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The Man in the Iron Mask

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Alexandre Dumas

Introduction and Notes by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

As early as the middle of the first chapter, it is clear that *The Man in the Iron Mask* is a very odd novel indeed. Within the first paragraph we are shown 'a house that may be recognised as the same which . . . had been besieged by d'Artagnan as elsewhere recorded' (p. 3) – but where recorded? and who exactly is d'Artagnan? A couple of pages later, the mysterious duchess is talking about the strange death of a Franciscan and a conversation in a cemetery – and if it then occurs to her (as it does) 'that we had scarcely told each other anything' (p. 4), prior to her referring familiarly to a character called Marie Michon whose first and last appearance in the novel this is (but whose ghost has forgotten nothing), it similarly occurs to *us* that no one has told us anything at all, and – frankly – what the devil is going on?

In fact, *The Man in the Iron Mask* is not a novel at all. It is, loosely speaking, the third section of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, Alexandre Dumas's immensely long sequel to the first two novels of what we

may term the *Musketeers* cycle. After the huge success of *The Three Musketeers* in 1844 and *Twenty Years After* in 1845, Dumas embarked between 1847 and 1850 on the publication in serialised form of the third and last novel in the sequence. When published in English translation, this blockbuster (it runs to well over 2000 pages in a recent French paperback edition) is normally (if arbitrarily) divided into three segments, entitled *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, *Louise de la Vallière* and *The Man in the Iron Mask*. However, there is no agreement as to where one segment ends and the next begins, with the confusing consequence that different editions of *The Man in the Iron Mask* pick up the narrative in different places. For example, the recent Penguin version released to coincide with the 1998 film of the book, starring Leonardo di Caprio, starts with the chapter entitled 'The Prisoner', whereas the current edition, in common with that issued in the Oxford World's Classics series, opens a good deal further back in the proceedings with 'A Pair of Old Friends'.[1] However, as we have already seen, there are problems for the reader no matter which point of embarkation is preferred.

Serial fiction was hugely popular in France at the time Dumas was writing. It was a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to 1836, when two rival newspapers, *La Presse* and *Le Siècle*, were able to cut their cover price by some fifty per cent thanks to the simple wheeze of accepting commercial advertising. In those days, newspapers depended for sales on a subscription system: the consequence of the dramatic price reduction was an equally dramatic increase in the number of subscribers.[2] The proprietors then had to devise ways of hanging on to their new readers, and, although they did not initially see serial fiction as the trump card it rapidly turned out to be, they did see the value of including regular features to keep the punters coming back for more. By 1838, *Le Siècle* had already developed the nineteenth-century equivalent of the modern trailer, boasting of the coming fictional attractions in store for the public, and the serial-fiction juggernaut was in the process of developing an unstoppable momentum.

1 Sadly, irrespective of the starting point, any similarity between book and film is almost entirely coincidental.

2 David Coward notes in his edition of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (World's Classics, Oxford 1995) that the number of newspaper subscribers rose as a result of this development from 70,000 throughout France in 1835 to 200,000 in Paris alone in 1836.

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Dumas quickly realised the potential of this new genre, as, given his past history and credentials, we might reasonably expect him to have done. Born in 1802 in Villers-Cotterêts, some fifty miles north-east of Paris, the son of a career soldier in Napoleon's army and an innkeeper's daughter, he migrated to the capital in 1823, where he quickly became involved in literary activity, initially as a dramatist, with a string of stage successes from the late 1820s onwards. However, by the mid 1830s his playwright's star was beginning to fade and the moment was ripe for him to change direction. He was quite at home with the public's enthusiasm for historical fiction (it has been calculated that around half of the serials published in the two main newspapers had settings that were at least ostensibly historical). Inspired, like most of the rest of Europe's budding literary talent, by the novels of 'the wizard of the North', Sir Walter Scott, he had set many of his plays in a historical context, and already in July 1836 he was setting the pace in *La Presse* for the new craze.[3]

Dumas thought traditional textbook history was boring, but took (at least for public consumption) a somewhat prudishly moralistic view of pure fiction. His compromise solution was to opt for a narrative version of a rather odd (and unsurprisingly ephemeral) dramatic form that had been popular for some years in France. This was the *scène historique*, supposedly unadulterated history in dialogue form (for reasons not difficult to divine, these *scènes* were never staged). Dumas, never averse to self-congratulation, argued that his adaptation of this genre to a narrative form brought history to life whilst not contaminating it with the base fictions of the novel, thus avoiding the pitfalls of both genres 'since truth would be rigorously adhered to as well as acquiring substance and spirit, and no invented characters would be mixed in with authentic historical figures, who alone would play out the drama of the past.'[4]

Doubtless entirely laudable, this endeavour was never entirely convincing, and by the 1840s, Dumas had changed tack somewhat. It is fortunate for us that he did so, since with the best will in the world, the nail-biting suspense of Edward III's preparations for the Hundred Years' War hardly seems quite on a par with the exploits

3 His first dramatic success, *Henri III et sa cour* (1829), was set against the background of the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion in France: arguably his best play, *Charles VII chez ses grands vassaux* (1831), has its setting a century earlier.

4 quoted in Y. Knibiehler and R. Ripoll, 'Les Premiers pas du feuilleton: chronique historique, nouvelle, roman', *Europe*, 542, June 1974, pp. 7–19

of the immortal (but essentially fictitious) musketeers in defence of honour, land and lady.

For with *The Three Musketeers* in 1844 Dumas struck a rich vein (indeed, 1844 was something of an *annus mirabilis* for him, since it was also the date when the serialisation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* began). His readership clamoured for more, and a fortnight before the day of the last instalment, the paper announced the imminent serialisation of *Twenty Years After*.[5] Nine months later, rejoicing (somewhat prematurely, as it transpired) at having secured Dumas's agreement to write *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, it lauded the two previous novels of its star contributor to the skies:

> M. Alexandre Dumas's talent shines forth brilliantly in these productions, where he has demonstrated signal qualities of which the combination is so rare at any time in history: compelling interest, involving verve, wit, charm, vigour, a fruitful imagination, extensive erudition, comic spirit, picturesque and sparkling literary style.[6]

Of course, one should never repose total confidence in advertising copy. There had arguably been a good deal less verve, wit and sparkle in *Twenty Years After* than in its predecessor – Dumas had got rather bogged down in the complexities of the Fronde rebellion – and although these qualities are far from absent in *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, the Dumas of 1850 was on the whole a sadder, wiser man than his predecessor of 1844. Robert Louis Stevenson, who included the novel among his favourites (claiming to have read it 'either five or six' times), defined its attributes thus:

> I was asked the other day if Dumas ever made me laugh or cry. Well, in this my late fifth reading . . . I did laugh once . . . and to make up for it, I smiled continually. But for tears, I do not know . . . above all, in this last volume, I find a singular charm of spirit. It breathes a pleasant and a tonic sadness . . . Upon the crowded, noisy life of this long tale, evening gradually falls; and the lights are extinguished, and the heroes pass away one by one.[7]

5 The last episode of *The Three Musketeers* appeared in *Le Siècle* on 14 July 1844; on 30 June, the newspaper had announced that it was already in possession (which it manifestly was not) of the first three volumes of *Twenty Years After*.

6 quoted in A. Dumas, *Vingt Ans Après*, ed. C. Samaran, Paris 1962, p. xxvii

7 R. L. Stevenson, *Works*, ed. E. Gosse, Cassell, London 1905, Vol. IX, p. 144

The Man in the Iron Mask is at least partially a novel about old men, and a lament for vanished glories – 'never glad confident morning again!' The musketeers are all in their fifties or sixties, and although the story makes fleeting reference to the famous oath of *The Three Musketeers* ('all for one and one for all'), this is shown to be an aspiration rather than a reality. For Athos, Porthos, Aramis and d'Artagnan are not only constantly at odds with each other, but – more significantly – are never once in the entire novel seen all together. In the cold, hard, cruelly efficient world they now inhabit, Dumas's musketeers are anachronisms – or at least, three of them are. The case of Aramis is rather different, as I shall hope to show.

Set against the musketeers and the heroic values of the past that they embody is the figure of Louis XIV, King of France. The Sun King, as he has come to be known to posterity, is portrayed here as a rather unpleasant customer whose sole aim in life is personal and political self-gratification elevated to the status of a creed. Dumas hints at the psychological damage inflicted on him when a boy by his humiliation during the Fronde (pp. 254–5).[8] His subsequent resolve to achieve both absolute power and absolute invulnerability are revealed in his resentment of his minister, Fouquet, who ultimately (and ironically) pays the penalty for releasing his king from the Bastille. Louis's personal imperatives (p. 128) dovetail neatly with the politics lesson he gives d'Artagnan towards the end of the novel:

> I am founding a state in which there shall be but one master. I promised you this long ago, and the moment has come for the promise to be kept. You think you can be allowed to thwart my plans and shield my enemies according to your own preferences or friendships? I will break you or I will get rid of you. [p. 552]

His complete success in all he has set out to do is illustrated in the closing pages of the novel (the Epilogue).

There is, however, a price to be paid. Dumas uses the musketeers to enshrine a series of challenges to Louis's authority and the nature of his vision. In three cases out of four, these challenges are moral or ideological, and, for historical reasons, foredoomed to failure. If Dumas had moved some distance from his initial premise of dramatising the past without misrepresenting it, he was still a historical romancer rather than a historical fantasist. Just as, in *Twenty Years*

8 In Chapter 54 of *Twenty Years After*, Louis, then aged ten, is paraded, much to his resentment, before the rebellious populace of Paris to prove that the king has not abandoned his people.

After, he had been unable to allow the musketeers to save Charles I of England from execution, so now he could not change the character or the policies of Louis XIV. Athos, Porthos and d'Artagnan, one by one, (fairly) effortlessly achieve the moral high ground in their explicit or implicit opposition to the king. But fine words butter no parsnips. Louis still comes out on top.

The least successful of the challenges is that posed by Athos and his son Raoul, the eponymous Vicomte de Bragelonne.[9] This is not because of the nature of the challenge itself, since Athos is arguably the only character (apart, that is, from Louis) to possess a clearly developed ideology. This is most lucidly enunciated in *Twenty Years After*: Athos, probably speaking for Dumas himself, states that 'the king is but man; royalty is the spirit of God', and subsequently berates Louis for failing to live up to this somewhat metaphysical conception of his role.[10] But Athos, 'sacred relic of the ancient glories of France' (p. 570) though he may be, is none the less a prig, and Raoul is a complete dead loss. The cloying relationship between father and son results from Dumas's misplaced desire to depict an implausibly idealised version of his difficult relationship with his own adored son (also named Alexandre).[11] This goes beyond the point where it is implied that father and son are twin souls (p. 429) and founders in a glutinous sea of sentiment when the spirit of the mercifully deceased Raoul rises Christ-like to heaven in a vision, leading his gently grieving papa with him through the pearly gates. Stevenson (for some inexplicable reason) thought highly of this scene, and French critics go into raptures about it, but it is sadly emetic stuff for all that.

Porthos is an individual of an altogether different kidney, a far cry from odour of sanctity and *Songs of Praise*. He is a brilliant

9 Jean-Yves Tadié notes that Dumas's choice of title originally symbolised the coming of age of a new generation, the young superseding the old (*Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, Gallimard, Paris 1997, p. 20). In the completed novel, however, where Raoul is presented as the spiritual inheritor of the musketeers, the symbolism is slightly different, the older generation defeated in its younger representative as Raoul loses Louise de la Vallière to the king.

10 *Twenty Years After*, ed. D. Coward, World's Classics, Oxford 1993, p. 224

11 Even Dumas's English hagiographer-in-chief, A. Craig Bell, notes sniffily of Athos that 'his relationship with his son is an amalgam of old-world parental strictness and over-emotional affection which today's reader must find both repellently sentimental and improbable' ('*Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* [*The Man in the Iron Mask*]', Merlin, Braunton [Devon] 1995, p. 2).

combination of Frank Spencer, Hyacinth Bucket and the Incredible Hulk. He has not the first idea what is going on most of the time – what little brain power he ever had (in *The Three Musketeers*), age seems to have eroded completely. Much of the comedy in the novel centres on his character and his actions. He acts as Raoul's second in a challenge to a duel, although he has not a clue what the duel is about, and he breaks a chair simply by sitting on it (but then, they don't make chairs like they used to). He is the coachman who drives the kidnapped Louis XIV to the Bastille, because Aramis persuades him that the king is not the king, but a usurper – and poor Porthos never tumbles to what is going on here, because in a body the size of Godzilla's, he has a brain the size of a pea. And he is the most appalling snob – witness his refusal to be measured for a court suit, because to be so, a mere tailor's boy would actually have to touch him, which would be 'humiliating, degrading . . . disgusting and repugnant to the feelings of a gentleman' (p. 206). But he is sublime in his innocence and unquestioning loyalty, his 'simple greatness of soul' (p. 497), dying for his friend in stark contrast to the way in which Louis XIV effectively (in his treatment of Fouquet) allows his friend to die for him. When Dumas came to write Porthos's death scene, his son found him slumped in his armchair and dissolved in tears.[12] Certainly the pages devoted to the event have a heartfelt (if slightly bombastic) eloquence somewhat reminiscent of the death of Sydney Carton in Dickens's almost contemporary novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.[13]

D'Artagnan is in many respects a more complex case. He, like the others, can be seen to embody aspects of his creator – if Athos represents the paternal Dumas, and Porthos is Dumas the trencherman, then d'Artagnan is the acquisitive Dumas, the Dumas who is reputed to have told his son 'don't let anything go without getting money for it'.[14] At the end of *The Three Musketeers*, Richelieu buys

12 'I found you sitting sadly in your big armchair . . . your eyes red. "You've been crying. What's the matter?" I can still hear your answer: "I'm very unhappy. Porthos is dead. I've just killed him. I can't prevent myself mourning him. Poor Porthos!"' (quoted in *Les Trois Mousquetaires. Vingt Ans Après*, ed. C. Schopp, Robert Laffont, Paris 1991, p. lviii, note 5).

13 Dumas wrote to his collaborator Auguste Maquet in December 1849: 'I want Porthos's death to have as much grandeur as possible' (quoted in *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, ed. C. Schopp, Robert Laffont, Paris 1991, Vol. II, p. 774, note). *A Tale of Two Cities* was serialised in *All the Year Round* during the second half of 1859.

14 quoted in H. Clouard, *Alexandre Dumas*, Albin Michel, Paris 1955, p. 370

d'Artagnan with a lieutenant's commission; at the end of *The Man in the Iron Mask*, Louis XIV buys d'Artagnan with the implicit promise of the baton of a Marshal of France. This is logical, in a way: d'Artagnan is a professional soldier, dependent on the income of soldiering, just as Dumas was a professional author, dependent on the income of authoring. Athos and Porthos have private incomes; Aramis has the untold financial reserves of the Society of Jesus at his disposal. D'Artagnan has neither of these, and must do the best he can. Oddly enough, despite Dumas's frequent references to his shrewdness, he is, for once in the cycle, rather out of his depth. Though he manages to persuade the king to release Athos from the Bastille, he cannot save Fouquet, he is outfoxed by Aramis, and, in the end, out-thought by Louis. He is an enthusiastic teller of home truths to the king:

> Do you prefer those who love you, or those who only fear you? If you prefer servility, duplicity, and cowardice, only say so, sire, and we will go away – we, who are the sole remnant ... of a pre-existent chivalry ... If you refuse to listen to the plain speaking of d'Artagnan, you are not a good king, and, tomorrow, may be a poor one. [p. 246]

But he runs out of steam. His ultimate secret weapon against the king is his resignation as captain of the musketeers, but, like the boy who cried wolf, he uses it once too often, and the king calls his bluff. D'Artagnan's belief that he can engineer a pardon for his friends Aramis and Porthos simply because (in the final analysis) they are his friends is shown to be incompatible with the workings of Louis's vision of the modern state. His insistence on getting the king's signature for everything he is asked to do plays into the hands of the monarch, who uses the weapon against him, tying his hands and preventing him from being more than a spectator of the final apocalypse. In the regime that Louis is constructing, only one person is indispensable – and that one person is not d'Artagnan, but Louis himself. 'You also must humble your pride,' he tells d'Artagnan, 'or else choose such exile as will suit you best' (p. 555). And d'Artagnan 'remained lost in mute bewilderment ... he had at last found an adversary worthy of his steel' (ibid.). The d'Artagnan of the Epilogue is no foppish courtier, certainly, but he knows his place, and the concluding aspirations of his life are not to give the king lessons on how to govern, but to make sure that he gets his marshal's baton firmly in his knapsack before he shuffles off his mortal coil.

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Which leaves us with Aramis, by some way the most intriguing of the four in this part of the cycle, and the only one to remain alive at its conclusion. His role is integrally bound up with that of the man in the iron mask, a historically-attested character whom Dumas makes into Philippe, the apocryphal twin brother of Louis XIV. It was Voltaire who, some hundred years earlier, had, in his *Century of Louis XIV*, first given wide currency to this putative identity of the masked prisoner, and Dumas, who shared the Romantic fascination for doomed heroes, was not the only nineteenth-century French writer to exploit the legend. Alfred de Vigny (1797–1863) had in 1819 written a very fine narrative poem called 'La Prison' on the topic (though he may have been inspired as much by Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon* as by the story of the Iron Mask himself). Victor Hugo (1802–85) had in 1839 partly written then abandoned a verse drama entitled *Les Jumeaux* (The Twins) which Dumas may also have had access to. Both Dumas and Hugo, at all events, acknowledged a debt to Paul Lacroix's *The Man in the Iron Mask*, which appeared in 1838.[15] In addition, Francis Wey (1812–82) had in 1839 provided *La Presse* with a short serial entitled *The Three Prisoners of Pignerol*, of whom the second was Fouquet, and the third the Iron Mask himself, again depicted as Louis XIV's identical twin brother. Dumas had previously touched on the matter in his volumes of historical popularisation entitled *Louis XIV and His Century* (1844), as well as developing a sequence of so-called 'systems' as to the real identity of the masked figure.[16] Whatever this might have been, Dumas had far too much of an eye for a good plot-line to pass up the opportunity of following the example of his illustrious literary predecessors and introducing him into the novel as the Sun King's twin.[17]

Popular prejudice (doubtless not unaffected in this respect by Hollywood's view of the matter) holds that the virtuous Philippe is substituted for his wicked brother and rules gloriously and justly in his stead. Dumas, though not above tinkering with history for the purposes of his narrative, baulked at taking such extensive liberties,

15 Lacroix is more commonly known by his pseudonym, Le Bibliophile Jacob (Jacob the Bibliophile); he lived from 1807 until 1884.

16 In 1841, writing in *Le Siècle* (19 and 21 February), Dumas had stated the existence of nine 'systems' in relation to the man in the iron mask. By 1844, in *Louis XIV and His Century*, the number had risen to 'more than twelve'.

17 A bewildering variety of possible identities have been advanced: these are helpfully (if briefly) reviewed in David Coward's edition of *The Man in the Iron Mask*, World's Classics, Oxford 1991, pp. xvii–xxiii.

with the result that Philippe becomes an innocent pawn in the devious and demonic game that Aramis is playing. That he does have a genuine claim to the throne is clear, even though he was born some hours later than Louis. Aramis stresses that in such cases 'both doctors and lawyers maintain that there is a doubt whether the child who happens to be the first-born of twins is in reality the elder by the laws of heaven and of nature' (p. 196), and his patron Fouquet, himself a jurist, agrees that this is so. Fouquet similarly accepts Aramis's contention that Louis is a usurper, in that he has seized the entire inheritance of his father, Louis XIII, whereas he is only legally entitled to half of it. But Aramis is essentially uninterested in the justice of Philippe's cause, nor is he really, as he subsequently protests, attempting to effect the substitution in the interests of his patron Fouquet, whom Louis XIV is determined to ruin. With Philippe on the throne, Aramis intends first to ensure that he is made a cardinal, secondly (like Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin before him) to take over the government of France from Fouquet, and finally to employ Philippe's influence to have himself elected Pope.

Philippe therefore becomes the sacrificial lamb caught in the toils of Aramis's Mephistophelean endeavours. At various points in the novel Dumas purposely stresses Aramis's diabolical attributes: his eyes are 'two blades of fire' (p. 176), and he invites Fouquet to 'hold fast to my cloak' (p. 73) and be transported to safety (just as Mephistopheles invites Faust).[18] An 'angel of death' (p. 236) with a 'sepulchral voice' (p. 532), he uses Philippe as the instrument of his ambition, abandoning him with barely a second thought when his plans go awry. More than once he is explicitly referred to as 'the tempter' (most notably in the title of Chapter 37). In this guise, he seduces Philippe just as Satan attempts to seduce Christ: 'he sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them' (Matthew 4:8). Lacking Christ's willpower, Philippe passes up the opportunity of the Edenic refuge in Poitou that Aramis offers as an alternative (just as Aramis had gambled that he would), only to find himself at the end of the novel imprisoned for ever in a parody of Eden, the prison governor's garden on the Ile Sainte-Marguerite. Aramis, on the other hand, gets away scot-free, to reappear in the Epilogue as the Duc d'Alameda, Spain's ambassador to the French court.

18 Aramis's involvement with the Prince of Darkness is signalled as early as Chapter 8 in *Twenty Years After*: 'in Aramis one finds Simara, which is the name of a demon'.

So *The Man in the Iron Mask* projects a rather gloomy view of the human condition that seems light years removed from the swash-buckling, devil-may-care heroics of *The Three Musketeers*, although that is not to say that such an upshot is not fleetingly prefigured even there. The young d'Artagnan had yielded to Richelieu just as the old d'Artagnan yields to Louis XIV. Athos withdraws – temporarily in *The Three Musketeers*, definitively in *The Man in the Iron Mask* – taking his dispiriting offspring with him. Porthos dies. Philippe, born to rule, 'every whit as much a king as his brother' (p. 373) in d'Artagnan's view, ends up doubly imprisoned, incarcerated on the Ile Sainte-Marguerite and inside a mask of iron. Aramis, having spent the entire novel trying to subvert the system that Louis is devoting all his efforts to creating, suddenly changes tack and announces to the unsurprisingly bewildered inhabitants of Belle-Isle-en-Mer that 'the king is master in his kingdom. The king is God's chosen instrument. God and the king have smitten M. Fouquet' (p. 514). It is possible that he does this in part with the intention of saving their rebellious skins from the king's troops, but in reality he too accepts the principle of the system, albeit ideally under somewhat different management. It is therefore certainly symbolic that, in the closing lines of the novel, d'Artagnan looks forward to being reunited with Athos and Porthos, but bids Aramis an eternal farewell. As General of the Jesuits, Aramis wields a power at least as absolute as Louis XIV's: significantly, he is the only one of the four musketeers to survive beyond the end of the novel, and Dumas may even have been thinking of bringing him back (presumably on a Zimmer frame) in an unwritten sequel, *Le Comte de Vermandois*.[19]

The reasons for the tone of disillusionment are not far to seek. By the time he completed *The Man in the Iron Mask* (the last instalment was published on 12 January 1850), Dumas was heading for bank-ruptcy. The glory days of the 1840s, when he appeared to have the

19 In *Louis XIV and His Century*, Dumas's review of the 'systems' relating to the man in the iron mask had included the suggestion that he might be the Comte de Vermandois, a natural son of Louis XIV and Louise de la Vallière. A letter to Maquet, dated March 1851, indicates that Dumas intended to write a novel with this title. However, nothing came of it, and in January 1854 he announced a sequel to *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* called *Le Maréchal-Ferrant* (The Blacksmith). This, too, failed to materialise, and it was left to an imitator of Dumas called Paul Mahalin to polish off Aramis in a spurious sequel to the *Musketeers* cycle entitled *The Son of Porthos; or the Death of Aramis* (first published in 1883). (I am very grateful to Jonathan Snowdon for alerting me to the existence of this text.)

Midas touch, were gone for ever. The Théâtre Historique, set up in 1847 under the sponsorship of the king's son, the Duc de Montpensier, to perform plays by Dumas and his friends, was folding, a victim of the 1848 Revolution and Dumas's lack of business acumen. The ludicrously lavish Château de Monte Cristo that he had built for himself at Marly-le-Roi, just outside Paris, had been mortgaged in a vain attempt to rescue the theatre. His aspirations to play a political role in the new order had come to nothing as a consequence of repeated defeats at the polls. Rather like his illustrious predecessor Walter Scott, he was writing to pay his debts and keep his creditors at bay. In such an atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that he should have reflected ruefully on the heady days of the 1830s and the 1840s, and that the overriding impression given by the novel should be one of sadness and of opportunities lost, of regret for a gallant, colourful, chivalrous past set against the depressing greyness of a regulated and regimented present. Dumas is ultimately too honest not to admit that the new regime achieved what it set out to do, and the Epilogue shows how Louis XIV, having got a grip on himself and his country, would go on to dominate Europe in precisely the way that Aramis envisaged the combined forces of Philippe and himself doing (Chapter 37). He is similarly too honest to deny that such a regime offered worthwhile prospects for a particular type of public servant (witness the transformation of Colbert in the closing chapters of the novel). But all this is achieved at a cost that Dumas cannot but regret.

If the tone is darker than in the earlier novels of the cycle, the trademarks of the master craftsman are none the less apparent. There are of course the inevitable inconsistencies deriving from the fact that, given the insatiable demands of serial publication, Dumas was writing, as always, at tremendous speed. But does it really matter that he forgets whether Philippe has spent six or eight years in the Bastille, whether his co-prisoner Seldon is Scots or Irish, whether the mask he wears on the Ile Sainte-Marguerite is made of iron or of steel? We may be slightly puzzled, but we are not greatly bothered – we are reading a historical romance, not the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Harder to forgive, perhaps, is his catastrophic misjudgement in respect of the emotional intrigues involving characters representing the younger generation. Dumas had observed to his collaborator Auguste Maquet in respect of *Twenty Years After* that 'the absence of a love intrigue will be a drawback' and detrimental to the success of the novel: readers had, he later argued, greatly enjoyed the tensions created in *The Three Musketeers* by the clandestine relationship between Anne of Austria and the Duke of

Buckingham.[20] But his young lovers are anaemic in the extreme. The ostensible hero of the whole saga (the eponymous vicomte) is Athos's son Raoul, the unlikely by-blow of his father's improbable one-night stand with Mme de Chevreuse (an old flame of Aramis's): a paragon of knightly virtue, he is a character of quite surpassing dullness. Whilst not all critics have been as extreme in their deprecation as Paul Morand ('Let Raoul de Bragelonne go off and get himself killed, we really couldn't care less!'), rarely has any character in literature received such a uniformly and continuously bad press.[21] Louise de la Vallière, Raoul's childhood sweetheart, is not much better: she falls in love with Louis XIV (and he – inexplicably – with her), and subsequently spends so much time dissolved in tears and 'fainting in coils' as to leave us profoundly bored and irritated with her antics. The best that can be said is that these two uniquely dismal tyros are rather less in evidence here than in the two previous sections of the novel.

But other characters are boldly, if brashly, drawn – and serial fiction is after all hardly the place to go for psychological refinement, especially when we remember that Dumas had no time to review and revise his work for publication in book form. A whole gallery of them is impressively memorable. Among the musketeers, Aramis in particular merits a mention. In his unscrupulous scheming for world domination, and in the way that, despite our better instincts, we half hope he may succeed – or at least live to fight another day – he is reminiscent of more contemporary villains such as the Mekon in *Dan Dare* or the Master in *Dr Who*. Even among the minor characters, those who make an appearance for a few chapters then vanish for ever, or those who pop up sporadically throughout the narrative, there are some undoubted successes. Here is Dumas's telling – and witty – description of Fouquet's nemesis, Colbert:

> Close behind the king came Monsieur Colbert, who had waylaid his majesty in the corridor and now followed him like a dark and watchful shadow. Monsieur Colbert, with his square-shaped head and his untidy though rich dress, reminded one somewhat of a Flemish gentleman after a more than usually prolonged interview with a beer-jug. [p. 113]

20 quoted in *Les Trois Mousquetaires. Vingt Ans Après*, ed. C. Schopp, Robert Laffont, op. cit., p. xxv.

21 quoted in *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, ed. J.-Y. Tadié, Gallimard, Paris 1997, Vol. I, p. xxxii.

Fouquet, too, sticks in the mind – a characterisation in defiance both of historical veracity and of natural common sense (though very much like Dumas himself in many of his attributes). This is the man who seals his own fate because, in spite of his recognition of the justice of Philippe's cause, he cannot bear the thought that the hospitality of his own house has been violated by the abduction of Louis XIV to the Bastille. This is the man who entertains his friends flanked by his 'two guardian angels', his devoted wife on one side and his devoted mistress on the other. This, finally, is the man who gets off his horse and allows d'Artagnan to arrest him, when d'Artagnan's own mount, foundered in the pursuit, has collapsed beneath him. 'Oh, monsieur,' cries d'Artagnan, 'the man who is really a king for true nobility is not Louis at the Louvre, nor Philippe at Sainte-Marguerite – it is you, the condemned outlaw!' (p. 477).

And there are some wonderful set pieces too, such as only Dumas could write them. The above incident is thrillingly narrated in the chapter 'White Horse and Black Horse', but Dumas does not just do horseback chases – he does pursuits in barges, too, as Colbert tails Fouquet all the way down the Loire from Orléans to Nantes. I personally feel that he slightly muffs the climactic confrontation scene between Philippe, the bird in borrowed plumage, and his identical twin, hotfoot from a night in the Bastille, but arguably the build-up has been so remorseless that the tension is difficult to maintain and extend convincingly. In any case, he redeems himself superbly with the extraordinary sequence that narrates the heroic death of Porthos, into which he self-evidently channels so much emotion and commitment. The tone is unashamedly epic, and cosmic and mythological imagery abounds. Porthos is the Destroying Angel, the barrel of gunpowder hurled at his enemies is compared to 'a shooting star across the heavens', prior to exploding and creating 'the very pit of hell'. 'One man had made all this chaos, worse confounded than the chaos that reigned ere ever God spake the word and brought forth light out of darkness' (p. 536) – Porthos, 'a giant in the midst of giants', 'the genius of ancient chaos', the Titan who finally cannot himself resist the unrelenting cascade of boulders that buries him alive in 'a giant's sepulchre befitting his gigantic frame' (p. 538). It is fabulous, riveting, spellbinding stuff, Dumas writing his heart out. No wonder he needed a few days' grace after burying this friend of six years' standing, and this despite the protestations of the paper's proprietor and the chagrin of the subscribing public.[22]

22 He wrote, at once apologetically and rhetorically, to Louis Perrée, the

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