

**Murderous Mothers: Historical Context and Madame Villefort of
*The Count of Monte Cristo***

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Alexandre Dumas' classic title *The Count of Monte Cristo* has remained in the public consciousness and the literary canon for over a century, continuing to influence literature and culture today. In fact, the book has never been unpopular. Back in the Victorian era, "at its first appearance, and for some time subsequently, [it was] the most popular book in Europe. Perhaps no novel within a given number of years had so many readers and penetrated into so many different countries" (Saintsbury). This long-cherished novel is unique in that it is rooted entirely in its historical, political, and social moment. To separate it from that context is to erase the rich political commentary and remove layers of meaning from Dumas' dynamic characters. In fact, "that unsettled historico-political framework is... critical to the story's evolution" (Cooper 196). Through his novel, Dumas "magnified, and made visible, issues latent in society. Of these, foremost was the nature of society itself – the question of individual identity and social role, and the definition of good and evil" (Stowe 121). Because he writes during the Victorian era, the main societal issues Dumas addresses in his work pertain to gender, race, and class. Furthermore, the Victorian era was "a rapidly shifting social and political environment," especially in Dumas' home country of France (Marinetti 266). Due to the instability of this time period, "the status and role of the individual, therefore his identity, are a matter of doubt for him" (Marinetti 266). Dumas' characters often struggle with their identities in an ever-changing society, reflecting the realities of the Victorian era. Some of these characters, especially those who find themselves

marginalized, serve as vessels for Dumas' social commentary. I argue that Madame Villefort is one such character. Mde. Villefort's actions demonstrate that the cult of domesticity—the societal expectations and norms of the Victorian era—is a fragile, idealized world that does not reflect reality. Dumas purposefully places her into a situation that is irreconcilable within the confines of the cult of domesticity. She must choose between obeying her husband, who will not grant her son, Edward, any inheritance, or protecting her son, who would fall into poverty and shame without any inheritance.

Ultimately, the reader is left with vivid descriptions of corpses and madness as the aftermath of a woman trying desperately to reconcile her two conflicting social roles. Her decision on how to resolve her contradictory roles is simple. She performs both to the best of her ability until they inevitably collapse. The climax of the novel ends with the illusion of Mde. Villefort's blissful home life finally falling apart in a dramatic murder-suicide. Her suicide note becomes one final challenge to the cult of domesticity, effectively paraphrasing Dumas' commentary. It reads: "you know that I was a good mother, since it was for my son's sake I became a criminal. A good mother cannot depart without her son" (Dumas 1013). Throughout the novel, Dumas takes the reader through Mde. Villefort's predicament, the societal restrictions she faces, her attempts to avoid the inevitable, and, finally, the destruction of the supposedly happy home.

There is sparse literature written about Madame Villefort's character in particular, despite her pivotal role in the story's main plotline. Indeed, Mde. Villefort controls the very climax of the novel, the true point of no return for the protagonist. She, unlike many of Dumas' other characters, is a composite character, made up of Victorian anxieties. She embodies the precarious balance between the most virtuous and the most sinister of Victorian values. As a devoted

mother, an ambitious woman, and a woman with access to poison, Mde. Villefort represents a threat to the cult of domesticity. While she is by no means passive, her environment and relationships mold her into a Victorian reader's worst fear. The cult of domesticity shapes Mde. Villefort's raw potential into a destructive force, and her downfall stems from an attempt to work within its confines.

Madame de Villefort's Complex Motives

Perhaps the most apparent justification for Madame Villefort's poisonings is that she killed her relatives to ensure her son's future financial security. Mde. Villefort asks, "is it not unjust – shamefully unjust? Poor Edward is as much M. Noirtier's grandchild as Valentine, and yet... she will still be three times richer than he" (Dumas 591). Because Valentine is M. Villefort's daughter by his first wife and Edward is his son by his second wife, Mde. Villefort, Edward will be left penniless when his father dies. When Valentine suddenly realizes this motive, she cries, "Edward? Poor child! Are all these crimes committed on his account?" (Dumas 940). While inheritance does play a role in the poisonings, Mde. Villefort is far too dynamic of a character to be motivated by only one factor.

Whereas Dumas' other characters "[believe] firmly in *la loi du talion*, the taking of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," Madame Villefort operates with more complex motives (Cooper 201). Her main task is to protest against the cult of domesticity while working within it. A key passage worth examining when discussing Mde. Villefort's motivations comes from her conversation with Edmond on toxicology. There is much to unpack in these few lines, which lead the reader to see the more abstract ideas motivating Mde. Villefort:

if you merely and simply remove from your path the individual who is in your way, and that without shock or violence, without the display of sufferings which, in the case of

becoming a punishment, make a martyr of the victims and of him who inflicts them a butcher, in every sense of the word; if there be no blood, no groans, no convulsions, and above all, that horrid and compromising moment of accomplishing the act, then one escapes the clutch of the human law, which says to you, 'Do not disturb society!' (Dumas 512)

Edmond emphasizes a few crucial concepts in this argument. First, he describes Mde. Villefort's targets as people who are "in her way." This description would imply that the forces restraining Mde. Villefort are, at least in part, the people in her own home, rather than outsiders or an abstraction. Edmond also suggests that murder should be subtle and without spectacle if the murderer wants to avoid garnering sympathy for the victim. This approach is noteworthy because Mde. Villefort *does* go on to carry out discreet poisoning attempts, following Edmond's advice. By avoiding spectacle and gore in her murders, Mde. Villefort prevents others from seeing her victims as "martyrs" or herself as a "butcher." The subtlety shifts the focus away from criminals and victims towards the murder itself. By consciously deciding to carry out her poisonings this way, Mde. Villefort primes society to focus on her motive, rather than any individual person. Finally, Edmond presents an interesting concept to Mde. Villefort. He explains that the law, which does not allow for murder, is a means of preventing the people from "disturbing society." By this logic, murder becomes a means of protest towards society and its norms. It becomes a tool for challenging the oppression that is the "clutch of the human law."

The Cult of Domesticity: Separate Spheres

The key to fully analyzing Madame Villefort's character is the cult of domesticity. Loosely defined, the cult of domesticity held that "home and family life were regarded as "sacred," "a source of virtues and emotions which were nowhere else to be found," and "a private

arena far removed from the unpleasantness of the outside world” (Bartrip 891). Put simply, “the public sphere (work) came to be associated with men, while the private sphere (the home) was identified as the domain of women” (Mamiya 113). That “unpleasantness” of the public world, however, also includes access to social, political, and economic participation in society. Only men had these privileges of the public sphere during the Victorian era. Mde. Villefort’s status as a woman even prevents her from visiting friends freely. When Edmond asks Mde. Villefort to visit him, for example, she curtly replies, “I do not think it likely, sir... [Valentine and I] very seldom go out” (Dumas 503). When Edmond shows disappointment at her refusal, Mde. Villefort goes on to say, “What would you have, sir? ...we do what we can” (Dumas 509). Clearly, she knows that she is constrained to the home, and is frustrated with this lack of freedom.

Perhaps more importantly, Mde. Villefort is both unafraid to share her unhappiness with powerful male figures like Edmond, and too afraid not to. Her replies to Edmond do not lend themselves to easy, mindless small talk. Mde. Villefort’s bold comments show her disregard for her husband’s desire to present a positive image of their home life. When left alone in the company of Edmond, notably without the presence of M. Villefort, her comments quickly dismantle any notion that all is well within her family’s domestic sphere—she is a prisoner within her own home. This is a small but powerful move towards undermining the power that her husband has over her narrative, and directly challenges how the cult of domesticity idealizes the separate spheres. It is also a cry for help. Her hesitation and fear are evident in the following passage:

“And then,” said Madame de Villefort, endeavoring by a struggle and with effort to get away from her thoughts, “however skillfully [the poison] is prepared, crime is always

crime, and if it avoid human scrutiny it does not escape the eye of God. The Orientals are stronger than we are in cases of conscience, and very prudently have no hell -- that is the point.” (Dumas 512)

In this conversation, the reader sees Mde. Villefort reach out to Edmond by insisting that she is not free. Dumas’ descriptions of her thought process also show her desire to avoid resorting to murder to protect her son. Without the help of someone with access to the public sphere, Mde. Villefort will be forced to go to extremes, a fate she tries to avoid.

Another way of thinking of the cult of domesticity is as a “reordering of separate spheres: the motif of home as ‘walled garden,’ a secure sanctuary from the public realm” (Prasch 194). The Victorian home was generally "a self-contained and curiously complete unit," eliminating the need for women to participate in society, and thus supporting the separation of men and women (Prasch 194). As the public and private spheres became more divided along gendered lines, Victorians justified the separation by claiming that restricting women to the home protected them from the evils of society. John Ruskin, a prominent social thinker of the Victorian era, wrote that “the man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial... But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her... need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace” (qtd. in Mamiya 113). Thus, Victorians understood virtually imprisoning women in their homes as an act of genuine concern, and perhaps even necessary for her safety and wellbeing.

While the “walled garden” theoretically protected women from the vices of the public world, it also cut off their access to the same opportunities as men. The separation of the public and private spheres resulted in “defining women as family matriarchs and nurturers [excluding] them as agents of social change, making such activity the exclusive domain of the culture bearers

(i.e., men)” (Rotman 666). Further, “French ideologues were obsessed with the... mother at home and committed to encouraging her fecundity,” solidifying woman’s status as a matriarch (Koven 171). However, keeping mothers at home did not protect them from the vices of public life, since their husbands could move freely between both worlds.

Traits that Victorians understood as virtuous in men, such as ambition and education, were the vices that women needed protection from, effectively sequestering them in their homes, away from opportunity. In fact, Victorians believed that "reasons such as... higher education (preventing marriage and inducing want), and excessive temptation" lured women into lives of crime (Flowers 66). With this emphasis on protecting women from temptation and vice, the “walled garden” view of the separate spheres resembles the Garden of Eden. Accordingly, Victorians framed knowledge as a tempting vice that women must be sheltered from. This shelter takes the form of the home, a stand-in for paradise.

This vision of blissful domestic life, however, was more of an ideal than the reality for most families of the Victorian era. In fact, “since women and children lacked freedom, power, and legal status, they could be virtual prisoners of a paterfamilial tyrant on whom the law conferred almost untrammelled authority” (Bartrip 891). During the timeframe Dumas’ novel takes place, it would even be legal for M. Villefort to beat and imprison his wife. At one point M. Villefort refers to his wife as “a poor, weak woman, without help or the power of defending herself against his absolute and supreme will,” demonstrating that even he understands her subjugated role (Dumas 1010).

The “walled garden” also isolated women, especially mothers who spent their days raising children. The cult of domesticity’s separate spheres force Madame Villefort into solitude, and her loneliness is evident. She barely ever sees her own husband, and says of him, "old men

are always so selfish in their affection" (Dumas 589). When M. Villefort hires new servants, it only serves to show how empty and distant the family's relationships are: "new faces were presented to the different masters of the house, thus widening the division which had always existed between the members of the same family" (Dumas 991). Even as Mde. Villefort suddenly faints from shock, the entire household neglects her, acting as if she were invisible. Dumas writes, "Madame de Villefort was overpowered; her eyes first flashed and then swam; she staggered toward the door and disappeared. Directly afterward the distant sound of a heavy weight falling on the ground was heard, but no one paid any attention to it" (Dumas 945). The cult of domesticity denies Mde. Villefort access to meaningful relationships by imprisoning her within the domestic sphere.

The strong disconnect between public and private life led to Victorians being "inundated with stories where home management had lapsed into unpredictable acts of aggression" (Mangham 51). Additionally, stories from this era that challenge the image of domestic bliss "played to people's fears: of disease, adulteration, child injury, burglary, aging, marital discord, and feelings of personal deficiency" (Mangham 195). These fears "fostered a notion of the home as a deceptive place of conflict between latent dangers and misleading appearances" (Mangham 51). Dumas knows his audience, and capitalizes on these fears and fascinations to hold their attention as he delivers his commentary against the cult of domesticity.

As a final assertion of the separation of spheres, M. Villefort denies Mde. Villefort access to a public trial. Once he realizes that she is a murderer, he locks her in her room and ruthlessly interrogates her. When M. Villefort demands she give him answers, she asks, "is it to the judge or to the husband?" (Dumas 996). Here, Mde. Villefort cleverly points out that he is bringing his public role as a judge into her domestic sphere, while simultaneously denying her the right to

bring herself into the public sphere in front of a jury. The distinction she makes between her husband's public and private identities highlights the double standard working against her. M. Villefort tells her that she must answer to him as a judge, not as a husband, and commands her to drink her poisons herself. Mde. Villefort then quickly realizes that her crimes will be swept under the rug, keeping society from seeing and understanding her motives.

Victorian Anxiety and Poison

Although Dumas could have written a more shocking and scandalous means of murder, he specifically chooses poisoning as Madame Villefort's modus operandi. However, to a Victorian audience, poisoning would have been the most shocking and thrilling crime imaginable. The shock of Mde. Villefort's actions "owed much to the hold that poison exercised on the imagination of the Victorian public" (Burney 6). Given that Mde. Villefort murders four people using poisons, not including her failed attempts, it is apparent that her methodology is no accident. In fact, Mde. Villefort "cannot be understood without reference to the broader anxieties engendered by criminal poisoning" (Burney 7). She is a personification of the Victorian "anxiety about fatalities amongst the general public through the misuse, criminal and otherwise, of a poison" (Bartrip 893). The Victorians had good reason to fear poison because it "was freely and cheaply available to shoppers at a multitude of grocer's, oilmen's, and chemist's" (Bartrip 893). The accessibility to poisons created a very strong fear of substances like brucine, the poison Mde. Villefort uses.

Accessibility to poison was not the only contributing factor to this social anxiety, though. Victorians understood that "at a time when divorce was wellnigh unattainable, [poisoning] offered a temptingly quick escape from an unhappy marriage" (Bartrip 893). Beyond simply having access to poisons, Victorian women had a motive to use them against their husbands.

Within the cult of domesticity, woman's virtue is dependent upon her ability to gracefully tolerate her husband's mistreatment and vice. After all, "bearing up under oppression and victimization, turning the other cheek, is the antithesis of revenge, and only God could be both pure enough and knowledgeable enough to administer vengeance in a morally fitting way" (French x). Poison became a readily available means of pushing back against men's abuse of power and authority. It was a means of "[taking] up arms against violence by seeking to get rid of the agent of violence... Men's violence" (Tuana 192).

Interestingly, Victorians were quick to acquit women accused of poisoning their husbands. Rather than empathizing with their plight, however, Victorian men sought to maintain their socially constructed ideas of female morality and crime. Convicting women of murder would contradict every previously held notion of women's virtue. A conviction would also bring the murderess' motives to light, publicly recognizing her status as a second-class citizen under the tyranny of her husband's rule. In fact, it was the very "normalcy of these women, who did not look like witches or crazy people and who were able to point to lives that were as orderly as they were difficult, that is, average lives – their indistinguishability from all other inconspicuous and devoted wives made their conviction as murderers of men impossible" (Thürmer-Rohr 190). Conviction of these average women would place more blame on men's abuse of power than the woman's morality. Further, because of the cult of domesticity, Victorians were not able to accept "an impression that crime was no alien introduction to the family, but a factor generated from within the home itself" (Mangham 49). The recognition of women committing crimes would contradict the belief that they are inherently moral and that the home is a refuge from vice. M. Villefort denies his wife's actions as long as he possibly can, refusing to let reality contradict the cult of domesticity. When confronted with evidence of his wife's crimes, he cries, "you are

wrong. No crimes are committed in my house. Fate has struck. God is trying me, which is horrible to believe; but no one is being murdered!" (Dumas 980). The reader can see M. Villefort reaching for a scapegoat to explain away what has happened. First, he claims that "Fate" is the cause, before quickly shifting the blame to God. It is easier for M. Villefort to believe that a divine ruler of the entire universe has, for some reason, decided to "try" him than to consider the possibility that his wife could be the culprit.

The Cult of Domesticity: Gender and the Moral Pillar

In the Victorian era, morality was heavily gendered. Victorians believed that men choose to act morally, while "women are not humans who act morally, they simply are moral. They make no effort, they make no decisions, they make no sacrifices, they make no distinction between protective and destructive actions" (Thürmer-Rohr 193). Despite placing women on a pedestal as inherently virtuous, this view simultaneously strips women of their agency. M. Villefort definitely believes his wife to be inherently virtuous, to the point that he refuses to blame her for her actions. He claims, "that woman became criminal only from associating with me! I carried the infection of crime with me and she has caught it as she would the typhus fever, the cholera, the plague!" (Dumas 1011). Here, the reader sees that M. Villefort, even when faced with the reality that his wife has attempted to kill her own family within the home, cannot accept a disruption of his idealization of domestic life. By blaming himself for his wife's actions, he maintains the artificial segregation of the wicked, masculine public sphere and the peaceful, feminine private sphere. He also denies his wife the agency to claim her actions as her own, making her poisonings about himself. Even after death, Mde. Villefort's narrative is distorted by men to fit within the cult of domesticity.

Because Victorians believed women to be inherently virtuous, and because the cult of domesticity kept women at home, they began to conceptualize women as the moral pillar of the home. While this idea placed responsibility for the morality of their families on women, especially mothers, it also gave them a distinct power. If a mother falls from virtue, the entire family falls with her. This power creates a “drama of the aggressive male checked by the virtuous woman” (LeGates 31). Thus, Victorians held that “woman under control is a help to man; woman out of control is his destruction” (Tuana 86). Of course, the delicate balance of power and control makes for a fragile system. If a woman acts immorally, she breaks the notion that the home is a peaceful haven, which contradicts a main characteristic of the cult of domesticity.

Dumas wants the reader to see just how fragile the illusion of a perfectly virtuous home can be. He wants to show how easily the system can break when a mother does not live up to the societal expectations put upon her. After Madame Villefort’s murder-suicide, Dumas presents strong imagery of M. Villefort’s descent into madness. He writes, “Villefort could not believe his eyes -- he could not believe his reason; he dragged himself toward the child's corpse and examined it as a lioness contemplates her dead cub” (Dumas 1013). Here, Dumas compares M. Villefort to a wild animal - to a beast that is less than human. M. Villefort begins to lose his grip on reason, proving that his mental state also reflects the animalistic comparison. Dumas goes on to write, “Villefort no longer presented a type of civilized man; he more resembled a tiger wounded to death, whose teeth were broken in his last agony” (Dumas 1013). Again, M. Villefort devolves into a wild animal after his wife no longer represents the home’s moral pillar. He becomes primitive without his wife’s power to civilize him. This absurd and sudden spiral into animalistic behavior exaggerates Victorian fears about women acting immorally. Through

this exaggeration, Dumas shows that the cult of domesticity is an illusion too far removed from reality to warrant the hold it had on Victorian society.

Victorian Motherhood

While Victorians idealized mothers as moral pillars of the family, they also held a strong fear of mothers in particular. Without virtuous mother figures, after all, the entire family structure was supposedly at risk of collapsing. Thus, “a sickly maternal influence can indeed poison, debilitate, and destroy” (Mangham 109). Even medical journals of the time echoed this notion, going so far as to claim that “the mother becomes melancholy, and is at times seized with an ‘uncontrollable impulse’ to destroy herself, ay! Even to destroy her own offspring -- the doting mother murdering her own beloved child -- and she is horrified with herself all the time” (qtd. in Mangham 27). Madame Villefort fits this description almost verbatim, embodying “the era’s larger notions of motherhood as simultaneously life-giving and destructive” (Mangham 24). Mde. Villefort’s murder of her son continues a long narrative tradition of “the image of motherly compassion turning sour when influenced by bad maternal care... the act of motherly tenderness as the culmination of an act of extreme brutality” (Mangham 25). In the Victorian era, this image manifested as “a fine line... between mothering and murdering” (Mangham 25). Victorians believed that mothers “were as capable of extinguishing life as they were of creating it, and it was the process of mothering *itself* that frequently led to murder,” exactly in the way that Mde. Villefort’s love for her son drives her to murder (Mangham 28). Dumas acknowledges this idea in his novel when Edmond observes of Mde. Villefort, “you are really very severe with that dear clever child” (506). Mde. Villefort unknowingly foreshadows the destruction to come by replying, “Oh, sometimes severity is quite necessary” (Dumas 506). Rather than merely providing a hint as to what’s to come, Dumas takes this exchange one step further. He attributes

Mde. Villefort's response to "a mother's real firmness," suggesting that her "tough love" comes from natural maternal instincts, without reference to any ill intent behind it (Dumas 506).

This murder, then, exploits a common Victorian fear of motherhood, a fear which seems to be at odds with the cult of domesticity's idealized household. M. Villefort even praises the intent behind his son's murder, saying, "she loves him. It was for his sake she has committed these crimes. We ought never to despair of softening the heart of a mother who loves her child; she will repent" (Dumas 1011). Here, Dumas draws the reader's attention to the disconnect between virtuous motherly devotion and the destruction it causes to the Villefort household.

Madame Villefort and Male Validation

One notable characteristic of Mde. Villefort is her genuine interest in and talent for science. A skilled botanist and chemist, Mde. Villefort has the means to poison others effectively. However, she lacks confidence in her abilities. Victorians believed that "woman's nature, her supposedly greater role in reproduction, makes her more vulnerable to insanity. But any attempt on her part to defy her 'nature,' perhaps by striving for an education equal to that of man, will also bring about a mental breakdown" (Tuana 100). Her ambitions in the traditionally masculine field of science blur the line between the public and private spheres, and she hesitates to challenge the cult of domesticity in this way. Her knowledge and skills in this field, as noted by Edmond, are unusual, given that the cult of domesticity restricts women from the public sphere. When Mde. Villefort asks Edmond to share more of his wisdom in toxicology, he remarks, "but I perceive I have not much to teach you. Allow me to compliment your knowledge; such learning is very rare among ladies" (Dumas 507). Dumas makes this comment the first and only instance of anyone acknowledging Mde. Villefort's talents.

Because she lacks validation, Madame Villefort is eager to accept it from Edmond, who twists her neutral interest in science into a more sinister interest in toxicology. In this conversation between Mde. Villefort and Edmond, Dumas suggests that Mde. Villefort might not have pursued toxicology if only her ambitions had been validated before. It is because society has restrained her ambition for so long that she is quick to accept Edmond's praise, without considering the consequences. Despite the public and social nature of science, Mde. Villefort is unable to share her talent with society. She is forced to try containing her little piece of the public sphere within the private sphere, where she is imprisoned by the cult of domesticity, leading to a misshapen and perverse manifestation of her ambitions. Dumas presents Mde. Villefort's ambitions as irreconcilable with her imprisonment in the domestic sphere, showing the reader the disastrous results of the separation of the two realms.

In addition to praising Mde. Villefort's ambition and skill, Edmond also notes that science has been a passion of hers for a long time: "but what you tell me, madame, what you inquire of me, is not the result of a chance query, for two years since you asked me the same questions, and said, too, that for a very long time this... occupied your mind" (Dumas 507). This means that Mde. Villefort does not begin studying the sciences with the intention of poisoning her family. Rather, she pursues her genuine ambitions and interests, and only years later does "science [become]... a defensive weapon" (Dumas 508). The lack of premeditation on her part supports the idea that Mde. Villefort's murder-suicide is an act of desperation and a last resort. In fact, Edmond must reframe poisons as a type of medicine to gain her interest at all: "Oh, no! In the first place, let us agree that the word poison does not exist, because in medicine use is made of the most violent poisons, which become, according as they are made use of, most salutary remedies" (Dumas 513). This comment situates poisons as a "remedy" to Mde. Villefort's

domestic problems. This view also redirects the focus to the effects on the poisoner, instead of the poisoned, redefining murder as an act of self-defense against an enemy who brings moral “sickness” into the home. The separation of poison from murder is part of what ultimately gives Mde. Villefort the permission she needs to move forward. Dumas includes this detail to prevent Victorian readers from blaming Mde. Villefort’s murder-suicide on her ambition. The separation of vice from female ambition is necessary, as Dumas will go on to demonstrate that Mde. Villefort’s poisonings stem from society’s limitations on her ambition, rather than the ambition itself.

Still, after Edmond’s praise, Madame Villefort remains hesitant to put her knowledge into practice. First, she must reconcile her abilities with the societal limitations of her gender. Edmond draws her attention to other cultures, where women have more freedom to pursue their ambitions, even if those ambitions be taboo. He tells her, "There is not one of those women, Egyptian, Turk, or Greek, whom here you call 'good women,' who do not know how, by means of chemistry, to stupefy a doctor, and in psychology to amaze a confessor” (Dumas 508). This comment teaches Mde. Villefort that there are women who pursue their ambitions and find success. Before her conversation with Edmond, she was unable to imagine a world in which she could pursue her scientific talent freely. Her surprise and excitement at this prospect are evident: “Really!" said Madame de Villefort, whose eyes sparkled with strange fire at this conversation" (Dumas 508). She is enamored with the possibility of pursuing her scientific ambitions - so much so that the excitement overshadows the taboo of toxicology. She becomes so enthralled with Edmond’s story that she does not realize she is forming a positive association between poisoning people and expressing agency.

To further inspire her, Edmond even goes so far as to share the secrets behind more taboo poisons that take a few days to kill their victims and are almost untraceable. Her response shows that she understands the gravity of her ability: "It is quite frightful, but deeply interesting," said the young lady, motionless with attention. 'I thought, I must confess, that these tales were inventions of the Middle Ages'" (Dumas 510). This passage also demonstrates that perhaps the only thing restraining her from creating poisons was the belief that it was not possible, at least, not for her. Supporting this reading is the fact that Madame Villefort is painfully aware that her status as a woman prevents her from being recognized for her skill. She confides in Edmond, "I have regretted that I was not a man, that I might have been a Flamel, a Fontana, or a Canabis" (Dumas 507). Mde. Villefort recognizes her own potential and that the main limiting factor for her is society's expectations of women. She plays with this idea a little in her conversation with Edmond, claiming that "it is very fortunate... such substances could only be prepared by chemists; for else, really all the world would be poisoning each other" (Dumas 512). Of course, the only people allowed to be professional chemists during this time were men. Her comment emphasizes that women would use the power of toxicology to their advantage, if only they could access it like men can. Dumas frames poisoning as an expression of power and agency all throughout Mde. Villefort's conversation with Edmond. Mde. Villefort's final comment highlights gendered societal limitations as the only prevention against women using poisons as a tool to express agency and power.

There is another reason why Edmond's validation is necessary for Madame Villefort to decide to pursue toxicology. Not only is he a man affirming her traditionally masculine ambitions, "he is an idealized physician, modeled on the mid-19th century vision of the French physician, in a time when Paris medicine was at its peak" (Murray 1). This makes him an

authority who is granting permission to pursue toxicology. In fact, in this era, “Romanticism superimposed on a growing scientific era gave rise to a superhuman image of a physician” (Murray 1). Given this context, it makes sense that Mde. Villefort would hold his opinion of her work in high regard. In a time where poisons were still mysterious and difficult to detect, “the toxicologist acted as a mediator between the insensible and the sensible, his task to demonstrate the presence of things not evident to others” (Burney 6). Edmond provides a sensible solution to the insensible restrictions of the cult of domesticity. He shows Mde. Villefort a way to express the unhappiness and inequality in her home, a way to make it “evident to others.” Poisoning, for Mde. Villefort, is not merely an act of rage. Rather, it is a bold and intentional statement, attacking the heart of the cult of domesticity. By poisoning members of her own family within her home, she negates the belief that the home is a place of feminine virtue and peace, supporting Dumas’ social commentary that the idealization of the cult of domesticity is not reality.

Victorian Women and Crime

Victorian thought on women’s morality made women’s crimes difficult to address. Even one of Madame Villefort’s victims, her step-daughter, Valentine, is in disbelief of her poisoning, asking, “is it possible that this frightful combination of crimes has been committed by a woman?” (Dumas 940). The reason why Valentine cannot fathom the fact the Mde. Villefort has attempted to poison her is that “crime was often figured, in the mid-Victorian period, as a foreign energy - infecting the lifeblood of the family from outside its established parameters” (Mangham 49). If the home, according to the cult of domesticity, was a virtuous and pleasant setting, crime would naturally have to come from beyond its walls. Further, with the public and private spheres being segregated by gender, that “foreign energy” of crime becomes inherently masculine.

Valentine expresses doubt at woman's capacity to do evil, denying Mde. Villefort agency over her actions.

Madame Villefort's Death

Dumas intentionally writes Mde. Villefort into an irreconcilable situation. She cannot remain faithful to her husband's wishes while also providing safety and security for her child. This conflict forces her to choose between her identities as a good mother and a good wife. Dumas ensures that the reader understands this conflict as the driving force behind her transition from mother to murderess: "the corpse of Madame de Villefort was stretched across the doorway leading to the room in which Edward must be; those glaring eyes seemed to watch over the threshold, and the lips expressed a terrible and mysterious irony" (Dumas 1013). By murdering her son, Mde. Villefort protects him from a future of poverty and shame. Thus, she reconciles her conflicting roles as mother and wife by destroying the role of mother. Left with her dead son, she then poisons herself to remain a moral wife, punishing herself for the murder. Mde. Villefort goes to these extremes to emerge from her predicament with her morality intact.

Madame Villefort holds no political or financial power with which to challenge her husband's absolute rule. Further, it would contradict Victorian ideals of morality for her to argue with her husband, even if on behalf of their son. Both of these constraints force Mde. Villefort to work within the very system she must tear down. Edward's death, then, is a result of the societal norms imprisoning Mde. Villefort, since the cult of domesticity provides no alternative means of protesting or escaping her situation - his death becomes inevitable. As Mde. Villefort drinks the poison, M. Villefort rushes home to prevent her from doing so, realizing that he has no right to sentence her to death as a guilty man, himself. Upon returning home, M. Villefort finds his wife convulsing as she stands in the middle of her room: "It is done, sir!" she said, with a rattling

which seemed to tear her throat. 'What more do you want?' and she fell on the floor" (Dumas 1012). Even as she is dying, Mde. Villefort has the wherewithal to remind her husband that she is simply complying with his demands, as any loyal wife would. Because she adheres to the restrictions of the cult of domesticity, Mde. Villefort deflects the blame for her actions from herself to society. Dumas situates her murder-suicide as the logical conclusion of following the societal norms which disempower her.

Further, the narrative's form cleverly echoes the sentiment that the murder-suicide is the fault of society, rather than Madame Villefort. After M. Villefort demands that she poison herself, Dumas writes, "that farewell struck Madame de Villefort like the executioner's knife. She fainted. The *procureur du roi* went out after having double-locked the door" (Dumas 998). Here, Mde. Villefort is not the one holding the "executioner's knife," implying that an external and abstract force drives the murder-suicide. She is also literally trapped within the domestic sphere in this scene, emphasizing the role of the cult of domesticity in the poisonings. Interestingly, as the cult of domesticity continuously backs her into a corner, Mde. Villefort inhabits smaller and smaller spaces. At first, the home is her metaphorical prison. By the end of her character arc, she is confined to a single room that is "double-locked." It is impossible for Mde. Villefort to maintain the illusion of a peaceful domestic life while imprisoned in her home, so the illusion falls apart. Dumas illustrates the pivotal moment of her demise with the image of the entire home falling down around her. Edmond, having just entered the home after M. Villefort finds the bodies and devolves into madness, sees for himself what has happened, "and as though he feared that the walls of the accursed house would crumble around him, he rushed into the street, for the first time doubting whether he had the right to do as he had done" (Dumas 1016). By the time the reader reaches this point in the story, Dumas has already made clear that

the crumbling of this home is the fault of the cult of domesticity, rather than one woman's fall from being a supposed moral pillar.

The literature surrounding *The Count of Monte Cristo* is rich and vast, but it sadly neglects Madame Villefort, arguably the most complex character in the novel. She highlights Dumas' ability to weave social commentary into his narratives at its finest. As a conglomerate of Victorian social anxieties, she is a case study in the cult of domesticity. Mde. Villefort desperately seeks to maintain both her status as a virtuous mother and as a virtuous wife, all while under the limitations of gendered social norms. Ultimately, Dumas demonstrates through her that the cult of domesticity is a false, idealized narrative that ignores the reality of women's domestic lives. It imprisons women in their homes, eliminates their access to the public sphere, and holds them accountable for the moral structure of the home. Mde. Villefort represents women trying to make their problems and plights known to society, only to have society silence their voices. When no other option is available, she must violently retaliate against the cult of domesticity's attack on her family. However, Dumas redeems her via her suicide note: she *is* a good mother, and the cult of domesticity is the true culprit in the murder of Edward.

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