



[The Man in the Iron Mask](#), by Alexandre Dumas

In A Nutshell

In the beginning, there was *The Three Musketeers*. (Shortly afterward, there was the Shmoop guide. Go check it out.) Next, there was *Twenty Years After*. Finally, there was *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*. Together, the three books are known as Alexandre Dumas's *D'Artagnan Romances* and cover many years of adventures and swordfights, chronicling the lives of four Musketeers.

The books were originally published in serial form, meaning they appeared one chapter at a time in the Parisian newspaper *Le Siècle*. This explains why Dumas's chapters are fairly self-contained and tend to end with a cliff hanger. He needed to retain readers. You can think of the serial form as the 18th century equivalent of a weekly sitcom that keeps the attention of its audience from one week to the next.

When *The Vicomte de Bragelonne* was put together for publication in book form, English translators took one look and realized it was too long. They typically break it up into smaller volumes - sometimes three, sometimes four. No matter how they slice it, they always entitle the last chunk *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

The Man in the Iron Mask takes place thirty-five years after *The Three Musketeers*. We meet our heroes - Athos, D'Artagnan, Aramis, and Porthos - as they encounter some serious responsibilities and challenges. The story takes place at the court of King Louis XIV. At court

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we discover that there are plenty of intrigues in which heroes are involved, including an interesting situation concerning a mysterious man in an iron mask.

The Man in the Iron Mask is the darker, more grown-up aftermath of *The Three Musketeers*, and as you can see in "Themes," the past figures heavily in this novel. By the end of the novel, King Louis XIV has ushered in an era of absolute power, where his word is law and he accepts no dissent. One way to view this book is to see it as the end of an era - the dissolution of a famous friendship and the end of fractured loyalties within a kingdom.

For those of you who *are* historically inclined, you can try reading *The Man in the Iron Mask* and try to understand how Dumas might also be commenting on the political situation in his own contemporary France. By glorifying the past through creating the beloved characters of D'Artagnan, Athos, Aramis, and Porthos, Dumas reminded his readers of what they might be missing in their own France.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What do you make of having a final chapter, an epilogue, and then - very curiously, it seems to us - having the very final part of the novel entitled "The Death of D'Artagnan"?
- 2 Whose death was the most moving? Try make a case for why the portrayal of D'Artagnan's death is more emotionally poignant than Athos's, or vice versa.

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- 3 As covered in "In a Nutshell," *The Man in the Iron Mask* was originally published in serial form, meaning that readers saw only a chapter at a time. How does this affect the pace, tone, or style of the story? Does the story gain anything or lose anything by these limitations?

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