Revenge and the Perfect Woman in Dante and Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, with Notes on Mo Yan and World Literature

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Abstract Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Christo* reveals the influences of adventure tales from Ariosto to the *Arabian Nights*. Although far too long to assign in an undergraduate World Literature survey, it deserves recognition for its influence, much as the work of Mo Yan will always be considered pivotal not for its literary excellence but for its representations of a difficult periods in history. This article looks at the universal themes of vengeance and the ideal women in Dumas's wide-ranging but erudite yarn, which, for example, characterizes the king of France as an effete enemy of the people by having him annotate an edition of Horace's poems, but also, in its entirety, establishes the great cultural watershed of Paris, France, in the 1840s, during the ferment leading up to the revolution of 1848 that so influenced Marx and hence so much of the world, including China.
Keywords world literature; Lukács; *Paradiso*; *Candide*; *Ben Hur*; *Les Miserables*; *Arabian Nights*.

At Purdue University the theory of comparative literature takes its most concrete form in the two-semester world literature survey. The theory that determines reading selections is often related to the explanations editors of anthologies give for the inclusions and exclusions. These critical approaches rarely include open appeals to stylistic excellence or religious instruction. Rather, today's criteria tend to include cultural coverage, common reactions to worldwide developments, and "resonances across time and space" (Longman xix-xxi). The Norton anthology searches for works that encompass a "global reach" and can be presented "as part of shared heritage of generations of readers in many countries, and as part of a network of cultural and literary relationships whose scope is still being discovered" (Norton 2002: xv).

Although one may think the Norton editors mean stylistic excellence when they

look for works of "consummate artistry", the context explains that they really mean a work's "ability to express complex signifying structures" (Norton 2002: xv), a weighty phrase that the third edition drops in favor of a new emphasis on travel and geography (Norton 2012: xix). In practice the new theories subtly add to the battle of the books from the old to the new, feeding the natural inclination of graduate students to focus on contemporary literature. The short story "Old Gun" by Mo Yan, now included in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (3rd ed., in six volumes) is part of the inexorable lure of the new, in large part because Mo Yan's work reaffirms so many older themes.

An informal survey of a dozen second-semester World Literature syllabi (from colleges in Indiana for which Purdue offers equivalency) finds that traditional faculty are more likely to end the course with the Modernists (e.g., Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, Woolf), *The Wide Sargasso Sea, One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or a selection of American Black literature.

By contrast younger teaching assistants tend to stress more recent contemporary authors, and sometimes reach the mid-twentieth century with as much as three weeks left in the course. This makes for interesting variety, of course, as in Dr. Laverne Nishihara's section of English L214 (Spring 2008) at Indiana University East in Richmond, IN, which left the Norton anthology at volume D and ended the course independently with Sofya Kovalevskaya's "Nihilist Girl" (chapters 5-8), written in Russian and published in 1892 before becoming a volume published by the Modern Language Association in 2001. Slaney Ross's section of ENGL/CMPL 267, taught at Purdue in the spring of 2013, retained both broad historical coverage and a good dose of the contemporary by ending with Mo Yan's "The Old Gun," which appears in the third edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*. She put the work in conversation with Aphra Behn's *Ooronoko* in order to argue for the theme of politically motivated suicide (These sample syllabi were included in a review of course equivalents conducted by Purdue's College of Liberal Arts.)

In the spring semester of 2013 I asked my graduate students to choose a literary work not normally found in anthologies and defend its inclusion, drawing on criteria found in various anthologies, including those for older Western Literature surveys, more recent world literature anthologies, and a consideration of what is meant by global literature. I did my best to convince them not to choose a contemporary author, but with only mixed results. The students argued for the inclusion of an important but overlooked work by Cicero, for offering of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* instead of *Hamlet*, for a portion from the Iceland *Edda*, and a representative story about the Holy Grail, and some poetry by Michaelangelo, in defense of the often maligned notion there was something special about the individual in the Renaissance.

But the Turkish student argued for the inclusion of Ayla Kutlu's novel *Kadin Destani* (*Woman's Epic*) a modern Turkish version of *Gilgamesh* from a woman's point of view. An Egyptian student made a case for including *Incendies* by Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-Québécois playwright, while a woman of Syrian nationality whose family lives in Saudi Arabia believed students or world literature should benefit from the exploration of desert life and Suni mysticism in Ibrahim Al-Koni's *Gold Dust*. A Chinese student supported the case for varying the selection of the already-anthologized Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing, 张爱玲 , 1920-1995).

I chose Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) for my own offering, despite the thousand pages that make it impossible to actually assign in a world literature survey, except as extra reading. In part I chose it just as an exercise in argument for a rather hopeless position, but in part to rethink Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), which despite its length is often included in survey courses. I also chose it because years ago my mother gave me the novel in two volumes. I never read them, but according to Italo Calvino, one definition of a classic is a book one can read for profit even after missing it in one's youth (Calvino 4).

A final reason is that by the standard of global reach, *The Count of Monte Cristo* positively screams for inclusion in courses on world literature. As I learned well after beginning this project, its Wikipedia page (which gets its facts from the introduction to a 2004 edition) tells us that "*Monte Cristo* is said to have been at its first appearance in 1844, and for some time subsequently, the most popular book in Europe. Perhaps no novel within a given number of years had so many readers and penetrated into so many different countries" (Dumas 2004: xxv). This popularity has extended into modern times as well. The book was "translated into virtually all modern languages and has never been out of print in most of them. There have been at least twenty-nine motion pictures based on it," including one in Tamil, the culture whose selections have proved most intractable to teaching at Purdue. There have been "several television series, and many movies [have] worked the name 'Monte Cristo' into their titles" (Dumas 2004: 601). The title Monte Cristo lives on in a "famous gold mine, a line of luxury Cuban cigars, a sandwich, and any number of bars and casinos — it even lurks in the name of the street-corner hustle three-card monte (Dumas 2004: xxiv). In *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Eugene O'Neill gives as a cause of his father's drunkenness and its effects on his family, that his father, the popular actor James O'Neill, during the course of the nineteenth century, played the part of the Count of Monte Cristo over six thousand times, for it turns out that Dumas turned his novel into a series of three highly successful stage plays.

In addition to writing an international best seller, Dumas himself is a post-colonialist's dream. His African features are no accident. Although his grandfather

was a French marquis, his grandmother was a slave on a Haitian plantation, and their son Thomas Dumas inherited the status of both, at least until the marquis brought him to Paris in 1776, where, since there was no slavery, Thomas Dumas was free. There he received an education. During the 1790s he became a general in the French army for his efforts in opening the passes through the Alps that allowed Napoleon into Italy. By age thirty-one he became the highest-ranking person of color in any Continental or American army before Colin Powell. His career is the subject of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize winner for biography (Reiss, *The Black Count*).

Unfortunately for Dumas' mixed-race father, the French Revolution was unable to hold back the interests of French slave traders. Despite the efforts of abolitionists, when The Constituent Assembly debated the slave trade in March 1790, the defenders of commerce prevailed, and even "secured the passage of a decree which included the alarming phrase: 'Whosoever works to excite risings against the colonists [slave holders] will be declared an enemy of the people'" (Thomas 522, citing memoires by Honoré Riquetti, count of Mirabeau). In 1802, the year Alexandre Dumas was born, slavery was reintroduced and all black officers expelled from the French armies. Thomas Dumas suffered from the decree and died two years later. Alexander's mother, the daughter of an innkeeper, nonetheless gave her boy an education. By the 1820s he had become a successful playwright. In 1844 he serially published *The Three Musketeers*, whose theme "one for all and all for one" is diametrically opposed to the portrait of the Count of Monte Cristo, which followed the same year, for the Count is a vengeful and calculating, if highly educated man of the world.

The Count of Monte Cristo always knows the right architects, can speak all languages, and hold his own in any society, whether cosmopolitan Paris, the Islamic Middle East, North Africa, among the bandits of Italy, or in papal Rome. He knows opera, plays, and painters. His collection of marbles, as his statues are called, is impeccable, and at the pistol range he can turn any numbered playing card into a ten. It is perhaps a fraught question for cultural studies how given Dumas's background, he could let his hero own several slaves and constantly give orders that he expects to be obeyed to the minute and without the slightest variance. But in fact the work exposes the contradiction between the world of honor and Christian providentialism that undergirded the world slave trade.

Although not obvious in the novel itself, Dumas' social commentary, like that of Mo Yan, is pointed enough for those who know how to look. It illustrates with unparalled success, in fact, Georg' Lukács' thesis in *The Historical Novel* (1937), that the swift economic and cultural changes in France between 1814 and 1844 — the period in which *The Count of Monte Cristo* is set — precluded the full development of an the idea of social progress that it would fall to Hegel, not Dumas, to articulate

(Lukács 28). Lukács dates the classical form of the historical novel from the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, whose mass armies of citizens came home from Russian, Germany, Italy, and Egypt with for the first time a realization of broader horizons and that they were a part of history too, "to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them. There is no point in dealing here with the social transformations of France itself," Lukács goes on, somewhat ingenuously. "It is quite obvious the extent to which the economic and cultural life of the entire national was disrupted by the huge, rapidly successive changes of the period" (24) — "obvious," Lukács leaves unsaid, because the changes of precisely this time period, from 1814 to 1844, provide the historical background for *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The Count's skillful revenge plot, which he ultimately curtails, is in fact based on his recognition of the role and limitations of Capital: "The inhumanity of Capitalism, the chaos of competition, the destruction of the small by the big, the debasement of culture by the transformation of all things into commodities — all this is contrasted in a manner generally reactionary in tendency, with the social idyll of the Middle Ages, seen as a period of peaceful co-operation among all classes, an age of the organic growth of culture" (26).

It was because of this "falsely idyllic picture" rather than a commitment to "human progress" (27) that Dumas could not come to terms with Louis Napoleon, and his increasingly reactionary regime. Although Dumas' novel weaves in and out of history, it fails to articulate "an ideological defense of human progress" such as Hegel devised (28), that would "preserve the achievements of the French Revolution as the imperishable basis of future human development" (29). In this sense, the novel remains a book for boys. The Count does not fully comprehend, even if he glimpses, the limits of his worldview.

The reactionary character of the novel is captured in the character of the Count, which Dumas crafted to illustrate the contradictory search for vengeance and the perfect woman. This paradox is the thesis of a simple comparison paper I wrote for my seminar in order to illustrate a theme that might be assigned in an undergraduate survey course that takes comparative literature seriously. Given the availability of information on the Internet, I find that comparisons should be random, so that students cannot find them pre-written somewhere on line. As an example, I made a random choice, for comparison with Dumas, and came up with the ninth canto of Dante's *Paradiso*.

As generations of teachers know, the work of Dante provides plenty of scope for comparison with almost anything. It also represents an important way station in the older conception of Western literature that runs from the Bible and Virgil to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The religious development of Western literature is itself a topic

often sacrificed, in our era, to differing conceptions of cultural studies, which do not take fully seriously the intellectual depth of Western thought.

Such oversight is a shame, since in an older anthology, three or four pages suffices to introduce students — and fairly naïve students such as myself — to the simple outlines of Christian imagery. At the level of iconology, one wants to know that St. Mark is represented in art by a lion, the Holy Spirit by a dove, and that Christ is the Lamb of God or the Word, which is how the gospel of John refers to him (Gould 390-393). Dante is too creative to be such a guide himself, but by randomly choosing a canto of a classic like *The Divine Comedy*, one can show how Dante, or any major author, can help one find things in Dumas we might not otherwise notice. Writing is a process of discovery, as we need to remind administrators, not just a way to put together a vita.

Dante's *Paradiso* itself is little read or assigned, compared to the great vignettes of evildoers in Dante's *Inferno*. Yet the theme of love gives us a glimmer of hope that something can be made of this ignored portion of Dante's text. By the time we reach canto nine — in composing part of this hypothetical comparison paper — Dante has ascended to the lunar sphere. There he meets Piccarda, whose inconstancy contrasts with the changing moon. He also meets a steadier woman, appropriately named Constance, who gives him his first instruction on the degrees of splendor that structure the *Paradiso*, for Dante's task in writing the *Paradiso* was to make everyone blessed yet find ways to distinguish degrees of blessedness without diminishing the souls found there. His solution lay in describing shades of light and brightness, such as pearls on a white forehead, a series of images that culminates in the Threefold Light of the Trinity, the disappearance of Beatrice, and the final white mystic rose of belief.

In Dante's cosmology, Venus is the second stop from the moon, coming after Mercury. Here the emperor Justinian lectures Dante on the righteous role of Rome in establishing the Roman Church, despite Rome's less praiseworthy pursuit of honor and fame. At this point Beatrice, who has taken over the role of Dante's guide from Virgil and Statius, explains how Christ's death can be regarded as God's act of vengeance against mankind.

Dante feels so close to *The Count of Monte Cristo* at this point that I am positively trembling. For the Count spends most of his time seeking vengeance — not exactly an unknown desire in the rather under-religious world of Mo Yan — once he finds his way out of the dungeon where he rots for many years, as Jean Valjean will do, perhaps more famously, in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (1862), a novel which also had a long afterlife in cinema and on Broadway.

In Dumas's novel, the Count of the "Mountain of Christ," if I may be so bold in paraphrasing, is resurrected (so to speak) and finds not only the light of day but

a fortune in jewels, which had been hidden on the island of Monte Cristo centuries earlier as the result of some Dantean struggle among the prelates and potentates of the Roman curia. His imprisonment is in fact the result of allegations that he favored the Emperor Napoleon, in the period between Elba and Waterloo, the post-French Revolutionary period that for Lukács begins our modern conceptions of History, when the average soldier, fresh from campaigns across Europe and the near-East, for the first time understand that he himself is not confined locally but is part of a larger world picture. Politics thus makes Dumas's hero's time in a dungeon comparable to the exile of Dante from Florence.

Dante was not immune to grand conceptions of history, such as Lukács expresses in his *précis* of Marxist-Leninist theory, for both exile and imprisonment are related indirectly to Holy Roman Emperor, whom Dante hoped would unite Italy, but who never did. He lacked Napoleon's military genius, but then, so did Napoleon in the end. Both Dante's poem and Dumas' novel, in the spirit of the French Revolution, call out for systems of government that will control local abuses.

Such local cruelty is one reason that Dante's *Divine Comedy* often reads like a series of personal vendettas, especially in the *Inferno*, where it seems Dante inserts almost everyone he hated in his lifetime. The Count of Monte Cristo's vendettas are even more central. Much of the book describes the way he tracks down the two men who framed him, one of whom married his fiancé, the beautiful Mercédès. Given the role of personal animosity in both works — and again, one feels the central conception of Mo Yan's various moral protagonists who so often personally face the sheer brutality of peasants, bureaucrats, the generally unenlightened — it hardly seems surprising that the name of the Count, before he becomes the Count, is Edmund Dantès.

As informed readers, we know that Italy's Dante has made some terrible error that requires him to make his voyage through hell and purgatory before he can reach paradise. No wonder that the Count of Monte Cristo, formerly Edmund Dantès, is similarly warned about the immorality of vengeance early in the book by a certain *abbé* — a religious man whom he met in his dungeon and who provided both his extraordinary education and the clues to the whereabouts of the jewels that make up his extraordinary fortune:

> "I regret having helped you in your investigation and said what I did to you," he remarked.
>
> "Why is that?" Dantès asked.
>
> "Because I have insinuated a feeling into your heart that was not previously there: the desire for revenge."

Dantès smiled and said: "Let us change the subject."

(Dumas 2003:168, ch.17)

Dantès does not smile ironically in the French original of this passage, making him colder, more mysterious, not the happy jack of all trades he seems in English:

-- Je suis fâché de vous avoir aidé dans vos recherches et de vous avoir dit ce que je vous ai dit, fit-il.

-- Pourquoi cela? demanda Dantès.

-- Parce que je vous ai infiltré dans le coeur un sentiment qui n'y était point: la vengeance." dit-il.

"Parlons d'autre chose", dit-il.

(Dumas *Le comte*: 209)

Setting aside the morality of vengeance, as Edmond wishes and as the novel does for hundreds of pages, we can say that the redemptive property of love, needed by both vengeful men, connects Dante and Dumas. For it turns out, despite the randomness of my selection, that canto nine of the *Paradiso* lets us see deeply into sexual side of a love that is otherwise almost entirely spiritual with regard to both Dante's Beatrice and the Count's beautiful — as she is constantly called — Mercédès. And we may even extend the comparison to Mo Yan, despite the overt absence of religion in his novels, for many of Mo Yan's male protagonists, such as Ding Gou'er in *The Republica of Wine*, are constantly groping women — for what? Sex? The truth?

Most of Dante's canto is taken up by two narrators, Cunizza da Romano and Folco of Marseilles, whose combination of violent politics and sexuality is remarkably close to that of the repeatedly beating lovers Gao Ma and Jinju suffer in Mo Yan's novel *The Garlic Ballads* (1988), which catches the restless mood of China just before Tianamen Square (1989). Dante's Cunizza is the sister of one of the most horrible Italian despots of all time, the infamous Ezzolino da Romano, tyrant of Padua, whom even Boiardo remembers two centuries later for having burned alive 11,000 Paduans in a single day (*Orlando* 2.25.48). The immediate point of her presence is to exemplify a discourse in the poem on heredity, where we are told that the natural disposition of a person can trump even the influences of the planets. Thus Cunizza need not be blood-thirsty just because her brother is. Dante's point, much overlooked, has immediate relevance to any society recovering from the trauma of tyranny, including post-Terror France or post-revolutionary China.

Cunizza was a real woman historically, and something of a scandal for commentators, for she was married at least four times and had at least two major

love affairs, and the question arose, how could Dante put such a tainted woman into Paradise? In the translation of Dorothy Sayers (whose commentary and sense of scandal I'm following here), she is said to speak "from her deep heart, as one delighted to give generously" (*Paradiso* 9.23-24)? We might note that Allen Mandelbaum's translation of the same passages loses the double entendre, if there really is one, when he translates *ben far giova* as "rejoiced in kindness": In his version the Cunizza Dante sees is a light who "out of that depth from which it sang before / continued as if it rejoiced in kindness" ("del suo profondo, ond'ella pria cantava / sequette come a cui di ben far giova"). Good people exist in every society, however troubled. But Cunizza admits that she is in the sphere of Venus for a reason and knows that there are vulgar minds (*Paradiso* 9.36) who might blame her, although she pardons herself.

What connects Cunizza to the beautiful Mercédès is that by the time Edmund Dantès tracks her down in Paris, twenty-one years have passed and she has married one of the men the Count intends to kill. The woman on a pedestal in Dumas's novel is also now the mother of the twenty-one-year-old son of his worst enemy, a boy whom the Count befriends, almost irreligiously, in order to work his revenge, for revenge by definition is never the true answer to the trauma of violence

The post-revolutionary world to which this boy gives the Count entry was Parisian society, and Paris was most important cultural center in the world in 1830-1848, providing another set of arguments for including Dumas in a World Literature course. Lukács believed that France lost her way as a leader in the fight for progressive social policies, instead reverting to a kind of reactionary admiration for an idyllic middle ages. Dumas himself was disappointed in the policies of Louis Napoleon. But there is another, cultural sense in which Paris was the capital of the world, and that is as a confluence of classical texts and education that explains the many literary and musical references in Dumas' work. Dante, Descartes, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Meyerbeer, seventeenth-century romances, Rossini, Beaumarchais, Victor Hugo and others are called on when needed. His daring constantly compares the Count to Byron's Manfred as a man who loses his social standing but then makes up for his loss; plus, the scenes in Epidaurus with Ali Pascha recall Byron's death fighting for Greek independence. Early in the novel Dumas shows King Louis XVI annotating an edition of Horace to prepare a new one, as a way to metonymically represent his aloofness to social changes despite his erudition. The Mercedes plot might be traced to Diego de Montemayor's *Diana*, in which a shepherdess abhors Sylvanus, but when her Sirenus leaves for a year, she marries Delius and puts Sylvanus in oblivion. There are further classical references to Sappho, Lucullus, Virgil, and to Cornelius Nepos, while the murder of a woman to preserve her honor from rape by the *banditi*

of Rome is right out of Livy's *De urbe condita* or any number of Italian Renaissance tragedies, such as Pietro Aretino's *Horatia* (1553). Perhaps due to the great success of Shakespeare in Paris following tours by English acting companies in 1827 (Haines), Dumas refers several times to *Macbeth*, especially the banquet scene where Banquo's ghost appears, and to *Hamlet*, including Claudius's advice on the death of fathers. Such insertions buttress the feeling that despite its wild adventure, *The Count of Monte Cristo* touches perennial human concerns, including violence and foregiveness.

Several references to Voltaire's *Candide* suggest that beneath the novel's surface adventures and romance, there is also a layer of social satire or at least social awareness. Dumas, who visited Rome, describes papal intrigue at length when the Count appears in Rome to befriend Albert, Mercédès son, in order to plot his way to Paris, and much of this intrigue recalls chapter eleven of *Candide*, where the fiancé of the daughter of the pope is poisoned drinking a cup of chocolate before being kidnapped by pirates from Salé on her way to Gaeta. One of the more troubling characters for a modern reading is the Count's mute, black servant Ali, at least before we realize his type is Cacambo, who appears in chapter thirteen of *Candide*, "a valet of the type one often finds in the provinces of Spain and in the colonies," something of a halfbreed, and impossibly fond of his master. The romance element is further strengthened by the Count's suddenly becoming a master marksman, just when his skill with dueling pistols is needed to defend himself against Albert. Similarly Candide in chapter sixteen, having learned to shoot when in the Bulgar army, suddenly turns out to be a perfect marksman during the episode when the two monkeys chase a naked woman. Finally, the sudden, fairy-tale richness of the Count finds it counterpart in the sheep filled with jewels that Candide finds in El Dorado in chapter eighteen. There is even a reference to Pangloss, Candide's tutor (Dumas 2003:217, ch. 22).

Among the many literary works Dumas cites from Horace to Shakespeare, perhaps the major one is *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Although this work is probably more French than Arabian, given that much of it is based on the extension of Persian culture into northern India — and given its lack of currency in middle eastern countries, despite episodes in Baghdad and Damascus — it fits the world of the Count of Monte Cristo, for Edmund Dantès lays claim to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, including experiences in North Africa and the Middle East — exactly the kind of wide experience of the world that led Lukács to say that it was the citizen armies of France, the masses of returning soldiers who had been as far as Russian, Egypt, and the Levant, that first gave the common man a conception of his place in history, that he was not confined by local custom but led a life connect to larger processes (such as the new role of what Marx called Capital).

The Count is a sailor and was to have been a sea captain before he is unjustly

imprisoned, and so he adopts the name of Sinbad the Sailor as he goes about rewarding his friends and punishing his enemies for their betrayal of him in his home town of Marseilles. Is it an accident that Edmund Dantès is originally from Marseilles, and that the second speaker of Dante's canto, named Folco, is also from Marseilles? Perhaps, but Folco derives from the Italian word *folcire,* to sustain, to prop up, and in the canto he props up the reputations of Cunizza and another calumniated woman, Rahab the harlot, who helped Joshua take Jericho. One hopes, throughout one's long reading of Dumas's novel, that the Count will come around and similarly prop up the besmirched reputation of Mercédès, despite the revulsion the Count feels when he learns that she waited only eighteen months for him, while he was imprisoned, before marrying his rival.

Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic analysis of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, tells us that Sinbad the Sailor represents the "old bad man within" Sinbad the poor porter who goes by the same name (Bettelheim 84). Due to this dark side of the Count's character, it is therefore appropriate that, although one expects for over a thousand pages that Edmond Dantès and the once-beautiful Mercédès will unite in the end, one cannot help feeling reunion may be unlikely, and might be unsuitable, for vengeance is a nasty business. The cold, commanding Count seems not to learn this lesson for most of the novel, despite the warnings of the Abbé Faria, his fellow prisoner who helps the otherwise bewildered Count identify his enemies. Edmond has a good memory and is a practical man, he says, but he does not have philosophy. "Philosophy cannot be taught. Philosophy is the union of all acquired knowledge and the genius that applies it: philosophy is the shining cloud upon which Christ set His foot to go up into heaven" (169). Missing his point, at least for about nine hundred pages, Edmund answers, "Come then. … What will you teach me first? I am eager to begin, I am athirst for knowledge" (169).

Unlike Dante's, the Count's vision of knowledge does not coincide with the perfect woman. Dante may see Beatrice, but she is, after all, dead when he meets her in heaven, and Dante himself in real life never returned to Florence from exile, where his real wife remained without him. As he wrote the poem in which he sought his spiritual health and beatitude in Beatrice, he knew how steep the steps are of another man's house, and how salt his bread. (In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante calls Beatrice the "gloriosa donna della mia mente" [the glorious woman of my mind] and the "donna della salute," because she gave him a greeting or salutation that restored his health ["salute"]. The steep steps and salt bread can be found in *Paradiso* 17.55-60.) One expects the Count to suffer too, and he does when the horrible but nonetheless innocent son of one of his victims is killed, but he never returns to Mercédès.

The reasons are given late in the story in a metonymic scene that both determines

Mercédès future relationship to the Count and symbolizes it. This happens when she shows the Count her grey hair. For stylistic excellence the speech in which Mercédès steps off the pedestal of the perfect woman must be set against Flaubert's description of the droplets of sweat on the voluptuous Emma Bovary that Vladimir Nabokov so admired and imitated when describing Lolita (Butler; Nabokov 134). Adulterous Emma is first seen perspiring at home on her farm, before she marries bourgeois Charles Bovary, because she is a peasant at heart, and many argue that Lolita is like a mounted butterfly (Butler). Mercédès role is mercifully to remove her aging self from the Count's life:

> See … (she completely removed her veil) "See: misfortune has turned my hair grey and my eyes have shed so many tears that there are dark rings round them; and my forehead is furrowed. But you, Edmond, you are still young, still handsome and still proud. You did have faith, you had strength, you trusted in God, and God sustained you. I was a coward, I denied Him, so God abandoned me; and here I am!"
>
> Mercédès burst into tears, her heart breaking under the weight of memory. Monte Cristo took her hand and kissed it respectfully, but she herself felt that the kiss was passionless, as if his lips were pressing the marble hand of the statue of some saint.
>
> (Dumas, 2003: 1191, ch. 113)

> Voyez…(elle découvrit tout à fait son visage), voyez, le malheur a fait mes cheveux gris; mes yeux ont tant versé de larmes, qu'ils sont cerclés de veines violettes; mon front se ride. Vous, au contraire, Edmond, vous êtes toujours jeune, toujours beau, toujours fier. C'est que vous avez eu la foi, vous; c'est que vous avez eu la force; c'est que vous vous êtes reposé en Dieu, et que Dieu vous a soutenu. Moi, j'ai été lâche, moi, j'ai renié, Dieu m'a abandonnée, et me voilà.
>
> Mercédès fondit en larmes; le coeur de la femme se brisait au choc des souvenirs.
>
> Monte-Cristo prit sa main e la baisa respectueusement; mais elle sentit elle-même que ce baiser était sans ardeur, comme celuis que le comte eût déposé sur la main de marbre de la statue d'une sainte. (Dumas, *Le comte* 2: 702)

Twelve years later, Flaubert gave his own version of such a scene, when Emma Bovary's appeals for money and receives only a cold response from Rodolphe, her first lover:

> "Dear Madame, I do not have them." He did not lie. … "You do not have

them!" she repeated several times. "You do not have them! I ought to have spared myself this last shame. You never loved me. You are no better than others" (trans. Nabokov, *Lectures* 169).

Enfin il dit d'un air très calme:

"He ne les ai pas, chère madame."

Il ne mentait point. . . . "Tu ne les as pas!"

Elle répéta plsieurs fois:

"Tu ne les as pas! … J'aurais dû m'épargner cette dernière honte. Tu ne m'as jamis aimée! tu ne vaux pas mieux que les autres!" (Flaubert 575-76; 3rd part, ch. 8)

Flaubert did not believe Mercédès's voluntary withdrawal from competition for the Count's affections; instead, he sent Mme. Bovary hurtling toward bankruptcy and ruin. Mercédès, to the contrary, is solvent thanks to the Count, and lives.

Instead of reuniting with Mercédès to atone for his excess of vengeance, the cold Count tries to warm his own heart by saving the life of two characters, one by means of an elaborately staged mock death, using a sleeping potion, and the other by an even more elaborate suicide scene like the central episode of the original *Mash* movie, complete with hookahs and candles and caves. The sleeping beauty who awakens is named Valentine, who is said to seem like an angel of mercy when she appears to her fiancée. He had wanted to kill himself, thinking she was dead, until she appears in all her

miraculous beauty. Pale and sweetly smiling, she seemed like an angel of mercy casting out the angel of vengeance"

(Dumas, 2003: 1239; ch. 117)

"merveilleuse beauté.

Pâle et doucement souriante, elle semblait l'ange de la miséricord conjurant l'ange des vengeances.

(Dumas, *Le comte* 2: 764; ch. 118)

Mercy thus prevails, but Mercédès does not, for the Count, rather than return to her and her graying hair, runs off with his beautiful young ward named Haydée, who is about sixteen and technically a slave he has purchased in Constantinople. It is an ending appropriate for Dumas, who is said to have had over forty mistresses, and who knew that in the real world of France in 1848, religion itself could be used on either side of the slave question, as it had for centuries. Is this why throughout the novel the Count can pursue vengeance and still believe that he is an agent of Providence? In

Dumas' novel, the final swarm of angelic appearances, resurrections, moral doubts, and providential opportunities bewilders the Count, thus allowing him to maintain his stature as a hero of romance, the literary form that uses magic to reconcile the contradictions of the real world. In the end the Count and Haydée miraculously sail from the shores of the island of Monte Cristo, disappearing from sight in an ending as mystical and entirely satisfying as Frodo's sailing from the Gray Havens at the end of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Flaubert or Tolstoy would have preferred someone be run over by a train, rather than fade into the sunset. And modernist critics make demands on style other than those Dumas satisfies. He was not an individual genius like Flaubert, spending hours alone searching for *le mot juste* (Dumas, 2003: xii). His narrator is all seeing, not limited in perspective like a modernist storyteller. His characters dwell in "the familiar ground of coherent social thought and behavior, against which the individual figure shows itself for what it is," not in "landscapes that neither know them nor share their conventional assumptions" (Weinstein 343). But the Count lives on, not only resonating across time and space but raising enough religious issues to create a "complex signifying structure" (Norton, 2002: xv) that gives Dumas's novel multiple dimensions of meaning in different cultures and eras.

As a man of African ancestry, Dumas bore what western societies considered the mark of Cain (Goldenberg 178). Following a misreading of Genesis 4.15, black skin was considered the mark of Cain (and Ham) in religious literature used to support slavery, and the protection God offers to Cain's descendants was taken instead as a curse. The Count for most of the book believes that sin can be passed down through the generations, which with his eye-for-an-eye attitude probably makes him something of an Old Testament figure, a French Ahab, needing correction, Dumas lets the reader fill in the Christian possibilities of his redemption, using mystical and hallucinogenic images (the Count likes his hashish), such as the shining cloud of philosophy that helped Christ to heaven, to suggest the possibilities of providence. Other biblical sources for the sins of the fathers being visited on the children can be found in Exod. 20.5 and 34.7, and Deut. 5.9. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, where the unbridled vengeance of Shylock provides a model for the Count before his enlightenment, the ignorant character Lancelot Gobbo tells Jessica, Shylock's daughter, that "the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children" (*Merchant* 3.5.2), a view the Count finally rejects.

Although the institution of slavery is remarkable in the novel for not being directly remarked on — just as Mo Yan uses fantasy to avoid direct descriptions of modern Chinese politics — Dumas had the good sense to make Monte Cristo belatedly feel inklings of doubt for seeking revenge not only on his tormentors but

on their descendants. History has done the rest, as can be seen by considering the three best-selling American novels of all time. Care to guess? The first is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. The most recent is *Gone with the Wind* (1936). The one in the middle is *Ben-Hur*, composed right near Purdue University in Crawfordsville, Indiana, and published in 1880; and it is a direct knock-off of Dumas' novel. Like Monte Cristo, Judah Ben-Hur is sentenced to the galleys for life by an ambitious Roman officer who knows he is innocent. He survives and returns to Jerusalem looking for revenge. But Lew Wallace evidently felt that Monte Cristo never adequately understood the contradiction of his belief that he was an agent of Providence in seeking vengeance, for in his version Ben-Hur witnesses the crucifixion of Christ and understands a new religion based on love. That is, where the Count of Monte Cristo is Castiglione's courtier gone wild, a master of everything from languages to finance to dueling pistols and architecture, Ben-Hur gets to meet Jesus. (In Mo Yan's later fiction, various forms of the Buddha appear.) But the story is ultimately the same, that of the most wildly popular of all figures in literature, the great man unjustly accused and tormented, seeking his redemption through an uncharted realm of religious inklings, vengeance, and love in its appropriate form.

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