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Daniel Desormeaux, *Alexandre Dumas, fabrique d'immortalité*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 347 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €13.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406111658.

Review by Eric Martone, Mercy College.

Perhaps the most popular francophone writer of the nineteenth century, Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) is among the giants of French and global literature. Best known in the English-speaking world for his novels, *Les trois mousquetaires* and *Le comte de Monte-Cristo*, Dumas's literary output transcended a vast array of genres, and included both fiction and non-fiction. He was an extremely prodigious writer and was novel in his era for intentionally pursuing writing to generate vast sums of personal revenue (rather than for art's sake). This prompted him to work with anonymous collaborators on many of his celebrated novels. Although a practice common in the theater, which was where he experienced initial success, these practices later brought much criticism on him, most notably in the form of a scurrilous 1845 pamphlet by Eugène de Mirecourt. The controversy over such practices, Dumas's popular reputation, and his status as a biracial individual made him a disputed figure in the French world of letters during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with many academics regarding him as a popular writer, but not a "great" one worthy of much serious study. However, a changing socio-political environment in France helped support a burgeoning reevaluation of Dumas that had been slowly gaining momentum since the 1970s. In 2002, Dumas's remains were exhumed from his grave in his hometown of Villers-Cotterêts and transferred to the Panthéon in Paris to commemorate the bicentennial of his birth. Over the subsequent two decades, Dumas has been the subject of much new scholarship that has made him a more prominent figure of academic study.[1]

Daniel Desormeaux, among the prominent scholars based in the United States writing about Alexandre Dumas, has written an intriguing book tracing the autobiographical process and authorial strategy of the famous nineteenth-century writer. While Dumas is immortalized by virtue of being placed in the Panthéon, he is also immortalized through his literary works. One could argue that his Panthéonization was perhaps more a reflection of contemporary socio-cultural and political concerns than a re-evaluation of his work. After all, Dumas was the grandson of an enslaved Afro-Caribbean woman in the French colonies; his legacy and significance could therefore be manipulated to suit various contemporary nation-building agendas seeking greater unity in a global France. Yet, writers of great literature also achieve permanence in the national memory through their work. This question of immortality is a central theme of Desormeaux's study.

Alexandre Dumas, fabrique d'immortalité begins with an introduction highlighting Dumas's literary legacy, which spanned diverse genres. The subsequent heart of the book is organized in three parts. These parts are each centered around broad, loose concepts summarized by three or four words. Each part also alludes to several works by Dumas, but includes one seminal text as its primary focus. While fleshing out his study, Desormeaux has a predilection for Dumas's prefaces, which often featured the author himself and related an anecdote about how he developed the subsequent piece of literature; other autobiographical texts; and newspaper articles he wrote relating stories about himself. Part one, entitled "Histoire, Fossile, Autoportrait, Dérive," is comprised of four chapters. Here, Dumas's supernatural thriller, *Les mille et un fantômes*, receives the most attention. This little-known gem is rarely studied, and its inclusion here is welcome. The second, "Mémoires, Histoire, Paternité," includes only one chapter and deals with Dumas's *Memoirs*, which relayed not only his life, but also that of his father, who was a French Revolutionary War general. As a result, there is an *esprit paternel* that dominates the work. The final part of the book, "Immoralité, Immortalité, Gastronomie," is made up of three chapters. At their center is Dumas's *Le Grand dictionnaire de cuisine*, which helps Desormeaux portray Dumas's literature as an allegorical feast of words. A conclusion sums up his analysis.

In *Alexandre Dumas, fabrique d'immortalité*, Desormeaux offers little by way of literary analysis. Nor does he focus on any key themes in Dumas's literature. Instead, he is focused on how autobiographical elements mix with romantic elements in these works, and how an analysis of self-representation in these works can yield hypothetical insights into Dumas's inner workings as a man and writer. Desormeaux is, therefore, less interested in analyzing Dumas's works as literature than he is in using them as gateways to Dumas's mind, soul, and psychology. In this way, instead of understanding the man and how this might help us better understand his literature, Desormeaux does the opposite; he pursues a course of study that uses the work to help explain the man. Desormeaux thus seeks to construct a hypothetical portrait of Dumas's psychology through his works and trace his inner thoughts and emotions stemming from his life experiences, which included brushes with French racism. As a result, we explore what may have been Dumas's doubts, insecurities, hopes, dreams, and his feelings of interiority or of being an outsider. Even Dumas's name has significance in this regard: Dumas's father, although born illegitimate to an enslaved mother, was recognized by his aristocratic father and taken to France, where he discarded his aristocratic surname (Davy de la Pailleterie) in favor of his mother's (Dumas) upon joining the French Revolutionary forces. Although Dumas's right to his aristocratic grandfather's title and surname was recognized by a government tribunal, this claim was never truly accepted socially by Dumas's peers in his adult years. Dumas generally only used "Dumas" as his surname, even though his 1802 birth certificate was amended to "Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie."^[2] Thus, the immortalized name of Dumas is packed with problems relating to legitimacy, heredity, and ancestry impacting the writer's psychology, self-perceptions, and emotions.

Desormeaux's book also unintentionally sheds light on some of the major problems in Dumas scholarship. I would suggest that there have been three general trends in scholarship on Dumas since his interment in the Panthéon in 2002. The first trend, which is perhaps the broadest, is to reevaluate his literary legacy and status. To advance Dumas's literary reputation, scholars have put forth such arguments that Dumas's historical fiction compose a series entitled *Le Drame de la France*; his broader work encompasses a variety of genres and unknown gems (thereby representing the richness of Dumas's talent); his classic works are complex/sophisticated pieces of literature with rich themes and imagery; and that he is entitled to be regarded as the author of

his works.^[3] Such efforts are reactions to decades of previous criticism that regarded Dumas as a popular but not great writer who ran a “writing factory” with collaborators who received no credit, as well as his reputation for being merely a writer for adolescents. The second trend is to reevaluate his life and writing in light of his biracial ancestry and status as a descendant of an enslaved woman. Such scholarship examines his experiences with racism and how such experiences influenced his writing and sense of identity. Most such scholarship focuses on his novel *Georges*, which features a biracial hero who leads a slave revolt in the French colonies. The third trend, which overlaps with the previous two, is to examine Dumas a symbol of French identity. Such scholarship focuses on how diverse groups in the French-speaking world and in France itself have constructed meaning from Dumas’s life and work since Dumas’s death in relation to his work’s global popularity and representation of French cultural heritage. Dumas’s status as a biracial individual and as a descendant of a slave complicate his status as a symbol of French identity, which has traditionally been equated with being “white.” However, with France become ever more diverse, this heritage has more often become a reason for celebrating the writer’s legacy. In Europe, particularly France, much scholarship has sprung up in the past twenty years. Dumas’s literary legacy has received renewed attention and has been subject to a more positive reevaluation. Consequently, Dumas scholarship in France has largely focused on this first trend. At the same time, Dumas has also become a growing subject of academic research in North America. American Dumas scholars publishing in French have mostly followed the same trend as that of their counterparts in France, whereas those publishing in English have largely focused on the second two trends. French scholarship on Dumas is largely siloed by language; those writing in French rarely, if ever, engage with English language scholarship while those writing in English engage on a broader level with French scholarship but the different research agendas limit this engagement. Desormeaux’s book arguably transcends all three trends to some degree, yet French literary criticism from the past twenty years is only superficially engaged, and very limited English language research is utilized, thereby illuminating the general silo effect in Dumas scholarship.

Nevertheless, Desormeaux’s arguments are intriguing and usually compelling. While his structure organizing each part loosely around a few simple words makes identifying common threads relatively easy, sometimes the analysis can come across as reaching. But his construction of a hypothetical portrait of Dumas’ psychology through his works is a novel approach to help further our understanding of Dumas and his (immortal) legacy. His book is a useful addition to studies on Dumas and nineteenth century French literature and culture, as well as those interested broadly in how literary works can possibly reflect the inner thoughts and feelings of the writer.

NOTES

[1] For some recent works in English contextualizing Dumas’s evolving legacy within contemporary France, see Eric Martone, “Introduction,” in *The Black Musketeer: Reevaluating Alexandre Dumas within the Francophone World*, ed. Eric Martone (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 1-29; Eric Martone, “Introduction,” and “Chapter Five: Alexandre Dumas *Métissé*: Celebrating Dumas as symbol of a Diverse France, 1946–2002,” *Finding Monte Cristo: Alexandre Dumas and the French Atlantic World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 3-12, 111-149; Eric Martone, “Introduction,” in *Alexandre Dumas as a French Symbol since 1870: All for One and One for All in a Global France*, ed. Eric Martone (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), ix-xxiii; Roxane Petit-Rasselle, “From the Literary Myth to the *Lieu de Mémoire*:

Alexandre Dumas and French National Identity(ies),” in *Alexandre Dumas as a French Symbol since 1870: All for One and One for All in a Global France*, ed. Eric Martone (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), 89-118.

[2] Although he was initially named “Alexandre Dumas” in 1802, his name on his civil birth record was amended in 1813 to “Alexandre Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie” after a tribunal recognized his noble ancestry. See: “Acte de Naissance de Alexandre Dumas,” 5 Thermidore, Year 10 of the Republic (24 July 1802), Records of Birth in Villers-Cotterêts, 1793-1803, Archives départementales de l’Aisne. <http://archives.aisne.fr/>

[3] On Dumas’s work comprising *Le Drame de la France*, see: Claude Schopp, “Le fil de l’Histoire,” *Le Figaro (hors-série): Alexandre Dumas, Au galop des mousquetaires* (2002), 66; Claude Schopp, “Le Testament perdu,” in Alexandre Dumas, *Le Chevalier de Sainte-Hermine* (Paris: Phébus, 2005), 47-49; Claude Schopp, *Dictionnaire Dumas* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2010), 266-270; Youjun Peng, *La nation chez Alexandre Dumas* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

Eric Martone
Mercy College
emartone@mercy.edu

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