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## "Une Amazone", a Manuscript of Alexandre Dumas père

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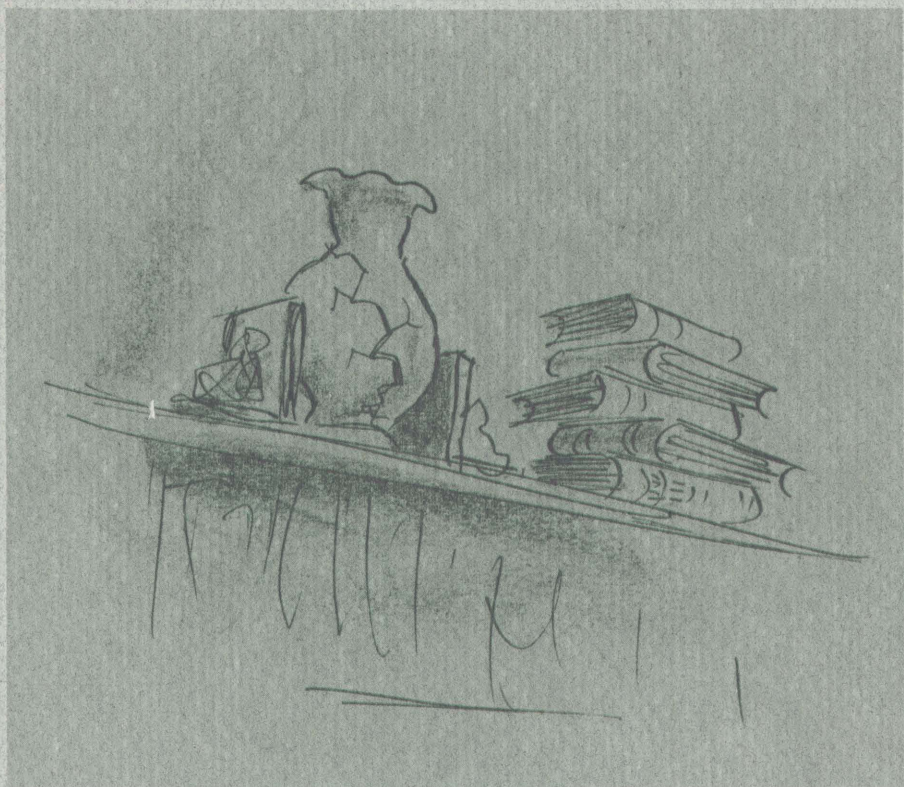
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# “Une Amazone”, a Manuscript of Alexandre Dumas père

BY PAUL J. ARCHAMBAULT

“Une Amazone”, the only manuscript of Dumas père (1802–1870) at Syracuse University, was acquired in July 1985 by the George Arents Research Library. This is the same story printed serially in *Le Siècle* between 29 September and 3 October 1845. A slightly modified version, entitled “Herminie”, appears in the Calmann-Lévy edition of Dumas’ works (volume 10 of 275 volumes, pages 191–274). Very minor stylistic differences between “Une Amazone” and “Herminie” suggest that there might have been an intermediate version. “Herminie” first appeared in print in 1858.

The Syracuse manuscript is incomplete. A comparison of it with the Calmann-Lévy text suggests that eight pages of an estimated thirty-two are missing. Altogether the Syracuse manuscript contains the following text as printed in Calmann-Lévy: “Avant-propos”; chapter I; all but the first eighteen lines as printed of chapter III; chapters IV, V, VI; and an epilogue.\*

“Une Amazone” is a typical ‘bal masqué’ story of the French Romantic period. It takes place in 183–, whereas “Herminie” takes place in 185–, but that is the only noticeable change. The mood is not as sentimental as that of Musset’s stories—one thinks, for example, of Musset’s “Les Caprices de Marianne”—nor is the tone as morbidly pessimistic as that of Maupassant’s stories later in the century; but the story is both lyrical and bitterly ironic, and Dumas claims in a brief foreword that, save for an alteration in the names, it is a true story.

The young hero, Edouard, is a blasé *enfant du siècle* who pretends, quite typically, to be far more worldly a seducer than he is in fact. As the story opens, the young man has had the good fortune of find-

\* I am very grateful to Edward Lyon of the George Arents Research Library for his help in compiling this information.

ing a bachelor's flat in the faubourg Saint Germain—rare luck, apparently, judging by the number of times the subject of finding one's own quarters comes up in the course of the story. Edouard has been carrying on a casual love affair with one of his many girlfriends, Marie, when he meets a fascinating, mysterious lady at a masked ball at the Opéra. Having found at last a woman worth pursuing, Edouard inquires further about her identity and learns that she is none other than the exquisite young woman who lives across the street from him in a luxurious town house. He also learns from his concierge that the young woman's name is Herminie de ——— and that she has been trained from her earliest youth to ride horses “comme une amazone”.

One need not be too perceptive a reader to detect here a reworking of the Amazon myth, that is, a story of an unconquerable woman. Edouard resigns himself, quite happily at first, to his role of centaur. Once the expected billet doux has arrived from Herminie, enjoining Edouard to pay her a nocturnal visit across the street, our hero will be allowed to enjoy the Amazon's favors. But on two conditions: he must slide a ten-foot plank from his window to hers every night at midnight in order to make his way across the street; and he must never breathe a word to anyone about their affair—if he does, the Amazon will kill him.

After two months of crawling across the plank Edouard has begun to tire of the Amazon and to find her conditions annoyingly restrictive. He secretly packs his bags for a four-month trip to “les pyramides”, and sublets his flat to his heretofore hapless friend Edmond. (This Edmond is the typical anti-hero of the Romantic short story, an anti-Edouard who has been unable to locate either flat or mistress so far.) In the meantime, Marie, Edouard's jealous ex-girlfriend, has let the Amazon know that she is aware of her love affair with Edouard.

The dénouement of the story is quick, ironic, and cruel. On the night following Edouard's departure, Edmond substitutes himself for his friend on the plank. As he nears the edge of Herminie's window, he suddenly feels the plank give way and plunges four stories to an unsavoury death. Thinking it was Edouard, Herminie had decided to punish him for revealing their love affair to the world.

Dumas père was a most prolific writer, with more than three hundred titles to his credit at the time of his death. Like Balzac, he wrote to make a living; unlike Balzac, whose manuscripts and galleys are saturated with corrections and addenda, Dumas does not seem to have

second-guessed himself very often. The manuscript of “Une Amazone” indicates a swift, fine, firm, legible hand (for Dumas père was trained as a clerk and was reputed for his calligraphy) and contains very few emendations. In every case, the emended version, to this reader at least, is an improvement over the original. Let one example suffice: on page [4] of the manuscript, Edouard is first described as “un de ces individus ~~qui~~ que les femmes ont en horreur parce que *tout en ayant l’innocence d’un écolier et affectant l’impertinence d’un débauché*”. Dumas must have realized here that he was being too judgmental toward his hero; so, he remodeled the material I have italicized to read: “quoique n’ayant sur leur compte que la théorie d’un collégien ils affectent avec elles l’impertinence d’un roué.” In toning down Edouard’s portrait from “debauché” to “roué”, Dumas has exchanged a bludgeon for a rapier; and a “theorizing student” hits the mark far better than “an innocent schoolboy”. Dumas might have recalled the fine remark by Talleyrand, that master roué of statesmanship: “Tout ce qui est excessif est sans portée.” Anything excessive falls short of the mark.