

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Count of Monte Cristo.* By Alexandre Dumas. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2011). 513 pp. Paperback, ISBN 0-7607-2574-8.**

By all means, *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a familiar story of revenge and retributive justice, and of the battle between good and evil. It is of love, friendship, betray, and retribution. The protagonist Edmond Dantès was wronged by three persons whose practical interests were joined strangely by fate. He was falsely accused of being “an inveterate Bonapartist” by a clerk of his ship in the name of Danglers who envied and hated him and the fishman in the name Fernand who wanted to marry Dantès’ fiancée Mercédès. He then was sentenced “to be kept in solitary confinement and under strict supervision” by the judge Gérard de Villefort who wanted to hide the truth that his own father was involved in a political scheme of which Dantès was totally ignorant. Accidentally, Dantès got acquaintance with and befriended a fellow prisoner the Abbé Faria, who revealed to Dantès the secret of an enormous amount of treasure and proposed to Dantès that they should escape the prison together and then find and share the treasure. However, the Abbé Faria died unexpectedly and Dantès escaped from the prison alone and afterward found the treasure which the Abbé Faria told him. Afterward, Dantès who assumed the title “the Count of Monte Cristo” first used his new acquired wealth and power to rescue his former employer and benefactor Monsieur Morrel from bankruptcy and dishonor. When this was done, Dantès said “farewell to kindness, humanity, gratitude”, and set start to revenge and punish the wicked three who had already established themselves in the high society of Paris. Then, Dantès left all his wealth in Paris to Monsieur Morrel’s son Maximilian Morrel who would be wedded Valentine de Villefort, Gérard de Villefort who was almost murdered by Villefort’s wife, Madame de Villefort, and said a Taoist farewell to the mundane world. End of the story.

Thus, the novel deals with some enduring themes of classical literature. The aesthetical beauty created by contrasts of opposites, intricacy of the events, well-crafted narrative structure, and capriciousness of individual protagonists’ fates only makes the novel more enchanting. That said, profound philosophical lessons of life, fate, and happiness can be learned from the novel. Indeed, it is its philosophical insight into human existence that makes the novel profound and a must-read. This is not so much because the novel has explored a wide range of philosophical themes including humanity, love, hatred, justice, injustice, self, happiness, friendship, good, and evil. It is more its philosophical wisdoms of human existence and insights into human happiness.

The concept of fate is repeatedly talked about. But the concept connotes neither fatalism nor mysticism. So far as Dantès’ fate is concerned, it is nothing but the causality of a set of events. Dantès was wronged by three persons at the outset because of their practical interests: one envied what he achieved, another wanted his fiancée, and a further another wanted to protect his social status and career. That his life path crosses with the three wicked persons’ was a matter of contingency, just as

Dantès' good luck of meeting the Abbé Faria, which led to a pivotal turn of his fortune. Dantès' afterward acts of repaying kindness with kindness and gratitude, and revenge against the wicked by visiting them with evils can be best explained by the concept of moral causality and retributive justice. There is nothing fatal or mysterious here. As for the so-called fates of the wicked three—Dangler, de Villefort, and Fernand—and the fates of others such as the senior Marrel and the young Morrel or Mercédès, they are the work of moral causality and retributive justice too. They can be explained by the traditional Chinese saying: “The good will be rewarded by good, the evil will be punished with the visit of evil; it is not that there is no consequence; it is that everything has its time; when the time comes, the good and the evil each will receive its due.” Thus, when the protagonist Caderousse complained that “Dame Fortune smiled at those who did evil but punished those who were honest, Dantès, who disguised himself as a priest visiting Caderousse to find out the cause of Dantès' imprisonment and the fates of his father and Mercédès, determinately claimed: “You are mistaken, my friend”; “There are times when God's justice tarries for a while and it appears to us that we are forgotten by Him, but the time always comes when we find it is not so” (132).

That said, the novel indicates that those protagonist are creators of their own fates. Dantès was thrown into where he was. Yet, he responded to his situation in a way that he could successfully turn misfortune into fortune, repaying those who deserved his kindness and revenged those who deserved his rage. The wicked three created their own fates. Fernand created his life karma by betraying one friend after another, and was brought to the end by the karma which he created. Dangler climbed up the society by betrays and sucking the life blood of others and was destroyed by the karma which he created. De Villefort practiced in justice and was punished by justice. Each chose his life path and was led to the destiny which he chose. Other protagonist' stories illustrate the same point. The Young Morel, who made his decision to rescue a person on the anniversary day when his father was rescued from dishonor, turned himself into a hero and honest man and was rewarded with true love. Gérard de Villefort's daughter Valentine Gérard de Villefort chose true love above marriage for wealth and rank and thus was rewarded by true love. By the end of the novel, each protagonist chose his or her future destiny. Dame Fortune did not make the choice for each protagonist. They were the creator, owner, and maintainer of their own fate. Thus, the concept of fate incorporates the notions of responsibility and right choice. It warns us of the truth that every choice made with free will has consequences. The models of responsibility and right choice increase their stock values in the context that there are objective laws of human existence. If one masters and makes use of these laws, one will be on the right track to happiness. Otherwise, one will be punished by these same laws.

The novel also illustrates Christian virtues, for example, forgiveness, love, and the like. Love and forgiveness are not only Christian virtues. Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism also teach love and forgiveness. All the same, in the novel, Mercédès' experience offers a titillating view on love and forgiveness. She made a mistake, with understandable reasons and paid for such a mistake. Still, the love and forgiveness between her and Dantès shined in the dark night of hatred, revenges, and

mutual killing among protagonists. For this love, Dantès spared the life of the son of Mercédès and Fernand. For this love, Dantès nurtured no hatred or ill-sentiment towards Mercédès. Also for this love, the former fiancé and fiancée said farewell to each other in one of the most touching scenes written. Respecting her choice that she would not accept anything other than the amount of money which he deposited twenty-four years ago for them (Mercédès and Dantès himself) and deeply touched by her unhappiness, Dantès said to Mercédès, “Will you not say *au revoir* to me?” and she replied, “On the contrary, I do say *au revoir*” (502). Both Mercédès and Dantès must get out of the shadow of the past to start each’s new life, and they mutually help each other in doing so. Love and forgiveness transformed them. Where there is love and forgiveness, there will always be stars shining in a dark night.

Dr. BARBARA ENTL, St. George’s University School of Medicine, Great River, NY 11739, USA.