



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS was born in 1802 at Villers-Cotterêts. His father, the illegitimate son of a marquis, was a general in the Revolutionary armies, but died when Dumas was only four. He was brought up in straitened circumstances and received very little education. He joined the household of the future king, Louis-Philippe, and began reading voraciously. Later he entered the *cénacle* of Charles Nodier and started writing. In 1829 the production of his play, *Henri III et sa cour*, heralded twenty years of successful playwriting. In 1839 he turned his attention to writing historical novels, often using collaborators such as Auguste Maquet to suggest plots or historical background. His most successful novels are *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which appeared during 1844–5, and *The Three Musketeers*, published in 1844. Other novels deal with the wars of religion and the Revolution. Dumas wrote many of these for the newspapers, often in daily instalments, marshalling his formidable energies to produce ever more in order to pay off his debts. In addition, he wrote travel books, children's stories and his *Mémoires* which describe most amusingly his early life, his entry into Parisian literary circles and the 1830 Revolution. He died in 1870.

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS (PÈRE)

The Count of Monte Cristo

Translated and with an Introduction and Notes by
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1

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Contents

[Chronology](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[A Note on the Text](#)

[The Count of Monte Cristo](#)

[Notes](#)

Chronology

- 1802** Alexandre Dumas is born at Villers-Cotterêts, the third child of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas. His father, himself the illegitimate son of a marquis and a slave girl of San Domingo, Marie-Cessette Dumas, had had a remarkable career as a general in the Republican, then in the Napoleonic Army.
- 1806** General Dumas dies. Alexandre and his mother, Elisabeth Labouret, are left virtually penniless.
- 1822** Dumas takes a post as a clerk, then in 1823 is granted a sinecure on the staff of the Duke of Orléans. He meets the actor Talma and starts to mix in artistic and literary circles, writing sketches for the popular theatre.
- 1824** Dumas' son, Alexandre, future author of *La Dame aux camélias*, is born as the result of an affair with a seamstress, Catherine Lebay.
- 1829** Dumas' historical drama, *Henri III et sa cour*, is produced at the Comédie-Française. It is an immediate success, marking Dumas out as a leading figure in the Romantic movement.
- 1830** Victor Hugo's drama *Hernani* becomes the focus of the struggle between the Romantics and the traditionalists in literature. In July, the Bourbon monarchy is overthrown and replaced by a new regime under the Orleanist King Louis-Philippe. Dumas actively supports the insurrection.
- 1831** Dumas' melodrama *Antony*, with its archetypal Romantic hero, triumphs at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin.
- 1832** Dumas makes a journey to Switzerland which will form the basis of his first travel book, published the following year.
- 1835** Dumas travels to Naples with Ida Ferrier (whom he will later marry), has a passionate affair in Naples with Caroline Ungher and falls in love with Italy and the Mediterranean.
- 1836** Triumph of Dumas' play *Kean*, based on the personality of the English actor whom Dumas had seen performing in Shakespeare in 1828.
- 1839** *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle*. Dumas' greatest success in the theatre.
- 1840** Dumas marries Ida Ferrier. He travels down the Rhine with Gérard de Nerval and they collaborate on the drama *Léo Burckart*. Nerval introduces Dumas to Auguste Maquet who will become his collaborator on many of his subsequent works.
- 1841** Spends a year in Florence.
- 1844** The year of Dumas' two greatest novels: *The Three Musketeers* starts to appear in serial form in March and the first episodes of *The Count of Monte Cristo* follow

in August. Dumas starts to build his Château de Monte-Cristo at St-Germain-en-Laye. He separates from Ida Ferrier.

- 1845** *Twenty Years After*, the first sequel to *The Three Musketeers*, appears at the beginning of the year. In February, Dumas wins a libel action against the author of a book accusing him of plagiarism. Publishes *La Reine Margot*.
- 1846** Dumas travels in Spain and North Africa. Publishes *La Dame de Monsoreau*, *Les Deux Diane* and *Joseph Balsamo*.
- 1847** Dumas' theatre, the Théâtre Historique, opens. It will show several adaptations of his novels, including *The Three Musketeers* and *La Reine Margot*. Serialization of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, the final episode of the *The Three Musketeers*.
- 1848** A revolution in February deposes Louis-Philippe and brings in the Second Republic. Dumas stands unsuccessfully for Parliament and supports Louis-Napoléon, nephew of Napoleon I, who becomes President of the Republic.
- 1849** Dumas publishes *The Queen's Necklace*.
- 1850** Dumas is declared bankrupt and has to sell the Château de Monte-Cristo and the Théâtre Historique. Publishes *The Black Tulip*.
- 1851** In December, Louis-Napoléon seizes power in a coup d'état, effectively abolishing the Republic. A year later, the Second Empire will be proclaimed. Victor Hugo goes into exile in Belgium where Dumas, partly to escape his creditors, joins him.
- 1852** Publishes his memoirs.
- 1853** In November, returns to Paris and founds a newspaper, *Le Mousquetaire*. Publishes *Ange Pitou*.
- 1858** Founds the literary weekly, *Le Monte-Cristo*. Sets out on a nine-month journey to Russia.
- 1860** Meets Garibaldi and actively supports the Italian struggle against Austria. Founds *L'Indépendente*, a periodical in Italian and French. Garibaldi is godfather to Dumas' daughter by Emilie Cordier.
- 1861–1870** Dumas continues to travel throughout Europe and to write, though his output is somewhat reduced. None the less in the final decade of his life, he published some six plays, thirteen novels, several shorter fictions, a historical work on the Bourbons in Naples and a good deal of journalism. He had a last love affair, with an American, Adah Menken, and indulged his lifelong passions for drama, travel and cookery.
- 1870** Alexandre Dumas dies on 5 December in Dieppe.

Introduction

‘Ah, a children’s novel,’ a Russian film-maker remarked when I told her that I was translating *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The comment was not intended to be disparaging, merely descriptive; and many people, in different cultures, would tend to agree with the categorization. Most will derive their idea of the novel, not from having read it, but because a kind of abstract of the storyline exists as part of the common culture: innocent man imprisoned, meets fellow-prisoner who directs him to a buried fortune, escapes and plots revenge. It has been adapted for film, television and the theatre, as well as being translated, abridged and imitated in print. It has supplied material for cartoons and comedy: the Irish comedian Dave Allen used to do a series of sketches around the theme of a young man (Dantès) breaking through a dungeon wall and encountering an old, bearded prisoner (Abbé Faria). Some events in the story are so well-known that they exist apart from the novel, like Robinson Crusoe’s discovery of Man Friday’s footprint, or incidents and characters from *Treasure Island* and *Frankenstein*. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of the great popular novels of all time and, like other popular novels, it has suffered the fate of being treated as not fully ‘adult’ fiction; like children’s fiction, it seems to inhabit a realm outside its creator’s biography and the period when it was written.

On the other hand, there are not many children’s books, even in our own time, that involve a female serial poisoner, two cases of infanticide, a stabbing and three suicides; an extended scene of torture and execution; drug-induced sexual fantasies, illegitimacy, transvestism and lesbianism; a display of the author’s classical learning, and his knowledge of modern European history, the customs and diet of the Italians, the effects of hashish, and so on; the length would, in any case, immediately disqualify it from inclusion in any modern series of books for children. Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that the author himself never thought of this as ‘a children’s novel’. Yet already in the earliest translations into English, with their omission or subtle alteration of material that might be considered indelicate by Victorian readers, and of some passages (for example, references to classical literature) that might be thought to hold up the story, one can see the start of a process of transformation, from ‘novel’ to ‘genre novel’ – which means, ultimately, almost any kind of genre novel: ‘adventure’, ‘romance’, ‘thriller’ and, if you like, ‘children’s novel’. This is

the usual fate of books that fail to meet the criteria for serious, 'literary' fiction.

Dumas himself must bear some of the responsibility. During his most productive decade, from 1841 to 1850, he wrote forty-one novels, twenty-three plays, seven historical works and half a dozen travel books. The nineteenth century was an age of mass production, which is precisely why Art felt the need to distinguish itself by its individuality and craftsmanship: 'Alexandre Dumas and Co., novel factory', was the contemptuous title given to one critical pamphlet, published at the same time as this novel, in 1845. Moreover it was known that Dumas wrote for money, at so much a line, and that he used at least one collaborator, Auguste Maquet, who would make chapter outlines for him and do research. There was a vast difference between this industrial labour and the monastic devotion to the cause of art that kept Gustave Flaubert at his desk for seven hours a day as he wrote and rewrote *Madame Bovary* (1857). In the history of the novel, Dumas and Flaubert stand near the head of divergent streams.

Alexandre Dumas was born on 24 July 1802; or, rather, since the Republican Calendar was still in force, on 5th Thermidor, Year x, in the little town of Villers-Cotterêts, near Soissons. His father was a general in the revolutionary armies, himself the illegitimate son of a marquis, Antoine-Alexandre Davy de la Paillerie, and a black slave from the island of Santo Domingo, Marie Dumas. In 1806, General Dumas died, leaving his family virtually without resources. The child had little education, enough however to allow him to read *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Arabian Nights*, and to cultivate his handwriting. In 1823, thanks to the second of these, he found employment in Paris, copying documents for Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orléans.

The 1820s were a marvellous time for an aspiring young writer in Paris. The two rival literary ideologies, of Classicism and Romanticism, were engaged in a mock-heroic combat for the soul of French literature. Classicism stood for universal themes, refinement, purity of language, clear division of literary genres and (despite its debt to the literature of the classical world) the peculiarly French ethos of the dramatist Racine. Romanticism meant energy, modern subject-matter, mixing genres and openness to foreign influences, particularly that of Shakespeare, the Romantic dramatist *par excellence*. It was in the theatre that the confrontation would chiefly take place.

Racine had based his plays on stories from classical Greece or on biblical history, both of which offered ‘universal’ events and characters. Shakespeare, like the German playwright Schiller, had dealt with subjects from modern history, which were national and particular rather than universal. In France, especially, the period that followed the great upheavals of the Revolution, the Empire and the Restoration was one which had an urgent need to make sense of the past. Shakespeare’s history plays – and, still more, the historical novels of Walter Scott – were models of how this could be done, drawing on the imagination as well as on scholarship. In 1828, Dumas, who had already tried his hand at a couple of plays and some short stories, submitted a historical drama to the Comédie Française entitled *Henri III et sa cour*. It was a typically Romantic work, ignoring the ‘unities’ of time, place and action, and written in prose, rather than the conventional medium of verse. It underwent the usual ritual of a public reading and, at its first night on 10 February 1829, scored a triumphant success and was warmly applauded by the author’s employer, Louis-Philippe. In the following year, Louis-Philippe became king, after a liberal revolution that was supposed to bring in a constitutional monarchy. Dumas welcomed it; so did the former ultra-monarchist, Victor Hugo.

During the next twenty years, Dumas was (with Hugo and Alfred de Vigny) the leading dramatist of the new movement – and, of the three, easily the most prolific. Perhaps too much so: overnight, after the first performance of *Christine* in 1830, while Dumas was asleep, Hugo and Vigny rewrote the play, reducing it to a more manageable size. Despite this, Dumas’ play *Antony* (1831) is an essential work of the Romantic period, as representative as Hugo’s *Hernani* or Vigny’s *Chatterton*, and more successful with its audiences than either. But the theatre is the very opposite of a monastic cell or an ivory tower. Collaboration is not only the norm, but inevitable, feedback from the public is instantaneous, work has to be produced to satisfy demand, and there is an immediate relationship between the author’s output and what comes in through the box office. In the theatre, Dumas learned the rudiments of literary production.

On one occasion, Charles-Jean Harel, director of the Odéon theatre, is supposed to have locked Dumas into a room, away from his mistress, for a week, until he had completed the manuscript of *Napoléon* (1831). The huge growth in the periodical press during the 1820s saw the invention of the *feuilleton* – not in the sense of a regular column by one writer, but of a

novel published in instalments; Dumas claimed to have invented the *roman feuilleton* with *La Comtesse de Salisbury*, published in *La Presse* in 1836. By the early 1840s he was writing more novels than plays, mainly (but by no means exclusively) historical fiction which, as I have already mentioned, was one of the most popular genres; it was also taken seriously as a means of exploring the past. He did, incidentally, write a book for children at this time: *Le Capitaine Pamphile* (1839).

Travel, to which he was addicted, helped to stave off boredom, providing the material for travel books, while translation filled in the remaining gaps in the working day. Like Balzac, he was a man of huge appetites: food, sex, work, sleep, pleasure, leisure, movement, excitement. In Italy, he found love, opera, colour and the Mediterranean: he visited Naples and Palermo in 1835, stayed a year in Florence in 1841 and returned in 1843 for a visit that included Sicily. The following year saw the publication of his first great historical novel, *Les Trois Mousquetaires/The Three Musketeers*, and on 28 August 1844 *Le Journal des Débats* began publication of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It was an immediate success, translated, adapted, pirated... in short, a popular novel.

It was also, very clearly, a work of its time. The plot was inspired by the true-life story of François Picaud, which Dumas found in Jacques Peuchet's *Police dévoilée: Mémoires historiques tirés des archives de Paris...* (1838), a collection of anecdotes from the Parisian police archives.¹

Briefly, the story is this: Picaud, a young man from the south of France, was imprisoned in 1807, having been denounced by a group of friends as an English spy, shortly after he had become engaged to a young woman called Marguerite. The denunciation was inspired by a café owner, Mathieu Loupian, who was jealous of Picaud's relationship with Marguerite.

Picaud was eventually moved to a form of house-arrest in Piedmont and shut up in the castle of Fenestrelle, where he acted as servant to a rich Italian cleric. When the man died, abandoned by his family, he left his money to Picaud, whom he had come to treat as a son, also informing him of the whereabouts of a hidden treasure. With the fall of Napoleon in 1814, Picaud, now called Joseph Lucher, was released; in the following year, after collecting the hidden treasure, he returned to Paris.

Here he discovered that Marguerite had married Loupian. Disguising himself, and offering a valuable diamond to Allut, the one man in the group

who had been unwilling to collaborate in the denunciation, he learned the identity of his enemies. He then set about eliminating them, stabbing the first with a dagger on which were printed the words: 'Number One', and burning down Loupian's café. He managed to find employment in Loupian's house, disguised as a servant called Prosper. However, while this was going on, Allut had fallen out with the merchant to whom he had resold the diamond, had murdered him and had been imprisoned. On coming out of jail, he started to blackmail Picaud. Picaud poisoned another of the conspirators, lured Loupian's son into crime and his daughter into prostitution, then finally stabbed Loupian himself. But he quarrelled with Allut over the blackmail payments and Allut killed him, confessing the whole story on his deathbed in 1828.

It is obvious both how directly Dumas was inspired by Peuchet's account of this extraordinary tale, and how radically he transformed it; incidentally, he used another chapter of Peuchet's book as the basis for the story of Mme de Villefort. One important step in the transformation from 'true crime' to fiction was to shift the opening of the tale from Paris to Marseille, giving the novel its Mediterranean dimension. Though most of the action still takes place in Paris (apart from a few excursions elsewhere, all the novel between [Chapters xxxix](#) and [civ](#) is set in Paris), the sea is always present as a figure for escape and freedom, while the novel uses the southern origins of its characters as a means to evoke that exotic world of the Mediterranean littoral that had so fascinated French writers and artists since the 1820s. The Mediterranean is the point where the cultures of Europe meet those of the Orient, and the region had been in the forefront of people's minds since the 1820s, because of the Greek struggle for independence and the French conquest of Algeria.

Both of these are directly present in the novel: one of its young characters is a soldier who has just returned from Algeria, another sets off to fight in the colony. As for Greece, which rebelled against the Turks in the 1820s, it inspired much fervour among European Romantics, most famously Lord Byron. The story of Ali (1741–1822), Pasha of Janina (Jannina) in Albania, plays a direct part in the novel and also takes us into the Oriental world that fascinated the French Romantics. 'The Orient,' Victor Hugo wrote in the preface to his early collection of poems, *Les Orientales* (1829), 'both as an image and as an idea, has become a sort of general preoccupation for people's minds as much as for their imaginations, to which the author has

perhaps unwittingly succumbed. As if of their own accord, Oriental colours have come to stamp their mark on all his thoughts and reveries...’ – as they also marked the paintings of Ingres and Delacroix. When we meet Haydée in [Chapter XLIX](#), she is lying on a heap of cushions, wearing her native Albanian costume, smoking a hookah and framed in a doorway, ‘like a charming painting’.

Italy was another Mediterranean land that held a powerful appeal for the Romantics, and in particular for Dumas. All the components of this appeal are in the novel: the classical world (the night visit to the Colosseum), the excitement of travel ([Chapter XXXIII](#), ‘Roman Bandits’), the cruel justice of the Papal states ([Chapter XXXV](#), ‘La Mazzolata’), colourful spectacle ([Chapter XXXVI](#), ‘The Carnival in Rome’), the Christian past ([Chapter XXXVII](#), ‘The Catacombs of Saint Sebastian’). The story of Luigi Vampa could have come directly from one of Stendhal’s *Italian Chronicles*, the description of the Colosseum at night from one of Byron’s or Shelley’s letters. There is also a good deal of wit – and the fruit of personal experience – in Dumas’ portrayal of the modern Romans and the day-by-day experience of the Grand Tour. Like all the most skilled popular writers, he offers his readers a mixture of the unfamiliar and the expected: references to places, people and events that will conjure up a whole complex of images and ideas – we have here the notion of Italy as it was perceived in France in the 1840s, through literature and art – combined with those intimate touches that allow readers to experience the sensations of being there. Reading Dumas, we know how it felt to be swept up in the crowd at the Carnival, to travel in a carriage through the Roman streets, to stay in a *pensione*. We can easily recognize the proud bandit, the bustling hotelier, the alluring woman in the Carnival crowd.

All these are described with as much economy as possible in order to avoid holding up the narrative. This is one reason why the popular novel tends to reinforce rather than to challenge prejudices – although, in one case, Dumas’ novel reversed a prejudice, namely that Marseille was, in the words of Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in France* (1847), ‘a busy and flourishing city... [but one that] has few fine public buildings or sights for strangers’. *The Count of Monte Cristo*, on the contrary, with its intimate topography of the area around the old port and its dramatization of Marseille as the focus of mercantile activity, the meeting-place of Mediterranean cultures and the gateway to the Arab Maghreb, is a good

deal more flattering than Murray's *Handbook*. Dumas was allegedly thanked by a Marseillais cab-driver for promoting the city.

Apart from this novel depiction of France's major sea-port, however, Dumas offers his readers a Rome, and an Orient, that are very much what they would expect: the first colourful, tuneful, proud and cruel, the second decadent and opulent. But he adds those little details that compel belief in what he is describing: the precise information about Carnival etiquette, the street-by-street itinerary of a drive round the walls of Rome, the horrifying description of a Roman execution, sketches of character or scenery that he has culled from his own memories of staying at Signor Pastrini's hotel when he visited Rome in 1835. His passages on sailing ships spare us none of the technicalities of sails and masts; his descriptions of the effects of opium convince us that he had experienced them. And, in much the same way, he adds touches of erudition: a quotation from Horace, a reference to *Hamlet* – all of which are meant to reassure us that we are in reliable hands. At times he even allows himself the luxury of a longer purple passage (perhaps a sunset over the Mediterranean) to show that he can do that, too.

All this helps to justify his claim that he has transformed Peuchet's material into something infinitely more valuable. Peuchet's account of the Picaud case, he wrote, was 'simply ridiculous... [but] inside this oyster, there was a pearl. A rough, shapeless pearl, of no value, waiting for its jeweller.' And, of course, the essential transformation that the jeweller makes to Peuchet's story lies in the character of the Count.

To begin with, we have Edmond Dantès, a man who could well be first cousin to the shoemaker, François Picaud. Betrayed by a jealous rival and an ambitious colleague, sent to the fortress prison of If by a magistrate who cannot afford to let the facts come out, Dantès goes through a kind of burial and resurrection. Educated by Abbé Faria and possessor of a limitless fortune, he can re-emerge into the world, not as the cobbler Picaud, content to stab or poison those responsible for his misfortune, but as an instrument of divine justice. Dumas' first, vital departure from Peuchet is to make Monte Cristo only indirectly the avenger: his 'victims' are all, in reality, destroyed by their own past misdeeds which Monte Cristo uncovers.

As the man who brings the truth to light and uses the discovery to punish the wrongdoer, Monte Cristo is the forerunner of the detective, that central figure in modern popular fiction. In fact, there is more than one reference in the novel to deductive methods that resemble those pioneered by Edgar

Allan Poe ('A Manuscript Found in a Bottle', 'The Gold Bug', 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue') – for example, in the way in which Abbé Faria deciphers the will showing where the treasure was hidden, Dantès' own analysis of where exactly it is concealed on the island and, earlier, Faria's explanation of Dantès' imprisonment. Note that, like the intellectual exercises of Monte Cristo's opium-taking successor later in the century, Sherlock Holmes,² these deductions at first amaze those who have not been able to follow the logic behind them or who do not have the expertise to know, for example, when something has been written with the left hand by a right-handed person. But, of course, Faria is not really a Holmesian detective: the stereotype in Dumas' mind is that of the eighteenth-century *philosophe*, a believer in the power of reason and a student of human nature. What Faria lacks (ironically, since everyone around thinks him mad, insanely obsessed with his fictitious treasure) is the Holmesian neuroses: the brooding violin and the opium stupor. These come from a different fictional archetype.

So does Monte Cristo, even though he is not averse at times to applying Faria's deductive logic (and shares Holmes's talent for disguise). Having emerged in 1829 from his entombment, found his treasure, discovered the fate of his father and Mercédès, and repaid his debt to Morrel, Dantès then disappears for another nine years, about which the reader is told virtually nothing. This second period of latency is not strictly a remaking but an effacement: the character who re-emerges in the novel as the Count of Monte Cristo is shrouded in mystery; we only assume, at first, that he is identical to Edmond Dantès on the slender evidence of their using the same pseudonym: 'Sinbad the Sailor'. He is a dark, brooding figure, pale-faced, with an aversion to food and apparently devoid of some human feelings: he takes an evil delight in terrifying his young friends, Albert and Franz, with the spectacle of an execution. He is also, as they learn later, on good terms with the bandit, Luigi Vampa.

The appearance of this deathly-white apparition in a box at the Roman opera immediately evokes two other personalities who played a major role in popular mythology in France in the Romantic era. The first is Lord Byron, a real-life character who very early was confused with his fictional creations, Childe Harold, Manfred and Don Juan – all the more so in France, where the poetry might be known only in translation. The image was that of a young but world-weary hero, tormented by nameless despairs.

The second figure was that of the vampire, associated with the first through the story *Lord Ruthwen, or The Vampire*, which was attributed to Byron (though in fact written by his companion, Polidori). This was not by any means the only vampire to be found in France at the time: the theatre, notably during the 1820s, was haunted by the Undead: English vampires, comic vampires, female vampires... The nature of the vampire was perhaps not so precisely codified as it was to be later, especially by Bram Stoker in that tale of another mysterious count: garlic, stakes, crosses, Transylvania, the vampire's native soil in the coffin which he keeps in the basement, these are not yet firmly established in the mythology. But the figure is there, and elements of the legend are specifically ascribed to the Byronic figure of Monte Cristo.

What I would like to suggest is that Dumas' novel stands at a crucial point in the development of modern popular fiction, drawing into the genre elements from Romantic literature, popular theatre, history and actuality, and wrapping them up in a narrative carefully enough constructed and dramatic enough to hold the attention of a growing reading public with a great appetite for fiction. They would satisfy it not only with books, but also with the newspaper serials which had brought fame and fortune to Dumas' precursor in the genre, Eugène Sue.

Monte Cristo owes its existence directly to Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842–3): it was precisely the success of Sue's tales that made Dumas' publishers demand a novel, rather than the historical guide to Paris that they had originally commissioned. Sue's appeal to the public was the ability to suggest the existence of a sinister underworld of crime and intrigue behind the façade of a Paris that was familiar to most of his readers. The growth of the nineteenth-century metropolis led to a whole literature of the urban life, later exploited on film, in which the city is no longer seen as a place of civilized, 'urbane' living and safety from attack, but as a menacing sub-world, in which human beings prey on one another or suffer fearful bouts of loneliness, alienation and ennui. A machine devised to supply every need of civilized humanity in one place has become a monster enclosing every form of vice and depravity. Only in England did murder continue to take place in country houses.

As noted earlier, Paris is the setting for the greater part of the book, but the episodes in Marseille and Rome enrich it enormously. We do have, at the very centre, a very Parisian murder story, joined to a rather trite Parisian

romance, and Dumas locates every event precisely on the city map, so that all the addresses are real; but the overall impression left by the novel is of something far larger in scope than a tale of Parisian wrongdoing and revenge. The episodes in Marseille and Rome may have been added after the book was begun – it was Dumas' collaborator, Maquet, who suggested actually recounting Dantès' arrest and imprisonment, instead of starting the novel in Rome and then transferring the action rapidly to Paris; yet the first section proves absolutely crucial. Where the count, in himself, descends at times to the level of a melodramatic stage avenger, Dantès is a compelling character, and it is the figure of Edmond Dantès (whom we feel obscurely present in his later incarnation) which gives the latter depth and weight.

The re-emergence of the other characters after the latency period of Dantès' imprisonment is more of a problem. Caderousse is essentially unchanged, Danglars more or less unrecognizable. Fernand offers the least plausible transformation of all, from the brave and honest Spaniard with a sharp sense of honour, whom we meet in the early chapters, to the Parisian aristocrat whose life seems to have been dedicated to a series of betrayals. Fernand/Morcerf seems to confirm a criticism of Dumas and of popular novels in general, namely that they tend to sacrifice character to plot.

In some respects, though, in Dumas' novel the reverse is true: Dumas' novel is dictated by character. But it is character viewed more as an imaginative construct than as a psychological novelist would conceive it. The count himself is a poetic character, a creature of the imagination who draws on elements from myth as much as from everyday psychological observation. And, while Madame de Villefort, Valentine, Morrel and some others in Dumas' huge cast may be 'flat' characters, performing a largely functional role in the development of the story, there are several secondary figures to whom this does not apply, notably Eugénie Danglars and Albert de Morcerf. In many ways, Eugénie is Valentine's twin. Both women are heiresses to large fortunes, both are presented with the alternatives of subjecting themselves to their father's will and marrying men whom they do not love or being confined to a convent. But where Valentine is willing to submit, Eugénie is not. Her lesbianism may be a trait of personality, but it is also an expression of her desire for independence.

There is far more to *The Count of Monte Cristo* than merely a tale of adventure and revenge. None the less, it is a book that many people first encounter and enjoy during their teens. Not long after Dumas' death, Victor

Hugo wrote a letter to his friend's son, Alexandre Dumas *fils*, in which he praised Dumas as a writer of universal appeal and added 'He creates a thirst for reading.' After more than 150 years, *The Count of Monte Cristo* remains one of the most popular and widely read novels in world literature; its longevity singles it out as almost unique among 'popular' novels. For many of its readers, despite its length, it seems all too short; we want to spend more time with the count and the other characters in the book, more time in its bustling world of drama and passion. Creating that thirst for more is among Dumas' great contributions to literature.

Notes

- [1.](#) Peuchet's text is reprinted in the edition of the novel by Claude Schopp (Robert Laffont, Paris, 1993).
- [2.](#) The link with Conan Doyle is actually strengthened by the more obvious similarities in the field of historical fiction (for example, between Doyle's *The White Company* and Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*). Conan Doyle may have consciously followed Dumas in his historical novels and unconsciously in creating Holmes.

Further Reading

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Stowe, Richard, *Dumas*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976.