Changing Places to See: Otherness and Essentialism in *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*

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ABSTRACT

Donald Miller McLean III: “Changing Places to See: Otherness and Essentialism in Le Comte de Monte-Cristo”
(Under the direction of Jessica Tanner)

Alexandre Dumas’s novels, especially Le Comte de Monte-Cristo, engage with cultural hegemonies and French social norms. This thesis will examine how Dumas explores these norms in Monte-Cristo, specifically in analyzing the Orientalist tropes in the Sinbad the Sailor episodes. Edmond Dantès, the main character, uses the persona of Sinbad to create a myth that will permeate French aristocracy in order to advance his revenge plot. The use of Sinbad inherently relies on Orientalist tropes, but Dantès, aware of their strategic power, inverts them to confront cultural hegemonies. Ultimately, Dantès’s plot succeeds in part because of the French aristocracy’s inability, or unwillingness, to critically engage with these tropes. Dantès, however, abstracts himself in order to assume multiple personas, and is ultimately unable to reestablish himself as an individual at the novel’s closing. Dantès’s strategic essentialism thus allows him to achieve his revenge against society but denies him closure as an individual.
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Introduction

Alexandre Dumas’s *Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1845) is the story of the sailor Edmond Dantès, his unjust punishment for a crime in which he unwittingly participated, and the revenge that he seeks for the wrongdoings that others have committed against him. Originally a sailor from Marseille, France, Dantès is imprisoned for nineteen years following accusations of treason for having attempted to deliver a letter from Napoleon. Dantès’s dying captain asks him to deliver the letter, but does not tell him its significance. Three jealous rivals, Fernand, Danglars, and Villefort, see Dantès as standing in the way of their goals, and plot to frame Dantès for a crime that was not his so that they can progress their agendas.

After escaping from jail, Dantès inherits a vast amount of wealth from a former prisoner in the Chateau d’If and proceeds to use this new wealth to seek revenge against Fernand, Danglars, and Villefort. Dantès succeeds, leaving each of the men dead or in various states of extreme turmoil before leaving his wealth to a young couple. Dantès’s revenge plot represents the revenge of the oppressed against their oppressors, and Dumas’s novel is an exploration of said revenge.

In order to achieve his revenge, Dantès makes use of multiple personas that rely largely on stereotypes and an understanding of societal reactions to and receptions of these stereotypes. Focusing on the strategic use of these stereotypes, I will explore a specific part of this revenge plot—the episodes that occur in Italy in which Dantès poses as Sinbad the
Sailor. The arrival of Sinbad marks the earnest beginning of Dantès’s revenge, and posing alternately as Sinbad and as the titular Count, Dantès leads two young Frenchmen, Franz and Albert, around the Italian coast and Rome during Carnival. Dantès’s use of Orientalist tropes is a part of a strategy that revolves around abstraction through strategic essentialism. This strategic essentialism not only defines the episodes in which Dantès poses as a foreigner, but also contributes to the lack of resolution as an individual in his revenge plot. Dantès adopts multiple personae through abstracting himself as an individual, allowing for the effective strategic essentialism that progresses the objectives of the revenge plot. Nonetheless, this same strategic essentialism is also ineffective in helping to achieve the full resolution that Dantès hoped to find—namely, Dantès achieves his material objectives in becoming more powerful than his enemies, but the final scene, in which Dantès leaves his fortune to another and sails away, suggests an ambiguity in the satisfaction that Dantès feels. In other words, Dumas’s novel is a cautionary tale on the use of strategic essentialism. As such, I mean to show that the text is more sophisticated than a simple revenge tale told through popular fiction. Rather, it is a text that confronts colonial power through a subversive narrative that inverts typical contemporary understandings of the Orient.

Orientalism and essentialism are two of the most important terms in my analysis, and before continuing I will define exactly what I mean by each of these words. I will clarify my usage of the words abstract and abstraction, as well. Orientalism can have two different meanings; either the study of cultures collectively known as the “Orient” or, as I will more frequently be using the term, the creation of an Other through the repeated use and enforcement of certain ideas, topics, and stereotypes associated with these cultures. This

1 When I am writing in English, I will use the English standard spelling Sinbad, as opposed to the spelling Simbad, which I will maintain in citations from Monte-Cristo, that Dumas uses in the novel.
latter definition stems from Edward Said’s foundational text, *Orientalism*, and will be a point of departure for much of my argument.

Said has this to say about the relation between Orientalism and the so-called Orient:

“The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ […] but also because it *could be*—that is submitted to being—*made* Oriental” (Said 6). What we call the Orient is a creation, not an essential. That is to say, colonial power structures, like the French Imperial occupation of “Oriental” countries, creates a society in which the colonizer can dictate what it means to be “French” or “not French.” Colonial powers like the French thus created the Orient—it was not initially a concept imagined by those now called Oriental. Said continues on to discuss the episode with Kuchuk Hanem in Gustav Flaubert’s *Voyage in Orient* (1849-1851), saying that Flaubert represents Kuchuk as he wishes to represent her, rather than allowing her to speak for herself (6). In other words, Orientalism is, at its base, a process of othering through representation and misrepresentation. However, one must ask if this is all there is to Orientalism—if representation were the only factor affecting the colonized peoples under the influence of European powers, then would it not be easy for the colonized to counter by showing the truth as opposed to the given description? European empires, however, created their version of the Orient as a truth in and of itself, making it difficult for the colonized within the imperial hierarchy to challenge what the metropole labels as the truth.

Said addresses this concern shortly after the previously cited passage:

“[Orientalism] is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction…but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means…it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly (or alternative and novel) world;
it is, above all, a discourse that…exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power.” (12)

Here, Said argues that Orientalism maintains its representations through what is effectively a cultural hegemony; the “uneven exchange with various kinds of power” allows one side, namely the colonizer, to represent and misrepresent the Orient as it pleases. Nuancing this idea, Jean-Marie Salien, citing Lisa Lowe, notes that “l’orientalisme ne constitue pas une tradition uniforme et continue, mais se produit à travers des tendances très divers […] l’orientalisme français n’est qu’un agrégat de référents variés” (181). Orientalism is a process that draws upon various points of reference in order to create a culturally hegemonic, if inconsistent, representation of certain peoples. It is what it is because a group with power wishes it to be so—it enacts and realizes what it represents. Rather than an event, it is a process, and we see this process occurring in texts, like Monte-Cristo, that make use of the established Orientalist themes, and in doing so perpetuate them.

This is the idea of Orientalism that I will be working with in this thesis—an Orientalism that perpetuates itself through authority, power imbalances, and hegemonies. It is also one that establishes itself largely through literary means; not only does Said discuss the idea of representation through Flaubert’s work, but the Sinbad character that Dumas uses stems from a cultural knowledge of Antoine Galland’s French translations of the 1,001 Nights. Dumas’s figuration of these tropes is not atypical for his time period, but that the way he uses them in order to challenge these same power structures is. Dumas uses Orientalism in order to critique Orientalism itself, though his attempt to do so makes use of the same themes, leading to possible misinterpretations at a surface level. However, within the context of 19th-century French literature and colonialism, the attempt itself was out of the ordinary.
Essentialism, on the other hand, is part of Orientalism, but is not uniquely an Orientalist tool. To essentialize something is to reduce it to a few key elements, or essence, such that the relationship between signifier and signified is unchanging. Essentialism is the broad application of this essence in an effort to generally categorize and define something. Orientalism, like other similar processes, use essentialism in order to reduce a specific Other to easily recognizable and definable characteristics, creating a separation and hierarchy between interacting cultures and peoples.

Specifically, I will be working with the idea of strategic essentialism, a tactic used not by the oppressor but rather by the oppressed. It is a tactic used, in the context that I will be examining in Monte-Cristo, by the oppressed to trick the oppressor through use of how the oppressor perceives the agent using strategic essentialism. Gayatri Spivak notes that the strategic use of essence is self-conscious: “Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical,” and that it is not “disinterested and universal” (4). Dantès strategically uses Orientalist tropes in order to progress his revenge plot, and while Dantès himself is from France, he is an outsider in French society—his profession as a sailor separates him physically and conceptually from larger French society, and his later imprisonment totally cuts him off from this same society. Dantès uses his position as an outsider in order to exploit the fears and anxieties of French society of the time in order to achieve his goals while passing unnoticed.² Dantès’s uses of Orientalist themes is strategic in that he is aware, or as Spivak would say self-conscious, of the fact that he is using them. As such, the novel reflects and awareness of the power that these tropes and themes have within

² Though outside the scope of my argument, the term passing is also relevant to Dumas’s novel Georges, in which the main character’s own father mistakes him for a white man (Georges 99). Both Georges and Dantès use their positions in which they can “pass” in order to progress their own agendas.
French society. Dantès does not simply reinforce Orientalism in order to assert hegemonic power; he uses it strategically to fight these hegemonies, even if the process of his othering and the process of colonial othering are different.

I would also like to address the way in which I will be using the terms *abstract* and *abstraction* in this thesis. Specifically, I will address how Dantès as a character loses any stable identity by adopting multiple personas. In playing the role Abbé Busoni, Sinbad the Sailor, the Count, and others, Dantès eventually ceases to be Edmond Dantès, becoming instead an identitary placeholder who can so easily adopt other personas that the fundamental Dantès introduced at the beginning of the novel no longer exists. This is not simply a character progression in which a dynamic character changes throughout the course of a novel; rather, Dantès’s change is one that allows him not only to progress as a character, but also to assume personas like Sinbad and non-material roles such as Providence, the giver of divine punishment. As such, when I say that Dantès abstracts himself, I mean to say that he removes his own personality from himself to the extent that he is no longer Dantès, but rather is the persona that he adopts at any given moment. By the end of the novel he is a multitude of personas joined in one body rather than simply Dantès.

Alexandre Dumas was himself an outsider within French society, as he was of African descent. Considering Dumas’s background, I will examine how this arises in his works, specifically in drawing comparisons between Dantès and the titular character of Dumas’s earlier novel *Georges* (1843). Dumas reused many of the same themes and character development arcs from *Georges* in *Monte-Cristo*, so comparing the two main characters, especially when one is very explicitly an African man within the French imperial
context, will show how Dumas as a writer returned to certain ideas in order to reevaluate and reconsider them.

The first part of this thesis examines the introduction of Sinbad in *Monte-Cristo*, the Orientalist tropes Dumas uses, and the role that they play in the narrative. In the second section, I examine Antoine Galland’s translation of the *1,001 Nights* and how it helped create a certain image of the so-called Orient in French culture, contextualizing the influence that translation has in cultural exchanges between colonizers and colonized. In contextualizing the colonial exchange, I situate Dumas, Dantès, and France’s understanding of the Sinbad character. Finally, in the last section, I will draw upon the two previous sections to examine how Dumas intentionally uses specific Orientalist tropes associated with the French colonial project in order to craft his novel in such a way as to critique the French Empire while also creating a narrative arc that does not allow Dantès himself to achieve closure at the end of novel. Dumas shows, through Dantès’s character progression and through the interactions he has with other characters, that the French Empire maintains certain power structures to establish and hold a social order, but Dantès challenges this order through his use of personas like Sinbad. However, in doing so, Dantès loses sight of himself as an individual and thus is unable to achieve closure as such.

Dumas’s tale of revenge and retribution shows us, as Linda Meyer argues, a thought experiment on what the ideal revenge could be (Meyer 121). However, I maintain that Dantès does not achieve the ideal, as he ends the novel with no personal closure to his revenge plot; though he achieves his immediate goals of avenging himself against those who wronged and oppressed him, he no longer feels satisfaction as an individual, but rather as an abstract collective of identities. He abstracts himself in such a way that he no longer defines himself
as an individual, but rather as a group. Specifically, in using French conceptions of the Orient to create the character of Sinbad, Dantès seeks self-definition through outside forces and concepts rather than through himself, and thus becomes a representation of the oppressed person, rather than the wronged individual. The shift from an individual to a collective redefines the scope of his revenge plot. Dantès moves from seeking revenge to seeking reprisal, or from seeking individual revenge to seeking the revenge of one group against another, as Claudie Bernard defines the terms (128). Thus, at the end of his tale, Dantès finds no resolution and must, as he does, sail off into the sunset, taking with him little more than the satisfaction that he has brought justice to those who wronged him. Through achieving his revenge, Dantès shows a nuanced understanding of the machinations of French society and of Orientalist themes. He completes his revenge, but in adopting the role of multiple personas, denies himself closure in his individual revenge plot.

**Sinbad the Sailor**

While *Monte-Cristo* appears on one level to participate in French Orientalism, it rather uses these tropes in order to critique the social structure and political powers at play in the colonial era. I will examine the persona that Dantès adopts at an early point in his revenge plot, Sinbad the Sailor, and how this persona and the surroundings that Dantès choses to occupy while posing as this character are steeped in Orientalist tropes. A surface reading of *Monte-Cristo* shows that the Sinbad episodes follow suit with Orientalist tropes and ideas of the 19th century. I will compare these with other well-known Orientalist texts, such as Flaubert and Nerval’s travel narratives in order to establish Dumas’s text within a larger tradition. However, *Monte-Cristo* ultimately breaks, at least partially, from this tradition.
First and foremost, Dumas characterizes Dantès as an outsider within French society. Legally, he is imprisoned for a crime in which he unwillingly participates, only to watch his jealous accusers rise to fame and prominence within Parisian society. Dantès is also a sailor—in other words, he is a man who makes his living in a stateless existence. He may sail for a country, but he does not sail in that country. The sea is stateless and as such represents a place that is constantly shifting and is not defined by politics, nationalities, or borders. There are indications in Dumas’s initial description of Dantès that suggest that he may also be a racial or ethnic Other within the context of French society: “C’était un jeune homme de dix-huit ans, grand, svelte, avec des beaux yeux noirs et des cheveux d’ébène” (Dumas, *Monte-Cristo* 4). His dark features, as well as his association with the Catalans through his engagement to Mercédès, suggest that Dantès could well be of non-French origin or heritage. We do know that Dantès is not in fact Catalan, as Fernand tells Mercédès “mais oubliez-vous que c’est parmi les Catalans une loi sacrée de se marier entre eux ?” (22). This, however, does not exclude other possible ethnicities.

There is here a parallel to *Georges*: both Dantès and the titular protagonist of *Georges* are young men raised by their fathers, wronged by societal powers, and who come to seek revenge for the crimes committed against them. I will discuss other parallels later in this thesis, but a key difference between these two characters is race; in Georges’s case, his African origin, much like Dumas’s own family origin, is explicit and continually acknowledged throughout the novel. Dantès, by contrast, is given little more than a fairly vague physical description while his otherness is enforced through other aspects of the story. However, the numerous other parallels between the two characters suggest that Dantès may have non-French origins that label him physically as an Other within French culture and
society. Dumas simply enforces this otherness through a profession that does not allow Dantès to ever fully integrate himself into French society and a prison that cuts Dantès off from this society.

As such, Dantès would already be in a position to understand how one functions and survives within a society as an Other even before he is sent to prison on false claims. His understanding of what it means to be an Other stems not just from his imprisonment, but also from social structures that insist upon ethnic, economic, and political hierarchies. Dantès, as a sailor, would not be high within the hierarchies from either an economic or political viewpoint. Abbé Faria, Dantès’s tutor and confidant in prison, quickly picks up that Dantès’s rapid rise in his ship’s ranks would be a reason for someone seeking to maintain these aforementioned hierarchies to denounce Dantès: “Quelqu’un avait-il intérêt à ce que vous ne devinssiez pas capitaine du Pharaon ?” (175). This person is Danglars, the ship’s bookkeeper. Faria also immediately thereafter concludes that Villefort, the substitute for the King’s Prosecutor and estranged son of the intended recipient of Napoleon’s letter that led to Dantès’s imprisonment, also had a motive to maintain social order: “Ce Noirtier, c’est son père” (181). Both of these men represent social power, with Danglars representing an economic power and Villefort a political power, and both see Dantès as a potentially disruptive force. Therefore, their actions assure that Dantès is removed from society. From a brief physical description cited above (4) followed by false accusations (46) and imprisonment (81), Dumas characterized Dantès as working within structures that wish to keep him where he is, or worse, take away what little power he does have.

Dantès’s revenge plot helps him regain and increase his own power. He beings this process in earnest when he adopts the person of Sinbad, whom he introduces while in the
Italian waters of the Mediterranean Sea. There are other contemporary examples in French literature that establish Italy and other parts of the Mediterranean as the “Orient” within the French mindset. Nerval, Flaubert, and Gautier all include sections on Italy in their travel narratives concerning the Orient, and in all three cases, it represents a space neither entirely European nor entirely Oriental. It exists between the two states, giving it a cultural malleability. Similarly, the sea is not bound to any particular nation or state, further emphasizing the malleable aspect of the setting in which Dantès appears as Sinbad. Dumas’s choice to introduce these Orientalist tropes in the Italian waters of the Mediterranean makes use of the liminal spaces that are Italy and the sea in order to initiate the revenge of both Dantès the individual and Dantès the placeholder for multiple personas.

Dantès tends to adopt Oriental personas while at sea: after escaping from the Château d’If, a group of sailors rescues him at sea and he introduces himself as such: “Je suis, répondit Dantès, en mauvais italien, un matelot maltais” (227). From this persona until he assumes that of Sinbad, the only others that Dantès adopts are those of the Abbé Busoni and the Englishman in chapters XXVI to XXVIII. However, unlike the Maltese sailor and Sinbad, neither the Abbé nor the Englishman is connected to the sea in any particular way. The former appears at Caderousse’s house, while the latter appears at the Chateau d’If. Neither appear in scenes that reference the sea. Their settings to not enforce any sense of malleability.

Sinbad, however, appears at sea and is steeped in Orientalist tropes and stereotypes. As Dumas introduces us as readers to the Sinbad persona, this exchange occurs:

“--Lorsqu’on le lui demande, il répond qu’il se nomme Simbad le Marin. Mais je doute que ce soit son véritable nom.
-- Simbad le Marin ?
-- Oui.
This conversation between the first speaker Franz, a French aristocrat who will shortly meet Dantès in his guise as Sinbad, and Gaetano, a boat owner, shows that the characters of this book think that they have no illusions about this supposed Sinbad the Sailor; he is clearly not Sinbad, but they are willing to accept this eccentric man for who he claims to be. However, they also unwittingly begin to create a myth here, for though they act like they understand him, they also admit that he is elusive, stateless, and of unknown origin. In other words, they have nothing by which they can define him other than an obviously false identity. In order to continue the charade that they understand this man, they must accept first and foremost that they do not know a single thing about him. The mercurial character of this persona allows others, rather than Dantès, to define Sinbad the Sailor as who they perceive him to be. Salien, not accounting for Dantès’s possible ethnic otherness, says “en situant l’action en Europe, en faisant parler l’Européen, en imitant un discours creux qui juge l’Orient d’après des critères fantastiques, Dumas ne met pas en cause l’Orient mais ceux qui l’ont inventé” (184). Dantès is aware that these definitions will be steeped in Orientalist interpretations and mindsets. This Orientalism is key to Dantès’s revenge, but nonetheless, these Orientalist tropes define how the French society of the novel receives this persona of Sinbad.

When Dumas introduces Sinbad, it is with a flourish of Orientalist themes, images, and other tropes. Aijaz Ahmed, in his In Theory, notes that culture is easy to idealize because of its removal from superstructure (8). Here, Ahmed references the Marxist sense of the term superstructure, thus everything that is supported by the means and relations of production.
Ahmed suggests that culture develops organically, not as something inherently tied to production. As such, Dantès is able to exploit culture that exists outside the logic of labor, production, and their products. Thus, Dantès relies on Orientalist cultural cues that the French would understand; namely, Dantès choses to reinforce his persona through clothing, furniture, and weaponry.

Dantès, now Sinbad, is said to be wearing

“un costume tunisien, c’est-à-dire une calotte rouge avec un long gland de soie bleue, une veste de drap noir toute brodée d’or, des pantalons sang-de-bœuf larges et bouffants, des guêtres de même couleur brodées d’or comme la veste, et des babouches jaunes ; un magnifique cachemire lui serrait la taille, et un petit cangiar aigu et recourbé était passé dans cette ceinture.” (346)

The various colors coming together in one figure wearing different articles of non-European clothing gives both us as readers and Franz an image of an eccentric, foreign, strange, and intriguing character. In particular, the color “sang-de-bœuf” evokes not only a specific, deep red, but also the violence associated with blood and the animosity of an ox. All these trains come together to form a subject that is mysterious with a hit of power and violence. The association between the Oriental and violence is a long standing trope that we see it in the introduction to Alexander Dow’s text on Muslims and Hindus in India, The History of Hindostan. Dow, writing during the time of English colonization of India, paints Islam as a religion of fear and violence (v-vii) that maintains power through “private despotism” (vi). Though Dow is English, not French, Said’s conception of Orientalism is one that reaches across the various European empires, implying that there is a degree of mutual exchange between the empires (Said 1); he mentions that the term “Oriental despotism” is “canonical” in the context of European literature (31-32). Gérard de Nerval shows us that the idea of the Orient as despotic is not confined to English Orientalism: “Tout ce régime est extrêmement
despotique, j’en conviens, mais il faut se persuader que l’Autriche est la Chine de l’Europe” (101). Despite calling the Austrian empire “despotique,” he maintains its standing as a European nation by asserting that is it *not* the Orient. Nonetheless, the parallel between despotism and the Orient remains. Considering Sinbad’s origin in an Arabic text, the French of the 19th century would almost inevitably link the character of Sinbad to the “despotic” traits that he would carry in Orientalist thought. Dantès does not display this sense of despotism in his portrayal of Sinbad, rather elicits it through other strategic Orientalist tropes. As such, Franz is in a place where he thinks he could be in danger, as he is facing a man steeped in the *idea* of despotic violence. Upon Sinbad’s insistence, Franz ingests hashish (*Monte-Cristo* 353), and after waking from his drug-induced dreams, thinks that he is in a “sépulcre où pénétrait à peine, comme un regard de pitié, un rayon de soleil” (357). He is, of course, still in Sinbad’s grotto, but Franz awakens believing that someone buried him alive. The violence that Sinbad merely suggests manifests itself in Franz’s mind when he is not in total control of it himself. Franz was never in any real danger, but Dantès manipulates this situation through the strategic visual and verbal referencing of common Orientalist tropes.

Not only is Dantès, as Sinbad, himself an Orientalist caricature, but so too is the grotto in which he has, as far as Franz is concerned, taken up residence:

> “Toute la chambre était tendue d’étoffes turques de couleur cramoisie et brochée de fleurs d’or. Dans un enfoncement était une espèce de divan surmonté d’un trophée d’armes arabes à fourreaux de vermeil et à poignées resplendissantes de pierreries ; au plafond, pendait une lampe en verre de Venise, d’une forme et d’une couleur charmantes, et les pieds reposaient sur un tapis de Turquie dans lequel ils enfonçaient jusqu’à la cheville ; des portières pendaient devant la porte par laquelle Franz était entré, et devant une autre porte donnant passage dans une seconde chambre qui paraissait splendidement éclairée.” (346)
Much like his clothing, Dantès’s choice in furnishings reflects a sense of power, of knowledge, and of mystery. Dumas explicitly describes the highly-decorated guns as “arabes” and places them in a position above the people in the room. The weapons, instruments of violence and death, take a position physically superior to those in the room, with the implication, of course, that they are Dantès’s to use as he pleases. Though Franz may represent the French aristocracy that rules in the colonial power structure, Dantès, here as a figure produced in part by colonial imagination, holds the actual power over life and death in this relationship. In bringing Franz here, Dantès symbolically reverses the context of colonial hegemonies.

Franz’s reaction to initially seeing Dantès as Sinbad, as well as the grotto in which he resides, is to reply with: “—et moi, reprit Franz, je vous dirai que [...] vous m’appeliez Aladin. Cela ne nous sortira pas de l’Orient, où je suis tenté de croire que j’ai été transporté par la puissance de quelque bon génie” (347-348). Immediately, Franz adopts the stance that Dantès was hoping he would take: that of the colonizer who has a basic understanding of the colonized, but no real knowledge thereof. Franz, aware enough to recognize that “Sinbad” is a persona, assumes the persona of Aladdin in order to even the power balance. However, in doing so, he shows that he knows little of the “Oriental” world that Dantès presents to him. Dantès asserts his dominance in multiple ways; through the appearance of power, the suggestion of violence, and ultimately Franz’s inability to show that he has any knowledge concerning the things he is discussing.

In these initial scenes, we see Dantès as a capable character, aware of his surroundings and choices. He specifically chooses to steep himself in Orientalist tropes that the French aristocrat immediately recognizes. These tropes are generally used in a dismissive
or even harmful way in typical French discourse of the time. In the introduction to his *Orientalism*, Said discusses the hegemonic and harmful nature of Orientalism with specific reference to Flaubert’s *Voyage en Orient*, and these examples do not need to be restated here; however, Dantès as a character shows the nuanced understanding of these Orientalist tropes that Franz lacks. Dantès knows that a Frenchman belonging to the colonial system that created the idea of the Orient would recognize the despotic, violent nature of Sinbad’s weaponry, and as such, Dantès knows that he can assert an implied dominance over Franz. Franz’s instinct to “Orientalize” himself in response shows that he does not understand Dantès’s intentions; in attempting to meet Sinbad conceptually, Franz ends up positioning himself such that he truly does not understand where he is, with whom he is dealing, and the significance of his surroundings.

This is not the first persona that Dantès adopts; we see him take of the mantles of the Maltese sailor, the Abbé Busoni, and the Englishman beforehand. Sinbad is however the first persona that is developed beyond a simple disguise, and is also the first to have a chapter bear his name: “XXXI. Italie. – Simbad le Marin” (331). Dumas furthermore made the explicit choice to give the chapter a double title referencing both Italy and Sinbad. In the French mindset, if we are to follow the models that Flaubert and Nerval offer us, Italy is the border between Europe and the Orient. Adding to this the location of Sinbad’s grotto in the Mediterranean Sea, our location is a liminal space; it is a transitional place devoid of identity until others give it a sense of identification. Dumas takes advantage of this liminality in order to give the setting a sense of exoticism; later episodes from the Italian part of the novel, are devoted to an execution, Carnival, and the violent story of the bandit Luigi Vampa. All of these instances serve to create an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, and violence, all of which
are elements that Europeans associate with the Orient, according to Said: the Orient is “irrational, depraved (fallen)” (Said 40), and “hostile”, while “Oriental mysteries” are “strangely threatening” (56). These mysteries are kept at bay, at least in Aeschylus’s play *The Persians*, by military action that stops the invasion of a foreign entity (56). Dumas thus creates a pseudo-Orient in his Italy. Rather than explicitly making it part of a “trip to the Orient” like other writers, Dumas subtly creates an atmosphere that suggests the Orient. This creates a space that enforces the Orientalist tropes that Dantès strategically uses as Sinbad.

These tactics on Dantès’s part make up a larger strategy to make use of Orientalism, power structures, and misinformation. However, this does not mean that Dumas as a writer is innocent of himself being an Orientalist in some degree. Much like in *Georges*, the stereotypes he uses to create the persona of Sinbad are indeed rooted in imperial discourse and cultural hegemonies. This stems largely from Dumas’s source for the Sinbad story, Antoine Galland’s translation of *Les mille et une nuits*, the most prominent translation of the Arabic tales collectively known as *Alf leila wa leila*. Galland’s work was more of an adaptation of the Syrian texts he had at his disposal than a translation, and as such he was able to easily integrate his own French twists on the stories.

**Language and Translation**

Near the start of his *L’Orient* (1889), Théophile Gautier examines a series of paintings and other images of North African, Levantine, and Eastern European peoples. He ascribes them with certain meanings based on his perception of the so-called Orient, despite not actually having traveled there. He creates meaning through language rather than experience; his authority stems from another rather than from his own life. Antoine Galland’s above mentioned translation of the *Nights* was the preeminent translation of the tales for most
of the 18th and 19th century in Europe, and its validity was not called into question until the 20th century. What effect did this work, and Galland’s use of language, have on the French perception of the Arabic-speaking world? That question may not be answerable within the context of my project, but it is relevant to Dumas’s creation of Dantès’s alter-ego. Rather than trying to answer this larger question, in this section, I will examine how cultural hegemonies, colonial power, and authority can stem from literature and translation. This language is what creates the Orientalist themes and ideas on which Dantès draws to create his Sinbad persona.

At its core, Said’s conception of Orientalism stems from the way that one group of people describes another: “Beckford, Byron, Goethe, and Hugo restructured the Orient by their art and made its colors, lights, and people visible through their images, rhythms, and motifs. At most, the ‘real’ Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it” (Said 22). Orientalism, in Said’s argument, is in large part a product of a European literary tradition of which Galland and Dumas were a part. Exploring Galland’s position as a translator and as an Orientalist within the French context, how he translated the Nights, and what that translation came to represent within French literature situates the impact that his translation had on French society. Madeleine Dobie’s analysis in her “Translation in the Contact Zone: Antoine Galland’s Mille et une nuits: contes arabes” hinges on the notion of the “contact zone,” which she calls the invisible intersection and exchange between cultures, or, as the term’s originator Mary Louise Pratt defines it, the area where cultures meet in social spaces (Dobie 26). Noting the histories of erasure that arise from translation in this contact zone, Dobie argues that Galland represented rather than translated the Nights since authenticity was not a concern in the art and literary world of Europe until the 19th century.
Galland, approaching the *Nights* from an anthropological rather than literary perspective, created what Dobie calls a “social testimony” of the work, rather than a straightforward reproduction of it in another language (38). In being a representation, rather than a translation, Galland’s *Nights* is a product of the contact zone in that it is the product of cultural exchange, but also a product of a power imbalance, as Galland’s authority allowed him to, as Said puts it, make the text visible through his own means—he was provoked, not guided by the Orient (22).

Galland’s authority as translator arose from a specific context. Douglas Robinson sets forth a model in which translation serves as the key way that meaning is created in the colonial encounter. Traditional translation, he argues, requires stability, but translation in the colonial context becomes more a process of conquest than one of equivalent exchange (27, 56). New meanings are given by the imperial power to the cultures with which they are interacting. Thus, Dantès is able to easily slip into a character that is less what a Levantine sailor would actually be, and more one that the French would expect him to be. Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Language and Symbolic Power*, argues that words are not intrinsically meaningful, but are rather endowed with meaning by authority. In a positive feedback cycle, the authority that endows these words with meaning does so in such a way as to validate its own authority, creating a power structure in which authority to justifies its own power. The creation of meaningful language is thus a process of creating others and of othering. This process becomes even more marked in translation, as a translator is endowing new meanings to words that have already been given meaning by another authority. The translator thus plays a double role in representing not only the target culture for which he is translating, but also the source culture from which he is translating.
Galland’s *Nights* was well received in France and Europe and was widely considered the ideal translation of the work (Dobie 44). Dobie notes that this reception showed a blindness to the exchange of cultures on the part of the French and the Europeans (29), and a positive feedback cycle of this reception was created when Galland was read, but not studied, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (45). Without critically engaging with Galland’s work, European societies permitted it to attain a status that allowed it to set the standards for many perceptions of the Arabic world, and thus Galland’s translations of the *Nights* accorded him the power to create meaning for European societies. His power to create meaning was given to him by Europeans and his authority was validated in the reception of his *Nights*.

It is in this context that Dumas’s Sinbad appears. Julie Anselmini notes Dumas’s explicit use of the *Nights*:

“L’auteur n’hésite pas à assimiler son roman au récit collectif et immémorial des *Milles et Une Nuits* […] Par ce moyen, le romancier détourne à son profit une parcelle du prestige des *Mille et Une Nuits*, ce Conte de Contes qui figure une matrice universelle de l’invention.” (10)

In her analysis, Dumas’s use of Sinbad relies on a “matrice universelle.” Sinbad is thus a mythic figure that has already transcended cultural boundaries by the time Dumas incorporates him into *Monte-Cristo*. It is thanks to Galland’s translation of the *Nights* and the public reception of this work that Sinbad holds this position in a European context. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his *Anthropologie Structurale*, “le mythe persiste, en dépit de la pire traduction” (232). In other words, the universal nature of myth allows an audience to understand it in any context. Considering that Robinson argues that translation is a method of creating universals (68), Galland’s *Nights* helps preserve, or perhaps create a universal myth that includes Sinbad. Dantès exploits these universals in order to portray
Sinbad within a specific context to a certain group of people that have a general, if vague, understanding of Sinbad and the Orientalist images that the character evokes.

Dantès’s use of the Sinbad persona is thus strategically placed within a specific cultural context. Orientalism, in Said’s argument, is in large part produced and maintained by literature (Said 31), and Dantès relies on the cultural mindset that Galland’s literature helped create in order to effectively use an obviously fabricated persona. Dantès’s understanding of Orientalist themes and images would originally stem from literature and language, a background that he would undoubtedly have after the liberal arts education he receives from Faria in prison (*Monte-Cristo* 182-183). Dantès shows a deep awareness and knowledge of the way that figures like Sinbad developed within the French cultural mindset. His use of this specific persona is as political as it is scholarly, as Dantès inverts the Orientalist tropes he exploits in posing as Sinbad.

**Essentialism and Abstraction**

**Resistance**

Dantès’s Sinbad, as it exists in the French imperial context, makes use of Orientalist tropes, and language enforces power structures that create the European perception of the Orient. Dumas’s use of these Orientalist themes is imperfect, but the novel demonstrates a nuanced understanding of Orientalism that ultimately subverts, rather than reinforces, its hierarchies. Here, I will ask why Dantès essentializes himself, how this effectively promotes his plot, and how this destabilizes the Orientalist paradigm the novel superficially endorses. Dantès creates meaning through the use of pre-established ideas and tropes, and Dumas’s inclusion of these tropes was atypical for the time in that his use of these tropes is more than simple French Orientalism meant to represent the Oriental subject in a specific way. Dumas’s
main character is aware of the societal impact of Orientalism and how he uses it within the context of his revenge.

The chapter previously examined, chapter XXXI, does not unequivocally embrace the Orientalist tropes it rehearses. While Dantès actively exploits Orientalist tropes of violence, dominion, and despotism, it is worth noting that this chapter is not recounted from Dantès’s perspective. Though the narrator is a third person narrator, his scope is limited to Franz’s perspective in this chapter. Thus, all descriptions of Dantès and Sinbad are not an objective commentary by an impartial narrator, but rather a commentary by a narrator influenced by Franz’s perspective. As such, the narrator of Monte-Cristo emphasizes the mythic aspects of Dantès’s character. Not only does Dantès assume the persona of a character from folk tales and fantastic stories, but he allows the perception of this persona to be permeated through the false assumptions that French society would associate with an Oriental subject. He knows that Franz is in no real danger, but Franz perceives danger in the grotto, as seen in the above cited passage after his hashish dream (357), thus creating a fabrication that is as powerful as if he were actually in danger. Here, we see a similar notion to Lévi-Strauss’s argument that the “pensée mythique” is akin to an “idéologie politique” (Lévi-Strauss 231). Franz’s fabrication of the danger that he is in is directly related to anxieties that the French of the 19th century had in regards to those they had colonized.

How would Dantès know that such a strategic use of these Orientalist tropes would be effective in exploiting social anxieties? Dantès walks a fine line between his position of privilege within the colonial system and his status as a member of an oppressed class—explicitly as a criminal, and implicitly as an ethnic other. Albert Memmi, in his Homme dominé, observes that all oppressed people resemble each other (24, 54), but also notes that
privilege is at the heart of colonial relationships (57). Dantès on one hand is the Frenchman in the colonial relationship, and as such can use this position to pose as not only Sinbad, a Middle Eastern character, but also an Englishman, an abbé, and the Count of Monte Cristo himself. On the other hand, his status as an unjustly accused criminal and possibly a non-white Frenchman places him squarely in the classification of oppressed people. To borrow the terms of Memmi’s argument, Dantès uses his positions of both privilege and oppression, as well as his understanding of both, to create the illusions, personas, and situations that strategically exploit the French understanding of their colonies. Memmi continues on later to note that effective liberation is linked to comprehending the conditions that necessitate liberation (117), and Dantès occupies a position that allows him to understand the nuances of these varying situations. This is a precarious position to sustain, but Dantès shows, through his persistence in achieving his goals, that he has an intricate understanding of these relations and power balances.

Dantès knows that the strategies of impersonation and creating an atmosphere of uncertainty would be useful because he knows that he will be able to tap into the anxieties of contemporary France. Early European notions of Orient, in Said’s argument, stem from literary representations of military interactions between the Persians and the Greeks (Said 56). Military invasion and power are thus early demarcations of what the Orient is in a European context. Samah Selim explores the societal anxieties that an imperial country has when considering its colonies, namely in the fear of invasion. She notes that invasion of the colonizers by the colonized was a common fear and anxiety of 19th century Europe, most notably in British literature of the time (Selim 27-28). Specifically in England, this was connected to the “domestication of Egyptology” that created a sense of mystery and nostalgia.
in regards to Ancient Egypt (28-29). France and England, as colonial powers, had a sense of anxiety and fear in regards to their colonies thanks to a long standing literary Orientalist tradition that creates a “hostile ‘other’” (Said 56) in the Oriental. Dantès capitalizes on this fear of the Other in order to attack French society from within, using the figure of a traveler to instill doubt, fear, and anxiety into French society.

In other words, Dantès actively engages with fears and anxieties of the French empire, rather than passively integrating himself back into French society after his imprisonment. Dantès is an Other already, as discussed before. In adopting the persona of Sinbad, Dantès assumes the role of the colonized, if he is not already by his ethnicity; he not only poses as a so-called “Oriental,” but also choses to become one that is known to France almost uniquely through Galland’s specific representation of the character. Tellingly, he adopts a persona linked with the sea and choses to enact his performances in the Italian waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Every aspect of this persona is meant to convey a sense of him being someone from somewhere else; he has come from lands, or seas, unknown to forcibly integrate himself into Imperial society. Dantès uses Sinbad and the violence and mystery associated with him to exploit the fear of invasion, the fear of the Other, and the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, of the Imperial subject to consider the Other as someone different than what cultural hegemonies and authority dictate.

Far from taking any kind of non-violent route in confronting authority, he instead addresses society where he knows it will respond the most—namely, its longstanding and culturally ingrained fear of the Other. Memmi asks if the oppressor will consent to the love that those like Martin Luther King, Jr. offer (Memmi 22), and Fanon offers an answer in his *Damnés de la terre*—an emphatic no. “La ‘chose’ colonisée devient homme dans le
processus même par lequel elle se libère” (*Damnés de la terre* 67), namely violence (65). Despite Dantès’s potential ethnic otherness, he is not explicitly a colonial subject. However, Memmi suggests that all oppressed people resemble one another (24, 54), and as Dantès is attacking the same social structures that oppress colonial peoples, then his only solution is a violent one. He cannot offer love as it will not be accepted, neither to the forces that unjustly imprisoned him nor to the Catalan woman to whom he was once engaged, now married to Fernand. To liberate himself from the oppression of French society that his enemies represent, he must confront them with violence.³ By attacking the anxieties of French society, he thus begins his violent project that does, indeed, result in bloodshed, death, and ultimately Dantès’s revenge.

Dantès uses the myth of the Sinbad persona not only to attack French political anxieties, but also to create a geographic and temporal Other. Lévi-Strauss notes that myth is both “historique et ahistorique” (Lévi-Strauss 231). It thereby holds a position as both something that is the product of culture and history, but also something that stands outside these boundaries. Sinbad is a product of so-called Oriental culture, via French interpretation and colonial reworkings of that myth, and because of this, this character as Dantès uses him is able to exist outside of these boundaries. Dantès inhabits a space as both a European and an Oriental in a space that is malleable and liminal.

Dantès choice to reveal his Sinbad persona in Italy and the Mediterranean Sea is telling. As mentioned above, Italy is something of a liminal space in the French mindset, being that which is in between Orient and Occident, and the sea simply reinforces this liminal

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³ Here there is another parallel to Georges, considering the titular character’s strategic involvement with a slave rebellion. Claudie Bernard examines this rebellion and the violence associated with it, but argues that George’s goals and decision are all ultimately self-serving (144).
space. These elements, or as Lévi-Strauss might call them, “paquets de relations” (233-234), come together to create a character placed in an unanchored space that allows anyone who sees him to perceive him as they wish to. Thus, Franz perceives him as a threat while Gaetano, in the previously cited passage (344-345), perceives him as an untouchable figure not to be disturbed.

Thus, we see that Dantès’s use of these Orientalist tropes, while seemingly typical for the time at first glance, is actually strategic. Aware of the political and temporal nature of the myth he chooses to use, Dantès allows others to see Sinbad not as he intends to portray him, but rather as they intend to receive him. The use of political ties to Orientalist thinking, the ability of myth to transcend temporal boundaries, and the liminal spaces within which he situations himself allow these tropes to transcend typical usages for the time to become strategic assaults on the French society that wronged Dantès.

Consequences

If Dantès, as an oppressed figure, is seeking his liberation, does he achieve it? He certainly achieves his revenge—his enemies are punished in violent manners while he survives with wealth, a woman who loves him, and his freedom. But does he find liberation from the societal structures that first unjustly imprisoned him? Does he find closure to his story? The end of the novel suggests that Dantès, in fact, does not. The final scene of the novel shows that Dantès’s abstraction of himself has taken him to an extreme from which he cannot return. Sailing off into the distance, he leaves Morrel and Valentine with two simple commands:

“Jacopo étendit la main vers l’horizon.
« Quoi ! que voulez-vous dire ? demanda Valentine. Où est le comte ? où est Haydée ?
-- Regardez », dit Jacopo… « Parti ! s’écria Morrel ; parti ! Adieu, mon ami ! adieu, mon père !
-- Parti ! murmura Valentine. Adieu, mon amie ! adieu, ma sœur !
-- Qui sait si nous les reverrons jamais ? fit Morrel en essuyant une larme.
-- Mon ami, dit Valentine, le comte ne vient-il pas de nous dire que l’humaine sagesse était tout entière dans ces deux mots :
"Attendre et espérer !".” (1398)

“Wait and hope,” he leaves with Morrel and Valentine, and perhaps this is more of a warning than it is advice. Dantès himself did not wait and hope; he acted and achieved revenge, but now recognizes that he has sacrificed his humanity. Linda Meyer suggests that Monte-Cristo is a thought experiment: the novel is an attempt “to determine what ideal revenge would be,” in order to do so, Dumas must “conduct a thought experiment…that has sufficient, deep, and enduring resonance to give us intimations of moral truth” (Meyer 121). If Dantès was a part of the initial thought experiment of acting rather than waiting and doing rather than hoping, then he is offering Morrel and Valentine an alternative.

But why would an alternative be necessary? Dantès clearly succeeds in his revenge plot, exacting retribution on all of the men who caused him suffering. Meyer offers an insight: “Dumas is careful to tell us that the peace [Dantès] achieves at last is not due to his vengeance. Indeed, the end of his vengeance was, according to his plan, to be closure by death” (134). Meyer’s argument seems grounded in the previous passage that I cited, as Morrel and Valentine have the feeling that they will never see Dantès or Haydée again. And indeed if death is the only closure for Dantès, than it would appear that the abstraction to which he submits himself comes full circle; in rising above men to assume the position of Providence in punishment, Dantès removes himself from the material world and by the end of his plot can no longer continue to exist in that world while simultaneously achieving a sense of closure.
Here, I would like to draw a comparison to the final scene of Georges, in which the titular character also leaves behind the life he has known by sailing away. Much like Dantès, he sails away with a woman he loves, in this case a woman named Sara, but has a very different attitude towards death: “Si je ne devais pas vivre avec toi, Sara, dit Georges en se retournant, sur mon honneur, je voudrais mourir comme lui !” (Dumas, Georges 452). Georges is ready to die, but his own death is not necessarily a part of his story. Unlike Dantès, Georges does not adopt multiple personas, but the text does describe him as being different upon his return to l’Ile de France. Rather that naming him, the text initially describes him as “un jeune homme brun, au teint pâle et aux cheveux noirs” (79) while the narrator continues to call him “l’étranger” (91). Georges, however, is not disguising himself, but rather waiting for a strategic moment to acknowledge who he is before the public. “C’est moi, c’est bien moi, mon père ; mais reconnaissez-moi donc, s’écria Georges” (102), he says upon seeing his father for the first time in fourteen years. At the very public governor’s ball later in the text, Georges allows himself to be announced by his full name: “Monsieur Georges Munier” (189). His goal is not to hide behind personas in order to deceive the people against whom he seeks revenge, but rather to strategically reveal himself at the opportune moment.

Unlike Dantès, Georges does not risk losing his individually in a pluralism of personas. Thus, he is able to achieve his goals as Georges, and not as a collective of identities. In drawing the comparison with Georges, Meyer’s suggestion that Dantès can only find closure through death makes more sense. Even though both stories end in the ambiguous space of the sea, if the two heroes are parallel to each other, then it would follow that Georges’s story does not necessitate his own death, while Dantès’s story does. There in a
degree of certitude in George’s ending that we do not find in Dantès’s, as George maintains his own identity. Both men are steadfast in achieving their objectives, but George achieves his goals as Georges, while Dantès achieves his as a collection of different personalities.

Claudie Bernard further nuances this in differentiating between revenge, *revanche*, and *reprisal*; revenge returns the injustice in kind, *revanche* demonstrates that the wronged party is superior, and *reprisal* refers to the revenge of one group against another (128). In this thesis, I have been referring to Dantès’s revenge in such terminology. Bernard as well sees Dantès’s actions as revenge, but my argument extends beyond this (136). Though Dantès is not taking revenge for a specific group of oppressed peoples, whether they are prisoners, colonized subjects of the empire, or ethnic others, he does seek revenge against individuals that themselves are representatives of larger groups. Bernard notes that Georges takes on the burden of *reprisal* only because the slave rebellion conveniently bolsters his project of *revanche* (144). By contrast, Dantès adopts an unintentional *reprisal* in my argument, as his revenge seeks justice not only for the wrongs done to him, but also to punish the groups that allowed him to suffer. However, maintaining Bernard’s definitions, there is a discrepancy here, as Dantès is an individual fighting groups. *Reprisal* necessitates two groups, thus Dantès must become something more than an individual. In adapting his multiple personas, he does just this and abstracts himself so that he seeks not only his individual revenge, but also the revenge of all oppressed peoples against the societal structures that oppress them.

Cognizant of this abstraction and loss of individuality, Dantès knows that his path led him to one invariable end and offers what is left of him materially, namely his wealth, and a warning to Morrel and Valentine. We see Meyer’s suggestion of “intimations of moral truth” (Meyer 121) in Dantès recognizing his faults, his errors, and his missteps by offering to
another a chance that he could not have, having chosen to pursue the path that he did. Tellingly, we do not see Dantès himself, but only the “voile blanche” (*Monte-Cristo* 1398) of his ship as he leaves. The last image we as readers have of the novel’s main character is that of an object that represents movement and a color that represents purity, or more pertinently in this case, absence. Dantès cannot continue to exist and hope to find closure, and we as readers are left with little more than a promise that he travels forward to nothingness, and ultimate abstraction. Dantès transcends and leaves behind his material form to aid those who loved him.

Memmi argues that only the transformation of the objective conditions of existence can end oppression (Memmi 215). Dantès strives to do just this, but ultimately achieves this change of objective conditions of existence not through the means which Memmi discusses, but rather through a metaphysical transformation in which he effectively turns himself into, if not a god, then a representation of divine justice. He transcends his human existence in order to assume one akin to Providence. His revenge succeeds, but his attempt to find closure results in a failure such that, at least in Meyer’s opinion, he can only resolve his situation through death.

**Conclusion**

In figuring Dantès’s departure, Dumas is not simply warning against the potential dangers of what is clearly an effective use of strategic essentialism. Rather, he is also critiquing the French society that made it necessary for Dantès to react to his imprisonment in such a way. Returning to Memmi’s comments on transforming the objective conditions of existence, Dantès reacts to a society that strove and was structured to prevent him from succeeding. From the novel’s first chapter, we see Danglars, the bookkeeper of the ship
Pharaon, openly display his jealously and dislike of Dantès: “vous voyez, dit Danglars, il se croit déjà capitaine, sur ma parole” (Monte-Cristo 7). Upon learning that the ship’s owner is, in fact, in favor of promoting Dantès to the position of captain after the previous captain’s death, “un nuage passa sur le front de Danglars” (7). It is clear from this that Danglars is at the very least jealous, if not resentful, of Dantès. Danglars is used to having a position of power over Dantès, and he is not willing to relinquish that and allow a man he thinks unworthy to hold the title of captain to hold power over him.

Danglars represents monetary power, as he controls the accounts for the ship. He is used to the responsibility and the position that working with money affords him. Resentment may also stem from Dantès’s potential ethnic otherness, but the text clearly shows that Danglars looks down on the nineteen-year-old Dantès as if he were an ignorant child. Dantès has done nothing explicit to warrant Danglars’s low opinion. Similarly, Dantès’s only slight against Fernand that we know of is his engagement to Mercédès, whom Fernand also loves. Furthermore, he does nothing actively against Villefort, the man who eventually imprisons Dantès; he is rather in the wrong place at the wrong time in regards to Villefort’s ambitions. In other words, Dantès does not actively contribute to the negative sentiments that fuel the plot against him, but is rather a victim of powers out of his control. He even says to Villefort during his interrogation, when asked if he has any enemies or those jealous of his rapid rise in the ship’s ranks:

“Des ennemies à moi, dit Dantès : j’ai le bonheur d’être trop peu de chose pour que ma position m’en ait fait…J’ai dix ou douze matelots sous mes ordres : qu’on les interroge, monsieur, et ils vous diront qu’ils m’aiment et me respectent, non pas comme un père, je suis trop jeune pour cela, mais comme un frère aîné…mais si ces envieux devaient être parmi mes amis, je vous avoue que j’aime mieux ne pas les connaître pour ne point être forcéd les haïr.” (69)
He is a humble sailor who worked his way up to the position of captain, only to have that stolen from him by two men who seek power and one who seeks love. He believes in all earnest that his shipmates love and respect him, but we do see a moment of foreshadowing in which Dantès makes it clear that he could easily hate them if they turned against him. However, Dantès does not initiate these negative emotions, but rather responds to them, both in word and in action.

Similar to Danglars, Villefort holds a position of societal power, but his is political rather than financial. He also holds power in the larger French society for which the Pharaon is a microcosm. Villefort is the substitute for the King’s Prosecutor, and as such holds political power similar to that of the king when it comes to delivering punishment to lawbreakers. During his interrogation of Dantès, Villefort asks for the letter from Napoleon that Danglars used to accuse Dantès of committing treason against the French crown. Villefort sees that it is addressed “À M. Noirtier, rue Coq-Héron, à Paris” (72), which causes Villefort a great amount of distress. Dantès is unaware of why Villefort has a sudden change in demeanor, but we as readers are informed of Villefort’s thoughts: “Oh ! s’il sait ce que contient cette lettre, murmura-t-il, et qu’il apprenne jamais que Noirtier est le père de Villefort, je suis perdu, perdu à jamais !” (73). All he says to Dantès, however, is “un fidèle serviteur du roi ne connaît pas les conspirateurs” (72). Villefort holds no personal grudge against Dantès, but rather sees him as a potential obstacle to the advancement of his political career. Putting his own goals before his family, the safety of a stranger, and the potential safety of the nation, Villefort burns the letter (74) and jails Dantès in order to preserve his own standing within the French imperial political structure.
Two of the three main conspirators, ignoring the peripherally involved Caderousse, clearly stand in for societal powers oppressing an unwitting victim who is initially unable to fight back against these structures that stand against him. The third conspirator, Fernand, is a more difficult character to parse. It is worth noting that while Danglars and Villefort represent societal power, both monetary and political, Dantès’s third rival is not initially part of the societal and cultural structures that plot Dantès. Though he eventually comes to be the representative of military power, if we continue with the same comparisons already assigned to Danglars and Villefort, he is only a poor fisherman at the start of the novel. Furthermore, he is Catalan; he is a foreigner. The narrator of the novel goes so far as to call the Catalans of Marseille a “colonie mystérieuse” (20) of people who speak a “langue inconnue” (21). They are othered within French society just as Dantès is, or at least comes to be.

However, Fernand rejects his position as a foreigner later in the novel in joining the imperial military and becoming part of the French aristocracy; he naturalizes and assimilates himself into French society, thus coming to represent another facet of the cultural hegemonies that play a part in structures of oppression. His transformation is a topic worth examining, but is outside the scope of my argument. His initial conflict with Dantès does not arise from societal structures of power, but rather from a genuine rivalry, felt at least on Fernand’s part, related to the love of Mercédès. However, when Dantès achieves his revenge against Fernand, he does so after Fernand has become part of these same powers that once rejected him. Danglars and Villefort both gain more wealth, power and influence as the novel progresses, but they initially start in positions with more power than Dantès. Fernand, on the other hand, becomes powerful after beginning the novel with no power whatsoever. Fernand
is the most dynamic of the three conspirators in this sense, and his relationship to Dantès changes appropriately.

Dumas uses these three characters to represent three different facets of French colonial, imperial, and societal power. Apart from the issues associated with initially placing Fernand in this group, Dumas almost perfectly establishes a consistent theme of society oppressing those who threaten to disrupt the status quo, whether intentionally or not. As Meyer notes, *Monte-Cristo* is a thought experiment, and Dumas’s thought experiment seems to find the same logical conclusion that Memmi and Fanon find; if the oppressor will not consent to love that is offered on the part of the oppressed (Memmi 22), then it must be through violence that the oppressed achieve their freedom. This violence represented is not the Orientalist stereotype, but rather a struggle for freedom.

Dantès’s use of violence is thus not condemned by Dumas; it is the only way he can achieve his freedom from the oppressive structures that bind him. Despite the fact that Dantès achieves monetary wealth through Faria’s treasure as well as political and military influence through his association with Ali-Pacha, Dantès does not let these facets of his new life define his relationship with the rest of the world. Rather, he sees them as tools to use in his revenge; otherwise he would not have relinquished all of his wealth and power at the end of the novel to supposedly go end his life. Power is secondary to Dantès, perhaps a convenient side effect of his plot, and thus he avoids becoming a part of the system that once oppressed and imprisoned him. While Dumas may critique the single-mindedness of Dantès’s approach with a lack of closure at the end, he does not critique Dantès’s use of violence. In fact, I would argue that he encourages it, as the violence-based revenge plot itself is successful in the most dramatic of ways: Dantès drives Fernand to suicide (*Monte-*)
Cristo 1134), causes Villefort to go insane (1328-1329), and humiliates and financially ruins Danglars (1381-1383). Dantès doubts himself at certain points in the novel, such as the moment that Villefort reveals the bodies of his dead wife and young son: “il [Dantès] comprit qu’il venait d’outrepasser les droits de la vengeance […] il s’élança dans la rue, doutant pour la première fois qu’il eût le droit de faire ce qu’il avait fait” (1328, 1329). Nonetheless, this never discourages him from continuing to achieve his goals.

Dantès, abstracted and violent, delivers punishment to the hegemonic and cultural forces that oppress those whom society others. As a quasi-divine figure, he is above reproach, and as an oppressed member of society, he is justified. He begins the novel under the assumption that he is loved, and thus would not be the victim of any kind of plot, but ends the novel as a vengeful god who has delivered justice and disappeared to find repose. French society, particularly the French aristocracy, is challenged and inverted by a poor sailor who was once engaged to a Catalan woman. Dumas foreshadows this transformation from humble beginnings to extravagant finales in one of the final lines of the first chapter: “Si Paris avait la Canebière, Paris serait un petit Marseille” (Dumas, Monte-Cristo 12). The Canebière represents Marseille much in the same that the Champs-Elysées represents Paris. Dantès physically moves from Marseille to Paris within the context of the novel, and in buying a house for himself on the Champs-Elysées (516), brings Marseille to Paris; he brings his revenge to French society. Monte-Cristo itself foreshadows the theories of Memmi and Fanon in showing an oppressed figure, representing here the larger group of peoples oppressed by the French Empire, rising up violently and effectively against these oppressors.

Ahmed argues that one cannot separate a text from its time (Ahmed 53), and we see this on multiple levels in Monte-Cristo. First and foremost, we as readers cannot separate
Monte-Crasto from its colonial context—we see the Orientalist tropes in it through the lens of a France at the height of its empire. However, we also see it through the lens of a novel by a man Othered by French society. As such, Dantès strategically uses the character Sinbad within the context that Galland introduced him to France. Dantès is aware of Sinbad’s position as a character and cultural figure in the French context. Through his use of specific tropes and themes in specific contexts, Dantès shows that he understands how to disrupt French society from within by strategically manipulating its Orientalist ideas.

Throughout this thesis, I have made two primary claims: first, that Dantès, and by extension Dumas, is aware of the strategic use of Orientalist tropes and was using them for more than just simple justification of French dominance in the colonies; second, that in using these tropes to create a persona, Dantès abstracted himself, thereby creating a myth of who he was, in order to maintain this image and in doing so was able to achieve his goals while being denied closure as an individual to his plot. Ultimately, Dumas’s use of Orientalist tropes shows a more nuanced understanding of how the French Empire interacted with its colonies and colonized peoples, but within the context of the novel, his exploration of these tropes is limited by Dantès’s pragmatic, strategic use of them. Dantès does not engage with these ideas in order to challenge them, but rather in hopes that his enemies will uncritically dismiss them and his personas. Dumas’s understanding of what we now call Orientalism was nuanced in an unusual way for his time, but his use of the tropes was more pragmatic than productive.

With this thesis, I hope to add to the limited Dumas scholarship in a productive manner by showing that Dumas, like authors given more scholarly merit than him, was also engaging with societal norms reflecting on the human condition, rather than simply writing
adventure novels to entertain the public. Dumas emphasizes Dantès’s position as an outsider by dedicating a large portion of the novel to his imprisonment; he is represented as being outside French society as he is physically and legally removed from it. Like Stendhal’s Julien Sorel, Dantès’s prison sentence is the moment in which he begins to think outside the paradigms of French society; as Jacques Rancière says of Julien, it is in prison that “il commence enfin à jouir de la vie” (62). Dantès, after his escape, uses this position as an outsider to pursue a revenge plot. However, Dumas does not represent the ideal outcome in *Monte-Cristo*. Rather, like Meyer argues, he presents a thought experiment. Dantès succeeds in punishing those who wronged him, but in order to justify assuming a position from which to punish, he needs to assume the role of a god-like abstraction. But in achieving this state of abstraction, Dantès is no longer part of the world and must continue to exist outside of it to avoid the responsibilities of his actions that come as an individual.

Dantès begins his revenge in earnest as Sinbad—all other personas to this point serve a purpose of gathering information. It is with Sinbad that he takes his first steps towards actually enacting his revenge. Dantès chooses a liminal space, adopts a specific foreign persona, and uses Orientalist tropes to his advantage in order to bring French social anxieties to the surface. However, this is also the first step towards his ultimate abstraction. Dantès ultimately succeeds through his use of personas, but these same personas cause Dantès to lose sight of himself as a being independent of these personas and their goal. Revenge becomes his sole purpose, and this revenge is expressed through Sinbad, the Count, the Englishman, and his other characters. However, he ultimately allows the pursuit of revenge to overtake him such that he is no longer and individual, but rather an abstract being whose purpose is to deliver punishment. As such, when this punishment is resolved, his purpose
ceases to exist. In achieving his goals, Dantès loses his humanity and ability to function within society as an individual. His revenge challenges ideas of power, society, and the role an individual can play within these larger frameworks. No longer merely one man, Dantès comes to represent the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors, and in doing so allows us to read Dumas’s work as more than a simple adventure novel.
REFERENCES


