

The Count of Monte-Cristo: Popular acclaim and critical reception in France and in Italy

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Abstract

Alexandre Dumas père's *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, undoubtedly one of the most translated and most widely read novels all over the world, has generated controversial comments and reactions.

Is it a real literary masterpiece or—given its first publication in the form of a *roman feuilleton*—must it be considered as an example of 19th century *littérature industrielle*? What is the difference between a popular—in the sense of successful—*roman feuilleton* and the *littérature populaire*? Why was (and still is) it so familiar among common readers and why was (and still is) it so much investigated by critics?

This paper gives an overview of the popular acclaim and of the critical reception of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* in France and in Italy, from its publication up to the present times. It will examine the “presence” of *Monte-Cristo* in French and Italian literature, in fiction and in drama, with the aim to identify the reasons for its fame as well as the literary strategies that allowed Dumas to create a veritable myth.

Key words: Alexandre Dumas père, Monte-Cristo, critical reception, roman feuilleton, drama.

0. Introduction: *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, a controversial literary masterpiece

Alexandre Dumas père's *Count of Monte-Cristo*¹ is unquestionably one of the most translated and most read 19th century novels all over the world. No wonder then that the book also has generated controversial comments (FRIGERIO 2002). Some consider it as a *roman populaire* mentioning this category with disdain, a few confine it to the category of adventure novels with no particular literary dignity, others classify it as children's or young adults' literature.

1 In this paper we prefer to use the current spelling “Monte-Cristo”, even if in the first *feuilleton* publication (*Le journal des débats*, 1844-1846) and in the first book edition (Paris: Baudry et Pétion, 1845-1846) Dumas chose “Monte-Christo”.

In some cases, people are familiar with movie adaptations but have no idea about the real contents and meanings of the literary text. Fewer people are acquainted with the many variations of the plot and the many reuses of its characters, themes and *topoi* in drama and in fiction, since its publication up to recent times. However, everybody knows something about Edmond Dantès even without having read the novel, so that he has become a universal literary hero or, perhaps, he has even been elevated to a modern myth.

As a whole, readers' praise has always been huge. But what about its critical reception? Misunderstandings and prejudices have risen about this novel and about Dumas's output in general. In fact, Dumas's popularity among common booklovers has not always met an exact correspondence in critical appreciation: most of his novels were considered by some of his contemporaries as examples of the so-called *littérature de gare* and *littérature industrielle* (SAINTE-BEUVE 1839), that is to say, cheap, second-rate publications for book consumers in search of pure *divertissement* (entertainment).

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Much has been rumored also about Dumas's co-workers, the so-called *nègres*, lit. "negroes", a term that was to suggest that they were "slaves" rather than assistants. Some of them are explicitly mentioned on the cover of his novels, while others are now forgotten and obscured by Dumas's celebrity. These figures provided him with indispensable raw material and even wrote some parts themselves. Later on, Dumas created his plots and characters according to his personal recipes and inspiration. For this reason, he has been accused of exploiting his collaborators and of making what today be termed "copy-pasting" from various books and from his companions' notes.

The vast bibliography on Dumasian studies relates that he made a living off his novels and that most of them were published in instalments in magazines and newspapers. He had to write quickly to respond to the needs of journals and reviews, hence in some cases he could not care too much about style: he could not do like Gustave Flaubert, who could spend an entire afternoon in selecting one particular fundamental adjective to better portray Emma Bovary's dress. Consequently, the fame of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* has become the subject of controversial opinions, as the novel manifestly combines the features of a literary masterpiece with those of 19th century *feuilleton* which could be appreciated by different types of readers, from well-educated bookaholics to less educated people.

This paper will propose an overview of the popular acclaim and of the critical reception of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* in France and in Italy, since its publication and up to the present time. We will investigate the recurrent presence of this novel in both French and in Italian literature, as well as in literary criticism, with the aim to pinpoint the reasons for its success as well as the strategies that resulted in the creation of a veritable myth in popular and cultivated imagery.

1. 1844-1846: *Monte-Cristo* landing on the French book market

The Count of Monte-Cristo was published in *Le journal des débats* from August 28th, 1844, to January 16th, 1846—in an 18 month-long series; later on it took the form of a book in 117 chapters.

Auguste Maquet's association, providing significant hints and documents, was essential: Dumas related about their teamwork in the *Causeries (Talks)* (DUMAS 2012), then published

in the magazine he had funded and later collected in the Lévy edition in 1860. In *L'État civil du Comte de Monte-Cristo*, he tried to defend himself from the offensive rumors about Auguste Maquet's extensive involvement in the composition: he explained which memories had inspired him and how Maquet had supported him to outline the plot, thus making out a definite role for both of them.²

Le Comte de Monte-Cristo was immediately a great success. In his essay *Les trois Dumas* André Maurois stated that "Ce qui est certain est que le roman représente le sommet du succès de Dumas. Le feuilleton mit Paris en délire" (MAUROIS 1957: 156). The writer himself got a bit delirious, and *Monte-Cristo* became a kind of obsession all his life long. He bought a gorgeous mansion in the countryside, surrounded by woods, at Port-Marly—not far away from Paris. Dumas liked to retire to his luxurious estate to write in peace. Everything in that building reminded him of his achievements, because the titles of his novels were engraved on its walls. But above all everything reminded him of what was probably the novel he most loved: *Monte-Cristo*.

As a matter of fact, *Monte-Cristo* fascinated Dumas since early on in his childhood: the black-skinned Dumas descended from a family that came from Santo Domingo, where his grandfather had married a local woman, a descendant from slaves—and where there existed a village named Monte Cristo or Monte Cristi (NARDIN 1977). In 1492 Christopher Columbus had chosen that name with the intention to dedicate the newly discovered island to Jesus Christ. As for the Mediterranean Sea, Monte-Cristo was and still is a small islet not far off the coast of Tuscany, next to Isola d'Elba, where Napoleon was exiled. All started in this tiny isle, in fact: Dumas was there in 1842, during a journey to Tuscany, and accompanied the son of the king of Westphalia, Jérôme Bonaparte, in a boat trip. The view of that uninhabited land mass lost on the sea inspired to him the plan for a new story (RANDACCIO 2013).

Later on, Dumas remembered that experience and indicated the historical sources for the plot. In *L'État civil du Comte de Monte-Cristo*, he quoted *Le diamant et la vengeance*, a chronicle in which he had read about a violent revenge action. *Le diamant et la vengeance* is a short anecdote mentioned in *La Police dévoilée* by Jacques PEUCHET, who worked in the archives of the French police, and printed that book in 1839. This report was at the core of Dumas's inspiration—what he much later called a "raw pearl" that he just had to polish in order to turn it into a jewel. Actually, he picked details from a wide range of sources, from literature to politics up to current affairs, as he always used to do. He was particularly concerned with the motive of revenge and justice because, in spite of his literary and social success in Paris, he always had to face prejudices about his origins and the color of his skin.³

"Monte-Cristo", or better *Le Monte-Cristo, journal hebdomadaire de romans, d'histoire, de voyage et de poésie* was a magazine too. It was one of Dumas's many ephemeral journalistic initiatives, but appears interesting to us nevertheless, as we can read in it about Dumas's literary project, about his expectations and even about his recollections of his stay in Tuscany—and in the island which inspired him. The number issued on September 17th, 1857, is particularly rich in information (TOESCA 2002).

2 In 1845 Eugène MIRECOURT published his *Fabrique de romans. Maison Alexandre Dumas et Compagnie*, Paris: Les marchands de nouveautés.

3 Important documents where Dumas related about his sources are reproduced in Jacques-Henry BOURNECQUE's edition of *The Monte-Cristo*, printed by Garnier Frères in Paris in 1956.

As for the best French editions of Dumas's works, the most complete one is the Calmann-Lévy edition, with 143 titles. The Le Vasseur edition, dating back to the end of the 19th century, contains many drawings, depicting the most impressive scenes. In 1956 Garnier set up the first critical version, edited by Jacques-Henry BOURNECQUE. In 1981 it entered Gallimard's series "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", edited by Gilbert SIGAUX.

The most complete edition of Dumas's novel has been printed by Robert Laffont in the "Bouquins" series in 1989, established by Claude SCHOPP, Dumas's greatest expert and biographer. It provides notes, extracts from drafts, letters, and many other documents concerning the genesis of Dumas's books: it is the most correct edition in philological terms, based on manuscripts (SCHOPP 2002).

1.1 *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* in France: Critical reception and literary sequels

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Alexandre Dumas's contemporary critics and novelists were not as enthusiastic about this book as readers were. Public opinion was not always appreciative, and Dumas was blamed for a generally excessive free use of sources, historical facts and characters. The refined Gustave Flaubert was slightly sarcastic and his comments clearly emphasized the difference between an author who could afford taking a long time to produce a polished prose, and a novelist who sometimes desperately needed to go to print quickly to put food on the table:

Ses personnages, alertes comme des singes, forts comme des bœufs, gais comme des pinsons, entrent et parlent brusquement, sautent des toits sur le pavé, reçoivent d'affreuses blessures dont ils guérissent, sont crus morts et réapparaissent. Il y a des trappes sous les planchers, des antidotes, des déguisements et tout se mêle, court et se débrouille, sans une minute pour la réflexion. L'amour conserve de la décence, le fanatisme est gai, les massacres font sourire. (FLAUBERT 1910: 165).

In a similar vein, the historiographer Fernand Brunetière included Dumas among the *amuseurs populaires* in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1885 (BRUNETIERE 1885: 705).

In contrast, Victor HUGO exalted him and insisted on his skill to attract readers in an intelligent way, so that his fascinating intrigues had become an opportunity to approach the masses in an "accessible" and "friendly" way:

Le nom d'Alexandre Dumas est plus que français, il est européen; il est plus qu'eupéen, il est universel [...] il féconde les âmes, les cerveaux, les intelligences; il crée la soif de lire. (HUGO 1992: 34)⁴

Émile ZOLA acknowledged the charm of Dumas's novels, even though he stressed the fact that history was disproportionately filtered through his imagination and that sometimes real facts were related as in an oriental tale—a feature that represented the key to his popularity:

⁴ The text is entitled *Funérailles d'Alexandre Dumas*. The excerpt is part of a letter to DUMAS *filis*, written on April 15th 1872.

Alexandre Dumas père a traité notre histoire nationale en conte des Mille et Une Nuits [...]. Cela n'est pas fatigant à écouter, on s'y amuse encore. ([ANON.] 1879)

More recently, Jean d'Ormesson has held a similar view: according to the author, Dumas's novels present a certain weakness in terms of their historical background and the construction of their plots, but they provide a good source of *divertissement* thanks to Dumas's talent as story-teller:

Le style n'est pas fameux, la psychologie bafouille, l'intrigue manque de rigueur—'qu'est-ce que l'histoire? un clou auquel j'accroche mes romans'—mais à force de mouvement, de panache et de vie, les héros sont inoubliables. Nous ne nous sommes jamais ennuyés avec eux. (D'ORMESSON 1998, II: 26)

Readers in any case were and still feel enthusiastic. Thus, a number of new Monte-Cristos have been produced since his first appearance on the French soil.

1.2 A (melo)dramatic hero for the *drame bourgeois*: From revenge to justice

Since the end of the 18th century, that is, since the Age of Enlightenment, playwrights often drew inspiration and plots from the best-known novels. English gothic novels, for instance, are at the basis of tragedies and of melodramas written and performed at the time of the French Revolution and a little later. The middle-class audience at the theatre enjoyed watching on stage characters and situations they knew from favorite books, where contemporary or recent historical events were echoed.

In the 19th century, the theatrical production exploited the popularity of the *roman feuilleton* (serialized novel). Readers were used to buy magazines and papers in order to read novels in instalments, and then looked forward to finding the same plots staged at the theatre. Dramatization inevitably condensed the novels, but in return the plays offered a nice selection of the best scenes and concentrated on the main *coups de théâtre*, surprises and highly emotional deeds, apt to trigger strong feelings in the audience; music and dance were introduced to complement the show for bourgeois spectators.

As for Alexandre Dumas, he wrote himself the theatrical version of his *Monte-Cristo*. He was familiar with that kind of rearrangement of the material. Before becoming a novelist he had been a playwright: he had a good talent for drama and had started his career as a dramatist with *Henri III et sa cour*, staged at the Comédie Française in 1829. His theatrical production includes 117 plays (66 of them are contained in the *Théâtre complet*, others were published under pseudonym, either because he had to escape from creditors or because he feared fiascos); other compositions are still waiting to be published.⁵ Second, as a matter of fact, *Monte-Cristo* is an impeccably theatrical novel, featuring all aspects of drama: many dialogues, a

5 His theatrical production includes history plays, *dramas bourgeois*, adaptations from Shakespeare and from his novels, above all in the years when he bought and directed the Théâtre-Historique (1847-1850). Specific details are given in Fernande BASSAN, "Le théâtre d'Alexandre Dumas père", in BASSAN & SCHOPP (eds.) 1995: 17-22.

magnetic and enigmatic hero, a secret past, the powerful classic themes of love and jealousy, big scenes, an interest in history—all the *topoi* shared by the *roman feuilleton* and by drama in the 1830s-1850s. Consequently, the *pièce Monte-Cristo* was produced without big effort. The only difficulty was selecting episodes and characters to fit the agenda of one *soirée*.⁶

On February 2nd and 3rd, 1848, at the Théâtre Historique, two *soirées* proposed the first two fragments of a four-part play in which Dumas had tried to abridge his novel with the help of Auguste Maquet. This play was composed on demand: towards the end of 1845, Antony Béraud, the director of the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, felt that a novel like *Monte-Cristo* absolutely had to be turned into a play. Dumas kept this idea for his own Théâtre Historique.

The first performance lasted from 6 pm to midnight, with eleven changes of scene. The best *décorateurs* were involved (Cambon, Thiery, Sécham, Diéterle, Despléchin, Lechevalier) and the best *couturiers* for costumes recruited (Gavarni, Louis Lassalle, Giraud). The company included 20 actors and 7 actresses. An 18-hours *entr'acte* separated the first from the second part. The audience had to attend two *soirées*.

Newspaper chronicles spoke about an enthusiastic audience. Théophile Gautier highly prized the play, both for the quality of the composition and for the *mise en scène*. On the opposite side, satiric papers and caricatures portrayed an exhausted audience trying to remain attentive to an action that seemed endless.

A few days later, the 1848 Revolution broke out and the reign of Louis Philippe came to an end in a chaotic Paris. The audience had to wait for three years to see the rest of the play. Moreover, in 1850 the Théâtre Historique closed.

On April 1st, 1851, at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique, finally *Le Comte de Moncerf*, in 5 acts and 10 scenes, carried on the performance of Dantès's adventures, focusing on the arrival of Monte-Cristo in Paris. On May 8th, in the same hall, the fourth part of Dumas's saga, always produced "en société avec Auguste Maquet", was shown: *Villefort*, a play all adjusted to the theme of justice rather than that of revenge: "Ma tâche est accomplie: j'ai puni les méchants, j'ai 'recompensé' les bons!" (Dixième Tableau, Scène II). A little later, Bonaparte's *coup d'état* caused a momentary standstill in Dumas's career. The novelist moved to Brussels, but in 1853 he was back in Paris again.

1.3 The French sons of Monte-Cristo: Parodies, pastiches, adaptations

Like all bestsellers, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* was soon followed by imitations, re-writings and sequels, sometimes in ironical or even satirical tones. On December 26th, 1846, at the Théâtre Beaumarchais, a little after the publication of the novel and two years before Dumas's play, Parisians could spend a pleasant *soirée* at Christmas time watching *L'Ile de Monte-Cristo* by Auguste JOUHAUD, an ephemeral "vaudeville en un acte". In this play, Dumas's masterpiece was just a pretext however: the story is about a certain Gobin, an old rentier who is obsessed by Dumas's novel and therefore decides to visit the remote desert isle of Monte-Cristo, not without realizing, after a short time, that he will be more at ease in Paris. In April 1847, the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin was chosen for *Le Comte de Monte-Fiasco, ou la Répétition générale d'un drame en trente actes et cent tableaux*, by Philippe-

6 See MONTCLAIR (ed.) 1998, in particular Florent Montclair's introductory pages.

Auguste-Alfred PITTAUD DE FORGES, a comic parody in which a certain Edmond Cantès wishes to marry “Lady Bouillabaisse”. Parodies and pastiches continued for quite a long time: in February 1848, at Théâtre Lazary, *Monte-Cristo* became *Monte et Christophe, ou les deux Pochards*, by Achille DARTOIS and Martial DUDON and, one month later, at the Théâtre des Funambules, Auguste JOUHAUD tried to amuse the audience with his *Montez les cristaux*.

On October 16th, 1861, the Théâtre de la Gaîté hosted MAQUET’s remake of the first two parts of Dumas’s *pièce-monstre*, after having condensed it in a play which could be completed in only one *soirée*. Dumaine’s excellent performance allowed to propose it again in 1866, 1871 and 1883.

A little later, on March 15th, 1894, at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, a free adaptation tried to satisfy a more modern audience. It was offered by Émile BLAVET, late secretary and friend to Dumas. The “grande féerie mélodramatique en deux parties d’égale intérêt” condensed and re-elaborated Dumas’s 4 plays in 5 acts and 15 *tableaux*. The play was performed again on April 21st, 1904.

An interesting adaptation was composed by Gaston BATY, the celebrated *metteur en scène*, in the age between the two world wars. In 1938, he obtained from Dumas’s descendants the permission to create a new version in 22 *tableaux*. In 1948, the text was ready, and the details for stage sets too. The acclaimed Pierre Brasseur would play Dantès and 19 scenarios were prepared for a three-hour performance. The idea was to respect the author’s style and tone, in coherence with Baty’s *théâtre d’art*. However, Baty did not manage to put it on stage because of the excessive costs: taste had changed so much in recent years, and the audience’s appreciation could not be taken for granted. On April 26th, 1953, a few months after Gaston Baty’s death, this version was broadcast on the radio. In 1960, another adaptation was performed as an “open-air show” by Jean MACHAT and Raymond GÉRÔME at the Festival d’Angers and on December 22nd, 1975, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées presented a musical composed by Jean COSMOS. Moreover, cinema, and later TV, had partially replaced drama among the most popular modes of entertainment, so movie adaptations were proposed.⁷ Musicals were produced, too.

In the meantime, some sequels in prose, with no satirical intention, were created, such as *La Main du défunt: Pour faire suite au roman “Le Comte de Monte-Cristo” par Alexandre Dumas*, printed in 1853, where F. LEPRINCE imagined that the book had been published by Faria in Lisbon. In 1867, Jean DUBOYS published the feuilleton *La Comtesse de Monte-Cristo*, then turned into a play in 1873. In 1881, Jules LERMINA printed *Le Fils of Monte-Cristo: Suite du roman d’Alexandre Dumas*, where he imagined Monte-Cristo expiating his revenge acts. A baby girl with the name Espérance, that is, Hope, appears in the plot. This Hope for a better future is Dantes’ and Haydes’s child. In 1885, a *Trésor de Monte-Cristo* by an anonymous author circulated. Moreover, echoes of Dantès’s legend are evident in Jules

7 The first adaptation dates back to 1908 and was produced in the United States by Francis BOGGS, but the first interesting version is a French *roman-cinéma* (1915-1917) by Henri POUCTAL for Le Film d’Art. A particularly charming film came out in 1966: a French-Italian co-production by Robert VERNAY with Jean Marais in the role of Dantès. For a complete list of past editions of the novel and of the play, and for cinema adaptations, see COMPÈRE 1998. Useful and updated information is provided by the Société des Amis d’Alexandre Dumas, in Paris, through the magazine *Cahiers Alexandre Dumas* and the website <<https://amisdumas.com/>>.

VERNE's *Mathias Sandorf* (1885), the story of a man fighting for justice and independence in Hungary, while Gaston LEROUX, a fervent admirer of Dumas, in 1908-1909 published *Le Roi Mystère*, a variation on the main theme of the palimpsest text.

A few 20th century novels still evoke *Monte-Cristo* in their titles, or in their plots, but there is no evident intention to re-write the plot, nor to continue the story. The interest in Dantès's adventures demonstrates the great popularity achieved by that hero. Dantès became "popular" and "universal" because he symbolized the universal fight for rights, for freedom and justice, and embodied the quest for happiness. In 1985, Thomas RIEN published *Cette mémoire du Cœur: Fragments pour un Monte-Cristo suite et fin*, pretending that Dumas's work was incomplete, and that a sequel and conclusion had to be provided. René REOUVEN's *Souvenez-vous de Monte-Cristo*, published in 1998, is a detective story where the crime related by Dumas's reference source PEUCHET stimulates a serial killer to commit a sequence of crimes. In 2012, Carlos Ruiz ZAFÓN published his *Prisoner of Heaven*, where a beautifully illustrated edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo* contains an enigmatic hint to Fermín's past, thus giving way to an epic tale of incarceration, betrayal, murder and love around the Cemetery of Forgotten Books.⁸

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2. *The Count of Monte-Cristo* landing in Italy

The Count of Monte-Cristo is indeed one of the most translated novels in Italy: 76 editions were printed in Italy, a number testifying to a diffusion that paralleled the popularity of *The Three Musketeers*.⁹

The first translation, printed in Livorno by Andrea Nanni, dates back to 1846; but the most successful version was the Italian edition that came out in 1847, by Oreste FERRARIO, published in four volumes by Borroni e Scotti, in Milan. An important edition was later presented by SONZOGNO thanks to Mario SGARBOSSA, in the "Biblioteca romantica illustrata", in 1867. In 1890, the Florentine publisher SALANI offered another valuable good translation. Both Sonzogno's and Salani's versions were regularly proposed throughout the 19th century and up to the middle of the 20th century, typically illustrated with charming drawings. From the middle of the 20th century up to nowadays, most publishing houses have printed Italian translations chiefly in pocket and paperback format. Today, the most interesting Italian edition, translated by Gaia PANFILI, is published by Donzelli, with a critical preface and a dictionary of the characters, compiled by Claude SCHOPP, first issued in 2010.

Research carried out by the Società Bibliografica italiana in 1906 produced the list of *I libri più letti dal popolo italiano* (*The most widely-read books in Italy*). At the beginning of the 20th century, *Monte-Cristo* was at the very top of the list. As is often the case, a novel loved by readers is not immediately appreciated by critics. In 1863 the Catholic Church even

⁸ A good survey into sequels, adaptations, pastiches and parodies is in COMPÈRE 1998.

⁹ For more detail cf. Anne-Christine FAITROP-PORTA, "La réception critique des *Trois Mousquetaires* et du *Comte de Monte-Cristo* de Dumas en Italie (1850-1994)", in BASSAN & SCHOPP (eds.) 1995: 149-163.

condemned *Monte-Cristo* for “immorality” (CASATI 1921: 233-239).

Subsequently, films and TV series drew attention to the novel again, and so new translations came out as paperbacks. A TV movie given by the Italian Radio and Television (RAI) in 1966¹⁰ inspired the production of seven new translations. Thus, the legendary aura of “popular novel” and “popular hero” surrounding Dantès and his comrades was reinvigorated. 1950s and 1960s TV movies based on literary masterpieces typically had a pedagogical aim: in general, they were very good productions, played by excellent actors, showing a high degree of philological accuracy as far as the text, the historical background, the plot, the costumes were concerned. This trend allowed common people who did not read much, or who did not read at all because they were not sufficiently educated, or because they could not afford buying books, to get acquainted with some of the most prestigious literary works of all times. Such a popularization and dissemination also facilitated the transformation of the novel here under consideration into a piece of children’s literature, similarly to what happened to Jules Verne’s books. Another 20th century publishing phenomenon was the publication of abridged editions for children and adolescents, in this way contributing to popular imagination around *Monte-Cristo* as a piece of kids’ literature.

2.1 Critical reception in Italy

As for the critical reception, Dumas’s Italian contemporaries acknowledged the popularity of *Il Conte di Monte-Cristo* among the common readers. However, they tended to categorize it as “popular” literature.

In his world-famous *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard), published in 1958, Giuseppe TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA portrayed 19th-century Sicily as lacking in education to the extent that even upper-class individuals were unfamiliar with names like FLAUBERT and DUMAS. Similarly, Federico DE ROBERTO in *L’Illusione* (The Illusion, 1891) mentioned *Monte-Cristo* among the novels prohibited to women but allowed for men to read... only while sitting at the barber’s shop. Ugo OJETTI shared a similar opinion, considering Dumas’s masterpiece as confined to popular literature. On the other hand, Vittorio BERSEZIO in Piedmont described a general “delirious” admiration for Dumas. In his literary portraits, Edmondo DE AMICIS reflected on the interest in Dumas’s novels; he confessed that his mother called him Edmond after Edmond Dantès.

Perhaps, the first really interesting critical interpretation expressed in Italy must be attributed to Antonio Gramsci (GRAMSCI 1996), as seen in his literary notes written while imprisoned under the fascist regime. He drew parallels between his own unjust condemnation and the experience of Dantès’s in *Monte-Cristo*. To him, *Monte-Cristo*’s success seemed a natural consequence of Dumas’s ability to awaken a feeling of hope in all those who suffered from oppression under despotic regimes, with Dantès’s character and story representing an allegory of the misuse of power and authority by figures such as Danglard, Moncerf, and Villefort, symbolizing autocracy in economy and finances, politics, and justice. He termed

¹⁰ *Il conte di Montecristo di Alessandro Dumas*; riduzione e sceneggiatura televisiva di Fabio STORELLI ed Edmo FENOGLIO, [Roma]: RAI. The script was published in 1966, in a collection devoted to TV films, with the title *Il Conte di Montecristo*, sceneggiatura televisiva di Edmo FENOGLIO e Fabio STORELLI, introduzione di Edmo Fenoglio, fotogrammi tratti dallo sceneggiato RAI del 1966, Torino: ERI (“I romanzi della TV”, I, n. 1, December 1966).

the novel *oppiaceo*, that is “opioid”, emphasizing its captivating charm for readers who could identify with Dantès’s plight. Additionally, Gramsci pointed out that *Monte-Cristo* served as a stern *j’accuse* directed at the deceptive Monarchie de Juillet and any oppressive régime, instilling the belief in the possibility of a restorative justice (PADUANO 2013, BERNABÉ 2013).

Yet, another intelligent elucidation can be seized in Gramsci’s pages: he is the first one to point out in the protagonist’s profile a prototype of NIETZSCHE’s *Übermensch*—the same goes for some other Dumasian heroes, such as the Musketeers and Joseph Balsamo, all of them sharing so much with Honoré de BALZAC’s characters—namely Vautrin, Lucien de Rubempré, Eugène de Rastignac. They were all “popular *Übermensch*” ordinary people coming from the rising lower middle-class and self-made men who, thanks to their intelligence, will to power, commitment and courage, could make a dream come true: to bring about societal change and perhaps even alter the political regime (GRAMSCI 1996, DURAND 2005).¹¹

In the 1970s, Umberto Eco revisited Gramsci’s analysis and discussed *Monte-Cristo* in a collection of essays on “popular literature” (ECO 1976, ECO 1993, VASSILEV 2001). He considered Dantès an exceptional hero capable of inspiring hope for a better future through his energy and his determination. Eco praised the novel’s allure, crafted around Dantès’s well-designed personality and character, but he noted a certain weakness in Dumas’s writing style, likely due to the need to produce the novel quickly and the melodramatic tone he had to adopt to meet his readers’ expectations.

More recently, Vittorio FRIGERIO, a specialist in 19th-century literature, particularly in popular and anarchic literature, re-considered these viewpoints. He emphasized the resemblance between Dumas’s creation and the ideal man conceptualized by the German philosopher Max STIRNER, a contemporary of Dumas. Stirner’s ideas on “individual anarchy” as presented in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (The Ego and Its Own), first published in Berlin in 1844, focused on the concepts of will, determination and individual inspiration as means to bring about exceptional actions. His book inspired Karl Marx and had a considerable impact on individualist anarchism. Frigerio highlighted the coherence between Dumas’s political views, belief in a utopian society, and Stirner’s theory. Consequently, Edmond Dantès may be considered a the prototype of “the rebel” a hero fighting for justice, equality, and freedom—an aspect that deeply resonated with Italian readers as they approached the achievement of the Risorgimento.¹²

2.2 The Italian sons of Monte-Cristo: Ballets, plays and novels

During the 19th century, theatrical adaptations of literary works were quite common in Italy. Research in Italian libraries has revealed two noteworthy stage adaptations centered around the mid-century period: a ballet and a play. The ballet in question was composed by Giuseppe ROTA (REGLI 1860: 468 ss., FABRIS 2011: 223-226), a versatile dancer, mime, and choreographer who was born in Venice and had previously showcased his talents at La Fenice. His exceptional performances earned him invitations to prominent theatres in Paris, Vienna and

11 Monte-Cristo’s ideology is explicitly exposed in chapter XLVII, entitled *Idéologie*, in the dialogue between Monte-Cristo and Villefort; it is explicated also in the chapter where, once back in Paris, Monte-Cristo has lunch with Moncerf.

12 See Vittorio FRIGERIO, “Le Comte de Monte-Cristo: Surhomme bourgeois ou Unique”, in BASSAN & SCHOPP (eds.) 1995: 119-133. Other relevant studies on this sujet are FRIGERIO 1996 and FRIGERIO 2002.

London. At that time, ballet plots were often inspired by well-known novels that appealed to the *bourgeois* audience, and Rota swiftly gained fame as “il Verdi dei balli”: in the field of ballets, his talent and success were favorably compared to Giuseppe Verdi’s achievements in the opera genre. In 1856, Rota created a ballet titled *Il Conte di Montecristo*, described as an “azione mimica” comprising four parts and seven scenes, with the musical composition crafted by Maestro Paolo Giorza. This condensed adaptation received successful reception during its performance at the Teatro alla Canobbiana in Milan in the autumn of the same year. Concurrently, a new three-part version emerged, and the libretto underwent editing. The revised work was titled *Il Conte di Montecristo*, “azione mimica in tre parti, di Giuseppe Rota, da riprodersi sulle scene dell’I. R. Teatro alla Canobbiana nell’autunno 1856”, published by Tipografia Paolo Ripamonti Carpano in Milan in 1856. The titles chosen for the three parts revolved around the main thematic elements: *Il delatore* (The Informer), providing a concise summary of the events in Marseille; *Il Tesoro* (The Treasure), depicting the protagonist’s detention; and *La giustizia di Dio* (God’s Justice), narrating Monte-Cristo’s return to Paris. In the introductory notes, Rota explained that he had to make a rigorous selection, leading him to focus on the most harrowing act of revenge, the one perpetrated against Moncerf, while effectively summarizing the backstory and the escape.

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Another edition of the ballet emerged, placing emphasis on the hero’s first name: *Edmondo Dantès, o il Conte di Oglavia*, featuring music by Paolo GIORZA. This edition was published in Milano by La Canobbiana in the autumn of 1856. Two years later, a four-part version was composed for a more prestigious theatre, Naples’s San Carlo, where it was staged on October 4th, 1858, under the title *Edmondo Dantès*, “azione mimica in 4 parti e 7 scene, di Giuseppe Rota”. Later, it was re-presented as *Il conte di Montecristo*, “azione mimica in 4 parti e 7 scene di Giuseppe Rota; musica del maestro Paolo Giorza”, published in Torino by Stabilimento nazionale premiato Giudici e Strada, in 1893. A scarce copy of the music, intended for piano solo, is kept in the Paris National Library under the title *Il Conte di Monte Cristo*, “ballo del coreografo G. Rota, musica di Paolo Giorza ridotta per pianoforte solo dall’autore”, published in Milan by F. Lucca in 1856, consisting of 10 fascicles, totaling 78 folio pages.

The play itself is also reported about in some library catalogues mentioning rare editions, some of which printed by Borroni-Scotti, the same publisher that had previously printed the translation of the novel. As titles show, printers sometimes took liberties with the original material, compressing the number of acts so as to create a play that could be easily staged in one single *soirée*. Two examples of such adaptations are *Il Conte di Monte Cristo*, “dramma in cinque atti, di A. Dumas ed A. Maquet, libera versione e riduzione di Luigi Enrico TETTONI”, Milano, Borroni e Scotti, 1852, and *Il Conte di Morcerf ed il Conte di Monte Cristo*, “dramma in sei atti ed otto quadri, di A. Dumas ed A. Maquet; libera versione e riduzione di Luigi Enrico TETTONI”, Milano, Borroni e Scotti, 1852. Both editions were explicitly identified as “free adaptations and reductions”. In contrast, certain editions include all four original plays from Dumas’s theatrical saga, albeit freely compacted by the translator. For instance, the booklet titled *Edmondo Dantes il marinajo*, “dramma in sei atti ed otto quadri di A. Dumas ed A. Maquet; libera versione e traduzione di Luigi Enrico Tettoni” Milano, Libreria editrice, 1876, corresponds to only the first of the four plays of the Monte-Cristo saga, narrating the initial incidents up to Edmond’s escape from jail. On the other hand, the booklet *Il Conte di Morcerf ed il Conte di Monte Cristo*, “dramma in 6 atti ed 8 quadri di A. Dumas ed

A. Maquet, libera versione e riduzione di Luigi Enrico Tettoni”, Milano, Libreria editrice, 1876, aligns with the second play of the saga.

Regrettably, no copies of parts III and IV of the play seem to be extant. The considerable length of Dumas’s original play contributes to the challenge of staging *Monte-Cristo* at the theatre without adequately condensing it into a more agile narrative.

The Count of Monte-Cristo was first published in France, and its subsequent translation into Italian occurred during a time when Italian patriots were not aware of the potential achievements of Risorgimento, which encompassed the ideals of independence and unity for the nation. Despite this, significant revolts had erupted in Naples, Milan and the Papal States during the 1820s and 1830s. It is noteworthy, however, that literature played a crucial role in expressing the Italian longing for liberty from Austrian rule and the aspiration for political unification. The novel’s central theme of the quest for freedom resonated deeply with Italian readers, and specific episodes and passages, such as Faria’s prediction of a better future where liberty would finally prevail, were highly appreciated. As a result, these elements naturally found their way into stage adaptations, where key scenes portraying Dantès’s triumphant escape plan and his pursuit for vengeance against the wicked captivated audiences. These intense moments became the focal points of plays and ballets, emphasizing the theme of retribution against evil forces.

Indeed, the themes and motifs presented in *The Count of Monte-Cristo* elucidate the profound interest that the novel garnered in Italy among translators, readers and authors, and the general public. Despite the different political and social contexts in both France and Italy, the novel served as a “political novel” that advocated hope. Within the challenging political and social environments of the time, the story of Edmond Dantès offered an optimistic lesson: the notion that resolute actions and the passage of time could ultimately reverse a political and social impasse. In the end the good and the weak ones may be paid back for all they suffered and what they deserved. The novel’s central message conveyed the idea that even in the face of adversity, justice could prevail, and those who had endured suffering and injustice might ultimately receive retribution for what they had endured.

The trend of theatrical adaptations of popular novels in the 19th century foreshadowed the later, and rather systematic, proliferation of sequels in the form of films and TV series. Some of these were ephemeral and quickly forgotten. It is well-known, however, that literary masterpieces often have had a long-lasting influence, continuing to inspire authors over time. No wonder then that even in more recent times, Italian novelists have revisited the paths of Dumas, with the legendary character of Monte Cristo occasionally resurfacing. The most significant example is the remarkable tale by Italo CALVINO, titled *Il Conte di Montecristo*, published in *Ti con Zero*, a collection of short stories released by Einaudi in 1967. In this short story, Calvino uses Dumas’s exact title and structures it as an interior monologue, with Edmond Dantès speaking to himself while imprisoned in the Château d’If. As Dantès plans his escape with Faria, he is haunted by two *châteaux*, or “castles”: the physical fortress that represents the tangible prison, and the “mental” castle formed by negative thoughts, pessimism and haunting memories. The story explores the notion that breaking free from the mental prison of negative emotions and perceptions can be more challenging than escaping from the physical jail. Totally in line with Calvino’s “hypertexts”, where many literary and historical references intertwine in a mental labyrinth, this tale serves as a pastiche, transforming the prison from a physical confinement into a metaphor for the need to grasp and understand

reality (GRANAT-ROBERT 2009, BIANCHI 2012). Moving forward to 2009, Rita Charbonnier, an actress, playwright and author of historical novels, published *La strana giornata di Alexandre Dumas* with Edizioni Piemme in Milan. This work incorporates elements of the Dumasian plot while focusing on an invented episode from Dumas's biography that precedes his career as a novelist.¹³

3. Conclusions: *Monte-Cristo's* success in France and in Italy: A literary masterpiece or a literary successful architect?

The novel's widespread acclaim, remarkable global dissemination through translations and adaptations, literary sequels, diverse paralytic developments, and numerous critical appreciations all stem from its extraordinary richness.

First, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* transcends the classification of a mere popular novel, if the employ the attribute "popular" to refer to a work intended "for the masses" and an "industrial" piece; it is a work far beyond the *littérature de consommation*, to borrow SAINT-EBUVE's words. Umberto Eco employed the term *popolare* to define it. However, in the context of French literature, it is essential to distinguish between the *roman feuilleton* and the *roman populaire*. The former emerged during the period from 1836 to the 1850s and even longer, when Émile de Girardin launched the innovative concept of publishing stories in newspapers. Through "La Presse", he established a more affordable magazine, facilitated by advertising revenue and reader subscriptions, thereby ensuring readers' loyalty.

Dumas, like Balzac, was among the most prolific authors of *feuilletons*. Despite the limitations of his style and of the evident flaws and inaccuracies in some of his works, his novels bear no resemblance to the mass popular novels that emerged during the Second Empire. The *roman feuilleton*, in reality, did not cater to the masses, as the majority of people did not read extensively and rarely purchased journals or magazines that featured *feuilletons*. Instead, *feuilletons* found their audience among the middle classes, who saw reflections of their lives, problems, and experiences within the urban reality shaped by socio-economic transformations. During the Second Empire, the advent of cheap paperback editions led to an increase in readership, consequently fostering the production of what was termed "commercial" literature (DURAND 1999). Consequently, a clear distinction between a "noble" literature and mass literature emerged since the Second Empire. It is true that not all *romans feuilletons* exhibited excellent quality; some characters were excessively stereotyped, popularized into simplistic good and evil figures, plots adhered to predictable *topoi* to meet readers' expectations, often employing melodramatic scenes and surprising twists (*coups de théâtre*) concerning the heroes' origins and adventures.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that many universally recognized literary masterpieces in 19th-century prose were initially released in instalments through *feuilletons*.

The primary element that makes *Monte-Cristo* a fictional masterpiece is the remarkably

¹³ See <https://www.ritacharbonnier.it/la-strana-giornata-di-alexandre-dumas/>.

¹⁴ See the collective work *De Monte-Cristo à Fantômas* 1976.

intricate nature of its protagonist. Edmond is not a mere stereotypical hero but a deeply complex individual, tormented by a profound sense of duality. He carries within him an atrocious past and an intriguing present, along with clear ambitions for the future. For 14 long years, he endured immense suffering— isolation, hunger, thirst, the deprivation of freedom and dignity. He lost his fiancé, his father, his friends, his career, his home, and even his dreams. Yet, amidst these hardships, Edmond’s character undergoes a profound transformation, thanks to the influence of culture and his close friendship with the abate Faria, who serves as an enlightened mentor. Moreover, Faria reveals the existence of a hidden treasure, destined to transform Dantès into a powerful and noble figure, ready to overturn his seemingly bleak fate.

During his arduous imprisonment, Dantès undergoes a profound transformation that turns him into the enigmatic figure of Monte-Cristo, manifesting in physical, intellectual, psychological and social metamorphoses. Despite this evolution, traces of the young, naïve Edmond still linger within the newfound persona of the gentleman. Interestingly, his relentless pursuit of revenge does not extinguish his innate generosity, sensitivity, loyalty to friendship, and capacity of love. Amidst solitude, his eyes veiled with sadness, Dantès successfully executes his revenge plan, and upon its completion, he finds the opportunity to embark on a new life, away from the confines of Parisian society. Together with the woman he loves, he sets off towards a freer and simpler existence, embracing individual happiness. In this way, Dantès emerges as an ordinary man with numerous positive attributes, who, paradoxically, assumes the role of a vengeful angel. Ultimately, his experience of cathartic revenge allows him to distance himself from the social complexities of Paris and embrace a life of personal contentment (FURBETTA 2001).

The narrative of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* does not conclude with a stereotypical happy ending. While readers might imagine a promising future for Monte-Cristo, the weight of his past experiences remains ever-present. He cannot no longer be the same Edmond he once was, as the trials and tribulations of his life have left deep scars on his soul. Nevertheless, the presence of love and friendship are there to assist him in forging a new identity.

Although Dantès embodies some of the archetypal traits of the hero found in the *roman feuilleton*—charismatic, with a mysterious past, possessing a strong personality, and driven by a pursuit of justice—he transcends this mold. While he shares certain characteristics with the Byronic hero and may even evoke a sense of a “supernatural” persona akin to the concept of the *Übermensch*, he remains grounded in his humanity. He is simply a man with unwavering determination, strong emotions, vulnerabilities, and moments of doubt. What distinguishes him as a remarkable protagonist is his unwavering commitment to human dignity and nobility, evident in every aspect of his life, from mundane everyday actions to daring adventures. Despite his stoic demeanor that befits a heroic figure, readers can relate to his feelings, attitudes, and ideas, and this relatability is the key factor in the enduring success of his character.

As for the plot, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* must not be reduced to a mere revenge tragedy; rather, as Gramsci and Eco have proposed, it represents a story of justice. While revenge, characterized by passionate and potentially violent reactions to injustice, rivalry, and inequality, was often associated with the “Mediterranean” characters hailing from regions such as Italy, Corsica and Spain, where a passionate and vindictive temperament was thought to be

inherent due to their Latin blood and culture, it was also a recurring theme in Romantic literature, particularly in works by authors like Mérimée and George Sand.

But to fully comprehend Dantès's experiences in *The Count of Monte-Cristo*, one must consider the historical context in which the novel was composed. Far from being a mere heroic romance, Dumas's narrative delves into a deep analysis of the epoch in which it is set. The novel paints a vivid picture of the atmosphere in the 1840s, a time when the Monarchie Bourgeoise was in a state of disarray. Dumas astutely portrays the deceiving nature of the regime he was familiar with, raising urgent political and social questions of his time. One such topic explored in the novel is the debate surrounding dungeons and punishments (LASTÉCOUÈRES 2014, PRÉVOST 2014). Particularly, discussions revolved around the treatment of political prisoners held in fortresses such as Le Mont Saint Michel and the Château d'If, where individuals were subjected to total isolation, spending years without any human interaction, leading to a loss of their sense of time, space, and even identity. In addition to these real-world considerations, the novel also includes references to the fortress of Fenestrelle, located in the Alps near Turin, which served as a daunting state prison where Faria (LASTÉCOUÈRES 2014: 20)¹⁵ had been detained. This place is important in famous stories and legends, including those related to the enigmatic figure known as the *Masque de Fer* or "(Man in the) Iron Mask".

At the same time, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* must be also read as a political *j'accuse* addressed at Dumas's society, which was wholly dominated by the bourgeois motto *Enrichissez-vous!* or "Get rich!". During Dumas's time, money had become an immensely powerful force that drove actions and decisions. It meant not only general wealth and social status but also community identity, authority, autonomy, and opportunities. In the novel, various characters embody different facets of the influence of money. Danglars represents the epitome of financial power, while Villefort personifies an unfair and corrupted justice system. Moncerf, on the other hand, exemplifies the worst traits of the ancient military aristocracy. In contrast, Monte-Cristo leverages his fortune to advocate for genuine and profound human values. For him, money is not an end in itself, but rather a crucial means to re-establish justice. He uses his wealth as an opportunity to integrate into society, with the intention of restoring order and ensuring equal opportunities for all while preserving individual independence.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the novel's exploration of French society and the political regime does not preclude broader discussions about the dichotomy between authentic values and a materialistic outlook on life. Dantès's conflict with the Monarchie Bourgeoise can be readily expanded to encompass the central theme of the quest for freedom, which permeates all of Dumas's theatrical production (RAHIER 2018). In the words of Antonio Gramsci, the power of the novel lies in its potential for allegorical interpretation, reflecting the struggle against various forms of abuse (DURAND 2003). Commenting on esteemed *feuilletons*, Jacques Dubois observes that from "*des Mystères de Paris* jusqu'à *Fantômas* [...], la figure du surhomme justicier représente une symbolisation typique des classes dominées" (DUBOIS 1978:

15 Dumas traced the profile of the *abbé* Faria drawing inspiration from a real priest, the Portuguese José CUSTODIO DE FARIA (1756-1819).

16 Important studies are Claudie BERNARD, "Le sang de la vengeance et le sang des familles: à propos du *Comte de Monte-Cristo*", in ARROUS (ed.) 1993: 155-188, and Anne-Marie CALLET-BIANCO, "De Monte-Cristo aux Mohicans: l'affirmation du sentiment républicain", *ibid.*: 189-208.

146). This assertion highlights how the figure of the superhero seeking justice symbolizes the typical representation of the oppressed classes, aligning with the underlying themes of the novel.

Consequently, the most appropriate interpretation of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* and the reasons behind its resounding success lies in its role as an anthem for freedom, independence, and individual rights. This accounts for its enthusiastic reception not only in 19th-century France but also in Italy. During this period, 1848 significant movements advocating for independence and liberal governance in Italy, while social uprisings in France culminated Bonaparte's *coup d'état* following intense hostilities and ferocious riots.

From a purely literary perspective, the success of *Monte-Cristo* can be attributed to its exceptional completeness as a work of literature. Once again, Dumas demonstrated his extraordinary talent in traversing the diverse literary landscapes of his time and skillfully integrating the finest elements from various literary traditions. Edmond Dantès, as the protagonist, transcends the limitations of this era and nationality, evolving into an allegorical figure with a universal appeal.

The novel exhibits both Romantic and Realistic elements. The protagonist, Edmond Dantès, embodies Romantic qualities with his passionate and tormented nature, his dreams and strong principles, his resilience in facing physical and moral challenges, and a gentleness that sometimes may even scare. With this, he shares traits with the Byronic hero, being both charming and disturbing. On the other hand, Realism is evident throughout the novel in its detailed depiction of settings, social environments, and everyday habits, aligning more with Stendhal's vision of the novel as a chronicle of society rather than with Balzac's and Zola's focus on analyzing human behavior through biological laws.

Furthermore, *The Count of Monte-Cristo* exhibits elements of both the Bildungsroman and a captivating adventure novel, drawing inspiration from the contemporary trend of orientalism. It embraces aspects of Eastern Mediterranean culture, such as the evocative names of Sindbad the mariner, Aladdin, and Ali-Baba, and features pirates, treasures, slaves, and legends, but also elements of "oriental" social, political, and cultural everyday realities. The novel's portrayal of these "oriental" elements reflects perceptions of "the Orient" prevalent in Western societies until the Romantic age, in spite of Enlightenment's teachings of cultural relativity and otherness. The roots of orientalism inspiring fictions can be traced back to Antoine GALLAND's translation of the *Arabian Nights* in the early 18th century. During the pre-Romantic and Romantic ages, the notion of the exotic East and its civilizations flourished, emphasizing details and imagery associated with a constructed "local color". Romantic writers sought inspiration in these imagined worlds, as they sought an escape from Western civilization into the allure of these "marvelous" new realms. Dumas's novel aligns to a large extent with this constructed, artificial East and the orientalist fashion.

Around the middle of the 19th century, esteemed authors like Gustave FLAUBERT, Théophile GAUTIER, Leconte DE LISLE and Eugène FROMENTIN began incorporating the *materia orientalis* in their prose works (ANSELMINI 2004-2005, DEW 2009). Unlike the earlier "exotic" and legendary focus, these writers, influenced by the Positivist approach to reality, shifted their interest towards delving into the histories of Eastern countries and those around the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, Alexandre Dumas also utilized some of the stereotypical "oriental" elements in his writing to cater to readers' fascination with characters and fictions from "legendary" civilisations. However, *Monte-Cristo* also stands as a deconstruction of the

Romantic orientalist sentiment, as Dumas aimed to dispel idealisations and reject the absurd opposition between Eastern and Western cultures (MARSANS-SAKLY 2018). In the novel, neither France nor oriental countries are exalted or depicted as exotic, idyllic lands (SALIEN 2000). Dumas emphasizes that good and evil, along with values and flaws, exist in both Western and Eastern Mediterranean cultures, societies, and governments. The character Haydes serves as a spokeswoman for her culture, but she never fetishizes it, acknowledging the hardships her people faced, such as slavery and the fact that her father was killed. Notably, Dumas employs specific adjectives like *sauvage*, *esclave*, *demi-civilisé* when describing analogous situations in Western Europe, echoing the teachings of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and other philosophers who questioned the concept of the “real *sauvage*” and the meanings behind such terms.

The Count of Monte-Cristo goes beyond being simply an “oriental” novel and should be read as a “Mediterranean” novel, encompassing frequent allusions to Mediterranean archetypes, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to more recent reworkings of the “myth” of Ulysses. The novel covers almost the entire expanse of the Mediterranean Sea (GIAVERI 2004), encompassing its ancient literary *topoi* and characters, such as the sea voyages, the pursuit of knowledge, mysterious countries, old wise men as mentors, brave heroes, perilous adventures, passionate emotions, rivalries, nostalgia, and the search for new horizons, all in an authentic quest for the most profound values in life. To fully appreciate Dumas’s masterpiece, it is essential to explore the narrative strategies influenced by a long tradition of travel literature, embracing patterns inherited from the *Odyssey*, and examining them in a comparative manner.

Therefore I argue that the Mediterranean dimension of the novel should become central in interpretations of the novel and that this would make our reading of *Monte-Cristo* more complete, as such a “Mediterranean” reading would account for the rich literary tradition of the region that Dumas draws from, including themes from Homer’s *Odyssey* and other Mediterranean archetypes. Dumas moves beyond superficial orientalism and focuses on the broader Mediterranean context, exploring timeless values and the interplay of different cultures.

The Count of Monte-Cristo has unquestionably earned its place as a timeless best-seller, making it an essential addition to any ideal to-read-list in world literature. Among Dumas’s extensive body of work, it stands out as an undisputed masterpiece, achieving remarkable fame and reception. Its enduring popularity can be attributed to its ability to embody the perfect “architext”, seamlessly combining various poetics, traditions, legends, and realities. In this novel, readers can encounter not only the author’s personal life and experiences but also the rich tapestry of 19th-century chronicles, where many individual stories and historical events are gathered in a polyphonic ensemble. Moreover, the protagonist’s exploits, the adventures of his comrades and adversaries, as well as the principles, values, and ideas explored throughout the narrative, extend beyond their specific historical and cultural context. They resonate as a universal struggle for justice, equality, and liberty, emphasizing the opportunity for each individual to forge their path in life. While the plot and characters may not be entirely original in isolation, the novel’s uniqueness and universal acclaim stem from the masterful blending of diverse ingredients, creating a “total” work of art that captivates readers across generations (FRIGERIO 2002: 225).

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