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Alexandre Dumas: The Original Musketeer

ROUNAK MAHTAB

Abstract:

Alexandre Dumas was the most well loved French historical novelist who created a new genre in classical French literature with his themes of high adventure and romance. Writing in his unique flamboyant style, his stories of intrigues, valour, and of course, love, captured the imagination of the French readership in those days. However, his versatility saw him transcend several genres as a playwright, a columnist, and a well-read travel writer. Today the works of Dumas are immortalised in books of many languages, plays, and cinema.

KEYWORDS:

The Original Musketeer

1.THE GREY LINEAGE

Alexandre Dumas was born to the Napoleonic General Thomas –Alexandre and Marie-Louise Elisabeth Labouret in 1802 in Picardy of France. His father, Thomas- Alexandre was the son of the distinguished Commissaire of Saint Domingue Marquis Alexandre-Antoine Davy but had a Creole mother, Louise-Césstte Dumas. That lineage remained to haunt his father and after him, Alexandre Dumas throughout their life. Thomas-Alexandre protesting against his father's abhorrence for his Afro-Caribbean descent on his mother's side , assumed her surname 'Dumas' and went on to serve with distinction in the Italian and Egyptian campaigns of Napoleon. The narration of his exploits by his wife to their young son fired Alexandre Dumas' imagination and quite often became the setting in many of his novels. However, despite his successes he had to face the prejudices and discriminations of the French society on being a Mulatto; a liability that the young Alexandre Dumas inherited. In fact, Dumas refused to travel to America terrified that he would be sold into slavery, which was persisting there at that time.

2.THE EARLY STRUGGLE

Thomas-Alexandre died in 1806, barely four years after Alexandre Dumas was born. With limited resources, his widowed mother could afford young Alexandre only a modest upbringing. As he came of age, she sent him off to Paris to seek a career with nothing but some letter of introductions addressed to his father's former friends. This formed the setting for the initial pages of *Les trois mousquetaires* (Dumas, 1884) where D'Artagnan, set foot in Paris with only a letter of introduction from his father to his friend, the Captain of the musketeers. Although he met with rebuff from most of his father's friends, his beautiful

handwriting fetched him a position as a junior clerk with the Duc d'Orléans. However a career in clerkship was not what he was after, and almost immediately Alexandre immersed himself in literary pursuit as he asserted 'I am going to live by my handwriting but I promise you that I shall someday live by my pen'. His self prophesy begin unfolding in 1829 with the staging of *Henri III et sa cour* or *Henri III and his Court*, which meet with spectacular success. He followed this up with his second play *Christine*, which was inspired by assassination of Queen Christina of Sweden. Besides being a resounding triumph, *Christine 2* with its explicit fervour and the overt melodrama broke free from the tradition of controlled restraint of classical French drama and inadvertently initiated an entirely new genre in performing arts. In fact, Alexandre Dumas became collaborator with his friend Victor Hugo in strengthening the Romantic Movement and contributed to the effort with more stage enactments in the form of *Anthony* (1831), *La Tour de Nesle* (1832) or *The Tower of Nesle*, and *Kean* (1836) that broke the stranglehold of the neo-classical style in Parisian drama. *Anthony* was ahead of its times with a theme that challenged conventional societal norms of marriage and marital conduct while idealising love. Its astounding success took Paris by storm, but also attracted a lot of criticism with outraged reviewers describing it as 'the most obscene play that has ever appeared in these days of obscenity'.

3. NOVELIST PARA COMPARE AND THE EXTRAVAGANCES

One of the great turning point of Alexandre Dumas life occurred when a former professor of history Auguste Maquet³ came to him with an appealing outline of a historical story, which he promptly completed and published. That was the beginning of as series of collaboration which produced a number of all time great novels beginning with *Les trois mousquetaires*⁴ (Dumas, 1884) or *The Three Musketeers*. With Maquet providing the historical setting, Dumes gave vent to his imagination as the main protagonist, the gallant D'Attagnan continued in his adventures that were a vivid expression of the stories of his father in his sub-conscience, which he heard from his mother. The two did not stop at that but published back to back, two more novels *La Reine Margot*⁵ (Dumas, 1845) or *Queen Margot* and *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge*⁶ (Dumas, 1845) or *The Knight of Maison-Rouge*. Inspired by an island called Monte Cristo in the Mediterranean off the coast of Italy, Dumas came up with the even more popular *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (Dumas, 1845-46) or *The Count of Monte Cristo* that was lapped up by the French public. Initially published as a serial in *Le Journal des Débats* the French public awaited with bated breath for the next issue as each episode finished with a "to be continued".

Alexandre Dumas had to be prolific in order to meet the increasing demands of his publisher. And to do that, he had a host of collaborators who composed the crude outlines of the plots for Dumas to personally edit and finalise. Among his co-writers, the contribution of Augustine Maquet was significant, as he was believed to have created the original plot for *The Count of Monte Cristo* besides making notable contributions to the other novels of Dumas. However, Maquest never got any formal acknowledgement in the books, despite taking Dumas to court seeking his legitimate authorship of the books. The enormous money that came from his writing was as quickly spent to maintain Alexandre's lavish life-style. He was reputed to have had as many as forty mistresses on whom he spent a fortune, many times over. At the height of his success, he built the magnificent *Château de Monte-Cristo* at the outskirts of Paris, where he wined and dined an endless stream of visitors. His extravagances were of course, unsustainable and he repeatedly had to confront insolvency. Pursued by relentless creditors, Dumas had to flee to Brussels in 1851, to escape them. Dumas articulated his experiences in his frequent and often impulsive travels in a number of travel books, which gave a vivid description of the places he visited and the people he met. Extremely readable most of his books were laced with humour revealing his drollness. With the decline of Romanticism and the increasing disinterest in the theatre, the fortunes of Alexandre took a plunge and if waiting for that cue his creditors descended on him in hordes.

4. THE LEGACY

Even if there is no agreement on the greatest of French writers, it is unanimous agreed upon that Alexandre Dumas is and remains the most popular. Much maligned for his 'writing factory' he was censured for appropriating the plots created by his many assistants and just putting the finishing touches on them. He was condemned for commercialising literature where the words flowing from his pen were dictated by the demands of his publishers rather than by his natural creativity. However, Alexandre was honest to his craft, hiding nothing and apologising to none. For him a book that entertains was good and the one that bores is bad. "Dumas did his historical research, but he had the good sense not to let facts get in the way of a good

story. Unlike his contemporaries Balzac and Dickens, he shunned realism in favor of escapist entertainment, and so instead of taking his readers into the salons and slums of Paris, he took them back to the 17th century, back to the French Revolution, and back to the aftermath of Napoleon's downfall earlier in the 19th century" (Morris, 2011). Given his vivid imagination, one would assume that Alexandre Dumas would effortlessly pluck out plots and their setting out of thin air. In reality that is hardly the case as he asserted 'I cannot make either a novel or a play on localities I have not seen'. This was evident "for Monte Cristo, as not only the island itself but Marseilles and the Château d'If had to be revisited: Les Trois Mousquetaires involved going to Boulogne and Béthune: La Route de Varennes was preceded by a special journey to Varennes" (Davidson, 1902)

In the turbulent backdrop of the Franco-Prussian War, Alexandre Dumas quietly died in December in 1870, the very day the Germans occupied Dieppe. The prejudice against him and his growing obscurity in the face of changing taste lead to his burial in a nondescript cemetery in Neuville. Although his body was subsequently shifted to at his birthplace of Villers-Cotterêts in Aisne, the racism that existed in France in those days defiled Alexandre Dumas even in his death.

The legacy of Alexandre Dumas was only acknowledged many years later as the contributions of the great master was reassessed and other lost works were recovered and restored. While doing that the wrong done to the people's author was sought to be consciously rectified and as a final mark of respect, in the bicentennial of Dumas' birth in 2002, his ashes were reinterred at the Panthéon of Paris by the side of other great luminaries of French literature like Victor Hugo and Emile Zola.

NOTES

1. Stung by constant jibes on his Afro-Caribbean descent, once Alexandre Dumas famously retorted to a tormentor, 'It is true. My father was a mulatto, my grandmother was a negress, and my great-grandparents were monkeys. In short, sir, my pedigree begins where your ends'.
2. Although Christine was written before Henri III et sa Coeur, its stage debut was delayed due to tantrums by the leading lady Madame Mars during rehearsals that temporarily held up the project.
3. Auguste Maquet was originally a professor in College Charlemagne who was trying his hand in historical novels. His great knowledge in history and a deep insight in court intrigues however were not matched with skills of narration or a flair for drama. His talents wonderfully supplemented Alexandre Dumas' brilliance, and so begin one of literary history's most fruitful partnership.
4. Set in 17th century France, the novels recounts the adventures of D'Artagnan and his three friends and fellow musketeers Athos, Porthos and Aramis who bind their relationship with the motto 'all for one, one for all'. It depicts the intrigues of the French court as gallant musketeers thwarts the evil designs of Cardinal Richelieu on the crown and on the Queen. The further adventures of d'Artagnan were penned in Twenty Years After and The Viscomte of Bragelonne: Ten Years Later.
5. In the backdrop of the French War of Religion, the main protagonist in the novel, Margot struggles to protect herself from the court intrigues and plotting of Catherine de' Medici which threatens her husband King Henri, her lover La Môle, and Margot herself.
6. The novel depicts the inner conflict within the loyal republican Maurice Lindsey, whose infatuation with Marie Antoinette compels him to join a Royalist plot to rescue her.
7. With a wonderful plot outlined by Auguste Maquest, The Count of Monte Cristo was one of the most popular books written by Dumas. Originally published as a daily serial for the insatiable French public the setting was an actual island off the coast of Italy inhabited by wild goats and seagulls. The main protagonist, Edward Dantès is framed and imprisoned. The story revolves around his tribulations as an innocent incarcerate and reprieve as he stumbles into a treasure and goes about seeking retributions.

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