f%206.image.r=Carvalho>.

It is impossible to examine Gounod's heroine's costume and imagery without mentioning the famous "Battle of the Marguerites," which caused a furor in the Parisian press in the spring of 1869⁵⁸ (Fig. 7). Who, of the aspiring Nilsson, the new heir to the role when *Faust* crossed the threshold of the Opéra de Paris, or Queen Carvalho, embodied the character with the most mastery, authority, and charisma? Physical characteristics, appearance, and cultural stereotypes were among the issues at the heart of the debate pitting the two artists, separated by fifteen years, against each other. Tall and relatively slender, the Swedish Nilsson personified the feminine ideal of the far North, a breath of fresh air after the hegemony of Latin sopranos. The young singer had piercing blue eyes and fair hair, close to the idealized image of the Germanic Gretchen. And, according to some, even closer to Scheffer's Marguerite than Miolan-Carvalho ever was. Nilsson's admirers readily praised her Pre-Raphaelite looks and the Nordic innocence and purity that shone through in her voice and personality. They also praised her acting, which was internalized, subtle, even Protestant, but supremely intense and human in powerful moments such as the prison scene. In short, Nilsson was the perfect choice to play romantic characters. Pro-Miolan-Carvalho fans, on the other hand, glorified the Latin fire of the dark-haired *Méridionale*, a native of Marseilles. In their eyes, the veteran singer knew how to convey human passion with rare mastery. In the end, Nilsson did not seem to succeed in imposing a truly original Marguerite and thus dethroning the role's creator. So much so that after twenty performances at the Opéra de Paris, Miolan-Carvalho reprised it. For posterity, it is indeed the latter who will own Marguerite, at least in France. Nilsson, for her part, left Paris and became a favorite interpreter of the Faustian protagonist, her preferred character, abroad.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the young American Clara Louise Kellogg (1842–1916) was the female star of *Faust*, performed at the Academy of Music in New York in November 1863. Her memoirs, published in 1913, included a long passage recounting the genesis of her costume, for which she claimed sole credit.⁵⁹ Fifty years after the premiere, her perception of the character left little room for empathy. "She was a well-brought-up but uneducated young person of an ignorant age and of a stupid class, and innocent to the verge of idiocy,"⁶⁰ she said of Marguerite. A little further on, she admitted that she had not given "the typically Teutonic bourgeois impression."⁶¹ The singer dwelt at length on the difficulties posed at the time by the protagonist's blonde hair for a brunette like herself, eager to avoid the mistake made by Lucca and Farrar, who had kept their natural ebony color. Brown, yellow, or gold powder that turned green, fake hair made of hemp rope... it took a great deal of patience and a wig imported from Europe at great expense to finally achieve the right look. The costume itself required a great deal of thought:

Of course I did not know what to wear. My old friend Ella Porter was in Paris at the time and went to see Carvalho in Marguerite, especially on my account, and sent me rough drawings of her costumes. I did not like them very well. I next studied von Kaulbach's pictures and those of other German illustrators, and finally decided on the dress. First, I chose for the opening act a simple blue and brown frock, such as an upper-class peasant might wear. Everyone said it ought to be white, which struck me as singularly out of place. German girls don't wear frocks that have to be constantly washed. Not even now do they, and I am certain they had even less laundry work in the period of the story. It was said that a white gown in the first act would symbolise innocence. In the face of all comment and suggestion, however, I wore the blue dress trimmed with brown and it looked very well. Another one of my points was that I did not try to make Marguerite angelically beautiful. There was no reason to suppose that she was even particularly pretty. "Henceforth," says Mephisto to the rejuvenated Faustus, "you will greet a Helen in every wench you meet!" In the church

58. This paragraph is based on: Clair Rowden, "Deferent Daisies," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 30, no. 2/3 (November 2018): 237–58, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26851139>.

59. Clara Louise Kellogg, "Chapter VIII: Marguerite," in *Memoirs of an American Prima Donna* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons/The Knickerbocker Press, 1913), 77–89, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38023/38023-h/38023-h.htm>.

60. Kellogg, 77–89.

61. Kellogg, 77–89.

scene I wore grey and, at first, a different shade of grey in the last act; but I changed this eventually to white because white looked better when the angels were carrying her up to heaven... The theatre costumier was horrified. She had never cared for my innovations in the way of costuming, and her tradition-loving Latin soul was shocked to the core by the new and dreadful make-up I proposed to wear as Marguerite... Well, I worked and struggled and slaved over every detail. No one else did. There was no great effort made to have good scenic effects.⁶²

It is therefore clear that great singers sometimes had the agency to also juggle histrionic and scenographic considerations when defining the aesthetics of their characters. This was certainly true of the French Emma Calvé (1858–1942) in Brussels in 1881. Renowned for her naturalistic acting, she appeared on stage in drab wool and a small hat, rejecting the “medieval” pseudo-princess look often associated with Marguerite.⁶³

A little later, another renowned diva would embody Gounod's heroine with panache: the Australian Nellie Melba (1861–1931) (Fig. 8). One of the best-dressed women of her time and a true style setter,⁶⁴ Madame Melba was a loyal customer of the House of Worth, both in town and on stage, from the 1880s onwards.⁶⁵ From 1896 to the 1910s, her dark costume, initially quite lavish — including a version probably from 1897, featuring impressive lace slit angel sleeves — evolved into much more subdued versions, if we are to believe the dresses attributed to her that are now preserved in the Powerhouse Collection in Sydney.⁶⁶ Incidentally, Melba's iconic 1896 costume is reminiscent in many ways of that worn by the English theater diva Ellen Terry (1847–1928) in an adaptation of the Faustian tragedy presented at the Lyceum Theatre in London from 1885 to 1888.⁶⁷ It may also have served as a model for that of the American Lillian Blauvelt (1873–1947), photographed in *The Queen* magazine in 1903 during her visit to the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.⁶⁸

Finally, a word about Marguerite by American Emma Eames (1865–1895) which demonstrates, in a different vein, the power of certain big names in couture over stage aesthetics, as the century progressed. Eames made her debut in *Faust* at Covent Garden in April 1891 and performed the same role that year at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In *A Century of Fashion*, Jean Philippe Worth (1856–1926), co-heir and artistic director of the august fashion house since his father's death, recounts how he developed her costume:

Now, the traditional Marguerite costume had been the bane of my existence from the day I had first seen it, in my thirteenth year, on the great Christine Nilsson... When I told [Madame Eames] what I had in mind, this keenly intelligent woman was delighted with the suggestion and gave me permission to go ahead and dress Marguerite as a girl in her position would be dressed. The first-act costume I made of beige cloth with réséda green corselet. I lined it with lilac and added pale blue ribbons in *crevés* to give it a touch of color and to preserve the suggestion of youth. The other costume I fashioned of black. The head-dress to go with it was of green velvet with a gold embroidered brim and a white veil to pull tight under the chin, after the manner of the portraits of Holbein. When Madame Eames

62. Kellogg, 77–89.

63. See Molly C. Doran, “Performing Trauma, Performing History: Women's Suffering in Gounod's *Faust*,” *Women's Suffering in French Opera: Nineteenth-Century Contexts and Twenty-First Century Performance*, doctoral dissertation (Bloomington: The Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, 2021), 61.

64. Cole, *Divas of the Gilded Age*, 16.

65. De Marly, “Leading Ladies,” 180.

66. See “Opera costume worn by Dame Nellie Melba as ‘Marguerite’ in ‘Faust,’ c. 1910,” *Powerhouse Collection*, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://collection.powerhouse.com.au/object/163391> and <https://collection.powerhouse.com.au/object/163392>.

67. See “Faust: Print 1885–1888,” *V&A*, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1425309/faust-print-window--grove/>.

68. Cole, *Divas of the Gilded Age*, 10.

appeared in this last costume with its black skirt draped over her arm and just a glimpse of the black-and-white petticoat showing, the dress had a little triumph all its own. This, naturally, was a matter of great satisfaction to me, not only for personal reasons, but because I was so happy to see the theater at least ready to accept costumes in keeping with the circumstances of the characters in the play.⁶⁹

Despite Worth's professed historicist concerns, the result, it must be said, was more in keeping with the tradition of opulence characteristic of the House of Worth than with a strict impulse toward minimalism and simplicity.

Far from being restricted to artistic institutions and professional stages, Marguerite's imagery also invaded the world of costume balls, those grand festive events highly prized by royalty, the aristocracy, and the upper middle class on both sides of the Atlantic. She thus featured prominently in guides intended for participants, which were full of suggestions for historical and ethnic costumes, or those inspired by literature, theater, and opera. Such proposals often copied the gowns of famous prima donnas in every detail. This could be seen in the *Album of Fancy Costumes* published in the 1870s, one of whose engravings reproduced the exact image of Miolan-Carvalho as the Faustian heroine, holding her jewelry box.⁷⁰ Commerce and advertising also seized upon the character, who appeared, for instance, on postcards, in an advertisement for Spunella silks in 1911, or, more prosaically, in a publicity for Liebig's *fleisch extract* in 1892.⁷¹

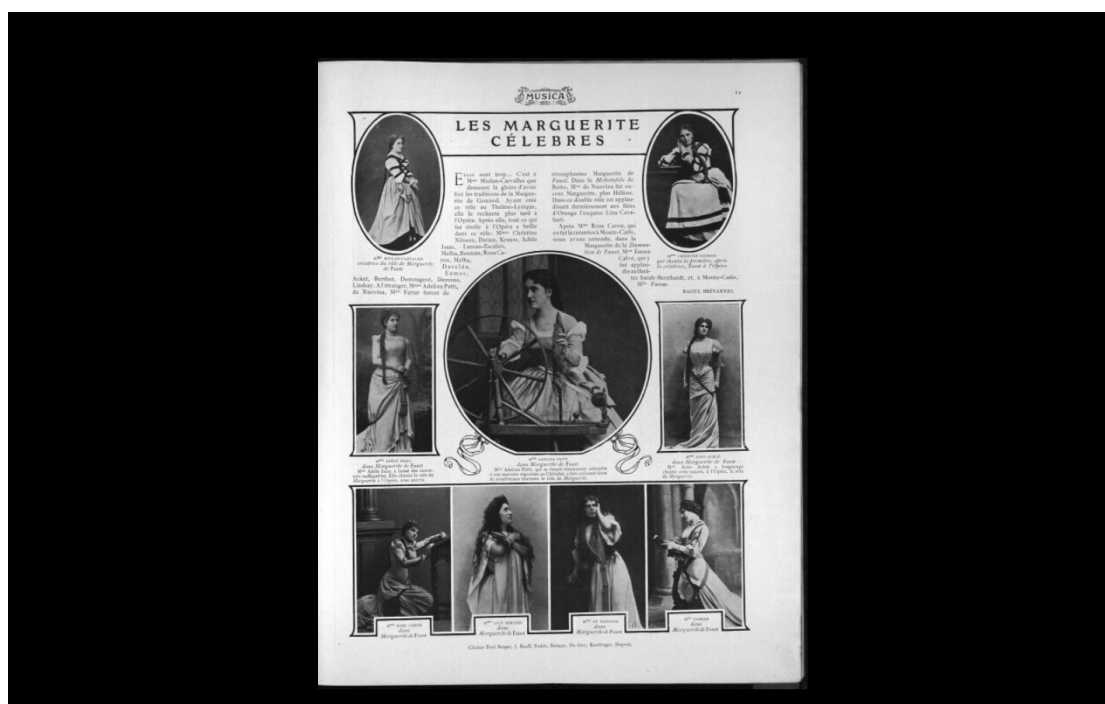


Figure 6: Raoul Brévannes, "Les Marguerite célèbres," *Musica*, no. 40, janvier 1906, Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, collections Jacques Doucet – Licence Ouverte / Open Licence. Upper row: Caroline Miolan-Carvalho, Christina Nilsson. Middle row: Adèle Isaac, Adelina Patti, Aino Ackté. Lower row: Rose Caron, Lucy Berthet, Marguerite-Zinah de Nuovina, Geraldine Farrar

69. Jean Philippe Worth, "Celebrities of the Stage," in *A Century of Fashion*, trans. Ruth Scott Miller (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1928), 167–8.

70. Marie Schild, ed., *Album of Fancy Costumes* (London: S. Miller).

71. See Cole, *Divas of the Gilded Age*, 10 and Anonymous, "Liebigbilder 1892, Serie 224. Oper Faust – 2 Faust begegnet Gretchen," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed December 12, 2025, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liebigbilder_1892,_Serie_224._Oper_Faust_-_2_Faust_begegnet_Gretchen.jpg.

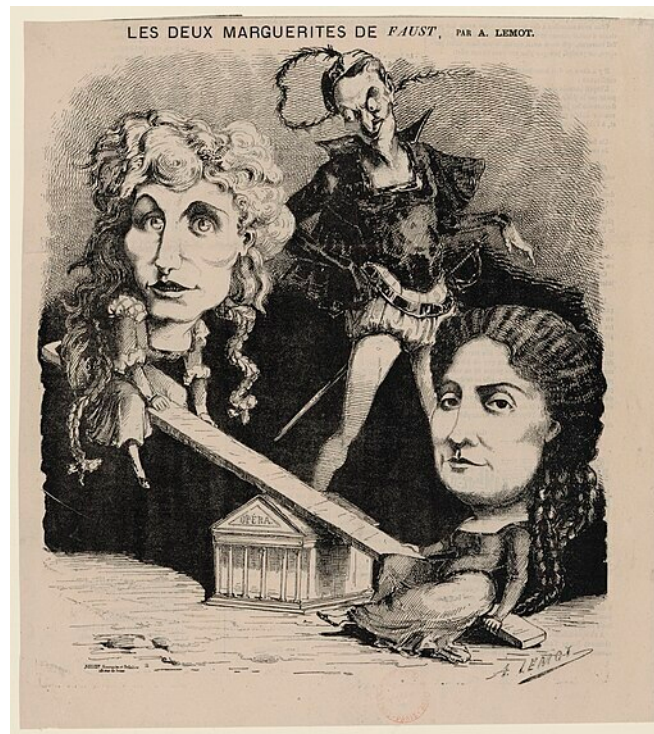


Figure 7: Valentin Achille Lemot, engraver, *Caroline Carvalho avec Christine Nilsson, les deux Marguerite de Faust*, 1869, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Musique, Est. Carvalho 021, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 8: Nellie Melba as "Marguerite" in *Faust*, March 1899, Digital scan from *Munsey's Magazine* (Vol. XX), Wikimedia Commons

From Character to Persona: Hysteria, Image, and Self-fashioning

This overview clearly shows how Marguerite's iconic costume, in its various versions and numerous incarnations, has been the product of a range of influences. However, one striking observation emerges from the iconography of Marguerites on stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the vast flood of cartes-de-visite and press images that have survived to this day, the clearly dominant type remains that of an ingenuous femininity, a chaste and candid young woman, the one who offers herself to the gaze of the audience from the very first scenes of the opera.

Despite her sin, Marguerite remains a character of great virtue and corroborates the pre-existing stereotype that, according to an essay by Cadet-Gassicourt from 1809, quoted by Stendhal, the love of Germanic women is above all virtuous, even if this love does not always fit within the social codes of marriage,

Claude Paul comments.⁷² Furthermore, Marguerite's role allies two types of operatic heroines that became popular during the first half of the nineteenth century with Vincenzo Bellini (1801–1825) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848), among other composers, and which Vlado Kotnik compiled in 2016. She thus combines the naive and pure *virgin prima donna*, like the idyllic Alpine mountains where she was set, and the *mad prima donna* who descended into passionate madness, a showcase for the artist's vocal virtuosity, but also an object of dramatic interpretation and a reflection of a then-growing interest in the emotional register in both music and society.⁷³ *La Sonnambula* (1831), *Anna Bolena* (1830), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Linda di Chamounix* (1842), for example, all featured a “devoted innocent”⁷⁴ who loses her footing.

Alongside these considerations, it seems that the delirious, disheveled, ragged prisoner in the opera's finale could have seriously tarnished the image that star songstresses wanted to promote on a large scale. Were they not more concerned with shining and, perhaps even, going down in history? In photographs, the stage costume gave the diva her credibility as an artist. But in the booming celebrity culture of the time, it was her public persona and image that were primarily reproduced, multiplied, and even collected in albums by admirers.⁷⁵ Hence, one might reasonably posit, the proliferation of this more flattering, mainstream, and universally appealing costume aesthetic, which is relatively faithful to historical clothing representations and conforms to the canons of art.

In her 2021 doctoral thesis, Molly C. Doran eloquently links Marguerite's scene of madness to the work of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) in the late nineteenth century.⁷⁶ At the same time that Gounod's *Faust* was drawing crowds and occupying newspaper columns, Charcot was spreading his theories on hysteria and trauma to the general public through highly popular theatrical performances in a fashionable new amphitheater at the Salpêtrière Hospital. French spectators and tourists were thus able to witness both the theatricalized scientific interpretation and the operatic embodiment of the same phenomenon, and within the same time horizon. Charcot focused his demonstrations on women and their reproductive organs, ovaries and breasts, which were “hysterogenic zones” responsible for triggering seizures when under pressure. On the other hand, for the prison scene in the opera, “[t]he staging manual [after 1866] describes Marguerite's hair as untidy and her dress as a gray bathrobe, an appearance that suggests (especially to Parisian audiences from the later part of the century) images of the Salpêtrière's infamous hysterical women.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the change in attitude — from delirious joy to terror — displayed by the lyrical Marguerite at the appearance of Mephistopheles in the prison corre-

72. Paul, “Le *Faust* de Goethe,” par. 25.

73. See Vlado Kotnik, “The Idea of Prima Donna: The History of a Very Special Opera's Institution,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 47, no. 2 (2016), 244–7, 254–5.

74. Kotnik, “The Idea of Prima Donna,” 258.

75. See David Mayer, “‘Quote the words,’” 236.

76. This paragraph is based on Doran, “Performing Trauma,” 25–69.

77. Doran, “Performing Trauma,” 41.

sponds exactly to the *attitudes passionnelles*, one of the four stages of the hysterical crisis demonstrated by Charcot.

As Doran explains, performances and responses to *Faust* have, to this day, greatly minimized or ignored the traumatic aspects of the plot concerning Marguerite, such as her pregnancy and infanticide. While music critics of the time concealed or downplayed these traumas — emphasizing instead the heroine's modesty, purity, and even repentance — the sopranos who performed the role often sought to aestheticize or expunge her madness. Although their approaches to the role varied, Miolan-Carvalho and Nilsen established a standard from the outset: that of a feminine and innocent Marguerite. It is therefore understandable that, for the sake of self-promotion, opera divas sought to distance themselves from a sartorial image that was now familiar to the public and that, taken out of context, could have been threatening or degrading. In short, they opted for visual compositions more conducive to conveying grandeur and respectability.

A substitute for the *theatrical portrait* produced in the eighteenth century by a painter and often similar in its grandiloquence to the *formal* or *state portrait*,⁷⁸ the photographic portrait of the diva contributed at the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth to a vast promotional system involving the star and her costume. Theater historian Aoife Monks wrote: "We realize that what we saw on stage was not so much the actor as the enactment of costuming: the peculiar conflation between flesh and dress and presence."⁷⁹ And also: "Costume is that which is perceptually indistinct from the actor's body, and yet something that can be removed. Costume is a body that can be taken off."⁸⁰ Posing as Marguerite and materializing herself with the use of the protagonist's clothes, the diva effectively capitalized on the immense success of the opera in which the character was a leading figure. It is then interesting to note the compelling tension between the diva's own physical body, constantly threatened with disappearance at the expense of the costume, and the corporeal and media visibility that the diva constructed for herself by highlighting and disseminating images of that very costume. After lending her body and voice to the heroine on stage, she reappropriated the latter's body-vestment and exported it to another medium in order to construct and promote her own image, her public persona. Person, character, and persona⁸¹ were thus intimately interwoven, interacting and reinforcing one another.

Several scholars such as Susan Rutherford, Karen Henson, Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss⁸² have recounted, explained and commented the rise, prominence and increasingly dominant status of the great opera diva through the nineteenth century with, amongst other factors, the downfall of the castrato, democratization of opera, and recognition of the unique magnetic power of her voice. Alongside her brilliant artistic and performance skills, her stage costume — which not only made visible her personal body and fictional character, but also her public persona — surely became a significant instrument of self-fashioning,⁸³ a construction that amplified and magnified the performer's glamour, stardom, and

78. See Maria Ines Aliverti, *La naissance de l'acteur moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 39.

79. Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 140.

80. Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, 11.

81. See Nathalie Heinich, "Chanteurs, acteurs et mannequins," in *De la visibilité: Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2012), 192–199.

82. See Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Susan Rutherford, "Divining the 'diva', or a myth and its legacy: female opera singers and fandom," in L. Zoppelli, ed., *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft-Annales Suisses de Musicologie-Annuario Sizzzero di Musicologia*, Vol. 36, 2016, 39–62, <https://doi.org/10.3726/b15085>; Karen Henson, ed., *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss, eds., *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Henry Sutherland Edwards, *The Prima donna: her history and surroundings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century...* (London: Remington & Co., 1888); Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Jennifer Hall-Witt, *Fashionable Acts: Opera and Elite Culture in London, 1780–1880* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007); Vlado Kotnik, "The Idea of Prima Donna: The History of a Very Special Opera's Institution," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 47, no. 2, 2016, 237–287; John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

83. On self-fashioning and dress, see: Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in ed. Arnold Marshall Rose, *Human*

charisma. In this endeavor of stylization and self-presentation, the diva, who, as we have seen, has become a master at manipulating fashion codes, has been able to do so by benefiting from the assistance of an expert accomplice, her trusted couturier. Speaking of herself, the famous British fashion and stage costume designer Lucile (1863–1935) stated in 1932: “Lucile believes that gowns may express ideas from grave to gay, even emotions and passions. So she has gone to the silent world of desires and temperaments and sensations and translates their secrets into wondrous colors and entrancing forms.”⁸⁴ Expanding on this, theater historian, performance specialist, and theorist of charismatic celebrity Joseph Roach wrote:

Lucile knew from girlhood that [fabulous clothes] do make statements. Indeed, they can even make the kind of statements that make things happen. In those instances, they are not mere objects, but rather provocations to enact behaviors or initiate social processes. They *perform* [Roach’s emphasis], in a word, and by performing they carry *the charismatic potential* [the author’s emphasis] to turn personalities into events, events into occasions, and occasions into precedents.⁸⁵

Roach continued: “clothes not only express but also actively create a *persona* [the author’s emphasis] through the selective revelation or installation of ‘desires and temperaments and sensations’ in the wearer’s own mind and in the minds of her beholders.”⁸⁶ Herself a superperformer, the diva could thus easily understand the performing and charismatic qualities of the stage costume, and of Marguerite’s in particular, and make them work to her benefit so as to fashion and mediate her image, in other words her public self.

At the same time, the stage costume helped the diva to create a sense of closeness with her audience or admirers, thanks to the intimate and manipulable medium of the *carte-de-visite*. Thousands of examples of cartes still exist today, such as this one featuring Pauline Lucca as Marguerite (Fig. 9). The *carte* was in fact a collectible object that fans kept in albums. According to celebrity and charisma expert Eva Giloi: “By depicting public figures in role-appropriate clothing and amongst expressive props, collectible photographs turned celebrities into ‘larger-than-life... stereotypes’ that gave coherence and order to the modern world.”⁸⁷ But in parallel, another phenomenon was indeed occurring. On the album pages, and because of photographic portraiture being increasingly popular and affordable, the faces and bodies of the commoners socialized, so to speak, with those of family members, political figures, monarchs, and, of course, renowned artists. The *carte-de-visite*, Geoffrey Batchen wrote, blurred social boundaries and allowed to build imaginary worlds that defied time and space, gender and class.⁸⁸ It thus activated memory, bringing the admirer closer to their favorite star, allowing the fan to engage in secret conversations with their diva. Here again we find a conjunction of interplays that Roach referred to as the constituent factors of “It,” that “profane magic,” that mysterious “je ne sais quoi” peculiar to great stars: “public intimacy” or virtual closeness to the star, whose strong singularity nevertheless

Behavior & Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962); Joanne Bubolz Eicher, “Dress, the Senses, and Public, Private, and Secret Selves,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 25, no. 6 (2020), 777–97. On divas and self-fashioning, see: George Biddlecombe, (2016). “Jenny Lind, Illustration, Song and the Relationship between Prima Donna and Public,” eds. Christina Bashford and Roberta Montemorra Marvin, *The Idea of Art Music in a Commercial World, 1800–1930* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), 86–113; Roger Freitas, “Singing Herself: Adelina Patti and the Performance of Femininity,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 71, no. 2 (2018), 287–369; Pierre Apraxine et al., “*La Divine Comtesse*”: *Photographs of the Countess de Castiglione* (New Haven, Londres and New York: Yale University Press and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000); Caroline Weber, *Proust’s Duchess: How Three Celebrated Women Captured the Imagination of Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

84. Quoted in Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 87.

85. Roach, 87.

86. Roach, 89.

87. Eva Giloi, “How Public Figures Became Glamorous Accessories: Affect Worlds, Consumer Culture, and Visual Technologies in the Long Nineteenth Century,” *Media History*, Vol. 28, no. 1 (2022), 85–110, accessed February 23, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2021.1944073>.

88. Geoffrey Batchen, “Rêves de la vie ordinaire: La carte de visite photographique et l’imagination bourgeoise,” in ed. Martha Langford, *Image & Imagination* (Montreal and Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 72.

distances them from ordinary mortals; the “synthetic experience” or vicarious experience of the Other (here, through photography, the press, and the carte-de-visite); and “mass attraction” or irresistible fascination, independent of the star’s will and comparable to charisma.⁸⁹ From the stage to the intimate and vice versa, the costume of the humble and candid Marguerite thus paradoxically helped its performers metamorphose from otherwise talented songstresses into sublime, larger-than-life divas.



Figure 9: Heinrich Graf, Pauline Lucca as “Marguerite” in Gounod’s “Faust,” c. 1870 (?), Ipernity, Wikimedia Commons

89. See Roach, *It*, “Introduction,” 1–44.

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