



Poetry Incarnate: Puccini's Mimi# as metonymy and metaphor combined

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Poetry Incarnate: Puccini's Mimì as metonymy and metaphor combined

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2018.11.09 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. This essay is linked with a lengthy book I published in 2015, [Masterpieces of Metonymy](#). There I argued that metonymy and metaphor, as they are known in verbal art, are analogous respectively to horizontal and vertical threading in the art of weaving. Taking a broader point of view here, I will argue that the art of fabric work in general can be represented as an interaction of metonymy and metaphor. Such a representation comes to life, I think, in the story of Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. Here a woman named Mimì, a fabric worker, is pictured as the incarnation of poetry. This picturing, I further think, is expressed by way of metonymy and metaphor combined.



Costume design for la rappazzatrice 'the seamstress' in the poster for the world premiere performance of *La Bohème*, Teatro Regio di Torino, 1 February 1896. Adolf Hohenstein (1854–1928). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. First, I offer some minimal background about the opera and then about the terms metonymy and metaphor.

§1a. The music for *La Bohème* was composed by Giacomo Puccini, with libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. The première took place in Torino, 1896, and the conductor was a youthful Arturo Toscanini. The dramatic date of the story hovers around 1830.

§1b. As for the terms, I epitomize the working definitions I developed in [Chapter 1](#) of *Masterpieces of Metonymy*:

Metaphor is an expression of meaning by way of substituting something that seems at first unfamiliar in place of something that is already familiar.

Metonymy is an expression of meaning by way of connecting something that seems at first familiar to something that is already familiar.

§2. With this background in place, I turn to the words of a song sung in Act 2 by Rodolfo, a poet, who has fallen in love with a woman called Mimì, who is a fabric worker—or, for the moment, let us call her a 'seamstress'. But the poet calls her a *fioraia* or 'flower-girl' as he introduces Mimì to his appreciative friends—to his 'company', as he calls them. Surely they are a full complement of kindred spirits: one of them is a musician, another is a painter, and yet another is quite the philosopher. Here, then, are the words of the poet. I quote the words in the original Italian, followed by my working translation into English:



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§2a. [starting at 00:37:37]

Eccoci qui. | Questa è Mimì, | gaia fioraia. | Il suo venir completa | la bella compagnia, | perché son io il poeta, | essa la poesia. | Dal mio cervel sbocciano i canti, | dalle sue dita sbocciano i fior; | dall' anime esultanti | sboccia l'amor.

La Boheme - Freni, Raimondi, Martino, Panerai. Full Opera



§2b. [starting at 00:37:37]

So, here we are... | This is Mimì, | lighthearted flower-girl... | Now that she's here, she makes complete | our beautiful company. | That is because I am the poet, | and she is poetry. | Coming out of my brain is the blossoming of songs. | Coming out of her fingers is the blossoming of flowers. | And coming out of our souls exultant | is the blossoming of love.

§3. For the poet, then, the woman Mimì is poetry itself. Since Rodolfo is a poet, this equivalence is for him the perfect metaphor. Substituted for the woman is the poetry of the poet. For the poet, his poetry is already familiar, but Mimì suddenly seems just as familiar to him, even if she has only just now entered his life. Mimì complements him perfectly. And the complementation itself is a perfect metonymy, since the poet is most perfectly connected to his poetry. The relationship of the poet to his poetry is metonymic and not metaphorical, since Rodolfo is not a substitute for his poetry. He is not poetry itself. Only Mimì is poetry itself. And the metonymy of complementation extends to the poet's friends, who are most familiar to him. But now their company is complemented perfectly by an altogether new familiarity, who is Mimì.

§4. The poet's picturing of Mimì as poetry itself, which is a metaphor, is relevant to his referring to her as a fioraia or 'flower-girl', which is a metonymy. Mimì is not literally a 'flower-girl' or 'flower-lady', that is, a woman who sells flowers. Nor is she a personification of any particular flower. Rather, she is connected to flowers in the same way as the poet is connected to the 'songs' that he makes. She 'makes' flowers in the same way as the poet 'makes' his songs: Dal mio cervel sbocciano i canti, | dalle sue dita sbocciano i fior 'Coming out of my brain is the blossoming of songs. | Coming out of her fingers is the blossoming of flowers.' The metonymy here depends on a new metaphor, since the blossoming of flowers is an image that is substituted here for the image of making fabrics. In real life, as it were, Mimì is a maker of fabrics, not a seller of flowers.

§5. To appreciate the metonymy here, we must now go backward in time, turning back to Act 1 of the opera. I quote from there the relevant words sung by Mimì herself, singing about herself. Again I quote the words in the original Italian, followed by my working translation into English:

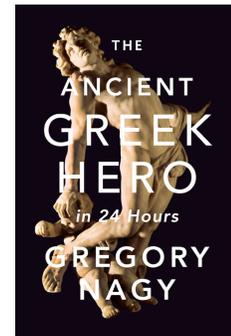
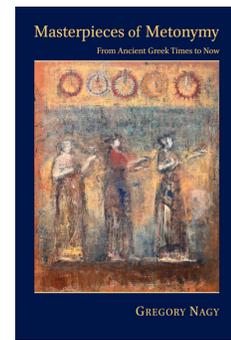
§5a. [starting at 00:24:28]

Mimì

(È un po' titubante, poi si decide a parlare; sempre seduta)

Sì, mi chiamano Mimì | ma il mio nome è Lucia. | La storia mia è breve: | a tela o a seta | ricamo in casa e fuori... | Son tranquilla e lieta | ed è mio svago | far gigli e rose. | Mi piacciono quelle cose | che han sì dolce malìa, | che parlano d'amor, di primavera, | di sogni e di chimere, | quelle cose che han nome poesia... | Lei m'intende?

Mi chiamano Mimì, | il perchè non so. | Sola, mi fo | il pranzo da me stessa. | Non vado sempre a messa, | ma prego assai il Signore. | Vivo sola, soletta | là in una bianca cameretta: | guardo sui tetti e in cielo; | ma quando vien lo sgelo | il primo sole è mio | il primo bacio dell'aprile è mio! | Germoglia in un vaso una rosa... | Foglia a foglia la spio! | Così gentile il profumo d'un fiore! | Ma i fior ch'io faccio, | Ahimè! non hanno odore. | Altro di me non le saprei narrare. | Sono la sua vicina | che la vien fuori d'ora a importunare.



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§5b. [starting at 00:24:28]

Mimi

(She is a bit hesitant, then decides to speak; staying seated all the way)

Yes, they call me Mimi, | but my name is Lucia. | My story is brief: | On plain cloth or on silk | I embroider at home or away from home... | I am serene, lighthearted, | and my pastime | is making lilies and roses. | They give me pleasure, these things | that have such sweet enchantment, | that speak of love, of Spring, | of dreams and chimaeras | —those things that have a name, poetry. | Are you understanding me?

They call me Mimi, | The reason for it, I don't know. | All alone, I make myself | dinner, all by myself. | I don't go to mass all that much, | but I do enough praying to the good Lord. | I live by myself, making it a little solo act, | over there in a little white room. | I look out at the roofs and the sky. | But when the thaw comes, | the first ray of the sun is mine, | the first kiss of April is mine! | Blooming in a vase is a rose. | Petal by petal, I watch it, | that is how delicate is the fragrance of a flower! | But the flowers that I make, | ah, they have no smell. | More than that about me, to you, I would not know how to tell. | I am your neighbor, | who comes to you now, not the right time to disturb you about something.

§6. So, as we can hear from her own words here in Act 1, Mimi is not a seller of flowers. Rather, she makes flowers—just as the poet makes his songs. And, to return to the song as sung by the poet in Act 2, flowers blossom from the fingers of the flower-girl just as words blossom from the head of the poet. There is a metonymy here, since the fingers of Mimi are connected to the patterns of flowers that her fingers embroider into the fabrics she makes. But there is also a metaphor here, since the embroidery of Mimi is just like the poetry of the poet. The making of art, whether it is embroidery or poetry, is a blossoming of flowers. And there is a further metaphor here, since such blossoming is then compared to the blossoming of love: dall' anime esultanti | sboccia l'amor 'And coming out of our souls exultant | is the blossoming of love'. The metaphor of exulting as some excessive kind of flourishing is already alive in Latin poetry. We see it in Catullus 51.14, otio exsultas nimiumque gestis 'In luxuriance you exult and are elated to excess' where the verb exultō implies the unchecked exuberance of a flourishing plant (as in Pliny Natural History 17.180, with reference to vines; see also [10§18 in my book Pindar's Homer](#)).

§7. But something is missing in this picture: sadly, the blossoms of real flowers give off a pleasurable aroma, while the blossoms of the flowers embroidered by the seamstress cannot give her such pleasure: Germogliata in un vaso una rosa... | Foglia a foglia la spio! | Così gentile il profumo d'un fiore! | Ma i fior ch'io faccio, | Ahimè! non hanno odore 'Blooming in a vase is a rose. | Petal by petal, I watch it, | that is how delicate is the fragrance of a flower! | But the flowers that I make, | ah, they have no smell.' The flowers that are embroidered by Mimi are not a metaphor. Only the blossoming of the flowers is a metaphor. But this metaphor of blooming is sadly defective here: it does not connect perfectly to the blooming of real flowers, which have a fragrance not to be found in the embroidered flowers made by Mimi. What the wording of her song implies, then, is that the fragrance of real flowers is perhaps also sadly missing in the poetry made by Rodolfo. Even more sadly, such a real fragrance is perhaps not to be found even in the love that blossoms from the exultant souls of the two lovers.

§8. But all is not lost. Love can prevail so long as love is connected to poetry. Love can blossom because poetry can make it blossom by way of combining metaphor and metonymy. Love is a flower—that can be the metaphor—and love blossoms because flowers blossom—that can be the metonymy. Such a combination of metaphor and metonymy is what inspires the poet to think of Mimi, that woman who causes flowers to blossom, as the incarnation of poetry. And such poetry is seen as a near-perfect expression of love.

§9. I close with a fleeting comment on something remarkable that can happen in languages where the very idea of love is directly connected to poetry—that is, where love is poeticized. I am thinking here of the French word amour, to be translated as 'love'. This word is derived from Latin amor, likewise to be translated as 'love'. But the question is, why is the standard French word shaped amour and not ameur? After all, Latin words like flor and odor and color for 'flower' and 'odor' and 'color' survive in standard French as fleur and odeur and couleur respectively, not as *flour and *odour and *coulour. The answer to my question is this: standard French had been strongly influenced in its cultural history by the poetic language of the troubadours, whose dialect as once spoken in southern France inherited Latin amor as amour, not as northern French ameur, which is nowadays attested only residually in standard French. So, what we see here is the strong influence of poetic culture on culture in general—and even on language. And a shining example of such a poetic culture is the imagining of Mimì as poetry incarnate in opera.

Tags: [Giacomo Puccini](#), [Giuseppe Giacosa](#), [La Bohème](#), [Luigi Iliaca](#), [Michael Marks Poets in Residence Program](#), [Mimi](#), [Rodolfo](#)

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