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The Three Musketeers

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

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THE THREE MUSKETEERS

Alexandre Dumas

With an Introduction and Notes by

KEITH WREN
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Alexandre Dumas was 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. Known in later years (much to his chagrin) as Dumas *père*, to distinguish him from his identically named writer son, he was hailed in his lifetime as one of the leading lights of the Romantic movement in France. Moving to Paris in 1823, he quickly became involved in literary activity, initially as a dramatist, with a string of stage successes from the late 1820s through to the late 1830s. Thereafter, he reinvented himself as a writer of historical fiction, mostly published in instalments in the popular press. In so doing, he capitalised on the 1840s craze for serial fiction (*roman-feuilleton*) and made himself huge sums of money (which he promptly spent). He wrote at tremendous speed (the first volume of *The Chevalier of Maison-Rouge* in 1845 took him only sixty-six hours to complete), sometimes to the extent of delivering copy

simultaneously to rival newspapers. *The Three Musketeers* was serialised between 14 March and 14 July 1844 in *Le Siècle*. It came out in book form later in the year. The present translation by William Barrow, very much true to the spirit, if not always entirely faithful to the letter, of the original (see below), was published in London in 1846.

The historical novel as known and practised in nineteenth-century France was, to all intents and purposes, the creation of Sir Walter Scott. Between 1814 and his death in 1832, Scott produced the sequence known as the *Waverley Novels* (so named after the first novel in the series). These novels were hugely popular both in France and elsewhere in Europe: his lustre undimmed by depressingly pedestrian translations, Scott became the lodestone of aspiring French novelists, even if the more successful amongst them seemed not entirely to grasp what it was that he had been trying to achieve.

Scott's method of composition remained largely unaltered throughout his career as a novelist. His central characters are invented heroes in real situations, almost always at turning points in history. In the course of the narrative, these invented heroes, usually rather naïve individuals (hence the *Waverley Novels* are often novels of education as well as historical novels), come into contact with conflicting historical forces. Typically, these forces are embodied in authentic historical figures in confrontation with one another. A good example of this is *Quentin Durward* (1823), one of Scott's most popular novels with French readers, and one that seems to have had an influence on Dumas. The central character, the young Scottish archer Quentin Durward, encounters both Charles, Duke of Burgundy (representing the feudal past) and Louis XI, King of France (representing an ultimately 'capitalist' future). Scott's purpose is to explain through the experience of his hero how and why it is that the past evolves into the present. Coleridge magnificently defined Scott's method as follows:

> The contest between the two great moving principles of social humanity: religious adherence to the past and the ancient, the desire and admiration of permanence, on the one hand; and the passion for increase of knowledge, for truth, as the offspring of reason – in short, the mighty instincts of *progression* and *free agency*, on the other.[1]

The response to Scott in France after long years of cultural stagnation under Napoleon was electric. He was lionised when he visited the

1 S. T. Coleridge, letter to Thomas Allsopp (8 April 1820), in *Correspondence*, ed. E. L. Griggs, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, Vol. 5, p. 35

country; his disciples undertook pilgrimages to Scotland to visit the great man; his works were greeted with wild enthusiasm and gave rise to legions of (mostly inadequate) imitations. Georg Lukàcs explains the vogue for history in France at this period as a consequence of the 1789 Revolution: '. . . it is in the nature of a bourgeois revolution that . . . the national idea becomes the property of the broadest masses . . . More and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history.'[2] Contemporaries were certainly highly aware of the importance of the historical dimension for an understanding of their age. For example, Albertine de Broglie wrote in 1825 to the historian Prosper de Barante: 'History is the Muse of our time; we are, I think, the first to have understood the past.'[3] The fashion permeated not just the novel, but a wide variety of other literary forms, notably (in terms of its effect on Dumas) the theatre. Stendhal, writing in 1823, argued that Scott's novels showed the way forward – take away the descriptive elements, and you were left with what he termed Romantic tragedy.[4] Gain-Montagnac, a distinctly obscurer contemporary, was similarly convinced, insisting that the interest of readers and audiences could only be compelled by writers depicting in an authentic setting those historical figures who had influenced the fate of nations.[5]

The sheer quantity of historical fiction that poured from the presses in Restoration France was by no means matched by its quality. Moreover, what there was that rose above the mediocre was often not altogether successful in terms either of its understanding of Scott or its viability within the genre. Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* (1826) deliberately rejected Scott's method: it foregrounded characters who had really existed in history and replaced impartiality with ideological tendentiousness. Balzac's *Les Chouans* (1829) reflected a dubiously over-sexed view of the historical process, essentially based on the theory that Scott had failed to allow sufficiently for the role played by women and passion. Mérimée's *Chronicle of Charles IX's Reign* (1829) was a sequence of tableaux searching not very energetically for a plot (Mérimée himself remarked in his preface that he only enjoyed the anecdotal aspects of history). Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) developed concerns that were literary and artistic rather than historical, the author himself

2 G. Lukàcs, *The Historical Novel* (1936), Merlin, London 1962, p. 25

3 quoted in S. Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, Twayne, New York 1995, p. 14

4 Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823), Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1970, p. 53

5 J.-R. de Gain-Montagnac, 'Discours Préliminaire', *Théâtre*, Potey & Petit, Paris 1820, p. viii

viewing it as fundamentally a work of imagination, caprice and fantasy.[6] Arguably the most successful of them all, George Sand's *Mauprat* (1837), was not primarily perceived as a historical novel, although this failure certainly undervalues both its importance and its relevance.

Dumas gave the French historical novel its second wind. He had already been at the forefront of the Romantic movement's conquest of the theatre: indeed, his *Henry III and his Court* (1829) predates by a year Hugo's better-known (and better) verse drama *Hernani* (1830). The first play he ever wrote on his own (in 1822) had been an adaptation of Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and he had returned to Scott as a source of inspiration for his 1831 success *Richard Darlington*, loosely based on *The Surgeon's Daughter*. His decision to switch from drama to the novel in the late 1830s represented a new lease of life for the genre inaugurated by Scott, but which, by the time he came to reinvigorate it, was looking a trifle anaemic. Dumas's approach, however, was, by virtue of the consumer context in which he was operating, rather different from that of his celebrated predecessor.

In fact, the early seventeenth century in France was a period ideally suited to Scott's method of recreating the past. In its epic confrontation between the centralising and modernising genius of Cardinal Richelieu on the one hand and the centrifugal, individualist and separatist tendencies of the great feudal nobles on the other, it offered a convincing exemplification of that conflict that Coleridge had shown to be at the heart of Scott's method. Oddly, Scott himself had never attempted to deal with it (although he did depict the corresponding period in Britain in *The Fortunes of Nigel* [1822]). One of his earlier disciples, G. P. R. James, however, wrote a first novel called *Richelieu* (1829), translated almost immediately into French.[7] Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* and Hugo's verse-drama *Marion De Lorme* (1829) were also set in the last days of Richelieu's ministry. None of these depictions had been at all favourable to the cardinal, 'that man of blood and treachery' as Anne of Austria terms him in James's novel. The Romantics disliked him because, historically and culturally, he stood for everything they detested. They saw him as a codifier and a classifier, a leveller and a bureaucrat, intent on suppressing flamboyant individualism, whether in the lifestyles of the great nobility or the literary ambitions of the dramatic poet Pierre Corneille. They admittedly found this distaste

6 quoted in L. Maigron, *Le Roman Historique à l'Epoque Romantique*, Slatkine, Geneva 1970 (reprint of original 1898 edition), p. 334

7 by Auguste Defauconpret, who had previously been responsible for the French versions of the *Waverley Novels*

rather difficult to reconcile with the fact that at his death he left France so much more influential and powerful than he found it, and this ambiguity resurfaces to some extent in *The Three Musketeers*. In the novel, Dumas recognises in Richelieu 'that moral force which made him one of the most unparalleled of mankind' (p. 123), whilst trivialising his motives for action and, in terms of his relationship with d'Artagnan and his friends, repeatedly depicting him as the villain of the piece.

The Three Musketeers is set at a slightly earlier period in Richelieu's ministry than either Vigny's or James's novel – not that this much matters, since Dumas is fairly cavalier in his approach to historical fact, and rather approximate in matters of both age and chronology. Thus, for example, the French queen Anne of Austria ages by three years (p. 109), Richelieu is rejuvenated by four (p. 123) and the real d'Artagnan turns out to be sixteen years the junior of his fictional equivalent.[8] The novel's time span as chronicled by events in the text appears to be only slightly in excess of one year, but the narrative none the less begins in April 1625 (p. 5) and extends to include the siege of La Rochelle and the assassination of Buckingham, which took place in August 1628. But whereas for Scott history was a primary consideration, constituting the very fabric of the novel, for Dumas it ultimately remains a secondary one. Though he preens himself in *The Companions of Jehu* (1857), a novel about the Revolutionary period in France, that he has taught the French as much about five and a half centuries of their history as any mere historian, such an assertion hardly seems plausible in any context other than the purely anecdotal.

Dumas's seventeenth century is essentially history seen through the eyes of *Hello!* magazine. It can be characterised to some extent as a throwback to the days of the courtly romance of the medieval period with its emphasis on deeds of derring-do and the quest for the beloved, or, as F. W. J. Hemmings remarks, 'a peculiarly rose-tinted, partial, not so much distorted as disinfected view of the past'.[9] We think of television adaptations of literary classics where both linen and teeth are far too white, and there is perhaps (for modern tastes) too much of a cartoon element to the bloody business of duelling: 'In three seconds d'Artagnan gave him three wounds, saying, at each thrust – "One for Athos, one for Porthos, and one for Aramis." At the third stroke the gentleman fell like

8 Dumas in fact knew nothing about the 'real' d'Artagnan (1623–73); such information as he did have at his disposal derived from the work of Courtilz de Sandrars (see Note 12).

9 F. W. J. Hemmings, *The King of Romance*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1979, p. 123

a log' (p. 177). Dumas, with his usual disarming honesty, admitted to having turned Scott's method on its head. Scott, he wrote, bored his readers by long descriptions of his characters. What was necessary was to begin with action rather than with preparation, to talk about the characters after their appearance rather than have them appear after talking about them. Elsewhere, he was even more candid about his approach to history:

> I start by devising a story. I try to make it romantic, moving, dramatic, and... search through the annals of the past to find a frame in which to set it; and it has never happened that history has failed to provide this frame, so exactly adjusted to the subject that it seemed it was not a case of the frame being made for the picture, but that the picture had been made to fit into the frame.[10]

As Henri Clouard observes, such a method leads Dumas into the byways of history, emphasising the life of individuals as opposed to that of nations, private passions as opposed to public ones, a sort of second-string sub-history more attuned to the tastes of the casual reader.[11]

Essentially, then, Dumas is not really writing historical novels but historical romances. This is not to suggest that he and his collaborator, Auguste Maquet, did not research the historical background of the novel quite carefully. They did, and the text bears frequent and eloquent witness to this. Maquet, in any case, had some pretensions to scholarship, even if Dumas had none. But the interest remains essentially an anecdotal one, derived in large part from some of the less reliable memorialists of the period. For all that Dumas gives us descriptions of the Merlaison ball (Chapter 22) or the French army's dispositions for the siege of La Rochelle (Chapters 41 and 43), for all that he describes his characters' costumes and offers us thumbnail sketches of the characters of Louis XIII, Anne of Austria, Monsieur de Treville and so forth, there is no real sense that history is anything other than a gorgeous and colourful décor against which the events of the novel are played out. Despite their rather reprehensible mania for duelling and their enthusiasm for the pleasures of the table, d'Artagnan and his friends seem more like tourists in the seventeenth century than inhabitants of it. There is really very little to convince us that they belong there rather than anywhere else in time, even though painstaking historical research has shown that all of them bear the names of individuals who genuinely existed. Dumas largely sidesteps the weighty political and diplomatic issues of the period and

10 quoted, ibid.

11 Clouard, *Alexandre Dumas*, Albin Michel, Paris 1955, p. 250

reduces everything to the level of personal animosity and amorous rivalry, never more so than in the siege of La Rochelle, of which he comments that 'the true stake, in this game which two powerful kingdoms were playing for the pleasure of two amorous men, was nothing more than a glance from the eye of Anne of Austria' (p. 350).

And, after all, why not? Dumas never intended to pose as a serious or professional historian, of whom there were in any case all too many in the France of the 1840s. His claim to fame is above all that he was, as Charles Samaran notes, the father of the popular novel.[12] And the speed at which he wrote, constrained as he was by the requirements of the *roman-feuilleton* with its insatiable chapter-a-day demands for copy, tended in any case to militate against coherent structure, depth of argument and characterisation, and indeed against accuracy in general. Generations of critics have taken him to task for the frequent inconsistencies of chronology, character and plot that his method of working inevitably entailed, but for all that the upshot here is ultimately a highly engaging, if rather meandering novel that carries its hero d'Artagnan forward via a series of encounters and adventures (arrival and installation in Paris, Buckingham and the queen's diamonds, the siege of La Rochelle) to the final confrontation with Milady. These are recounted with tremendous *élan*, even if the cynical reader is sometimes overly aware of Dumas's enslavement to the penny-a-line requirements of serial fiction. This is most apparent in the way in which dialogue exchanges are on occasion spun out beyond the bounds of plausibility (for example, d'Artagnan's and Richelieu's conversations with Bonancieux in Chapters 8 and 14 respectively, or the discussion between Milady and Rochefort in Chapter 62).

Perhaps as a consequence of the way Dumas wrote, his characters are memorable more in their simplicity than in their complexity: there is more than a touch of two-dimensionality about most of them. Of the musketeers, Athos is essentially anachronistic, because his sensibility is very firmly that of the nineteenth-century Byronic hero, the aristocrat whose life is doomed and blighted by an initially nameless sadness. Like the Byronic hero (and his earlier French counterparts), Athos alternates between galvanic activity and morose inertia, here exemplified by a tendency to absorb gargantuan amounts of alcohol (apparently with few of the ill-effects habitually experienced by the rest of suffering humanity). Porthos alternates too – somewhat oddly – between the shrewd and the stupid: it is rather difficult to reconcile the smooth operator who is so

12 A. Dumas, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, ed. C. Samaran, Garnier, Paris 1968, 'Avertissement'

successful at wheedling significant amounts of money out of the cheeseparing Madame Coquenard and her even stingier husband, and the dimwit who needs to have all d'Artagnan's schemes and stratagems explained to him in words of one syllable. Aramis, paranoiacally secretive and the least attractive of the three, seems unable to make up his mind whether to be a priest, a soldier or a ladykiller, although his preoccupation with his personal appearance – 'pinching his ear to make it red, as he had before waved his hands to make them white' (p. 235) – even in moments of deep theological debate, seems to indicate where his real interest lies. However, whereas Dumas does at least attempt to explain the contradictions in Athos's character (Chapter 27), he leaves us to try to work out Aramis for ourselves. In the event, we find the challenge too difficult, simply because there is just too little evidence available to us.

For all the inherent weaknesses of his characterisation, Dumas holds his central quartet together very engagingly and perfectly convincingly. He is possibly less successful in his treatment of d'Artagnan's opponents. Rochefort, 'the man of Meung', remains a shadowy figure, whose main attribute appears to be the ability to elude d'Artagnan with a frequency that defies belief. His final semi-reconciliation with the hero – a feature of the distinctly odd conclusion of the novel, of which more anon – is diminished in impact by a role significantly more marginal than we are initially led to expect. We are told early on that Rochefort is to have 'a vast influence' (p. 9) on d'Artagnan's future life, and later that he is ' "my evil genius" ' (p. 211), but the evidence is less than overwhelming. Milady, on the other hand (or 'her ladyship' as this translator calls her), occupies a peripheral position at the beginning of the novel (she is 'the lady of Meung' to Rochefort's 'man of Meung'), subsequently moving centre stage to a point where she almost dominates it. There is a juncture at which d'Artagnan and his fellow musketeers almost entirely vanish from view (Chapters 49 to 59) and the story collapses into a melodramatic farrago as Milady seduces the credulous Felton into liberating her from captivity and assassinating the Duke of Buckingham. It is as if Dumas, like d'Artagnan himself, has become transfixed by the spell woven by his own creation, and this has explosive consequences in the concluding pages of the novel. Here all the gloomy paraphernalia of Gothic fiction is deployed in the judgment, condemnation and execution of Milady, in a scene which moves us from the realms of the novel to those of grand opera. Dumas spares no effort in orchestrating his effects. The elements – storm clouds, high winds, thunder, lightning, torrential rain, moon red as blood – set the scene for the musketeers and Lord de Winter, a self-constituted secret tribunal, to bring Milady to justice. De Winter, d'Artagnan and Athos intone in almost identical and repeated

phraseology the accusations (pp. 539–40). Porthos and Aramis, acting as the chorus, express repugnance (' "Oh, horror!" ') and pronounce sentence. The wretched Milady is thereupon duly beheaded by the executioner of Lille, whose brother she had coincidentally seduced. It is the most sublimely ludicrous stuff, and the subscribers to *Le Siècle* lapped it up – as have generations of readers ever since!

Even in respect of Milady herself, however, Dumas, relying on the cardboard characterisation of melodrama, gives us relatively little to go on. We are never quite sure whether she is English or French (she speaks both languages perfectly). We know next to nothing of her background. The name under which she is condemned to die, Anne de Breuil, suggests (if it is her real one) that she is of noble birth, but the only evidence of this appears to be her confinement in a convent at an early age. It must indeed have been at a very early age, since she is sixteen when she marries Athos (p. 255) and supposedly only twenty or twenty-two when d'Artagnan encounters her in Chapter 1. We never, moreover, have any inkling as to why she takes such a perverse and sadistic pleasure in doing evil, although by the end of the novel we are more than prepared to accept Athos's contention that ' "you are not a woman . . . you do not belong to the human race: you are a demon escaped from hell" ' (p. 544). Even Richelieu, the man who controls everything and everyone, is secretly frightened of her and not entirely unrelieved when she goes to meet her Maker (p. 551). There is certainly something of the uncanny, perhaps even a touch of the supernatural about her, combined with a slightly alarming sexual voracity (evidenced in her obsessive infatuation with de Wardes). She also displays an unnerving tendency to alternate without warning between icy malevolence, frantic rage and (when things are not going her way) panic terror.

Among those characters on the side of the angels, d'Artagnan and his improbable girlfriend Constance Bonancieux pose problems too. Both effectively suffer from split-personality syndrome. The symbolically named Constance of the earlier part of the novel, tough, sparky, resourceful, energetic, totally committed to her unhappy mistress the queen, is a far cry from the frightened, gullible, pathetic creature whom Milady encounters and destroys at the convent in Béthune in the closing pages. It seems probable that this rather irritating personality bypass is performed on her by Dumas as a way of underlining the unscrupulous wickedness of Milady, whose method of revenging herself on d'Artagnan he may have aimed to render yet more obnoxious by accentuating the victim's helpless innocence and transforming her into an angelic, suffering Romantic heroine. It is notable, at all events, that Milady describes her as a ' "dear little pretty thing" ' (p. 513), despite the

fact that she is in fact – or so it would seem – slightly older than her murderess (p. 88).[13]

D'Artagnan's relationships with women are somewhat tangled, to put it mildly. Essentially he is a man's man, in a novel where the importance of male bonding is paramount. Dumas stresses not only the friendship that unites the new arrival from Gascony with the three musketeers, but also the way in which, in 'this coalition of four brave, enterprising and active young men' (p. 73), he rapidly assumes the leading role. ' "He is the cleverest of the party" ' (p. 83), says Athos, as both he and Aramis cheerfully defer to him and oblige Porthos to do likewise (Chapter 9). In this preponderantly masculine context, d'Artagnan's sudden affection for Constance Bonancieux appears to be a rather half-hearted version of that Romantic (or just romantic) commonplace, love at first sight. At all events, it is half-hearted enough to allow him to experience relatively little compunction in devoting himself to the seduction of Milady. The translation we read, conscious of the susceptibilities of its Victorian readers, is less than frank about what occurs in Chapter 37, thus giving rise to a degree of perplexity as to why, at the beginning of the following chapter, d'Artagnan is decked out in a woman's hood and cloak. Dumas's original French makes it clear that he flees, stark naked, from Milady's bed when, by mischance, he reveals the brand on her shoulder, and acquires this somewhat unbefitting apparel in the course of his headlong departure. Given the fact that Dumas also suggests (in Chapter 33 – needless to say, the translation glosses over this as well) that d'Artagnan, *en route* to Milady's embraces, also seduces Kitty the chambermaid, we might be forgiven for entertaining doubts as to the moral character of the supposedly lovelorn swain.

In fact Dumas's d'Artagnan seems to be an uneasy composite of the writer's sources and his imagination. Jean-Yves Tadié notes that many of Dumas's novels start with the solitary figure of the traveller on the road and *The Three Musketeers* is no exception (Scott's *Quentin Durward* begins in precisely the same way).[14] The protagonist is the innocent abroad, and d'Artagnan's early experiences are very much variations on the theme of the naïve young hothead's first time away from home. But amongst Dumas's source material were the fictionalised memoirs of the 'real' d'Artagnan, written in a racily picaresque

13 The French text gives her age as twenty-five or twenty-six, which the translator, perhaps with a view to minimising inconsistencies, amends to twenty-two or twenty-three.

14 J.-Y. Tadié, *Le Roman d'Aventures*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1982, p. 35

style by Gatien de Courtilz de Sandrars (1644–1712). These 'memoirs' depict the hero somewhat differently from the callow youth most likely to endear himself to a readership that would have been predominantly (lower) middle-class and at least partly female. Pressed for time as he was, Dumas was not as fussed about such inconsistencies as more leisured readers might be.[15] In any case, as we have seen, character psychology was not his strong suit, a contention to which the attempt in Chapter 35 to reconcile d'Artagnan's feelings towards Milady with his love for Constance Bonancieux bears eloquent witness. If d'Artagnan's heart is 'little sensitive' (p. 311), then it seems slightly bizarre that 'the memory of Madame Bonancieux' should be 'but rarely absent from him' (p. 315). If he is resolved to avenge both himself and Madame Bonancieux, then it is less than convincing that 'all the ideas of vengeance which he had brought with him' should have 'completely vanished' (p. 313) and this immediately after hearing Milady refer to him as ' "that monster of a Gascon" ' (p. 312), and committing herself to taking revenge upon *him*.

The great triumph of *The Three Musketeers*, however, is the brilliance with which Dumas exploits the essential requirements and characteristics of the popular novel of which he was one of the first and best practitioners. What he aims to do, he does superlatively well – well enough to enthral not only the readers of *Le Siècle* in the mid-1840s, but generations of readers, the young and the not so young, down to the present day. He tells a great story so compellingly that we happily engage in that willing suspension of disbelief that Coleridge defined as the principle of poetic faith – and by extension, we may say, of narrative art.[16] If Dumas were alive today, he would certainly not be bidding for the Nobel Prize for Literature, but writing scripts for the French equivalents of *The Bill* or *Brookside*. For the serial-fiction addicts of the nineteenth century were the ancestors of those millions amongst us who religiously switch on our TV sets three and four evenings a week to follow the adventures of our soap-opera heroes and heroines. Critics may sneer (though how many are secret addicts behind drawn curtains?), but Dumas had an unerring sense of what *worked*, what *felt right* in the context. If, as I have suggested, his readers relished the demise of Milady at the hands of the executioner of Lille, it is essentially because, in spite

15 Dumas was indebted most notably to the *Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan* (1700) and the *Mémoires de Monsieur le Comte de Rochefort* (1687). The discovery of the brand on Milady's shoulder in fact derives from the latter work.

16 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. G. Watson, Everyman, London 1965, p. 169

of all the bells and whistles of his melodramatic frills and furbelows, Dumas was giving them what they wanted to read. It is here that, paradoxically, his weaknesses become his strengths. With no time to check or to rewrite, Dumas had to concentrate on sustaining the interest of a relatively unsophisticated readership sufficiently to spur them on to go out and buy the next issue of the newspaper in which the serial was appearing. This he does magnificently. Of course he melodramatises, but melodrama's great achievement is to clarify and simplify the issues, in such a way as to enable the ordinary reader to identify passionately with the forces of virtue, truth and justice, and to read on, gripped and oblivious of all else, as the narrative surges irresistibly to an outcome which satisfies his or her innate moral sense. No one would deny that Balzac was a greater writer than Dumas, but the serialisation of *The Peasants* in *La Presse* was a disaster – F. W. J. Hemmings notes that it 'had been driving the unappreciative readers . . . crazy with boredom'.[17] The great names of popular fiction in the 1840s – Dumas himself, Frédéric Soulié, Eugène Sue – were successful precisely because their gifts either matched or could be adapted to the requirements of a readership that had no time – or inclination – to sit down for hours on end to wade through Balzac's superb (but remorselessly long) descriptions of towns and buildings and acute analysis of character.

But there is more to Dumas's enduring success over the years than an ability to create strong situations and resolve them to the audience's satisfaction. Charles Samaran is surely right to point out that Dumas also rates among the classics for qualities some way removed from those associated with writers more commonly thought to merit the accolade. Dumas's great talents, he suggests, are those of the king of dialogue (verve was a word frequently used by contemporary critics), and the prince of suspense.[18] As I have said, Dumas was not beyond overplaying his hand in the realm of dialogue, but at his best he can make his more celebrated contemporaries look pretty leaden in comparison. D'Artagnan's first meeting with Constance Bonancieux in Chapter 10 is a case in point. In the space of four pages, Dumas, without wasting a word, contrives not only to involve d'Artagnan up to his neck in the ramifications of the queen's affair with Buckingham, but to invest the conversation with a degree of flirtatiousness that makes it perfectly plausible that the young Gascon should take his leave 'with the most amorous glance that he could possibly concentrate upon her charming little person' (p. 92).

17 Hemmings, op. cit., p. 117

18 Samaran, loc. cit.

Dickens, as complete a master of the serial fiction form in England as Dumas was in France, memorably defined his own art as follows:

> It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. . . . Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight.[19]

Dickens's argument is precisely that melodrama is no more than a heightened form of real life, with its 'transitions from well-spread boards to deathbeds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments',[20] but Dumas additionally uses this type of juxtaposition to achieve suspense and keep his readers dangling. A particularly striking example of this may be seen in Chapter 32 where, having in the previous instalment intrigued his readers by chronicling the initial stages of the three-way relationship between Milady, d'Artagnan and Kitty the chambermaid, Dumas breaks off for the space of an entire episode to transport us to the abode of Master Coquenard, where the luckless Porthos is to be entertained to dinner. More commonly, he uses the time-honoured device of the cliffhanger, as at the end of Chapter 39, where d'Artagnan is ushered into the presence of a man writing at a desk – 'He raised his head; and d'Artagnan recognised the cardinal' (p. 342). In this case, Dumas plays fair, and continues the narrative in the following day's instalment. A little later, at the end of Chapter 41, we find a refinement of the technique. D'Artagnan, having just escaped death at the hands of Milady's hired assassins, thinks he can relax: 'This tranquillity, however, proved one thing – that d'Artagnan did not yet thoroughly estimate her ladyship' (p. 359). The opening of the following chapter seems to bear no relationship to this ominous conclusion – but we should not allow ourselves to be deceived . . .

Isabelle Jan highlights the roller-coaster element in Dumas's novels, likening them to a headlong flight where there is no time to pause or even to draw breath.[21] This aspect of the narrative is emphasised by Dumas's use of the device of the race against time. This can be seen in a number of variations, and is admittedly sometimes over-indulged – for example,

19 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. K. Tillotson, World's Classics, Oxford 1982, p. 102

20 ibid.

21 I. Jan, *Alexandre Dumas Romancier*, Editions Ouvrières, Paris 1973, p. 21

Milady's extended psychological campaign to seduce Felton before Buckingham can put his signature to the warrant for her transportation. It is perhaps most memorably achieved in the affair of Anne of Austria's diamond studs, which the musketeers must go to England to retrieve from Buckingham in time to prevent her humiliation by Richelieu at the Merlaison ball. Dumas's handling of this episode is quite masterly: one after another, the musketeers fall by the wayside, until only d'Artagnan is left. He arrives in London: Buckingham is at Windsor. He arrives at Windsor: Buckingham is out hawking with the king. Once Buckingham has been located and the studs produced, it is discovered that two of them have been stolen by Milady: identical copies must be made, as precious moments tick away. Back across the Channel rushes our hero, galloping from staging-post to staging-post, fresh horses mysteriously appearing to speed him on his way – 'nearly sixty leagues in twelve hours' (p. 189) and – of course – he gets there in time. It is Dumas's equivalent of the modern car chase or hospital mercy dash – and just as exciting.

To these attributes we should add that of humour, in which regard Dumas, despite his aspersions on Scott, may well not have been above learning a thing or two from his illustrious predecessor. There are some marvellously comical set-pieces in the novel, notably the unfolding of Porthos's relationship with the increasingly desperate Madame Coquenard (Chapters 29 and 32), d'Artagnan's 'rescue' of Aramis from the theologians at Crèvecoeur (Chapter 26), and the celebrated scene in which the musketeers nonchalantly consume their breakfast in the Saint-Gervais bastion with Huguenot bullets whistling round their ears (Chapter 47). Let us not forget, too, the case of mistaken identity in Chapter 13, where Athos, masquerading as d'Artagnan, is finally forced to admit to his own name – giving rise to the immortal (if despairing) reaction of his interrogator: ' "But that is not the name of a man; it is the name of a mountain!' " (p. 119). And – surely the mark of a true classic – one line in particular in *The Three Musketeers* has become part of our collective literary folk memory, on a par with Sherlock Holmes dismissing his feats of detection as elementary or Oliver Twist asking for more. This is, of course, the unforgettable oath of the musketeers, as d'Artagnan says to his new-found friends: ' "And now, gentlemen . . . 'All for one – one for all!'; this is our motto, is it not?" ' (p. 84)?[22]

What is not altogether clear, however, is exactly where Dumas intended to leave the apparently indissolubly bonded d'Artagnan and the

22 It is strange, given the way in which this formula (or a variation of it) has passed into the collective consciousness, that Dumas, after using it twice in Chapter 9 of the novel, never repeats it.