

**“Nothing Mythological About Them” - Historical Context in**  
*The Three Musketeers and The Scarlet Pimpernel*

**Research Question:** How do Alexandre Dumas and Baroness Orczy utilize historical context in their novels *The Three Musketeers* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*?

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**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Historical Events</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Protagonists</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Antagonists</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Other Historical Figures</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Setting &amp; Historical Details</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>16</b>

## **Introduction**

For millennia, some of humanity's most popular and retold stories from Homer's *Iliad* to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* to William Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* to Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* have incorporated famous portions of history into their setting and plot. It appears that when real history is effectively used in some way to propel a story's plot or enrich its cast of characters, this consistently enhances the appeal to generations of readers, but no two authors implement historical context in exactly the same way. An excellent place to observe this is in Alexandre Dumas' 1844 hit novel *The Three Musketeers* and Baroness Orczy's 1905 play-turned-book *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The two novels are both set in famous periods in French history (the reign of King Louis XIII and The French Revolution respectively), are the first in a series, and have been translated into a wide variety of mediums from the stage to the silver screen, yet there are many differences present in how the authors incorporate historical context, making this an interesting area of study. Both authors weave historical events into the narrative or setting, use historical figures as inspiration for many of their characters, and bring in other historical details all in order to establish their novels as immersive, historical fiction, though they differ greatly in how exactly they choose to incorporate these elements of historical context.

First, a brief summary of both novels is in order to ensure the reader can fully appreciate the details of history that will be examined. *The Three Musketeers* follows the tale of the young Frenchman D'artagnan as he sets out from home, armed only with some small presents and advice from his father, to fulfill his dream of becoming one of the legendary Musketeers, the personal guards of King Louis XIII. Shortly after arriving in Paris and speaking with Monsieur

de Treville, the captain of the Musketeers, a series of unexpected incidents lead D'artagnan to become fast friends with three of the most famous and popular musketeers, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, who aid him in his quest. Along the way, in service to the king and queen, as well as to uphold his own chivalrous values, D'artagnan comes into frequent conflict with the powerful Cardinal Richelieu as he conspires against the queen and the Duke of Buckingham, as well as many of his agents, some of whom, like the mysterious Milady de Winter, possess their own malicious personal agendas.

*The Scarlet Pimpernel*, set during the beginning of the French Revolution in late 1792, follows the adventures of the titular hero, an Englishman and master of disguise, as he and his valiant league rescue French nobility from the horrors of the bloody revolt. Marguerite Blakeney, a beautiful and intelligent french woman recently married to the popular, yet foppish, British Sir Percy Blakeney and living in England with him, is dragged into the conflict when French Diplomat and revolutionary agent Chauvelin tasks her with discovering the Pimpernel's true identity, threatening to expose and execute her brother, still residing in France, as a traitorous member of the Pimpernel's league if she fails. To Marguerite's horror, after uncovering all the necessary clues for Chauvelin to sabotage the Pimpernel's next mission and unveil his identity, she discovers the vigilante to be none other than her own husband. With the aid of another member of the League, Sir Andrew, she rushes to France to save her husband before it's too late, but as Chauvelin is hot on Sir Percy's heels, this proves to be no easy task.

### **Historical Events**

One of the most perceptible ways in which both stories cement their statuses as strong pieces of historical fiction is by weaving famous historical events or elements of them into the

narratives. In *The Three Musketeers*, Alexandre Dumas uses many historical events as plot points in his narrative, the most striking of which are the Siege of La Rochelle and the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham. The 1627-28 Siege of La Rochelle, a real battle in the Huguenot Rebellions, features prominently in the novel, encompassing several chapters. The battle was very important for the French government, as La Rochelle was one of the largest cities held by the protestant rebels, and the English, another enemy of France, attempted to aid the rebels in holding the city. Recognizing the battle's importance, Dumas himself writes it is "one of the great political events of the reign of Louis XII" and that "It is, then, interesting and even necessary that we should say a few words about it, particularly as many details of this seige are connected in too important a manner with the story" (Dumas 398). The event is placed and described appropriately by Dumas in its historical context, occurring at the same time and location as reality, though of course Dumas has his protagonists play vital roles which their real-life counterparts did not ("George Villiers"). This is especially important as this section of the novel is both where the heroic D'artagnan finally achieves his dream of becoming a Musketeer and when the primary antagonist, the villainous Milady de Winter, is first imprisoned, so Dumas truly adapts this major event in history to be a major event for his characters as well. Around ten chapters after La Rochelle, the assassination of George Villiers I, the Duke of Buckingham, also takes place in its appropriate time (1628), with the real actors present - James Felton assassinating the Duke - and the same motive given for the killing - Felton being refused for a promotion ("George Villiers"). However, unlike La Rochelle, which is used as a stage on which the protagonists shine, Buckingham's assassination is instead portrayed as a consequence of the antagonists' actions, as if Dumas is revealing a secret history behind the event. In the

narrative, Felton is manipulated by Milady as he serves as her prison guard, carrying out the assassination as a favor for her and, when he is interrogated by his master the Lord de Winter as to why he committed the deed, he tells the Lord he “killed the Duke of Buckingham because he twice refused you yourself to appoint me captain” in order to protect Milady’s identity and involvement in the affair (Dumas 564).

While there aren’t as many large, specific events as are present in *The Three Musketeers*, Orczy still brings in references to many key events in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to serve as the backdrop for her tale. The first chapter of the novel opens in Paris in September of 1792, where it is noted that all day “the guillotine had been kept busy at its ghastly work” (Orczy 11). Though no exact date is given, this likely means the first chapter takes place during the gruesome September Massacres - one of the first heavy uses of the newly-invented guillotine as over a thousand political prisoners were executed in a week (Davidson 106, 116-117). Even if Orczy did not intend the reader’s mind to jump to this specific event (though this seems likely considering later references to the Massacres in the text), she is still appropriately using the spike in executions throughout the whole month of September 1792 as an event to frame the context of her novel. Orczy continues this trend of referencing ongoing developments in the Revolution to provide a backdrop to the main drama. These include references to the debates in the British Parliament in late 1792 on how to officially respond to the increasing violence and France sending new diplomats (here including the sinister citizen Chauvelin) to Britain upon the establishment of the French Republic in late September (Davidson 119). For both novels, portrayals of historical events are some of the strongest areas in which they accurately display the real history behind their narratives, which serves to immerse the reader in the time period and

make them more engaged in the plot. As the historical facts of the events are incorporated accurately, it becomes much easier for the reader to imagine these characters actually existing and engaging in important facets of European history. However, while Dumas uses these events to develop his characters and drive the plot forward, Orczy instead weaves them consistently throughout the entire setting of the novel.

### **The Protagonists**

Next, to examine the historical veracity of the characters, the first place to start is by examining those whom the readers are most exposed to - the protagonists. Dumas opens his novel by proudly proclaiming all of his protagonists to be real people, with their names merely slightly altered for the text, subtitled the foreword: "In which it is proved that, notwithstanding their names' ending in -os and -is, the heroes of the story which we are about to have the honor to relate to our readers have nothing mythological about them" (Dumas ix). Unfortunately, this statement is not entirely accurate. Dumas claims in his foreword that he found and read a historical work entitled *Mémoires de Monsieur D'artagnan* by Gatien Cortilz de Sandras, which is where he found information on his main characters (Dumas ix). However, despite what Dumas may have believed, this work is a fictionalized version of D'artagnan's life, adding numerous unsubstantiated anecdotes and adventures to make it more interesting, and not an accurate biography ("Introduction: The Real"). Partially as a result of this, though D'artagnan and the Three Musketeers (Athos, Porthos, and Aramis) have since been traced back to real people - Charles de Batz Castlemore, Armand de Sillegue, Isaac de Portau, and Henri d'Aramitz - their literary counterparts bear few similarities to the originals (Norris). All four were indeed Musketeers at one point or another, but Dumas further detaches from reality by placing these

characters in the service of Louis XIII, decades before their actual work for Louis XIV (Norris). Thus, while inspired by real, valiant musketeers, the years of service and many of the accomplishments of Dumas' protagonists are far more fiction than fact. The impacts of this decision are that, as previously discussed, Dumas is able to involve his characters in many famous historical events to further engage the reader in his tale, and as Louis XIII also had Musketeers as described, this shifting of career dates only breaks the immersion for the few readers with in depth knowledge of the real men on which the protagonists are based.

Conversely, in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Orczy's protagonists are entirely fabricated, and unlike Dumas she makes no pretenses as to her work being a real history. The heroic Sir Percy Blakeney, The Scarlet Pimpernel, as well as his wife Marguerite Blakeney and several members of his organization, The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, have no record in history. However, this does not mean Orczy's protagonists are unrealistic - even if there was no real Pimpernel to save them, sympathy for the victims of the Revolution was still prevalent in Great Britain, especially among the nobility of which these characters are members ("Britain and the French"). In fact, the Blakeney's with both their noble status and disdain for the violence of the revolution form a perfect antithesis to the novel's revolutionary antagonists and embody many elements of Loyalist (anti-revolutionary) British thought. For example, early in the novel it is noted of Marguerite: "She had but little real sympathy with those haughty French aristocrats [...] but, republican and liberal minded though she was from principle, she hated and loathed the methods which the young Republic had chosen for establishing itself" (Orczy 71-72). Therefore, while Orczy's protagonists are not based on real personages, they still embody an important portion of the era's history. While the reader isn't granted real people to attach the protagonists to, their

symbolic role helps the reader to understand the nature of the historical conflict and further immerse them in the tale. Thus, through the lens of the protagonists we see a striking difference in how the authors use history. Dumas clearly intended his characters to be based on real heroes even if his research was faulty, while Orczy leaves it to her antagonists and other historical figures to be more realistic so she can shape her protagonists around more general viewpoints and ideals, unconfined by the bounds of specific historical figures.

### **The Antagonists**

Right behind the protagonists in their importance to the tale are the drivers of the conflict, the antagonists, so it is logical to inspect them next. In *The Three Musketeers*, the primary antagonists throughout the novel are the personal guard and agents of His Eminence, the Cardinal Richelieu, as well as the Cardinal himself. As related in the novel, especially when they duel with the protagonists in the earlier acts, Richelieu's guards were indeed established as a counterpart to Louis XIII's Musketeers and did have a strong rivalry with them (Louis 68). However, while Richelieu's guards are prominent in early acts of the book, the most heavily featured antagonist is the Cardinal's agent Milady de Winter, who does not appear to be based on any real person (Sudley 20). A Milady does appear in Sandras' *Mémoires de Monsieur D'artagnan*, but there she plays a significantly smaller role than in Dumas' work, and, as previously mentioned, much of Sandras' book is also fictionalized, so it seems likely Milady never actually existed (Sudley 20).

On the other hand, in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, there is only a single featured antagonist, the Citizen Chauvelin. Unlike Dumas' Milady, Chauvelin is based on a real person - the French diplomat and revolutionary François-Bernard de Chauvelin (Chisholm 6: 19). The real and

fictional Chauvelins both share status as a French envoy to England during the war and firm supporters of the revolution, though Orczy appears to have fictionalized most other details of his character and personality (Chisholm 6: 19). Nonetheless, by modelling her antagonist after a real person with the same diplomatic role in the revolution, Orczy makes Chauvelin's character and actions seem more credible and realistic, and thus the conflict more intense, to the readers.

Regardless of the accuracy of their featured antagonists, both novels do share the fact that the antagonists are agents for more famous and powerful historical figures, Cardinal Richelieu and Maximillian Robespierre respectively. By tying their antagonists to famous and controversial people, and in Orczy's case basing her antagonist himself off a real person, the readers are more easily able to view these characters as real people and develop a stronger emotional connection in relation to their villainous actions.

### **Other Historical Figures**

For a final point on characters, both novels prominently feature famous historical figures to enrich and drive their narratives, both through the antagonists as aforementioned, as well as side characters. In *The Three Musketeers*, in addition to the Cardinal, King Louis XIII, his wife Queen Anne, and George Villiers I, the Duke of Buckingham, also play prominent roles. For example, the relationship between Queen Anne and the Duke of Buckingham is used to drive forward the plot in several sections of the novel. It is commonly believed there were some flirtations between the Queen and the Duke, and Villiers did in fact create a scandal by openly declaring affection for Anne when he visited the French Court in 1625 ("Anne of Austria"). However, while rumors haunted her for many years following, whether or not the Queen actually reciprocated or corresponded with him after that is unknown (Grant 18-25). Yet Dumas treats

this romantic relationship as fact and takes it much farther than historical records can actually support. This spawns the first major quest for our protagonists, as they have to recover a necklace the Queen gifted to the Duke when he secretly visited her again in Paris. Furthermore, while there are no specific events related to him, Louis XIII, being the king of France as well as a friend and rival of the Cardinal's and Queen Anne's husband, is integral to many elements of the plot in the book. This includes his recognizing the protagonists for their service in dueling with the Cardinal's guards, joyously stating to them on one occasion "What the devil! Seven of his Eminence's guards placed *hors de combat* by you four in two days!", and bringing his musketeers as guards when he goes to participate in the aforementioned Siege of La Rochelle (Dumas 69). Similarly to the historical events, Dumas' incorporation of historical figures into his story without any glaring contradictions of established fact aids the reader in envisioning the time period, and thus be more interested in the tale as a whole.

Historical figures are also present in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, where Lord William Grenville and the Prince of Wales are featured in several chapters. Rather than focusing on their historical accomplishments and activities to drive the plot, Orczy utilizes these men primarily to add to the environment of the novel and to enhance some scenes. The Lord William Grenville does retain his actual role in 1792 of Great Britain's Secretary of State, and as a result he is responsible for the hosting of many social events mentioned in the novel, including a ball which encompasses several chapters of the novel's rising action ("William Wyndham"). Furthermore, as Secretary of State he is responsible for hosting the antagonist, Chauvelin, and serves to bring him into closer proximity to the protagonists during the aforementioned ball scene. The Prince of Wales is mentioned and engages in dialogue repeatedly, but primarily for the purpose of

enhancing the characters of the protagonists. He is shown as a great friend of Sir Percy Blakeney and Marguerite St. Just and converses with or accompanies them in several early scenes to remind the reader that these two characters are much renowned and beloved in European high society. Again, though they play a lesser role than in Dumas' novel, the historical figures in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* enhance the realism of the plot and provide the reader with another reference to understand the actual history behind it. Both novels feature historical figures prominently and largely accurately, aside from giving them dialogue unrecorded in history and relationships to fictional characters. But while Dumas uses historical figures primarily to drive the narrative forward, Orczy treats them more as a part of the setting - a detail to be used to enhance the overall backdrop of the novel, similar to how the two authors incorporated historical events.

### **Setting & Historical Details**

Finally, while usage of historical figures and events is certainly important, it is also vital that there be references to many details and other elements in the setting relevant to the time period for a work of historical fiction to be truly immersive. Both authors go about incorporating these historical tidbits in different fashions, but they are present in both stories. In *The Three Musketeers*, Dumas takes advantage of his status as a Frenchman to incorporate numerous details about the geography of Paris, where most of the novel is set, as well as frequent references to historic provinces in the nation, though his cultural details are occasionally flawed. Dumas lists exact street names for his characters' residences and destinations whenever possible, and these can all still be observed as accurate today by simply viewing a map of Paris. This includes the Rue des Fossoyeurs where D'artagnan lives, the Rue de Vieux-Colombier where the Musketeers are headquartered in the novel, and many other locations (Ertmanis). Another particularly

excellent detail Dumas employs is references to the historic provinces within the country.

Though the French provincial system was abolished during the French Revolution, in the early 1600's when the novel is set they were still a very important facet of French government and society. Dumas makes note of this especially by referring to the province of origin of many characters, repeatedly calling D'artagnan a Gascon (from Gascony) and his servant Planchet a Picard (from Picardy), among numerous other references (Gagne). However, while his geographical details are impeccable, Dumas does make an error in the most major cultural detail, the *Ballet de la Merlaison*. In the 22nd chapter of the novel, "The Ballet of La Merlaison" King Louis XIII hosts a ball at which this ballet, correctly noted to be one of his favorites, is to be performed: "nothing was talked of in Paris but the ball which the aldermen of the city were to give the king and queen, and in which their Majesties were to dance the famous La Merlaison - the favorite ballet of the king" (Dumas 213, McGowan). Yet in reality, this ballet was not first performed until 1635, while in the novel it takes place several chapters before the 1627 Siege of La Rochelle, meaning Dumas is inaccurately placing it eight or nine years too early (McGowan). Despite his musical mishap, which would likely be overlooked by most readers, Dumas' other details still make the reader feel again that this incredible tale could have truly occurred, as they can visit many of the locations in France if they so choose.

Orczy, on the other hand, while certainly accurately naming several locations, opts instead to weave many elements of British and French society and politics from the time throughout the tale to add vivid detail. One of the most intense scenes of the first half of the novel occurs when the villainous Chauvelin confronts and blackmails Marguerite Blakenley in an opera house. At the beginning of this scene, Orczy draws special attention to the fact that the

show being performed is Christoph Willibald Gluck's "Orpheus", stating "Gluck's *Orpheus* made a strong appeal to the more intellectual portions of the house" (Orczy 80). Furthermore, to account for the fact that the show is opening the season at this theatre despite premiering in Vienna in 1762, she notes that many in the audience perceive it as a "latest importation from Germany" (Gardiner, Orczy 80). For the French side, when describing interactions with any of the revolutionary characters, Orczy takes care to draw attention to elements common to these individuals in reality. The most immediately noticeable to the reader is that the French revolutionaries, especially Chauvelin, refer to everyone as *Citoyen*, French for "Citizen," which all Frenchmen used at the time due to the revolution abolishing titles (Davidson 104). Some examples of this include the very first named character, Sergeant Bibot, being referred to as Citoyen Bibot, Bibot himself stating "Citoyen GrosPierre was a fool!" in reference to another sergeant, Chauvelin greeting an innkeeper in France with "Hey! Citoyen Brogard! Holá!", and Chauvelin referring to his second-in-command, Desgas, as as Citoyen Desgas in lines like "Choose your men well, Citoyen Desgas" (Orczy 14, 190, 211). Furthermore, in one of the first scenes in France, Marguerite notices that all men "wore red caps - in various stages of cleanliness - but all with the tricolor cockade pinned on the left-hand side" (Orczy 174). While the significance of this may not be readily apparent to one who hasn't studied the French Revolution, tricolor cockades were a symbol used by revolutionaries as far back as the storming of the Bastille (Clifford 369). All of these details combine to grant the reader a clearer picture of what life at the time was like, and in turn make the characters and conflicts appear more lifelike. While both authors use key details and elements of the setting to cement the historical status of their novels, Dumas primarily relies on his own knowledge of French locales, and when he

details cultural aspects there are inaccuracies, while Orczy actually also describes appropriate elements of culture and fashion. This makes her work superior in this aspect because her accurate inclusion of more details than just geography makes these details both appear more purposeful and more impactful on the reader.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while they do both in fact have something “mythological about them,” *The Three Musketeers* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* are both excellently immersive and well-researched pieces of historical fiction set in France. While they vary on whether their protagonists or antagonists are more fictional, how their characters interact with real historical events, and the ways in which they incorporate historical figures and details, both novels have firmly established their own places in history through their usage of historical context. The wide variety of historical elements both authors employ to frame and advance their narratives help the readers to more easily place themselves in the setting, empathize with the characters, and understand the plot, which is perhaps why both stories have been featured in so many forms and continue to be treasured by audiences today.

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