

Alexandre Dumas, père

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Born: July 24, 1802
Villers-Cotterêts, Aisne, France

Died: December 5, 1870
Puis (near Dieppe, Seine-Maritime), France

Occupation: playwright and novelist

Nationality: France

Writing period: 1829 - 1870

Literary movement: Romanticism and Historical fiction

Alexandre Dumas, père, born **Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie** (July 24, 1802 – December 5, 1870) was a French writer, best known for his numerous historical novels of high adventure which have made him one of the most widely read French authors in the world. Many of his novels, including *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask* were serialized, and he also wrote plays and magazine articles and was a prolific correspondent.

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Origins and early life

Alexandre Dumas was born on July 24, 1802, in the town of Villers-Cotterêts in France. He was the son of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, a French General, and of Marie-Louise Élisabeth Labouret, the daughter of an innkeeper. His father was himself the son of the Marquis Alexandre-Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, who served the government of France as Général commissaire in the Artillery in the colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), and his black slave Marie-Céssette Dumas. This made Alexandre Dumas a quarter black.

General Dumas died in 1806 when Alexandre was not yet four years old, leaving a nearly impoverished mother to raise him under difficult conditions. Although Marie-Louise was unable to provide her son with much in the way of education, it did not hinder young Alexandre's love of books, and he read everything he could get his hands on.

Growing up, his mother's stories of his father's brave military deeds during the glory years of Napoleon I of France spawned Alexandre's vivid imagination for adventure and heroes. Although

poor, the family still had the father's distinguished reputation and aristocratic connections, and after the restoration of the monarchy, twenty-year-old Alexandre Dumas moved to Paris where he obtained employment at the Palais Royal in the office of the powerful duc d'Orléans.

Literary career

While working in Paris, Dumas began to write articles for magazines as well as plays for the theatre. In 1829 his first solo play, *Henry III and his Court*, was produced, meeting with great public acclaim. The following year his second play, *Christine*, proved equally popular, and as a result, he was financially able to work full time at writing. In 1830, he participated in the revolution that ousted King Charles X and replaced him on the throne with Dumas's former employer, the duc d'Orléans, who would rule as Louis-Philippe, the *Citizen King*.

Until the mid-1830s, life in France remained unsettled with sporadic riots by disgruntled Republicans and impoverished urban workers seeking change. As life slowly returned to normal, the nation began to industrialize and, with an

improving economy combined with the end of press censorship, the times turned out to be very rewarding for the skills of Alexandre Dumas.

After writing more successful plays, he turned his efforts to novels. Although attracted to an extravagant lifestyle, and always spending more than he earned, Dumas proved to be a very astute business marketer. With high demand from newspapers for serial novels, in 1838, he simply rewrote one of his plays to create his first serial novel. Titled *Le Capitaine Paul*, it led to his forming a production studio that turned out hundreds of stories, all subject to his personal input and direction.

From 1839 to 1841, Dumas, with the assistance of several friends, compiled *Celebrated Crimes*, an eight-volume collection of essays on famous criminals and crimes from European history, including essays on Beatrice Cenci, Martin Guerre, Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia and more recent incidents including the cases of executed alleged murderers Karl Ludwig Sand and Antoine François Desrues.

Dumas also collaborated with his fencing master Augustin Grisier in his 1840 novel *The Fencing*

Master. The story is written to be Grisier's narrated account of how he came to be witness to events in the Decembrist revolt in Russia. This novel was eventually banned in Russia by Czar Nicholas I of Russia, causing Dumas to be forbidden to visit Russia until the Czar's death. Grisier is also mentioned with great respect in both *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Corsican Brothers* as well as Dumas's memoirs.

In 1840, he married an actress, Ida Ferrier, but continued with his numerous liaisons with other women, fathering at least three illegitimate children. One of those children, a son named after him, would follow in his footsteps, also becoming a successful novelist and playwright. Because of their same name and occupation, to distinguish them, one is referred to as Alexandre Dumas, *père*, the other as Alexandre Dumas, *fils*.

Dumas made extensive use of the aid of numerous ghostwriters of which Auguste Maquet was the best known. It was Maquet who outlined the plot of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and made substantial contributions to *The Three Musketeers* and its sequels, as well as several of Dumas's other novels. When working together, Maquet proposed plots and wrote drafts, while Dumas added the details,

dialogues, and the final chapters.

His writing earned him a great deal of money, but Dumas was frequently broke or in debt as a result of spending lavishly on women and high living. The large and costly Château de Monte-Cristo that he built was often filled with strangers and acquaintances who took advantage of his generosity.



Alexandre Dumas, photo by Nadar.

When King Louis-Philippe was ousted in a revolt, Dumas was not looked upon favorably by the newly elected President, Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1851 Dumas fled to Brussels, Belgium, to escape his creditors, and from there he

traveled to Russia where French was the second language and his writings were enormously popular. Dumas spent two years in Russia before moving on to seek adventure and fodder for more stories. In March of 1861, the kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, with Victor Emmanuel II as its king. For the next three years, Alexandre Dumas would be involved in the fight for a united Italy, founding and leading a newspaper named *Indipendente* and returning to Paris in 1864.

Despite Alexandre Dumas' success and aristocratic connections, his being of mixed-race would affect him all his life. In 1843, he wrote a short novel, *Georges*, that addressed some of the issues of race and the effects of colonialism. Nevertheless, racist attitudes affected his rightful position in France's history long after his death on December 5, 1870, at the age of 68.

In June 2005, Dumas's recently-discovered last novel *The Knight of Sainte-Hermine* went on sale in France. Within the story, Dumas describes the Battle of Trafalgar in which the death of Lord Nelson is explained. The novel was being published serially and was almost complete by the time of his death. A final two-and-a-half chapters were written by modern-day Dumas scholar

Claude Schopp.

Works

Fiction

Alexandre Dumas, père wrote stories and historical chronicles of high adventure that captured the imagination of the French public who eagerly waited to purchase the continuing sagas. A few of these works are:

- The Women's War
- When Pierrot Was Young by Alexandre Dumas-French 1975
- *Charles VII at the Homes of His Great Vassals* (*Charles VII chez ses grands vassaux*), drama, adapted for the opera *The Saracen* by Russian composer César Cui
- *The Fencing Master* (*Le maître d'armes*, 1840)
- *The Nutcracker* (1844): a revision of Hoffmann's story, later adapted by Tchaikovsky as a ballet
- the D'Artagnan Romances:
 - *The Three Musketeers* (*Les Trois Mousquetaires*, 1844)
 - *Twenty Years After* (*Vingt Ans Après*,

1845)

- *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* (*Le Vicomte de Bragelonne, ou Dix ans plus tard*, 1847): When published in English it was usually split into three parts: *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, *Louise de la Valliere*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*, of which the last part is the best known.
- *The Count of Monte Cristo* (*Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, 1845–1846)
- *The Regent's Daughter* (1845)
- *The Two Dianas* (1846)
- the Valois romances
 - *Queen Margot* (1845)
 - *La Dame de Monsoreau* (1846) (a.k.a. *Chicot the Jester*)
 - *The Forty-Five Guardsmen* (1847)
- the Marie Antoinette romances:
 - *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge* (1845) (a.k.a. *The Knight of the Red House*, or *The Knight of Maison-Rouge*)
 - *Joseph Balsamo* (1846–1848) (a.k.a. *Memoirs of a Physician*, *Cagliostro*, *Madame Dubarry*, *The Countess Dubarry*, or *The Elixir of Life*)
 - *The Queen's Necklace* (1849–1850)
 - *Ange Pitou* (1853) (a.k.a. *Storming the Bastille* or *Six Years Later*)

- *The Countess de Charny* (1853–1855) (a.k.a. *Andrée de Taverney* or *The Mesmerist's Victim*)
- *The Black Tulip* (*La Tulipe noire*, 1850)
- *The Wolf-Leader* (*Le Meneur de loups*, 1857)
- *The Gold Thieves* (after 1857): a play that was lost but rediscovered by the Canadian Reginald Hamel researcher in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2004
- *The Knight of Sainte-Hermine* (*Le Chevalier de Sainte-Hermine*, 1869): The novel was his last major work and was lost until its rediscovery by Claude Schopp was announced in 2005.

Drama

Though best known now as a novelist, Dumas earned his first fame as a dramatist. His *Henri III et sa cour* (1829) was the first of the great Romantic historical dramas produced on the Paris stage, preceding Victor Hugo's more famous *Hernani* (1830). Produced at the Comédie-Française and starring the famous Mademoiselle Mars, Dumas's play was an enormous success, launching him on his career. It had fifty performances over the next year, extraordinary at

the time.

Other hits followed. For example, *Antony* (1831), a drama with a contemporary Byronic hero, is considered the first non-historical Romantic drama. It starred Mars's great rival Marie Dorval. There were also *La Tour de Nesle* (1832), another historical melodrama; and *Kean* (1836), based on the life of the great, and recently deceased, English actor Edmund Kean, played in turn by the great French actor Frédérick Lemaître. Dumas wrote many more plays and dramatized several of his own novels.

Non-fiction

Dumas was also a prolific writer of non-fiction. He wrote journal articles on politics and culture, and books on French history.

His massive *Grand dictionnaire de cuisine* (*Great Dictionary of Cuisine*) was published posthumously in 1873. It is a combination of encyclopedia and cookbook. Dumas was both a gourmet and an expert cook. An abridged version, the *Petit dictionnaire de cuisine* (*Small Dictionary of Cuisine*), was published in 1882.

He was also a well-known travel writer, writing such books as

- *Impressions de voyage: En Suisse* (*Travel Impressions: In Switzerland* , 1834)
- *Une Année à Florence* (*A Year in Florence* , 1841)
- *De Paris à Cadix* (*From Paris to Cadiz* , 1847)
- *Le Caucase* (*The Caucasus*, 1859)
- *Impressions de voyage: En Russie* (*Travel Impressions: In Russia* , 1860).

Posthumous recognition

Buried in the place where he had been born, Alexandre Dumas remained in the cemetery at Villers-Cotterêts until November 30, 2002. Under orders of the French President, Jacques Chirac, his body was exhumed, and in a televised ceremony, his new coffin, draped in a blue-velvet cloth and flanked by four Republican Guards costumed as the Musketeers - Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D'Artagnan - was transported in a solemn procession to the Panthéon of Paris, the great mausoleum where French luminaries are interred.

In his speech, President Chirac said: "With you, we were D'Artagnan, Monte Cristo, or Balsamo, riding along the roads of France, touring battlefields, visiting palaces and castles—with you, we dream." In an interview following the ceremony, President Chirac acknowledged the racism that had existed, saying that a wrong had now been righted with Alexandre Dumas enshrined alongside fellow authors Victor Hugo and Voltaire.

The honor recognized that although France has produced many great writers, none have been as widely read as Alexandre Dumas. His stories have been translated into almost a hundred languages, and have inspired more than 200 motion pictures.

Alexandre Dumas's home outside of Paris, the Château Monte Cristo, has been restored and is open to the public.

See also

- Ada Menken

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External links

- Works by Alexandre Dumas, père at Project Gutenberg
- The Alexandre Dumas père Web Site, with a complete bibliography and notes about many of the works.
- Herald Sun: Lost Dumas play discovered
- Lost Dumas novel hits bookshelves
- Dumas' Works: text, concordances and frequency lists
- Rafferty, Terrence. "All for One", *The New York Times*, August 20, 2006 (a review of the new translation of *The Three Musketeers*, ISBN 0670037796)
- 1866 Caricature of Alexandre Dumas by André Gill
- Freely downloadable works of Alexandre Dumas in PDF format (text mode)

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