

The Liszt-d'Agoult Affair: A Study in Biography

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ABSTRACT

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Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult had one of the best known affairs in the nineteenth century. For decades it has been debated who was at fault for their many problems and their eventual split. Early biographies are not a valuable resource for this; the first biography, written by Lina Ramann, was edited by Liszt and his lover at the time, Princess Carolyne Wittgenstein and contained their bias. Many early biographies were written based on the information in this book. Then Ernest Newman, in 1934, wrote a new type of Liszt biography. His stated goal was to tear down the trendy hagiographical depiction of Liszt and try to show him as a real man. Eleanor Perényi, in 1974, wrote a biography that was supposed to be a truer account of Liszt. In truth, Newman's goal was to tear down Liszt to the point of degrading him and Perényi's goal was to villainize Marie D'agoult. In this paper I examine the information in both biographies and

present relevant parts. My purpose is to show that it is not useful to try to place blame on both parties of the affair, but rather see them both as people with faults and graces and that both contributed to the downfall of their affair.

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After 1827, when his father died, Liszt came to live in Paris. He and his mother were in a difficult financial situation and Franz supported them by teaching piano to aristocrats. He was sick of performing for a living and compared himself to Munito, the performing dog.¹ Without his father's influence over him, he could choose how to lead his life. He was still obscure, known as a child prodigy but was not yet a household name. Liszt would eventually become a lion of the social scene in Paris, known for his gallivanting and party-hosting. He was the champion of pianists, thought by most to be the best in the world. He would have many affairs in Paris but none as important as the one with Marie d'Agoult.

Liszt had had his first love affair in 1829. Her name was Caroline de Saint-Cricq. Caroline was the daughter of Count Pierre de Saint-Cricq, a minister of commerce. At first, Caroline and Liszt's love for each other went unnoticed but then her mother slowly caught on, as she chaperoned the lessons. Caroline's mother approved of the couple but she soon died and the father had control. After he found out that Liszt was visiting the house, sometimes until midnight, he said the lessons were over. Liszt always had a soft spot for Caroline, even up to his old age. Liszt fell very hard and very fast for Caroline, thinking of nothing else during the time they were meeting.² This is something Liszt would do all his life, become enamored very quickly. He would fall especially hard for Marie d'Agoult years later.

¹ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso years* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 130.

² Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt* (Great Britain: Cassell and Co. Ltd. 1934), 30.

On March 9, 1831, Paganini made his Paris debut. This was an important stage for Liszt. He would be inspired by Paganini's virtuosic playing to become the Paganini of the piano. Many times people came to their own conclusion about this but he also liked to encourage the comparison. After seeing Paganini for the first time, he had an outpouring of ideas, such as the *6 Etudes d'execution transcendante d'apres Paganini*. Barely anyone could play them except for Liszt alone. This is similar to Paganini who did the same thing with his instrument. This would lead Liszt down a road of virtuosity. He took much liberty with the music he played, adding or subtracting notes, adding arpeggios and octaves or playing a line of melody in thirds. This was distasteful to many people, including his friends. He also wrote paraphrases of operas that were meant to impress by their virtuosity. One would think if one considered Liszt's life as a whole that he would eventually grow past this behavior but, to the dismay of his friends, he would periodically draw out the old virtuoso trick to amaze the audience. He also kept writing transcriptions and paraphrases that his friends thought he was wasting his time with. Marie d'Agoult is one of these people. When she was in Germany with him, she was dragged to a concert, in which Liszt played like the old virtuoso. She said she barely recognized him and that he played much differently when he played privately for her. This is the picture of Franz Liszt as his friends knew him, a man with two personalities.

Another dichotomy Liszt possessed was his fascination with religion. He talked about Catholicism a great deal in his letters and always talked about joining the religious life. After the affair with Saint-Cricq, he had a nervous breakdown and took the break as a religious sign. He said he wanted to join the priesthood but his mother persuaded him not to. This is another tendency that went throughout his life. Just as the Romantic tradition beckoned him to solitude

and work, so did the religious life. He would live between two lives while he was with d'Agoult. The frivolous social life, with alcohol, tobacco and caffeine, and the religious life, where he and Marie would work in peace. Eventually, Liszt would become an abbe, but that was much later in his life.

Liszt met Marie d'Agoult in 1833.³ By 1834 he was writing a note to Countess Marie d'Agoult telling her that George Sand had arrived in Paris. George would come to influence the Liszt-d'Agoult affair in the years to come. Liszt did not have a hard time meeting members of the romantic scene. It is said that Liszt would come unannounced to author's homes he liked. Some names mentioned are Lamartine, Victor Hugo and George Sand herself. He was also close to Berlioz whom he would talk to about nature. This period in his life is very telling in reference to his behavior later on. The prevailing romantic notion was that a romantic man should feel distaste for cities and company and be more at home in nature. Liszt, however, had learned so much from other members of the Romantic movement and enjoyed their company, unlike Hugo, for example, who claimed that socializing with groups was an interference with art. This love of being among company and enjoying dinners and nights out would in the future to give him much psychological pain. He was always balancing serious work with the frivolity of social groups.

According to the biographer Ernest Newman, the biographies before his had one major problem. These books were hagiographical in nature. They described Liszt as a type of romantic god who had no faults. A Christ-like figure, a picture of Liszt in the later years was called to mind, with his cassock and collar. Newman detested this type of scholarship and tried to put an

³ According to Walker and others, but the date has been challenged.

end to it in *The Man Liszt*. *The Man Liszt* claims to draw conclusions about Liszt as a person, observing his personality and not old legends or even his music (there is no musical analysis at all). He fails in this process and he tears down Liszt excessively. He says himself in the introduction that he is going to do this. When he says he's going to tear down Liszt's legend, however, one does not expect the lengths he goes to tear down any positive view of Liszt.

Newman declares his mission in his first sentence, "Musical biography has always tended to the diffusion of a romantic legend rather than to an impartial record of the sober truth."⁴ Newman goes on to give some evidence for this new approach. He claims that the first volume of the biography by Lina Ramann, *Life of Liszt*, was filled in with material by Liszt himself and the ever-interloping Wittgenstein, especially regarding the Liszt-D'Agoult affair. He says, "...common prudence would have prompted the reflection, on part both of the biographer and the reader, that possible only half the story may therefore have been told."⁵ He is always cautious of the Princess, saying that she interfered with most of Liszt's written work, including his book on Chopin. Besides this involvement of Liszt and Wittgenstein on his own biography, the greatest sin, according to Newman, occurred after Liszt's death. This is when biographers started propagating the Liszt legend. He states, "There could therefore be no discussion of the question whether Liszt had been 'good' in the D'Agoult affair, because his unvarying and incorruptible goodness was the first principal of the Lisztian faith!"⁶

Newman claims that his book is inevitably going to upset three different types of readers, those who object to musical biography, those who object to honest, frank biography

⁴ Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt* (Great Britain: Cassell and Co. Ltd. 1934), 5.

⁵ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, xii.

⁶ *Ibid.*

and those who object to the tearing down of a musical legend. To the first class, he states that many people want to know artists' past that is represented in his or her art. There is something to be gained in understanding the subject psychologically. To the second class, he says that the nineteenth century had a habit of casting biographical subjects as a representative of a certain virtue and that all the contrasting evidence against this view was suppressed and called unimportant. So, writing a frank biography including all this evidence is important. To the third class he states that every legend must at some point be held up to scrutiny and be compared with relevant facts. Since, as he said before, many of the facts used to bolster this Lisztian legend have been supplied by the biased Ramann and Wittgenstein, especially about the d'Agoult affair, they will fall apart when compared to contrasting material supplied by sources that were discounted.

Newman is not completely untrustworthy, however. He does succeed in his quest to tear down the Liszt legend and the truth is that some of it deserves to be torn down. He does expose certain qualities of Liszt that had until then never been seen. The angry Liszt, for example, the one that would scream and bully Marie. One time when they were living in Geneva, he broke a window out of fury.⁷ He also fully illustrates the Liszt with a dualistic nature. He talks about Liszt the serious artist and Liszt the circus rider (his virtuosity was very often compared to the circus). He is also very quick to defend Marie. Whenever there is a problem, it is Liszt's fault. This is very different from Eleanor Perényi's book, *Liszt: The Artist As Romantic Hero*, which will be discussed later. For Newman, he says that he wants the truth about Liszt but he fails to illicit the truth about Liszt's companions. Marie is considered a saint the way Liszt

⁷ Ernest Newman, *The Man Liszt* (Great Britain: Cassell and Co. Ltd. 1934), 62.

was in other biographies. But other modern biographies show that she was no saint, nor was she a demon. He does do the service of refuting many of the claims written down by Ramann and Wittgenstein which hadn't been done thoroughly before. Marie writes that she likes traveling because, "it gives me a feeling of the unity in my life. When I visit in his company places that I did not know before, I feel that he is my sole support, my sole guide, the my destiny is in him alone, that I have voluntarily and gladly placed it in his hands, that truly I have neither temple nor country except in his heart."⁸ They "sneer at her" and criticize her for wanting to be "his muse".⁹ The response by Liszt shows a much different picture, "I cannot go a month without seeing you, so come here, and come as soon as possible: understand me and love me. But what need is there for me to tell you this? Am I not wholly yours? Is it not you who multiply my ambition a hundredfold?"¹⁰ Clearly the Princess and Ramann were out of place to sneer. Liszt saw her as a muse himself, without whom he could not create art of a grand nature.

Newman also stated that biographers are too hard on her and extreme biographies treat her as a hindrance to Liszt's work. According to *Nelida*, the book she wrote about her and Liszt after the break up, she was plagued by his double life, the serious artist and the charlatan. This double life has been discussed before and is evident in all biographies of Liszt, so it's no wonder that this would affect Marie. She also plagued him with complaints about this double life, always asking him to use better use of his time. Liszt responds by saying, "She said to me today, you ought to make better use of your time-work, learn, take exercise, etc. Often she has

⁸ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

scolded me, in her own way, for my indolence, my indifference; and these words of her sadden me.”¹¹ Clearly both are at fault here, Liszt for his misuse of time and Marie for her complaining.

The author of *Liszt: The Artist As Romantic Hero*, Eleanor Perényi, takes a much different approach to writing a biography of Liszt. She tries to be as impartial as possible. Although this is truly impossible for a biographer, she is successful in a few ways. She tends not to sanctify Marie as Newman does. She properly shows Marie’s paranoia. Citing a letter that was from Marie to Liszt who was traveling as a performer she said, :You ask me to join you; it is at least two hundred leagues from here to Vienna. I can hardly get from my bed to my armchair...You leave my wretched life to someone else’s care. If I had died, you would, however, have had to come or would you also have left to others the task of closing my eyes?”¹² She also shows her duplicitousness. When Marie and Liszt’s affair was all but over, She was reliant on all the friends that she had met through Liszt, effectively stealing them from him. She also shows Liszt in his imperfections. Perényi talks about all of Liszt’s affairs while he is with Marie and describes the excuses as weak.

Perényi is also a much more thorough biographer. Perényi goes through Liszt’s life in her biography except for his last 25 years, while Newman starts with the D’Agoult days and ends before his death. She is also inclusive, talking about other subjects that influenced Liszt and his life. This includes the political goings on and the artists of the period. Newman has an entire opening section stating that the old biographies of Liszt were incorrect and he is out to correct them. He also states that he is going to tear down the image of Liszt. There is none of

¹¹ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 81.

¹² Perényi, Eleanor S. *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 187

this in Perényi. She strives for what biographers normally strive for: the truth. She does this by using evidence from the correspondences between Liszt and Marie. Newman does the same, but does not quote as much as Perényi. Sometimes they share quotations, with Newman stopping prematurely and Perényi showing the whole picture with a longer quote. Perényi also does something that Newman does not. He does not put in the details about Liszt's connection with other things going on in his life other than the affair with Marie, for this was not his intention. Perényi gives a great insight into Liszt and George Sand's relationship, one that would influence Liszt and Marie's. At first, she implies that Liszt is attracted to George right before meeting Marie and after. Liszt was obviously enamored with Sand and met up with her often. There was a lot of talk around Paris and it was no secret that all of Paris wanted them to end up together in a liaison. All of this pained Marie with the effect that Sand wrote her a letter saying that she was not interested in Liszt in simple but vague language. She also sent a letter to Liszt suggesting they cease talking about it, and with that any qualms about an affair were relieved. This is relevant because it shows Marie's jealousy and also the relationships that Liszt had with other women who were not his lovers.

Perényi and Newman contest the date of Liszt and d'Agoult's first meeting. They agree on the place, the house of a certain Madame la Marquise de Vayer, but Perényi dates it at the end of 1832 and Newman 1833 (Walker dates it at the beginning of 1833 as well). This is what Marie has to say about the meeting, "I would say an apparition, lacking another word to describe the extraordinary sensation he gave me, altogether the most extraordinary person I had ever seen . . . like that of a phantom about to be summoned back to the shades, this is how

I saw the young genius before me.”¹³ Newman says that a few days later, Marie pressed the Marquise for his address. She wrote to him to call, which he did without responding to the letter.

Newman adds that Lina Ramann would have us believe that Marie wanted Liszt out of vanity and tried to catch him in her wiles. Marie’s diary paints a different picture.¹⁴ She speaks of the serious conversations they had during his many visits to her house, how he dazzled her with his strange manners and enthusiasm for various topics. She was clearly infatuated with him as well.

Perényi offers that Marie’s memoirs are confusing and sometimes complete fabrications. She says that when they met, he was aloof from the world and did not play concerts nor join in the social scene. A letter from Liszt to Valerie Boissier in May in 1833 says differently.¹⁵ He says that he is in a whirlwind of parties, dinners, concerts, etc. Perényi offers that the contradiction shows that Marie wanted to display Liszt as shy and aloof because otherwise it would be obvious that she was trying to entice Liszt and that he was slightly unwilling. She says, “More likely he was wary of a woman six years older than he, with a husband and two children, dead serious and infinitely pleased with herself.”¹⁶

After a period of six months, Marie seems to have missed Liszt and asked him to come stay with her at Croissy, her country home. However, Perényi states that Liszt was daunted by the grandeur. According to Perényi and Newman, when Liszt came and saw Marie with her two

¹³ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 79.

¹⁴ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 29.

¹⁵ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

children, his manner suddenly changed. Marie said he talked and acted strangely but Perényi suggests that he was acting “boorishly” and that another woman would have had “second thoughts”.¹⁷ A scene then plays out in both Newman and Perényi, Marie breaks down and weeps and Liszt grows softer and consoles her, kneeling at her feet. She said from this point forward they knew that they belonged together. Perényi argues that the correspondence between Liszt and d’Agoult is too badly put together in this period to find out if this story and others are true. Newman decides that the letters justify the story.

Their loving letters together extend into 1834. During this time, Marie shows her first signs of jealousy, according to Perényi, questioning his past affairs. Liszt tried to console her with, “I was only a child, almost an imbecile with Caroline [de Saint-Criq]”, etc.¹⁸ This jealousy is a consistent theme in their relationship in the years ahead.

In Autumn 1834, Marie’s daughter became very ill. She was removed to Paris. In December she died. Newman and Perényi give very different views of Marie’s reaction. Newman says that she was inconsolable, and had to even be restrained from suicide. Her other daughter’s pleasant attitude haunted Marie so much that she sent her “out to board”.¹⁹ Perényi suggests a scene much more unpleasant. She states that her record with other children who died in the future, which will be discussed later, betrays her act of the mourning mother and that Marie was simply not that affected by her daughter’s death, as she was not very concerned with her during her life.²⁰ In Perényi’s version, Claire, Marie’s other daughter, was simply trying

¹⁷ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 48.

²⁰ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 119.

to make her mother feel better but Marie was disgusted and the grandmother had to intervene and send her away.

According to Newman, Liszt was then, after the death of Marie's child, subject to one of his mood changes that lasted throughout his life. Liszt called on Marie but did not see her while Louise was first ill. He then sent a cold letter saying he did not want to see her at such a time and that he was going to La Chenaie to visit Lamennais.. Then Marie didn't hear from Liszt for six months. To Newman this is typical of his lack of tact. Perényi insists this is a false hood. He did not go to La Chenaie that December but had gone the previous fall. The cold letter she received has never been found, but one that Liszt wrote during the time of Louise's illness and death does exist. In it he is full of compassion for her.²¹ The fact that Marie said Liszt went to Chenaie is telling in its own way. On Liszt's previous visit, Lamennais shared with Liszt that he was opposed to Liszt's new affair and suggested he cut it off. Liszt was possibly going to do this on his return to Paris in October. Knowing that Lamennais was in the way, Perényi says that it may not be unlike Marie's behavior to use her loss to solidify her affair with Liszt.

Another potential barrier came between Liszt and Marie at this time, the arrival of George Sand. George was introduced to Liszt that October and the two quickly became close. He would go to her apartment and stay late, talking about the miseries they shared. For now, Marie and George did not meet, but each was curious about the other.

In January 1835 and that spring, Liszt's letters to Marie start to change. According to Perényi they "scald the page"²². Perényi poses the possibility that the two have not yet had

²¹ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 119.

²² *Ibid.* 120.

sexual relations. She says that Marie was a well known flirt who enjoyed keeping men waiting. In any event Marie becomes pregnant in March 1835.

Liszt then joined Marie in Croissy. Newman has Liszt bursting with emotion at the sight of Marie, cursing the misery that she has had to endure. Liszt proclaims that they should leave together to be happy in each other's company. Marie says a week later they left for France. Perényi proposes that it is possible he said this after finding she was with child, or that it never really happened at all. They did not travel to Switzerland together but left a few weeks apart. Newman cites Ramann, who has Liszt suddenly realizing his ensnarement with Marie and resisting going away but eventually giving in. Both Perényi and Newman disagree with the simple statement that Liszt did love Marie. Their behavior at the time supports this. Why would Liszt suggest they go away together if he felt "ensnared"? It seems unlikely that Liszt would continue to live with a woman abroad who had forced herself on him, especially for another nine years.

While in Geneva, Liszt and Marie had a blissful solitary life. They did not even receive letters from home, besides the ones from Liszt's mother. Here Liszt starts displaying what Newman considers his dependency on a strong woman to give purpose and structure to his life. This is to become a theme in Newman.

After a few happy months in Switzerland, Liszt became restless. Newman contests that Liszt had two sides to him. The side that loved solitude with Marie and concentration art, and the side that needed society, parties, and fame. He was now slipping into his lesser side, the one that needed company. He soon started meeting the elite of Geneva and socializing with them. Marie started to become uneasy. Newman cites Robert Bory, who claimed that Marie

dragged Liszt on to the social scene to show him off²³, but Newman contends that Marie did everything in her power to stay away from society.

Liszt soon received a letter from a student, Hermann Cohen, whom he called Puzzi, asking if he could come stay with him in Switzerland.²⁴ Liszt's students were very important to him, and throughout his life he would sacrifice for their sake again and again. Newman has it that Liszt went behind Marie's back and did not care if she wanted Puzzi there or not, which she did not. Perényi puts it that he did not ask her because he knew the answer would be no.

Liszt's love of sharing art with his students was not the only facet of his creative life that Marie did not understand. Perényi says that Marie always stated she was in love with Liszt's genius, but she acted and talked differently. His playing in Switzerland became tortuous to her. Perényi says that if you look over Marie's writings, it would be hard to find the fact that Liszt was even a composer. It could be due to her aristocratic upbringing, thinking no matter how talented a musician was, he or she did not have the same status as writers or artists. This would explain a lot about their relationship. She consistently requests of him to seek solitude and create "real art" but the truth is that she perhaps would not know true art even if he presented it to her. This had to have had an impact on their relationship. It has been shown that there were several barriers to their relationship, and some of them come from misunderstanding. This could perhaps be another misunderstanding.

Another barrier in Liszt and Marie's relationship, and another marking of Liszt's vanity, it his obsession over Thalberg. Newman finds it an unpleasant topic because Liszt acted in such an appalling way. An example is given in a letter to Marie: "you have never seen me so well

²³ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 56.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 57.

understood and so much applauded. The public is decidedly veering in our direction. Thalberg was stupefied with amazement. He said out loud, before several people, that he had never heard anything like it...Unless I deceive myself he must be feeling rather unhappy...He shuts himself up in his narrow solemnity. I prefer that it should be so, though he will have to pay for it, and devilishly."²⁵ This certainly makes Liszt look quite vindictive. March 31 of 1837, he and Thalberg finally played a concert together. Perényi states flatly that Liszt was better, Newman arguing that according to most, it was a draw.

In August 1837, Liszt and Marie moved to Italy. In Bellagio, they once again found the solitude that they had so loved in Switzerland. Marie says, "A bad piano, some books, the conversation of a serious woman are enough for him. He gives up all the pleasures of amour-propre, the excitement of the struggle, the amusements of social life, even the joy of...doing good; and he gives it all up without appearing to renounce anything."²⁶ Liszt writes to George that he is happy there with Marie. Cosima Liszt was born on December 24, 1837. Marie was unhappy because the pregnancy forced her into seclusion for a few weeks. They eventually moved to Milan, where Newman says that Liszt fell into his old habits; society, liquor, tobacco. She writes in her Journal in the Spring of 1838, "My heart and my mind are dry; it is a malady I brought with me on my entry into the world. Passion elevated me for a moment, but I feel that the principle of life is lacking in me. I feel that I am a shackle on him; I do not benefit him; I cast sadness and discouragement on his days."²⁷ This quote may give some insight into her own personality and weaknesses. Apparently she has had this "dryness" all her life, which Liszt was

²⁵ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 66.

²⁶ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

able to curb for just a while but it comes back. This kind of emotional lethargy seems to affect her all throughout the affair. She also seems self conscious over the pain she causes Liszt.

In Venice, in April 1838, a low point was struck in their relationship. Liszt came to Marie and stated he wanted to go to Vienna to play a benefit concert for the victims of the recent Danube floods. Newman maintains that it was sudden, Perényi contends that he had had the idea for some time. Regardless, Marie was not happy. He said he would only be gone for eight days but ended up staying abroad for two months. When he was leaving she asked how he could leave her while she was ill. Perényi protests that she wasn't too ill to go sightseeing with a Venetian admirer.

Newman once again discusses the idea of Liszt's dual personality. While in Vienna, Liszt wrote to Marie of all of his triumphs. She writes back to him, "This world about which it now seemed a necessity that I should hear, these aristocratic names, these princes, these emperors- it was all like a false note in harmony. We had gone into solitude; now he had returned in triumph once more into the world he had so despised and disdained, and from which he had wanted to fly with me."²⁸ Perényi admits that he was not even trying to be humble. His letters betray his vanity.

He wants her to come join him in Vienna. Perényi says Marie never says a word about this letter. Marie invented stories about mail coming from Liszt on other women's stationary. Marie claims to be close to death and can not come to Vienna. Newman says he leaves for three reasons: money, fame and love affairs. Both Newman and Perényi give the same quote from Marie: "Franz had abandoned me for such petty motives. Not for a great work, or an act

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of devotion, or out of patriotism, it was for salon successes, gossip-column glory, invitations from princesses..."²⁹ There was some truth to this. As shown by the letters quoted by Newman, he was more vain than Perényi would have us believe. He was writing back to Marie tirelessly about his "good business" of making money. Despite this being a tour for charity, he brought back quite a sum. His "gossip-column glory" is shown by the endless letters he sent to Marie full of newspaper clippings about his victories in the social scene. What is most certain is the invitations of princesses. It was no secret that Liszt was having affairs and Marie knew about them. but Perényi says that Liszt had not abandoned her, he had given up an extension of the tour because it would keep him from her for too long. When he comes home, his talk of Vienna makes her depressed. He was falling into Newman's lesser half. He hints to Marie that she should go back to Paris and take Theodoro as a lover. Her response is, "let us try again."³⁰ Perényi offers a much different scenario. Marie calls him a "Don Juan parvenu."³¹ He never forgave her for saying this.

They next moved to Genoa, where the weather was more tolerable. Again, Liszt was spending lavishly on expensive things. Perényi insists that this is because he is comfortable in the fact that he can make more money quickly with a tour, Newman says it is because of his lesser half. Plans to go to Germany to tour were brought up. He asked Marie to go back to her family in Paris. Newman quotes Marie in reply, "My family? Have I one now? Would my daughter recognize me? My only talent was my love for you, the desire to please you. A tear coursed down his cheek. He reproached me with being lacking in precision; he pretended not to

²⁹ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78

³¹ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 187.

understand what it was I wanted, what it was that was making me suffer, the points upon which we felt differently. In six months he had forgotten much and traveled far!"³² The German tour was canceled and Daniel was born the following May.

When Marie went back to Paris, it was "mandatory that she hang on to her one remaining female friendship there."³³ This of course was George Sand. Marie wrote to her several times, but could not help herself from being a bit sharp with George. She would boast of her happy life with Liszt and at the same time take shots at George for her various men. She said, "I think you'll end by finding all sorts of people amusing. If one could retire with the elect on a mountain-good, but since the mountain is a molehill and the elect are never two together . . .it's better to stick to the plain and amuse oneself with grotesque types."³⁴ George left these letters unanswered. She was upset with George over George's relationship with Chopin. The reason she gave was that she was upset that George did not talk to Liszt or Marie about it. Perényi supplies the suggestion that perhaps Marie was afraid that their affair would overshadow her and Liszt's. Marie kept correspondence with Carlotta Marliani, a mutual friend of George and Marie's, and would George talk poorly to her. Of course, Carlotta went to George with the letters and warned her that Marie was untrustworthy. She heard in the spring of 1839 that Chopin and George were going to Genoa, and she sent a letter to George suggesting they all meet there. When she did not receive a reply, she knew something was wrong. She wrote to George, "You will perhaps be astonished at my persistence in writing you, since your absolute silence of about eighteen months, the silence you seem to have imposed on Carlotta . . .and

³² Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 79.

³³ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 192.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

above all your non-response to my last letter, in which I begged you to come and spend the summer with us, say well enough that our relations have become inconvenient . . . I have searched my conscience and can find now shadow of guilt on my side . . . I sincerely desire an explanation worthy of you.”³⁵ This type of backhandedness is astonishing. It shows a facet of Marie’s personality that must have affected her relationship with Liszt. We’ve seen her faking illness before and manipulating Liszt with her cries of despair. Perhaps this was another barrier in their relationship. Just as Liszt had too personalities, so did Marie. She demanded Carlotta give back the letters about George, she told Marie that she had given them to George. Marie saw this as a betrayal.

George replied, “I don’t understand your appeal to our past. You know I threw myself into your . . . friendship with enthusiastic abandon. Infatuation is one of the things you laugh at in me, and not very charitably, at the moment when you are destroying what I had of it for you. You understand friendship differently . . . You bring to it not the least illusion, the least indulgence. It follows that you should also bring to it an irreproachable loyalty and judge people as severely to their faces as you do behind their backs. One gets used to that . . . one can learn from it . . . But you only have soft words tender caresses, even gushingly sympathetic tears for those you love . . . [until] you talk and above all, write about them.”³⁶ This was the ending of Marie and Sand’s relationship and unfortunately for Liszt and Sand as well. It is possible that Marie was partially happy about this breaking off of a relationship. This is shown by the letter Marie sent ten years later to George confessing that she had suspected an affair between

³⁵ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 194.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

George and Liszt.³⁷ After Marie and Liszt had their final rupture, he tried to extend the hand of friendship towards George once more, but she never accepted.

At this point, Newman declares about their relationship that, “It is manifest that the pair had arrived at the stage that is the most mournful of all in the lives of lovers, when they can maintain a tone of aspiration, of idealism, or merely of mutual toleration only so long as they are corresponding with each other but are not together in the flesh.”³⁸ For nine months of the year, he toured and she stayed in Paris.³⁹ In April 1840, they went together to England. They stayed in Richmond because they feared they would not be accepted in London, as they were unwed and living together. A fight broke out between them in June. He suggested that an English friend call on her, and she told him to say she was sick so she did not have to entertain him. She also declines going to the theater on Monday, saying that she would rather be alone. Liszt exploded at this and said “This is what you have to say to me! This is the end you have reached after six years of the most absolute devotion!”⁴⁰ Newman questions what he means by six years of devotion. If he is talking about himself, says Newman, he must have been “deluding himself”.⁴¹ If it was about Marie, it is not certain why Liszt would have been so angry that should be forced to socialize with people that only saw her as his mistress. This is another rift in their relationship, Liszt, once again, prizing society over spending time alone with Marie. It is interesting, though, that Marie should be so cognizant of the fact that people would see her as Liszt’s mistress. Apparently she had always been conscious of this, but only recently did it affect

³⁷ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 197.

³⁸ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 96.

³⁹ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*. 229.

⁴⁰ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

her so much that she did not want to be seen with him. This is a new barrier in their relationship and it is not one that could be overcome. As long as they were together, Marie would indeed be seen as Liszt's mistress.

Marie went back to Paris and Liszt went back to touring. Marie caught wind of an affair Liszt purportedly had with a woman named Bettina von Arnim, a woman who had known Goethe. She was in her sixties now but was still apparently very beautiful. Liszt was very interested in her on a platonic level, but the two never had an affair according to Perényi.⁴² Marie was furious about it. She took revenge the only way she could, by writing an attack on Bettina's writings under the name Daniel Stern. This probably caused Liszt some embarrassment. Marie's anger is not quite justified, as she soon started with her own affair. Perényi does not suggest who, and Newman, of course, never mentions that she had affairs as his defense of Marie would never allow this.

Marie could have been angry about the affairs for a different reason. "These women also gave him something that Marie did not and it wasn't only sex. The self-educated dame aux camélias was not stupid and Lola Montez was bright enough to take Lamennais's theories and brash enough to try to put them into practice . . . The musical and stage personalities with whom his name is linked were not imbeciles either: Camille Pleyel, in addition to being ravishingly pretty, was a first class pianist. Ungher-Sabatier, Charlotte Hagn, had the intelligence that goes with reaching the top of one's profession."⁴³ Marie's jealousy probably had more to it than just a sense of betrayal. She also probably felt that these women were supplying Liszt with

⁴² Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 231.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 232.

things she did not. They were all great women and Marie probably felt below them in terms of artistic merit and intelligence.

Marie at this time had affairs, as well. She approached these affairs with rationality. In her essay *Sur la liberté* she says: "In all civilized society, coquetry for women has become as profound a science as politics. In the idleness they are condemned to, they have learned to take advantage of masculine desires, to make men at least temporarily slaves, and all their finesse, intelligence, faculties of observation and calculation are applied to this unique goal: to inspire love without sharing it. Whence . . . a complicated art . . . calling on a hundred times more skill, perseverance, audacity, artifice, agility, deliberation and knowledge than would be needed to administer kingdom, discipline a military camp, or rule an assembly."⁴⁴ This is indeed the way she acted with men. She took on as a lover Emile de Giardin, the husband of Delphine, even though they were good friends, simply because he was the person who controlled her literary career. In 1840 he asked her, "The need to dominate, to tyrannize even, isn't that the driving force most inherent in your nature?"⁴⁵ He was right. She was proud of her collection of suitors, over which she had great power. She told him, "In these matters I rule."⁴⁶ When Sainte-Beuve tried to make love to her, his humble and submissive attitude was seen as comedic. The letter he wrote were "unbelievably ridiculous"⁴⁷ These were mostly all ploys to make Liszt jealous. He responded differently than she expected when he told her to be gentle with them.

These letters, written during the part of the year that they did not see each other, was a struggle between them. Perényi postulates that they only incidentally involved his infidelities.

⁴⁴ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Newman responds, of course, by saying that the infidelities caused the struggle. There were other causes for their struggle. Marie wrote to Liszt to be a “good child” or else become “swollen with your success.”⁴⁸ Newman’s theory that Liszt was too vain comes out again, as Liszt disregarded this advice and gave concerts and had the usual celebratory parties and once again they were “on the rocks”. When he went to London, the debate continued through the mail. Marie says, “Abandon that savage pride that rears itself between us like a mountain . . . It is my enemy in you, it is what makes you say, ‘I have gained ground,’ to which I answer softly, ‘Yes, in a graveyard.’” She ends the letter with, “Keep my love if you can. I am a little afraid that the trouble is you can no longer stand the truth or any restraint. Surrounded by Puzzis of various degrees, the language of the most absolute flattery is all you can listen to . . .”⁴⁹ This must be true to some degree, it comes up far too often in the literature to deny. Even though it is easy to disregard Newman on certain standpoints, he seems to be correct in this one. Liszt was vain and needed people around him who would flatter him. You can see this in his earlier letters from Vienna, with names of dignitaries who praise him throughout his letters. You can also see this in his decision to bring Puzzi from Paris to Switzerland, which he probably did not inform her of, because he was bringing Puzzi there to supply the admiration he missed being alone with Marie for so long.

Newman maintains that, in the period of 1840 – 1844, they still love each other a great deal. He says that Marie was the only woman with which Liszt was ever truly in love. All of his love affairs were just physical and meaningless. Marie loved him but made it known to him that she disapproved of some point of his conduct and nature. Newman argues that his comments

⁴⁸ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 234.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

on her later in life must be untrustworthy because the correspondences of the time refute them. Newman says, "Marie knew well that it was that was dividing them - the flaw in Liszt's soul that made him run after the glittering prizes of the world at the same time that he longed for seclusion from it, and by the chances presented by his wandering life, and by the adulation brought him by his pianism, for the infidelities that were a necessity of his strongly erotic nature. Again and again she asks him why they can not retire into comparative solitude together. He, for his part, cries out incessantly that she is the one object in life that is dear to him, that she is 'the most delicate, the most charming, the most adorable thing in the world,' that he 'will end by living exclusively for her and for music,' that a life for them, apart from each other, is finally inconceivable."⁵⁰ This does not sound like a Liszt ready for a rupture. Clearly the two still love each other a great deal, as Newman contested. It is curious that Newman said in the above context that Liszt 's infidelities were a "necessity of his strongly erotic nature." He seems to be excusing Liszt, saying that it is not his fault. This is a very different position from his view of the ending of the relationship, which he says is the fault of Liszt's many infidelities.

Newman says that according to Ramann and the Princess Carolyne, the ending of the relationship occurred because Marie was not suitable to be a soul-mate of such a genius. He disagrees, arguing it was simply because Marie had grown tired being associated with Liszt and his many infidelities. In 1844, which was to be their last year together, he had an affair with Marie Duplessis, which was great fodder for gossip of the time. Marie said that she "had no objection to being his mistress, but would not be one of his mistresses."⁵¹ Liszt could not deny his affairs, they were too well-reported in Paris. Instead he says, "The distinction is charming

⁵⁰Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 98.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

and very just. But allow me to inform you that the alternative has never existed for you. My faults, my wrongdoings and my follies are my own, whatever superficial resemblance they may bear to those of others; and you also are mine, very much mine. Why talk about the other things?"⁵² This is not the best defense but at this point Liszt seems to concern himself less with defending himself.

Newman states that in his "better moments" he admitted that his affairs were estranging them. His only excuse now was that it was natural for women to throw themselves at him and to sleep with them was in his nature. He recognized in a letter from 1843 that the real beginning of the split happened in 1839 when he had left to play concerts in Vienna. He regrets that "the acclamations of the crowds, the intoxications and excesses of my life, and the banal and lying embraces of my mistresses which in Vienna, in Trieste everywhere, indeed, have re-sounded the pitiless funeral bells of that hour."⁵³ Newman's theory that Liszt's vanity caused all the trouble in their relationship seems to be true. But it is important to remember Perényi's version of Marie in all this. Her constant barrage of his ego seemed hardly to make the situation any better, and as for the affairs, they could not have been the only cause because Marie had affairs of her own. It would seem that the truth is that, like most relationships, this one fell apart due to failures on both sides.

In April 1844, she sends him a letter breaking it off.⁵⁴ When he responds, according to Newman, there is no rough argument on his side, no accusations of wrongdoing or insincerity, which conflicts with Ramann's version of the break up, where Liszt accused her of being the

⁵² Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 101.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 102.

reason for the break up. In truth, Liszt took the punishment as just. Liszt wrote to her a year later saying he could not “condemn his past.” “That past, Madame, was filled every day with a serious and passionate devotion to you; the escapades and the faults that may be found in it never lasted and were not in any way serious. The hand you promise to reach out to me some day, when all is forgotten, I shall be very happy to grasp and to hold tightly for ever; but I cannot, and never will be able to, persuade myself that it ought to have been withdrawn from me for a single instant.”⁵⁵ Newman argues that “This is his sole charge against her at the time—the egoistic one that, much as she had endured from him, she ought to have endured more.”⁵⁶ This is too drastic a tone. The truth is that Liszt was still in love with Marie and thought it was unjust that she should end things due to his affairs, as she had affairs of her own.

Liszt arrived in Paris in April 1844 and perhaps did not know the storm that was approaching. On the eighth, he requested to have dinner with her alone. Her lover of the time, Georg Herwegh, was told to come between four and six on that same day. No one knows what happened at this meeting but on the eleventh he wrote her a note, “I am mortally sad and profoundly afflicted. I count one by one the sorrows I have put in your heart and nothing and nobody can save me from myself. I want neither to speak to you nor to see you, even less than write to you . . .”⁵⁷ Clearly the break had occurred. In this next note to her he says, “I don’t understand your uncertainty. You desired to see me no more. I obeyed.” Finally there is a note that says “Why threats from you to me?”⁵⁸ Perényi thinks that this shows that Marie was trying

⁵⁵ Newman, *The Man Liszt*, 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 242.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

to prolong the good bye. Third parties were brought into it, she asked him to talk to Lamartine. Ronchaud was also mentioned and there was always the shadow of Herwegh.

Marie's excuse for the "ruckus"⁵⁹ was the children they shared. She wrote to Herwegh, "I will fight like a lioness to get my children back."⁶⁰ It is never made clear whom she intends to fight. The children had never been a source of debate between her and Liszt. Liszt thought that this did not have to be a fight involving anyone else but them and could be solved quickly and without argument. He thought that the "education of the children would be a source of embarrassment to you [Marie]." Also, "if you take up the position of an enemy, it would be impossible for me to leave them in your hands." Liszt, however, agreed to let Marie take care of them. He said, "Persuaded that you better than anybody would know how to direct the education of my daughters, I can only be grateful for the desire you express to occupy yourself with it more than in the past . . . Allow me to hope that you will have fewer annoyances and also to pray that you will send me news of these children from time to time, their health, their studies, etc."⁶¹ Perényi figures that this is not what Marie intended. She wanted big dramatic scenes and more meetings about the children. Liszt also sent a note saying, "I have told no lies to my intimate friends. I have said flatly that you disapprove and condemn my orgiastic life, that you have therefore told me that it would be better not to meet again, and therefore that we will see each other no more."⁶² She very quickly realized that being right about the children had caused her to ground in the debate with Liszt.. A few days after receiving this note, she changed her strategy and wanted to remind Liszt of his duty to her and the children and try to

⁵⁹ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 242.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 243.

⁶² Ibid.

force a reconciliation. She used Herwegh for this. Herwegh approached Liszt and wrote to Marie: "Liszt remains entirely true to his nature. Just as it is impossible for him to shake himself free of the present and of the thousand good-for-nothings who fasten themselves on him . . .so he will never free himself of his past . . . He will never have the courage to break with anything. In order to assimilate everything . . . a man must be a *character*. Liszt will never be that as long as he persists in his virtuosity: this . . .has made him a veritable 'man-eater' who will never find enough people to devour . . .if it were possible to steady him by a violent shock of some sort and decide him to go more deeply into things instead of skating on the surface, we could save him. But that is perhaps more your affair than mine."⁶³ One can hear echoes of Newman in this statement. According to Herwegh, Liszt is the victim of his own vanity.⁶⁴ She answered this letter, "How can you think that what I attempted in vain for five years of absolute devotion and ardent passion, I could accomplish now that I can only speak in the name of duty and maternal tenderness?"⁶⁵ Marie is painting herself as the victim, again appealing to her maternal nature. Marie never had any interest in her children before this point, but suddenly she is their sorrowful mother, desperate to do right by them.

Liszt left Paris under the impression that Blandine would be put in a girl's school and the other two would stay with his mother. Massart, a violinist friend of Liszt's, was in charge of their finances. This infuriated Marie. She would not in the least cooperate with Massart. At one point she said that she would take Blandine to live with her. She did not want to take Cosima, but she threatened to take her all the same. Liszt tells Massart to refuse money to Marie and

⁶³ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 243.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

says that if Marie did not start cooperating that he would take the three children to Germany with him. Marie hired a lawyer who gave her bad advice. The lawyer said that it would be impossible for Liszt to legitimize the children and if he could not he would not have any legal backing. This is untrue, as the children were not citizens of France and could have been given Austrian citizenship, which would take away Marie's rights entirely.⁶⁶ Perényi contends that he did not want this to happen, he simply wanted to keep the children away from Marie. This makes sense, as she was at the time speaking ill of Liszt and he did not want his children growing up in this atmosphere. Liszt said in a letter, "A year ago, Madame, I could believe that the incredible view of me you have conjured up and put forth in numerous letters, would be a secret between us. I even concluded from your ardent devotion in the past that you would maintain with other people the same reserve I have imposed on myself in regard to you: now this illusion is no longer possible because I can not ignore your telling all comers the wildest and most abusive things about me . . . [Can] you really think it would suit me to have Blandine brought up by you so long as you keep us on a footing of armed warfare?"⁶⁷ This letter shows Liszt taken aback by her stinging words, as if he did not expect such vile things from her. He claims to have stopped himself from speaking ill of Marie. If this is true, then Marie truly is the one at fault in this situation. That is not to excuse Liszt, however. He seemed, in that letter, to just want the best for his children. But the truth is the children were horrible victims of Marie and Liszt's split. When Blandine went to her girls' school, Cosima missed her so desperately that they eventually sent her to the same school. Daniel was left all alone with his grandmother and despaired. Anna would regularly ask Liszt to write to Daniel but it does not seem that he did.

⁶⁶ Perényi, *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero*, 246.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Both Marie and Liszt missed the formative years of their lives. Liszt was rarely in France and after 1846 he was never there.

When one looks at the conflicts in the affair between Franz Liszt and Marie d'Agoult, one sees a confusing tapestry of blame that lasted many years. This is true of most relationships; normally it is not a single person who is to blame but both parties are at fault in some way. When reading the literature, it seems that Liszt and d'Agoult's affair was just one long battle up to the end. I would suggest that this is not the truth and that both parties loved each other greatly and the good times between them are left out because they do not seem as interesting to biographers.

The contrasting evidence supplied by Newman and Perényi brings up an interesting question; can a biographer offer a true account of a relationship like Liszt and Marie's? The answer is no. These biographers decided to take sides instead of entertaining the possibility that both Liszt and Marie were at fault at certain times. It is easy to take stories from both sources and believe that they are true. Liszt's vanity, argued by Newman, is put forth very plainly in his letters to Marie. Also, Marie's penchant for faking illness is shown by her time in Venice when she told Liszt in a letter that she was deathly ill but was healthy enough to go sightseeing with a prospective suitor.

The truth of the matter is that biographers bring biases to their biographies. This is true of all biographies. It is natural that a biographer would bring psychological biases to their work. With Newman, it was his desire to show Liszt as a real person, not as the saint of earlier legends. By doing this, he tore Liszt down. Anyone who has read other Liszt literature can see that he overcompensates and goes too far to bring Liszt down. Instead of showing him as a true

person, with faults and graces, he showed him as a cad. Perényi, on the other hand, wants to show Marie with all her faults and in doing so, makes Liszt look blameless and Marie look like a calculating, needy woman.

There is another problem that is beyond Newman and Perényi's ability to correct. This is the doctoring of sources years after they are written. The most obvious example is Lina Ramann's biography. She started with an already biased account, then had the Princess Wittgenstein supply information that made it even more biased. Newman, in his quest to defame the princess, does not talk about the material Liszt supplied to Ramann. Perényi also skips over this detail. Liszt had a copy of the Ramann biography with copious notes in the margins. He wanted to correct his past as badly as Ramann and the Princess. Marie was guilty of this as well. She doctored some of her letters to Liszt and her diaries when they were published. Most of the blame is on the people that owned her writings after her death, however. All in all, it is left up to the reader to sift through the sources and get as accurate a picture as possible. By recognizing Liszt for his many faults, and Marie for hers, the reader may get closer to the true picture.

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