



ALEXANDRE DUMAS

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS was born at Villers-Cotterêts in 1802, the son of an innkeeper's daughter and of one of Napoleon's most remarkable generals. He moved to Paris in 1823 to make his fortune in the theatre. By the time he was 28 he was one of the leading literary figures of his day, a star of the Romantic Revolution, and known for his many mistresses and taste for high living. He threw himself recklessly into the July Revolution of 1830, which he regarded as a great adventure. Quickly wearying of politics, he returned to the theatre and then moved on to fiction. By the early 1840s he was producing vast historical novels at a stupendous rate and in prodigious quantities for the cheap newspapers which paid enormous sums of money to authors who could please the public. A master story-teller, he became the best-known Frenchman of his age. He earned several fortunes which he gave away, or spent on women and travel, or wasted on grandiose follies like the 'Château de Monte Cristo', which he built to symbolize his success. In 1848 he stood unsuccessfully in the elections for the new Assembly. By 1850 his creditors began to catch up with him and, partly to escape them and partly to find new material for his novels, plays, and travel books, he lived abroad for long periods, travelling through Russia, where his fame had preceded him, and Italy, where he ran guns in support of Garibaldi's libertarian cause. Without guile and without enemies, the 'great' Dumas was a man of endless fascination. He died of a stroke at Puys, near Dieppe, in 1870.

DAVID COWARD is Professor of Modern French Literature at the University of Leeds and the author of studies of Marivaux, Marguerite Duras, Marcel Pagnol, and Restif de la Bretonne. For *The World's Classics*, he has edited six of Dumas's novels (including the final instalment of the Musketeer saga, *The Man in the Iron Mask*) and translated Dumas fils's *Lady of the Camelias*, two selections of Maupassant short stories, and Sade's *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales*. He reviews regularly for the *Times Literary Supplement*. A new edition of Dumas's *La Reine Margot* is forthcoming.

Alexandre Dumas (père) in World's Classics

The Black Tulip

The Count of Monte Cristo

Louise de la Vallière

The Man in the Iron Mask

The Three Musketeers

Twenty Years After

The Vicomte de Bragelonne

Forthcoming:

La Reine Margot

INTRODUCTION

THE Romantic Age in France was a period of extravagance and excess when feelings replaced thought and heroes died young. But it was also an Age of Money. After 1789, France had run through successive regimes of different political hues, from the rabid republicanism of the *sans culottes* to Napoleonic imperialism and, after 1815, the entrenched conservatism of the newly restored monarchy. The Revolution of July 1830 carried the hopes of a new generation eager to see the establishment of the rule of liberal values. In the event, it did not, as is the way with Revolutions, devour its children. Instead, it encouraged them to grow rich. The cautious reign of Louis-Philippe offered little to idealists. It refused to extend the suffrage, did nothing to improve the life of the poor, and, as J. S. Mill remarked, operated 'almost exclusively through the meaner and more selfish impulses of mankind'.

For France now at last embarked upon its long delayed industrial revolution. Manufacturers began to be a power in the land. Railways put out tentacles everywhere. Lawyers and money-men became the new élite. Books, hitherto a privilege of the leisured classes, became a product and were now put within the reach of shallower pockets, not in the cause of enlightenment, but of profit. The artisanal publishing trade of the eighteenth century had been transformed by better inks, improved papers, and mechanized presses. Small and medium-sized publishing houses learned new methods and by the 1860s publishing would represent 10 per cent of France's industrial output. Thus the phenomenal abbé Migne, who cornered the market for sacred texts, was in 1842 employing 300 typesetters, printers, bookbinders, and clerks, a work-force exceeded only by the larger ironmasters and textile barons. But the competition for the hearts, minds, and money of the French was nowhere keener than in the fledgling newspaper industry.

The July Monarchy relaxed the rules controlling the press, which had contributed significantly to bringing down the previous regime. Anyone who could afford to put up a modest surety

could now start a newspaper. The result was an explosion of newsprint. There were satirical and literary reviews, magazines for women, children, socialists, and catholics, and dailies which carried news and comment. The newspaper columnist was born: Jules Janin and Sainte-Beuve emerged as arbiters of literary taste and Mme de Girardin, author of popular novels, invented the gossip column with her weekly contributions to *La Presse*, founded by her husband, Émile, in 1836. Girardin was one of the new breed of press lords. He halved his cover price by carrying advertisements. Armand Dutacq, founder of *Le Siècle*, responded immediately, and their more conservative colleagues had no option but to follow. When it was launched in 1829, annual subscription rates for the highly respected intellectual *Revue des Deux Mondes* were fixed at 80 francs: it was read by few manual workers, who were paid an average of 3 francs a day. In 1835 there were about 70,000 subscribers to periodicals published in Paris. In 1836, after the opening salvos of the press war, 200,000 Parisians were subscribing to a daily newspaper and the figure continued to rise. *Le Siècle*, aimed at manual workers and the lower middle classes, quickly got into its stride with an unprecedented circulation of 36,000 copies. The battle for readers, who meant economic survival, was joined.

Newspapers may have followed different editorial policies and catered for different audiences, but on one thing they agreed: running a novel in episodes could mean the difference between success and failure. The *roman feuilleton* became an indispensable factor in the expansion of the cheap press. So strong was the belief that fiction sold papers that until the end of the century nearly all novels were first published in serial parts. Girardin, Dutacq, and Dr Varon (who acquired *Le Constitutionnel* in 1844) now commissioned writers to provide gripping copy to tight deadlines. Stories which proved popular were extended indefinitely; those which did not were terminated abruptly. Balzac and George Sand failed to demonstrate the popular touch which, however, was possessed in abundance by Frédéric Soulié and Eugène Sue, who specialized in vast, sensational novels of low life. Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (*Le Journal des Débats*, June 1842–October 1843) set new cliff-hanging standards and *Le Juif errant* (1844–5) had an immediate impact on the circulation of

Le Constitutionnel in which it appeared: the number of subscribers rose from 3,600 to 24,000 almost overnight. Serialized fiction, condemned by Sainte-Beuve as 'industrial literature', acquired a vast readership which in 1847 the historian Michelet estimated at 1.5 million. To newspaper editors, *feuilletonistes* had become indispensable and they were prepared to pay them huge fees. The situation was made for Alexandre Dumas, who was to overtake even Sue and become the 'King of Romance'.

Born with no social advantages in 1802 at Villers-Cotterêts, he had taken Paris by storm in 1829 with a play which catapulted him into the front ranks of the young Romantics. But this first success had not been bought easily, nor was it easy to sustain. His mother was an innkeeper's daughter. His father was the illegitimate son of a minor French noble, the Marquis Davy de la Pailleterie, who had emigrated to Saint-Domingo (Haiti) in the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1762 a son, Thomas-Alexandre, was born of his liaison with Marie-Cessette Dumas, a slave. After the Marquis returned to France in 1780, Thomas-Alexandre took his mother's name, enlisted, and during the Revolution rose rapidly through the ranks where, for his impetuous bravura, enormous physical strength, and the colour of his skin, he was known as 'the Black Devil', an inspiring cavalry commander but a general of erratic judgement. He took part in the Egyptian campaign in 1798 and proved to be Napoleon's most uninhibited critic. Though Bonaparte once threatened to stand him in front of a firing squad, General Dumas was tolerated for his qualities of military leadership. But when he applied for sick leave at the end of 1798, it was immediately granted. The captain of his ship, unaware that Nelson's friend, King Ferdinand, was now at war with France, ill-advisedly put into southern Italy and General Dumas was detained in a pestilential prison, returning to France, broken in health, in 1801. He died in 1806, when Alexandre was only 4 but already old enough to register the tales his father told. Indeed, the General's career could have been a novel written by his son. His headstrong courage and outspoken individualism belong to d'Artagnan and his giant strength to Porthos (who Dumas said was 'perhaps the best' of the Musketeers), while the relationship between Athos and Raoul has seemed to some critics to reflect both Dumas's

love for his lost father and his paternal affection for his own son, the author of *The Lady of the Camellias*. In the same way, the triumph of the Count of Monte Cristo, one of the most famous examples of the Romantic fascination with prisons, may be seen as retribution for the Italian privations of the father he had known only briefly.

The General bequeathed him the swarthy skin and tight curls which were later to prove a boon to cartoonists, but little else. His mother had no money and when Dumas was later to seek patrons, his father's former colleagues, with their feet comfortably under the restored Bourbon table, were not anxious to be reminded of their Napoleonic past. Dumas received an education of sorts, was put to work in a lawyer's office at 14 but quickly decided that he would be a writer. By the time he was 16, he was writing plays with a friend. In 1823 he moved permanently to Paris where he was employed as a copyist by the Duc d'Orléans. In 1825, already a father (Alexandre *fils* was born in 1824), he staged a play, written in collaboration with two other young hopefuls, which went unremarked. The following year he published, at his own expense, a volume of short stories which sold only four copies. But he managed to get his poems into respectable periodicals and slowly gained a foothold in literary circles. In 1829 *Henri III and his Court*, a rousing melodrama which not only broke all the accepted dramatic rules but was highly critical of the prevailing regime, made his name famous. At 27, Dumas was one of the acknowledged leaders of the Romantic movement in literature and, in his own terms, a General.

Romanticism, said Victor Hugo, meant 'liberalism in literature'. But before literature could become liberal, France had to be made free of the stranglehold of the reactionary right. When unrest turned into revolution in July 1830, Dumas put down his pen and picked up a gun, though he never fired it in anger. He toured the streets, stood on a barricade or two, and rushed off to Soissons where, much to the surprise of the bemused and most co-operative garrison commander, he captured a gunpowder depot single-handed. Fresh from this triumph, which he was to describe with self-disparaging irony in his *Memoirs*, he persuaded General La Fayette, commander of the insurgents, to send him on a mission to the Vendée, where Bourbon loyalties

were strongest, to attract recruits to the National Guard which would serve the new Orleanist regime. The Vendéens surrendered to his charm but not to his cause and Dumas soon returned to Paris, laden less with political glory than with vivid memories of La Rochelle, Tours, and Blois which he would later use as settings for tales of the Musketeers.

The July Revolution proved to be as grave a disappointment to Dumas as it was to progressive opinion generally. The new government, he said, was arbitrary in its actions and no friend to freedom, and it was staffed by hangers-on who put preferment above justice. But if Dumas's political opinions were sincere, his political indignations were short-lived. Besides, his extravagant lifestyle had to be financed, and writing was his only resource. *Henri III* was followed by a stream of explosive melodramas with plots drawn from historical sources and contemporary manners. In the preface to *Napoleon*, he stated his creed. 'I do not recognize any literary system; I belong to no school; I march under no banner. To entertain and intrigue are the only rules, which I do not say I succeed in observing, but which I acknowledge.' Fortunately, his notion of what 'entertained and intrigued' coincided exactly with that of his audiences who thrilled to inflamed passions, poetic retribution, heroic self-sacrifice, and gore. These, Dumas furnished in generous measure. He was quite aware that in terms of poetry and subtlety his plays were inferior to those of Hugo, whom he greatly admired. But he also knew that his crudeness was his strength. He had a greater feel for theatre which he rooted in the principle of brutal conflicts between strong characters in strong situations. To the dissection of motive and feeling and the introspective monologue, he preferred action. Audiences loved Dumas.

But the public palate becomes easily jaded and by 1835 tastes were changing. Dumas remained committed to the theatre—he liked the immediacy of contact with an audience—and *Kean* was staged with great success in 1836. But the vogue for Romantic drama was fading and he turned increasingly to prose. He published short fictions and accounts of his travels in magazines, but they consolidated rather than enhanced his reputation. He was generous to budding authors who asked his opinion of plays and tales which he would revise and sometimes rewrite. Dumas was

not entirely disinterested in this. For all his creative energies, he was not blessed with the kind of imagination which conjures narratives out of nothing. He needed a spark—an incident, a climax, a character—to ignite his invention and he regularly begged, borrowed, and even stole plots which appealed to him. It was a habit, no doubt exacerbated by the tight deadlines to which he worked, which created considerable misunderstanding. Few authors rely entirely on their imaginations and most depend on real memories, live 'models', and written 'sources'. Dumas was no plagiarist and was never successfully sued for theft of literary property. But he did use 'collaborators' in ways which anticipate the use made by cinema and television of 'researchers', 'script editors', and 'story consultants'. His long collaboration with Auguste Maquet, whom he met in 1838, is instructive.

In 1838 Maquet, a former history teacher who had hopes of a literary career, brought Dumas a play and asked for an opinion. Dumas revised it extensively and it was performed the following year, as *Bathilde*, under Maquet's name. But Dumas so transformed a short novel, *Le Bonhomme Buvat*, which Maquet had set in the early eighteenth century, that it was entirely reasonable that the result, expanded into four volumes, *Le Chevalier d'Harmental*, should have been credited to Dumas alone. From these beginnings developed a ten-year association which coincided with Dumas's most productive and brilliant period. It continued until 1851 when Maquet, tired of waiting for Dumas (then in straitened circumstances and, as always, far too impatient to attend to such dull matters) to pay him the money he owed under the terms of the formal written agreement they had drawn up. He never complained that he was exploited. He did not take the opportunity to protest when, in 1845, a journalist publicly accused Dumas of being the capitalist director of a 'fiction factory' which employed ill-paid hacks to churn out tales which he then sold at a large profit. Dumas sued and won his case. Much later, in 1858, Maquet asked the courts to recognize him as Dumas's 'co-author', not to establish plagiarism, but rather to give him a legal entitlement to his unpaid royalties. He lost the argument.

If Dumas came to count on Maquet's help, Maquet was not

indispensable and, left to his own devices after their association ended, his attempts to make an independent career came to nothing. Nor did any other of Dumas's collaborators achieve great things alone. But Dumas was always grateful to Maquet and acknowledged his role whenever his publishers agreed: the plain commercial fact was that a book signed by Dumas sold more copies than a book for which he shared the credit. But the exact nature of their collaboration is still mysterious. It is certain that they worked together adapting the novels, once written, for the stage. But it is clear too that Maquet had a hand in planning the novels, discussing plots with Dumas and helping to develop story-lines. But between the drafting of a plan and the writing of the book, considerable changes were made by Dumas, as the draft outline of the opening of *Louise de la Vallière* will make clear: the original order of events has been changed (the corresponding chapter numbers appear in square brackets) and the published text contains additional material:

[...] The request to the King—the King's reply [1]. Madame's coquettish behaviour towards the King [20]. The King's love for Madame. Monsieur's jealousy—Anne of Austria torn between her 2 children. Monsieur's jealousy—he goes to see his mother [17]. Anne of Austria warns the King [18]. The King in love with Madame [19]. Madame accepts his love. Plan agreed between the King and Madame to make it appear that H. M. loves somebody else. Madame says it should be somebody unimportant. They choose La Vallière [20].

The fête at Fontainebleau [21]. La Vallière confessing to Montalais that she cannot understand how anyone who has seen the King could fall in love with any other man [23].

Fouquet—the King asks him for another 2 millions to pay for the fête at Fontainebleau; he is convinced that no finer fête had ever been staged. Ah, says Colbert, who has skimped on the festivities, M. Fouquet ought to lay on a fête for the King at his splendid mansion at Vaux. Agreed, replies Fouquet [28].

Athos, d'Artagnan walking the staircase. Baisemeaux at the foot. His little difficulty. What he tells d'Artagnan about deferring his debt to Aramis [3]...

But Maquet also supplied what would now be called 'treatments' which Dumas would then expand beyond recognition. Some of Maquet's outline chapters for *The Three Musketeers*

have survived and they show how drastically Dumas altered them, turning flat descriptions into dramatic action, adding new twists, and injecting suspense and humour. But there is no doubt that on odd occasions, when Dumas ran out of time, Maquet's copy was sent directly to the printer without being changed (or probably even read) by Dumas.

But in one area, Maquet was invaluable. As a trained historian, he filled the gaps in Dumas's knowledge and suggested books where he might find authentic background details. Now, Dumas's taste for history was no personal idiosyncrasy, but a professional necessity. The novels of Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper had thrilled French readers in the 1820s and Romantic writers sought and found inspiration in their own history. It was a source of local colour and a stick with which to beat the present. It furnished playwrights like Dumas, Vigny, and Musset with subjects and it fed the imagination of novelists: Hugo set *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) in the fifteenth century and even Balzac, the chronicler of contemporary manners, revisited the French Revolution in *Les Chouans* (1829). Historians like Michelet and Guizot adopted a strongly narrative style, but readers who wished to explore their past in the original texts were spoiled for choice. Memoirs, journals, and letters were published, some for the first time, in huge collections, often running to hundreds of volumes, and demand seemed inexhaustible. But the general public was not interested in the causes of the French Revolution or the clauses of the Treaty which ended the Thirty Years War. It clamoured for the dramas of history, the anguish of victims, and the triumph of heroes. As his career as a dramatist began at last to wane, Dumas decided to give them, through the columns of newspapers which paid so well, what they wanted.

He had been commissioned to write a history of *The Century of Louis XIV* (1843), and during the course of his researches had wandered down many byways littered with tales waiting to be told. It was thus, quite by chance, that he found his four heroes. In the preface to *The Three Musketeers*, he tells how he stumbled across the pseudo-*Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan* (1700) by Courtilz de Sandras, which he promptly 'devoured'. He was much taken by the central character, a resourceful Gascon, who steps gaily from one adventure to another and, in one episode, roguishly

gets the better of a steely Englishwoman referred to only as 'Milédi'. He was also struck by the names of d'Artagnan's three companions which he thought might be assumed. Though they make only a brief appearance in the pseudo-*Mémoires*, they were enough to set his imagination to work.

Dumas claimed that history was a 'peg' on which he hung his stories. But if his musketeers rub shoulders with real kings and queens and involve themselves in events which decided the fate of nations, they are heroes who sprang fully grown from Dumas's imagination. Even so, they had distant links with history. For behind Courtitz's d'Artagnan, a picaresque adventurer who might have stepped out of a sub-Defoe novel, lay a rather dull and unattractive career soldier, Charles de Batz-Castelmore, born near Tarbes in about 1615, a d'Artagnan on his mother's side and a distant ancestor of Robert de Montesquiou, Proust's model for the homosexual Charlus. Charles de Batz joined Richelieu's Guards in 1635, took part in the King's wars and may have fought at the side of the royalists at the battle of Newbury in 1643. He became a Musketeer the following year and made a friend of a fellow officer, François de Montlézun, future governor of the Bastille (the Baisemeaux of *Louise de la Vallière*). When the company was disbanded in 1646 he became, as Colbert later put it, a 'creature of Mazarin' for whom he undertook many missions which may have included drowning an English spy. He saw further active service in the 1650s and rose to be Captain of Mazarin's Guards. When the Musketeers were re-formed in 1657, he was given effective command, though the absentee Duc de Nevers, a nephew of Mazarin, was officially the company's Captain-Lieutenant. He married in 1659 but the marriage, which produced two sons, ended in separation in 1665. After the death of Mazarin in 1661, he transferred his loyalties to Colbert whose orders he followed without question. It was he who arrested Fouquet, Louis XIV's disgraced finance minister, in 1661, and Lauzun, the King's rival for the affections of the Duchesse de Montpensier, a decade later. Doubtless as a reward for such loyal services, he was appointed Captain-Lieutenant of the Musketeers in 1667 and, in 1672, acting governor of Lille. A few official letters survive, the spelling of which is atrocious even by seventeenth-century standards, and they suggest that he exercised

his authority rather uneasily. He was shot in the throat by a stray bullet at the siege of Maastricht in March 1673.

Much less is known about Athos, Aramis, and Porthos, though Dumas was wrong in suspecting that their names were assumed and perhaps concealed the identities of 'illustrious persons'. All three were Gascons and, like many of their compatriots whose fathers had loyally served Henri IV, 'King of France and Navarre', they sought to make their way in the King's armies. All three were distantly related to each other and to the Comte de Tréville who was appointed Captain-Lieutenant of Musketeers in 1634. Armand de Sillègue d'Athos d'Autevielle was born in the valley of the Oloron in about 1615, became a Musketeer in about 1640, and died in Paris in 1643. Henri d'Aramitz, born in the Béarn, joined the Musketeers in 1640, married in 1654, produced four children, and died perhaps in 1674. Isaac de Portau was born at Pau in 1617, was a member of Richelieu's regiment of Guards in 1640, transferred to the Musketeers in 1643, and thereafter disappeared without trace. Behind the larger-than-life characters invented by Dumas lay shadowy, unremarkable men.

When he began work, Dumas did not possess even these meagre facts. But it scarcely mattered: those names had started wheels turning in his mind. He approached Maquet who, to begin with, was unenthusiastic but was won over when Dumas showed the way. He began by rewriting and amplifying Courtilz's account of the first encounter of d'Artagnan, a raw youth from the Midi, and Athos, Aramis, and Porthos, veteran Musketeers and seasoned campaigners. But soon his doughty quartet came to life under his pen and thereafter Courtilz was largely abandoned. Taking a hint here and borrowing an anecdote there, he supplied his champions with adventures which immediately thrilled the readers of *Le Siècle* and, within a few years, had conquered all parts of the known world.

The Three Musketeers was written quickly and appeared in episodes in *Le Siècle* between 14 March and 14 July 1844. Covering a three-year period (1626–8), it tells how the champions of right confront evil in the delicious shape of the wicked Milady and counter the *realpolitik* of the ruthless Richelieu, the cunning Red Duke. Dumas inserted his heroes into the chronicles of France—they are present at the siege of La Rochelle and had a

secret hand in the events which made history—but their instant popularity did not stem from Dumas's ambition 'to raise the novel to the dignity of history'. What boosted the circulation of *Le Siècle* was their unconquerable spirit, a mix of nonchalant bravado, selfless comradeship, and an unflagging zeal for just causes. On 30 June 1844, before the last episode appeared, readers were informed that a sequel was already in hand. In reality, Dumas was committed elsewhere: among other obligations was *The Count of Monte Cristo*, promised to *Le Journal des Débats*, which began appearing on 28 August 1844. It was not until the end of the year that he began work on *Twenty Years After*, which was serialized, again in *Le Siècle*, between 21 January and 2 August 1845.

Lesser authors would have been only too happy to produce further adventures cast in the same heroic, youthful mould. Not so Dumas. The novel opens in 1648 and time has taken its toll. D'Artagnan is still a musketeer but is bitter because he has not been given the rank to which his past services and undoubted qualities entitle him. Aramis has joined a religious order and sees his future in the Church. Athos has retired to a small estate near Blois, far from the sordid jostling for power which passes for life at Court. Porthos married a rich widow, now dead, and has become a gentleman who would dearly love to grace his absurd new name of Monsieur du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds with the title of Baron. But when the call comes they sink their differences, unsheathe their swords, and sally forth to save kings from their enemies. They travel to England and make a desperate attempt to rescue Charles I from the axe of the puritan executioner, confront evil once more in the guise of Mordaunt, son of Milady, and finally end the civil war in France in such a way that the French throne is made secure for the young Louis XIV.

In the issue carrying the final instalment of *Twenty Years After*, *Le Siècle* announced that the first episode of a further sequel, to be called *Ten Years After, or the Vicomte de Bragelonne*, would appear within three months. Dumas had decided that on their third outing his heroes would be not young, nor even mature, but on the threshold of old age. Unfortunately, he had over-committed himself again and would not settle down to

work until September 1847. By then, he was at the height of his powers and success. He was living in his splendidly ornate Château de Monte Cristo at Marly and the Théâtre Historique which he had created and managed was doing excellent business. *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (the subtitle *Or, Ten Years After* was added when the novel began appearing in volume form in 1848) was published in *Le Siècle* between 20 October 1847 and 12 January 1850. It is 1660. D'Artagnan has still not been given the promotion he believes he has earned. Athos has retired and is writing his memoirs, having raised his son, Raoul, to believe that a gentleman's honour lies in serving kings. Aramis has become a bishop but has even greater ambitions. And Porthos, now a baron and hoping for a dukedom, is still busy being a gentleman. Time has barnacled them and while they are all still committed to the principles of honour and monarchy, they no longer trust each other. Athos and d'Artagnan follow different paths in their efforts to restore Charles II to his throne. But if they have changed, so have the times: the new political undergrowth cannot be cleared with a swift thrust of a rapier. Their views are too honest and straightforward to allow them to enter the labyrinthine struggle for power between Fouquet and Colbert and understand the King's decision to become an absolute monarch. Only Aramis, always a master of intrigue, finds himself at home in the new age of political manoeuvring. Porthos, chasing his dukedom, is a pawn to be used by whoever gets to him first. Yet in the end, they unite once more to uncover the mystery of the prisoner in the Iron Mask . . .

Dumas had been concerned that *Twenty Years After* had been weak in one respect: it had no love interest. The whole saga is, of course, an unashamed celebration of male clubbability which reduces women to stereotyped roles. In the first instalment, Milady, the tigress, not only wounded Athos to the point that he never loves again, but she murdered Constance, the only woman who ever touches d'Artagnan's heart. Aramis has always avoided commitments and known only scheming coquettes, while Porthos embarked on marriage with at least half an eye to the widow Coquenard's money. Dumas, always alert to the demands of the market, clearly decided that *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* would be different. For long periods, the Musketeers disappear from the

story, which makes a great deal of room for the amorous intrigues of the court. Guiche, Buckingham, and Louis are all drawn to the pert and pretty Duchesse d'Orléans, while Raoul, a character conjured out of a stray reference in a memoir of the period, is doomed to love Louise without return, for she loves and is loved by the King.

Louise de la Vallière is the middle section of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, the final instalment of the Musketeer saga. It is also the least swashbuckling and most talkative stretch of Dumas's epic narrative. For this reason, many readers have preferred the earlier adventures of the Musketeers, a choice which 'pained and puzzled' Robert Louis Stevenson, who confessed to having read *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* at least five times with increasing admiration. He accepted that Raoul, 'so well-conducted, so fine-spoken, and withal so dreary' makes a poor hero, and conceded that Louise, who is 'well-meant, not ill-designed, and sometimes has a word that rings out true', is an uninspiring heroine. But he was greatly taken with the Duchesse d'Orléans and was prepared 'to forgive that royal minx her most serious offences'. But Dumas, so inventive, spreads a 'feast' before us: 'the love adventures at Fontainebleau, with St Aignan's story of the dryad and the business of de Guiche, de Wardes, and Manicamp; Aramis made general of the Jesuits; Aramis at the Bastille . . .':

What other novel has such epic variety and nobility of incident? often, if you will, impossible; often of the order of an Arabian story; and yet all based in human nature. For if you come to that, what novel has more human nature? not studied with the microscope, but seen largely, in plain daylight, with the natural eye? What novel has more good sense, and gaiety, and wit, and unflagging, admirable literary skill? . . . what novel is inspired with a more unstrained or a more wholesome morality? (*Works*, London, 1889, ix. 131)

Stevenson, like many of his generation, was convinced that 'there is no quite good book without a good morality' and would not have exchanged a chapter of 'bracing old Dumas' 'for the whole boiling of Zola'. It was a view echoed by Dumas's son in 1893 when he tried to explain why nearly three million copies of his father's books had been sold and 600 of his titles re-serialized in newspapers in the 23 years since his death. 'Man surrenders