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BEFORE 1842.

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BALZAC'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN  
A STUDY IN THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HIS FICTIONAL  
WORKS BEFORE 1842

by

EVA STEINBERGER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate  
Faculty in French in partial fulfillment  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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To my parents.  
For their love and patience

My deepest gratitude, beyond what words can express, goes to my dissertation director, Professor Henri Peyre, for his illuminating guidance, for his inspiration and for his smiling encouragement. Great thanks go, too, to my readers, Professor Sidney Braun and Professor Alex Szogyi, whose painstaking criticism and helpful advice were invaluable to the accomplishment of this work. And to all three goes my special appreciation for showing me most emphatically the sheer joy of learning and of scholarship.

## Foreword

In the Avant-Propos of the Comédie Humaine, Balzac declares his intention to accomplish for human society that which Charles Buffon had done for the animal kingdom: Since people are as different from one another as, he says, the lion is from the lamb, his plan is to catalogue them and to study the dissimilarities in their make-up. But opposed to Buffon who "quand il peignait le lion... achevait la lionne en quelques phrases,"<sup>1</sup> he is going to give his work a triple subject: "les hommes, les femmes et les choses, c'est-à-dire, les personnes et la représentation matérielle qu'ils donnent de leur pensée."<sup>2</sup> Woman is to be quite as important as man and since "dans la Société, la femme ne se trouve pas toujours être la femelle du mâle,"<sup>3</sup> she is to be carefully examined.

It is the purpose of this dissertation to examine Balzac's attitudes towards les femmes and to define the varying currents of sympathy for them, many times undeserved, which run through the novels of the Comédie Humaine. Balzac's compassion for his feminine creations is apparent in what he says and in what he leaves unsaid, in his descriptions of them and of the men in their life.

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<sup>1</sup> Honoré de Balzac, "Avant-Propos," La Comédie Humaine, ed. Marcel Bouteron (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), vol. I, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 4

In order to discuss the subject with any degree of validity, it was necessary to treat a large number of Balzac's novels. Since the author tends to type his characters, I felt it would be logical to consider them in groups, separated according to their basic characteristics: la jeune fille, the adulterous woman, the wife, the mother, the courtesan and la vieille fille. At the risk of breaking the continuity and causing some confusion, some women appear under more than one heading because they have the traits of more than one group. For example, la Marana, the personification of la courtisane, exhibits the most tenderly concerned maternal feelings.

But since in typing his characters, Balzac did not stereotype them (at least not to a marked degree), and since there is a great deal of differentiation within categories, it was necessary to include discussions of a large number of them. In this way, the differences and the similarities could be seen more clearly.

It is impossible to read the Comédie Humaine without giving much thought to its historical and sociological framework. As it is meant to be l'histoire des moeurs, the full representation of the society of the Restoration and of Louis-Philippe, the characters naturally reflect their times. The conditions of life for Balzac's heroines correspond faithfully to the information which social historians like Michelet wrote of so movingly. They are word

paintings of Daumier's drawings, which capture the human pathos, the suffering, the vices and the pleasures of the people. It would have been possible to discuss Balzac as a social historian much more fully in view of the wealth of material in his work. The various classes and types described in his novels, the young girls and their inept, unsuitable education, the women reduced to the most straitened circumstances, eking out a living as best they could, sometimes even dying of hunger, the tragic courtesans, the wives of the nobility who think nothing of committing adultery, all are taken from reality. Balzac as a novelist magnifies and dramatizes the historical facts, but he doesn't distort them. <sup>But</sup> in order to limit the material of this dissertation, it was thought best not to concentrate on this historical and sociological background.

With the same view in mind, I have isolated Balzac from other literary creators. In his introduction to Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique, Bolster comments that it is possible to separate into two currents the pre-Balzacian works that are concerned with women. One portrays her in the hazy, rosy light of a sometimes mawkish idealization. To this group belong novels like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's la Nouvelle Héloïse as well as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Paul et Virginie. The second tradition shows women playing a far from admirable role, for example in Manon Lescaut and in la Religieuse. Though Balzac's works have their share of corrupt women, the author tends rather towards the

the writers of the first group. He finds redeeming features even in the least noble of his feminine characters. In order to restrict this work and to prevent it from becoming a discussion of nineteenth century woman, it was necessary to separate Balzac from his contemporaries, many of whom treated the same subjects as he did. For example, there is Stendhal's proud and forceful mademoiselle de la Mole, and his tender and loving Clélia CqM. In Rolla, Musset tells the story of a poor young girl sold into prostitution by her mother. And Flaubert's Madame Bovary is the detailed history of one women's adultery.

Not discussed either are the women who played important roles in Balzac's own life. There are many biographies which give detailed accounts of his relationships. While it is obvious that some of these women's characteristics eventually found their way into his heroines, Balzac is essentially a creator and he has transformed his own experiences with the aid of his imagination into the fiction of his books. Of course, there is no denying the fact that Balzac must have thought of his own sisters at least some when he discussed la jeune fille , that he must have been remembering his own yearnings for a warm, tender mother in the face of his own mother's cold indifference when he praised the noble maternity of some of his characters, that his attitude towards adultery as a social phenomenon was developed at least in part by his awareness of his own mother's infidelity. And there is probably a fair amount of Madame de Castries in la duchesse de Langeais, as there

is of Laure de Berny in Henriette de Mortsau. But all this has been much discussed, and I have preferred to concentrate on the text of the novels and on the concrete expressions of the author's words rather than on the chimerical traces of the flesh and blood women that he knew.

There have been many books written about Balzac, but only a number of them had any bearing on my subject. Bolster, in his study Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique, sets the climate of the nineteenth century as a time of increased consciousness for women and of growing feminist feelings. He underlines the Romantic elements in some of Balzac's heroines and studies the problem of liberty, freedom to love, which was one of the chief demands of the century's feminists.

E. R. Curtius discusses the general themes of the Balzacian creation and includes a chapter on love which gives some insights into the emotions and actions of the Comédie Humaine's heroines. (Balzac)

In Balzac and his World, Félicien Marceau gives a general overview of Balzac's universe. He describes many of the myriad characters which people the novels of the Comédie Humaine, but in a most superficial manner, preferring to whet the reader's curiosity rather than satiate his appetite.

Among the other volumes which have helped are La Comédie inhumaine by Wurmser, which gives a sociological

view of Balzac, and Beguin's Balzac Visionnaire, particularly the chapter on the courtesan.

These works were helpful in giving the background of the subject, but none of them discusses precisely my topic. I have tried to show through a detailed examinations of the heroines, of their actions and their thoughts, the attitudes of the author vis-a-vis his creations, particularly his sympathy and his empathy with them, which earned him the gratitude of many thousands of women.

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Chapter One  
 The jeune fille

A quinze ans, ni la beauté  
 ni le talent n'existent:  
 une femme est tout promesse.  
 (Une Fille d'Eve)

In Balzac et le mal du siècle, Pierre Barbéris comments that the jeune fille as a character in the romantic novel has the depth of a cardboard cutout.<sup>1</sup> She has no past, only the potential for a future. Balzac's jeune fille however, is a more substantial presence, but she too lacks, in most cases, the richness of his preferred femme de trente ans. Most of the young girls that he treats are "poetical creations, virgins with a halo of purity... angels of modesty, overflowing with devotion."<sup>2</sup> Ill-prepared for life by short-sighted parents and by totally inadequate educators, they suffer much until they learn wisdom through bitter experience. Balzac follows these young girls through the vicissitudes of their fate, illuminating the causes of their difficulties and shedding much light on their actions.

Balzac usually works from the outside in. That is, he first supplies a physical description of the character wherein are strong clues to her personality and temperament. But his delineation rarely goes above the ankle or below the

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Barbéris, Balzac et le mal du siècle (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p.170f.

<sup>2</sup>P. Bertault, Balzac and the Human Comedy, trans. R. Monges (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p.152.

throat, observes Diana Festa-McCormick.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he concentrates on his subject's head.

The color of the jeune fille's hair seems to be an indicator of the strength of her character and the amount of her vitality. The palest gold hair belongs to Angélique Bontems, Roger de Granville's fiancée in Une Double Famille. It seems to presage the pallor of her feelings towards everything outside of religion, particularly the feebleness of her love for Roger. Victorine Taillefer, boarder at Madame Vauquer's seedy establishment (Le Père Goriot), has hair of tawny blond and Balzac compares her to "un arbuste aux feuilles jaunies,"<sup>4</sup> because she too is withering slowly away. Véronique Sauviat, heroine of Le Curé de Village, is a blonde as well, and she turns out to be a rather weak character. While Laurence de Cinq-Cygne is the bravest personage in Une Ténébreuse Affaire and the most forceful, Balzac notes that her hair is of the nicest blonde color, seeming thereby to render her coloring less significant.

All these girls are unsuccessful in their personal relationships. Either they lack the ability to attract the person whom they love- for example, Victorine's passion for Rastignac is never reciprocated- or they lose their loved one

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<sup>3</sup>Diana Festa-McCormick, Les Nouvelles de Balzac (Ann Arbor:University Microfilms,1972), p.184.

<sup>4</sup>Balzac, Le Père Goriot in la Comédie Humaine(Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,1951), II, p.856. All quotes from Balzac's novels are taken from this edition.

to death as does Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, whose beloved de Simeuse twins die on the front in the battle of Sommo-Sierra. A few of these young girls are even incapable of keeping by their side the man they have picked; Angélique Bontems drives her husband away with her bigotry, for example. None of them is ultimately happy.

The two girls who fly in the face of parental authority, Marguerite Claés (La Recherche de l'Absolu) and Eugénie Grandet both pile onto their head, thick chestnut tresses. And black hair suggests the possession of a strong vital force and a vibrant will. Émilie de Fontaine (Le Bal de Sceaux) and Ginevra di Piombo (La Vendetta) are both raven-haired beauties with vivid personalities, and the quality much beloved by Balzac, energy. The author's sympathy goes with her who reaches out for what she wants and is willing to fight for it.

The eyes are also of prime importance in the Balzacian description. Angélique Bontem's are a pale, pale blue, reminding one of the winter sky in northern climes, an impression of coldness which will be confirmed later on. Louise de Chaulieu's blue eyes are "fiers" and "pas bêtes,"<sup>5</sup> and Augustine Guillaume's (La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote) reflect a Raphaelian calm. Sweetness and a Christian resignation shine out from Victorine's grey orbs, and the glow

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<sup>5</sup>Balzac, Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, Pléiade I, p.144.

in Eugénie Grandet's similarly grey eyes is the result of her chaste life. Grey signifies religious purity in the jeune fille. Intensity of color here too means strength of purpose and resolution. Laurence, who dedicates herself to fighting bitterly against Napoleon, has deep blue eyes, and Émilie de Fontaine, whose resolution to marry un pair de France is unshakeable despite the strongest temptations to abandon it, looks out at the world with eyes black as coals.

One can read the destiny of a young girl in her eyes. Hélène d'Aiglemont has "(des) yeux de feu"<sup>6</sup> which are an indication of her extraordinary fate. She runs away with a fugitive murderer who becomes a pirate and spends her life sailing the seven sea with him. The Granville girls have, in their eyes, an expression of "naïve insouciance, d'étonnement non prémédité, bien rendue par la manière vague dont flottaient leurs prunelles dans le blanc fluide de l'oeil."<sup>7</sup> They are destined to lead their lives in the same vague, undecisive manner.

As an indicator of character, the brow is also very important. Angélique's is narrow, suggesting an extreme narrow-mindedness. Ginepra's is a "front de marbre"<sup>8</sup> which hints at her hardness and stubbornness in the face of fatherly

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<sup>6</sup>Balzac, La Femme de Trente Ans, Pléiade II, p.802.

<sup>7</sup>Balzac, Une Fille d'Ève, Pléiade III, p.70.

<sup>8</sup>Balzac, La Vendetta, Pléiade I, p.870.

opposition to her marriage. "Le front masculin mais délicat"<sup>9</sup> of Eugénie foreshadows her virile resolution in the face of her father's commands, and Marguerite's brow shows a great firmness of purpose. Finally, Adélaïde, heroine of "La Bourse", has a noble front and the reader knows immediately that she could never be the thief that the artist Schinner suspects her of being.

All of these young ladies have white skin, so white that the tracery of blue veins is clearly visible. White is the symbol of purity and of virginity. In fact, Véronique Sauviat is nicknamed la petite Vierge because "elle promettait d'être bien faite et blanche."<sup>10</sup>

Pur and pureté are the words that occur most frequently in Balzac's description of the jeune fille. He thus emphasizes her purity before the struggles and the injustices of life have soiled her.

The calm that radiates from the young girl is the direct result her great purity. "La paix profonde et sereine imprimée... aux visages vierges... ce calme est le plus grand charme d'une fille, il est le signe de sa pureté; rien encore ne l'a émue; aucune passion brisée, aucun intérêt trahi n'a nuancé la placide expression de son visage; est-il

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<sup>9</sup>Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade III, p. 528.

<sup>10</sup>Balzac, Le Cure de Village, Pléiade VIII, p. 543.

joué, la jeune fille n'est plus."<sup>11</sup> Her emotional life is still a tabula rasa. In every description he gives of the young girl, Balzac is at pains to emphasize this tranquillity "de ces vierges (de Raphaël) devenues proverbiales."<sup>12</sup>

Mostly small and thin, the jeune fille seems to have difficulty doing battle with the realities of life. The ones who are capable and willing to meet the hardships of living head-on are tall; Émilie de Fontaine for example, has regal height and even Eugénie Grandet is not insignificantly small.

All Balzac's young ladies have melodious voices, except for Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, whose guttural speech is yet another sign of her masculine outlook.

When Balzac gives a description of a young girl, he describes her as though she were a painting. He frames her face in a bonnet or in a ruff. And he compares her to the figures painted by various artists. For example, Césarine Birotteau (César Birotteau) is like a Flamande of Rubens, Pierrette resembles a Raphaelic figure of the Swiss Leopold Robert, and Eugénie Grandet "était belle de cette beauté dont s'éprennent seulement les artistes."<sup>13</sup> Balzac sees everything<sup>through</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Balzac, Le Contrat de Mariage, Pléiade III, p.102-103.

<sup>12</sup>Balzac, La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Pléiade I, p.20.

<sup>13</sup>Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade III, p.528.

the painter's eye and perhaps that is why he gives such a minute and detailed description of the facial features.

Even while individualizing them, Balzac places his characters into certain type groups. In Balzac and his World, Félicien Marceau speaks of the different kinds of jeune fille in the Comédie Humaine. He classifies them according to their energy, judgment and honesty.<sup>14</sup>

Victorine Taillefer personifies the members of the first group. Locked away from life in the pension Vanquer, with only an old lady for a companion, ignorant of the ways of the world, she is doomed to failure. Her fellow boarder Rastignac catches her fancy and she falls in love with him; but, her love is never to be fulfilled because instead of deploying all her talents and energies to fight for his love, she sits back and waits for him to love her. In the world of the Comédie Humaine, love has to be won by cunning or by force.

The second group does have energy, but uses no judgment. Laurence de Cinq-Cygne works very hard to accomplish Napoleon's downfall, but she fails because, among other things, she acts without carefully considering the consequences her actions are liable to bring. Hélène d'Aiglemont fails, too, because of the same reasons. She runs away with a known

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<sup>14</sup>Félicien Marceau, Balzac and His World, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Orion Press, 1966), p.149-161.

murderer and eventually suffers great disasters and dies in misery. And Clotilde de Grandlieu finally chooses a husband, but unfortunately for her, she chooses Lucien de Rubempré whose weakness leads him to commit suicide at the first obstacle in his path. (Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes)

Possessing judgment, but of an inferior sort, others, like Émilie de Fontaine, attain some sort of success. She, like Bathilde de Chargeboeuf, marries an older man, and waits quite patiently it seems, for time to remove him from her life so that she may marry happily the second time.

There are some young girls who have the judgment to pick a man who is suitable, the honesty to pick only a man they can love, and the energy to act on their choice. Marguerite Claës truly loves her Emmanuel who is eminently right for her, and she knows how to capture his heart. Just as skillful is Ursule Mirouët who lives happily ever after with Savinien.

The key to this classification is the concept of energy. E. R. Curtius emphasizes Balzac's admiration of energy. The vital force which impels a person to accomplish great feats always caught Balzac's attention. His heart is with those who are willing to work for what they want or even to go to any extraordinary lengths to acquire their desires.

There is of course a whole group of young ladies who

display no interesting or unusual characteristics to set them off from the stock image of the jeune fille. For example, mademoiselle Adélaïde has a face like a painting by Prudhon, all poetic, delicate features, and her every motion wafts waves of sweetness, tenderness and modesty around her. True to the accepted romantic image of the jeune fille, she embroiders various little gifts for her love, including a purse. It is easy to visualize her, straining her eyes in the light of a flickering flame, setting her tiny stitches with care and hope. Of course, such true devotion is rewarded, and her artist marries her. It is to be supposed that they will live happily ever after, since there is no jarring element in Balzac's description of her, as there is for example in his sketch of Augustine de Sommervieux, where he says: "Un homme du monde n'aurait pu reprocher à cette charmante créature que des gestes mesquins ou certaines attitudes communes et parfois de la gêne."<sup>15</sup> The trouble that is hinted at loses little time in coming.

Césarine Birotteau is yet another conventional young lady. All pink and white and happy, she lacks the poetry of the pensive figures so beloved by painters. A true daughter of the bourgeoisie, she is practical and somewhat prosaic in looks and in spirit. (Elle) "inspirait l'amour sans laisser le temps d'examiner si elle avait assez d'esprit pour le

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<sup>15</sup> Balzac, La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Pléiade .I, p.26.

rendre durable."<sup>16</sup> Her milieu, the merchants who are her father's friends, the constant talk about business and money-making, the very sane instruction that she gets from her mother, a former shop girl, all are not conducive to the formation of a scintillating personality. "Mais à quoi bon, "demands the author, "ce qu'on nomme à Paris l'esprit, dans une classe où l'élément principal du bonheur est le bon sens et la vertu?"<sup>16</sup> While it is true that Césarine does benefit from an unusually good education, it somehow has not helped her to acquire some sparkle. Balzac criticizes her rather querulously, commenting for example that the complete library of the classics that she buys her father as a housewarming gift is a "bibliothèque vulgaire."<sup>17</sup> When disaster strikes and her father goes bankrupt, she is willing to go out and work as a demoiselle de magasin to help him out. She's nice, but she is not in a class which elicits Balzac's enthusiasm.

Neither is Charlotte de Kergarouët. She has "une vulgaire fraîcheur"<sup>18</sup> and a decisive manner of speaking which belies her essential insignificance. Daughter of a noble provincial family, she is totally guileless and her feelings for her love, Calyste, are true and pure throughout.

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<sup>16</sup>Balzac, César Birotteau, Pléiade V, p.389.

<sup>17</sup>Balzac, César Birotteau, Pléiade V, p.450.

<sup>18</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade II, p.441.

She describes herself when she says: "Nous avons le malheur d'avoir une santé robuste et d'aimer nos amis sans coquetterie,"<sup>19</sup> which is truly a decided disadvantage for a Balzacian heroine.

Charlotte Kergarouët, with her robust good health and her vulgar rosiness, impresses herself on the reader's vision first by her appearance and then only by her deeds and words, as do all the young girls in the Comédie Humaine. Balzac's use of characterizing through physical characteristics and particularly through physiognomy is quite effective. The success of this method depends, of course, at least somewhat, on the reader's own preconceived prejudices. For example, a narrow forehead means a narrow intelligence and the eyes are the windows to the soul. But it is a psychologically sound method because most people tend to form a judgment about someone whom they are meeting for the first time just by physical appearance. When the reader "meets" the character for the first time, the author's descriptions channel his thinking into a certain direction. Of course, some of the statements the author makes are hard to accept. He says, for example, that Natalie Évangélista "avait la taille ronde... indice immanquable d'une volonté qui souvent arrive à l'entêtement." Her hands, he continues, announce "un esprit de domination illogique,

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<sup>19</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, II, p.478.

le vouloir pour le vouloir."<sup>20</sup> Though such details are vividly impressed on the reader's mind, they sometimes strike one as illogical and untrue.

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<sup>20</sup>Balzac, Le Contrat de Mariage, III, p.103.

### The young girl's education

Balzac was very sympathetic intellectually if not emotionally to the jeune fille. Dissatisfied with the French attitude to her and with the way she was treated from the time she was ready to be educated until the moment of her marriage, he entered the lists carrying her colors, in order to do battle with age-old taboos and practices.

In the France of 1829, the year that the Physiologie du Mariage was published, the education that was being given to girls was in every respect inferior to that being given to the boys. Indeed, in most cases it was not to be dignified by that name. Until 1836, there was no official primary education for girls and, of course, secondary education was almost non-existent.<sup>21</sup> This state of affairs was the result of a long accepted tradition that girls did not need much instruction to accomplish their God-given tasks on earth.

This tradition was questioned by Fénelon, the greatest educator of his age. In 1687, he wrote a "Traité de l'éducation des filles" in which he recognized that it is necessary for a girl to learn a certain number of things: She should be able to read and write her own language

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<sup>21</sup> L. Abensour, Le Féminisme sous le règne de Louis-Philippe (Paris:Plon, 1903), p.78.

correctly, to do the small amount of arithmetic it is necessary for a housewife to know, and to understand the little legal information that she may need. No knowledge of modern languages is necessary, since a taste for novels might be disastrous. Nor should a young girl learn the classics; no one wants a bluestocking for a wife. This education, which consists then of a bare smattering of literacy, plus a training in the social accomplishments and in the usages of polite society, and of course includes some religious instruction, is the education that Fénelon advocates for the girls, whose function in society does not demand more. To become a good wife and mother, it is sufficient that a girl learn to think and to see things as they really are, and that she learn to be a good housewife and manager. If she has sound character and is a faithful daughter of the Church, then she has accomplished all that is necessary. This education outlined by Fénelon was a revolutionary one at a time when a girl's instruction consisted traditionally of purely religious training.

A century later, Laclos wrote three essays on the problem of educating young girls. These essays affirm that woman, who should be man's companion, ends up being his slave because she has not been properly educated. A proper schooling would develop her faculties and direct them towards some sort of social utility. A proper

training should include study of the works of the historiens which teach what men and society really are like. The jeune fille should also peruse the works of the moralists in order to know how to act, and the works of the littérateurs to develop her ideas and to make her a more interesting person. This type of knowledge would liberate her to become a true companion of man.<sup>22</sup>

Oberman de Senancour pleads the case of numerous women, who being condemned to an insupportable repetition of the peines comprimantes, do not have the possibility to form their own personalities, nor even to obtain a respectable education. This is the fundamental thesis of every feminist theory of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Charles Fourier, creator of the phalanster movement, is convinced of the superiority of women, both in spirit and in body. He accuses the education of the jeune fille of making her servile and of preventing her from developing her full potentialities.

In his article on some of the aspect of Balzac's Saint-Simonisme, Donnard quotes him thus: "...mais n'est-ce pas à ce défaut de formation intellectuelle et morale qu'il serait juste d'imputer les désordres des femmes (qu'on ne les juge pas dignes de recevoir une instruction,

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<sup>22</sup>Choderlos de Laclos, Oeuvres Complètes (Paris:Gallimard, Édition de la Pléiade, 1951), p.450-453.

<sup>23</sup>R. Bolster, Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique (Paris:Minard, 1970), p.22.

une instruction étendue."<sup>24</sup> It's a vicious cycle. Other writings of the period express the same opinion.

"L'éducation des jeunes filles est si arriérée qu'il est impossible qu'arrivées à l'âge de la raison, elles ne se trouvent bien au-dessous de l'intelligence de l'homme,"<sup>25</sup> writes a contemporary pamphletist. Or as another thinker says, "On vise à faire de la jeune fille une oie blanche... c'est-à-dire, un être timide aux yeux baissés, ignorant tout des réalités de la vie."<sup>26</sup> The result of this is that her education, "faussée dès l'enfance, la laisse désemparée lorsqu'elle se trouve aux prises avec les difficultés de la vie."<sup>27</sup> It is Balzac's intention to show all this in the Physiologie.

The Physiologie du Mariage discusses at great length the problem of teaching young girls about life. The issue is how to educate a jeune fille so that she be suitable to run a house and raise her children properly, as well as be a fitting companion to her husband. Balzac seems to be a member of the second of the two feminist groups predominant

<sup>24</sup>Jean-Hervé Donnard, "Aspects inconnus du Saint-Simonisme de Balzac," L'Année Balzacienne 1961, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup>Le Conseiller des Femmes, 10 mai 1834, quoted in Abensour, Le Féminisme sous le règne de Louis-Philippe, p.71.

<sup>26</sup>La Femme Libre, no.10, quoted in Abensour, p.80.

<sup>27</sup>Claire Brune, preface de L'Ange de Spola, quoted in Abensour, p.80.

in the early nineteenth century. The first group advocated exactly the same instruction for girls as that given to boys, from literature to gymnastics. The second, on the other hand, were the Christian feminists, who saw the purpose of education forming "les femmes accomplies, capables de remplir avec courage et intelligence leurs devoirs de filles, d'épouses et de mères."<sup>28</sup> The development of religious sentiments was regarded as most important; it would help the jeune fille lead a moral and righteous life.

A proper education would be useful in helping prevent bad marriages as well. Since the shallowness of "les êtres brillants et frivoles"<sup>29</sup> wouldn't attract her, the young girl would pick her husband with more discernment. Once married, she would be intelligent enough to share her husband's thoughts and work. And she would be better fitted to fill her role as educator to her children. The Christian feminists believed that a woman should not leave the narrow circle of family and home where "sa nature la renferme."<sup>30</sup> Balzac too, is of much the same opinion. In the Avant-Propos of the Comédie Humaine he comments: "Aussi regardé-je la

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<sup>28</sup> Madame Dudrezène, article dans le Conseiller des Femmes, 7 décembre, 1833, quoted in Abensour, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Madame Sircey, La Mère de Famille, février 1835, quoted in Abensour, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Madeleine de Sirey, La Mère de Famille, fév. 1835, quoted in Abensour, p. 87.

Famille et non l'individu comme le véritable élément social.<sup>31</sup> His main interest was with keeping the family unit intact; this was the woman's assigned task. Balzac deals very little with the woman whose main concern lies in the masculine world of professions. Only the writer *Félicité des Touches-Camille Maupin* breaks completely out of the family-woman mold and she ultimately regrets it.

In Balzac's day, there were three places a jeune fille could get some instruction: in a boarding school, in a convent or at home, under the tutelage of her mother or of a governess. None of these is judged particularly satisfactory by Balzac. In a pensionnat, the girls spend their time in idleness. Much of the day, they sit with their heads together and pass back and forth a philosophy of life and love which has no basis in fact. In formal lessons, they are taught a little geography and a few historical facts from *Le Ragois'* history of France, a most unscholarly work. Raised in the knowledge that they are to be slaves to their menfolk- "Notre destinée est faite par l'homme et pour l'homme"<sup>31a</sup>- they become accustomed to the fact that they exist "pour imiter leurs grand'mères et faire couvrir des serins de Canarie, composer des herbiers, arroser de petits rosiers de Bengale, remplir

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<sup>31</sup>Balzac, 'Avant-Propos', *Pléiade I*, p.9.

<sup>31a</sup>Balzac, Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, *Pléiade I*, p.142.

de la tapisserie ou se monter des cols."<sup>32</sup> Their main concern in life is how to arrange "cette feuille de figuier que prit notre mère Ève."<sup>32</sup> In an article in la Mode, 2 avril, 1840, Balzac paints a satirical picture of the pensionnats and accuses them of concerning themselves only with "des bonnes manières et les arts d'agrément."<sup>33</sup> The pensionnaires learned practically no useful occupations and they certainly did not learn how to think practically. In fact, Laclos comments in his "Essai sur l'éducation des femmes" that "ce qui éloigne beaucoup de gens de mérite de la société des femmes ...c'est l'impossibilité de causer avec elles, ou même devant elles, des objets auxquels ils s'intéressent,.. (Car) un des grands moyens de plaire est de parler à chacun son langage."<sup>34</sup>

The convents are even worse than the boarding schools. The inactivity there is greater and the results are even worse. "Les grilles claustrales enflamment l'imagination. La solitude est une des provinces les plus chéries du diable; et l'on ne saurait croire quel ravage les phénomènes les plus ordinaires de la vie peuvent produire dans l'âme de ces jeunes filles rêveuses, ignorantes et inoccupées."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Balzac, Physiologie du Mariage, Pléiade X, p. 711.

<sup>33</sup>Pradalié, Balzac historien(Paris: Presses Universitaires de France,1955), p.210.

<sup>34</sup>Laclos, p.451.

<sup>35</sup>Balzac, Physiologie,p. 659.

Both the boarding schools and the convents produce girls with unchaste spirits. Having discussed together many times the important questions concerning lovers, "la corruption aura nécessairement entamé le coeur ou l'esprit."<sup>36</sup> This is where the seeds of bad marriages are planted.

In actual fact, very few of the jeunes filles in the Comédie Humaine have attended a pensionnat or a convent. The only ones that come to mind are Renée de l'Estorade and Louise de Chaulieu (Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées). It is Louise who particularly illustrates the dangers of a convent education. She confirms that "le sujet qui nous occupait tant" at the convent was l'amour.<sup>37</sup> She admits that she is "d'une ignorance crasse,"<sup>38</sup> but she believes that it is only an unawareness of "les choses extérieures"<sup>39</sup> like literature, music and science. She believes that she did manage to acquire "une éducation inconnue, celle," she says to Renée, "que nous nous sommes données l'une à l'autre en raisonnant à perte de vue,"<sup>40</sup> in their discussions and surmises about life. She is convinced that she has grasped

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<sup>36</sup>Balzac, Physiologie, p. 658.

<sup>37</sup>Balzac, Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, Pléiade I, p.142.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p.142.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.143.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.143.

the essentials which are necessary for a successful life.

The third, and according to Balzac, the best education a young girl can secure, takes place in the home. He believes that it is a woman's main function to teach her children, and the woman who sends her daughter away from home to be educated by strangers is likely to belong to "la partie la plus douteuse de nos femmes honnêtes,"<sup>41</sup> since she is afraid that her activities will be too closely watched by her "argus" of a child. A mother who does keep her offspring at home is doing her a great service. Away from the society of young, foolish, idle girls a "levée au logis par une mère ou une vieille tante vertueuses, bigotes, aimable ... une jeune fille... environnée de chaperons, dont l'enfance laborieuse a été fatiguée par des travaux,... à laquelle tout est inconnu.. est .. un... trésor."<sup>42</sup> This is the author's belief in theory, but in practice, the jeunes filles of the Comédie Humaine who are educated at home under their mother's surveillance usually turn out to be ignorant of the world, incapable of holding their own in society, and totally unable to deal with their husbands. Their mother's eagerness in preventing their being sullied by a knowledge of the world, is to their daughters' detriment. The young girls of the bourgeoisie are doubly handicapped. "La médiocrité marque la culture

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<sup>41</sup>Balzac, Physiologie, Pléiade X, p.659.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.660.

de la bourgeoisie."<sup>43</sup> Raised in homes where everyone lives and breathes business and practicality, "elles sont rompues aux soins du ménage, s'intéressent de bonne heure au commerce, mais manquent de largeur d'esprit."<sup>44</sup> They are mostly innocent and totally without interest.

The Guillaume sisters are typical of this type. Their home is the dark and culturally unstimulating maison du chat-qui-pelote. Except for a few hours spent learning the rudiments of grammar and a few more spent with the unremarkable history text of le Ragois, their book learning is rather neglected. Madame Guillaume strictly censors their reading material and consequently "leurs idées n'avaient pas pris beaucoup d'étendue."<sup>45</sup> Their horizon is only as wide as the narrow frontage of their medieval house. The Guillaume sisters are incapable of imagining an existence differing from that of their parents.

Several times a year, the doors of their "prison" open, and mesdemoiselles Virginie and Augustine Guillaume are allowed out to attend a ball or entertainment. They profit little "des enseignments que le monde offre aux jeunes âmes."<sup>46</sup> So strict is their mother's surveillance, that they dare not converse with their partners and their entire

<sup>43</sup>Pradalié, p.58.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.58.

<sup>45</sup>Balzac, La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Pléiade I, p.27.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.28.

conversation consists of monosyllables, mostly oui and non. Their mother is unaware of the inadequacy of such a strict education and is pleased with herself and with her daughters' perfect characters.

Madame Guillaume is pleased, too, with her daughters' housewifely abilities. Trained in modest virtues and in the running of a household, living a life of "une régularité monastique,"<sup>47</sup> doing everything according to an inflexible schedule, they never think of breaking out of their milieu, even in their dreams. Augustine's insurmountable difficulties when she marries out of her mercantile class and into a more liberal circle, are caused by this rigid education.

Eugénie Grandet, as far as can be ascertained, receives no formal education. She lives in Saumur, a very narrow-minded and stifling provincial town. Her days are spent sitting with her mother near a window which looks out on the perpetually silent streets of the town. Mending the household linen keeps her busy day after day. Her chief enjoyment in this stultifying existence is embroidering some small item, perhaps a collar for her mother. She seems to have no friends, and her only society outside her parents consists of the Cruchots and the des Grassins.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.48.

She knows nothing of the world, never having learned by direct experience with people or by indirect experience through literature. This is the cause of her naïveté in her dealings with her cousin Charles.

Marguerite Claës is also educated at home, but she has more native intelligence than Eugénie or the Guillaume girls. Probably the fact that her family is more social and more open to the world helps her develop into a more worldly wise individual. The author doesn't speak of any intellectual accomplishments she may have. What she does learn she probably has from outside sources; her mother has a very weak grasp of ideas and is not capable of teaching her daughters anything else but lace making, embroidering, drawing and how to play the piano. <sup>Madame</sup> Claës is determined that, come what may, her children would never starve for lack of a trade. (La Recherche de l'Absolu).

Marguerite's is a saner upbringing than that of Angélique Bontems (Une Double Famille). Madame Bontems wants to bribe her way into heaven. Obsessed by religion, she has dragged her daughter along with her. Angélique, who has been practically brainwashed by her devout mother and by the priests that constantly surround her, is in danger of retiring from the world because she has been advised to live out her life as a "vierge et martyre."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Balzac, Une Double Famille, Pléiade I, p.959.

Only a prompt marriage can save her. The comte de Granville has chosen her as a daughter-in-law; he strongly suggests to his son that she will make a good wife because, having been nourished on prayers, confessionals, masses, fasts and hair shirts, she must have "principles." He is to be proven wrong. Religion is only one aspect of the total person, but if an exclusively religious education turns it into an all-encompassing obsession, no good can come out of it. An inflexible bigot whose face is a mask of "rigidité silencieuse"<sup>49</sup> makes a very bad wife.

Madame de Granville attempts to turn her own two daughters into carbon copies of herself (Une Fille d'Ève). Having lived all their lives in a somber hotel du Marais, Marie-Angélique and Marie-Eugénie reach the moment of their respective marriages without ever having left the narrow domain over which the spirit of their mother, "femme dévote et d'une intelligence étroite"<sup>50</sup> rules. Their rigorous education, as rigorous as that given in any convent, prevents their attendance at any entertainments. Instead, "les églises de Paris furent leurs théâtres."<sup>51</sup> That is not to say that they receive a good education. They do not; they learn about the same things that the Guillaume sisters do : a

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<sup>49</sup>Balzac, Une Double Famille, Pléiade I, p.962.

<sup>50</sup>Balzac, Une Fille d'Ève, Pléiade II, p.62.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.63.

bit of grammar, a little French language, some history in Le Ragois and a smattering of arithmetic. This is supplemented by some reading, but only of books approved by the most intolerant of priests, for example Les Lettres édifiantes and les Leçons de littérature. Since these are the studies which filled out days spent mostly in religious duties and in sewing for the poor, "aucune idée dangereuse, malsaine ou seulement équivoque ne souilla donc la pulpe blanche de leur cerveau."<sup>52</sup> One gets the impression that the author is a little revolted by such brains, which are like unripe and tasteless fruit.

"Cette éducation," comments the narrator, "porta ses fruits. Imposée comme un joug et présentée sous de formes austères, la Religion lassée de ses pratiques ces jeunes cœurs innocents, traités comme s'ils eussent été criminels; elle y comprima les sentiments et quoiqu'elle y jeta de profondes racines, elle ne fut pas aimée."<sup>53</sup> This repressive education provokes an equally strong reaction. These two girls wish desperately to escape from their home. And since marriage is the only socially acceptable form of escape possible for a young lady of the nineteenth century, they eagerly await the first suitor who will ask for their hand. Running into marriage thus, is inviting disaster.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.73.

In fact, "cette sévère et religieuse éducation fut la cause des mariages de ces deux soeurs."<sup>52a</sup> It was also the cause of their marital difficulties because it left them "sans armes contre le malheur comme sans expérience pour apprécier le bonheur."<sup>53a</sup> Marie-Eugénie's husband is du Tillet, a most difficult man whom she doesn't know how to handle, and Marie- Angélique, who is luckier in her marriage, cannot appreciate her Félix de Vandenesse. Du Tillet explains the situation clearly when he remarks to his wife: "Les filles élevées comme vous l'avez été, dans la contrainte et les pratiques religieuses, ont soif de la liberté, désirent le bonheur, et le bonheur dont elles jouissent n'est jamais aussi grand ni aussi beau que celui qu'elles ont rêvé."<sup>54</sup> Raised in an unrealistic setting, they have a most unlikelike idea of the world and of its opportunities.

Du Tillet seems to express Balzac's own opinion about girls who are repressively educated . The opposite view, which was more commonly held in the nineteenth century, is expounded by the Granville daughters' father, Roger. He concerns himself only with his sons' education because he feels that there is danger solely to them under his wife's oppressive and narrow tutelage. Only the male's intelligence

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.70.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.76.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.76.

must remain free from the violent constriction and restraint of extreme religious ideas , in order that it not deteriorate. A woman does not need a free intelligence. "Les deux Marie, destinées à subir quelque tyrannie,"<sup>55</sup> that of their parents or that of their husbands, are not fated to be free agents. When they leave the maternal home to go to the Church and the Town hall for their marriage, they go "avec la simple mais épouvantable recommandation d'obéir en toute chose auprès desquels elles devaient dormir ou veiller pendant la nuit."<sup>56</sup>

Dangerous as this education which forms des petites oies blanches is, the other extreme is just as likely to lead to trouble. Anaïs de Nègrepelisse (later to become madame de Bargeton in Illusions Perdues) is taught by an abbé Niollant, from whom she receives "une mâle éducation."<sup>57</sup> She learns Italian, German, Latin, Greek, music and the natural sciences. What's more important, she also learns how to think. The abbé is "surtout remarquable par l'esprit particulier aux artistes ...qui s'élève au-dessus des idées bourgeoises par la liberté des jugements et par l'étendue des aperçus."<sup>58</sup> Having communicated to his pupil "sa

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.68.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>57</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.494.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.494.

hardiesse d'examen et sa facilité de jugement,"<sup>59</sup> he helps turn her into a difficult person. Unused to society as a young girl, the rough edges created by this education remain unsmoothed, and when she finally enters the provincial society of Angoulême, her boldness and her audacity sit badly with that company. As a matter of fact, Balzac maintains that these qualities developed in her by this progressive education are wasted and even harmful, because "ces qualités si nécessaires à un homme deviennent des défauts chez une femme, destinée aux humbles occupations d'une mère de famille."<sup>60</sup>

An even more masculine education is that of Félicité des Touches, "l'incarnation masculine de la jeune fille."<sup>61</sup> Félicité is self-taught; she has read voraciously all the volumes in her uncle Faucombe's library (Béatrix). Devouring literary works indiscriminately, "son instruction devint surprenante, excitée par les passions de la lecture et servie par une belle mémoire."<sup>62</sup> Not only is she highly intelligent, but she is much more chaste than the young girls who receive their education in a convent. "Ces prodigieuses lectures continrent ses passions beaucoup

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.494.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.494.

<sup>61</sup>Balzac, Beatrix, Pléiade II, p.370.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.371.

mieux que la vie de couvent ou s'enflamment les imaginations des jeunes filles."<sup>63</sup> Her inclinations are toned down because she can conceive everything mentally and doesn't need to carry it out physically. "Son esprit avait pris une énorme étendue, et des habitudes de critique lui permettaient de juger sainement les hommes,"<sup>64</sup> but this is a great hindrance to her since she finds it impossible to subjugate such a superior spirit to an inferior male in marriage. "Le hasard l'a jetée dans le domaine de la science et de l'imagination, dans le monde littéraire au lieu de la maintenir dans le cercle tracé par l'éducation futile donnée aux femmes, par les enseignements maternels sur la toilette, sur la décence hypocrite, sur les grâces chasseresses du sexe."<sup>65</sup> Her education, gloriously complete though it may be, is really not suitable, because it kills her desire to take up the task that woman was created for, the raising of a family.

There should be a golden middle road between one extreme in education for the jeune fille and the other. Émilie de Fontaine seems almost to have accomplished it. She learns those skills that a woman of the world should have; she paints, speaks the modern languages English and Italian, plays the piano and sings

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.371.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.372.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.374.

in a gracefully trained voice. She's witty and she is knowledgeable. "Nourrie de toutes les littératures, elle aurait pu faire croire que les gens de qualité viennent au monde en sachant tout."<sup>66</sup> But, remarks Balzac, education consists not only of facts and skills, but also of the strengthening of one's moral fibers. Though she is a well-read, modern woman who is at home in the world of society, Émilie is desperately spoiled. Given every material advantage that she could ever wish for, she has never been taught to consider others; she is the center of her universe and never lets anyone forget it. Her terrible pride prevents her from making a truly good marriage. As Geneviève Delattre says of her, she is dragged into misfortune "justement par cette irresponsabilité qui crée chez elle une éducation qui en fait un enfant gâté et ignorant ..."<sup>67</sup>

Ursule Mirouët (Ursule Mirouët) is the jeune fille who is educated in the best possible way. Raised by three elderly men , a doctor, a priest and a military man, she learns the easy way all that they have gleaned from bitter experience. They are "mothers" but with intelligence. The "savante éducation"<sup>68</sup> develops her at

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<sup>66</sup> Balzac, Le Bal de Sceaux, Pléiade I, p.78.

<sup>67</sup> Geneviève Delattre, Les Opinions Littéraires de Balzac,

<sup>68</sup> Balzac, Ursule Mirouët, Pléiade III, p.310.

her own pace. Ease and freedom for the intelligence and for the body are the characteristics of Ursule's training. She is taught language and all the arithmetic she may ever need. She reads books chosen from the doctor's library for their ability to teach while entertaining. Learning is a pleasure, not a task for her. And her development into a lovely person is assured. "Abandonnée à la divine culture d'un naturel amené dans les régions pures par ces trois prudents instructeurs, Ursule alla plus vers le sentiment que vers le devoir et prit pour règle de conduite la voix de la conscience plutôt que la loi sociale."<sup>69</sup> She does good because that is her nature, not because she is forced. "Le jugement confirmait l'élan du coeur.... Cette nuance est le propre de l'éducation chrétienne."<sup>70</sup> This training is fitting for a woman who is and should be "le génie et la conscience de la famille, l'élégance secrète de la vie domestique, enfin presque reine au sein du ménage."<sup>71</sup> Ursule's virtue and her patient resignation are the weapons with which she will fight her battles. It is her religious training which helps her to become "la pieuse et mystique jeune fille dont le caractère fut toujours au-dessus des

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.311.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.311.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p.311.

événements et dont le coeur domina toute adversité."<sup>72</sup>

To sum up, the Physiologie pleads in favor of an education which will fortify young girls against the dangers of the social life. The author is in favor of a system where nature and reason will control teaching, much as they do for Ursule Mirouët. He asks that the pupil not be shut up in a dreary house, away from other people, with only religious works and edifying but boring opera for her to read, and needlework for her to do. Neither should she be sent to such institutions of learning where there are a lot of other idle young women, spending their time in idle fantasies and useless conversations. Rather, she should be able to read at will any books that interest her, for they will teach her some<sup>thing</sup> about life. If she is given the opportunity to give free reign to her ideas and if she is not held back by narrow-minded individuals, she will develop an independent, thinking mind. But she should also be taught, that though her self-confidence is very necessary, her pride must be tempered with modesty and with consideration for others. Though she should learn some science, it should not be an inordinate amount since a woman must "éviter toute pédanterie."<sup>73</sup> Religious training too holds an important place, but it should be moderated

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p.312.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p.

so that she not end up a martyr in a hair shirt. And most important of all, she should learn all that she can about the workings of society, so that she not fall into one of the pitfalls that are ever present in life. In the dédicace of Ursule Mirouët written to his niece, Balzac says: "On vous defend de voir la Société telle qu'elle est."<sup>74</sup> He is protesting "comme son maître Molière contre l'éducation des filles."<sup>75</sup> In L'École de Femmes, Chrysalde is speaking for Molière when he says:

Mais comment voulez-vous, après tout, qu'une bête  
 Puisse jamais savoir ce que c'est qu'être honnête?  
 Une femme d'esprit peut trahir son devoir;  
 Mais il faut, pour le moins qu'elle ose le vouloir:  
 Et la stupide au sien peut manquer d'ordinaire  
 Sans en avoir l'envie, et sans penser le faire.  
 (106-107, 113-116)

Better instructed, Agnès would have been more distrustful and more prudent. Since she knows nothing of the concepts of friendship, thankfulness and love, she doesn't know how to differentiate between them. Neither can she tell the difference between right and wrong. Agnès typifies the young girl who is secluded from all knowledge of the world and who cannot know how to act in society. This is Balzac's point. This young girl is liable to fall into the arms of the first man who asks her since she doesn't realize what danger this may entail. So, as the author says in his préface

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<sup>74</sup> Balzac, dédicace to Ursule Mirouët, Pléiade III, p.265.

<sup>75</sup> Andre Wurmser, La Comédie inhumaine (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p.618.

to the first edition of Scènes de la Vie Privée,<sup>76</sup> his purpose in writing these pieces is to "relever par avance le rideau du théâtre qu'elles doivent un jour embellir," the theater of life where the the young girls of today will play the social scene. Rather than have her daughter wait as much as possible before learning about life, and rather than have her learn the hard way by "suffering naked and defenseless in the storms that she is bound to encounter," a mother should have her read these Balzacian scenes; in them, she may learn about the difficulties and the pitfalls of social and married life and perhaps avoid shedding "les larmes de sang" which would be her lot. The purpose of these books is to replace "les sots livres que les esprits mesquins ont présentés aux femmes jusqu'à ce jour."

Once a girl knows where the dangers lie, she will be able to pick the correct husband and not run after chimeras as do Louise de Chaulieu and Julie d'Aiglemont. If the jeune fille were emancipated, as she is in England and the United States for example, there would be less unfortunate marriages. This freedom, "le droit d'aimer" advocated by the feminists of the 1830's, means anything from freedom to marry the man of her choice and the authority to divorce her husband if she so desires, to complete sexual emancipation. It is this emancipation that Balzac advocates in his

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<sup>76</sup>Balzac, Préface of Scènes de la Vie Privée, Pléiade XI, p.162-163.

Physiologie. He quotes the following statement from Rousseau to prove his point: "Chez les peuples qui ont des moeurs, les filles sont faciles et les femmes sévères."<sup>77</sup> That is what he would like to see in France. Instead of placing a young girl in purdah, she should be given the freedom to love as she wishes. Society should keep its censure for the erring married woman whose adulterous relationships are apt to ruin her whole family. Anticipating criticism of this highly liberal attitude, Balzac avers that this license would not produce high scale corruption because every jeune fille has enough innate modesty and caution not to submit to a man who does not love her. She will be careful too, because she knows the high price that a man puts on the virtue of his bride. It is here that Balzac contradicts himself: If France could change its moral attitude as Balzac would like, and virtue in a young girl would not be so precious, then the reason for her prudence- the value of her virtue- would be wiped out and she would be totally corrupted.

In the Balzacian world, the jeune fille who does follow the dictates of her heart, like Juana in Les Marana, brings great misfortune on her head. Perhaps though, had she been educated as Balzac advocates, she would have known enough of the world to reject with disdain a man who could

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<sup>77</sup>Balzac, Physiologie du Mariage, Pleiade IX, p.661.

accept the sacrifice of her young life in return for a few moments of pleasure for him.

"Si elle était libre, une éducation exempte de préjugés l'armerait contre l'amour du premier venu."<sup>78</sup>

Seduction would hold out no snares for her. She would know the dangers hidden and lying in wait to trip her. No more would she be the romantic jeune fille who, at the first sight of "les régions enchantées de l'amour" would err "à cause de sa croyance au bien ou de sa confiance dans le vrai."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.663.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.,

### Tyranny and the young girl

Perhaps the most heart rending painting of a young girl suffering the cruelty of her relations is that of Pierrette (Pierrette). Sent to live with her cousins the Rogrons, because lack of money has forced her grandparents to enter the poor house, Pierrette Lorrain brings with her a pure , frnak and loving nature, a happy disposition and an uncomplicated personality. Under the harsh treatment of her guradians, she is transformed into a washed out, tormented little girl. At first, she is tortured only verbally: "Elle est maltraitée en paroles,"<sup>80</sup> but this mental torment turns life into a hell for her. Slowly, she closes in on herself and locks herself into a sort of passive obedience. "Les roses d'affection qui s'élevaient ...dans cette jeune âme... étaient impitoyablement écrasées."<sup>81</sup> At first, she thinks of escaping from the frigid and corrosive atmosphere of her cousins' house, but the abbé Habert persuades her to take refuge in the mystical aspects of religion, where she begins to see some sense in her sufferings.

After the mental torment, comes the physical. Pierrette is gradually turned into a servant in the Rogron household. Her maltreatment causes her desperate illness. Brigaut,

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<sup>80</sup>Balzac, Pierrette, Pléiade III, p.709.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p.709.

a childhood friend, saves her from death and brings her grandmother to take care of her. But it is too late for a cure and worn out by her miseries, she dies on Easter morn. She dies like an angel: "Ces êtres (marqués par la Mort) exhalent comme un parfum céleste, leurs regards parlent de Dieu..."<sup>82</sup> The Rogrons are brought to trial for the part that their maltreatment - overworking- of her and their refusal to grant her proper medical care has played in her death. But the trial ends inconclusively and they are not convicted. A young girl, says Balzac, really has no recourse to justice. There is no legal power that can help her if she is unfortunate enough to be without a loving family to help her.

Eugénie Grandet also suffers from a tyranny, but it differs totally from the despotism of which Pierrette is a victim. Eugénie's oppressor is her father.

Eugénie and her mother are only pale shadows who live in the dark and cheerless house of the Grandets. Papa Grandet controls everything that goes on in the home. It is he, for example, who doles out the daily supplies for the kitchen, and he who decides what dates the fire is to be lit in the drawing room. He keeps his wife and daughter virtually penniless, prisoners in their constricted world. He is the god of their universe and they cannot imagine ever defying him.

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.775.

Life is a very colorless affair in the Grandet household. Grandet allows only one candle to be lit in the evenings. It is always dark, dreary and cold within those walls. No cheer livens the hours and the first time that Eugénie ever attempts to make a joke is on her twenty-third birthday.

Balzac dwells on Eugénie's naïveté and pure heart and on her utter lack of mercenary feelings. "Encore combien d'ignorance dans leur naïveté! Eugénie et sa mère ne savaient rien de la fortune de Grandet, elles n'estimaient les choses qu'à la lueur de leurs pales idées et ne prisait ni ne méprisait l'argent, accoutumées qu'elles étaient à s'en passer."<sup>83</sup>

Eugénie's life is as pure as the life in a convent. Imbued with the spirit of the Christian religion, she leads a chaste existence. All her days are spent mending her father's socks and staring out of the window at the dismal streets.

It is in Eugénie Grandet that can be seen the force that repressed emotion in a jeune fille can acquire. Never having had the opportunity to communicate with other young people nor with different strata of society, she is completely transformed at the first sight of her elegant cousin Charles. Exaltation takes hold of her soul and she fervently wishes to do anything for him in order that

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<sup>83</sup>Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pleiade III, p.505.

she might please him. That is precisely the first time that she realizes that Grandet is "maître de son sort"<sup>84</sup> She experiences terror when she looks at his face. Her father has heretofore controlled every facet of her being to such an extent, she is so totally brainwashed, that "elle se crut coupable d'une faute en lui taisant quelques pensées."<sup>85</sup> Even her thoughts are not her own. And so, it is all the more remarkable that she manages to scrape together enough courage to face her father on the Charles question.

The first conflict occurs at the breakfast table. As Bardèche says, she effects "un coup d'état intérieur" in bullying Nanon to make a galette for Charles' breakfast, thus breaking the hard and fast economic rules of the house. And from this act we can guess, he continues, "tout ce qu'Eugénie dépensera plus tard d'esprit et de courage pour défendre son amour."<sup>86</sup> For it is a formidable difficulty to break out of the chains that a mental tyranny can make, and to oppose the person who has been the dictator of one's universe. When Eugénie puts the sugar bowl back on the table under the terrible eye of her father, she shows no less courage "que la Parisienne qui pour faciliter la fuite

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p.529.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p.529.

<sup>86</sup>p. Bardèche, Balzac Romancier, ( Geneva: Slatkine reprints, 1967), p.479.

de son amant, soutient de ses faibles bras l'échelle de soie."<sup>87</sup>

The climax comes when Eugénie begs Charles to accept the hoard of gold, which her father has been adding to, each birthday. For Grandet, this gold is like a second soul—he loves it so much. Charles takes the treasure and leaves Saumur. Eugénie, meanwhile, lives in an "effroi mortel"<sup>88</sup> waiting for her father to find out that she has given away her coins. The active part of her rebellion against her father is over; from this moment, it will be merely a passive resistance to her father's tyranny. Grandet has resumed his god-like place in her world, again wielding the power of life and death. Though she is no longer a minor at twenty three years of age, Eugénie places herself completely under her father's authority and lets him do as he wishes. In only one thing does she oppose him: She refuses to tell him what she did with her gold. Her stubborn silence and her rock like immovability show that she too is a Grandet. "Elle devient aussi rusée par l'amour que son père était par l'avarice."<sup>89</sup> Her father knows that he cannot force her to tell her secret; legally, he has no right, so he tries to fight her with religion.

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<sup>87</sup>Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade III, p.543.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p.599.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p.606.

"Les prêtres vous ordonnent de m'obéir,"<sup>90</sup> he tells her. But nothing will make her move from her position; not even the dictates of religion will break her resistance. Grandet refuses to accept defeat and locks her in her room on a bread and water regime. This is treatment about which she could complain to the courts, but she refuses to so betray her father. "Mon père est maître chez lui.... Tant que j'habiterais sa maison je dois lui obéir. Sa conduite n'est comptable qu'à Dieu."<sup>91</sup> Eugénie has reverted to her original subservient state. She is psychologically unable to oppose her father.

Madame Grandet's imminent death brings the end to the war-like state of affairs in the house. Grandet wants to keep control of the family's entire fortune in his hands. Since Eugénie inherits directly from her mother, she can demand the division of the whole property. In order to divide it, it must be liquidated. Grandet's pride and joy, the forest Froidfond, would have to be sold in order to make a proper division. Eugénie can prevent this liquidation by simply asking that it be dispensed with. In order that she do this, Grandet makes his peace with her. Eugénie is so pathetically grateful to him that he is speaking to her again and that she is once more in his good graces, that <sup>she</sup> <sub>λ</sub>

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p.607.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p.614.

would agree to anything he requests. She even refuses to accept the louis d'or that he tosses to her, saying that she needs only his tenderness, not his money. After her mother's death, she signs a document denuding herself of all her property and giving it all to her father. And she is pleased with what she does because she has thereby pleased him. She doesn't exist in her own mind as an independent and worthy being. It is a wonder that she had the temerity to oppose her father on the matter of Charles and the gold. Balzac attempts to explain her behavior by saying that "les penchants naturels de la femme ...durent se déployer d'autant plus vivement qu'elle avait atteint sa vingt-troisième année,"<sup>92</sup> which illustrates the point of the theory he posits in la Physiologie. If the feelings of a young girl are repressed, they will eventually explode with the force of a pressure cooker. In Eugénie, the explosion subsides quite fast. Though her love for Charles lives on, she quickly sinks back into and under her father's tyranny. In fact, she eventually becomes a replica of him; she takes on his parsimonious habits and even some of his speech patterns. At the end, she is probably genuinely convinced that she must <sup>stick</sup> carefully to his way of life because she will have to give him a reckoning of her accounts in heaven.

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 529.

Marguerite Claés, heroine of La Recherche de l'Absolu, lives also in a house where the father's relationship with his family is not normal. But Balthazar Claés' mania is something quite different from that of Grandet. Balthazar is looking for the "Absolute" and he spends everything on his experiments, thus reducing his family to penury.

When Marguerite's mother lies dying, she promises her that she will not do anything to cause her father any chagrin nor will she judge his actions. But when she meets her father's eye across her mother's deathbed, she breaks her promise: "La fille jugeait son père."<sup>93</sup> She sees him and his faults very clearly.

Marguerite takes over the management of the house, and from the very first moment, she gives proof of her feminine courage, "de cette sérénité constante que doivent avoir les anges chargés de répandre la paix."<sup>94</sup> Hiding her sufferings under a calm exterior, she works hard to better her family's fate. As newer and newer proofs of her father's profligacy come in, the pressure on her increases. She must save the family from total ruin. Since she can't marry, having promised her mother to wait until her younger brother is old enough to succeed her as manager, another way has to be found to permit the liquidation of the Claés fortune, to prevent at least part of it from falling into Balthazar's

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<sup>93</sup>Balzac, La Recherche de l'Absolu, Pléiade IX, p.574.

<sup>94</sup>ibid., p.577.

hands. Emmanuel, Marguerite's friend, finds a way. Gabriel is emancipated by a family council. Throughout all the legal manoeuvring, Marguerite insists that nothing be done to cause pain or sorrow for her father. However, Balthazar, by his irresponsible behavior, gives her no choice. He has put into circulation a number of unpaid lettres de change and Marguerite finds the situation desperate. So, she opens the letter that her mother has left for her and in it, receives permission to do what she thinks is necessary to save the family, even at the risk of hurting Balthazar. She is desperately upset at defying her father and cannot bear to see him angry with her, but still, she does the necessary unpleasantness and arranges for him to take a position as rêveur des finances in Bretagne. She plays the part of a mother for him. "Vous êtes mon enfant,"<sup>95</sup> she tells him. She is sending him away from home, she continues, because he would be an obstacle to the reestablishment of their fortunes. Though her heart is very heavy, she thus literally throw him out. It is only in her "étreinte désespérée"<sup>96</sup> that there is a hint of the desolation in her heart at having to do such a thing to her father. When he leaves his home, she prays for strength to do all that she has to do.

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p.613.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p.624.

In three years, Marguerite succeeds in reestablishing the family fortune. She works very hard all through and is bothered throughout by a guilty conscience that she had to banish her father. When she goes to fetch him back home, she throws herself weeping into his arms. "Elle se sentait criminelle à la manière de grandes hommes qui violent les libertés pour sauver la patrie."<sup>97</sup> She is pardoned by the author and admired for her courage. She has behaved more like a man than like a timid and incapable jeune fille, saving with her bravery the future of her brothers and sister.

There are in the Comédie Humaine various other young ladies who have troubles because of their fathers. For example, Victorine Taillefer lives in the greatest misery because her father won't recognize her as his daughter, and Ginevra di Piombo has to invoke the Code against her father so that she can marry the man of her choice.

Marguerite Clàès is an intellectually virilised woman. There are several other such Balzacian creations, others like Félicité des Touches and Laurence de Cinq-Cygne. Laurence whose frail body houses "une âme trempée comme celle d'un homme du plus beau caractère"<sup>98</sup> hides it under a sweet, sheeplike exterior. The usual occupations of women do

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p.633.

<sup>98</sup>Balzac, Une ténébreuse Affaire, Pléiade VII, p.480.

not interest her. "Elle dirigeait sa pensee vers un but trop élevé pour descendre aux occupations (d'une femme)."<sup>99</sup> Even the usual female vanities like fine clothes bore her. She is a woman with a mission; to kill Napoleon and to help the triumph of the royalist cause. "Elle portait dans sa tête une résolution virile et une fermeté stoïque."<sup>100</sup> Laurence shoots well and rides magnificently. All her outstanding qualities are masculine and Balzac has no end of admiration for her. "Elle était une noble et sublime fille."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.481.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.483.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.525.

The jeune fille in the Comédie Humaine is thus more a character to be pitied than anything else. Shunted to the side in favor of her more important brothers, she has a difficult time fighting for her place in the sun. Much of the time, she is so demoralized by her situation and by the coldness of her family that she gives in to their plans for her without much of a battle.

Ill-prepared for the life outside the narrow confines of her home, the young girl is often the prey of unscrupulous men in search of a dowry. She is naive in the ways of the world and often has no ideas of the dangers she is courting. Her upbringing is usually totally useless; she learns very little that will help her in life.

Some jeunes filles are unfortunate enough to spend their young lives cowering under one tyrannical master or another. Since she is considered in some ways unimportant, the daughter of the house suffers much from the dictates of the master. Whether she is Eugénie, trembling under her father's eye, or Marguerite, fearing to offend her irresponsible father, she probably would have fared better had she be born a boy. It would have been easier for her to make herself heeded, and her opinions would have carried more weight.

Balzac's jeune fille seems to be rather a conventional character. She is mostly just sketched rather than fully

studied and she usually lacks greatness, whether it is great tragedy or great passion or great spiritual strength. She fails to touch the reader's heart as his creations of more mature women do.

Chapter Two  
Marriage and the young woman

Bonne famille, bien élevée,  
jolie, et trois cent mille  
francs comptant.

(Petites Misères de  
la Vie Conjugale)

Having shown how lamentably the education of the day prepares the jeune fille for marriage, Balzac traces her fate further. He accompanies her from the day that she bids good-bye to the convent walls, through the difficulties that attend her choice of husband, the hardships that are associated with her marriage, and the problems that arise during her first years of matrimony.

Marriage, in Balzac's day was the only really respectable career for a woman. "Le mariage était pratiquement la seule 'profession' ouverte aux femmes, à celles des classes aisées surtout ..." <sup>1</sup> Of course, there were women who worked, but they were mostly of the lower classes who had to earn their daily bread as seamstresses and laundresses. But Balzac hardly concerns himself with this class at all, preferring the women whose only possible profession was marriage. In the Comédie Humaine, all the respectable women and some of the unrespectable ones are married, or want to be or should have been. The only outstanding exception is Félicité des Touches or Camille

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Bolster, Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique (Paris: Minard, 1970), p.106.

Maupin, the famous writer; but even she finally acknowledges that her way of life was not the right and proper one, and certainly not the most fulfilling.

The all-importance of marriage colors the young girl's existence. She must marry quickly and as well as she can. Life only begins with marriage. Desperation fuels the search for a proper husband. "Ignorez-vous," says madame Évangélista to a friend, "ce dont est capable une mère quand elle a sur le bras une fille qui ne se marie pas....la mère et la fille en quête d'un mari, c'est des hyènes... qui cherchent une proie à dévorer..."<sup>2</sup>

While the jeune fille's immediate goal is marriage, most young men are not too anxious to set up housekeeping. The typical young man has a business or some sort of livelihood to keep him busy, and the years are not so cruel to him as they are to the female of the species. "Physiquement et moralement," says Balzac in la Physiologie, "l'homme est plus longtemps homme que la femme n'est femme."<sup>3</sup> He leads, what is painted in the same work, as a felicitous bachelor existence, and there has to be a very strong inducement to make him give it up. As Balzac says: "Un homme se marie: Par Ambition...cela est bien connu(et) Par Intérêt

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<sup>2</sup>Balzac, Le Contrat de Mariage, Pléiade III, p.146.

<sup>3</sup>Balzac, Physiologie du Mariage, Pléiade X, p.627-629.

mais c'est presque toujours ainsi."<sup>4</sup>

For a girl to be able to attract a marriage-minded man, she must offer him something he wants and cannot get otherwise: a large amount of dowry money or perhaps a social advantage like a title or entry into the higher classes of society. Making a marriage is like arranging a business deal; most often, it is the girl who contributes the most in exchange for the coveted position of married woman. "La plupart des hommes," says Balzac, "se marient absolument comme s'ils achetaient une partie de rentes à la Bourse."<sup>5</sup> And he amplifies elsewhere, "On sait comment se font presque tous les mariages..on cherche une bonne dot, on prend une femme là où la met le hasard des écus..."<sup>6</sup>

It is obvious then, that it was quite difficult for a young girl to find a suitable husband, because men could pick and choose amongst the many girls offered for marriage. A jeune fille literally had a price painted on her forehead and was sold like a piece of merchandise. Balzac keenly felt the injustice of this system, and in la Physiologie he is careful to point out the miseries which are created by the lack of a proper dowry. In order to prevent the abuses inherent in the system, he suggests a new system,

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.605.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.660.

<sup>6</sup>Balzac, Mémoire sur le proces Peytel, in Wurmser, La Comédie Inhumaine(Paris: Gallimard,1970), p.629.

marriage without dowry, which would entail the disinheritance of the jeune fille.

The concept of exhérédation is one of the pet concerns of the nineteenth century feminists, who favored les mariages d'amour, which were possible only if the dowry was suppressed. One of the most interesting works of the period, Voyage en Icare, written by Cabet, depicts the ideal life in that fabled land. One of the author's main purposes is to show how much happiness and contentment there is in Icare because the dowry system doesn't exist ; the young people marry those whom they know and respect, instead of selling themselves to the highest bidder as it is done in France.

Balzac is enthusiastic about disinheriting the young girl and vastly improving her chances for a happy life. Since every girl would enter the matrimonial sweepstakes with equal monetary advantage, poor ones as well as rich ones would have the same chance to acquire a husband. Married life, too, would be more satisfying; one would pick one's mate from those who would offer one "des gages de bonheur par leurs vertus, leur caractère, ou leurs talents,"<sup>7</sup> and a rapport would be established. Depending only on character and temperament, more firm relationships would be created than would be if money were the criterion. Marriage would be an altogether happier institution, as it is, says

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<sup>7</sup>Balzac, Physiologie du Mariage, Pléiade X, p.

Balzac, in England, in the United States and in Switzerland, countries where there is no dowry system. The germ of this idea can be found in Molière, who was one of Balzac's inspirers. In Molière's plays, says Wurmser,<sup>8</sup> love is the most important ground for marriage. It triumphs over maternal foolishness (Les femmes savantes), over paternal vanity (Le bourgeois gentilhomme), over any number of manomaniacs (bigotry in Tartuffe and avarice in L'Avare) and finally over everything. Molière's bourgeois marry for love and in the Comédie Humaine, Balzac has retained some of this tendency; when there is a marriage made for love, it is usually in the bourgeoisie. Examples are Césarine Birotteau and Anselme Popinot in César Birotteau, and Eve Chardon and David Séchard in Illusions Perdues.

Theoretically, Balzac is all in favor of the love match; a marriage where money is the chief factor repels him. In practice however, there is cause for wonder. Balzac himself was constantly on the lookout for a suitable match, suitable meaning with a large dowry. And he always judged every marriage on the basis of money. For example, when his niece married he exulted: "On trouve pour Sophie le phénix des maris. Il se contente pour dot d'actions sur le pont du Jura que Surville finit en ce moment. Il est riche."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Wurmser, La Comédie inhumaine (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) p. 634.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.630.

In Balzac's novels too, when there is question of marriage, the subject of money is always lurking in the background if it is not in the open entirely. For example, one person suggests an eligible parti thus: "Bonne famille, bien élevée, jolie et trois cent mille francs comptant."<sup>10</sup> It is the mention of the trois cent mille francs which is meant to decide the reluctant suitor, for it is said last, and last impressions last the longest. Balzac paints an amusing picture of the young husband, who having been won over by the large dowry, spends his time trembling for the safety of a legacy he is not sure will ever reach his wife. (Petites Misères de la Vie Conjugale)

Heiresses are often the object of battles fought over them by determined suitors. In La Vieille Fille, Balzac details the struggle of two old bachelors for the hand of mademoiselle Rose Cormon. To both of them, Rose is only incidental. What they really want is the fortune that will go to the man who marries her.

An even longer, more protracted duel is fought over Eugénie Grandet by the Cruchots and the des Grassins, who dedicate themselves to charming the great heiress so that she might bestow her hand and her millions on one of them. It is in the analysis of the finally hoped for (by the groom) marriage, that Balzac shows what he really thinks

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<sup>10</sup>Balzac, Petites Misères de la Vie Conjugale, Pléiade X, p.896.

about a man whose sole criterion in choosing a wife is the amount of money in her dowry.

Eugénie chooses to marry the Président Bonfons (Cruchot) who uses his "habileté juridique"<sup>11</sup> to compose the marriage contract in which the couple give to each other, in the case that they have no children, all their worldly goods. Eugénie, whose "education" at the hands of Charles Grandet has taught her to be a good judge of human nature, guesses that her husband wishes her dead so that he alone may have control of their vast combined fortune, and she pities him. He is, believes Balzac, a man whose avarice has prevented him from experiencing any of the warmer feelings which enrich one's life, and as such, he is surely to be pitied. His life is a wasteland with none of the budding promise of truly human emotions. But if he is to be pitied, he is also to be condemned for his cold calculations and his absolute callousness in the matter of his marriage. And retribution comes, from a just Providence who avenges Eugénie "des calculs et de l'infâme indifférence d'un époux qui respectait, comme la plus forte des garanties, la passion sans espoir dont elle se nourrissait."<sup>12</sup> Eugénie's undying feeling for Charles precludes any emotion for her husband.

Bonfons does not want any children because a child

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<sup>11</sup>Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade III, p.647.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.648.

would mean the end of his most cherished ambition, to be the sole heir of his wife's fortune. "Dieu ne frappe jamais à faux."<sup>13</sup> He dies soon after the marriage, rightfully punished, says the author, for his falseness and uncaringness for his wife. Balzac brands this husband a despicable creature, motivated only by his egoism and his avaricious ambition. Money is necessary to life and very good to have, but deifying it leads to no good. Even if one marries for money, one should be able to place it in its correct perspective. A husband should not be so blinded by money that he forgets the true purpose of marriage, the building of a satisfying life. If he does, he, like le Président Bonfons, is apt to be punished.

There are, in the Comédie Humaine, husbands who have enough delicacy of heart, tact and understanding to behave properly to the wives whom they have married for their dowry. Félix de Vandenesse, for example, is persuaded to marry Marie-Angélique de Granville by the enormity of her dot; but he is the model husband for her. "Les mères de famille devraient rechercher de pareille hommes pour leurs filles... Les recherches, les délices que ses habitudes d'homme à bonnes fortunes et d'homme élégant avaient apprises à Félix ...les enseignements de la haute politique, les observations de sa vie... toutes ses forces furent employées à rendre sa

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.6+7

femme heureuse, et il y appliqua son esprit."<sup>14</sup>

Félix is, however, quite unusual in the world of the Comédie Humaine. Most of the marriages that Balzac chronicles, in which money was the deciding factor, are not happy. For example, Véronique Sauviat's father believes that he is ensuring the happiness of his only child by endowing her with an enormous dowry. Pierre Graslin, a rich banker, is only too happy to take possession of it by marrying the young Véronique. His truly rapacious nature manifests itself a short while after the wedding. He then decides that though his wife has brought him over a million francs, it is not necessary for her to have even the smallest allowance, nor does she need any of the small luxuries that she was used to enjoy before her marriage. This avarice eventually kills him; the events of July, 1830, lead to a business disaster in which he stands to lose all his money, and he cannot bear the thought of becoming poor. He dies amidst the cruelest sufferings. Perhaps this is Balzac's idea of poetic justice: Graslin marries for money and thus destroys the illusions and ruins the life of a pure young girl. It is this thirst for money which eventually kills him. The author has made it clear that Graslin has felt no spiritual or emotional affinity with Véronique. His motives were always mercenary and he never even attempted

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<sup>14</sup><sub>B</sub> Balzac, Une Fille d'Eve, Pléiade II, p.78.

to create any stronger ties with his wife than those exterior ones of church and contract.

Ironically, Véronique Sauviat did not have to marry Graslin as her father believed. "...si cette dot eût été connue, Veronique aurait pu choisir un mari,"<sup>15</sup> a man after her own heart. Tragically unaware of the power of her dowry, she throws her life away.

Not so the daughters of le père Goriot, who know that they can choose their husbands "suivant leurs goûts; chacune d'elles devait avoir en dot la moitié de la fortune de son père."<sup>16</sup> With such riches, Anastasie can satisfy her longing and marry into the nobility and Delphine can accomplish her ambition and marry even more money. Needless to say, both of them are unhappy in their marriages. Having picked their husbands without sentiment, just as they were selected merely for their fortunes, their marriages are dry and joyless. Once it is that only practical money considerations decide a union, there is very little possibility of happiness.

The converse of this theory seems also to be viable. In these marriages where money is not an issue, the likelihood exists of domestic felicity. Ève Chardon and David Séchard are truly in love. If anything, David's fortune is an impediment to their union, because Ève doesn't want to be thought setting her cap for a man whose father passes for

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<sup>15</sup>Balzac, Le Curé de Village, Pléiade VIII, p.559.

<sup>16</sup>Balzac, Le Père Goriot, Pléiade II, p.922.

a rich landowner. But the "intime union de leurs âmes"<sup>17</sup> is not to be denied. They marry and live very content with each other.

There are several similar marriages in the Comédie Humaine. César Birotteau marries his Constance and they both look forward to the satisfying, but quiet existence of the petite bourgeoisie. There is no question of a dowry here, but of the mutual sympathy and shared closeness which are the cornerstones of a good life together. Their daughter Césarine weds Anselme Popinot under similar conditions. Her dowry lost in the unfortunate business deals her father has entered into, she is no less desirable in her groom's eyes. Even a bankrupt father-in-law does not deter Anselme. Someone comments on this extraordinary behavior in wonder: "(Popinot est) le seul être à Paris, capable d'épouser une belle fille sans le sou. Ces gens-là sont fous."<sup>18</sup> The Popinot union seems to be a very happy one.

All these happy couples are tied together by a love which has a bon bourgeois flavor. Not for these couples are the tumultuous passions which mark the progress of other, less fortunate lives. They respect each other and love each other in a sweet, quiet way, enjoying "le bonheur égal, sans exaltation ...(et) sans orages."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.520

<sup>18</sup>Balzac, La Cousine Bette, Pléiade VI, p.151.

<sup>19</sup>Balzac, La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Pléiade I, p.56.

It is in the aristocracy that the road to marriage is the most difficult if one has not the sufficient funds. The higher classes use marriage as a means to get ahead in the world. The bourgeois marries so that he may have a home and a wife and children, but the aristocrat uses marriage mostly as a stepping stone to a better life. So, when Julie d'Aiglemont cries out against the dowry system, she is speaking mainly for her own social class. "Exhérédez les femmes!," she demands, "...au moins accomplirez-vous ainsi une loi de nature en choisissant vos compagnes, en les épousant au gré des vœux du cœur," she says, echoing Balzac's idea in la Physiologie. Those girls who do marry are the lucky ones. "Quant aux pauvres filles sans dot, elles deviennent folles, elles meurent; pour elles aucune pitié."<sup>21</sup> Balzac knew well the terrible stigma it is not to be able to get married. He had seen many girls waste away and die in the awful position their lack of money placed them. He watched daily, the anguish of such families as the de Bernys, whose daughters sat at home, single and melancholic, because funds to buy them a propriétaire just did not exist. Even his own sister suffered heartbreak when she fell in love with a certain Auguste de l'Egreville who refused to marry her because

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<sup>20</sup>Balzac, La Femme de Trente Ans, Pléiade II, p.753.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.752.

there was not enough money. "Ah," he wrote about this episode, "maudit argent."<sup>22</sup>

Not only do unmarried girls themselves realize the frightfulness of their situation, but all of society regards them with disdain. Balzac, too, looks down on them as sterile, uncontributing members of society, and understands well their desperation to march to the altar.

The author of the Comédie Humaine studies several aristocratic young girls and their financial woes. Louise de Chaulieu is a member of one of the most blue-blooded of French families. Her family packs her off at a tender age to a far away convent in the hope that she will find her vocation as a nun. However, when she reaches the age of eighteen, she decides that a life in the convent would kill her. Her family is forced to bring her back home, though she constitutes an obstacle to their plans. The problem in the Chaulieu family is also a matter of money. Louise has inherited a large fortune from her grandmother; this should be used for her dowry. But her father wants to employ the money to advance her second brother's career. "Vous ne devez pas avoir de fortune," he tells her, "tant que celle de votre frère cadet n'est pas assurée et je veux employer tous vos capitaux à lui constituer un majorat."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Wormser, p.636-637.

<sup>23</sup>Balzac, Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, Pléiade I, p. 175.

It is for this reason, to use her money for their son, that Louise's parents have kept her in the convent, shut away from life behind those thick walls. As Louise writes to her friend Renée: "Ma fortune doit être à son fils le marquis."<sup>24</sup> She calls him son fils and not mon frère because she apparently feels very little kinship with him, nor can she feel much closeness to such parents. The author here is underlining the desperately inferior place that a ~~daughter~~ has in a family. She is sacrificed without a qualm to the welfare of the sons, and she herself is expected to recognize that it is just and proper for her to give up her chance at marital happiness for a sibling who happens to be born male. "Vous me paraissez plus raisonnable que je ne le croyais,"<sup>25</sup> her father tells her. He means that what he wants her to do, to hand over her fortune to her brother, is the reasonable thing to do.

The treasonable way that Louise's family treats her colors her feelings about them. Every fresh betrayal wounds her more. The author traces the three main deceptions of Louise by her family. The first is when she is sent to the convent in the hope that she will never return. Wishing to spare themselves the bother and the unpleasantness sure surface in a disagreement over the princesse de Vaurémont's

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.140.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.139.

fortune, a fortune which has been left to Louise, they immure her, for life they hope, in a Carmelite convent. In all her years spent behind those walls, they never visit her because they want to cut all psychological ties with her so that she may never wish to return home. The second betrayal comes when her parents tell her pointblank that her inheritance cannot be hers because her future as a girl is nowhere nearly as important as her brother's. And the third betrayal which is perhaps the most ugly of the three, shows the mentality of the aristocratic houses. Louise finds out that her father is eagerly awaiting the implementation of a law which would give restitution to the returned emigrés for their lost properties. Her father intends to use this money, not as a dowry for her, but to refurbish his hôtel. The elegance of his home apparently means more to him than the welfare of his daughter.

"Cette confidence," writes Louise bitterly to her friend, "eût pour effet de me jeter sur le sofa de mon salon. Eh quoi, mon père, au lieu d'employer cette somme à me marier, me laisserait mourir au couvent?"<sup>26</sup>

The interesting thing is that Louise, after an initial bit of resistance, is ready to do as her father says and to hand over her fortune. She seems to feel the futility

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

of opposition and accepts the fact that she will have to find, as she half-jokingly says, "un vieux pair"<sup>27</sup> who will be willing to marry a young and very noble girl without a dowry.

In the normal run of things, no one is willing to marry a jeune fille, be she of the highest nobility, if she has no money. Only the opportunist bourgeois are happy to trade money for nobility of birth in their brides. Some noble families are desperate for someone to marry their daughters and are even willing to give them to members of the middle class. The de Fontaine family marries its daughters to rich men who are beneath them socially. But the comte de Fontaine, the father, is very pleased at the matches he has made: "Des mariages si avantageux ne se rencontraient pas tous les jours pour les filles sans dot."<sup>28</sup>

There is one renegade in the de Fontaine family. Émilie is a different breed from her sisters. A true snob, she wants to marry only a pair de France, an ambition which arouses the exasperation of her father. "Tu vois, mon enfant," he says to her, "que la faiblesse de ta dot ne saurait être en harmonie avec tes idées de grandeur."<sup>29</sup> And he proceeds to give his (and Balzac's) opinion about marital happiness: "Le bonheur conjugal ne se fonde pas

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.175.

<sup>28</sup>Balzac, Le Bal de Sceaux, Fléiade, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.90.

pas tant sur des qualités brillantes et sur la fortune, que sur une estime réciproque."<sup>30</sup>

Though many of the bourgeois marriages in the Comédie Humaine are illustrations of this principle, the society of the nineteenth century did not subscribe to this way of thinking. The upper class man looked mainly for money in his alliances. Wurmser point out that the Balzacian heroes almost never fall in love. They keep a clear head when choosing a wife, and they base their choice on strictly material considerations. "La beauté, les vertus ne sont pas des valeurs dans votre bazar humain,"<sup>31</sup> cries madame Julie d'Aiglemont. The author puts the same thoughts in the mouth of the formidable madame Évangélista. When my husband married me, she tells the two notaries hired to draw up her daughter's marriage contract, I had only my name and my person. "Ma dot était la beauté, la vertu, le bonheur, la naissance, l'éducation. L'argent, donne-t-il ces trésors?"<sup>32</sup> Money should be unimportant to the groom who is selecting a wife. It is surprising that Balzac has made the disreputable madame Évangélista express this opinion, and thus has diminished its force, just as he has put the plea for exhérédation in Julie d'Aiglemont's tirade, thereby lessening its efficacy; Julie despises her husband,

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.

<sup>31</sup>Balzac, La Femme de Trente Ans, Pléiade II, p.752-753.

<sup>32</sup>Balzac, Le Contrat de Mariage, Pléiade III, p.125.

and she is arguing with the representative of Church, who, by definition has the last word. This is in spite of the fact that the opinions expressed by Julie and madame Évangélista are favorite ones of Balzac, which he expounded particularly in la Physiologie.

The occasion for madame Évangélista's remarks is the writing of the marriage contract, one of the most important documents in the life of everyone. This document, which seals the financial fate of the two spouses and their descendants, brings out the primitive worst in the participants. While the parents of the couple are each manoeuvring to put their own child in the better position, and the groom is allowed in on the negotiations, the bride must sit outside; it is thought best to keep her in total ignorance of money matters. Balzac emphasizes the point, but allows the reader to draw his own conclusions. Perhaps she is not considered clever enough to take part in the discussions, or perhaps, since her place is in the boudoir or the salon, she is not to mix into affairs that do not concern her. At any rate, it is an insult to the intelligence of the woman, who is considered incapable of controlling her own destiny.

The writing of the contract, is "le plus saint des devoirs."<sup>33</sup> As Paul de Manerville's respectable attorney

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.107.

remarks in Le Contrat de Mariage: "On se marie en Espagne à l'espagnole et comme on veut; mais l'on se marie en France à la française, raisonnablement et comme on peut."<sup>34</sup>

Though it is tragic that a girl's opportunities in the marriage market are directly proportional to the amount of her dowry, and though ideally the whole system should be changed, society in its present form would not allow any of these necessary changes. So, to marry well, one must reasonably try and pick a wife whose other qualities are equally as attractive as her dowry. To marry solely for money is despicable and dangerous because it often leads to an unhappy marriage. Rather, a clever man tries to find a woman who has the best possible balance of good qualities and financial basis.

For, money is very necessary in a marriage. The practical man will not marry a poor girl, because, as they say in the provinces, that would be like marrying hunger and thirst. In poverty, in the constant battle against misery, all dreams die. "La plus belle ambition s'éteint dans le livre de dépense du ménage."<sup>35</sup> This is a simple statement of fact. In the nineteenth century, the economic opportunities were not too broad, and in order to start any business or to get ahead in some way or another, one had to

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.125.

<sup>35</sup>Balzac, Ferragus, Pléiade V, p.30.

have money. Credit was difficult to get and the surest way to have a financial background was to marry it. Balzac is merely opting for the practical solution to a young man's problems.

Having shown the difficulties which attended a girl with insufficient dowry on the marriage market, Balzac continues to describe the fresh problems that picking a suitable groom entails.

It was the author's avowed purpose to show that a jeune fille, left to her own devices, cannot have, because of her lamentably inadequate education, enough discernment to pick well amongst her suitors. But he intended too to show that the success of marriage is usually dependent on parental approval. Fathers, it seems, know best and should be heeded by headstrong daughters who want to succeed in their marital life. While this was the accepted premise in many of his stories, there is a strong feeling of sympathy for those daughters who defied their parents to go their own ways.

Ginevra di Piombo, the fiery daughter of a Corsican baron (La Vendetta), marries in the face of the most violent parental opposition. Her husband is Luigi da Porta, the son of a family who was feuding with the di Piombos. It is ostensibly the fact that Luigi is a member of a family who are arch enemies, which releases the violent anger and the dreadful opposition of Ginevra's father to the match. But the narrator is careful to show that di Piombo is against his daughter's marrying even before he knows who the bridegroom is. He is hostile to the idea that she will leave him and love another man. "O," he cries, "Reste avec nous, reste aupres de ton vieux père. Je ne saurais te voir

aimant un autre homme."<sup>36</sup> He is trying to form a guilt complex in her. He is old and she is abandoning him at the end of his life and with such an unadmirable purpose, to love another another man. He is speaking in his second sentence, not like a father, but like a lover, jealous of anyone else his daughter might love. "Tu n'attendras pas longtemps ta liberté," he says bitterly. He is making her marriage conditional on his death and trying to make a strong connection in her mind between her marriage and the thought of death. And when she insists that she wants to get married; his great pain and bitterness spill over. "Élisa," he cries to his wife, "nous n'avons plus de fille, elle veut se marier."<sup>37</sup> When Piombo finds out that the intended bridegroom is a Porta, he feels himself justified in his bitter opposition to the marriage, and in his terrible wrath, he cuts himself off from his daughter forever. Of course, he leaves her penniless ; at their wedding Ginevra says to her groom: "Nous n'avons d'autre fortune que notre amour."<sup>38</sup> And that is precisely the problem. Here is a perfect illustration of the necessity of money in a ménage. Ginevra and Luigi are both loving and passionate young people and are totally devoted to each other. Their

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<sup>36</sup>Balzac, La Vendetta, Pléiade I, p.895.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.895.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p.907.

spirits are in harmony, and they should be very happy together. But poverty rears its ugly head; the misery in their home becomes so great that eventually they can no longer buy bread, and Ginevra and her baby son starve to death.

If it is Balzac's intention to prove that a girl should always listen to her father in the matter of marriage, he does not succeed here. Ginevra's tragedy is the direct result of her father's foolish obstinateness. Had he been possessed of insight and of fatherly tenderness, had he truly wanted only his daughter's happiness, he would not have allowed her to marry without any sort of financial support. There is no intrinsic harm in Ginevra's choice of husband. Only her father's unreasonable and unreasoning hate causes her death. Piombo is a less likeable character than is his daughter, who pulsates with life. He is a selfish, unbending man, who finally outsmarts himself and causes the death of his beloved Ginevra.

While destruction comes from within the family for Ginevra, H el ene d'Aiglemont's life is shattered by forces completely outside her group. H el ene has special problems. At the age of seven, she pushed her little brother into the swollen Bi evre river. Her action caused by a fit of jealousy, she regrets it bitterly for the rest of her life; her brother drowns. Ever since that day, she has lived with a cloud of guilt over her head. She believes herself to be

a murderer, and her mortal sin has blackened her life from that moment. Though the narrator insists on her constant awareness of this childhood crime, it is hard to believe that a seven year old can fully realize the gravity of her act, nor that her every moment, even after the passing of ten years, was colored by her guilt. It is this guilt that the narrator uses to explain her elopement with the young self-avowed murderer who knocks on the door of the d'Aiglemont household, late one night. When her father calls the night visitor assassin, she feels that it is she who is being named; sympathy for Victor, for that is the name of the young man, strikes a chord in her heart. She feels a strong kinship with him, feels that she is the same kind of person he is and thus believes that she must share his destiny. (La Femme de Trente Ans )

In order to explain H el ene's flight with this totally unknown young man more completely, the narrator emphasizes a mystical closeness which there seems to be between them. Victor looks at H el ene "et son regard remua dans le coeur de cette singuli re jeune fille un monde de pens es encore endormi chez elle... Son  me fut terrass e, subjugu e, sans qu'elle trouv at la force de se d efendre contre le pouvoir magn etique de ce regard ... un regard de serpent."<sup>39</sup>  
The word "serpent" implies treachery. Victor is seducing

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<sup>39</sup>Balzac, La Femme de Trente Ans, Pl eaide II, p.803.

a young girl away from her family and home . Actually though, he has practically no part in this bizarre episode, except to accept her passively as a companion. It is Hé<sup>l</sup>e<sup>n</sup>e who makes the decision to escape with him.

Victor, fugitive from the law, becomes a successful pirate and makes Hé<sup>l</sup>e<sup>n</sup>e very happy aboard his ship. They love each other and find perpetual joy in each other's company. Daughter of a soldier, Hé<sup>l</sup>e<sup>n</sup>e exults in the war-like life aboard their vessel.

For, Hé<sup>l</sup>e<sup>n</sup>e is a majestic creature. Her face conveys an expression of "grandeur, une fermeté majestueuse, un sentiment profond par lequel l'âme la plus grossière devait être impressionnée."<sup>40</sup> She resembles a queen "d'un grand empire au milieu du boudoir dans lequel son amant couronné aurait rassemblé les choses les plus élégantes de la terre."<sup>41</sup> Image of some sea goddess, she is "suave de beauté, riche de bonheur, et faisant pâlir tous les trésors qui l'entouraient devant les trésors de son âme, les éclairs de ses yeux et l'indescriptible poésie exprimée dans sa personne et autour d'elle."<sup>42</sup> She is a personification of power and pride, of triumphant satisfaction and contented womanhood. "Les froides et étroites combinaisons de la société mouraient

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.821.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.822.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.826.

devant ce tableau"<sup>43</sup> of <sup>Aiglemont's</sup> daughter with her husband, and her children tumbling around them.

But H el ene has joined forces with her husband against society's strictures and must therefore be punished. Magnificent creature though she is, she comes to an ignominious end in Les deux rencontres. The author, though, seems to be paying a mere lip service to critics of his moral rectitude who were offended by his happy and successful pirate family and particularly by the portrait of the magnificent H el ene, a murderess and a runaway from home. The moral of the story, "Le bonheur ne se trouve jamais, pour une fille, dans une vie romanesque, en dehors des id ees re ues, et, surtout, loin de sa m ere,"<sup>44</sup> seems tacked on, as does H el ene's terrible death. H el ene and her husband have dared to fight and stand up against established social laws, and no matter how much solidarity Balzac feels with them, society's censure forces him to conform and show a just retribution for anyone stepping outside its bounds.

Ginevra di Piombo and H el ene d'Aiglemont could have been and should have been very happy with their husbands, but someone or some force outside of themselves destroys their lives. There are, however, many marriages in the Com edie Humaine which fail, not because of an outside influence, but because the two spouses do not understand each other

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.826.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.833

and cannot communicate. It is interesting to note that in two of three instances of unmatched couples in the Comédie Humaine, it is the wife who has the superior intellect, while in the third case, the young wife is treated with compassion, though she is at the root of the breakup of the marriage.

The unfortunate young woman who marries a man out of her class is Augustine Guillaume in La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote. Daughter of a bourgeois cloth merchant, she is raised within the narrow confines of her mercantile family. "Sa figure silencieuse et immobile respirait cette mélancolie passagère qui s'empare de toutes les jeunes filles trop faibles pour oser résister aux volontés d'une mère."<sup>45</sup> She is not a sparkling personality; rather she possesses a certain rigidity and inflexibility resulting from her background and training. When she announces to her stunned family that she wishes to marry Théodore de Sommervieux, her father makes a statement which later events prove to be a prophecy: "Pour trouver le bonheur, une femme devait épouser un homme de sa classe."<sup>46</sup>

In spite of great opposition, Augustine marries Théodore. He is a nobleman and an artist who has fallen in love with her pink and white beauty and her air of innocence. Their mutual passion burns bright for a year and they are very happy. But when passion wears off, Augustine has no hold over her husband.

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<sup>45</sup>Balzac, La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Pléiade I, p.26.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.47.

Maitre Guillaume is fond of saying: "...l'amour résistait si peu au tracas du ménage, qu'il fallait trouver l'un chez l'autre des qualités bien solides pour être heureux; il ne fallait que l'un des deux époux en sut plus que l'autre, parce qu'on devait avant tout se comprendre; un mari qui parlait grec et la femme latin, risquaient de mourir de faim."<sup>47</sup> Augustine marries Théodore with blithe irresponsibility. "Incapable de deviner les rudes chocs qui résultent de l'alliance d'une femme aimante avec un homme d'imagination,"<sup>48</sup> she cannot imagine what is happening when the honeymoon atmosphere ends in her home.

Augustine Sommervieux is the same person as Augustine Guillaume has been, "l'ignorante petite fille qui vivait obscurément rue Saint-Denis."<sup>49</sup> Though now she lives in a very different world from the one she grew up in, she has made no effort to acclimatize herself to it. Very conceited by her hold over Théodore, she thinks that his passion is deathless. She knows nothing at all about men, having been brought up in the restricted atmosphere of la maison du chat-qui-pelote. The only two romances she has ever read are the trashy novels the family cook devoured, and they give her a completely distorted view of life. She

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.47.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.35.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.50.

believes fervently that her life will be the continuation of the fairy tale: "And they lived happily ever after".

But they do not live happily or even contentedly. Gradually, Augustine's life becomes a hell. Théodore, who at first laughs at her naïveté and at her social solecisms, begins to be annoyed by them. In the artistic circles that the young couple frequent, Augustine becomes an embarrassment to her husband. "Elle laissa percer son ignorance, l'impropriété de son langage et l'étroitesse de ses idées."<sup>50</sup> Unable to throw off the constricting influence of her upbringing, she moves into her husband's world with a disconcerting inflexibility. She brings with her an air of self-righteousness and a spirit of distrust and suspicion of these bohemian artists. She constitutes a foreign element in their world, never laughing at their jokes, looking clearly shocked at the irreligious opinions being expressed. Augustine is incapable of the hypocrisy which would have allowed her to function in such a crowd.

What is even more pernicious to her marriage is the fact that Augustine is insensitive to the beauties of the art world; when Théodore recognizes this, it is the beginning of the end of the marriage. "Sa femme," he realizes, n'était pas sensible à la poésie, elle n'habitait pas sa sphère, elle ne le suivait pas dans tous ses caprices,

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

dans ses improvisations, dans ses joies, dans ses douleurs; elle marchait terre à terre dans le monde réel, tandis qu'il avait la tête dans les cieux."<sup>51</sup> They are an unbridgeable universe apart. For an artist and his wife to live together in harmony and mutual satisfaction, she has to be a part of his world and of his work. If he is obliged "de refouler sans cesse les plus chères expansions de sa pensée, et de faire rentrer dans le néant les images qu'une puissance magique le force à créer,"<sup>52</sup> because his wife, with whom he should be sharing everything, is by her nature incapable of understanding and taking part in his spiritual world, then eventually some feeling in him towards her will die and he will begin to think of her with a certain coldness.

Théodore fights against the growing antipathy he feels for his wife. At first he hopes that time will teach his Augustine what she has not learned yet. He starts to become secretive with her, judging her incapable of appreciating "les considérations morales qui justifient, à ses propres yeux, la singularité de ses manières envers elle, et se crut fort innocent en lui cachant des pensées qu'elle ne comprenait pas et des écarts peu justifiables au tribunal d'une conscience bourgeoise."<sup>53</sup> He is deluding

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.52.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.52.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.53.

himself about the correctness of his actions; he has taken the first step to the dissolution of the marital bond.

The second step is the betrayal. Instead of staying at home with his wife and child, instead of going into company with Augustine, he begins to go out alone and to the salon of the duchesse de Carigliano, a celebrated coquette. The domesticity of his wife repels him. Her talk of mended linen and unbalanced household books is definitely not in keeping with the "laissez-aller des artistes."<sup>54</sup> When a "good" friend of Augustine's takes it on herself to inform her of the exact nature of the relationship that Théodore has with the duchesse, she falls into a deep despair. Pale and resigned, she walks like a sleepwalker through all manner of gatherings, alive only to the knowledge that Théodore has disdained her love. At first, Augustine lacks the energy to try to do something about the deplorable situation in her home; she is content to let things be and merely broods about them. Though the narrator recognizes that she is to be pitied, he takes a condescending tone to her. Instead of collapsing from "un incroyable désespoir"<sup>55</sup> when her husband addresses something contemptuous to her, she must fight in any way that she can to regain his affections. Recognizing that "il est

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.54.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.54.

des mésalliances d'esprit aussi bien que des mésalliances de mœurs et de rang,"<sup>56</sup> she plucks up her courage and sets out to fill the sizeable gaps in her knowledge. "Aussi osa-t-elle entreprendre à vingt et un ans de s'instruire et de rendre son imagination au moins digne de celle qu'elle admirait."<sup>57</sup> But though she becomes more cultured and less ignorant, though she learns to appreciate music, to understand some literature and to listen with intelligence to the conversations around her, she remains fundamentally the same woman. It is impossible to learn "la légèreté de l'esprit et les grâces de la conversation,"<sup>58</sup> since these are talents one has to be born with or at least taught from the cradle. Neither can she extract from her soul the religious ideas and the prejudices with which she grew up, and these "s'opposèrent à la complète émancipation de son intelligence."<sup>59</sup>

Théodore sees the efforts that she is making to please him and should be touched, but he isn't. He mocks those who praise his wife to him and so frightens his wife, "cette jeune et touchante créature,"<sup>60</sup> that in his presence

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.54.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.55.

she trembles. The burden of guilt for destroying this marriage has shifted from Augustine to Théodore. Though other men are attracted to her, she remains solitary and virtuous. "La fidélité d'Augustine deplut meme à cet infidèle mari, qui semblait l'engager à commetre des fautes en taxant sa vertu d'insensibilité."<sup>61</sup> He is so prejudiced against whatever she does, that he even finds fault with her faithfulness to him. No matter how hard she tries, no matter how completely she suppresses her own individuality and bends herself "aux caprices, aux fantaisies de son mari,"<sup>62</sup> no matter how completely she dedicates herself "à l'égoïsme de sa vanité,"<sup>63</sup> it is all to no avail. Her husband's prévention, prejudice, is too strongly rooted in his heart.

Finally in desperation, Augustine does something which requires "un courage surnaturel"<sup>64</sup> to accomplish; she pays a visit to the duchesse de Carigliano in order to see for herself what great attraction it is that draws her husband there and away from her. This excursion to "the other woman" could only have been undertaken by someone possessing "un coeur aussi pur, aussi vertueux qu'était

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.55.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.62.

le sien."<sup>65</sup> She realizes the futility of her mission when she sees the voluptuous elegance of the duchesse's house. A loving heart is not sufficient to satisfy an artist, she sees. He must have a woman with a strong temperament and a powerful soul. If at least she would have had the same upbringing as the duchesse, she would have started out with equal advantages, but now, it is too late.

The duchesse de Carigliano, the toast of a certain sector of Parisian society, can afford to be generous, and touched by the tears of Augustine, she gives her some very practical advice on how to deal with Théodore. In essence, she tells her that it is necessary always to play a rôle with one's husband, to keep him at a certain distance and to make him grateful for any attentions that she may give him. Augustine is horrified; "faudra-t-il donc dissimuler, calculer, devenir fausse, se faire un caractère artificiel et pour toujours?"<sup>66</sup> She is obviously not going to be able to, and thus, she has lost the battle. The author says that she is "épouvantée"<sup>67</sup> in the face of the reality that life and marriage are a constant struggle of never-ending vigilance. Nevertheless, she goes home with the firm intention to have a showdown with Théodore. Compared to

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p.66.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p.67.

the sheep who are very courageous in the absence of the wolf, she prepares a whole tirade that she will deliver to her erring husband. But as soon as he enters, she is quelled by his terrible eye, and all her prepared words evaporate as dew under the sun. She cannot behave as she should, but rather shows a patient resignation "qui chez les mères et chez les femmes aimantes, surpasse dans ses effets, l'énergie humaine, et révèle peut-être dans le coeur des femmes l'existence de certaines cordes que Dieu a refusées à l'homme."<sup>68</sup> A martyr to her fate, she dies a few years later, destroyed because she, "a humble and modest flower" is transplanted from her native valley, "trop près des cieux, aux regions où se forment les orages, où le soleil est brulant."<sup>69</sup> She is not strong enough to be able to live with the genius of her husband. Had her husband really loved her, he would have appreciated her pathetic efforts at self-improvement and would have cherished her purity and her naïveté. But he needs a wife of whose affections he can never be sure, a wife who can make him jealous, a coquette who knows that one of the cardinal sins in love is to show just how much one loves.

Though Augustine is lacking in the talents necessary to keep Théodore happily at home, she is a victim and as

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p.70.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.71.

such she is to be pitied. While the narrator praises her patient resignation, the truth is that she is much too meek, much too passive, and her inexpertness at the art of sulking is excessive. But it is the husband who is the villain of this story, and it is he who is shown to be a callous person whose fits of anger border on madness.

While Augustine is the "inferior" spouse in her marriage, Balzac, more often than not, makes the woman the superior personality . One such woman who finds herself tied to an inadequate man is Julie d'Aiglemont.

Julie's father has warned her against Victor d'Aiglemont. "Sa gaieté est une gaieté sans esprit, une gaieté de caserne, il est sans talent et dépensier. C'est un de ces hommes que le ciel a créés pour prendre et digérer quatre repas par jour, dormir, aimer la première venue ... il est ignorant, égoïste ...un jour, tu déploreras amèrement sa nullité, son défaut d'ordre, son égoïsme."<sup>71</sup>

Julie's father is a very good judge of character. A short while after her marriage to Victor, Julie finds herself in a very unpleasant position. She has, of necessity, become "le conseil de son mari,"<sup>72</sup> directing his actions and controlling his fortune. In spite of all her desires "(de) repousser le fardeau,"<sup>73</sup> her superiority compels

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<sup>71</sup>Balzac, La Femme de Trente Ans, Pléiade II, p.684-685.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p.706.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p.706.

her to accept it. This influence "contre la nature"<sup>74</sup> humiliates her and causes her a great deal of mental and emotional anguish. She would rather obey a man of talent than lead a fool, and she feels that her rôle has turned her into a monster, a being who is neither man nor woman. A young wife who takes up such a rôle, "abdique toutes les grâces de son sexe en en perdant les malheurs, et n'acquiert aucun privilèges que nos lois ont remis aux plus forts."<sup>75</sup> Femininity depends, it seems, on not doing anything that infringes on the domain of the male; a woman should not get involved with finance or politics or military affairs.

Since it is against nature for a woman to rule her husband by her superior intellect, Julie feels very unhappy in her marriage. Her husband knows that her mind is much better than his, but saves his self-respect by concluding that she is morally and physically weak, which gives him the right to wallow in self-pity. Not at all concerned with her well-being, he throws<sup>to</sup> her, much as one might throw a bone to a dog, "l'amour égoïste des maris."<sup>76</sup> A husband's love is égoïste, a woman's love is unselfish. D'Aiglemont is interested only in his own physical and emotional welfare. In his wife, "il ne voyait (en elle) que

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.707.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p.707.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.707.

la femme,"<sup>77</sup> an insignificant creature. Since he considers her so unimportant, he doesn't concern himself with her emotional well-being, not deigning or not knowing, "injure tout aussi profonde, s'inquiéter de ses plaisirs."<sup>78</sup> The irony of this statement is fully apparent. Julie controls her husband's fortune, and indeed all his affairs, because he is not clever enough to do it himself. He knows that he himself is incapable and would be lost without his wife, and yet, he looks down on her because she is only a woman, after all. Meanwhile, Julie is obliged to smile at her husband and accord him the honor which belongs to the head of the household.

Julie's all-consuming bitterness is a little difficult to understand. She cannot stand the thought that she is the "power behind the throne, the force which controls her husband's affairs. But, for centuries women have always been trying to manipulate their husbands' affairs with more or less success, even while keeping up, as Julie does, the socially necessary pretense of their husband's superiority. It is true that Julie is thrust into the rôle, but just the fact that what she does, she does well, should mitigate her depression at having to do it. It seems that Balzac is too set on emphasizing her essentially feminine nature to accord her any affection for the job of

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p.707.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.707.

of head of the household.

The true source of Julie's desperate unhappiness lies elsewhere, though. The problem dates from the first days of her married life. When Julie's father cautions her against marrying Victor, he says: "...il n'est pas doué de cette délicatesse de coeur qui nous rend esclaves du bonheur d'une femme ...Victor blessera les naïves qualités de ta jeune âme....Un jour, tu déploreras amèrement ...son ineptie en amour."<sup>79</sup> His prophecy comes true.

The first time that Julie is portrayed as a married woman, she is barely recognizable; she has been transformed from a gay and laughing jeune fille into a tired, sickly, apathetic young woman with deep circles under her eyes and tired cheeks. "Elle a l'air aussi stupide que peut l'être celui d'un paysan breton écoutant le prône de son cure."<sup>80</sup> She is perfectly satisfied to sit in silence, not looking at anything or anyone. What is the cause of this dramatic transformation? Balzac at first skirts the subject delicately, only hinting at the awful problem. The first hint comes with a lightening of Julie's tragic air as soon as her husband leaves her to go on army business. He is the origin of her sadness, apparently. The second hint, the sign that there is something radically wrong,<sup>81</sup> in Julie's attitude when she sees that she has made a conquest in

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p.684-685.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p.688.

the young Englishman, lord Arthur Grenville. Instead of being pleased as any other young woman would be, "le regard de Julie fut terne et froid. Son visage indiquait un sentiment de repulsion voisin de l'horreur."<sup>81</sup> She looks, at the moment when she realizes that lord Arthur is coming to see her, like the person to whom the memory of a too present danger is causing great pain. The aunt with whom she is staying at this time, "bien convaincu que sa niece n'aimait pas son neveu, fut stupefaite en découvrant qu'elle n'aimait personne."<sup>82</sup> This is Julie's real problem; she is revolted by the thought of normal marital relations. She admits, when her aunt prompts her, that she feels an indefinable anxiety when Victor is around. She says that she is ashamed of herself because it is torture for her to see Victor made happy by an act which causes her torment, and she accuses herself in secret because she cannot share his pleasures. Who is to blame for this lamentable state of affairs? Balzac charges Victor, who mishandles his bride on their wedding night and turns her whole life into a nightmare. Her aunt recognizes in Julie "une jeune femme à qui l'expérience d'un jour, d'une nuit ... avait suffi pour apprécier la nullité de Victor."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p.695.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.696.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.696.

She tries to explain to Julie that military men take brutality for gallantry, that they <sup>know</sup> practically nothing about women just as they know very little about love, and that they think that since they may die in battle any day, they can dispense with the consideration that is owing to a woman. The narrator thus, very emphatically, lays the blame for these difficulties at Victor's door and absolves Julie from any imperfections. The situation never improves because the aunt, who would have taught Julie how to overcome her problems, dies suddenly. Besides, "la perfection même de son caractère (de Julie) s'opposait à ce qu'elle osât se soustraire à ses devoirs, ou tenter de rechercher la cause de ses douleurs; car les faire cesser eût été chose trop délicate: Julie aurait craint d'offenser sa pudeur de jeune fille."<sup>84</sup>

The reader is never told exactly what caused this terrible trauma in Julie. From the information given, it is difficult to understand why Julie is so repelled. She admits that she loves Victor, that he loves her, and their love should count for something. (This is at the beginning of their marriage and she has not yet found out about his incapacity and incapacities.) And yet, when he comes looking for her, she wants to flee. One is inclined to think differently from Balzac and conclude that there is something wrong with Julie, some mental disorder which

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p.704.

ruins her marital life. The fact that she doesn't discuss her problem with her husband, of course, is the result of education given to the young girls of the day. They were imbued with a maidenly modesty which was characteristic of many women for the duration of their lives. Julie is not to be blamed, thus, for her reticence.

The young woman who encounters the type of problem that Julie has, is rarer in the Comédie Humaine than the wife who has to battle another woman for her husband's affections.

Sabine de Grandlieu marries Calyste du Guénic (Beatrix) knowing full well that his heart is full of another woman. He was and still is in love with an older woman, Beatrix de Rochefide, but Sabine marries him anyway. She is young, beautiful and charming and could have her pick of youthful suitors. It is possible that she is in love with Calyste, though she knows that he doesn't love her. She even goes through the degrading procedure of dressing to resemble Beatrix for the occasion of the signing of the marriage contract. One wonders that she is willing so to abase herself in order to find a sort of perverse favor in Calyste's eyes.

Calyste is convinced to marry her by her resemblance to Beatrix and by the very generous marriage settlement a gift from Félicité des Touches. Félicité has left her fortune to Sabine; she believes that Sabine will make Calyste a

good wife and will make him forget Béatrix.

Marriage however, does not change Calyste's emotional state. Sabine finds herself "le garde-malade d'un coeur,"<sup>85</sup> a situation which seems to have been quite common according to Balzac. Calyste doesn't trouble to conceal his feelings from his bride and tells her in the coach that is taking them on their honeymoon, that it would be best if they start their life together as they are sure to end up; they will be like brother and sister and not, he implies, like lovers. This callous suggestion seems to be made in the best of faith. Calyste apparently believes that Sabine, too, has made a marriage of convenience just as he has. Sabine is very hurt by his remark, but she says nothing; her effort to control herself is evident in her "petit rire forcé." <sup>86</sup>

Sabine is a sophisticated young woman "de l'école de mademoiselle Louise de Chaulieu,"<sup>87</sup> who lent herself "aux combinaisons inventées par mademoiselle des Touches pour la marier."<sup>88</sup> Her mother has given her very pertinent advice on how to conduct herself with her husband. She is to act "grande, noble, digne et fière pour obtenir de Calyste

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<sup>85</sup>Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 526.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 524.

des sentiments qui ne seraient sujets à aucun changement dans la vie, (c'est-à-dire) l'estime et la considération."<sup>89</sup> But in spite of all this, Sabine is unable to control herself, unable to put a rein on her feelings, and she shows Calyste how much she loves him. She abandons herself to her love and acts, not with the dignity of a woman who knows that she deserves consideration, but with an abandon which is "un peu trop fille."<sup>90</sup>

Sabine loves Calyste so much that she loses her perspective, loses what self-esteem she has had and becomes his slave. She loves him, she remarks, with the devotion of a mother who finds that everything her son does is fine, even if he beats her a little. She, like Augustine Guillaume, finds it practically impossible to play with him, to be a coquette, to be, sometimes, a little hard on him. She can't play at war when her heart is full of love. "Calyste," she says, "fera de moi tout ce qu'il voudra ... je ne tiens pas contre un regard de mon seigneur."<sup>91</sup> This attitude is going to lead to much trouble for Sabine.

Lulled by her love, Sabine gets the first cruel shock when she realizes that Calyste occasionally pretends that she is Béatrix, even in their most intimate moments.

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 525.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 525.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 534.

She is disgusted by the idea. "Mais," she cries, "c'est une prostitution! Je ne suis plus moi, j'ai honte."<sup>92</sup> She feels the bitterness of a "retrospective adultery."

In truth, Calyste thinks of his marriage as he has always thought of it, as a marriage of convenience. Sabine of course, thinks of it as a love match. He is "un bel indifférent,"<sup>93</sup> cold to Sabine and inconsiderate of her feelings, while she is a warm and loving soul. He is perhaps unaware of Sabine's love, but that doesn't excuse his callous behavior to her.

Once back in Paris after their honeymoon, Calyste joins a set of young noblemen who abandon their wives, "les plus nobles et les plus belles créatures,"<sup>94</sup> for the pleasures of cards, smoking and horseracing. He is thus gradually weaned away from the little bit of closeness to Sabine which developed on their honeymoon and is easy prey for Béatrix who happens to catch sight of him one evening at the Opéra.

Béatrix is now une femme abandonnée and she is only too glad to see Calyste. Calyste is more than pleased to meet her; all his old feelings for her are awakened and are intensified by his wish to escape from the domestic-

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p.537.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p.539.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p.540.

ty of married life, which to him represents duty and boredom. All of Sabine's ineffable tenderness cannot compete against one look from Béatrix's eyes. What attraction does she, a dried out woman of thirty-six have for a young man like Calyste? Balzac attempts to explain it thus: There are natures so noble that they tire of any nature which is similar to their own. They look, not for nobility in their partner, but for some fault of character or of personality. They want a partner who is inferior to them. They are searching for the excitement of moral decadence, for someone to whom they can feel superior. Sabine is so irreproachable that Calyste cannot deploy any of his hidden forces to protect her. He turns therefore to Béatrix, a social outcast who needs him.

Cheating does not come easily to Calyste. He knows that he is the object of a cult; his wife idolizes him, and he finds it difficult to lie convincingly to her. But he gradually becomes more expert, inventing dinner dates and card parties to lull her suspicions. She however feels that he is betraying her and when she has proof that he is spending his time at the comtesse de Rochefide's, the shock almost kills her. Calyste is so caught up in Béatrix's toils that even when his wife lies on the edge of death, he refuses to stop seeing his mistress.

Sabine recovers from her illness and resolves that she will win Calyste back with excessive sweetness, "par un

tendresse d'agneau pascal."<sup>95</sup> Of course, this is not the way to do it, but Sabine is untutored in the coquetterie which would catch Calyste's interest. She has not developed any of the wiles and strategy any normally intelligent girl would have, but remains a bit frozen in the attitude she has always had, an attitude of purity and submissiveness. She spends her time primping for Calyste, trying to lure him back with exotic meals and humility. Every failure she has, breaks her down a little bit more, and one can see the chagrin growing and the bitterness eating away at her life and corroding her being. In her eyes, there is only humility, but in her heart there is death. Finally, she gives up her battle for Calyste and admits to her mother that her life holds no more attraction for her; she would like to die.

The duchesse de Grandlieu is a great lady and a clever one. She sees that something drastic must be done in order to save Sabine's marriage and her life. When she tells her daughter that she will take care of the matter, Sabine's remarks make it obvious to what depths she has sunk. She cries: "Cela fera du chagrin à Calyste?" Her sister echoes the reader's sentiments when she answers: "Oh! mon Dieu! serai-je donc aussi bête que cela!"<sup>96</sup> Calyste is killing her with his cruel behavior and she is

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p.563.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p.568.

worrying about causing him the slightest chagrin. She has lost her perspective entirely and is not thinking quite rationally. If not for her mother, she most probably would end her days as does Augustine Guillaume, dead at the age of twenty seven of a broken heart.

Of course, there are, in the Comédie Humaine, one or two young wives who are clever enough and intelligent enough to lure their husbands back to hearth and home with their strategies. One such woman is the comtesse de Soulanges (La Paix du Ménage), a blue eyed beauty whose husband has left her to pine at home for a year, while he is out with his mistress, the ravishing madame de Vaudremont. With just a little prodding from a world-wise aunt, madame de Soulanges consents to dance with a handsome young officer in order to make her husband jealous. She manages the whole thing very adroitly, succeeds in inflaming him, and he realizes the error of his ways and comes back to her.

Balzac is the champion of womanhood in these works, denouncing the husband as callous, cold and even cruel, but finding the wife naïve, trusting and loving. He feels compassion for the woman who is not capable of the machiavelian instinct for politics, nor of the falseness which requires her to show a cold face when her heart is agonizing inside. He never blames her for any of the qualities which might be regarded detrimental to her marriage.

Balzac is intent on showing that most marriages are failures. He sees the young married woman as a most unfortunate creature, unfortunate because her education doesn't prepare her to cope with a husband, unfortunate because the fact that she is a woman presupposes her inferiority and unfortunate because she must compensate this inferiority by bringing to the marriage a large dowry.

It is mostly the woman too, who brings to the marriage a wealth of love which is, more often than not, unreciprocated.

The husband usually only marries for money. There are many instances in the Comédie Humaine of young men whose only concern in marrying is the lucrative gain. Most, like Victurnien d'Esgrignon, who weds a rich bourgeoisie, have nothing more to do with their wives after the wedding. A wife's place is in the home, where she can sit and watch helplessly while her husband goes out and dissipates her fortune.

Balzac recommends the instituting of a dowryless society in order to give marriage as an institution more of a possibility of success. "Le mariage," he says, "implique des convenances d'humeur, des sympathies physiques, des concordances de caractère qui font de cette nécessité sociale un éternel problème."<sup>97</sup> If these are missing, there is

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<sup>97</sup>Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.522-523.

is nothing. It is the lack of these elements which make failures of most of the marriages in the Comédie Humaine.

Women always cry at weddings, says Balzac, because they are aware of the risks. Men always smile because they think that they are risking nothing and can only gain. They are both right. Many women spend their married years like Augustine Guillaume, crying bitterly at their husband's desertion, while many of the men are out in the world, enjoying their lives.

Very rarely, a young couple actually marry from mutual love, but that love is usually doomed. Some outer force will destroy their happiness. There is no future for happiness in marriage, Balzac suggests, especially a happiness based on mutual passion.

### Chapter Three

#### Happiness in marriage and motherhood

Tu as fait ton destin  
 au lieu d'être son  
 jouet.  
 (Mémoires de Deux  
 jeunes Mariées)

Since the Comédie Humaine is meant to be a faithful picture of a society, and since it is to be assumed that in every society there do exist at least a minimum of happy marriages, Balzac probably felt it to be necessary to include in his novels a few descriptions of ménages which could be classified as happy, and to analyze what makes them so.

There are fleeting glimpses, in the Balzacian universe, of domestic felicity. Such couples as Virginie and Joseph Lebas (La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote), Ève and David Séchard (Illusions Perdues) and Césarine and Anselme Popinot (César Birotteau) embody ideals of quiet contentment. Mostly members of the bourgeoisie, their lives are spent against a background of commerce or trade. These couples love each other with a calm love, mostly devoid of the ravages of searing passions. In describing these marriages, the author gives the credit for their success to the wife, but doesn't analyze her role in this success. It is only in Ferragus that he attempts to explain to the reader just how it is possible for a woman to create and sustain a happy home life.

When Clémence Desmarets marries her Jules (Ferragus), he is a poor clerk. Poor also, she is of unknown parentage, but Jules doesn't care. A short while after the marriage, Jules is mysteriously helped to become a stockbroker and very quickly becomes one of the richest men in his company. Later in the tale, the reader finds out that this help has originated from Ferragus, the ex-convict who is really Clémence's father. It is significant that Balzac has chosen to endow Clémence and Jules with a fortune whose source is actually Clémence. This is either a disguised dowry or it is meant to show that the origin of benediction in a household is the wife.

Clémence seems to be the ideal woman. Her great beauty is a reflection of the loveliness of her spirit. Her virtue, her "grâce décente" and her "imposante sainteté"<sup>1</sup> are admired by all the men of her acquaintance. "Cette femme était vraiment digne d'inspirer un de ces amours platoniques qui se rencontrent comme des fleurs au milieu de ruines sanglantes ..." <sup>2</sup> Her appeal is a very innocent appeal; she does not set out lures for any men, but moves in society, cocooned in the knowledge of her virtue.

The happiness of Jules and Clémence is perfect. They love each other with a deep passion "qui résistait

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<sup>1</sup>Balzac, Ferragus, Pléiade V, p.21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.21.

au mariage,"<sup>3</sup> a thing which is very unusual in the Balzacian universe. "Pour tout exprimer en un mot, il se prirent sans honte tous deux par la main, au milieu du monde, comme deux enfants, frère et soeur, qui veulent traverser une foule où chacun leur fait place en les admirant."<sup>4</sup> They share a purity of spirit and of sentiment which is child like in its innocence.

Clémence goes to great pains to keep their love burning brightly. She creates a luxurious atmosphere in her home, "un luxe qui allait si bien à l'amour."<sup>5</sup> Her room is "une chambre coquette,"<sup>6</sup> and she herself is often more elegant at home than in public. Her aim is to please her husband: "Elle aimait à ne se parer que pour son mari, voulant lui prouver ainsi que, pour elle, il était plus que le monde."<sup>7</sup>

Since love is fed by illusions, Clémence is at great pains not to shatter any that her husband may have about her. She never allows him into the dressing room where she divests herself of her ballgown and whence she issues, tall and stately, ready for the night and "mystérieusement

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.31.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.30.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.61.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.61.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.32.

parée."<sup>8</sup> Other women, remarks the author, are impatient for sleep and drop their clothes on the floor, scatter their wilted bouquets and worn shoes all over the room, caring little that their husbands see all the underpinnings of their elegant parures and coiffures. "Plus de mystères, tout tombe alors devant le mari, plus de fard pour le mari."<sup>9</sup> All the artifices which a woman uses to carefully build the false picture that she shows of herself to the world, all lie strewn about on the floor, under the repelled at first and then bored, eye of her husband. Clémence, on the other hand, goes to enormous pains to see that this does not happen in her marriage. Inspired by true love, she is willing to work to invest strength and patience in the small details which perpetuate love. She proves, too, by her actions that she has a very attractive self-respect. "Ces devoirs, ne procèdent-ils pas d'ailleurs d'une dignité personnelle qui sied à ravir?...N'est-ce pas respecter en soi l'être aimé?"<sup>10</sup> Jules believes it is and his love grows every day. Her admirable "entente du métier de femme"<sup>11</sup> is the secret behind Jules's suffering "avec

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.61.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.63.

délices les bonheurs de sa fidélité."<sup>12</sup>

Jules too is an exemplary man, a man of high personal dignity and nobility of heart. The love he bears for Clémence, like the love she bears for him, is true, pure and happy.

Given the character of the two protagonists, the story does not follow a logical line to its conclusion. Clémence, the most faithful of wives, is suspected of infidelity by her husband; she dies in a few short days because she cannot bear his odium. Of no consequence is the fact that Jules admits that his suspicions are unfounded and that he is deeply sorry for the hurt he has caused her; the reconciliation comes too late. It is difficult to believe that such a misunderstanding can cause so precipitate a death in a wordly young woman. Human beings are made of more resilient stuff. But Balzac is resolved to show that even such a seemingly perfect husband as Jules, is quick to suspect his very innocent and blameless wife. He plays the role of the villain in this story, while she nobly forgives him with a "délicatesse de mère, délicatesse d'ange."<sup>13</sup> She, the accused, is really the innocent victim, while he, the accuser, is in reality guilty of the foulest murder. The happiness of this couple is shattered only

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.63.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.100.

because of the self-centeredness, impatience and intolerance of the husband. (Balzac does mention that this is the second incident of something irregular in the marriage. Jules has killed a man who besmirched the name of his wife. The author doesn't claim this to be a mitigating circumstance for Jules's suspicions in this case. He merely offers the information to make his behavior more understandable.)

Jules's and Clémence's marriage seems to be perfect until the final disaster, but in reality it is doomed as are all marriages in the Balzacian universe which are not a blend of affection and reason. Félicien Marceau comments that for marriage to succeed in the Comédie Humaine, it is necessary for the spouses to have some sort of goal, some project for social or familial utility.<sup>14</sup> Everything is too perfect in the Desmarets marriage; they have nothing to strive for. It is also significant that they have no children. "Je me sens contente de ne pas avoir d'enfant," says Clémence to her husband, "et (je) n'en souhaite point. Je me sens plus épouse que mère."<sup>15</sup> She has not yet reached the stage where she would bemoan her childlessness.

In contrast to Clémence, Balzac has created Renée de Maucombe. Renée is one of the rare women in the Comédie

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<sup>14</sup>Félicien Marceau, Balzac and his World (New York: Orion Press, 1966), p.265.

<sup>15</sup>Balzac, Ferragus, Pléiade V, p.64.

Humaine who painstakingly succeeds in building a satisfying and happy marriage from the most unpromising elements. The credit for her success is all her own. As she tells her story in Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, her husband is only incidental in the scheme of things and a puppet in her hands.

Renée is a remarkable person. Raised in a Carmelite convent, she ought to be a very sheltered and naïve young lady. Instead, she is an extremely knowing and natural individual. She has no illusions about her possibilities; either she marries Louis de l'Estorade who is willing to wed her without a dowry or she must return to the convent forever. Louis is thirty seven years old, she but seventeen. He has just returned, a broken man, from long years in Russian captivity. Prematurely aged by his extended suffering, he is really just a shell of a man, desperately thin, with eyes sunken in their sockets. Prematurely grey, he is also prematurely deaf. And perhaps worst of all, suffering has imparted a greyish tinge to his face and to his outlook on life. Though he seems to be a bad marriage risk, Renée agrees to marry him. She makes her decision coldly and resolutely; he is the best that she can hope for and she sheds no tears of self pity or of frustration.

Marceau says that Renée has in her character "that

greatness of soul and ambition that is one of the recognizable traits of Balzac's best characters."<sup>16</sup> She has the greatness of soul to accept what fate has meted out for her and the ambition to undertake the great job of rehabilitating Louis and of building a good life for them both.

Like Cl  mence, Ren  e works hard to create an ambiance of beauty in her home. She, too, knows the importance of surroundings to set the proper mood in her relationship with her husband. And she is careful, too, of her appearance always appearing fresh and well-groomed. But if Cl  mence dedicates her existence only to pleasing her husband in such frivolous ways, Ren  e has a broader ambition in life. "Nous avons," she writes, "des terres    faire valoir, une demeure    orner,    embellir; j'ai un int  rieur    conduire et    rendre aimable, un homme    r  concilier avec la vie. J'aurai sans doute une famille    soigner, des enfants      lever."<sup>17</sup>

Ren  e attacks her assigned tasks with a vigor and an energy that never flag. Her first task is to insure the stability of her marriage. She begins by consoling "ce jeune homme sans jeunesse"<sup>18</sup> who is her husband, Louis. "La t  che de faire croire au bonheur un pauvre homme qui

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<sup>16</sup>Marceau, p.122.

<sup>17</sup>Balzac, M  moires de Deux jeunes Mari  es, Pl  iade I, p.168.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.153.

a été le jouet des tempêtes est une belle oeuvre."<sup>19</sup> Her job is made easier by the fact that Louis, who has been starved of feminine companionship for years, has no difficulty falling in love with her. He is moreover grateful that such a young and pretty girl is willing to marry him and that she cares so much about making him happy.

She works hard to change Louis into the man he would have been had not his Russian captivity soured him. She lightens the mood and the atmosphere in her house. She plays the coquette. "Une femme doit avoir les charmes d'une maîtresse,"<sup>20</sup> she cleverly realizes. She sets out to try and preserve Louis's illusions about her. And she resolves to deal with him so that he never becomes bored. A man must have "de l'incertitude dans les plaisirs,"<sup>21</sup> so that he be always interested and tantalized.

It is partly to this end that Renée asks Louis not to force her to live with him immediately after the marriage, but rather to wait until she comes to him of her own free will. Other reasons for this request include her desire not to submerge her personality in his; she wants to remain an independently thinking and feeling individual. Primarily however, it is to give her sufficient time to

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.168.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.184.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.184.

get to know and like him and maybe even love him.

Throughout the novel, Renée reiterates that she doesn't love Louis even though he loves her. But if one traces her remarks about her relationship with him, one gets a different picture. After a few months of marriage, she comments, "Maintenant, je suis presque heureuse ... Insensiblement je me suis habituée à lui."<sup>22</sup> When she looks at him, she sees a lover, "dont les paroles m'allaient à l'âme."<sup>23</sup> Touched by his love, she finally decides to give herself to him. Her happiness is overwhelming. "Sache cependant," she says, describing the moment to Louise, her friend, "que rien n'a manqué de ce que veut l'amour le plus délicat, ni de cet imprévu qui est, en quelque sorte, l'honneur de ce moment-là; les grâces mystérieuses que nos imaginations lui demandent, l'entraînement qui excuse, le consentement arraché, les voluptés idéales longtemps entrevues et qui nous subjuguent l'âme avant que nous nous laissions aller à la réalité, toutes les séductions y étaient avec leurs formes enchanteresses."<sup>24</sup> This is not the rapture of a woman of a woman to whom her husband is indifferent. Clearly then, her marriage is no longer only one of convenience, but rather one "auquel," as she says, "je puisse donner

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.185.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.185.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.185.

un consentement entier."<sup>25</sup> She feels a great liking for Louis, she says. Passion, she believes, is not necessary for a happy marriage. "Aussi ne faut-il pour faire un mariage heureux que cette amitié, qui en vue de ses douceurs, cède sur beaucoup d'imperfections humaines."<sup>26</sup>

Renée is contented with her marriage and eventually finds happiness. "Si je n'ai pas l'amour," she asks, "pourquoi ne pas chercher le bonheur?"<sup>27</sup> She finds a quiet joy in being able to nurture the love that Louis has for her. "Être le principe constant du bonheur d'un homme quand cet homme le sait et mêle de la connaissance à l'amour ...cette certitude développe dans l'âme une force qui dépasse celle de l'amour le plus entier."<sup>28</sup> And later she notes that Louis' joy "est si profonde qu'elle ...jette ses reflets jusque sur moi. Je le trompe," she continues, "par le sourire ou par le regard plein de satisfaction que me cause la certitude de lui donner le bonheur."<sup>29</sup> It seems that her pleasure in his joy is proof of her very deep affection for him, in spite of the fact that she admits that "son amour est actif et ma tendresse est

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.183.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.181.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.181.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.186.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.209-210.

abstraite."<sup>30</sup> Actually though, her affection for Louis spurs Renée to work hard at keeping him happy. She creates activities for him as well in order to keep him occupied, as she says, "pour le distraire de moi, au nom de son propre bonheur."<sup>31</sup> A wife should be always a little inaccessible to her husband she believes.

Renée seems to personify the brains of the marriage, while Louis represents its heart. She strives to turn Louis into a superior human being and she succeeds. But she does it without offending his sensibilities or hurting his pride. She knows "que l'influence d'une femme doit être entièrement secrète,"<sup>32</sup> and she only advises and teaches Louis in the privacy of their room, in not, it should be added, a supercilious manner. She never makes him feel inferior even though she is fully aware of his faults. In effect, she is the power in the marriage, because "dans la solitude où nous vivons, si une femme ne commande pas, le mariage devient insupportable en peu de temps."<sup>33</sup> But she believes that since marriage is like a constantly ongoing chess game, a woman must never reveal her innermost thought and feelings, but must be what Louise calls, "un

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.209.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.201.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p.184.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.184.

ministre en corset."<sup>34</sup>

Renée is ambitious and does her best to infuse some of her drive into Louis. She makes her love contingent upon his success. He must become a deputy "sous peine de perdre mon estime et mon affection."<sup>35</sup> With this punishment held over his head, Louis does his best to please her and attains quite a respectable position.

Years after her marriage, Renée glories in the idea that she has helped transform "un fragile, un secret, un pauvre bonheur" into something "durable, riche et mystérieux."<sup>36</sup> The love that Renée bears for her husband, for love it is no matter he disclaimers to the contrary, is a gentle emotion, not related to the stormy passions of a Louise; ultimately, it is a more lasting and richer experience.

There is a strong element of maternal feeling in Renée's affection for Louis. She says that when they are alone, her pet name for him is mon enfant. She notes that she lends herself to his illusions "comme une mère ...se brise pour procurer un plaisir à son enfant."<sup>37</sup> Since Balzac's first and perhaps only true love was madame de Berny, a woman twenty or so years older than he was, he

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p.186.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.209.

was keenly aware of the quality of a quasi-maternal love, and he valued it above all other types. Renée seems to cherish her husband and look after him with same love a mother lavishes on the child who is not as successful nor as talented as her other offspring. Her dedication, her devotion has the same selfless quality a mother's love has.

The emotions that Louis evokes in Renée's breast are amplified and completed by the sentiments that the birth of her first child awakens. She is deeply grateful to him for having made her a mother. "Je ne sais si cette tendresse, si cette reconnaissance dégagée de tout intérêt ne va pas au-delà de l'amour."<sup>38</sup> In fact, "il y a je ne sais quoi de religieux et de divin dans l'affection que porte une mère à celui de qui procèdent ces longues, ces éternelles joies."<sup>39</sup>

Motherhood brings Renée the greatest joys as it does to other mothers in the Comédie Humaine.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p.249.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.249.

La famille belle oeuvre  
 des femmes ...  
 Dieu c'est un grand  
 coeur de mere.  
 (Mémories de  
Deux jeunes Mariées)

Balzac's feelings about mothers are necessarily ambivalent. He strongly disliked his own mother. She was rather a cold woman, at least towards him, and what affection she was capable of, she lavished on her other son. Balzac was put out to nurse in the country and was only brought home at the age of four. Soon after, he was packed off to a boarding school where he stayed for long years. He practically never saw his mother and felt the bitterness of her rejection. Reading his correspondence, one often has the feeling that he hated her passionately throughout his life.

There are a number of portraits of unsympathetic and even cruelly cold mothers in the Comédie Humaine. As soon as their children are born, they hand them over to nurses and governesses. As far as they are concerned, others can raise them. A good example of such a mother is the duchesse de Chaulieu and her non-relationship with her daughter Louise (Mémories de Deux jeunes Mariées).

On the opposite end of the scale, there are the devoted mothers who dedicate themselves to loving and raising their children. Balzac may have created these mothers as antitheses and as therapy for the wounds that

he suffered because of his mother's callousness. These are the mothers that he would have liked to have.

In order to find any pretty scenes of motherhood, comments Marceau, it is necessary to look at the studies of women who live in the provinces or in the countryside. Women like madame de Mortsau and madame du Guénic personify the maternal spirit. The Parisian aristocracy did not indulge overmuch in the luxury of mother's love.

Renée de l'Estorade, the reasonable and reasoning wife in Mémoires de Deux Jeunes Mariées is the personification of motherhood. She decides, at the tender age of seventeen, that her greatest pleasure in life will be in the children that she will bear. Renée reads Bonald and she, like him, considers the family to be the most important social unit, as does Balzac. (In the Avant-Propos, Balzac declares: "Aussi regardé-je la Famille et non l'Individu comme le véritable élément social."<sup>40</sup>) Of course, it is the woman who bears the children and it is her job to mold the family and hold it together. This, according to Renée, is her true calling in life. As the Christian feminists said: "Une fois mère, elle pourra remplir sa véritable mission: jouer le rôle (auquel toute sa nature la destine) de l'éducatrice de l'humanité enfant."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Balzac, Avant Propos de la Comédie Humaine, Pléiade I, p. 9.  
<sup>41</sup>Le Conseiller des Femmes, 2 août 1834 quoted in Abensour Le Féminisme sous le règne de Louis Philippe (Paris: Plon, 1903), p. 87.

Renée has accepted, with admirable calm, the fact that passionate love is rather more a chimera than a reality in marriage. In her convent days, she dreamt of filling her days and her nights with great passions, but <sup>that</sup> now, she realizes the impossibility of those dreams, she has to find another outlet for her energies. "...(Je) voudrais être mère, ne fût-ce que pour donner une pâture à la dévorante activité de mon âme.... La maternité est une entreprise à laquelle j'ai ouvert un crédit énorme...elle est chargée de déployer mon énergie et d'agrandir mon coeur, de me dédommager par des joies illimitées...là est tout mon avenir, et, chose effrayante, celui de ma vertu."<sup>42</sup> Motherhood is to compensate her for the destruction of her girlhood illusions. In her children, she hopes to find the happiness that life has deprived her of until now.

Renée's piercing joy when she first feels the child within her move, surpasses her highest expectations. "La maternité, n'est-ce pas la nature dans sa joie?"<sup>43</sup> she asks. And a later later, she continues:"La maternité, n'est-ce pas à la fois une passion, un besoin, un sentiment, un devoir, une nécessité, le bonheur?" A child fills her life, enriches it and makes it infinitely more meaningful. "Quand une femme est mère, elle déploie alors seulement ses forces, elle pratique les devoirs de sa vie, elle en a

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<sup>42</sup>Balzac, Mémoires de Deux Jeunes Mariées, p.209-210.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.239.

tous les bonheurs et tous les plaisirs."<sup>44</sup>

From the time that her children are born, Renée's every thought and every action is dedicated to their welfare. She pushes Louis into politics so that her children's father might occupy a high position. She begs favors from her friend Louise, daughter of a ducal family, who has the influence to advance her husband's career. She deprives herself to amass fortunes for her children's future. The great events of her life, as she once says, are the plain, everyday childish occurrences that form the fabric of family life: the baby's teething problems, grazed knees and lost hair ribbons. Renée's total contentment with her life shines from her eyes. "La joie d'une mère est une lumière qui jaillit jusque sur l'avenir, et le lui éclaire, mais qui se reflète sur le passé pour lui donner le charme des souvenirs."<sup>45</sup>

Renée believes that there is no really meaningful life for a woman except as a mother. "Voilà la vie particulière de la femme."<sup>46</sup> Balzac, too, believes that "une femme qui n'est pas mère est un être incomplet et manqué."<sup>47</sup> Sterility is abhorrent to the author. The tragedy of a childless

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.250-251.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.249.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.250.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.251.

woman is explored in the history of Louise de Chaulieu, Renée's friend and counterpoint. Desperately longing for a child, even though her marital life is a happy one, she writes to Renée: "Oui, tu es heureuse, tu as sagement accompli les lois de la vie sociale tandis que je suis en dehors de tout. Il n'y a que des enfants aimants et aimés qui puissent consoler une femme de la perte de sa beauté."<sup>48</sup> Once Louise has reached a certain age, she has nothing; Renée has her children and the satisfaction of knowing that she has created and nurtured the greatest social entity, the family.

Motherhood reconciles Nature and Society. "...la Société se trouve avoir enrichi la Nature, elle a augmenté le sentiment maternel par l'esprit de famille, par la continuité du nom, du sang, de la fortune."<sup>49</sup>

Renée lives a happy and fulfilled life. The quiet and satisfying love that Louis and she feel for each other is enriched by their goals for their family. The purpose of her life is to raise her family well. Maternity to her is "une de ces choses simples, naturelles, fertiles, inépuisables, comme celles qui sont les éléments de la vie."<sup>50</sup>

Balzac once said that he would rather live a day with

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.308.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.

Louise than a year with Renée. Louise, who personifies carefree love, is a much warmer person than Renée who calls herself Devotion. Renée's constant calculation makes her an unnatural and unspontaneous person. Her every motion has been planned ahead. She calculates exactly how to act with her husband, precisely what she can tell him and what she cannot. Her lack of emotion when she decides to marry Louis inspires pity of a woman who does not feel but rather reasons. This very pragmatic way of deciding her future is not usually the way a seventeen year old thinks, certainly not a young girl whose whole experience in life has consisted of the rather restricted atmosphere of a Carmelite convent. The wisdom of her choice and the wisdom of her entire behavior which become apparent with the passing of time, are rather surprising in such a young girl, as is the strength of her personality and the courage she shows to stick to her resolutions. In order to prevent her from becoming overwhelming, Balzac felt it imperative to show some of the little cracks in the veneer. Renée sometimes sheds tears of self-pity when she reads Louise's letters detailing her gay Parisian life, but the tears dry very quickly and she goes back to being her devoted and capable self.

Renée's truest feelings, when she shows what she feels

in the depths of her heart, are in relation to her children. Her absolute, selfless devotion is a quality that Balzac associates with the best mothers.

Of course, each of the mothers in the Comédie Humaine has different traits and each approaches the task of being a mother in a distinctive way.

Madame Fanny du Guénic in Béatrix is the mother of a twenty year old son, Calyste, though she is still very young herself. She is "une de ces sylphides, forte de tendresse... douce comme la musique de sa voix, pure comme était le bleu de ses yeux..."<sup>51</sup> A loyal and loving wife to her elderly husband, she tries hard to make his life comfortable. "Quand vous verrez une femme déployant dans la vie intérieure la coquetterie ...croyez-le, elle est aussi noble mère que noble épouse."<sup>52</sup> A woman who is tender to her husband will be tender to her children as well. This is because a woman who loves her husband will necessarily love the children that she has from her husband, because she will see in them the characteristics of their father. (The opposite of this is also true: A woman like the duchesse de Chaulieu who feels nothing for her husband, treats her children with the same coldbloodedness that she shows her husband.)

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<sup>51</sup>Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.338.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.338.

As a woman, Fanny has most admirable qualities. "Elle a compris ses obligations de femme, elle a dans l'âme et dans la tendresse les élégances de son extérieur, elle fait le bien en secret, elle sait adorer sans calcul, elle aime ses proches, comme elle aime Dieu, pour eux-mêmes."<sup>53</sup> Her face expresses "l'inaltérable douceur, la tendresse infinie des anges."<sup>54</sup> And like an angel, she has been in some ways removed from life; she is naïve and would be very shocked at much that goes on outside the confines of her narrow circle.

Fanny's only child, Calyste, is a noble creature whose education has been lovingly controlled by his mother. Calyste has the misfortune to fall in love with his neighbor, Félicité des Touches. Félicité, who is a writer known as Camille Maupin, has a life style which is completely foreign to Fanny. A woman of "mœurs équivoques"<sup>55</sup> who haunts the theater and fraternizes with artists, a woman who never attends church, a profligate spender, she is, in short, everything that is repulsive to Fanny.

The author traces Fanny's mental struggles and anguish as she tries to accept Calyste's love for Félicité. Her heartache is doubled, for she is hurt also by the fact

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.338.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.339.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.358.

that she has been displaced in her son's heart. She is, says Marceau, just a little bit in love with Calyste herself. When she sees that Calyste has ceased to be a child dependent on her, she is very sad. "Cette phase dans la vie de l'homme, est un des maux de la maternité."<sup>56</sup> The fact that he loves "une baladine... une femme qui le trompera et le rendra malheureuse,"<sup>57</sup> is salt upon her wounds. Nevertheless, Fanny does all that she can to help him succeed in wooing Félicité; she loves him too much to try to deprive him of his love. "Les mères n'aiment pas à maudire," she says, "et je ne maudirais pas la femme qui aimerait bien mon Calyste."<sup>58</sup> Though her actions in helping Calyste along with his affair go strictly against the grain, Fanny is willing to do anything that will make him happy. She puts her high moral principles into abeyance, closes her eyes to the shocking happenings at les Touches and allows Calyste to visit there often.

It must be noted that Fanny has never been in love as Calyste is now in love. She realizes that she is totally ignorant in the ways of love. "Je voudrais maintenant avoir aimé d'amour, pour observer, conseiller,

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.359.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.359.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.368.

consoler Calyste,"<sup>59</sup> she thinks. Even this secret wish of hers is totally out of character. Heretofore, she has been satisfied with her almost saintly existence and has never even given a thought to being something else than she has always been.

The love that sickens Calyste drives all the conventional plans that Fanny has made for his happiness out of her head. Up to now, she has thought of his future in terms of a good marriage, a good marriage meaning money and not passion. Now, she is ready to give up that ambition, at least temporarily, so as not to disappoint his desires.

Fanny sacrifices a great deal for the happiness of her son. She causes herself pain in accepting the idea of Félicité being her son's love. More than Renée, she has renounced her own feelings and desires for her child. It is true that Renée's children are still very young in Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées, and their problems are much easier to handle than the problems of a grown up son. But one feels that Renée loves her children because they are a projection of herself and an outlet for her energies, as well as a goal in her life. The author comments that mothers prefer it when their children are young and in need of maternal help and protection because they are made to feel useful. "Les véritables mères...sentent

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.360.

instinctivement les effets de la grande émancipation de l'amour... (elles) n'aiment pas cette tacite abdication, elles aiment mieux leurs enfants petits et protégés."<sup>60</sup> Fanny overcomes her reluctance to see Calyste going to another woman's arms and actually sends him to Félicité.

When Calyste transfers his affections to Béatrix de Rochefide, Fanny is very pleased. She has felt a peculiar type of jealousy of Félicité since the moment that she has concluded that Félicité's motivation in the affair is "une fantaisie de la maternité."<sup>61</sup> In Béatrix, on the other hand, she sees a type of daughter-in-law and not another mother to compete with for her son's affections. Fanny is even willing to give Calyste some worldly advice on how to capture Béatrix, advice that is somewhat incongruous coming from such an unwordly and naïve person. "Tu me rends bien perverse, mauvais enfant,"<sup>62</sup> she chides her son. The author emphasizes that Fanny "fût restée aux timidités de la jeune fille ignorante et pour elle l'amour eût tenu ses livres fermés," but that because of her maternal feelings, she was able to reach beyond the confines of her innocent world and think in terms of Calyste's

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.363-364.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p.434.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.435.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p.456.

desires.

Eventually, Fanny suffers a change of heart; she comes to hate Béatrix who so tortures her son and to feel very sorry for Félicité. Félicité, she feels, really loves her Calyste and has proved it by generously giving him up to Béatrix when she sees that that is where his heart is.

Fanny is a woman "qui vivait autant par les intérêts que par la tendresse de son fils."<sup>64</sup> She has given him life of her own life, "(elle l'a) nourri de son lait après avoir ainsi donné deux fois son sang."<sup>65</sup> She has done things to make him happy which have caused a great amount of personal anguish for herself.

Of course, no human being can be eternally sweet and good; Fanny has moments of selfishness and jealousy. At times she feel that she cannot bear the fact that someone else has superseded her in Calyste's heart. But she fights down these feelings for the good of her son.

The way a mother's love can give her courage to go against her own nature is thus clearly shown in Béatrix. This phenomenon can be seen in various other of the novels of the Comédie Humaine. In Eugénie Grandet for example, Balzac contrasts the type of wife that madame is Grandet is, to the characteristics that she exhibits when she is

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.362.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.361.

called upon to defend her child.

Madame Grandet is the prototype of the browbeaten wife who is totally under the thumb of her rather frightening husband. She accepts every edict of monsieur Grandet without murmur and finds the courage to oppose him only in one matter, the rebellion of her daughter Eugénie.

When Eugénie admits to her father that she no longer has in her possession the gold coins that he has been giving her over the years, his terrible wrath descends on her head. He puts her on a bread and water diet and locks her up in her room. Madame Grandet collapses from anguish and takes to her bed. But she gathers her forces to beg her husband to forgive Eugénie; she addresses to him "les plus tendres, les plus religieuses, les plus touchantes supplications,"<sup>66</sup> but they all leave him unaffected.

Madame Grandet's strength is greatly diminished by her efforts to sway her husband to mercy for her daughter, and she never again rises from her bed. Though she is physically ill as well, "elle est dévorée par le chagrin encore plus que par la maladie."<sup>67</sup> (As a matter of fact, this illness is a result of the mental suffering she has undergone since the moment Eugénie has confided in her that she no longer has her gold. Madame is so disturbed by this confidence, that she cannot concentrate on knitting her

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<sup>66</sup> Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade III, p.613.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.614.

woolen cuffs for the winter and in her underheated house, she catches cold.)

When she sees that Grandet is persisting in shutting Eugénie away from the world in her room, madame Grandet gathers the fantastic amount of courage and resolution it takes and does something "unfaithful" to her husband; she turns to maître Cruchot, tells him the story of Grandet's anger and begs him to help Eugénie.

Towards the end of her life, madame Grandet speaks to her husband with a great deal of force concerning Eugénie. No longer timid in his presence, she becomes, as close as it is possible for her to become, a ferocious tigress defending her kitten from cruel attack. For the welfare of her child, she changes her character and becomes a fighter, rather than the shrinking, suffering woman she has been until now. She attacks that which has been the only constant in her universe, her husband.

It is interesting to note that madame Grandet is finally the instrument of Eugénie's reconciliation with her father, unwittingly though it may. It is for fear of losing control of his wife's fortune, which would go to Eugénie, that her father makes up his differences with her. But peace descends on the household too late to save madame Grandet. She dies soon afterwards, having in effect lost her life because of her sensitive motherhood.

Madame Balthazar Claës is perhaps more of a heroine than madame Grandet when it comes to the well-being of her children. While there never seems to have been too great an affection between madame Grandet and her husband, their relationship being held together mostly by his tyranny and her fear of him, the Claës marriage is solidly based on love. It is more difficult to stifle the voice of love than that of fear. Madame Claës, in addition to loving her husband deeply, is also very grateful to him for having married her in spite of her hunchback and her limp. But her children are very important to her as well. "Le sentiment de la maternité fut chez madame Claës presque égal à son amour pour son époux."<sup>68</sup> During most of her life, Balthazar is her sun, but towards the end, "se passa-t-il dans son âme ... un combat horrible entre ces deux sentiments également puissants."<sup>69</sup> The two sentiments have become mutually exclusive because of the extraordinary behavior of Balthazar. He has become obsessed with the desire to find the Absolute and has spent all his fortune on the search (La Recherche de l'Absolu). In order that her children not be left destitute by their father's experimentations, madame Claës secretly and with painful frugality puts a considerable sum of money aside for them. At first, she feels guilty that she is thus cheating her husband, but as

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<sup>68</sup>Balzac, La Recherche de l'Absolu, Pléiade IX, p.500.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.500.

the love between her and her husband grows weaker, her maternal love strengthens, and she feels more and more justified in what she is doing. The money that she saves from the sale of the Claës family paintings is a lifeline that her daughter Marguerite will eventually use to rebuild the family fortunes after her mother's death.

Madame Claës is tortured by feelings of guilt; she thinks that she has neglected her children for their father during most of her married life. These are "torts imaginaires,"<sup>70</sup> because she has always been a loving mother, but yet, she feels that she must atone for her sins by caring for her children and protecting them even to a greater extent. Though the narrator says that her transgressions are imaginary, he does remark that she wishes to love her family "en un jour pour tous ceux pendant lesquels elle les avait négligés."<sup>71</sup> Perhaps her entire involvement with Balthazar has deprived her children of some of her time and attention. As she says to her daughter, Marguerite: "Je n'ai pas su me sacrifier pour vous.... Le bonheur rend égoïste... j'ai été faible parce que j'étais heureuse."<sup>72</sup> She hasn't dared to oppose Balthazar because she was afraid of offending the source of

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.564.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p.564.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p.570.

her happiness. However, she exhorts her daughter to be stronger than she has been and to sacrifice herself for the good of the family.

Madame Claës leaves a letter as a legacy to her daughter. In this letter, which is to be opened only if she finds herself in the direst straits, madame Claës maternal love shows its true strength. She has found the resolution to set her daughter against her own father if it means the salvation of the Claës children. This letter is the culminating disloyalty of the woman who was always the worshipful and adoring wife. The protective instinct of the mother has triumphed over the love of a lifetime.

Madame Claës belongs to the middle class as does madame Grandet. Fanny du Guénic and Renée de l'Estorade are members of the provincial nobility. While these women who come from the highest aristocracy do not usually display strong maternal tendencies, there is one mother in the Comédie Humaine who comes from the highest nobility, and yet lives only for her son. She is madame la comtesse de Dey.

Madame Dey (Le Réquisitionnaire) is a widow with an only son, Auguste. Auguste is an émigré, but his mother refuses to emigrate, though she lives every day in the shadow of the guillotine. Her sole purpose in life is to keep the inheritance of his son intact, so that he will be able to enjoy it once he returns to France. To this

end, she lives in the little town of Carentan and cultivates the local people. "Soutenue par un courage de mère, elle sut conquérir l'affection des pauvres en soulageant indifféremment toutes les misères et se rendait nécessaire aux riches en veillant à leurs plaisirs."<sup>73</sup> Her whole life, thus, is organized around her effort to gain and keep the good will of the town so that no one should denounce her to the authorities, who would confiscate all her son's domains.

All madame Dey's affections are concentrated "dans un seul sentiment, celui de la maternité. Le bonheur et les plaisirs dont avait été privée sa vie de femme, elle les retrouvait dans l'amour extrême qu'elle portait à son fils."<sup>74</sup> The reasons her love is so intense are many. First of all, Auguste is her only surviving relation and the only being in the world "auquel elle pût rattacher les craintes, les espérances et les joies de sa vie."<sup>75</sup> He is the only person in her life who makes her feel anything deeply. Second of all, Auguste Dey was a sickly child whom all doctors doomed to an early death. But his mother raised him with infinite pains and the greatest of care and led him safely past the perils of childhood to be one

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<sup>73</sup>Balzac, Le Réquisitionnaire, Pléiade IX, p.853.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.852.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p.852.

of the most dashing young men at Versailles. Mothers always love their weak offspring most (says Balzac in Mémoires de Deux jeunes Mariées), and madame Dey is no exception to the rule.

Madame Dey is the type of woman who needs to have "une haute passion"<sup>76</sup> in order to survive. Her passion for her son fills her need. She loves him with the pure and profound devotion of a mother, but also with "la coquetterie d'une maîtresse, avec la jalousie d'une épouse."<sup>77</sup> She is deeply unhappy when he is not near her and she never tires of his company. She lives "par lui et pour lui."<sup>78</sup>

Madame Dey's feelings for her son are just like any other mothers, but intensified by other interests. (He is the sole heir to his family and her only living relative, etc.) This aspect of the relationship is clear, but the other side of the bond between mother and son is a mysterious one.

There is a strong mystical tie between madame Dey and Auguste. "Leurs âmes s'entendaient par de fraternelles sympathies."<sup>79</sup> The connection between their souls has no logical explanation. It is almost as though they share

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.852.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p.852.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.852.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p.853.

one spirit and one life.

One day, madame Dey receives the news of her son's capture by the revolutionary government; he has attempted the reenter France after having lived in exile. There is a chance of escape and madame Dey, told of this, spends her time in a fever of apprehension and hope. Meanwhile, she is busy entertaining all the busybodies of the village, because she dare not lock her doors to society, lest they suspect that she is expecting anyone. Madame Dey never shows by even a flick of the eyelid, the great emotional upheaval that she is undergoing, waiting for her son to knock on the door. "Les mères," says Balzac, "ont tant de courage."<sup>80</sup> But Auguste never arrives and the room that his mother has so lovingly prepared for him is used by an other conscript. At dawn of the same day, madame Dey dies, at the precise moment that her son is executed many miles away.

Madame Dey has given up her life because of her son. If he dies, she has no more reason to live. The way she dies underscores the mysterious and unbreakable bond between mother and son. Ultimately, though there may be all kinds of logical explanations for maternal love, it is a mysterious force and stronger than life.

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p.859.

The same kind of mysterious bond between mother and child can be seen in quite a different social stratum, that of the Maranas in Les Marana.

The Marana women have been courtesans for many generations. They have a certain pride in their position; the antiquity of their trade has given it a certain nobility.

One day, a day of "melancholy and religious introspection,"<sup>81</sup> the Marana of the nineteenth century makes a vow to raise any daughter she may bear to be a virtuous woman, "afin de donner à cette longue suite de crimes amoureux et de femmes perdues, un ange, pour elles toutes, dans le ciel."<sup>82</sup>

When a child is born to her, she regards it as "une fille à sauver, une fille pour laquelle elle désira une belle vie, et surtout les pudeurs qui lui manquaient."<sup>83</sup> For the sake of her daughter, she leaves the world of the courtesan and lives the life of a virtuous woman. It is surely a great sacrifice for a woman who has known only one sort of life, to give it up entirely and all at once. "Plus de fêtes, plus de nuits, plus d'amours."<sup>84</sup> Her

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<sup>81</sup>Balzac, Les Marana, Pléiade IX, p.802.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.802.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.803.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p.803.

only joy is in her daughter. It is the first true, pure joy of her life, which till now has been strangely arid in spite of the welter of passions that she has inspired and experienced. "Ce sentiment," says the author about her maternal feelings, "n'eut rien qui pût se mesurer à aucun autre. Ne comprenait-il pas tous les sentiments et toutes les espérances celestes?"<sup>85</sup>

Motherhood, remarks Balzac, is the most beautiful of all human sentiments because it is the most unselfish. Love has a certain egoism, but maternal love has none. La Marana is the most unselfish of all unselfish mothers. As ignoble as her life has been until the birth of her child, so noble is it afterwards when she is caring for her little Juana.

The narrator makes a slightly ambiguous statement about la Marana. "Elle fut mère," he says, comme aucune mère n'était mère; car, dans son naufrage éternel, la maternité pouvait être une planche de salut. Accomplir saintement une partie de sa tâche terrestre en envoyant un ange de plus dans le paradis, n'était-ce pas mieux qu'un tardif repentir?"<sup>86</sup> Does la Marana think of motherhood as as her salvation, or is this the narrator's comment on the nobility of raising a child to virtuous adulthood?

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p.803.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p.803.

If it is she who is thinking this, then a slight tinge of self-interest has been injected into the selfless dedication that she displays to her child.

The second great sacrifice that la Marana makes for her daughter takes even more courage. When Juana reaches the age of seven, her mother sends her to live with an honest Spanish family, so that she may not grow up with the stain of the "honte héréditaire"<sup>87</sup> of the Maranas. Her renunciation of her child is sublime. She is giving up the only creature whom she has truly loved; henceforth, another woman will care for her and would be her mother for all practical purposes. The narrator speaks of her with great compassion. She is "une mère déshéritée de son enfant,"<sup>88</sup> and she leaves "sur le seuil de cette maison une de ces larmes que recueillent les anges,"<sup>88</sup> a tear of sublime suffering. The only way that la Marana can bear the separation is to think of Juana growing up to be a virtuous wife and a happy mother who will live a long, satisfying life. She has sacrificed her happiness for her daughter's.

Though separated by physical distance, there remains a mystical closeness between mother and daughter. La Marana has promised never to see Juana again; yet she is drawn

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p.804.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p.804.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p.804.

back to the Spanish merchant's house three times, by an irresistible force. The first time, she feels that something is very wrong, and she flies to Tarragone in time to nurse Juana through a dangerous illness. The second time, she comes to watch from afar the first communion of her daughter and her heart is torn because she has to stay in the distance while another woman plays the part that she should have by rights played. The third occasion is when she has a premonition that there is something dreadful happening to Juana. She escapes from Naples, where her life is a constant round of entertainments, where she is surrounded by all the luxuries her royal lover can give her, "et sans se soucier d'une cour , ni d'une couronne,"<sup>90</sup> she flies across Europe, "munie d'un firman quasi impérial, munie d'or."<sup>91</sup> The urgency that drives her leaves no room for thoughts of what she is leaving behind. Every ounce of her being is with Juana in her unknown peril.

To explain la Marana's extraordinary ability to feel her child's danger, Balzac makes a sweeping statement: "Pour les mères, il n'y a pas d'espace, une vraie mère pressent tout et voit son enfant d'un pôle à l'autre."<sup>92</sup> But this is not an explanation of la Marana's unerring

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 815.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 815-816.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 816.

presentiments and they are comprehensible only if one takes into account that the soul of the child is forever a part of the mother's, who has given him life.

La Marana's daughter is truly in danger, but her mother arrives only when the damage has already been done. The soldier Montefiore has seduced Juana with promises of marriage, promises he has no intention of keeping. La Marana is fully ready to murder the seducer to avenge the honor of her daughter. In the scene with Montefiore, she is comparable to a wild tigress protecting her offspring anyway she can. It never comes to murder and Juana is married as honorably as possible under the circumstances.

Before returning to Naples, la Marana expresses the desire never to see Juana again, because every time she sees her, some danger is threatening. She is willing to give up the joy of being able to kiss her daughter for the knowledge that she is safe and happy.

La Marana is a very tragic figure. Her life, in the midst of all the luxury that her profession brings her, is arid and loveless. The daughter who could have brought her much joy lives far away from her. But the knowledge that this daughter will break out of the accepted mold of the Maranas and live as a contented wife and mother redeems all her hours of pining for her.

Balzac brings much nobility and dignity to the character of la Marana. The contrast between her greatness as a mother and her profession is considerable. It is a contrast that Balzac was fond of making. He is very insistent on the good qualities of the courtesan.

In the Comédie Humaine, marriage is usually a dismal affair and a good marriage is sufficiently unusual. Renée de l'Estorade finally declares herself happy with her Louis and her children, but she has invested every ounce of her strong spirit and every ounce of her determination in order to achieve satisfaction in her home life. She has, as Louise de Chaulieu tells her, made her own destiny "au lieu d'être son jouet." But even if she does personify the ideal wife who always knows what to do and what to say and whose life runs almost only according to her plans, one wonders whether she would not prefer the romance of a more spontaneous existence. She herself once observes that her life is like a wide boulevard where the sun rarely shines. Perhaps it would be better to take a few more chances so that one's joys should be all the more sharp.

Renée's purest joy is when she looks at her children. Woman has the important job of raising and educating the children and motherhood should be every woman's goal.

Though there are not too many mothers in the Comédie Humaine, of the few that there are, a good number are models of devotion. At various times, the mothers whom the author singles out as notable, show great courage in protecting their children from the dangers which threaten them. They are even ready to declare war on their own .

husbands if they feel that they are not treating the children correctly. These mothers are ready to ride roughshod over their own feelings, over the habits of a lifetime to prevent any harm from coming to their children. Some mothers even give up their lives because of their children. Madame Grandet dies from the effect of grief caused by Grandet's refusal to pardon Eugénie and madame Dey finds it impossible to go on living after the death of her only son.

Perhaps the greatest courage is displayed by la Marana who bravely gives up her child to others so that that child might be happy.

All in all, mother exhibit the noblest of human characteristics in Balzac.

## Chapter Four

## Faithless wives and abandoned women

On comprendra bien alors  
l'énorme différence que  
nos lois et nos moeurs  
mettent, chez les deux  
sexes, entre la même  
situation.

(Béatrix)

Given the Balzacian theory that marriage is generally an unhappy affair, and given also that human beings will continue to search for happiness, it is natural to assume, according to Balzac, that partners in a joyless marriage will seek a measure of happiness outside the bonds of matrimony. In his novels, men, as well as women, cast off the responsibilities and the strictures of conjugal life, but it is mostly the fate of these women that Balzac chronicles so sympathetically.

The Revolution instituted divorce in France, but the Restoration abolished it, creating, as Wurmser declares, "une immoralité permanente."<sup>1</sup> Marriage had its justification as a social institution for the development and transmission of fortunes, but husbands and wives lived in an atmosphere devoid of love and often found it impossible to resign themselves to such an emotionally barren existence. The love that was glorified by the aristocracy, the well-to-do

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<sup>1</sup>André Wurmser, La Comédie inhumaine (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p.617.

bourgeoisie, and indeed the literature of the day, was not conjugal love. "La femme divine' c'est la maîtresse, non cette associée ou cette ménagère: l'épouse... L'amour est une chose, merveilleuse, le mariage est une autre-sociale."<sup>2</sup> "L'amour est bien supérieur au mariage," says Balzac in Petites Misères de la Vie Conjugale.<sup>3</sup> And that model wife, Sabine du Guénic avows that she loves Calyste "comme s'il n'était pas mon mari."<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the climate was not favorable for love in marriage. Certainly there were no great moral barriers in the minds of the aristocracy to being unfaithful to one's spouse.

Though moral barriers to adultery were almost non-existent, there was strong social opposition to a mate who looked outside of marriage for love, especially if it was the wife who strayed. In fact, Wurmser comments that "l'adultère n'est pas un crime masculin. L'infidélité n'est péché capital que si la femme le commet. C'est elle seule que ligotent ces liens sacrés."<sup>5</sup> The woman was tied, both socially and practically by matrimony.

Practically, it was impossible for a woman to acquire economic independence. It made no difference whether she

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.635.

<sup>3</sup>Balzac, Petites Misères de la Vie Conjugale, quoted in Wurmser, p.635.

<sup>4</sup>Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.525.

<sup>5</sup>Wurmser, La Comédie inhumaine, p.617.

was a worker, whose meager salary was much below the subsistence level, a member of the bourgeoisie, who did not consider taking a job because it was looked down upon in her class, or a member of the aristocracy, who may have brought her husband many thousands in dowry but had no independent control over that fortune. All these women were dependent upon their husbands for the basic necessities of life and risked much when they embarked upon an extra-marital affair. A husband literally had the power to cut his wife off without a penny if he disapproved of her behavior. A wife, of course, had no such power to exert upon an unfaithful husband.

It follows that if a woman committed adultery, she was jeopardizing her economic security and social status, while a man doing the same thing risked no reprisals. On the contrary, the latter often escaped any recriminations from a wife who was only too happy to have him at her side again, to risk alienating him by discussions of the affair or nagging. Sabine du Guénic (Béatrix) promptly <sup>forgets</sup> all of her husband's sins when he finally comes back to her, as does la comtesse de Soulanges (La Paix du Ménage) when her husband is reconciled with her. All is forgiven and promptly dismissed from mind. It is to be noted that these two wives never give their husbands any cause to err. Most of the Balzacian wives are blameless in their conduct and loyal to their husbands, while most of the husbands of straying wives have

given some reason to provoke unfaithfulness.

Of the many wives in the Comédie Humaine who have just cause to betray their husbands, there is a certain number who have the will to do the deed but never manage because of various reasons. Chief among these women are Henriette de Mortsauf and the duchesse de Langeais. There are, of course, wives who do take lovers with whom, it seems, they are happy. And naturally, there are women like madame de Beauséant, who love the men who eventually abandon them.

Antoinette, duchesse de Langeais, is not one of Balzac's most appealing characters. She is a woman who lives only according to her reason, and not at all by the dictates of her heart. Though she seems a cold woman, yet she generates a certain sympathy because she is unhappy and, with all her wealth and background, unfortunate. Born into one of the oldest and most noble families of France, she is married, at the age of eighteen and a few days after leaving the convent, to the eldest son of the duc de Langeais. It is purely a marriage of convenience. She and her husband, "les deux caractères les plus antipathiques du monde, s'étaient trouvés en présence, s'étaient froissés secrètement, secrètement blessés, désunis à jamais. Puis, chacun d'eux avait obéi à sa nature et aux convenances."<sup>6</sup> The new husband **throws** himself into the pursuit of his pleasures,

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<sup>6</sup>Balzac, La Duchesse de Langeais, Pléiade V, p.156.

and, acting like a grand seigneur of the preceding century, leaves his young wife to do as she wishes. Her virtues disregarded, her womanhood ignored, her very self-esteem gravely wounded, she never forgives him for this insulting abandonment. The couple, who become duke and duchess de Langeais eventually, thus live entirely separated from one another "de fait et de coeur."<sup>7</sup> "Ce mariage de convention avait eu le sort assez habituel de ces pactes de famille."<sup>8</sup> There are many such couples in the Comédie Humaine, who are well matched in terms of fortune, nobility and beauty, but who share only a name; they have nothing else in common, yet remain united in the eyes of the world while living entirely separate lives.

Her unfortunate marriage has left Antoinette cold and unfulfilled. Never having known the real meaning of love, she feels bitter against her father who picked a bridegroom for her according to his own interests and without having even consulted her. He has thus condemned her, as she says, to "irréparables malheurs."<sup>9</sup> It is understandable, therefore, that she eventually toys with the idea of taking a lover. As the princesse de Blamont-Chauvry, the duchess's aunt,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.156.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.156.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.234.

tells her, it is quite normal to want some happiness and to try and take it where one may.

The difficulties arise when Antoinette, who has been declaring her love for Montriveau for months, cannot bring herself to become his mistress. Though Balzac is very critical of her refusal to prove her love, one senses an underlying sympathy for a woman like her, whose inability to feel true love is all caused by her heretofore loveless existence. "Pour l'honneur de cette femme, il est nécessaire de la croire vierge, même de coeur... Elle<sup>en</sup> était, sans doute, non pas à son premier amour, mais à ses premiers plaisirs."<sup>10</sup> Antoinette uses many excuses to fend off Montriveau, among them her religious strictures; she repeatedly expresses her fear, too, that one day he will tire of her and leave her so that "rang, fortune, honneur, toute la duchesse de Langeais se sera engloutie dans une espérance trompée."<sup>11</sup> She is also hampered by the rules of society. "Si la manière dont je vis avec monsieur de Langeais me laisse la disposition de mon coeur," she says, "les lois, les convenances m'ont ôté le droit de disposer de ma personne. En quelque rang qu'elle soit placée, une déshonorée se voit chassée du monde."<sup>12</sup> Public opinion, while

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.191.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.193.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.180.

condoning and even applauding the erring husband, severely condemns the erring wife. Antoinette fears that she will be banned from society for any indiscretions and will share the fate of her friend madame de Beauséant, whose lover, monsieur d'Ajuda, leaves her to marry a girl with a large dowry. Antoinette is convinced that she too will be left with no husband, no lover, and just a bad reputation.

If one is moved to take a lover, however, in spite of all the valid objections which may be raised, one must be extremely discreet and must accord one's behavior with les usages. When Antoinette finally falls truly in love with a Montriveau who no longer wants her, and she throws herself at his head in plain view of all Parisian society, a family delegation comes to enlighten her on the dangerousness of her behavior. She is told in no uncertain terms that if her husband finds out about her infatuation, and if he is embarrassed by her conducting the affair without benefit of covert secrecy, he will separate himself from her, keep her fortune and leave her poor. Consequently unimportant, she will be ignored by everyone. Meanwhile, her inherited money would pay for her husband's mistresses and she would be bound by law "de dire 'amen' à ces arrangements-là."<sup>13</sup> In addition, the sad possibility exists that Montriveau will leave her; many beautiful, clever women have been

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.235.

abandoned by men who tire of them or who see better opportunities for advancement with other women. Any children born of such an affair would necessarily be social outcasts and could not inherit from either of their parents. Sacrifices of their parents' passions, they would grow up in a sort of limbo, unwanted anywhere, and necessarily poverty-stricken. (Balzac elaborates on this theme in la Grenadière, where he describes the tragic fate of two adulterine children, left destitute at the death of their mother. From their father they had nothing, not even his name.)

The family group who attempts to talk reason into Antoinette, concludes its lecture by saying: "Une femme ne doit jamais donner raison à son mari,"<sup>14</sup> because a husband can easily destroy his wife; he can render her penniless and friendless and a social outcast. She must always observe la loi des convenances, because it is not worth making foolhardy sacrifices for any man's love. "Une imprudence, c'est une pension, une vie errante, être à la merci de son amant."<sup>15</sup>

Antoinette refuses to listen to this advice and continues to pursue Montriveau. She gives him an ultimatum and, because of an unfortunate misunderstanding, he fails to

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.236.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.239.

answer her . She thinks that he has abandoned her completely, and she flees Paris never to return. In her last letter to him she writes: "Après m'être entièrement donnée à vous en pensée, à qui donc me donner?... à Dieu."<sup>16</sup> She cannot resign herself to live in the everyday Parisian world if her love is not part of that world. Because he has rejected her, she enters a Carmelite convent and immures herself forever there. In her last desperate effort to bring Montriveau to her side, she has attained a dignity heretofore lacking in her. The last view of her, crying like "a Madeleine" and holding herself "droit comme un piquet,"<sup>17</sup> is very touching, as is her ultimate fate in her convent. Her innate pride humbled by her deeply-felt repentance for her treatment of Montriveau, she spends what little of life remains to her as a member of the order of the Carmélites Déchaussées, on an island in the Mediterranean. She is consumed by love, says Balzac, but entirely separated from all things of the flesh. She has secluded herself from the world, but this does not mean, says the author, that she is a coward, nor that she is afraid of life. "La réclusion d'une femme, n'est-elle pas toujours une lutte sublime?"<sup>18</sup> he demands. That may be, but it is a fruitless

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.243.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.247.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.137.

fight against the bitter self-recriminations and self-doubts, and it can end only as it ends here, in soul-searing suffering, and finally, in death. Antoinette de Langeais is worn out from her long battle with herself and with her never ending love, and she dies. Ironically, her death comes on the same day that Montriveau, who has finally found her after years of desperate searching, manages to get into her convent to "rescue" her. The tragedy of the last part of her life, when her penances transform her into the wraith-like figure which so shocks Montriveau, and the tragedy of her death at such a young age, turn her from a merely pathetic creature into a sublime woman.

Henriette de Mortsauf (Le Lys dans la Vallée) never really betrays her husband either, though she has the motivation and the opportunity. She has been married since the age of seventeen to a man who is sixteen years her senior. Quite willing to become his wife because the marriage gives her an opportunity to live near a beloved aunt, she soon finds that her husband is a sickly man and is very like an old man. She doesn't really mind, since she considers it a wife's first duty to be a mother to her husband and to nurse him through his never ending ailments. "Mon coeur est comme enivré de maternité," she tells her young admirer, Félix de Vandenesse. "Je n'aime monsieur de Mortsauf... que par un irrésistible sentiment qui l'attache à toutes les fibres de mon coeur... Mon mariage... fut décidé par ma

sympathie pour les infortunés. N'était-ce pas aux femmes à réparer les maux du temps, à consoler ceux qui coururent sur la brèche et revinrent blessés?"<sup>19</sup> She considers herself a martyr, there only to soothe her family's wounds and to assuage their troubles. She is satisfied with this rôle of ministering angel and asks nothing for her own personal enjoyment of life.

When Henriette meets Félix, she has been married a number of years and she has veritably suffered continuously throughout. "La vie réelle est une vie d'angoisses,"<sup>20</sup> she says. She is happy, if one can use that word, that it is monsieur de Mortsauf that she has married, because anyone more attractive would have abandoned her long ago and she would have died of jealousy. Monsieur de Mortsauf loves her as much as he is capable of doing, and this seems to be enough for her. Content with the thought that her sufferings have served to increase her family's happiness, she bears the anguish of the years, the constant illnesses of her two children and of her husband, with fortitude. However, her husband's nagging is slowly wearing her down. He is constantly complaining about an assortment of imaginary ills and is exhausting her soul. Never good humored when he is with his family, he repeats over and over again: "Je vais

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<sup>19</sup>Balzac, Le Lys dans la Vallée, Pléiade VIII, p.836.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.835.

mourir, la vie me pèse."<sup>21</sup> He has a great need to tyrannize others and his chief victim is his wife, a fact that she herself recognizes. "Peut-être l'ai-je habitué à me prendre pour sa victime,"<sup>22</sup> she muses. She does nothing to prevent this persecution, and he always attacks her until he finds a chink in her armor of calm. Then he is happy that he has asserted his domination over her.

The strange thing is that Henriette endures this treatment without rebelling against it. Not only doesn't she rebel, but one has the impression that she is positively revelling in it and welcoming the fate that has turned her into such a martyr. She refuses even to listen to Félix's entreaties that she become his mistress, saying, "(que) la vertu... a des eaux saintes où l'on se retrempe et d'où l'on sort renouvelé par l'amour de Dieu."<sup>23</sup> Love of virtue triumphs over love of Félix. She says too, that she cannot give her husband the right to despise her by being unfaithful to him, because the only thing that gives her the strength to go on is her virtue and if she loses that, she loses everything. She has refused to enter into a relationship which might have given her the first true joy of her life.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.832.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.832.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.879.

Henriette's behavior is not logical. She loves Félix but with a selfish love which offers him nothing. When he goes off to Paris, she gives him a great deal of advice on how to conduct himself in that wicked city. She advises him to cultivate influential women, influential women being almost exclusively elderly. He must flee from young women since they are incapable of serious thought, love only themselves and will accomplish nothing useful for him. A young woman, she says, is interested only in dominating her surroundings and will tie to her apron strings any man who gets close enough. What you need, Henriette tells Félix, is not a corrupted and corrupting society lady, but "une créature chaste et recueillie dans l'âme de laquelle vous régnerez toujours... elle sera solitaire... ses plus belles fêtes seront vos regards."<sup>24</sup> Oblivious to her own problems, Félix's ideal young lady will be concerned only with smoothing his way in life. Obviously, according to Henriette, the perfect woman for him bears many striking similarities to herself. She is casting herself, consciously or subconsciously, into the role of Félix's love, while at the same time she is strenuously disclaiming any ulterior motives in her advice. She repeats many times that her only goal in giving him this advice is to help him steer safely through the dangers of the social scene.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.897.

Nonetheless, Henriette orders Félix to save his love "pour l'ange au coeur pur,"<sup>25</sup> a mold into which she has been trying to cast herself. For, she is constantly talking about her pure life and is trying to drown her love for Félix in feelings of religious virtue. Even when she questions Félix about his feelings for her, she does it in a way which makes it sound like a religious litany: "M'aimez-vous saintement?" she demands. "Saintement," he replies. "...Comme une vierge Marie, qui doit rester dans ses voiles?" she continues. "Comme une vierge Marie visible,"<sup>26</sup> he intones. Henriette has a mania for what she believes is purity.

This mania for purity has led her to refuse to live as husband and wife with monsieur de Mortsau who complains, rather strangely, to Félix; "Elle porte mon nom et ne remplit aucun des devoirs que les lois divines et humaines lui imposent, elle ment ainsi aux hommes et à Dieu ...(Elle) met tout son art à rester jeune fille; elle me rend fou par les privations qu'elle me cause ...elle me tue à petit feu, et se croit une sainte."<sup>27</sup> And Henriette herself tells Félix: "Je puisais quelques forces dans ma chaste solitude ... mais si je suis privée de ce bonheur négatif, je deviendrai

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.898.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.914.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.873.

folle."<sup>28</sup> Balzac describes Henriette's difficulties in her home life with sympathy, while placing much of the blame for the unhealthy atmosphere on her husband, whom he compares to a famished beast slinking out of a dark forest and ready to pounce on his prey. Henriette is usually her husband's prey, and he attacks her sensibilities unmercifully. But the fact remains that Henriette is unwilling to live with him, but unwilling also to fight with him and to stand up for herself. Her attitude is dishonest; she keeps her resentment of her husband hidden, but it is festering inside her and poisoning her marital relationship while it is slowly eating away at her soul as well. She is supposed to be a saintly creature, but one has the feeling that her holier-than-thou attitude can't be real, that she is playing at being good, rather than honestly feeling the sentiment. "Oui," she says, "je sais souffrir, mais faire souffrir les autres! jamais ...pas même pour obtenir un résultat honorable ou grand ...je recevrai(les) coups (de monsieur de Mortsauf) pour qu'ils n'atteignent ici personne."<sup>29</sup>

The feeling that Henriette's goodness cannot be completely true is reinforced by her reaction to the news that Félix has been ensnared by the lovely and vivacious Arabella Dudley. Henriette has sent Félix off to Paris with

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.923.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.925.

totally unrealistic expectations about his behavior. He is a young man and very attractive, and she cannot and should not really believe that he would live for years, faithful to her, a wisp of a dream, a woman who only speaks to him of her maternal feelings for him and gives him no hope that that love will turn into something more earthly and more tangible. Yet when she hears of his involvement with lady Dudley, she loses her sweet and dedicated nature, and becomes sullen and sulky. Very hurt by his abandonment though she is the one who sent him away and forced him to look elsewhere for a mistress, her heart becomes bitter. Yet it is she who has asked him to love her as he might love a mother and to remember that she would always hold a place in her heart for him, her third child.

When Félix comes to visit her from Paris, she cannot help questioning him about lady Dudley. Told that while Arabella Dudley is his passion, she, Henriette, is his pure love, she is unsatisfied and demands to be assured that "la vertu, la sainteté de la vie, l'amour maternel ne sont donc pas des erreurs,"<sup>30</sup> because she fears that she has committed an error in the way that she has arranged her life.

In spite of Félix's assurances that he still loves her, Henriette's doubts about the principles that have governed

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.961.

her behavior have continued to grow. Dealt a crushing blow, by Félix's refusal to give up his affair with Arabella, Henriette laments: "Si je me suis trompée dans ma vie, 'elle' a raison."<sup>31</sup> She no longer is sure that she was right to refuse Félix. Confused by the turn of events, she says desperately: "Je ne sais plus ce qu'est la vertu."<sup>32</sup> But in moments of calm, Henriette still clings to her original ideal of virtue. "La marquise Dudley m'a sauvée," she says to Félix. "À elle les souillures ... à moi le glorieux amour des anges ... La vie terrestre ... nous ravale trop en faisant dominer l'égoïsme des sens sur la spiritualité de l'ange qui est en nous."<sup>33</sup> Life is only for suffering and even her greatest joy, her children, are sources of much pain: "Devenir mère, pour moi ce fut acheter le droit de toujours souffrir."<sup>34</sup> Life as she has lived it has been a tragic affair, but she refuses to admit it, even to herself, until the moment of truthfulness that her illness's delirium brings. Then all her bitterness and pain and frustration at having lived her whole life as a lie, at never having done what she truly wanted to do, at having refused to become Félix's mistress, pours out in a gushing stream of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.963.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p.963.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.970.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.972.

remorse.

Henriette de Mortsauif dies tragically unfulfilled, eaten up from within by her secret sorrow at Félix's defection. It can't really be called an abandonment, for he continues to love her as a saint, though that love cannot suffice for his needs. But the fact that he has gone elsewhere and found fulfillment that she could not and would not give him, strikes at her heart. She would have expected him to stay near her always, but to adore <sup>her</sup> from afar and to be thus satisfied. Instead, the very justifiable inclinations of a young man take him to Paris where his love affair with the lady Arabella Dudley follows quite naturally after such a repressed and unnatural interlude with Henriette. Her secret chagrin at Félix's surrender to Arabella's attractions, as well as her regrets that it is someone else and not her in Félix's arms, and the doubts which slowly crystallize into certainty that she has been living a lie pernicious to her whole existence, all this eats away at Henriette's soul as the sickness is symbolically gnawing away at her body.

It is hard to sympathize with Henriette. She is too good and she is too conscious of her goodness and of her suffering. She speaks interminably about her virtue and it is hard to see how Félix's faith in her is never shaken. Yet Balzac insists on the fact that she is worthy of our pity. It is in the letter that she leaves for Félix just before

she dies, that the mask that she has worn all her life is removed and she is revealed as a pathetic and vulnerable creature. She had never known the pleasures of love, she writes, even though she has borne two children. Félix's first kiss had awakened in her the feelings of an "impérieuse volupté"<sup>35</sup> she never knew could exist, and the rest of her life was spent fighting against these feelings, though she knew that if she did not give in to them she would lose Félix and would die. She tried to keep Félix at her side "par égoïsme"<sup>36</sup> but was not successful. It was her confessor who advised her to sublimate her desires for Félix into maternal affections for him. Feeling guilty about her overwhelming love and her sinful thought about Félix, she accepts her husband's cruelties willingly as a sort of expiation. And fearful that her preoccupation with Félix has caused her to deprive her children of some of the maternal tenderness which is their due, she dedicates herself completely to being a "good" mother. Religion, too, helps her to fight against the temptation of Félix's presence. Prayer acts as a balm on her troubled soul, but it loses its efficacy when she hears of lady Dudley. The pain that awareness of Félix's liaison brings is murderous, but instead of spurring her to action, it causes her illness because it is turned inward and it corrodes her.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p.1019.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p.1019.

She has lived and died a profoundly unhappy woman. She has not played the game according to Balzac's rules which resemble lady Dudley's: "Aimer, tête levée, à contresens de la loi ...soumettre le monde et le ciel à un homme ... ne le trahir pour rien, pas même pour la vertu."<sup>37</sup> And therefore she has never tasted the sweetness of love.

Many of Balzac's heroines do live and love according to lady Dudley's code. For a rare few, such a life brings unending happiness; for others, great joy is followed by bitter unhappiness.

One of the few women who can and does take a lover with favorable results is Massimilla Doni. A great heiress, she is married, as is the accepted custom straight from the convent, to the Sicilian duc Cataneo. The marriage is arranged by her mother who finds this the best method to happiness and wealth. She is convinced that Massimilla, once married, "accomplirait selon les lois de l'amour ce second mariage de coeur qui est tout pour une Italienne."<sup>38</sup> But the root of Massimilla's problem lies in the fact that she is truly religious, and when she took her marriage vows it was with a true conviction that she would keep them by being a faithful loving wife to her husband. Unfortunately though, the duc Cataneo does not want a wife in the true

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.950.

<sup>38</sup>Balzac, Massimilla Doni, Pléiade IX, p.315.

sense of the word, but rather needs a duchess in name only. When Massimilla complains that he neglects her, he tells her to find a "primo cavaliere servante"<sup>39</sup> and even offers to help her search for one that will be to her liking. She cries bitterly but eventually comes to accept her fate, in theory if not in practice. It takes her, actually, quite a while to overcome her reluctance and find her love, Emilio, and much time passes before she consents to become his mistress. At the beginning, their relationship is a spiritual relationship and Massimilla only agrees to a more earthy connection because she believes it is necessary in order to save his life. The tale ends very prosaically with Massimilla expecting a child.

Massimilla is literally pushed into another man's arms by a husband who is totally disinterested in her as a wife. He has gotten what he wanted at the marriage ceremony where he has conferred on her his name, and she upon him, her inheritance. There is no question here of jealousy or of retribution on the part of her husband when she takes Emilio as a lover. Rather it is his desire she is fulfilling by taking her troublesome presence out of his sight. Though such a husband is unusual even in the Comédie Humaine, the work abounds in husbands who are simply uncaring about their wives' extra-marital affairs because they care nothing

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.315.

at all for their wives. Georges de Maufrigneuse is a case in point.

Diane de Maufrigneuse, one of the queens of Parisian society, is not a happy woman. Her mother, the duchesse d'Uxelles, marries her at the age of seventeen and only fifteen days out of the convent, to her own lover, Georges de Maufrigneuse. It is a marriage, recounts Diane, arranged "non pas par amour pour moi, mais par amour pour lui."<sup>40</sup> He is thirty eight years old at the time, an old roué, who has led a completely dissipated life for many years. After the unexpected birth of an heir, unexpected because his excesses have left the duke only half a man, he leaves his wife entirely free to do as she may wish, while he sets out to amuse himself in his old haunts. He has accomplished what he wanted, having acquired a son by the way and a fortune in dowry with which to pay off his myriad debts.

Meanwhile, Diane, raised in a convent, takes a while to realize exactly what has happened to her. When she sees what her husband has done, she decides to strike back at him by taking lovers. Abandoned within a marriage, her actions are the logical result of her solitude and her humiliation. She admits to her friend, la marquise d'Espard, that she has never really loved any of her lovers. The impetus for her actions was her husband's behavior. It is true that not

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<sup>40</sup>Balzac, Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan, Pléiade VI, p.50.

every woman would have reacted to such a husband as did Diane, nor would every woman have gone as far in her revenge as she did, for she has the inclinations and the temperament to ensnare many men; but Balzac mentions her motive and thus, creates even for her, a touch of sympathy and understanding.

The story of the adulterous woman often has as a corollary that of the abandoned woman, abandoned by her lover as she has been abandoned first by her husband. The two most celebrated abandoned women in the Comédie Humaine are Béatrix de Rochefide and Claire de Beauséant.

Béatrix's story (Béatrix) begins the way so many other unhappy women's stories begin, with marriage to a man who is inferior to her. Arthur de Rochefide is quite stupid, while Béatrix is remarkable for her originality and for the superiority of her ideas. She soon becomes bored with him. And he, insensitive to her feelings, thinks that she is a cold person, while she is only ignorant and inexperienced. But he uses her "coldness" as an excuse to go back to his bachelor life and is secure in the knowledge that she will be entirely content to live a life of the spirit, to have only "des passions de tête"<sup>41</sup> and to submerge herself totally in literature, music and art. In addition, he is certain that her virtue will be protected by "une manière de vivre grandiose qui entoure de mille barrières une femme

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<sup>41</sup>Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.395.

à Paris."<sup>42</sup> A jealous and vain man, he thinks that Béatrix knows nothing of his affairs and dreads her ever finding out. But she is not interested in him and she finds her own company in Camille Maupin's salon. There she meets Gennaro Conti, composer and singer, and she falls madly in love with him. He is an inconstant Italian, seemingly charming, but detestable in reality. They carry on an intrigue secretly for over a year. Béatrix is terrified lest her husband find out; he would torment her forever if he even suspected Conti's existence. Tired of clandestine meetings, she makes up her mind to flee with her lover to Italy. She stays there with him for two years, but all is not paradise there either for her. She would have liked to live quietly, hidden away from the world's prying eyes. "N'est-ce pas la seule manière d'être qui convienne à des femmes en opposition directe avec le monde?"<sup>43</sup> she demands. But Conti's profession, writing operas and presenting them, necessitates meeting with many people. And it is Béatrix who suffers the slurs that are directed against her by the high society ladies who are contemptuous of her morals and her position. As she writes to Félicité des Touches, "Il existe pour nous autres femmes de grands désavantages dans la position où je me suis mise."<sup>44</sup> One's standing in the world goes down,

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.394.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.407.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.408.

one loses one's free will in all matters of the heart, and more important, one loses the privilege of being an independent person, of quarreling with one's lover or of being capricious and playing the coquette. Instead, since a woman like Béatrix is now very dependent on her lover, she must be eternally sweet and accommodating to him. But in spite of all these unpleasant problems, Béatrix says that she is relatively happy with her Conti.

When Conti must return to France, Béatrix comes with him. Since she is under no illusions about her probable reception in Paris ("Je ne voudrais pas rencontrer un de ces regards de femme ou d'homme qui me feraient concevoir l'assassinat."<sup>45</sup>), she has decided rather to stay with her friend, Félicité des Touches, at her estate. It is there that she meets the young Calyste du Guénic, who promptly falls in love with her.

When Calyste avows his undying passion for her, Béatrix gives him several reasons for refusing his entreaties that she become his mistress. She tells him that besides the fact that she already has a lover to whom she is very devoted, she cannot commit another indiscretion because it would put her on a level with the lowest women. "Le monde," she says, "est encore indulgent pour celles dont la constance couvre de son manteau l'irrégularité du bonheur; mais il

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.409.

est impitoyable pour les habitudes vicieuses."<sup>46</sup> Society will perhaps tolerate an extra-marital liaison if time and faithfulness give it the outer trappings of a kind of marriage, but it will not suffer a succession of affairs; jumping from one lover to another is reprehensible in all eyes.

Three years pass from the time that Calyste last sees Béatrix at Touches, to the moment he catches a glimpse of her at the Opera. Béatrix has become une femme abandonnée; Conti has left her and she, who has become an object of ridicule, is quite ready now to forget her former scruples and objections, and to become Calyste's mistress.

Béatrix's pride has been broken by her experience with Conti, and she has also suffered much from a monetary point of view. Like most of the grandes dames who leave their husbands, she is penniless when she flees with Conti, having left her fortune in her husband's hands. She has to rely first on her lover, and then on gifts from her mother, to make life economically bearable. Strict economy is absolutely necessary and she has to give up many of the luxuries to which she has been accustomed. Meanwhile, Arthur de Rochefide is leading a most pleasant existence. He has no financial worries and turns his energies to finding ways of enjoying himself. Since he is in the position of un homme abandonné, he sets up housekeeping with

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.467.

a certain madame Aurélie Schontz, a practiced courtesan. "(Il) jouissait en ce moment de la plus grande somme de bonheur que puisse désirer un Parisien. . . On comprendra bien alors l'énorme différence que nos lois et nos moeurs mettent, chez les deux sexes, entre la même situation. Tout ce qui tourne en malheur pour une femme abandonnée, se change en bonheur chez un homme abandonné. Ce contraste frappant inspirera peut-être à plus d'une jeune femme la résolution de rester dans son ménage."<sup>46</sup> Arthur's reputation is not hurt by his adventure with madame Schontz and he is not ostracized by society, as is Béatrix, for having committed what is essentially the same sin.

Béatrix eventually drops Calyste, just as she is abandoned again, this time by her new lover la Palférine. She sees that the most useful thing that she can do is to go back to her husband and try to resume her original way of life with him. With him, she will have no passionate interludes, but she will be protected from the scorn of the world and from any monetary problems.

A lady of a different calibre, of a higher nobility of spirit, is madame Claire de Beauséant. She is the Femme Abandonnée of the Comédie Humaine.

Born into one of the most noble of French families, she holds the position of queen of high Parisian society.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.573.

She is married to the marquis de Beauséant, a seemingly amiable and harmless sort of man, whose chief pleasure in life is the table. He is on the terms of the greatest civility with his wife and has accepted her liaison with the marquis d'Adjuda-Pinto with very good grace.

Madame de Beauséant's affair with the Portuguese seigneur (Le Père Goriot) has been an accepted part of the Parisian scene for three years. It is a well-known fact that Claire de Beauséant is not at home to callers every afternoon from two to four, because those hours are set aside for d'Adjuda-Pinto.

The drama of Madame de Beauséant's abandonment begins with d'Adjuda's decision to get married. Offered a pretty wife and an enormous dowry, he has made up his mind to sign the marriage contract. Everyone in Paris knows about the impending marriage, except madame de Beauséant. Being at heart an ignoble person, d'Adjuda is reluctant to tell her in person of his defection and decides to accomplish "ce galant assassinat"<sup>47</sup> in writing. He is afraid of tears and recrimination, but Madame de Beauséant has too much pride and self-control for that. When she does find out about her lover's treachery, it is from her best friend, madame la duchesse de Langeais, and after the first crushing moment of shock, her behavior is exemplary.

The signing of the marriage contract of d'Adjuda-Pinto

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<sup>47</sup> Balzac, Le Père Goriot, Pléiade II, p.902.

is slated to take place the day after the grand ball that Claire de Beauséant is giving. The ball is the social event of the season and all Paris attends. Everyone watches the hostess to see if she will break under the strain of having to show a calm face to the world. "Le monde se rit d'une infamie, et il y trempe."<sup>48</sup> All her "friends" are waiting for her to show a sign of the heartbreak that they know she is feeling. But Claire de Bourgoigne, last descendant of the quasi-royal house of Bourgoigne shows herself superior to her misfortune and she dominates "jusqu'à son dernier moment le monde dont elle n'avait accepté les vanités que pour les faire servir au triomphe de sa passion."<sup>49</sup> Surrounded by the glitter and elegance of her ball, she receives all her guests with grace and dignity. Calm, she seems the same as she always has been. "... elle parut à tous semblable à elle-même, et se montra si bien ce qu'elle était quand le bonheur la parait de ses rayons, que les plus insensibles l'admirent, comme les jeunes Romaines applaudissaient le gladiateur qui savait sourire en expirant."<sup>50</sup> For, the social world is as blood-thirsty as the classical Romans, whose chief enjoyment was watching the the lions tear the gladiators limb from limb; they rejoice at another's misfortune, but admire the way she

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p.1051.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.1058.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.1059.

handles herself in a hostile world.

But though she gives no hint to anyone of the pain in her heart, inside she is dying, although it is not really clear why. It is true that she has been abandoned by her lover of three years, whom she has loved deeply. It seems, too, that he apparently does not love her, at least not to the extent that she cares for him. She has been jeopardizing her position in society, her marriage and her fortune for him, but he is not so dedicated to her. For him, the word "love" is a synonym for expediency and not for devotion. It is pleasant for him to have as a mistress the lovely madame de Beauséant, and he must have some affection for her. But when the opportunity comes along to marry two hundred thousand livres de rentes, and there is a pretty face in the bargain, he gladly gives up his mistress and his "love".

In spite of this, the question remains: Why did this abandonment have such a terrible effect on madame de Beauséant? She must have realized that a man like d'Ajuda would eventually want to get married. After all, marriages in the Comédie Humaine are made mostly for practical purposes: to acquire large dowries, and to have children to whom to pass on these large fortunes and any titles one may have. Nothing lasts forever, least of all love affairs, and a clever, resilient woman like madame de Beauséant surely knows this truth. As a leader of Parisian society,

a woman who has seen many of her sisters being abandoned by their lovers, for it was not an unusual occurrence, she should have swallowed hard once or twice and then gone on living. In fact, even d'Adjuda was convinced that she would accustom herself to the idea of his marriage "et finirait par sacrifier ses matinées à un avenir prévu dans la vie des hommes."<sup>51</sup> And the future bride's family, the Rochefides, are quite willing to play along and do what they must to pacify their future son-in-law's mistress. "Le marquis d'Adjuda, de concert avec les Rochefides ... espéraient que madame de Beauséant s'accoutumerait à l'idée de ce mariage ..."<sup>52</sup> (From this statement, it is obvious how very much a marriage of convenience the Rochefide alliance is; there is no question of sentiment here, just of practicality.)

Madame de Beauséant, however, does not get used to the idea of d'Adjuda's marriage. Instead, she has decided to leave Paris and its society forever, and to bury herself in the depths of Normandie for always. "J'ai l'éternité devant moi," she tells her young cousin Rastignac. "J'y serai seule, et personne ne m'y demandera compte de mes larmes."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.919.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.919.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.1061.

Claire de Beauséant's flight is all the more incomprehensible if we take notice of her husband. He is perfectly willing to forget about the whole affair and tells her: "Vous avez tort, ma chère, d'aller vous enfermer à votre âge! Restez donc avec nous."<sup>54</sup> Had she stayed and brazened the whole affair out, the world would have forgotten about it eventually. Newer and more interesting scandals are always cropping up, and everything eventually fades from the public's eye. In fact, it is her flight from Paris which gives new interest to the affair and captures society's imagination.

Madame de Beauséant's position is very noticeable. She is a woman who is leaving her home because her lover has left her in order to get married. It is almost as though d'Ajuda-Pinto is really her husband and le marquis de Beauséant, only a by-the-way friend, who regards her position with sympathy and decides to grant her asylum.

In spite of her husband's willingness to have her stay with him, she has made an irrevocable decision to go to Normandie, to Courcelles, "aimer, prier, jusqu'au jour où Dieu me retirera du monde,"<sup>55</sup> as she tells her bosom friend, la duchesse de Langeais. It is a monk-like existence that she has planned for herself, an existence ill-befitting

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.1061.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.1062.

the beautiful Claire de Beauséant, just as the convent to which la duchesse de Langeais flees, seems to be out of character with her personality. It is somewhat more understandable that Antoinette de Langeais chooses to live out her life in the order of the Carmelites Dechaussées. Until Montriveau insinuates himself into her innermost feelings, she has never loved anyone, and she feels that if she loses this one and only love, life has no more meaning. Feeling the desperation that comes from remorse at having, she thinks, driven Montriveau away with her own stupidity and intractability, she can't bear to live with herself and goes to a place where "self" is unimportant. But Claire de Beauséant has nothing to reproach herself with, and she is a much more flexible person than her friend. She has many more social possibilities and is an altogether less isolated soul.

There is another difficulty here. Society universally condemned the adulterous woman in the nineteenth century. Then why is it that when madame de Beauséant's liaison ended, that when she could have reverted to the status of an honest married woman, why is it that it was then that she was looked down upon by the world? Her status, according to the mores of the time, should have gone up rather than plummeted.

Having arranged her affairs, Madame de Beauséant bids

farewell to one or two of her friends, and leaves in the cold, grey, dawn hours after the end of her ball. In her good-bye to Rastignac she says: "À mon départ de ce monde, j'aurai eu, comme quelques mourants privilégiés, de religieuses, de sincères émotions autour de moi."<sup>56</sup> For, in one way, she is dying. The physical shell of the woman is left intact after her experience, but the spark of life has been destroyed, or so she believes. D'Adjuda-Pinto is referred to as a murderer by Félix de Vandenesse, "un meurtrier impuni,"<sup>57</sup> and madame de Beauséant has been his victim.

Courcelles, Normandie, is a very cold little town. The local nobility and gentry (La Femme Abandonnée) do not receive madame de Beauséant because, as one says, "Vous comprenez que nous ne pouvions pas admettre ici une femme séparée de son mari. C'est de vieilles idées auxquelles nous avons encore la bêtise de tenir."<sup>58</sup> The ironic thing about this situation is that the point of madame de Beauséant's flight from Paris is not to get away from her husband, because she has been as good as separated from him during the years of her love affair with d'Adjuda, but to leave behind a world from which her lover is gone, a

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.1062.

<sup>57</sup>Balzac, Le Lys dans la Vallée, Pléiade VIII, p.996.

<sup>58</sup>Balzac, La Femme Abandonnée, Pléiade II, p.212.

world which would despise her as a woman abandoned and disgraced. Besides, she did not leave her husband to run away with another man, but left him in order to be alone completely, with only the memories of her happy love to sustain her. It is when the affair is over that she has come under censure, because she has defied the conventions of society. As long as she conducted her liaison discretely, there was no overt disapproval of her actions. But an open break with husband and home is beyond reproach. "La vicomtesse," continues this member of Normandie society, "a eu d'autant plus de tort dans ses escapades que monsieur de Beauséant est un galant homme, un homme de cour: il aurait très bien entendu raison. Mais sa femme est une tête folle."<sup>59</sup>

Almost completely ostracized, Claire de Beauséant sees no one but the marquis de Champignelles who uses his family connection to her to explain their friendship. The marquis is, at least, sympathetic to her unhappiness and to her enforced solitude, just as he is impressed by her nobility of birth: "Mais enfin," he says, "ce nom-là blanchit tout."<sup>60</sup> If she is nowhere received, neither does she wish to see anyone. The good citizens of Courcelles think that her isolation is the result of her recognizing the falseness of her position. But it more probably a consequence

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.212.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.211.

of the melancholy that has taken possession of her, and of her general dislike of people. She has experienced the falseness of even her best friends who fawned over her when she was successful, but who came to gloat over her unhappiness as soon as d'Ajuda abandoned her. She has become sick of human society.

To Gaston de Neuil, an impressionable young man in Normandie to convalesce from some ailment, the figure of madame de Beauséant embodies a romantic ideal. His imagination is caught. "(Elle) réveillait en son âme le souvenir de ses rêves de jeune homme et ses plus vivaces passions..."<sup>61</sup> He employs a subterfuge to have himself admitted to her house so that he may see her for himself.

Balzac draws a very attractive portrait of madame la vicomtesse de Beauséant. She has "un front d'ange déchu qui s'enorgueillit de sa faute et ne veut point pardon."<sup>62</sup>

(Balzac has a tendency to compare many of the women in the Comédie Humaine to angels. He idealizes woman and sees her as "l'être le plus parfait entre les créatures." She is, he continues, "délicatement intelligente par le sentiment comme est l'ange."<sup>63</sup>) Madame de Beauséant's faute is never really made clear. It is questionable whether she is to

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p.213.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.218.

<sup>63</sup>Balzac, Note en appendice à la première édition of Eugénie Grandet, Pléiade XI, p.202.

to blame for having left her husband or for having been abandoned by her lover.

Continuing his description of Claire de Beauséant, Balzac comments that the majesty of her head is crowned with masses of golden hair in which it is easy to imagine the golden ducal crown of Bourgogne. Her eyes shine with all the courage of her house, "le courage d'une femme forte seulement pour repousser le mépris ou l'audace, mais pleine de tendresse pour les sentiments doux."<sup>64</sup> In short, she is the personification of beautiful womanhood, the ideal blend of head and heart which balance each other. The sadness still speaks from her eyes, though three years have passed since the end of the affair "qui avait failli lui coûter la vie."<sup>65</sup> The description of Claire de Beauséant makes it even more difficult to understand how she could have fled from the world. With such courage, one can face anything, even the shame of being an abandoned woman.

When Gaston sees madame de Beauséant for the first time, she is seated in the midst of an immense salon, silent and cold. Her isolation is a symbol of her aloneness in the world. The silence that surrounds her is like the silence in her soul, the néant, the frightening nothingness that is her future. She has nothing to sustain her faltering soul neither children, nor loved and loving husband, and she

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p.219.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.219.

must turn inward, "prendre sa force sur elle-même, vivre de sa propre vie, et n'avoir d'autre espérance que celle de la femme abandonnée: attendre la mort, en hâter la lenteur, malgré les beaux jours qui lui restaient encore."<sup>66</sup> Hers is the tragedy of an unfulfilled destiny.

It is apparent though, that if her interest in life was almost extinguished once, it is now slowly starting to flicker alive once more. Very pleased by Gaston's very apparent admiration of her beauty, she is flattered enough by the sentiments she inspires in him, to allow him to stay and talk to her, even though he has admitted that he entered her house under false pretenses. "Elle savoura la plaisir toujours nouveau d'être pour un homme le principe de son bonheur..."<sup>67</sup>

In spite of her pleasure at being a desirable woman in Gaston's eyes, madame de Beauséant bitterly resents his coming because she feels that she is an object of pity and a curiosity in his eyes. Besides, she knows the danger of welcoming male visitors in her home; the provincial gossips magnify such visits and before long, everyone believes that she has taken a new lover. She could not bear to be the center of such rumors.

But Gaston perseveres in his pursuit of Claire de

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p.219.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p.221.

Beauséant because he recognizes that she is "une de ces femmes rares, toujours victimes de leur propre perfection et de leur inextinguible tendresse, dont la beauté gracieuse est le moindre charme, quand elles ont une fois permis l'accès de leur âme où les sentiments sont infinis, où tout est bon, où l'instinct du beau s'unit aux expressions les plus variées de l'amour pour purifier les voluptés et les rendre presque saintes."<sup>68</sup> He expresses his amazement that anyone could have abandoned such an incomparable woman, and she thaws under his sympathy and empathy. But she refuses him entrance to her house because she is afraid of public opinion and afraid of being labeled "une femme méprisable et vulgaire."<sup>69</sup> For, what she has been longing for all along in her self-imposed exile is absolution from society, sympathy for the cruel blow that fate in the person of d'Adjuda has dealt her, and social respect. She believes that a pure life, a blameless existence will re-establish her character in the eyes of the world. Her pride keeps her living apart from society while she waits to be asked back. A victim of the law by her marriage, since she can't break her marital ties as divorce doesn't exist, and a victim of people by her love, she knows that she must live in solitude and virtue, lest she be, what she believes, is, rightfully, condemned. She is aware of the sins

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p.223.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.225.

she has committed by breaking her marriage vows; she has done it because the relationship is a deadening one. She has wanted to live; she has wanted happiness in life and she has found it for a brief time. But she has had to pay dearly for it. In spite of the fact that she has suffered much with and from the husband to whom she is married at the age of eighteen when she knows no better, it is forbidden to search elsewhere for fulfillment. "J'ai voulu vivre... J'ai violé les lois du monde, le monde m'a punie; nous étions justes l'un et l'autre."<sup>70</sup> She accepts the fact that what she has done deserves a punishment. She has no illusions about the tender mercies of the world, nor about the unbreakable rules that govern it. There are no ways out, particularly if one is a woman.

Madame de Beauséant is very naive about d'Adjuda's part in her troubles. She believes that he left her because she has done something to displease him; she has been too loving, or too demanding, or simply not adroit enough to hold him. She doesn't realize that their position made such an abandonment inevitable. She, a married woman tied legally to a husband, could not hold forever a man who is one of the "illustres impertinents de l'époque"<sup>71</sup> and who, by his temperament, is bound to grow jaded by his love affair.

But it seems that she has learned somewhat from her

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p.225.

<sup>71</sup>Balzac, Le Père Goriot, Pléiade II, p.874.

mistakes. She feels that a love affair with Gaston would have no future. "Il ne faut point former de liens quand ils doivent nécessairement se briser un jour."<sup>72</sup> And she is not ready to go through the emotionally wrenching experience of an unsuccessful affair again. She could not survive being abandoned by a second man. So she sends Gaston away with the intelligence that she doesn't love him and can never feel anything for him, because her emotions do not hold sway over her actions as they did in her younger, heedless days. Now she does everything according to cold reason and reason tells her not to start any sort of affair with Gaston.

Having said her piece, Claire packs her bags and leaves on an extended voyage to Geneva. Gaston follows her there with the vague feeling that she wants him to, because she has not meant a word of what she has said, and prefers Switzerland where nobody knows them, to be the scene of a love affair. There is no basis for this supposition, according to the author. Such calculation on the part of a woman would be too off-putting and wouldn't belong in a real love.

For love it is, "une passion vraie,"<sup>73</sup> which Gaston and Claire enjoy for a number of years. After spending three years together in Geneva, they return to France; Gaston has inherited from his father and must organize his affairs.

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<sup>72</sup>Balzac, La Femme Abandonnée, Pléiade II, p.227.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p.234.

But their life together continues. "Les deux amants mirent entre eux et le monde des barrières que ni les idées sociales, ni les personnes ne pouvaient franchir, et retrouvèrent leurs bonnes journées de la Suisse."<sup>74</sup> They are as isolated from the world back in France as they were in their private villa in Geneva. But it is impossible to live separated from the world forever and their happiness is fated to end.

Gaston's mother is understandably not too happy with the state of affairs; she is eager to tear him away from his anti-religious and immoral way of life. Madame de Beauséant realizes the danger threatening her from that quarter and thinks seriously of returning to Geneva, out of harm's way; but she is incapable of showing such mistrust of Gaston. However, when rumors about Gaston and a young and very eligible heiress begin to fly, she takes her courage into her hands and writes him a questioning letter. She has been indescribably happy, she says, for the last nine years, but now she is tormented by one recurring thought: Is she causing him any unhappiness? She knows that she is ten years older than him, that he has renounced living a social life because of her, that he has made many other sacrifices for her. She recognizes the great importance that marriage has in the social development of a young man.

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.235.

"Tu as pensé peut-être à ta destinée sociale, à ce mariage qui doit augmenter nécessairement ta fortune, te permettre d'avouer ton bonheur, tes enfants, de transmettre tes biens, de reparaitre dans le monde et d'y occuper ta place avec honneur."<sup>75</sup> Thus, she is willing to give him his freedom. Not wanting him to be faithful to her out of pity, she shows her fierce pride. At all costs she wants to know the truth. She has learned the tragedy of deluding herself in the affair with d'Adjuda-Pinto, and she doesn't want to repeat it.

Ever faithful to her love, she writes: "J'ai assez d'amour pour préférer ton bonheur au mien, ta vie à la mienne."<sup>76</sup> Generous because she loves him too much to want to deny him anything, she feels also that she has had the best years of his life. She is the only woman in the world who has loved the young Gaston, the Gaston whose illusions were not yet tarnished, whose whole being was still grace and freshness and had not yet taken on the shadow of middle age cynicism nor been tainted by the anxieties of life. Her consolation exists: He will surely love no one with the same purehearted singlemindedness as he loved her, because that comes only in youth. "Oui, l'homme, le coeur, l'âme que j'aurai connus n'existeront plus; je les ensevelirai

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p.237-238.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.240.

dans mon souvenir pour en jouir encore, et vivre heureuse de cette belle vie passée, mais inconnue à tout ce qui n'est pas nous."<sup>77</sup>

Though madame de Beauséant makes the noble gesture to give Gaston up, it is at the moment that she knows or at least feels that the rupture is inevitable. Furthermore, though she is saying one thing, she means quite the opposite. Every statement of hers screams at Gaston: Don't leave me. She refers to their intimacies which no one can understand, to the closeness that they have enjoyed and which cannot be duplicated, to the impossibility of Gaston loving another woman as he has loved her and to the inconceivable notion that he should ever be loved as she has loved him. Her last sentence: "Je te suis soumise, comme à Dieu, à ce seul consolateur qui me reste si tu m'abandonnes,"<sup>78</sup> is calculated to make him feel desperately guilty. If she is abandoned again, her situation will be extremely bleak and practically unbearable. And everything depends on him. A plaything in his hands, the balance of her life depends on his decision.

While madame de Beauséant is agonizing over her letter to him, Gaston has almost decided to marry the young heiress, mademoiselle de la Rodière. His mother, who sincerely wishes to save him from eternal damnation because of his

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.239.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.240.

ungodly life, tells him that if madame de Beauséant really loves him, she surely wants him to marry and be happy. The great fortune of his intended bride is also a great inducement. Gaston is already wavering towards a life of great comfort, a life which convention would approve of, and madame de Beauséant's letter aids his definite decision to marry. But he is very sorry for her and would like to bring her to a state of mind in which she would order him to get married. To accustom her gradually to the idea, he tries at first to lull her suspicions. He is counting on her nobility, on her pride and on the "belles qualités de son âme"<sup>79</sup> to make his break with her easier to bear. But she reads between the lines of his answer to her and knows the whole truth. She does not want to see him ever again. She has no intention of showing him how much she has been hurt, or of sharing him with a wife.

Gaston marries soon afterwards, and Claire continues to live in her chateau. She immerses herself in the deepest solitude and sees no one, not even her servants. She never leaves her apartments except to hear a privately celebrated mass. Several months after his marriage, Gaston attempts to see her, but she refuses and sends back the letters he writes her, unopened. She spends her time in a sort of mute sorrow, staring straight ahead of her at

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.241.

at nothing. "Il y avait dans cette attitude(une expression de la douleur la plus complète), une vague espérance, mais l'on ne savait si Claire de Bourgogne regardait vers la tombe ou dans le passé."<sup>80</sup> Balzac leaves this in question, but one has the feeling that she is yearning towards death; her expression of deep melancholy, her deep seclusion, all point towards a woman who is tired of the life which has given her so many shocks. Disgusted with life and particularly with Gaston, she threatens to throw herself from a window if he dares cross her threshold. Gaston, realizing that he has lost the one true love of his life, goes home and shoots himself.

In his book on Romantic feminism, Bolster comments that Stendhal affirmed "que l'ennui du mariage, tel que l'a fait le 19ème siècle, prédispose à l'adultère toute femme qui n'a pas une âme sèche."<sup>81</sup> Balzac agrees with this idea. Marriages in his world are made with the head and do not take into account the dictates of the heart. Thrown together were a man mostly interested in the size of the dowry, and a young girl freshly released from a convent, not old enough to know better than to consign herself to a man who, more often than not, cared little for her personally, and who, after the marriage ceremony, proceeded to live very much as if he had no wife waiting for him at home.

A woman, abandoned on her own hearth, often decided that she would look elsewhere for happiness. But she had to be much more discreet than her husband was in a comparable situation. A husband was a powerful being, not to be thwarted or embarrassed by his wife's unfaithfulness. Though many of the Comédie Humaine's husbands do not love their wives, neither do they want to be publicly humiliated by their affairs. In retribution for her misconduct, a husband could cut a wife off from her fortune, send her away from her home and condemn her to live her life out in solitude and pain. As the duchesse de Langeais' aunt

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<sup>81</sup>Richard Bolster, Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique (Paris: Minard, 1970), p.106.

tells her, "Quand tu seras vieille, tu seras bien aise d'entendre la messe à la cour et non dans dans un couvent de province, voilà toute la question."<sup>82</sup>

Husbands who don't care about their wives' marital affairs are an even more despicable group. The duc de Cataneo who actually sends his Massimilla to look for a lover is the prime representative of these.

Balzac describes many of the husbands in his novels as being emotionally inferior to their wives. While the women are very attached to their husbands, the men cannot form the deep emotional attachments that are necessary for successful marriages. Women are intellectually superior to their husbands as well. A woman like Béatrix, no matter how unsympathetic she may be to the reader, is recognized as being much superior to her husband, and this among other things, justifies her flight from home, according to Balzac.

Not only are husbands unworthy beings; lovers are equally second-rate. As la princesse de Blamont-Chauvry tells her niece: "Aucun homme ne vaut un seul des sacrifices par lesquels nous sommes assez folles pour payer leur amour."<sup>83</sup> They are opportunists who go where their interest leads them, and who think nothing of leaving their mistress

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<sup>82</sup>Balzac. La Duchesse de Langeais, Pléiade V, p.239.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.239.

to go cultivate another more useful woman.

Abandoned and sick at heart, women like madame de Beauséant must suffer the indignity of being ostracized by the very people who have fawned over them. The inner loneliness of the abandoned woman is matched by the solitude that surrounds her. The "inégalité monstrueuse" which decrees that "la gloire de l'un est le déshonneur de l'autre,"<sup>84</sup> has trapped her and slowly destroys her. Man is free but woman is fettered by her womanhood.

And all this suffering is for naught. The moral of these tales, says Barbéris, is that love in Balzac equals disorder, dissolution and destruction of the family unit and of the whole social structure. Occasionally, the woman who loves is destroyed too, ravaged by useless desires and regrets, as is madame de Mortsauf. Except in the case of Massimilla Doni, who is not a Frenchwoman and therefore subject to different rules, enduring happiness in love is impossible. "On sait bien que la seule ombre de bonheur se trouve justement à s'arrêter, à refuser l'amour, à sagement ne plus vouloir, à s'abstenir, et qu'il n'y a rien de pire, surtout après une première expérience qu'une rechute, qu'une concession au mouvement."<sup>85</sup> This is the point of La Femme Abandonnée.

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<sup>84</sup>Edith Thomas, Pauline Rolland, Socialisme et féminisme au 19ème siècle, quoted in Bolster, p.24.

<sup>85</sup>Barbéris, Le Monde de Balzac (Paris: Arthaud, 1973), p. 437.

Rather, Balzac would seem to think that one should look for happiness in the established entity of the family. As madame de Beauséant says, she would probably never have left her husband had she had children. Motherhood is extremely important as a mode of fulfillment for the woman in the Balzacian novel. It gives meaning to her existence and helps her bear the miseries of life. Henriette de Mortsauf's only consolation are her children and the joys of motherhood help counteract the sorrows of her marital life.

But in spite of Balzac's theory that women should be orthodox wives and mothers, he has great sympathy for the woman who chooses passion over reason, and implicitly, nature over society. He feels a spiritual accord with her, and although she will lose in her battle against the established forces of society, she is clearly the choice of his heart.

Madame de Beauséant is his favorite and the epitome of womanhood. She has "le génie de son sexe"<sup>86</sup> and she can turn love into the most sublime thing in the world. "Après d'elle, toutes les femmes pâlisent."<sup>87</sup> She arouses a terrible pity that she cannot fulfill her promise.

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<sup>86</sup> Balzac, La Femme Abandonnée, Pléiade II, p.245.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

Chapter Five  
The courtesan

La grisette qui certes  
a l'instinct de la  
misère et des souffrances  
du coeur...  
(La Vieille Fille)

Balzac was fascinated by the courtesan. The Comédie Humaine is replete with lorettes, grisettes, filles and courtisanes who are intrinsic to the fabric of the Balzacian world.

There are many theories to explain the author's fondness for the figure of the courtesan. Marceau remarks that Balzac always had to "assemble his characters into groups, to confront them with one another,"<sup>1</sup> that they could reveal their inner thoughts and their personalities in conversation. The perfect place for this was the salon of a woman like Coralie where a poor journalist like Lousteau, a young aristocrat like Rhetoré, and a successful writer like Nathan, could come together and discuss all manner of things without restraint.

Albert Béguin believes that Balzac's courtesans satisfied some of his own inner sensual appetites, better than any living mistress ever could. But, he says, this is only incidental. More important, the courtesan "paraît porter

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<sup>1</sup>Marceau, Balzac and his World, p.243.

en elle, et manifester plus suggestivement que toute autre créature, les sentiments, les élans, les pouvoirs qui constituent en chacun de nous la source du mouvement vital."<sup>2</sup> Thus Béguin points to the courtesan as the embodiment of the vital energy which for Balzac was one of the character's most important attributes.

In addition, says Béguin, Balzac was seduced by the extraordinary scope a courtesan's life may encompass. "Ayant choisi de créer elle-même son destin, elle a brisé tous les cadres et les écrans que les hommes vivant en société ont appris à maintenir entre eux et les périls ou les promesses de la vie."<sup>3</sup> She is the mistress of her destiny, "le poète de ses propres aventures."<sup>4</sup> She uses her creative faculties to the fullest and nothing is closer to Balzac's heart "que ces existences faites par la volonté et l'imagination."<sup>5</sup>

The courtesan lives a disordered life and her ultimate fate is variable. She may exist in great luxury but die in poverty and disgrace, or she may turn into a respectable

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Béguin, Balzac Visionnaire, (Genève:Éditions Albert Skira, 1946), p.151-152.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.154.

woman, married and highly conventional. "Les destinées des filles comportent la plus grande variété de dénouements possibles,"<sup>6</sup> and Balzac makes the greatest use of these possibilities.

In The 'Courtisane' in the French Theater from Hugo to Becque, Dr. Sidney Braun catalogues the various types of courtesans that were common in the France of the nineteenth century. There was the grisette, a working girl "de moeurs accueillants,"<sup>7</sup> who was not looking for money in her love affairs, whose pleasures were simple and undemanding, but who did accept something from her lover, if "only the cost of lodging and food to supplement her own meager income as a seamstress or milliner."<sup>8</sup> "From the point of view of mercenary gain, she is the least 'wicked'."<sup>9</sup> She usually feels a deep affection for her lover, though marriage to him is out of the question because of class differences, not to mention the absence of a dowry.

The lorette's aim in her liaisons is the acquisition of money. She doesn't work, but goes from one relationship to another in search of increasing comfort and greater

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<sup>6</sup> Balzac, Beatrix, Pléiade II, p.575.

<sup>7</sup> Larousse du XXe Siècle, s.v. grisette, quoted in Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theater from Hugo to Becque (1831-1885) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1947), p.11.

<sup>8</sup> Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theater, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.140.

luxuries. She would like to marry, but she is not singlemindedly pursuing that objective. She has a definite feeling for her lovers. Dr. Braun distinguishes two other important types of courtesan, the cocotte and the demi-mondaine. The cocotte has no sentimental illusions about her love affairs. Her whole approach is so extremely businesslike that she mixes only with those who are likely to supply her with the wealth that she desires. The demi-mondaine is cultured and rich from her venal career, but would rather forget her past and become respectable through marriage, preferably in the nobility. Both types appear often in the Balzacian world, though not called by those names.

Balzac treats the courtisane with sympathy and often finds valid excuses for her behavior. In Une Double Famille, Caroline Crochard is stitching her life away, embroidering tulle day and night for some rich woman's gown, while hunger is never very far away. She exists together with her mother in a room redolent of misery, working at night by the flame of a candle and, during the day, by the meager light that filters in from the narrow dark street. Though her mother watches the passers-by religiously, she herself rarely lifts her head. "La pudeur ou peut-être le sentiment pénible de sa détresse, semblait retenir sa figure attachée sur le métier."<sup>10</sup> She is like one of those

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<sup>10</sup>Balzac, Une Double Famille, Pléiade I, p.929.

poor work horses, whose day-in day-out existence contains the same unrelenting drudgery, and who drags his heavy load, head lowered, and resigned to the wretchedness of his life.

Late one night, when Caroline is trying desperately to finish embroidering a gown whose price may pay the landlord and the baker, Roger de Granville passes by. He hears her conversation with her mother on the graveness of their financial situation and, in pity, throws them a full purse through a crack in the window. Contact is established and they become friendly. He takes them to Saint-Leu one Sunday, and both mother and daughter are thrilled with the outing. Madame Crochard takes care to leave her daughter alone with Monsieur Roger, so that a more serious relationship may develop. Caroline meanwhile is content to enjoy the moment. She has no great ambitions and confides to her companion that she would like to be rich only so that her mother might have coffee sweetened with sugar every morning. As for herself, her greatest joy would consist in the assurance that embroidered tulle would never go out of style "pour que l'ouvrage ne manque jamais."<sup>11</sup> Grinding poverty has shrunk her horizons. The modesty of her desires mark her as a typical grisette. She has "achieved her 'raison d'être' as a victim of poverty and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 939.

injustice"- She often does not get paid by the upper class women for whom she works- and she "is not to be regarded as a sinner, but rather as one sinned against."<sup>12</sup>

Soon Caroline's status changes from grisette to femme entretenue. Roger moves her to a beautiful apartment, where she is content to remain day after day, waiting for her lover, whenever he may come. To please him, she learns to play the piano, but elegant manners don't interest her, nor does she develop any facility in conversation. With no ambitions to storm a society which would not accept her, she is quite happy tending the two children who are eventually born to her. Caroline's greatest pleasure is derived from her motherhood, fulfilling "les douces obligations d'une mère.... Cette discrète et douce créature se résigna... à ne point faire un pas hors de la sphère enchantée où pour elle se trouvaient toutes ses joies... Ses modestes plaisirs ne fatiguèrent jamais par une ambition mal placée le coeur de Roger..."<sup>13</sup> She has remained at heart the good-natured grisette, for whom money has less importance than her Roger's love.

Suzanne du Val Noble, in La Vieille Fille, is a different type. Ambitious, witty and charming, she was

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<sup>12</sup>Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theater, p.31.

<sup>13</sup>Balzac, Une Double Famille, Pléiade I, p.948.

"belle comme la plus belle courtisane"<sup>14</sup> with a fresh, radiant Norman beauty. In Alençon, where she is a laundry girl, she has refused the fortune that various men have offered her "autant par honneur que par dédain de leur mesquinerie."<sup>15</sup> Capable of deep emotion, she falls in love with the young Athanase Granson, but realizes that since neither of them has any money, their relationship is doomed to failure. In the Balzacian world, sufficient resources are absolutely essential for any marriage to succeed. However, Suzanne bitterly regrets that she has sullied herself in Athanase's eyes with her story (entirely false) that she has been seduced and left pregnant by the rascal, Du Bousquier. This fabricated story was developed in order to extort money from the supposed father, and, failing that, from the Société maternelle of which Athanase's mother is the president. Making a resolution to return to Alençon and to Athanase as soon as she has amassed a large enough sum, she leaves her native town, but returns only when it is too late. Athanase has committed suicide and she, who has truly loved him, weeps with real sorrow at his tomb.

Meanwhile in Paris, "elle resta dans les régions les plus élevées et les plus décentes de la galanterie."<sup>16</sup> She

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<sup>14</sup> Balzac, La Vieille Fille, Pléiade IV, p.220.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.222.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

changes from the grisette of her Alençon days, to one of the most beautiful and elegant women "qui composaient alors à Paris le monde exceptionnel de ces femmes qu'aujourd'hui l'on a déceimment nommées des 'Lorettes'."<sup>17</sup> A succession of protectors each takes her under his wing, but her position is rather precarious; she is often à pied, without a source of income. At last, very thankfully it seems, she marries Theodore Gaillard, a former lover. She apparently never had the requisite toughness to live her whole life as a lorette.

Madame Aurélie Schontz is a cut above Suzanne du Val Noble. First of all, she has been well educated. At Saint-Denis, where she, as the daughter of a superior officer, has been sent by order of the Emperor, she has learned to speak four languages, to play the piano well, to paint, and to appreciate the finer points of various world literatures. In fact, she has even worked as an assistant teacher before deciding that there are no opportunities for advancement, nor for getting married in a boarding school. So, attracted to the life of the courtisane because some of her friends appear to be quite successful at it, she sets out to make her mark in Paris. She has a spirit of adventure and she is lively, witty and intelligent; but she is handicapped by exactly this last

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<sup>17</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.748-749.

attribute. She picks as her companions, interesting but poor writers and witty but debt-ridden journalists. Having sacrificed her (material) interests to true love, she has sunk to a level of extreme misery. Luckily for her, she chances to meet Arthur de Rochefide, who has been abandoned by his wife (Béatrix), and she charms him with her great wit. Until now, the high spirited Aurélie, who entered her "profession" with more good-nature than business acumen, has not been too prosperous. Balzac comments that sometimes, it is better to be a little less intelligent and a little more mercenary, if one is to succeed as a courtisane. One has to stifle all feelings and to be singleminded in the pursuit of one's goals. Emotions and good taste in picking one's companions are very detrimental to the process of acquiring a fortune as a lorette.

Arthur de Rochefide sets up housekeeping with Aurélie. after she has skillfully persuaded him that her only ambition in life is "conquérir honnêtement une petite existence bourgeoise."<sup>18</sup> All Aurélie's actions are exemplary; concerning herself with Arthur's son, she takes him to school every day, buys him presents and generally becomes "la plus tendre des mères."<sup>19</sup> Clever in investment matters, she increases Arthur's fortune for him, all the

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<sup>18</sup> Balzac, Béatrix, Pléiade II, p.519.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.580.

while amassing a tidy sum for herself without seeming at all greedy or acquisitive. Her fidelity to Arthur never comes into question, even with the variety of young artists and men of letters whom she takes under her protection, and she is generally considered "la femme la plus agréable que l'on connût sur la lisière qui sépare le treizième arrondissement des douze autres."<sup>20</sup> Though she once avows that she loves Arthur "comme une femme aime son mari quand elle est honnête femme,"<sup>21</sup> it is far more likely that Aurélie is expressing her hidden desires rather than the actual reality. She would like to be an honest woman with a loving and loved husband, but Arthur can never be that for her. Rather it is gratitude that Aurélie feels towards him for the help that he has given her, unaware though he may be, in building a large fortune and in achieving a certain social prominence. Ready to attempt the actualization of her ultimate goal, a respectable marriage, she first picks the bridegroom, Fabien de Ronceret, a magistrate. Then, she is promised help in realizing the marriage and her goal for Ronceret in return for taking part in the complicated scheme that has been hatched by Maxime de Trailles, among others, to return Calyste du Guénic to the young wife that he has abandoned for Béatrix,

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<sup>20</sup>  
Ibid., p. 580.

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Ibid., p. 580.

Rochevide's runaway wife. The erstwhile lorette eventually becomes la Présidente du Ronceret, thus achieving a great career. One feels that she has suffered enough during the early part of her life, and has paid for her later successes quite adequately with the tears and miseries of her younger days.

In talking about women like Caroline Crochard, Suzanne du Val Noble and Aurélie Schontz, Balzac says: "C'était une de ces jeunes filles qui, soit par la misère la plus profonde, soit par défaut de travail ou par l'effroi de la mort, souvent aussi par la trahison d'un premier amant, sont poussées à prendre un métier que la plupart d'entre elles font avec dégoût, beaucoup avec insouciance, quelques-unes pour obéir aux lois de leur constitution..." They have been pushed into their position by the circumstances of a merciless life. "En effet," he continues, "l'idée fixe de beaucoup de ces pauvres filles consiste à vouloir se faire accepter comme de bonnes bourgeoises, tout bêtement fidèles à leurs maris; capables d'être d'excellentes mères de famille, d'écrire leur dépense et de raccommo-  
<sup>22</sup>  
 le linge de la maison." Her domestic longings in the midst of her irregular life are pitiful and show that at heart she is no different from her eminently respectable bourgeois sisters.

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<sup>22</sup>Balzac, Melmoth reconcilié, Pléiade IX, p.277-278.

There is however, a different type of courtesan in the Comédie Humaine who does not strive for marriage, but only for money and luxuries. She doesn't long for any permanence in her relationships, nor do the virtues of bourgeois fidelity attract her. Often, she is the heir to a family tradition of selling herself for lucre, as are la Marana and Esther Gobseck. It is when describing this type of courtesan that Balzac examines more fully the miseries and the anxieties that are present under the glittering triumphs of such a woman's life, the miracles of true love that effect the great transformations in her character, and finally, the agonizing death that prematurely ends her days.

La Marana's life is "un tissu d'aventures romanesques et de vicissitudes étranges."<sup>23</sup> Daughter of an ancient line, her family name Marana has come to mean, by the fourteenth century, une fille de joie in the larger sense of the word. Centuries before, the Maranas held very high positions in the world, et "réunissaient chez elles la soutane, la robe et l'épée."<sup>24</sup> Their name has finally become a sort of glory for them. It represents a way of life whose very ancientness justifies it and lends it a certain type of perverse respectability.

The Marana of the nineteenth century is true to her lineage. Of an overwhelming beauty, she is often taken up

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<sup>23</sup>Balzac, Les Marana, Pléiade IX, p.801.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.802.

by some great seigneur who showers her with gold and extravagant luxuries. For a while, her life is the life of a queen, whose every caprice is obeyed and whose wishes are anticipated. But then, by some unknown process, her gold evaporates, her prince grows bored of her, and she finds herself out on the street, poor and alone, having nothing left but her all-powerful beauty. This seesaw existence has developed in her a very carefree philosophy; she lives with no thought<sup>t</sup>to and with no worries about the past, the present or the future. If she has no rich protector, she attaches herself to some poor officer, "comme un chien à son maître."<sup>25</sup> The image that one gets is of a faithful and good-hearted woman, naïve in her own way about the difficulties of life. She sleeps, says Balzac, as gaily under the roof of an attic, as under the most opulent silk covers. Always faithful to her lover of the moment and accepting her fate with grace, she is not hardened by her life, nor is she bitter. Her religious fate throughout all remains strong. "Plus d'une fois, elle avait dit à l'amour: 'Tu reviendras demain, aujourd'hui je suis à Dieu.'"<sup>26</sup> Belief in God shines in her heart and lifts it above the level to which her existence might condemn her. And, in fact, during one moment of religious

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.801.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.801.

introspection, she vows, "comme jurent ces sortes de femmes, avec la probité, avec la volonté du baigne, la plus forte volonté, la plus exacte probité qu'il y ait sous le ciel; elle jura donc devant un autel, en croyant à l'autel..."<sup>27</sup> to make her daughter a virtuous woman, so that the long line of Maranas may finally have a moral and pure descendant. La Marana keeps her vow, as one might expect. Balzac is very insistent on her sincerity in making it, and on the honesty of her intentions.

When her daughter is born, la Marana forsakes her former way of life. She lives alone and virtuously. "La Marana fut mère comme aucune mère n'était mère; car, dans son naufrage éternel, la maternité pouvait être une planche de salut."<sup>28</sup> Motherhood sanctifies her. For the duration of the time that she tends to her daughter, she is a model of rectitude. After several years, not wishing any hint of scandal to ruin her little Juana's future, she has "le courage de renoncer à son enfant pour son enfant,"<sup>29</sup> and she gives her to raise, to a very correct Spanish family in whose house "la religion, la sainteté des sentiments et

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.802.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.803.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.804.

l'honneur étaient dans l'air."<sup>30</sup> Her sacrifice is underlined by the author who comments that "la pauvre fille de joie, mère déshéritée de son enfant... la courtisane laissa sur le seuil de cette maison une de ces larmes que recueillent les anges."<sup>31</sup> But, by calling her une fille de joie, Balzac also emphasizes that once she no longer has her child with her, she goes back to her former calling. La Marana fully realizes the shame inherent in what she herself is doing and the dishonor of her position, and is deeply pleased that "Juana serait la plus humble des femmes peut-être, mais non pas une infâme courtisane à qui tous les hommes pouvaient dire: 'Qu'avez vous, mon amour',"<sup>32</sup> with a careless concern.

The odds against the success of la Marana's plans for her daughter are great. Juana has inherited the passionate blood of her family, and the soldier Montefiore finds it relatively easy to seduce her while promising to marry her, a promise that he of course has no intention of keeping. But la Marana manages to marry Juana as honorably as possible under the circumstances.

The courtesan appears in this work (Les Marana) as a

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.804.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.804.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p.805.

dedicated mother who fights as she can for her daughter's honor and well-being. Able to renounce her own greatest joy, the contemplation of her child, so that that child might grow up without the stigma of her race, she is truly admirable.

Motherhood has effected the moral regeneration of la Marana, at least for a certain period of time. Love does the same thing for Coralie, and later, for Esther.

Coralie is an actress at the Panorama-Dramatique, one of the most charming and lovely actresses in Paris. "Cette femme ...était le type des filles qui exercent à volonté la fascination sur les hommes."<sup>33</sup> Her life is a tragic story. Sold by her mother to De Marsay, the Parisian lion, for 60,000 francs, Coralie has literally been thrust into slavery. She enters the theatre in desperation; "elle avait en horreur De Marsay, son premier acquéreur."<sup>34</sup> She is not even considered a person, but is spoken of as an object with a purchaser. Degraded by a mother who peddled her own daughter's virtue, it is no surprise that "elle n'a encore recolté que des chagrins."<sup>35</sup>

Soon abandoned by De Marsay, Coralie finds Camusot, a silk merchant who keeps her and loves her. This Camusot is

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<sup>33</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.720-721.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p.722.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p.722.

fifty-six years old and fat, "mais il est comme un père pour elle, elle le souffre et se laisse aimer."<sup>36</sup> One must not forget that Coralie is very young, a mere fifteen when De Marsay acquires her. She is probably emotionally scarred by the experience, and she is thankful to Camusot for his care. Belying the image of the courtesan who is interested only in money, she has refused many more lucrative offers from men who would have liked to be her lovers because she cares for Camusot "qui ne la tourmente pas."<sup>37</sup> Of course, Camusot keeps her in style, pays for her luxurious living accommodations and even for her costumes at the theatre. Coralie's salary as an actress is very meager and would barely buy her daily bread.

One day, Coralie catches sight of Lucien de Rubempré (Illusions Perdues) and falls desperately in love with him. "Elle cherche le bonheur,"<sup>38</sup> comments Lousteau, and she thinks that she has found it in the poet from Angoulême. "L'amour pur, sincère, le premier amour enfin, joint à l'une de ces rages fantasques qui piquent ces pauvres créatures; et aussi l'admiration causée par la grande beauté

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.722.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.722.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.722.

de Lucien,"<sup>39</sup> gives Coralie the courage to approach him. Curtius comments that physical beauty is very important in Balzacian love. For Balzac, the sensual side of love was inextricably intertwined with the emotional side. The period in which he wrote saw a resurgence of a type of paganism which was strongly amoralist and displayed an overwhelming aestheticism. This combination of sensuality and the pursuit of the sensuously beautiful results in the type of love that Coralie feels for Lucien. "Dans cette sphère, l'amour est sanctionné par cette adoration de la beauté... Coralie... grâce à 'la beauté surhumaine' de Lucien, se sent absoute et n'éprouve aucun remords à l'aimer."<sup>40</sup>

Coralie takes Lucien home with her one night after a party at Florine's, where he has had too much to drink. She herself tends him, puts him to bed, and gives him tea to drink. The next morning, Lucien awakes and sees her watching him with loving eyes. "Lucien reconnut les dévouements, les délicatesses de l'amour vrai qui voulait sa récompense,"<sup>41</sup> and they become lovers. This love is "un noble amour, qui réunissait les sens au coeur et le coeur au sens pour les exalter ensemble. Cette divinisation qui permet d'être deux ici-bas pour sentir, un seul dans le

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.735.

<sup>40</sup> E. R. Curtius, Balzac, trans. Henri Jourdan (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1933), p.121.

<sup>41</sup> Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.742-743.

ciel pour aimer, était son absoluion."<sup>42</sup> Balzac, says Béguin, is evoking here one of his cherished ideas, that of the angel created in heaven by the two souls whose bodies are united on earth. "Quand une scène de ses romans prend cet envol lyrique, on peut être certain qu'elle touche à une vérité qui n'est plus extérieure, objective, mais liée à cette transmutation magique du terrestre qui est la grande entreprise balzacienne. C'est dans un univers ainsi métamorphosé que 'l'infini de l'amour' dont est capable une Coralie'efface toutes les fautes'."<sup>43</sup>

Bérénice, Coralie's servant, tells Lucien that her mistress is quite willing to send Camusot away, because she doesn't want to share her love for Lucien with anyone. Coralie has "romantic" ideas about love and is ready to move into Lucien's garret and share his poverty with him. But she doesn't fully appreciate what living with a very destitute writer might mean. Bérénice begs Lucien not to protest against the existence of Camusot in Coralie's life because Camusot and his money are essential if Coralie is to live decently. Besides, Camusot has only the shell of the woman, while Lucien has the heart and the soul. Lucien being Lucien, tacitly accepts the part that Camusot has in his mistress's life and consequently in his own.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.743.

<sup>43</sup>Béguin, Balzac Visionnaire, p.173.

Coralie meanwhile uses the money that she is getting from Camusot to make a dandy of Lucien. She buys him shirts and gloves and dresses him in the height of fashion. She wants only the best for him, and cannot bear to see the miserable room in which he has been living. "Elle voulait être misérable comme son amant... Ce désespoir était si vrai, si grand, il exprimait tant d'amour, que Lucien, à qui l'on avait reproché d'avoir une actrice, vit dans Coralie une sainte bien près d'endosser le cilice de la misère."<sup>44</sup> In effect, this is what she does, because she goes to Camusot and tells him that she prefers to live in misery with Lucien rather than in the greatest luxury with him. It is not a matter of principle that prompts her to tell her protector that she is unfaithful to him. Rather it seems the bravado of a very young lady whose inexperience in financial matters would prove disastrous to her, as would her utterly impractical attitude. "Je ferai des dettes,"<sup>45</sup> she gaily cries when Bérénice demands to know who will pay for all the luxuries that her mistress is used to. Coralie is earning only five hundred francs a month at the theatre, while Lucien's wages are even less. Her glib

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<sup>44</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.754.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.763.

assumption that they will live like Croesus on a thousand a month is very uncharacteristic of the courtesan that she has been. It is almost as though she has no interest in money except insofar as it might be necessary to Lucien's comfort.

A short time later, Camusot, unable to relinquish Coralie so easily, offers her "une inscription de six mille livres de rente sur le Grand-Livre,"<sup>46</sup> if she would only agree to continue as his mistress. He is even willing to close his eyes to her love affair with Lucien. She refuses categorically and somewhat cruelly. "Trahir un pareil ange?" she asks. "... mais regarde-le donc, pauvre magot, et regarde-toi!"<sup>47</sup> Camusot is fat and probably ugly. Coralie's love, all consuming as it is, is a love based practically only on Lucien's physical beauty, and she pounds this fact home to poor Camusot. Quite obviously, love doesn't soften Coralie; in fact, it brings out the pitiless streak in her. When she dismisses Camusot, he is thoroughly shaken but still loves her. "Je ne saurais me faire à l'idée de ma Coralie dans la misère,"<sup>48</sup> he says, begging to be able to see her sometimes. "La douceur de ce pauvre homme, dépossédé de tout son bonheur au moment

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.770.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.771.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.762.

où il se croyait le plus heureux, toucha vivement Lucien, mais non Coralie."<sup>49</sup> Merciless towards Camusot, she is even more so towards herself when it is a question of Lucien's success. "Et quand il ne sera séparé de quelque sceptre que par l'épaisseur d'un cadavre, il pourra se faire un marchepied du corps de Coralie,"<sup>50</sup> she declares. She is willing to give her whole being, to sacrifice her whole existence, if it would do any good for her Lucien. She now exists only for him. This complete dedication is close to Balzac's heart. "Libérées des égoïsmes de l'honnête femme, exemptes des prudences de qui se réserve et calcule ses générosités, les filles sont seules capables d'un don d'elles-mêmes qui soit vraiment total; la courtisane vit et meurt d'amour, elle donne l'exemple de l'infini dans la passion."<sup>51</sup> This amour-passion, which was a feeling that Romanticism had brought back into style, commands Balzac's greatest respect. Curtius quotes a passage in Ferragus where Balzac's feelings are evident: "Les âmes féminines assez puissantes pour mettre l'infini dans l'amour constituent d'angéliques exceptions... Les grandes passions sont rares... Hors cet amour, il n'y a rien que des arrangements, des irritations passagères, méprisables

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.762.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.787.

<sup>51</sup>Béguin, Balzac Visionnaire, p. 152.

comme tout ce qui est petit."<sup>52</sup> Coralie is one of the few who love to the whole extent that it is possible to love.

There seems to be a suspicion of disapproval, though, in Balzac's attitude towards Coralie. He call her a fanatique, which implies that she is pursuing her love of Lucien to lengths that are considered inordinate and even irrational. She ruins herself in order to deck her idol out in the most elegant costumes. And she ruins him by encouraging him in dissipations "avec l'aveuglement particulier aux sentiments entiers qui ne voient jamais que le présent et qui sacrifient tout, même l'avenir, à la jouissance du moment."<sup>53</sup> (This ability and desire to live only for the moment is a characteristic of la Merana as well. These women are not calculating, but have the properties of a small child who naïvely thinks that the way it is now is the way it will always be. Balzac says that this child-like behavior is characteristic of the state of true love: "...l'irréflexion, l'imprudence, la dissipation, le rire et les pleurs..."<sup>54</sup> It would seem rather that these are the characteristics of an infatuation rather than of a true and mature love, of the courtesan's character rather than the serious woman's.)

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<sup>52</sup> Curtius, Balzac, p.123.

<sup>53</sup> Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p. 820.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.820.

At first, it seems that Coralie is wholeheartedly in favor of Lucien's dissipated gambling because she wishes him to enjoy himself. But the truth is that she feels safe from betrayal if he is participating in a game of whist because she sees in that pastime "des gages pour la durée de son attachement et des liens dans les nécessités qu'elle créait."<sup>55</sup> A dedication to card-playing will preclude any interest in other women. Coralie is not at all sure of Lucien's affection.

But soon, larger and more threatening problems loom on her horizon. Very little money is coming into the ménage, but the debts being incurred are rising with alarming rapidity. Coralie takes her courage into her hands and starts gently but firmly to push Lucien to do more work and to earn more money. Lucien, unfortunately, finds it easier to spend money than to make it. In his efforts to establish lucrative society contacts, he succeeds only in creating enemies.

Coralie's own affairs are going no better. As an actress, she has to have the ability to take on the feelings and the traits of the character she is playing. But, since she is very young and still dominated by the "maidenly modesty" of the very young actress, she finds it very difficult to lose herself in her parts. "L'art de

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.822.

rendre les sentiments, cette sublime fausseté, n'avait pas encore triomphé chez elle de la nature."<sup>56</sup> She is ashamed to bare her heart to an audience, to make public sentiments which should by right belong only to the one person that she loves. This reluctance on Coralie's part to act a part which would truthfully express not only the character's state of heart but her own feelings as well, would be easy to understand if Coralie were essentially a shy and inexperienced girl. The author says that she is "intérieurement naïve et timide,"<sup>57</sup> but that is highly unlikely in view of her past which was anything but quiet and sheltered. Her mother beat her regularly and sold her into prostitution to one of the most corrupt men in the whole Comédie Humaine. Surely, she must have learned something about the world from having spent some time in close proximity to a man like Marsay. And she can't have been so naïve and timid if she managed to acquire another protector in such a short time. Besides, an actress's life is not a hothouse existence. In order to have even a modicum of success, she must learn to deal with all sorts of unsavory characters. And before she met Lucien, she was relatively well-accepted by her audiences.

But it would seem that Balzac wished to insist upon

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.855.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.855.

the fact that Coralie is really more a jeune fille than a courtesan. This delicacy of sentiment renders her unfit to hold her own on the stage and off it. "Inhabile aux faussetés de l'actrice, Coralie était incapable de se défendre contre les rivalités et les manœuvres des coulisses..."<sup>58</sup> She is too simple and generous to intrigue against her rivals. She finds it impossible to go begging to authors for parts in their plays; she is too proud. And she is unwilling to submit to the dishonorable conditions that the journalists set for her, if she wants to receive favorable notices. It is as though she were two completely different people- One, the courtesan who uses her body to "earn" the luxuries she would otherwise not have, and two, a shy, pure young girl who cannot accept any sort of dubious dealing, anything which would besmirch her personal integrity and morality. Perhaps it is possible to compartmentalize one's principles, using one group in a certain situation, the others elsewhere. But it does look as though Coralie's callous behavior with Camusot somehow proves that she is not as naïve or as tender as Balzac seems to want her to appear.

Coralie fails in her first dramatic role at the Gymnase and she is let go; the role is completely contrary to her talents. She becomes ill from grief. Camille Maupin

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 856.

offers her a part in a play that she has written, and she enjoys great success in the rôle, but some secret sorrow is eating away at her, eventually rendering her too sick to act. The author hints that she has made a deal with Camusot, a deal which is very repugnant to her; the agreement is probably a promise by Coralie to become his mistress again if he would bail Lucien out of the financial muddle that he is in. The creditors have been breaking down the doors of the pair's miserable room. In addition, Lucien has signed some forged letters of credit and were it not for Camusot, he would be unceremoniously hauled off to prison.

A few weeks later, her health broken by the terrible conditions under which she is living, by the lack of decent food, and most of all by her secret sorrow, Coralie lies dying. "Cette pauvre fille (est) au désespoir de mourir à cause de Lucien."<sup>59</sup> She doesn't regret her own short, wretched life. She is afraid that Lucien will not be able to keep stride with the world when she is not there. Before she dies, she asks Lucien to bring her a priest. "Par un retour étrange... l'actrice voulut se réconcilier avec l'Église et mourir en paix."<sup>60</sup> This final request of hers is intended to put the seal of dignity on her life. "Elle fit une fin chrétienne, son repentir fut sincère."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.874.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.874.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p.874.

Balzac doesn't stop his description at her death, but goes on to relate the anguish that she left behind her. Lucien, torn by grief, cannot pay for her coffin, and is reduced to composing ribald drinking songs in order to earn the necessary money. These pages, says Béguin, are full of allusions to man's great frailty and at the same time, to "(les) vertus rédemptrices des terrestres amours."<sup>62</sup> When Blanchon and d'Arthez, "ces deux représentants de l'intelligence de Balzac,"<sup>63</sup> come in to see Lucien the morning after Coralie's death, they are struck dumb by the scene in front of their eyes. "Le spectacle de cette belle morte souriant à l'éternité... ces quatre chandelles autour de cette actrice dont la basquine et les bas rouges à coins vert faisaient naguère palpiter toute une salle, puis sur la porte le prêtre qui l'avait reconciliée avec Dieu retournant à l'église pour y dire une messe en faveur de celle qui avait tant aimé! ces grandeurs et ces infamies ..."<sup>64</sup> chill the two visitors and they are unable to utter a single word. Yet, they understand that Coralie has been saved, that her face has taken on a smiling serenity because with her last sigh, she has pronounced Lucien's name together with the name of God.

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<sup>62</sup> Béguin, Balzac Visionnaire, p.171.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.171.

<sup>64</sup> Balzac, Illusions Perdues, Pléiade IV, p.877.

Lucien is broken by Coralie's death, but he eventually finds a replacement for her in Esther van Gobseck. Esther's mother is Sarah van Gobseck, niece of the notorious money-lender. The women of Gobseck's family never marry. They seem similar to the Maranas, but on a lower level. Sarah, known in the annals of prostitution as la belle Hollandaise, has ruined many men. She is one of those women who never bothers about where the money for her costly luxuries is coming from; she would be quite content, says Balzac, to give a party with the proceeds of a parricide. She, like most of the courtesans in the Comédie Humaine, never thinks about the past. For her, "l'avenir était son après-dîner."<sup>65</sup> Roguin, the notary, lets himself be drawn into an abyss by her capricious spending. Eventually abandoned by Roguin, hounded by creditors, Sarah flees to one of the houses of the Palais-Royal, where she is murdered a short time later by an army captain.

Esther, her daughter, starts her career in a manner similar to her mother. She was the rat of des Loupeaulx. A rat was a child, ten or twelve years old, who was being trained for a career at the Opéra, and whom "les débauchés formaient pour le vice et l'infamie."<sup>66</sup> Having begun her life in that direction, she successively becomes the mistress

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<sup>65</sup>Balzac, César Birotteau, Pléiade V, p.372.

<sup>66</sup>Balzac, Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes, Pléiade V, p.664.

of d'Estourny, of Désiré Minoret-Levrault and of various others. She has been nicknamed la Torpille because she is so beautiful that she would numb the emperor Napoleon himself. Balzac describes her as having all of "les trente fameuses perfections décrites en vers persans sculptés, dit-on, dans le sérail, et qui sont nécessaires à une femme pour être entièrement belle."<sup>67</sup> These perfections are found together only in the women who come from the Mediterranean area around Greece and Asia-Minor. "Esther venait de ce berceau du genre humain, la patrie de la beauté: sa mère était Juive. Les Juifs, quoique si souvent dégradés par leur contact avec les autres peuples, offrent parmi leurs nombreuses tribus des filons où s'est conservé le type sublime des beautés asiatiques... L'origine d'Esther se trahissait dans cette coupe orientale de ses yeux...Il n'y a que les races venues des déserts qui possèdent dans l'oeil le pouvoir de la fascination sur tous... Leurs yeux retiennent sans doute quelque chose de l'infini qu'ils ont contemplé."<sup>68</sup> Even though Esther is separated by many centuries from her desert-living ancestors, the Orient blazes in her eyes and on her face. "Ce regard n'exerçait point de fascination terrible, il jetait une douce chaleur, il attendrissait sans étonner, et les plus dures

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p.687.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p.687-688.

volontés se fondaient sous sa flamme... Tout, chez elle, était en harmonie avec ces caractères de la péri des sables ardents."<sup>69</sup>

Balzac finds great physical charm in the Jewish woman. This is perhaps because of the attraction of the Orient and the exotic aura that he feels accompanies her. The Romantic period was fascinated by the East and by anything which contained the mystery of the unknown and the unusual. Balzac, influenced by the currents around him, chose to portray the three most tragic figures of the world of the filles as Jewesses. Coralie is a descendant of the same inspiration that created Esther. Coralie is not Jewish, but "(elle) offrait le type sublime de la figure juive... Sous des paupières brûlées par une prunelle de jais... on devinait un regard languissant où scintillaient à propos les ardeurs du désert."<sup>70</sup> "Ce qu'il y a de commun chez ses Juives c'est... la noblesse et la pureté de cet amour et de leur âme,"<sup>71</sup> comments I. Jarblum. Balzac sets out to show this nobility and purity of love in the person of Coralie first and, later, in a more complete way, in Esther.

At the time that Esther meets Lucien de Rubempré, she is living in a brothel, la maison de Madame Meynardie. She

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p.689.

<sup>70</sup>Balzac, Illusions Perdues, p.721.

<sup>71</sup>I. Jarblum, Balzac et la Femme Étrangère(Paris: Anciennes Maisons Thorin et Fontemoing,1930),p.58

has a day off, and she goes to la Porte-Saint-Martin where she encounters him by accident. She falls in love with him, and this love has the same effect on her as a bite from the apple had on Eve in the Garden of Eden. She realizes the evil of her life up to now. "L'amour était entré dans mon coeur," she says, "et m'avait si bien changée qu'en revenant du théâtre, je ne me reconnaissais plus moi-même: je me faisais horreur."<sup>72</sup> Esther escapes from the house of ill-repute and goes to live in a miserable room in one of the poorer sections of the city. To earn her living, she works day and night, sewing shirts at twenty-eight sous a piece. For one whole month, she has subsisted on nothing but potatoes, "pour rester sage et digne de Lucien, qui m'aime et me respecte comme la plus vertueuse des vertueuses,"<sup>73</sup> she declares. She has even made a declaration to the Police requesting them to remove her name from the "registres d'infamie,"<sup>74</sup> the list of known prostitutes, and she spends much time praying to Heaven for moral strength to protect her resolution.

(The theme of the repentant Magdalen was a common one during the Romantic period and therefore not unique to Balzac. Victor Hugo, for example, wrote the play Marion

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<sup>72</sup>Balzac, Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes, PléiadeV, p.676.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p.677.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p.677.

Delorme in which he intended to prove that "a courtesan can be rehabilitated through pure love."<sup>75</sup> The idea of the play, similar to the theme of Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes, is formulated by Marion who tells her lover: "Et ton amour m'a fait une virginité."<sup>76</sup>)

However popular this theme may have been, it leaves something to be desired from the point of view of likelihood; the sudden and complete transformation of Esther is not realistic. After all, she has met Lucien only once; yet on the strength of this meeting, she is ready to change her whole way of life and become a radically different person. Just a year earlier, she had been described as "une petite fille de dix-sept ans, belle... rusée... Il n'y a pas de femme qui puisse tenir contre ce petit ange sous lequel se cache un démon: elle saura jouer tous les rôles, empaumer ton oncle et le rendre fou d'amour... (Elle vient de) lamper la fortune de deux Anglais, d'un Russe, et d'un prince romain... S'il y avait des fortunes en France, ce serait la plus grande courtisane des temps modernes."<sup>77</sup> She has a vocation and a talent. A genius in the manipulation of men, "elle tient comme une baguette magique avec laquelle elle déchaîne les appétits brutaux si violemment

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<sup>75</sup>Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theatre, p.21.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p.21.

<sup>77</sup>Balzac, La Rabouilleuse, Pléiade III, p.1093.

comprimés chez les hommes..."<sup>78</sup> She would have been a second Ninon de Lenclos, "magnifique d'impertinence , écrasante de luxe,"<sup>79</sup> had she fallen into the right hands, laments one of the young men who has known her. Instead, she has become Lucien de Rubempré's mistress, and all the talents that she has, all the knowledge of men's hearts and minds that she has culled in the widely divergent situations that she has been in , all will come to nothing. Her destiny will be unfulfilled. "Cette femme est le sel chanté par Rabelais et qui, jeté sur la Matière, l'anime et l'élève jusqu'aux merveilleuses régions de l'art."<sup>80</sup> It is this girl, la Torpille, well-known and admired as an accomplished courtesan, who changes suddenly and irrevocably into a poor worker who prays to God every morning and sew all day. The abruptness of this rehabilitation is nothing short of miraculous, though the narrator tries to make it more understandable. Something has made Esther suddenly acquire a loathing for her way of life. After her meeting with Lucien, she says: "Je ne me reconnaisais plus moi-même: je me faisais horreur."<sup>81</sup> A sudden moment of illumination has

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<sup>78</sup>Balzac, Splendeurs et Misères de Courtisanes, Pléiade V, p.666.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p.666.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p.666.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p.676.

come to her. Her whole life, everything that she has done up to this moment, has been ugly and reprehensible. "J'étais la dernière des créatures et la plus infâme."<sup>82</sup> Perhaps one glimpse of a different existence attracts her as being good because it is not the same as the one she has been leading. Perhaps it is also the fact that at the moment of her encounter with Lucien, she is living in a house of prostitution, where instead of being the mistress of one man, she is constantly being handed from one man to another, in a process that is degrading and humiliating.

Esther's metamorphosis from common prostitute to honest working girl and her accompanying desire for purity is not as drastic as it first may seem. For, Esther's basic values have persisted; she has not withstood Lucien's entreaties- "On ne résiste pas à un Dieu,"<sup>83</sup> she remarks- and she has become his mistress. She admits this to the false Spanish priest Herrera, who has appointed himself Lucien's protector. Herrera has just rescued her from death by suicide. Esther has made the mistake of taking Lucien to a masked ball the evening before. Recognized by some of the young men whom she has known, she is insulted by them. The veil of innocence with which she has covered herself is torn, and Lucien hears the knowing laughs of her former "friends."

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p.676.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p.678.

She couldn't bear the idea of Lucien's contempt and she tried to kill herself. Esther believes that Lucien regards her as "la plus vertueuse des vertueuses,"<sup>84</sup> but the irregular life that she has been leading up to then with him is far from the conventional idea of vertueuse. Could he really believe that she is such a mimosa-like creature, if she was ready to become his mistress so very easily? It is much more likely that Lucien has some sort of idea of her past; Esther is a well-known figure in his circle, and he has probably even recognized her. She is virtuous only as compared to her past life, but the established standards of modesty and chastity are, at this moment, beyond her comprehension.

Herrera offers Esther a way of staying alive and gaining Lucien's respect. In order to prove that her love for Lucien is true and free from any self-interest, and in order to become worthy of him, she must enter a convent school where she will change completely. "Je me charge," Herrera tells her, "de vous rendre méconnaissable."<sup>85</sup> In this institution, she will be educated with the daughters of the best Catholic families in Paris, and will become "une jeune fille accomplie, chaste, pure, bien élevée."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p.677.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p.684.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p.684.

In her present state, degraded and dishonored, she could never hope to become Lucien's wife. But, Herrera hints, perhaps if she improves, who knows?

Esther agrees with Herrera. Illuminated by his revelations, she sees the great task that she has to accomplish, and her tears are tears of desperation at the monumentality of the job that is to be done before she can see Lucien again: "se perfectionner sans cesse pour se rendre digne de celui qu'on aime, lui faire mille sacrifices secrets, l'adorer de loin."<sup>87</sup>

Esther's inner strength and resolution are direct results of her pure and noble love for Lucien. Love of this sort is very rarely found in the heart of a courtesan, says Balzac. A woman who has seen and known so many men, usually acquires a distaste for the whole sex. It is unusual for a lasting passion to take root and to grow in the calcified soil of her heart.

Love like Esther's for Lucien, is often accompanied by great humility. Esther admits that she considers herself entirely worthless, with no redeeming features. Herrera is perfectly justified in demanding that she consign la Torpille to oblivion and that she take on a new personality and character. "Ah!", she cries, "s'il était possible de verser tout mon sang et d'en prendre un

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p.679.

nouveau."<sup>88</sup> At the end of their interview, she takes Herrera's hand and kisses it, with the same humility that one would have, it seems, kissing the Pope's ring. "Ce n'était plus une courtisane, mais un ange qui se relevait d'une chute."<sup>89</sup> The Romantic era's writers, says Dr. S. Braun, were very partial to the theme of a chute to explain and to excuse the behavior of a courtisane. Most women, once fallen, never managed to rise again, and spent their remaining years involved in sordid affairs. In Esther's case however, there is a reversal of fortune, and she is lucky enough to heave herself up and out of the muck in which she has been living.

The author, to explain how she can cheat her fate, underlines Esther's innate goodness and inner purity. She is an angel who has plunged from the heights which she should have been occupying and which she would occupy again by virtue of long, arduous labors.

It is not clear however, if Esther is repentant because she feels that what she has been doing is morally wrong, whether she instinctively feels that what she is doing is ugly, <sup>whether,</sup> or, what is rather more likely, she regrets her former life because she thinks that it would repel Lucien and erect an unbreachable barrier between them

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.684.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.687.

if he knew about it. It seems that her motive is less angelic than very practical. She wants Lucien and is prepared to do what is necessary to keep him.

Esther knows that most of the sentiment and most of the sacrifice in the affair with Lucien has come from her side. She has been doing the loving while he has been letting himself be loved. "Je ne pouvais trouver grâce à ses yeux que par la force de mon amour,"<sup>90</sup> she tells Herrera. Lucien is practically doing her a favor by accepting her single-minded devotion. She has also confused in her mind, currents of religious feeling and of love. "On ne résiste pas à un dieu,"<sup>91</sup> she says, perfectly serious and convinced that Lucien is a god. Now she uses the word grâce, which carries a trace of religious connotation. She is taking her very secular and earthly feeling for Lucien and dressing it in the trappings of religion. There is in fact, a great relation between Esther's moral reform through love and her "conversion" to the Catholic religion. They are accomplished almost simultaneously. The day after she meets Lucien, she buys a small statue of the Virgin and she prays for the first time. The death of Esther's alter-ego, la Torpille, happens at the same time as the birth of her interest in

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.686.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.678.

Catholicism, a fate which faintly parallels the story of Coralie, who, before she dies, is gathered back into the Church.

In her convent school, Esther comes into her own element. She has rediscovered "sa nature première."<sup>92</sup> The veneer of the well-bred girl which she acquires, covers a nature which is just as admirable. The nuns who teach her say that in all their experience, they have never found "naturel plus aimable, douceur plus chrétienne, modestie plus vraie, ni si grand désir d'apprendre."<sup>93</sup> In short, she is a paragon of all virtues. The author seems compelled to add an explanation of this analysis of Esther's difficultly explicable character. It is understandable, he maintains, in view of the great sufferings she has undergone until now and which have purified her, and of the enormous reward that Herrera promises her for her good behavior: the opportunity to see Lucien again and to hold his respect.

There is however one persisting characteristic of the old la Torpille in the new Esther and it is a characteristic which she cannot rid herself of, no matter how hard she tries. Her pure and regular life in the convent and the fervor of her great resolution aren't enough to repress the memories of Lucien's love. "Elle ne pouvait vaincre les

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p.690.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p.690.

instincts développés par la débauche."<sup>94</sup> No amount of praying can countereffect the insistent demands of her body's desires. "Sa patrie infernale exerçait encore son empire."<sup>95</sup> Her very marrow has been penetrated by the vice in which she has lived until now and no amount of holy water can wash such vice away. In addition, Lucien is always in her mind's eye because he is the reason that she is making such a great effort to be good.

Esther's desires sicken her and she is slowly wasting away, dying. Herrera is shocked by her appearance. Esther is important to him because she is a key to the control of Lucien. He wants to keep Lucien satisfied and docile enough to be obedient to him. He also wants to make Lucien grateful to him for reforming Esther and bringing her to him. In addition, he foresees that she may be useful to further Lucien's ambitions in the future. So he promises her that she shall see Lucien just as soon as she is baptised. And she, who has given herself over to the pursuit of the virtue which is killing her, revives as if by magic.

After the baptismal ceremony, where she declares that she feels the glory of having had all her sins washed away and of really being reborn pure and innocent, Esther is taken to a prepared apartment, where she receives her orders

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p.691.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p.692.

from Herrera. She will live as the mistress of Lucien but in the deepest secrecy. She will not leave her luxurious home, except in the darkness of the night. She will have no companions or friends, and will speak to no one except the two horrible servants-cum-watchdogs who are to share her quarters with her. At first, Esther accepts Herrera's dictates with a heavy heart. She is surprised that Lucien doesn't protest against her virtual imprisonment. "Est-ce ta volonté que je reste sous la puissance de cet homme qui me fait garder par ces deux hyènes?"<sup>96</sup> she demands incredulously, and she is disappointed when he nods his answer. Lucien doesn't love her in the way that she loves him: he desires her but his soul is not one with hers. A weak man, he is under the power of Herrera and will do anything that he suggests. It is Esther's tragedy that her lover is not an independent person. Her fate might have been less terrible.

If Esther's transformation is difficult to believe, it is even more incredible that she lives in the unnatural way that Herrera has decreed, for five years; but she seems to revel in it. "L'idéal de la courtisane amoureuse,"<sup>97</sup> her every moment is occupied with pleasing Lucien and nothing outside of the isolated cocoon of their lives seems to

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p.710.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p.973.

interest her at all. Even Herrera, who is the author of her regeneration, who has acquired her pardon from the Police, who has had her educated, and has engineered her life with Lucien, hardly receives a thought in passing. Esther too, has the common flaw of the courtesan: She never thinks of the future. Herrera's motives in concerning himself with her so much, never really worry her. Perfectly satisfied with enjoying the moment, never looking ahead, she doesn't see, nor wants to see, that eventually, she will have to make payment for all that she has had, and the payment is apt to be more painful than the pleasures were sweet.

Herrera's ambitions for Lucien are big. He wants him to have wealth and position, which can only be achieved through a good marriage. The chosen bride is the daughter of the duc de Grandlieu. She is amenable to the idea, but her father demands that Lucien prove himself worthy of her by purchasing a certain plot of land for a million francs. Of course, Lucien is almost penniless. The money is to be extorted from the baron de Nucingen who has conceived a great passion for Esther, by Herrera's accomplices, the servants who watch over Esther, and mostly by Esther herself, who is to become again, for that purpose, la Torpille. It is here that Herrera's investment in Esther is to bring its rewards.

Since she loves Lucien so completely, Esther accepts the notion of his marriage to Clothilde de Grandlieu. Honest

enough to recognize that "le mariage est un élément nécessaire de ta destinée," as she tells him, she has resolved to exercise close control over her emotions: "Dieu me garde d'arrêter les développements de ta fortune."<sup>98</sup> But though she knows that this marriage or another is imperative for Lucien, her heart is heavy, and reason cannot convince her emotions to accept her loss and live on. If and when Lucien marries, she has decided to go somewhere out of the way and kill herself quickly and quietly, so as not to cause him any pain or discomfort; for her lifeless body would, she thinks, accuse him wordlessly of her death and burden his conscience with guilt feelings. She is assuming more feelings in Lucien than he actually has for her. Her devotion to his well-being is sublime; she will die, while he will be married, rich and happy, and yet, she worries about causing him even a suspicion of unpleasantness. Satisfied with what happiness she already has had, she sees no incongruity in the fact that her life will be ended because she cannot live without Lucien, while his life is only beginning and he will manage perfectly well without her. Her humility is taken to the extreme; she sees herself only as a tool to be used for his happiness and then discarded without protest.

Esther finds death easier to embrace than dishonor.

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p.739.

Ever since the day that she meant to kill herself rather than face Lucien's disdain, she has always had the idea of death lurking in the back of her mind. What she cannot accept is the role she must play in bringing about Lucien's marriage, because it involves becoming again the prostitute that she had consigned to oblivion when she fell in love with him.

Herrera doesn't understand Esther's scruples. To him, she has always remained the girl from the gutters whose principles are no better than one might expect. He thinks that she should be supremely happy having a lover like Nucingen, who is rich enough to give her anything she may desire. Any one of her former associates would be delighted with a situation in which she finds only misery and despair.

The difficulty lies in the fact that Esther has become used to a virtuous way of life. She has been "cloîtrée dans sa passion."<sup>99</sup> The author uses the word cloîtrée to suggest the purity of the cloisters with reference to her five years with Lucien. She has been as faithful to him as is any moral bourgeois housewife to her husband. Her morality, though condemned by the social world- She is living with a man who is not, and will never be, her husband- is, if looked at in the absolute sense, in a vacuum, pure and honest. Never unfaithful to him,

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p.817.

even in thought, "elle s'était vue, pendant cinq ans, blanche comme un ange."<sup>100</sup> Now she is being forced, by the moral terror exerted on her by Herrera, to sully herself by becoming Nucingen's mistress. "Ce bel amour pur allait être sali...Hermine par sa propre volonté, la souillure morale ne lui semblait pas supportable."<sup>101</sup> It is not clear whether her anguish is caused by her betrayal of Lucien, or whether she is repelled by the thought of falling back into the patrie infernale which she has worked so hard to forget. It is probably, at this stage of her existence, her disgust with an irregular life which is uppermost in her thoughts, because the physical betrayal of Lucien is for his own good. Besides, she will never see Lucien as a lover again, since he is getting married, and Herrera has forbidden<sup>her</sup> any intimate relationship with him. Lucien himself gives approval to the plan for Esther to fleece Nucingen. And Esther can see, with not much effort, that Lucien's love for her does not deserve such undivided dedication as she has shown for him. His acceptance of all of Herrera's suggestions with regard to her shows not only his weakness of character, but also a disinterest in her ultimate fate. He is forever concerned with his marriage plans and doesn't even protest when Esther announces that she cannot live without him and will poison herself immediately after his

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p.818.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p.818.

wedding. It is almost as though he would be glad to be rid of such an embarrassment. He feels only lust for her, while her love for him is the noblest. "(Elle aime) comme aiment les actrices et les courtisanes qui roulent dans les fanges et les impuretés, ont soif des noblesses des dévouements du véritable amour et qui en pratiquent alors l'exclusivité."<sup>102</sup>

Despite the violent protests of her inner being, she agrees to go along with the plan to become Nucingen's mistress, because she knows that without the money that she will squeeze out of the baron, Lucien has no future. She makes herself amenable to Nucingen, but cannot force herself to become more than his maitresse en titre. All the while, she is extorting large sums from Nucingen, promising him what she secretly never intends to fulfill. She feels no qualms about what she is doing, just as Coralie feels no guilt at taking Camusot's francs to dress Lucien. Herrera, though, presses Esther to take the final step. He is afraid that Nucingen will get tired waiting and will leave her before he has supplied the necessary money. "Vous êtes une miserable femelle, vous aimez en femelle!"<sup>103</sup> he cries. I myself would be happy even if I spent the rest of my life in the galleys, he tells her, if only I knew that Lucien is prospering. "L'amour chez une courtisane, devrait

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 833.

être, comme chez toutes les créatures dégradées, un moyen de devenir mère, en dépit de la nature qui vous frappe d'infécondité."<sup>104</sup> <sup>says Herrera,</sup> Esther should love Lucien as a mother loves her child. Just as a mother is ready to sacrifice herself for the welfare of her child, so Esther should be ready to prostitute her body and soul to insure Lucien's future. At the same time, it appears that Herrera is trying to hint to Esther that she is a second rate being, because she has not given Lucien any children. He must have children, Herrera implies. He suggests how marvelous it will be to see his children; to run her hands over their heads and derive much satisfaction from the fact that they are his. Herrera is brutal in his methods of dealing with Esther and what he says is calculated to hurt as well as to hearten her in her efforts on Lucien's behalf. If she couldn't present him with what he needs, let her at least be the means which make it possible for someone else to give it to him.

Her resolution strengthened by Herrera's words, Esther decides finally to take her place in the world of the Tulias and the Florines. She says her last prayer in which she renounces her "belle vie... l'honneur qu'elle s'était fait... sa gloire... ses vertus... son amour... Les yeux retenaient encore un peu de l'âme qui s'envolait au ciel... Les lèvres

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., p.833.

gardaient comme une expression des dernières invocations aux anges, à qui sans doute elle avait emprunté la palme du martyre en leur confiant sa vie sans souillure."<sup>105</sup> She has decided to sacrifice what is very dear to her, her pure life, to further Lucien's cause. She is a martyr to his ambition, though in her heart she knows that he is unworthy of her sacrifice. Herrera offers her consolation for her suffering. A man, he says, never forgets the person (l'être and not la femme) who has made it possible for him to wake up every day in the greatest luxury. She has lost her identity and has become a mere tool for Lucien and Herrera. Her identity is submerged in the word être.

Having resolved to become again "une infâme et immonde creature, 'une voleuse,' une fille,"<sup>106</sup> she does her self-assigned task so well that she becomes "la femme la plus belle, la plus spirituelle, la plus amusante et la plus élégante des Pariahs femelles qui composent la classe des femmes entretenues."<sup>107</sup> But while she is outwardly savoring the resumption of the life she had once before known, in her mind's eye she always has a picture of herself as she was in those five years with Lucien, and she despises

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p.834.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p.834.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p.863.

herself for the rôle that she is playing with her body. "Elle réalisait l'admirable fiction des Contes Arabes, où se trouve presque toujours un être sublime caché sous une enveloppe dégradée."<sup>108</sup> She is now different from the time that she was originally la Torpille. Then she knew nothing better; now her every act is painful because she is conscious of how low she has sunk.

Nucingen gives a lavish party for Esther to celebrate the housewarming of their petit palais. Esther's gown is une toilette de mariée. She has finally decided to capitulate to the baron's entreaties that evening, because she feels she owes him a debt of honor which she must pay before her suicide. She cannot live any more because she feels that "une honnête femme a des chances de se relever d'une chute; mais, nous autres, nous tombons trop bas."<sup>109</sup> Besides, after she has done what she can for Lucien, life has no more meaning for her. At the party, Esther asks Lucien's blessing and she tells him that this is her last day as "une femme chaste, aimante."<sup>110</sup> That woman will die that evening in Nucingen's bed. But Lucien doesn't seem to be inordinately interested in what she is saying. He can only talk of Clothilde de Grandlieu, his intended bride. Esther is

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.863.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.824.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.908.

justifiably enraged and lashes out at him, saying that she is sure that he would marry her if she had seven or eight million francs. She has no illusions about his character. The irony of this observation by Esther is apparent the morning after her death when the news comes that Gobseck, the usurer, has died and has left her, his only relation, his entire fortune, which amounts to exactly seven million francs. Esther has really died in vain. Had she waited one more day, all the world's happiness would have been hers. Her death is meaningless, because by it she has helped no one. Even her precious Lucien ultimately dies because of the events which transpire from her tragic end, <sup>which is</sup> another irony. She has been the unwitting "murderer" of Lucien.

"La courtisane est un être qui accepte en se laissant dévorer par la vie, de livrer ses énergies vitales à une combustion précipitée." Her life, continues Béguin, is "une marche consciente vers la mort."<sup>111</sup> In Esther, Balzac has created the archetype of this courtesan in whose thoughts and actions there is always a hint of her impending death. She is aware fully of the doom that hangs over her, and the inexorable events that suck her down into the inferno; this awareness, says Béguin, is what gives her her pathetic appearance "et ce qui vaut la compassion de Balzac."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Béguin, Balzac Visionnaire, p.155-156.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., p.156.

Balzac's courtesans all share certain characteristics. They are, for the most part, warm creatures who are capable of feeling tender emotions. Some are primarily mothers like la Marana, who does all that she can to give her daughter the chances for a normal life that she herself never had. Others are essentially women who devote their entire lives to the welfare of the man they love. Coralie, and, after her, Esther, show a devotion to Lucien that cannot be faulted. Their dedication is not lessened even by the caddish and irresponsible behavior of Lucien; he merely allows himself to be swept along on the tide of their passionate love, but he himself could never imagine returning it in equal measure.

It is interesting to note that the most important characteristics, the ones that Balzac emphasizes in his courtesans, are the features of the honest wife and mother: devotion, loyalty to the lover, overwhelming self-sacrifice for the child. They are models of chastity in their own way, hardly ever displaying any of the seductive talents which have marked them apart from other women. One never actually sees Esther meeting Lucien and charming him, nor is la Marana portrayed using her wiles to entrap any of those seigneurs. These things are just suggested, but never described.

Neither does money count all that much with these courtesans. Those grisettes and lorettes who have "1<sup>st</sup> instinct

de la misère"<sup>113</sup> certainly have a right to better their situation. No one, Balzac implies, can blame a Caroline Crochard for becoming une femme entretenue if it means an end to the backbreaking work and unrelenting misery which would otherwise be her lot. But he is quick to underline the fact that once she has been comfortably established, she is quite satisfied. Great luxuries do not attract her, and she has never demanded diamonds or carriages from her Roger. This same disinterest in money for money's sake, in great luxuries, is evident in most of the other courtesans as well. Esther, for example, is ready to live in a writer's dingy garret, if the writer is her Lucian.

In spite of her generally good nature, the courtesan often does not enjoy much happiness. Some achieve lifelong ambitions to marry respectably, but others, particularly the great courtisanes like Coralie and Esther, die in penury, surely not an end they deserve.

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<sup>113</sup>Balzac, La Vieille Fille, IV, p.240.

## Chapter Six

## Old maids

La citta dolente des  
vieilles filles...  
(Le Curé de Tours)

Of the many types of feminine characters that Balzac treats, la vieille fille is the most pathetic and her life the most futile. Though she may act in the capacity of housekeeper to other members of her family, keep them fed and clothed and shod properly, as does for example mademoiselle Zéphirine du Guénic (Béatrix), or become a substitute mother to her orphaned nieces and nephews as does Armande d'Esgrignon. in Le Cabinet des Antiques, yet she is always something like a fifth wheel, never really belonging, never really necessary, sometimes even resented, and much of the time looked down upon. Doomed to live life vicariously, never experiencing the love that a woman should have, rocking only other women's children and never her own, the tragedy of her life often sours her, and sometimes even turns her into a fearful anomaly, malicious and cruel to her fellow creatures, like Sophie Gamard.

As the years go by, the old maid ages, but not gracefully; rather than blooming and fading, she is like the flower bud that, pinched by the cold, never opens, but withers away unfulfilled on the stalk. Not deluding herself about the

sadness of her fate, she becomes embittered and hardened.

There are, according to Marceau, two groupings of old maids in the Comédie Humaine: the daughters of the aristocracy like Zéphirine du Guénic and Armande d'Esgrignon who are intelligent good-natured women, and the bourgeois who embody all the repelling characteristics that are associated with the word "spinster": spitefulness, envy and narrow-mindedness.

Victournien d'Esgrignon's aunt in twenty-seven years old at the time of his birth. She is still unmarried because the times have been most unpropitious; the upheavals of the Revolution and of the "Terror" have made it impossible to arrange a fitting match for her. The new baby, Victournien, is given into her care because its mother has died in childbirth. Armande dedicates herself to the infant and becomes for all practical purposes its mother. When a respectable offer of marriage comes from the scion of one of the noblest families in the area, she refuses it categorically, saying: "...je suis mère."<sup>1</sup>

All her adult life, "chacune de ses actions fut marquée au coin du dévouement le plus pur."<sup>2</sup> She exists only for her brother's and her nephew's good. It's almost as though she feels unworthy to live a life of her own. The narrator

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<sup>1</sup>Balzac, Le Cabinet des Antiques, Pléiade IV, p.339

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p.340

suggests that this extreme devotion is the result of a subtle persecution that Armande experiences and the ensuing inferiority complex. For her father made a rather stunning mésalliance when he married his second wife, her mother, who was the daughter of a man whose patent of nobility dated only from the reign of Louis XIV, a shocking thing for a d'Esgrignon. Armande's brother has always considered her, his half sister, as a stranger in the family and she is fully aware of his attitude. This is in spite of the fact that it is Armande whose efforts during the Revolution saved a large chunk of the d'Esgrignon estate from being lost from the family forever. It is only when Armande, who has "une sorte de culte pour son frère,"<sup>3</sup> declines a proposal which is apt to be her last since she is thirty-two years old, saying that her responsibilities to "her" child don't permit her marriage, it is only then that her brother tells her: "Vous êtes une d'Esgrignon."<sup>4</sup> Touched to the point of tears, she declares, "Je mourrai mademoiselle d'Esgrignon."<sup>5</sup> The approval and acceptance of her brother mean more to her than having a family of her own.

Unfortunately, Armande doesn't know the eternal and immutable truth: "Une mère ne se remplace pas."<sup>6</sup> No matter

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.340.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.340 .

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.340.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.354.

how tender and how truly loving a single woman may be, she will always lack "le je ne sais quoi de la maternité."<sup>7</sup>

"Une tante...peut aimer (Victurnien) autant que l'aimerait la mère, être aussi attentive, aussi bonne... aussi indulgente qu'une mère; mais elle ne sera pas sévère avec les ménagements et les à-propos de la mère; mais son cœur n'aura pas ... ces hallucinations inquiètes des mères, chez qui, quoique rompues, les attaches nerveuses ou morales par lesquelles l'enfant tient à elles, vibrent encore..."<sup>8</sup> A mother foresees what is going to happen to her child long before another woman even admits there is something wrong, even when she is confronted with the facts. Victurnien goes blithely along his way to ruin and no one in his family knows, or can even conceive the difficulties he is in. The narrator hints that Armande compounds her inefficiency as a parent with her involuntary and unmotherlike feelings for Victurnien, which are the result, of course, of her unmarried and unfulfilled state. "La maternité factice d'une fille comporte d'ailleurs des adorations trop aveugles pour qu'elle puisse réprimander un beau garçon."<sup>9</sup> Her emotional development has been arrested at a stage where she still feels romantic warmth for a handsome young boy, even if he is the nephew whom she is raising.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.353.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.353.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.354.

This lack of the requisite amount of steeliness in Armande's treatment of Victurnien and her indulgent adoration has its unfortunate results in the development of his character. In Paris, he dishonors himself and he disgraces his family by running up horrendous debts , forging signatures to letters of credit and finally being arrested. Though his aunt does her best to extricate him from the humiliating circumstances that he is in, and though she manages to prevent her brother from finding out about his heir's doings, she herself is devoured by chagrin. Émile Blondet, who is the narrator of Le Cabinet des Antiques, underscores the tragedy of her life by contrasting her appearance at the age of thirty with the way she looks some years later. When she is young, she is like a feudal beauty, all majesty and pride. Her tawny blond hair, emerald green eyes, and pure features are enhanced by "l'admirable calme de cette tête intérieurement ardente, la dignité des mouvements, (et) la sainteté des devoirs accomplis ..."<sup>10</sup> But the emotional hardships that she suffers because of Victurnien's behavior and the final blow of his marriage to the daughter of an iron-master, have all ravaged her. "Habituellement triste," she who was always in smiling good humor, "muette," she whose salon was the most aristocratic one in

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.342.

Alençon, "elle ne conserve de son ancienne beauté, que des yeux d'un éclat surnaturel."<sup>11</sup> Her eyes seem to be focused on eternity. "... Je n'ai pu m'empêcher," remarks Blondet, "de penser qu'elle demande à Dieu de la retirer de ce monde."<sup>12</sup> She has failed in her one appointed task, to raise Victurnien to honest manhood. "Une femme ne sait jamais," someone says of her, "à quoi elle s'engage en faisant des sacrifices qu'elle a faits à sa maison."<sup>13</sup> Her sacrifice was excessive; she never married, never lived the life of a normal woman, never experienced the joys that should have been her lot. Some people believe "qu'elle a voulu rester fille pour laisser toute sa fortune à son frère et à son neveu."<sup>14</sup> But her real reasons are more complicated; she searches all her life for the approval of her half-brother whose birth is more noble than hers and perhaps never finds out that it is not worth very much to her ultimately, that she has been working all the time for a hollow fiction which does not bring her much happiness.

Armande d'Esgrignon turns her unhappiness inward and lets it gnaw away at her, but a woman like Sophie Gamard, typical old maid of Tours, releases her lethal bitterness

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.463

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.463

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.400.

<sup>14</sup> Balzac, La Vieille Fille, Pléiade IV, p.298

where possible, in this case, on the hapless curé Birotteau who happens to be one of her lodgers.

The abbé Birotteau thinks that he has found a paradise when he moves into mademoiselle Gamard's house. The furniture is well polished, the chairs well upholstered, and the library well-stocked. But only eighteen months later, he finds himself the object of an underhanded persecution by the mistress of the house. He simply does not know the first thing about how to deal with a provincial old maid. His predecessor in the apartment he now occupies was an expert judge of people; he always treated mademoiselle Gamard with a deference that flattered her, never deviating from the most formal relationship. He flattered her pâtés and her cornichons and pronounced her coffee the best in Tours, and thereby earned her eternal gratitude. He knew "(comment) le malheur de se trouver en dehors de la société met d'amertume au coeur d'une vieille fille,"<sup>15</sup> and he tried to make her feel like a valued and important woman who had accomplished unmarried, the same miracles of cuisine that others had managed to do only when wed.

The abbé Birotteau lacks the subtlety of his friend. "Aussi avec enthousiasme... avec la candeur d'un enfant et la niaise étourderie d'un vieillard sans expérience mondaine,

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<sup>15</sup>Balzac, Le Curé de Tours, Pléiade III, p.794.

entra-t-il dans la vie de mademoiselle Gamard, comme une mouche se prend dans la toile d'une araignée."<sup>16</sup> He thinks that she is a perfect creature, "charitable, la femme de l'Évangile, la vierge sage, décorée de ces vertus humbles et modestes qui répandent sur la vie un celeste parfum."<sup>17</sup> He is to find out his mistake in judgment before much time passes. Sophie Gamard is self-centered and despotic. She never forgives Birotteau his desertion of her salon which eventually leads to its disbanding. He doesn't know how great is the sin he has committed and is astonished at her vengeance "froide<sup>ment</sup> calculée."<sup>18</sup> She eventually hounds him out of his dearly loved apartment; he never comes to understand what is happening to him and why.

To explain mademoiselle Gamard's overwhelming hatred of Birotteau, Balzac attempts to depict the soul of an old maid. The society of the nineteenth century had very little room for the unmarried woman. It was a society based on marriage, where a woman was often judged by the type of husband that she had. "Le malheur de se trouver en dehors de la société,"<sup>19</sup> fills the old maid's heart with

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.797.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.797.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.801.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.794.

with a great bitterness. She is labeled useless by the bulk of her acquaintances because she has never taken care of a husband or borne children. Her days comprise an existence "dont le but et l'utilité sont inexplicables."<sup>20</sup> Both morally and practically, a being who consumes but doesn't produce, who accomplishes nothing, neither good nor evil, has no rightful place in human society. Sophie Gamard knows that she is in the class of "êtres improductifs,"<sup>21</sup> an acknowledgement which makes it difficult for her to bear life and to live with herself. She feels the same contempt for herself that others feel for her. "Cette dure réprobation sociale est une des causes qui, à l'insu des vieilles filles, contribuent à mettre dans leur âmes le chagrin qu'expriment leurs figures."<sup>22</sup>

She is in addition the victim of a prejudice; a woman with whom no one wanted to share his life is considered, with some probable truth, the author adds, to be defective. For it is inconceivable that a normal woman should not want to get married. Those women who are opposed to marriage because they wish to remain independent and not to join the ranks of the downtrodden wives are thought of as un-womanlike creatures. "... ni les hommes ni les mères ne leur pardonnent d'avoir menti au dévouement de la femme, en

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.808.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.808

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.808.

s'étant refusées aux passions qui rendent leur sexe si touchant: renoncer à ses douleurs, c'est en abdiquer la poésie, et ne plus mériter les douces consolations auxquelles une mère a toujours d'incontestables droits."<sup>23</sup>

They are non-participants in the pageantry and in the battles of life. Always watching from the sidelines, never entering the fray, they miss not only the battles and the troubles, but the marvelous moments of woman's life as well.

Never having had the opportunity to develop her potential for womanliness, which atrophies from lack of use, withers her heart and her tenderer emotions, the vieille fille grows rigid and brittle, instead of becoming the picture of soft womanhood. She suffers because of her rejection by society as well as and because of her inner disquiet, and she grows cruel. "... la souffrance engendre la méchanceté."<sup>24</sup> Though she eventually realizes that much of the fault for her situation lies in her own personality, yet she searches to satisfy her grievances against her fate by taking her revenge on anyone in her way. "Jalouse à vide"<sup>25</sup> because she is different from others, perpetually "en guerre avec (soi-même)... ou en contradiction avec la vie... il est impossible de laisser les autres en paix, et

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.808.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.809.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.809.

de ne pas envier leur bonheur."<sup>26</sup> Sophie Gamard, who as no other creature is able "(de) formuler la nature élégiaque de la vieille fille,"<sup>27</sup> experiences a great and perverse pleasure in taking her revenge on the human race by practically destroying the abbé Birotteau. Since her natural energy seeks an outlet, she uses it, not as nature intended, in the age-old duties of the wife and mother, but "dans les intrigues mesquines, les caquetages de province et les combinaisons égoïstes dont finissent par s'occuper exclusivement toutes les vieilles filles."<sup>28</sup> The hate that has been lying dormant in Sophie Gamard, that has been waiting for an object, has become more and more intense until it bursts over Birotteau's head.

Balzac compares Sophie to various animals. She scratches and claws like a cat, finding pleasure in wounding. The image of the spitting cat whose fast flashes of paw leave bleeding, throbbing tears in the flesh of its victim, is superimposed on the vieille fille whose nasty remarks and sharp vituperative attacks on the poor, blundering good-natured abbé Birotteau leave no less painful marks on his soul. The abbé Birotteau is compared to a fly who is

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.809.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.807.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.811.

unwittingly trapped in the web of the spider who is mademoiselle Gamard. There is hardly an animal image which conveys more horror and more calculated cruelty than that of the spider waiting patiently in the center of its web for its next victim. Merciless in its choice of prey, it annihilates it quickly and completely. Finally, the author compares Sophie Gamard's eyes to the eyes of a tiger, flaming with an extraordinary fire at the moment of the kill, in this case, the moment when the full extent of her vengeance on Birotteau becomes clear to him. She gives a little frisson of pleasure when he sees that she has trapped him, reinforcing the image of cruelty that her glittering tiger's eyes convey.

Mademoiselle Gamard has only a short while to enjoy her triumph over Birotteau; she catches cold one day on her way home from church, and dies soon afterwards. L'abbé Troubert delivers the eulogy at her funeral, calling her a "sainte fille"<sup>29</sup> whose days were dedicated to God and to good deeds. He praises "la noblesse et la candeur de son âme"<sup>30</sup> and, in short, makes her seem like the personification of an angel, descended mistakenly to earth, but too fine to be able to exist amongst the wicked of this world. No one who knew Sophie Gamard can reconcile the picture

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.843.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.843.

that Troubert paints of her with the real woman. His overblown phrases of fulsome praise contrast comically with the grim reality of her personality.

There is not much to say to excuse Sophie Gamard's character. The author comments that the misfortune which corrupts her soul is caused perhaps by the fact that it is necessary "à l'homme d'éprouver certaines passions pour développer en lui des qualités qui donnent à sa vie de la noblesse, en étendent le cercle et assoupissent l'égoïsme naturel à toutes les créatures."<sup>31</sup> Mademoiselle Gamard has never felt these emotions; never having had to please anyone but herself, she has grown rigid in her egoism. Even her jerky movements, so unlike the graceful, flowing undulations of other women, express her inflexibility. The circumstances of her life have carved her in ice.

If Sophie Gamard reminds one of a tall, straight, dried out sapling which never branched out in lush foliage, Rose Cormon is nothing so much as one of those plants placed in a dark corner, which sends out myriads of yellowing shoots in a vain effort to reach the sunlight, spending its strength until it is a mass of sickly stems.

Mademoiselle Cormon has always wanted to get married. While really a member of the bourgeoisie, she has high aristocratic pretensions, many of her family having married

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.830.

noblemen. "Nulle bourgeoisie ne ressemblait davantage à la noblesse."<sup>32</sup> She lives in a formidable house, almost like a castle, whose beautiful interior awakens the envy of all who see it. This dwelling is one of the reasons that Rose Cormon is so desired as wife by Du Bousquier and by the chevalier de Valois. It represents all the power of the wealth which stands behind it and which would make its owner one of the most influential men in Alençon. The salon that mademoiselle Cormon presides over, wields a considerable authority in Alençon, uniting as it does much of the moneyed society of the town with many of its politically active citizens. For each of her suitors, the salon represents an answer to his dreams: "Pour l'un et pour l'autre, là était la Députation; et par suite, la pairie pour le noble, une Recette Générale pour le fournisseur(Du Bousquier)...Épouser mademoiselle Cormon, c'était régner sur Alençon."<sup>33</sup>

Mademoiselle Cormon has a third and undeclared suitor, a young man of twenty-three named Athanase Granson, who though he starts out wanting to marry her for her money, ends up truly loving her. At first, he imagines that marriage to her will make it possible for him "s'élancer vers la gloire, rendre sa mère heureuse... Bientôt sa propre

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<sup>32</sup>Balzac, La Vieille Fille. Pléiade IV, p.244.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.251.

volonté créa, sans qu'il s'en aperçût, une passion réelle: il se mit à étudier la vieille fille, et par suite du prestige qu'exerce l'habitude, il finit par n'en voir que les beautés et par en oublier les défauts."<sup>34</sup> The deep monotony of a town like Alençon, the calm and the silence and the eternal presence of mademoiselle Cormon in his circle, all help to intensify his passion for her.

A more unlikely object of a young man's secret desires could hardly be found. Rose Cormon is forty-two years old and has long ago left the slim form and the freshness of girlhood behind her. "Une bonne grosse taille, un embonpoint de nourrice," which she obviously is not, to her distress, "des bras forts et potelés, des mains rouges,"<sup>35</sup> make her seem more like a stevedore than an unmarried woman searching desperately for a husband. The forms of her face blurred by layers of fat, her prominent eyes of an indeterminate color give her a sheep-like expression "qui seyait d'ailleurs à une vieille fille."<sup>36</sup> The author obviously thinks that spinsterhood and stupidity go hand in hand, or should. No one expects an old maid to be incisively clever; she has shown the world her calibre by not getting married. In fact, Rose's brow is narrow and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.239.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.254.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.254.

and small, signifying "trop peu d'idées pour que le coeur fût dirigé par l'intelligence."<sup>37</sup> She is rather a good person, but there is no charm and understanding supporting her benevolence.

Mademoiselle Cormon's chief desire in life is to get married. The political upheavals of the years from 1789 to 1799 have thwarted her marital ambitions. Resolved to marry a person of quality, she is too frightened of the Revolutionary tribunal to carry out her ambition. Pulled one way by her aspirations, and the other way by her fear, she is immobilized and marries no one. The Napoleonic wars further reduce her chances; great numbers of eligible men die in battle. While her opportunities are shrinking, her desires are not. She wants a husband, a landowner, not too young but definitely not above the age of forty, and preferably a member of the nobility. And she wants to be loved solely for herself, and not for the dowry that she brings. It is a very "excusable mania,"<sup>38</sup> this desire of hers, but not a very practical one. "Vous ne sauriez croire," says the narrator, "jusqu'où l'avait menée ce désir."<sup>39</sup> She has used every ounce of inventiveness that she has to set up a thousand traps for her admirers in order to test

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p.254.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p.252.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.252.

their affections and all, without exception, fail her "épreuves baroques."<sup>40</sup> Quite obviously, her behavior is not normal. "(Elle) ne les étudiait pas, elle les espionnait."<sup>41</sup> She magnifies every tiny incident, she analyzes every single word her suitors have said and she always finds some objection to every one of them. It's almost as if she were looking for an excuse, any excuse to avoid committing herself to one man and to an irrevocable marriage. While logically she should know that the perfect creature that she is looking for doesn't exist, while in the normal course of events she should have found, at sometime, a man for whom she has conceived, if not a passion, then at least a tendre, this has never happened, and at forty two years of age, she is still trying to pick a husband with the rigorous standards of a housewife who pokes and prods her way through a fishstall until she finds one that is to her satisfaction.

While her standards are as exacting as ever, she expects her husband's to be much less so. "Elle voulait être épousée pour sa fausse laideur et ses prétendus défauts, comme les autres femmes veulent l'être pour les qualités qu'elles n'ont pas et pour d'hypothétiques beautés."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.252.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.252.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.253.

She gleefully looks forward to the day, when safely married, she will uncover to her husband all the virtues that she has kept heretofore hidden, the same way that others reveal all the imperfections that they have kept carefully hidden until the wedding ring is safely on their finger. But as the narrator cannily remarks, calling forth the irony of the situation, "... elle fut mal comprise; la noble fille ne rencontra que des âmes vulgaires où régnait le calcul des intérêts positifs et qui n'entendaient rien aux beaux calculs du sentiment."<sup>43</sup> Of course, all those who refused mademoiselle Cormon were perfectly justified in doing so. No person in his right mind would deliberately pick as a wife a woman who chooses to display all her forbidding characteristics and none of her redeeming features. It is not a question of âmes vulgaires, but of men possessing normal intelligence and normal desires.

As time goes by, Rose Cormon becomes more bitter and misanthropic. Every marriage which doesn't come to pass makes her uneasier and more suspicious of the next suitor. People begin to talk, saying there must be something very wrong with her to refuse all the partis she has seen. The only defect she has though, is a mental block against marriage. Physically, she is perfectly healthy. "La pauvre fille était pure comme un ange, saine comme un enfant, et

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.253.

pleine de bonne volonté, car la nature l'avait destinée à tous les plaisirs, à tous les bonheurs, à toutes les fatigues de la maternité."<sup>44</sup>

Her consuming desire is for a child, not for the physical pleasures of married life, of which she has no idea. "Elle aimait en bloc, sans rien imaginer de l'amour; c'était une Agnès catholique, incapable d'inventer une seule des ruses de l'Agnès de Molière."<sup>45</sup> She is unbelievably naïve, and she treads the straight and narrow path without the slightest deviation. She uses no artifices to catch a husband, not even the perfectly legitimate ones which let a woman dress herself in the way that is most flattering to her. "Se moque qui voudra de la pauvre fille! vous la trouverez sublime, âmes généreuses qui ne vous inquiétez jamais de la forme que prend le sentiment, et l'admirez là où il est!"<sup>46</sup> But the narrator is actually signifying that she is a subject worthy of mockery. Unwillingness to conform to the ways of the world does not necessary signify purity of sentiment. The only thing it does prove is an inability to compete in society.

The author traces mademoiselle Cormon's incompetence as an unmarried woman trying to ensnare a man to "la sublime

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.254.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.256.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.259.

religion catholique, apostolique et romaine... La foi, la piété n'admettent pas ces subtilités. Mademoiselle Cormon marchait dans la voie du salut, en préférant les malheurs de sa virginité infiniment trop prolongée au malheur d'un mensonge, au péché d'une ruse."<sup>47</sup> This was her great misfortune, because "la dévotion cause une ophtalmie morale... Elle ôte aux âmes en route pour l'éternité la vue de beaucoup de petites choses terrestres. En un mot, les dévotes sont stupides sur beaucoup de points."<sup>48</sup> Mademoiselle Cormon is unaware of the world and of the people around her. While even a reasonably inexperienced young lady would have noticed the deep feelings that Athanase's eyes expressed, Rose Cormon is sublimely unaware of his love for her. Neither is she alert to the silent rivalry of Du Bousquier and le chevalier de Valois for her hand. She has "un effroyable et légitime désir de se marier,"<sup>49</sup> and in her intimate circle there are three men who would give anything to marry her, but she doesn't know it. Ironically, she is searching for a husband everywhere, while she would need only to nod her head at any one of these three for him to fall gladly at her feet.

Matters finally come to a head one evening when she

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.260.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.260.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.251.

is giving a dinner for le vicomte de Troisville. She loves to entertain and to preside over her richly set table, and on this occasion, she has invited a large number of guests. Under the mistaken impression that her guest is unmarried and that he has come to her house because he has picked her as his bride, she assembles the cream of Alençon society to watch her triumph. She expends all her energy trying to be witty and clever, but succeeds only in displaying her "nullité d'esprit."<sup>50</sup> No one notices though; everyone is watching le vicomte for signs that he is about to declare himself to his hostess. Instead, he, all unaware of the hopes that he has raised in mademoiselle Cormon's heart, casually mentions that he is looking for a large house for his wife and children. That innocent remark precipitates a crisis. Mademoiselle Cormon falls to the floor senseless. Du Bousquier catches her and manages to get her to her bedroom, where she stays, covered with the greatest embarrassment. Meanwhile the whole of Alençon is discussing the tragicomedy, laughing at la vieille fille's discomfiture, embroidering the story out of all proportion.

Rose Cormon admits the correctness of her maid's observation that only a prompt marriage would put a stop to the vicious gossip about her that the town was enjoying. Her

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<sup>50</sup>  
Ibid., p.297.

only problem is whom to marry. Le chevalier de Valois is an aristocrat and she dearly wants an aristocratic husband.

"Il était l'homme choisi par le coeur , par l'esprit, par l'ambition"; but "la prétendue pureté de ses moeurs dans une maison pleine de grisettes, faisait un tort énorme à monsieur de Valois, contrairement à ses prévisions."<sup>51</sup>

Mademoiselle Cormon thinks of him in a most unexpected manner, considering how devout she is: "Quel dommage qu'il ne soit un peu libertin!"<sup>52</sup> Du Bousquier, on the other hand, is a républicain, but he has one thing in his favor.

Suzanne Val-Noble has accused him of fathering her illegitimate child, an accusation that is as false as can be. There is no child, nor could there have been. But mademoiselle Cormon, whose main goal in getting married is to have a child, believes the slander and is willing to accept Du Bousquier's suit. Ironically, it is those people who want to blacken Du Bousquier's name with the heiress who have told her the story of Suzanne's child. Le chevalier de Valois wants to rid himself of a rival for the vieille fille's affections, and madame Granson too wants to remove Du Bousquier from the lists in the battle for mademoiselle's hand so that her son might succeed in winning her, but they have both badly miscalculated; with this story, they have

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.272.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.273.

pushed Du Bousquier into Rose Cormon's arms.

In the end, this consideration and a bit of pure chance decide the matter. The chevalier gives too much attention to his toilette and arrives at the Cormon residence too late; Du Bousquier has already proposed and been accepted. The irony here is also very apparent; had the chevalier given less attention to his dress with which he wanted to impress, he would have been the first on the scene and thus, perhaps, the bridegroom.

Marriage, that much hoped for state, is cruelly disappointing for Rose. She has lost the control of her fortune, and her husband allow her only the dubious freedom of sorting the household linen and ordering the daily menus. The rest of the administration of her house is taken completely out of her hands. "Sait-on combien il en coûte de renoncer aux délicieuses habitudes du pouvoir?"<sup>53</sup> Unhappy in her daily activities, she feels all the more strongly the tragedy of her childlessness which isn't her fault at all. She who wanted to marry in order to have a child and who picked her husband because she thought that he would give her that child, has to live with the fact that it all is an impossible dream.

To console herself, Rose tries to still the feelings of dissatisfaction in her heart by telling herself that

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.321.

is a great honor to live with such a remarkable man as is Du Bousquier, and that it is infinitely preferable to living alone with only a canary for a companion. But in the privacy of the confessional, she cries bitterly and begs forgiveness for having married a man whose principles are so contrary to all that she believes in. Yet in her own home, she deals with him "avec une tendresse obligée. Trouvant en elle-même tous les sentiments froissés et immolés, mais forcée par le devoir à faire le bonheur de son époux, à ne lui nuire en rien et attachée à lui par une indéfinissable affection que peut-être l'habitude engendra, sa vie était un contre-sens perpétuel."<sup>54</sup>

Since she finds it simpler to agree with her husband's opinions rather than to risk alienating him, she eventually stops thinking for herself and leads a purely animal existence, resigning herself with the humbleness of a slave "d'accepter l'abaissement dans lequel le mit son mari."<sup>55</sup> She fills her days with church devotions and good works.

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.330.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.330.

The vieille fille of the Comédie Humaine is basically a tragic figure, an illustration of the melancholy what might have been but never was. Whether she is like Armande d'Esgrignon, "un sacrifice noblement offert à de nobles sentiments,"<sup>56</sup> or like Sophie Gamard, an acidulous, back-biting gossip, she is pitiful because somewhere her life has taken a turning away from her true destiny, that of wife and mother.

Balzac calls Armande and women like her heroic because they have devoted "tous leurs sentiments au culte du malheur. Elles idéalisent," he says, "la figure de la femme, en renonçant aux récompenses de sa destinée et n'en acceptant que les peines."<sup>57</sup> But the truth is that Armande has not accepted the real sufferings, just as she has not longed for the real pleasures of woman's life. She is content with a pale imitation. She has raised a child borne by another woman, but is afraid to have her own children. Her martyr-like sacrifice of herself on the altar of family probably hides a deep-rooted fear of marriage and an unwillingness to take on her own responsibilities. Armande insists that her own position as "mother" to her nephew precludes the possibility of her getting married; but she

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.822.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.822.

could very well have taken care of Victurnien and borne her own children as well. In fact, it would have been very beneficial for Victurnien to grow up with more of his own contemporaries. In addition, Armande's techniques as a mother would have improved considerably.

Armande buttresses her first objection to marriage with another: She is unwilling to marry a man whose blood is not blue enough to satisfy her brother d'Esgrignon's ambition. This second reason for her disinclination to wed acts as a reinforcement to her first and absolutely guarantees that she will die an old maid. The truth is that she does not want to get married.

Neither does Rose Cormon. Opportunity after opportunity presents itself to her, all men who would be glad to have her as a wife; but she refuses them all, often on the flimsiest of pretenses. This one, she says, lacks delicacy, the other one has no breeding and still another's ancestors were most undistinguished. In short, she is searching for an excuse that will prevent her marrying, and she always finds one. She finally throws herself into marriage, not because she wants to, but in order to prevent a full-scale scandal; dread however looms large in her mind.

Rose Cormon is a soft, stupid creature, a fool whose ideas of marriage have not progressed much beyond the adolescent dreams of a young girl; she wants to be swept off her feet by a young and handsome landowner who will

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fall blindly in love with her. Though she surely cannot be untutored in the realities of a day when men married more for money and power than for love, she stubbornly insists on seeing her dream come true. She refuses to accept the world as it is because subconsciously, she is setting up insurmountable barriers to her ever getting married.

The only one of these spinsters whose marital chances are truly slim, is Sophie Gamard. Though she is the daughter of a merchant who probably set aside a respectable dowry for her- She owns a large furnished house- she was either not pretty enough or not sweet and good enough to catch a husband. Perhaps since her father was an "espèce de paysan parvenu,"<sup>58</sup> her ambitions exceeded her chances by a great deal, and she could not or would not reconcile the two.

The fact remains that she, like all spinsters, talks many times of the lover she did not marry, saying that she is happy that she found out about his bad character before it was too late. She is trying to show that she too was desired, and that the choice to remain unmarried was her own. Amongst the three old maids, she alone seems to have suffered the most because of her unwed state, and to have felt the opprobrium of her situation constantly.

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<sup>58</sup> Balzac, Le Curé de Tours, Pléiade III, p.810.

For whatever reason Sophie Gamard did not marry, it is probable that the choice was at least partly hers. She could have made herself more accommodating and sweeter and more compromising had she really wanted to ensnare a husband. But she did not.

All three of these vieilles filles have a certain mental block against marriage. They search, if only subconsciously as in Rose's case, for any objection, for any excuse to prevent their marrying. Afraid of marriage and of a man who would make demands on them, afraid of childbirth and its accompanying dangers, their sickly fears of life keep them on the sidelines. In spite of Balzac's excuses for their behavior, and even his praise for their nobility in certain cases, they are in truth, unable to take up life's battles with the necessary courage.

### Conclusion

At every stage of her life, a woman's days are fraught with the perils which are inherent to her existence because of her sex. When she is a young girl, she is often sent to a convent to be educated in the hope that those grey cloistral walls will enclose her forever and will thus spare her family the obligation to pay out a large sum of money as dowry for her. But no matter if she is instructed in the convent or whether she is educated in a pensionnat or even at home, she learns very little and remains basically une petite oie blanche. A prey of wily fortune hunters, sought in marriage only because of her dowry, she is often entrapped in matrimony with a husband who is totally unsuited to her, both emotionally and intellectually. Misunderstood by her spouse, abandoned much of the time by him because of his personal indifference to her, she is usually miserably unhappy. Very rare is the couple who is matched spiritually and rarer still is an enduringly happy home life.

The only really true satisfaction in a woman's life, according to the author, is the joy she feels as a mother. Though motherhood entails great sacrifices, it also brings great happiness. When a woman contemplates her child, she tends to forget all the pain and suffering he has caused her, though they may be considerable. And yet, children often cause the greatest sorrows for their mother and sometimes even bring about her death.

Women who search for a measure of happiness outside

the bounds of matrimony very rarely find enduring satisfaction. They are often discarded by their lovers and left to make their way as best they can in the world.

Outside the regulations of polite society are the courtesans. These women, forced into their vice mostly by their abject poverty and the impossibility of supporting themselves, are portrayed by the author as loving, devoted and loyal women, mostly devoid of the commonly accepted faults of the courtesan.

Outcast of society also, but in a different way, the vieille fille whose presence is tolerated, is despised by everyone because no man has seen fit to confer his name upon her. Her life is a succession of sterile days and her overwhelming bitterness corrodes all who surround her.

These are the basic types of women that are treated in the Comédie Humaine. Since it was necessary to limit the material of this dissertation, only novels written before 1842, the date of the Avant-Propos, were discussed. However, Balzac wrote some of his greatest works after this date and in these there are many examples which would have fitted well into the material of this dissertation. For example, in La Cousine Bette, the lady of the title is the personification of the bitter and evil old maid, while her cousin, Madame Hulot, is the prototype of the saintly wife whose sufferings in her marriage mark her as a martyr of her husband's evil inclinations.

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