

Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Pons*

Chapters 1-7

About three o'clock in the afternoon, one day in October 1844, an old man of some sixty years (though anyone who saw him would have thought him older) was walking along the Boulevard des Italiens, with his nose thrust forward and a smug expression on his lips, like a merchant who has just made an excellent deal, or a bachelor emerging from a lady's boudoir, pleased with his prowess—in Paris the expression of male self-satisfaction can go no further. (19)

With this opening sentence, Balzac precisely establishes time and place and location and introduces us to an old man who for some unexplained reason wears a prominent self-satisfied expression. Balzac goes on to note the bemused response of onlookers to this man's unusual appearance: "his attire [has] an unconquerable fidelity to the modes of 1806" (19). . . . In 1844, meeting a man in [such old-fashioned clothes] made it seem as if Napoleon had deigned to come back to life for an hour or two" (20). This man is, Balzac declares in his chapter title, "A glorious relic of Imperial times" (19). Balzac then zooms in to describe his "quaint, comical face," which "seemed to have no definite shape," a bone-structure replaced with "planes of gelatinous flesh. . . . rounded out into flabby bulges" (21). But his appearance does more than present a buffoonish character. "This ludicrously exaggerated ugliness," Balzac writes, "did not excite derision" for there was "excessive melancholy abounding in this poor man's pale eyes," and to anyone looking closely at him "the thought came that nature had forbidden this man to make tender advances, because they could only awaken laughter or distress in a woman" (21). In this depiction, we (the readers) have been placed in the position of Parisian street idlers puzzling over the appearance of this strangely comic yet tragic character. "Had you been there," Balzac tell us, "you would have wondered why a smile lit up this grotesque face, for its usual expression must have been sad and cold, like that of all people quietly struggling to meet the trivial needs of existence" (22). This opening demonstrates Balzac's skill at delineating character through appearance; at establishing a novel's tone—in this case, a comic pathos; at making the reader an active part of the narrative; and at withholding information to further our interest. We ask ourselves, who is this man, where is he going, and what has produced this uncharacteristic "smug expression on his lips"? (19).

We don't wait long for an answer. The opening of Chapter 2 reveals that he is Monsieur Sylvain Pons, a one-time prize-winning composer who survives now by conducting a theater orchestra, by giving music lessons and by working as a music-teacher at several girls' boarding schools (a job he holds thanks to his ugliness: no young girl, it is assumed, would surrender her heart or anything else to a man so ugly). He is a failed artist who, in his clothes, lives in the past, the time of his long-forgotten minor success, "the author," Balzac discloses, "of several well-known ballads that our mothers used to warble; he also had a few unpublished scores to his credit" (23).

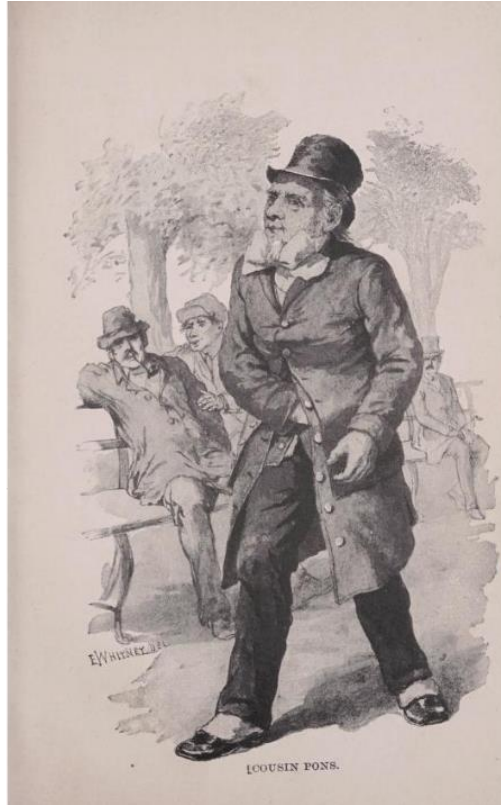


Illustration from *Cousin Pons* published by R. Bonner's sons, 1890 ([Library of Congress](#)).

In this portrait of an artist as an old man, Balzac is in a way creating an alternate portrait of himself, an imagining of what his life might have been if his artistic career had remained as it had begun, the pseudonymous author of potboilers—nine written in five years. About these early novels, Balzac biographer Graham Robb opines, “After a thousand pages, when the appetite for bludgeoning villains and helpless maidens begins to sicken, they can still be admired as detailed practical manuals on How To Write Popular Romantic Fiction” (87). His lack of commercial success and critical recognition was such that the 27-year-old Balzac responded to one correspondent by alleging he’d given up his dead-end novelistic career: “some time ago now,” he wrote, “I condemned myself to oblivion after the public proved to me with some brutality that I was a mediocrity. I therefore took the public’s side in the matter and dismissed the man of letters” (qtd. In Robb 119). Perhaps, too, there’s an imagined future here, the 48-year-old Balzac imagining what might become of him as his art is superseded by younger writers, just as Pons’s “melodies were . . . submerged under the flood of German harmony and the operas of Rossini” (25).

But what, you ask, about that smug smile? As a young man, Pons had travelled to Italy on an academic scholarship where he developed “a taste for antiquities and fine works of art.” Using up his modest inheritance, Pons returned to Paris in 1810 “laden with pictures statuettes, frames, wood and ivory carvings, enamels, porcelains, etc.” (24). It was this habit which gave him a sense of purpose. As Balzac puts it, “he found such lively compensation for his failure to reach fame in the pleasures his collecting gave him, that if he had to choose between the reputation of a Rossini and the possession of his curios. . . . Pons would have preferred his beloved collection” (25). In particular, Pons took pleasure in bargains, the thrill of paying little for antiquities worth much more, a thrill nowadays seen on TV shows like *Antiques Roadshow*. In the pleasure Pons finds in his finds we see, yet again, Balzac’s own habits. “Old Pons’s art collection,” asserts the novelist, translator, and biographer André Maurois, “is the one Balzac would himself have liked to possess (and, indeed, believed he did possess). Pons’s passion for antiques was [Balzac’s] own” (496).

Balzac sees Pons's obsession as compensation for his emotional and sexual deprivation and the overall sadness of his life. "To adopt a mania," he explains, "is like applying a poultice to the soul; it can cure any" weariness with life (27). This mania, however, can't fulfill Pons's other desire—to dine on the finest foods, for free, in the homes of the elite, a habit he developed when, many years earlier, he had been a popular composer worthy of filling out guest lists. During that time, which ended nearly thirty years before, he had "got into the disastrous habit of dining well, of seeing his hosts sparing no expense, procuring out-of-season delicacies, uncorking the best wines, taking pains over the dessert, the coffee and the liqueurs" (28). But even as his popularity dwindled, his appetite remained. Denied sexual pleasure, he sought the pleasures of the gourmand, an habitual and ultimately an addictive behavior whose motives Balzac well understands: "sensual pleasure worms its way into every recess of the heart, establishes itself as sovereign, makes inroads into will power and sense of honour, demands satisfaction at all costs" (29).

There is, I'll note, a physiological cause for this uncontrollable urge to consume gourmet foods, a rare condition known as "Gourmand syndrome," in which, after an injury to the frontal lobe, there develops, explains Massimo Cuzzolaro, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Medical and Surgical Sciences at the University of Bologna, "an abnormal preoccupation with preparing and eating fine-quality food" (35). The researchers Dr. Marianne Regard and Dr. Theodor Landis describe one case:

a 48-year-old political journalist had had no particular interest in food before he suffered a hemorrhagic infarction in the territory of the middle cerebral artery . . . During his stay in the hospital—perhaps not unlike other patients before him—he complained of the hospital food, but his diary during that time showed the beginning of the preoccupation to come: [. . .] it is time for a really hearty dinner, e.g. a good sausage with hash browns, or some spaghetti bolognese, or risotto or some breaded cutlet, nicely decorated, or escallop of game in cream sauce with Spatzle . . . Where is the next oasis? With date trees and lamb roast or couscous and mint tea, the Moroccan way, real fresh. (qtd. in Jeffrey)

After recovering from his injury, this political journalist shifted to writing a food column. As much as Pons's gourmand obsession seems similar to this syndrome, though, there's no indication that his mania is the product of anything other than a psychological need.

Balzac's understanding of the psychological need for fine food was influenced, he tells us, by food writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, credited as the originator of the gastronomic essay and best remembered for his 1821 volume (which has remained in print ever since), *Physiology of taste, or meditations on transcendent gastronomy; theoretical, historical and current work, dedicated to Parisian gastronomes, by a professor, member of several literary and learned societies*, more commonly shortened to *Physiologie du goût* (and translated into English under a variety of titles: *The Physiology of Taste: Or, Transcendental Gastronomy, The Handbook of Dining; Or, How to Dine, Theoretically, Philosophically and Historically Considered*, and most recently, *The Pleasures of the Table*). (Appropriately, Brillat-Savarin is now probably best known as a type of cheese named for the famous gourmand, a soft triple cow's milk produced in the Burgundy and Normandy regions.) Brillat-Savarin opens his book with a number of aphorisms, which would surely be endorsed by both the character Pons and his creator Balzac: "Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are" (25); "The discovery of a new dish confers more happiness on humanity, than the discovery of a new star" (26). "The pleasure of the table . . . mingles with all other pleasures, and remains at last to console us for their departure" (25). Balzac expands upon the latter, on how the pleasure of eating can substitute for sexual pleasure: "The digestive process brings all the human forces into play. It is a kind of inner combat which, for those who make a god of their bellies, gives as much enjoyment as sexual intercourse" (31). Understanding that eating food and making love are responses to the same impulse—bodily desire—Balzac contends that "In Paris . . . the table competes with the trollop" to bring people like Pons to their ruin.

This understanding of human behavior, this interest in the causes of individual ruin, especially as it is driven by mania and obsession, lies at the heart of Balzac's fiction, as in *Cousin Bette* where we observe Bette's ruin brought on by her desire for revenge, Valerie Marneffe's by her desire for wealth, Baron Hulot's by his sexual desire, and Annabelle Hulot's by desire to please, her husband. So much does Pons desire gourmet foods that he's willing to debase himself, "degenerat[ing] from the position of habitual guest to that of a sponger" (29). He flatters, he runs errands, he spies on one family for another. He swallows his dignity in order to swallow haute cuisine. Or in Balzac's words, "Abject humiliation became his daily fare" (30). The consumption of food and the acquisition of antiques, the filling of his belly and the filling of his apartment, compensate for Pons's unfulfilled desires. Explains Balzac, "The small change of good food and bric-a-brac stood him in lieu of a woman's affection—for music was merely his profession" (31).

Ultimately, though, pottery and pate don't compensate Pons for his loneliness. Fortunately, eight years prior to the narrative present, Pons establishes a long-lasting human connection with Wilhelm Schmucke, a German-born composer and pianist, like Pons a failed artist, a man who lacked the boldness to be a great composer but whose humility marks him as one of the novel's few honest and humane characters.



Pons and Schmucke, designed by Charles Huard, engraved by Pierre Gusman, 1909 ([Maison de Balzac](#)).

Pons works as orchestra director and occasional composer and Schmucke as music-copier and musician (playing piano and uncommon instruments such as the English horn and the Viola d'amore) for a boulevard theater, that is, for one of the many popular theaters on the boulevard du Temple (aka the boulevard du Crime), where it was, writes Angela Pao, Indiana University professor emerita in Comparative Literature, "situated amid a wide variety of street performers, carnival sideshows, puppet shows, cafes, gambling dens, and brothels" (22). The aesthetic here, needless to say, was far from the distinguished classical aesthetic embraced by respectable theaters, the Comedie-Francaise, the Comedie-Italienne and the Opera. Struggling to get by on the fringes of the musical world, with little ambition and mild temperaments, the comic duo of Pons and Schmucke are close friends, aging bachelors (they're around 60) who have lived together for nearly a decade, "for economy's sake" (36), Balzac says, on the third floor of a house in the Marais district where they're served by two porters, Madame Cibot and her husband.



The boulevard du Temple, 1838, daguerréotype by Louis Daguerre: “believed to be the earliest photograph showing a living person” ([Wikipedia](#)).

As their titles suggest, the novels *Cousin Pons* and *Cousin Bette*, written concurrently, are related, although the characters Pons and Bette are not. Both novels feature close same-sex relationships (Bette and Valerie Marneffe; Pons and Schmucke). As I wrote in Episode 17, Bette has a strong romantic attachment: she “adored Valérie; she had made her her daughter, her friend, her beloved. She found in her the docility of the créole, the yielding nature of the voluptuary. She chatted with her every morning with much more pleasure than she had had in talking to Wenceslas; they could laugh over the mischief they were jointly planning, over the folly of men” (*Cousin Bette*, 172). The relationship between Pons and Schmucke is, if anything, more intimate: Pons had, Balzac explains, “contracted what was for him the only kind of marriage possible in his situation—wedlock with a man, an elderly man, a musician like himself. in a week they became like brothers” (33). They expressed their bond through music “like lovers, to persuade themselves of the truth of their convictions” (35).

More significant are the differences between these couples. Bette and Valerie are a mismatched pair, the former old and ugly, the latter young and beautiful, while Pons and Schmucke are nearly identical. “Never, perhaps, in the sea of humanity,” Balzac writes, “had two souls found themselves so alike” (33). Both novels are set in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s where both couples, at least initially, subsist in a lower middle class milieu within a post July revolution culture defined by the shallow, materialist values of the bourgeoisie. But whereas Valerie and Bette are able to take advantage of this culture of greed, Pons and Schmucke find themselves alienated from its values and temper. Balzac explains their alienation: “In Paris, especially since 1830, no one gets to the fore without thrusting aside, [in whatever ways], a formidable throng of rivals: one needs excessively sturdy loins for this, and the two friends were suffering from that gravel in the heart which

impedes all activity prompted by ambition” (38). Having sturdier loins, Bette and Valerie are vengeful and lustful, seeking wealth and power. Content to live on their modest incomes, Pons and Schmucke have none of these traits, Balzac reversing gender roles, the women aggressive and conniving, the men passive and accepting.

I've suggested that the pleasure Pons receives from collecting objets d'art compensates for the emptiness of his life, particularly his lack of close human connection. Yet Pons can't quit obsessively collecting even after connecting with Schmucke because it provides him with pleasures Schmucke can't give him. To understand Pons's behavior, I draw from an essay by Frederick Baekeland, a one-time Psychiatry professor who became a well-known collector of and dealer in Japanese art, someone seemingly uniquely qualified to explain the psychology of collecting. Pons derives pleasure from being a connoisseur, which elevates him from failed composer to expert collector, as we can see when he proudly and insufferably describes to relatives with whom he's dining how he discovered a rare and valuable fan, its images painted by Jean-Antoine Watteau, which he's given them as a gift:

In the rue de Lappe, from a dealer who had just brought in from a *château* near Dreux which was being dismantled, a *château* where Madame de Pompadour sometimes resided before building Menars. The most splendid panneling known has been salvaged from there, so lovely that Lienard, our celebrated wood-carver, has kept two of its oval frames for patterns and as a ne plus ultra in craftsmanship. This *château* was full of treasures. The dealer in question discovered this fan in an inlaid cabinet. I would have bought it for myself if I collected such works. But the price is prohibitive—a piece of Riesener furniture is worth between three and four thousand francs! People in Paris are beginning to realize that the famous German and French inlay-workers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries used wood as a medium for real painting. It's up to a collector to be ahead of fashion. Why, in five years' time Frankenthal porcelain, which I have been collecting for twenty years, will fetch as much as Sevres soft paste. (48-9)

And what, you wonder, is Frankenthal porcelain? Pons is happy to explain: “The name of the Elector Palatine's china factory; it is older than our Sevres factory, just as the famous Heidelberg gardens, destroyed by Turenne, were so unlucky as to exist before the gardens of Versailles. Sevres copied Frankenthal, a great deal . . . one must do the Germans the justice of admitting that well before us, they produced admirable ware in Saxony and the Palatine” (49). This is the language of a monomaniac oblivious to social context and propriety. Pons's pride in his expertise overwhelms any sense of audience, his lecture causing “mother and daughter [to] exchange . . . glances as if Pons had been talking double Dutch” (49). This self-absorption isn't new: “For twenty years,” Balzac records, “Pons has been dining at the house of Camusot, his only real cousin, and the poor man was still waiting for a kindly inquiry about his own affairs, his life and health” (55).



[Fan, Jean-Antoine Watteau, 1708.](#)

Besides rewarding him with the refined knowledge of a connoisseur, the collecting of beautiful works of art satisfies aesthetic needs no longer satisfied by music. And collecting these rare and beautiful works can substitute for intimate relations with another. Baekeland observes that in collecting “there is the ever-present possibility of making a find or undergoing what can be, like falling in love, one of life’s most compelling experiences: irresistible attraction to a beautiful work of art, suffusion with the desire to own it, and finally possession and enjoyment” (210). The particular art Pons collects, most of it from the Renaissance through the 18th century, the elaborate finery of the baroque and the rococo but nothing contemporary, suggests his discomfort with a present in which he struggles for respect and it suggests a concomitant desire for a past where his talents might have been recognized and admired. For collectors, writes Baekeland, “the art of the past represents a vision of order and fixity. By identifying with it, [collectors] are able to deny the primacy and transiency of the present” (217). Collecting provides Pons with an identity not determined by the whims of musical fashion and the impersonal materialism of Paris in the 1830s and 1840s. Balzac’s understanding of the complex unconscious motivations of Pons’s collecting mania, which mirrors much of Baekeland’s analysis, is remarkably insightful, especially for someone writing in a culture with no developed science of psychology.

Just as he continues to collect, so, despite the comfort he finds in Schmucke, Pons continues to desire fine foods; unable to go cold turkey, he continues trying to feed his habit, while “the mounting difficulties . . . render his occupation as a parasite more and more painful” (40), and so is forced to turn as a last resort to his rich relatives. The Pons family’s fortune was built upon an embroidery business established by two Pons brothers. It’s where Bette works in *Cousin Bette*. One of the wonders of Balzac’s *Comedie Humaine* is precisely this interconnection of characters across novels. At times, though, the unspooling of these character and family relationships can become eye-glazing, as if a distant cousin at a family reunion were detailing all of the fractions and numbers and removes and steps of relationships between you and him. To luxuriate in, for instance, a plate of capon with Parisian truffle sauce and a Burgundian chardonnay, Pons tries to exploit his family ties, as Balzac here elaborates:

Our one-time laureate was first cousin to the first wife of Monsieur Camusot, the rich silk-merchant established in the rue des bore-dough-nay Bourdonnais: she had been Mademoiselle Pons, sole heiress of one of the famous brothers Pons, embroiderers by Royal Appointment. The musician’s parents had been sleeping partners in this firm which they had founded before the Revolution of 1789. It had been bought in 1815 by a Monsieur Rivet from the first Madame Camusot’s father. . . . Pons wormed his way as a kinsman of the Camusots into the extensive Cardot family. These formed a second middle-class clan which through intermarriage constituted a whole society no less influential than that of the Camusots. Cardot, the notary, a brother of the second Madame Camusot, had married a Mademoiselle Chiffreville. . . . Pons lined up behind the Camusots and the Cardots and gained access to the Chiffreville’s, and thence to the Popinots—still as a cousin of other cousins. (41)

Don’t worry. This won’t be on the test. Suffice it to say that Pons tries to use family ties, however remote, to satisfy his cravings for fine food. These relatives are confronted by a distant cousin, if that, who appears unannounced at dinner time and who offers as recompense long-winded and esoteric discourses on collectible curios, without condescending to discuss matters of personal or family interest, a man, in Balzac’s words, who “wrack[s] his brains for one of those obsequious replies which always occurred to him too late” (56), a man, in other words, incapable of the gossip and small talk these social gatherings demand. This inability to fit in, to ingratiate himself with his hosts, and his inability to recognize his inability to fit in, to understand what an odd and boring burden he’s perceived to be, is the beginning of his downfall.

This incident occurs at a dinner at the home of Madame Marie-Cécile-Amelie Camusot de Marville, known as Présidente, the wife of the Président of the Royal Court of Justice, (Note: Balzac refers to the wife of the

Président as Présidente—that is, the word “Président” ending with the feminine silent “e”—to evoke her control over her husband and her overall domineering character. To avoid the confusion of the nearly identically pronounced titles, *Président* and *Présidente*, I will refer to them as *Monsieur* and *Madame Camusot*). At this dinner, *Madame Camusot* is handed a page from her 23-year-old daughter *Cécile* which offers a plan to dispose of the irksome *Pons*: “If we made out, dear *Mamma*, that this note was sent from the Law Courts by my father, telling you to bring me for dinner to his friend’s for further talks about my marriage, *Cousin Pons* would go away; and we could carry out our plan to go the *Popinots*” (56). *Cécile*’s mother plays along with this ruse, excusing her and her daughter’s departure, and telling him he can stay and eat the already prepared dinner since otherwise it would be eaten by the servants. Passing by *Cécile*’s door, *Pons* sees her “shaking with laughter and speaking to her mother in the language of nods and grimaces” (57), which tells *Pons* he is being had. As a result, he resolves to never again go anywhere without an invitation. To make matters worse, he hears the maid *Madeleine* tell the other servants that “the masters in the houses where he dines find him such a bore that he will be thrown out everywhere” (58). Learning that *Pons* has overheard her insults, *Madeline* is unrepentant: “What does it matter?” she asks, “Bad luck for him, good luck for us. The stingy old beggar’s done for” (58).

It’s a testament to *Balzac*’s skill as a novelist that he can depict *Pons* as tedious and comically obsessive yet make us sympathize with him, that he can elicit pathos from something as slight as a man losing his fancy dinner privileges, and that he can make us understand that to *Pons* this loss—and attendant recognition of his own social marginality—is traumatic. *Pons* leaves in a daze, “hurried along in fits and starts . . . his wounded self-respect urg[ing] him on,” returning home with what *Balzac* calls “a most unusual thing—he had lost all appetite for food” (58).

At this point, *Balzac* shifts his focus to *Pons*’s and *Schmucke*’s home. They reside in a second floor flat of a former three-story mansion; on the first floor is a shop run by *Monsieur Rémonencq*, a scrap-iron merchant who has broadened his interests to become a dealer in curiosities and who is well aware of “*Pons*’s standing in bric-a-braquerie” (59). To cook lunch (for both men) and dinner (for *Schmucke*) and to do their housekeeping (cleaning, mending, shopping, laundering), *Pons* and *Schmucke* rely on the caretakers *Monsieur* and *Madame Cibot*. In describing the latter, *Balzac* makes clear the toll enacted by working class life: “Hot gusts from the kitchen buffet and coarsen their features; leavings from bottles of wine, shared with the waiters, seep through to their complexion; and no bloom is more quickly over than the bloom of a comely oyster-girl. Forty-eight years-old and mustachioed, “she remains a fitting model for a *Rubens* canvas,” although her rivals call her a “fat lump” (60). She reigns over the two men with maternal care: “When she found that the two [men] were as docile as children, easy to get on with, very trusting, just like a couple of children,” *Balzac* explains, “her plebian kind-heartedness prompted her to protect, adore and serve them with such genuine devotedness that she scolded them on occasions and defended them against all the swindling . . . in Paris” (62).

When *Pons* returns early from his spoiled dinner, he’s greeted with astonishment by *Madame Cibot*, while *Schmucke*, seeing his friend’s despair, attempts to placate him by saying they can go antiquing, even though he has no appreciation for *Pons*’s collection, which he has gazed at, writes *Balzac*, “as a fish . . . would gaze at a flower-show” (67). *Pons* goes three months without dining out, pining “for the choice dishes the liqueurs, the excellent coffee, the small talk, the insincere civilities, the varied company and the scandal-mongering” (71). *Balzac* again describes *Pons*’s gustatory desire in sexual terms. He is like “an elderly gallant [who] yearn[s] for a discarded mistress, guilty though she may be of countless infidelities” (71). Someone hearing him sigh, notes *Balzac*, “would have imagined that the good man was thinking of an absent mistress, but he had something more rare in mind: a succulent carp” (72). *Balzac* also suggests a connection between his appreciation for art and for fine food: “*Pons* yearned for certain kinds of *crème*, each one a poem; for certain white sauces, each one a masterpiece” (72). *Pons* is unable to hide his grief over the demise of his dinners. And thus his fellow musicians note his signs of unhappiness, weakness, and decline—a diminuendo prompted by what *Balzac* labels *Pons*’s “gastric nostalgia” (72).

Chapters 8-11

Leaving the declining Pons, Balzac takes us to Frankfurt-am-Main, the current city of Frankfurt, Germany, but which at the time was a city-state within the German Confederation. Here we learn from one of Pons's musicians, the flautist Werther, during intermission of a performance of the operetta *The Devil's Beloved* the history of Fritz Brunner, a man sitting near the stage "wearing yellow gloves and radiating opulence" and "tricked out with all a banker's elegance" (73-4). Although now wealthy, this man clearly has suffered on his way to riches: "The constant self-prostitution which life in Paris entails had blurred his gaze and put shadows round those eyes." More than Paris, Balzac continues, "This young old man was the handiwork of a stepmother" (74). After the death of Fritz's Jewish mother, his father married a good German girl, the daughter of another innkeeper. An only daughter idolized by her parents, she was ill-natured and flighty; "and she squandered her husband's money, and avenged the first Frau Brunner by giving her husband a home life which made him the unhappiest man known throughout the territory" (75).

No kinder to young Fritz, she seems almost a wicked stepmother freed from the pages of "Cinderella." This archetypal monster appeared in a French version published by Charles Perrault in 1697 ("Cinderella"); the first French translation of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, which also included a version of the story, appeared in 1824 (Seago 303). Balzac's description of Fritz's wicked stepmother would fit into either of these: "This hyena was so much the more furious with the cherubic son of the handsome first Frau Brunner," narrates Balzac, "because, though she puffed and strained like a railway-engine, she could produce no offspring. With diabolic cunning, this wicked woman launched young Fritz, at twenty-one, into a career of dissipation. . . . She hoped that English ponies, Rheinisch vinegar, and Gretchen *a la Goethe* would destroy [him] and his fortune" (76). "Reinish vinegar" is Balzac's contemptuous term for German wine, "Gretchen *a la Goethe*" refers to a character in Goethe's *Faust*. Fritz's mother, in other words, hopes her step-son will be lost to drink, women, and gambling. And he succeeds in this moral failure to such a remarkable degree that "every family still holds him up as a bogey to frighten their children and keep them on the straight and narrow path" (76)

For his wastrel ways, Fritz's father, a successful innkeeper, "denied him food and drink, hearth and home, and even tobacco" (77). At his father's urging, the local authorities banished him on a trumped up charge. Fritz wandered off to Strasbourg where he met Wilhelm the flautist and helped him waste his inheritance, "squandering all their money in the . . . beer-houses, in the most stupid and vulgar manner, in the company of ballet dancers . . . and Alsatian girls" (78). Their money spent, the two young men journeyed to Paris, were able to take advantage of the generosity of Johann Graff, who had been headwaiter at Fritz's father's hotel, who now runs the Hotel du Rhin where he allows them to stay in the attic, and who finds them jobs, Fritz as a clerk, Wilhelm as a bookkeeper before joining Pons's theater orchestra. After seven years of barely getting by, Fritz has discovered that his father has died and has left him a huge inheritance, having made a fortune as "one of the promoters of railroads in Baden" (89): the Grand Duchy of Baden opened a rail line from Mannheim to Heidelberg in 1840. By the time of the novel's setting, the line had extended to the spa town of Baden Baden and Fritz's father's wealth had grown to four million francs, some of which will be shared with his friend. Fritz this time hopes to escape his stepmother's curse by investing with Wilhelm in a start-up banking venture, Brunner, Schwab & Co.



A train leaving [Heidelberg station](#), 1840.

Not only Wilhelm's but Pons's fortune seems to be turning. Although the *Présidente*, Madame Camusot, "lost no sleep for being delivered of her parasite" (81), her husband, who never felt put upon by Pons's visits and with whom he had been friends for forty years, wants to know why he's stopped visiting, especially after having given them the exquisite fan whose beauty and craftsmanship and value was recognized by his acquaintances. Meanwhile, other people he used to visit have started wondering what happened to Pons. Encountering one such former dinner host, Count Popinot, the Minister of Finance, who asks him why he's disappeared, Pons alludes to the Camusots, saying, "I never did get much welcome there" and in fact was humiliated. As a result, Pons declares, "I have resigned from my post as hanger-on" (83). Count Popinot confronts Monsieur Camusot about this abuse who confronts his wife and daughter who in turn blame their servants who thus are forced to visit Pons and apologize. In the end, Pons is returned to society transfigured: "the gloomy, moribund old man gave way to the self-satisfied Pons" (87), a transformation that disappoints Schmucke since he'll have "to forgo the happiness to himself for nearly four months" (87) of sharing dinners with Pons.

The first stop on Pons's re-entry into society is a banquet in honor of the flautist Schwab's engagement which is held at a mansion on the Rue de Richelieu, home to the wealthy tailor Wolfgang Graff where the newlyweds will live and where the offices of Brunner, Schwab and Company will be situated. It was on the Rue de Richelieu, by the way, that a few years earlier August Zang, an Austrian artillery officer who had started a Viennese bakery, "Boulangerie Viennoise," modified an existing Austrian roll called a "kipferl" creating that buttery perfection, the croissant ("Croissant").



The original [Boulangerie Viennoise](#) on rue de Richelieu, Paris, c. 1909.

Far more than croissants are served at the catered banquet. “There were dishes to send you into raptures,” writes Balzac, “such delicious vermicelli as had never been tasted before: fried smelts which dissolved in the mouth: a ferra [sic] from Geneva in a real Genevese dressing: and a sauce for plum-pudding which would have astonished the London doctor who is said to have invented it” (90). “Fera” is a freshwater whitefish native to Lake Geneva that was last found in 1920 and which presumably has become extinct due to over-fishing and species hybridization I think “Genevese dressing” is a pesto sauce. The traditional sauce for plum-pudding is made from cream and brandy. I’m not sure what doctor is alleged to have invented plum-pudding. Perhaps, though unlikely, this notion is related to the title of one the first cookbooks to include a plum-pudding recipe, Mary Kettlby’s 1714 *A Collection of Above Three Hundred Receipts in Cookery, Physick and Surgery*. On the way to this feast, Pons hits upon the idea, to secure himself a place in this society and at the dinner table, of helping to arrange a marriage between the newly wealthy Fritz Brunner and Cécile Camusot de Marville, the young girl who had contrived the false letter which had led to Pons’s exile. He tells himself, “they will be tremendously obliged to their hanger-on!” (91). The very next day he proposes this potential proposal to Cécile and her family.

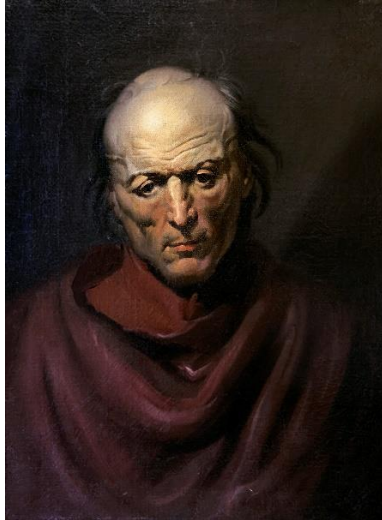
In what follows Balzac takes us through the stages preparatory to an upper-class marriage. First, discover the potential husband’s financial status: Cécile “expressed approval of his generosity” (92), since it’s known he’s given his friend Wilhelm 500,000 francs. Second, learn if he’s good looking, learn “about Frederick’s clothes, his height, his appearance, the colour of his hair and eyes” (92). Pons tells her that “he’s over forty and he’s half bald”. Third, determine his motive. “We must have time to collect information,” says Madam Camusot, “Never will I give over my daughter to a nobody” (93). Pons reveals that “He’s looking for family life as a haven of refuge” (93). Fourth, arrange to meet him without committing to anything further: Pons says a mere one interview with Fritz will confirm his qualities, and “they can make acquaintance of the prospective bridegroom without committing [them] selves” by visiting his flat where Friz will be viewing his art collection (93).

Pons is ecstatic when his wealthy guests appear in his modest art-filled apartment both “because of the good he was doing, and the future he saw looming ahead. . . . more dinners like the one he had had at the signing of Werther’s marriage-contract” (93). His rooms are filled with priceless art—“Floral studies by Van Huysum, and David van Heim; Abraham Mignon’s insects; the canvasses of Van Eyck, and Albrecht

Dürer, the genuine works by the elder Cranach, the Giorgione, the Sebastian del Piombo; the Backuysen, the Hobbema, the Géricault.” The artists here are German, Dutch, and Italian painters from the 15th to the 18th centuries, with the exception of Théodore Géricault, a French painter from the 19th century. They’re known for a wide variety of genres: portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and devotional scenes—all of which his relatives ignore, “having no thought for anything but this fiancé with his four millions. . . . nothing stirred their curiosity, for they were waiting for the solar deity who was to light up these riches.” This philistinism,



Albrecht Dürer, [Melancholia](#), 1514.



Théodore Géricault, [The Melancholic Man](#), year unknown.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, [Melancholia](#), 1532.

this lack of appreciation for or knowledge of fine art is, for Balzac, an indictment of the bourgeois values that have come to dominate Parisian society. Ignoring these paintings, Pons’s guests appreciate only those objects d’art which seem to exhibit monetary value: jewelry and fancy snuff boxes. Little attention is paid to Pons’s paintings until Fritz tells Cécile he would pay 800,000 francs for them. Per the nuptials, Fritz is asked to join Pons for a dinner at the Camusots. But he’s unenthusiastic, telling Pons that Cécile’s nothing to get excited about and her mother a bit prim. To which Pons reminds Fritz that she has a fine fortune, more than a million. As they part, Fritz offers Pons five or six hundred thousand francs for his collection. But Pons says he would never part with things that give him such happiness and would in fact only part with them after his death. Pons then watches the carriage take Fritz away without noticing, ominously, that Remonenq, the curio dealer whose shop is on the first floor, had been standing nearby and had overheard Fritz’s bartering for Pon’s collection.

That very night Madame Camusot begins to spread the news that her daughter will be marrying a “young German setting up as a banker. . . . he has a capital of four millions. He’s a hero straight out of a novel, a real Werther, charming, good-hearted, with all his wild oats sown. He has fallen madly in love with Cécile. Love at first sight” (99-100). When Fritz appears for dinner at the Camusots, he joins eleven guests, not just family members, but the Minister of Justice, his Chief Justice, and the Attorney General, “its purpose was, through the prestige of the guests, to get Monsieur Brunner definitely committed” (101). The Camusots are so pleased that they offer Pons a lifetime annual income, an offer that makes the blood tingle in his ears “and all the gasjets in the footlights of his theater seemed to be flaring up before his eyes” (101), an offer that Fritz correctly interprets as payment for services rendered. Fritz also notices “how completely Cécile, the idol of the household, was spoiled by her father and mother” (103), which leads him to ask if she’s an only child, and when told she is, Fritz’s “face clouded over and an ominous silence brought a strange chill to the atmosphere” (104). It’s as if Fritz has been told that Cécile is an epileptic. Shocked by this sudden change in Fritz’s demeanor, Monsieur Camusot takes him aside and asks if he had been sincere about seeking his daughter’s hand. Fritz says he had indeed come to propose, but can’t do so now because of what

he's just discovered: Cécile is an only child. To Friz, this condition is an "absolute impediment" for "an only daughter is a child whom her parents' indulgence accustoms to doing as she pleases and whose will has never been crossed" (104-5). He goes on to explain that his "stepmother, the cause of all [his] misfortunes, an only daughter, an object of worship, the most charming of fiancées, became a fiend incarnate" (105). Hiding in her mother's dressing room and hearing everything, Cécile emerges after Fritz's departure, deathly pale, and faints in her mother's arms, causing Madame Camusot to address the innocent Pons: "This will be the death of my daughter and *you* will have killed her" (106)

Because of this humiliating rejection of their daughter, the Camusots must salvage their daughter's and their family's reputation. They must, first, make it appear that they, not Fritz, cancelled the marriage and so they denigrate the once groom-to-be Friz Brunner as unsuitable, emphasizing —to accomplish this goal—his lower class roots:

this "son of a German innkeeper, the nephew of a rabbit-skin merchant. . . . This German's best friend is . . . a sorry individual who plays the flute! He's in league with a man who runs a lodging house . . . and a family of tailors. . . . One can see by his gloves that he belongs to the working-classes: a German cook-shop keeper for a father, no refinement of feeling, a beer-drinker. . . . Heaven has preserved us from that" (109-10)

The second step in salvaging the Camusot reputation is to explain that they were duped. For this, they need a scapegoat:

"I can see through the plot this person has hatched," said the outraged mother, pointing to Pons.

Pons started up as if the trumpet blast of Judgement Day had sounded in his ears.

[Madame Camusot's] eyes were like twin pools of green bile. "Monsieur," she continued, "you decided to do us a wrong in return for an innocent jest. . . . I hope, Monsieur Pons, that in future you will spare us the displeasure of seeing you in a house on which you have tried to bring shame and dishonour."

Pons stood like a statue, stared down at a rose-pattern in the carpet, and twiddled his thumbs.

"What! You are still here, ungrateful monster," cried [Madame Camusot]. (107)

Having been on the verge of a lifetime stipend and a permanent dinner invitation, Pons is devastated by these accusations. He "walked through the streets to his theatre, which he entered in a daze. He went to his stand in a daze and conducted the orchestra in a daze. . . . to have reawakened fearful hatred in persons whose happiness he had tried to ensure meant that his whole existence was turned upside down" (108). Thankfully, Schmucke is there to help the distraught and destroyed Pons, who spends a month in bed suffering from nervous fever until at last he seeks to recover by strolling through the Paris streets, unaware of how in the interim he has been defamed by Madame Camusot who had alleged that "He introduced that fine gentleman to us in order to make a laughing-stock of us." It was, she says, "a piece of vengefulness on the part of Monsier Pons" (109). This allegation has spread throughout their society, with no one to stand up for this outsider, "that sly, miserly parasite, that wolf in sheep's clothing, henceforth buried under a weight of scorn, written off as a viper nourished in the family bosom, an extraordinarily wicked man, a dangerous mountebank, best consigned to oblivion" (110).

Unaware of the pariah he's become, Pons is shocked when he encounters Count Popinot, the Finance Minister who had once sought to reconcile him with the Camusots: "Please understand, Monsieur, that from now on we can have absolutely no dealings with one another. My wife the [Countess] shares the indignation which everyone in society feels with regard to your behaviour" (111). Later, he runs into "a young woman who had had enough unhappiness in her life to incline her to indulgence. A lapse from virtue which had been hushed had made her her husband's slave" (113). Yet even this woman, the victim of social outrage over an extramarital affair, is agitated by Pons's presence, telling him, "I did not think you were a bad man, cousin; but if only one quarter of all I have heard said about you is true, you are a very deceitful person" (113). Only his close friend Schmucke remains an ally, while Pons's health declines. "This walk," Balzac declares, "was to be the last the good Pons ever took" (114).

Stumbling from one sickness to another, Pons is treated by a doctor who lives in a poor neighborhood on the rue de Normandie in the Marais. Access to healthcare was difficult in the Marais and in other poor parts of the city because doctors mostly served the wealthier neighborhoods. "They tended to concentrate where professional rewards were greatest. . . . Paris, for example, had 1231 doctors in 1851, but 720 lived in three arrondissements," with only thirty-one living in the Marais (Price 66). The neighborhood physician, Doctor Poulain, who often tended to the poor, explains to Madame Cibot that Pons is doomed because of his low spirits but that if well cared for and given a change of scene, he might pull through. She knows, though, that Pons probably cannot afford such treatment, leading Doctor Poulain to lament that his life "is spent watching people die, not of disease, but of that grave and incurable injury—shortage of money" (115). At last recognized for his connoisseurship, praised for finding an eligible suitor, promised a yearly stipend, welcomed to the homes of the wealthy, and guaranteed many a fine dinner, the unassuming and well-intentioned Pons, almost overnight, is banished from proper society, its dining tables emptied, its doors slammed shut, his only comfort his art treasures and his friend Schmucke.

Balzac ends this chapter not by focusing on Pons's health or his relationship with Schmucke but by turning his attention to what have been up to this point two minor characters, his landlady Madame Cibot and the tin-merchant / curio-seller Remonencq. The good woman Madame Cibot, who had displayed real maternal care for her bachelor boarders, expresses to Remonencq her concern for Pons's health and his inability to pay for the care he needs. But Remonencq assures her that "he's richer than . . . all of the owners of curiosity shops. I know enough in that line of business to tell you that the dear man has a gold-mine of treasures" (116). Referring to the conversation Remonencq had overheard, Fritz's offer to buy Pons's collection, Balzac writes, "In Paris . . . there is no greater danger than gossiping at front entrances. The tail-end of a conversation . . . may be . . . dangerously indiscreet both for those who let themselves be overheard and for those who overhear it. The truth of this observation . . . our narrative is about to illustrate" (116).

Chapters 12-17

If, to Balzac, the Camusots represent the haute bourgeoisie in their ignorance and philistinism and class cruelty, then Remonencq represents the lowest bourgeoisie in his avarice and immorality. Within the full range of the bourgeoisie, then, we see a willingness to destroy others—in this case, Pons—for their own benefit, whether that's to maintain their reputation and social position or to gain wealth and move up the social ladder. In this society, Balzac argues, the bourgeoisie, a frequent target in his fiction, is amoral and cruel, in fact, almost sociopathic in its disregard for those whom it destroys.

Despite the airs they put on and their repudiation of Fritz for his low class roots, the Camusot family's own roots are unassuming, beginning in the silk trade, then gaining wealth through marriage into the Pons family and its fortune earned from serving as embroiderers to the Court under Napoleon. Monsieur Camusot was a judge and president of the Royal Court of Paris. He took the name "Camusot de Marville" (just as Balzac added the noble particule "de" to his own name), with its aristocratic suggestiveness, to distinguish himself

from his half-brother but also, of course, to add a suggestion of nobility. His wife, Madame Camusot, was the daughter of an usher, in other words, the daughter of a kind of upper-class servant in the cabinet of Louis XVIII.

Remonencq was born in the Auvergne region, a rural area dominated by mountain ranges and dormant volcanoes, one of the least populated areas in Europe. It contains the city of Vichy, the residence of the Nazi-collaborationist French government. Arriving in Paris in 1825, Remonencq “pushed a handcart round for curio-dealers” for the next six years, then went rummaging throughout Paris for his employer, saving, by 1839, enough money to open a curio shop on the first floor of the building in which Pons lived. “Having no overheads, and remaining in the rue de Normandie where he paid next to nothing in rent,” Balzac details, “he sold goods to the dealers and was content with modest profits. . . . [But] he wished to become a rich curio-dealer so that one day he might bargain directly with collectors” (121).

Because he’s discussing someone from the lower classes striving to make money, Balzac, like many 19th Century novelists when detailing similar situations, can’t help but think of the Jews. In describing Remonencq’s appearance, Balzac notes that his chilly, blue-tinted eyes “revealed the concentrated avidity and sly cunning of a Jew, minus the mock humility which Jews combine with a deep contempt for Christians” (122). When Balzac tells us that Fritz perceived Pons’s receiving money from the Camusots as “for services rendered,” he explains that the half-Jewish Fritz’ had his “Hebrew instincts . . . aroused, and he assumed an attitude indicative of the . . . withdrawal of a man counting his gold” (103). And when discussing the healthy rewards of breathing in the air on a city’s crowded streets, he explains “that in Rome it has been noticed that there is no malaria in the loathsome Ghetto swarming with Jews” (110-11). That Jews despise Christians and cunningly pretend to be humble, that they have an innate instinct to respond to financial exchanges like someone counting gold, and that they swarm in their loathsome Ghetto, is evidence in its reliance upon stereotype of Balzac’s own anti-Semitism. (For a more comprehensive discussion of Balzac and anti-Semitism—and of anti-Semitism in the 19th Century novel in general—see [Episode 21](#) of this podcast series.)

Balzac doesn’t confine himself to Jewish stereotypes. He relies as well on national and even regional stereotypes. In *Cousin Pons*, he makes frequent assertions about Germans. They are slow-witted when compared to “a Frenchman’s quickness of perception” (35). New ideas are uncommon to Germans because a German’s “brain [is] normally congealed by the respect he pays to sovereign princes” (68). They drink much but have a great tolerance for alcohol: “no one can conceive how much liquid a German can absorb while remaining calm and peaceful. . . . bottles vanish. . . as if Germans were absorbent sponges” (90). Therefore, “a career of dissipation [is] unusual among Germans” (76). And Germans seem to be less worldly than the French: both Pons and Schmucke, for instance, were “abundantly given to those childish sentimentalities noticeable in Germans” (34).

Besides the gross generalizations Balzac makes about Germans’ intellectual shortcomings and drinking habits, he claims particular traits for Auvergnats like Remonencq: uncultivated and unscrupulous, Auvergnats are much like Jews. Pons points to this connection when he explains that in his haggling over price, “One needs a great deal of practice to bring off such bargains. It’s a close contest between two pairs of eyes—and there’s nothing wrong with the eyes of a Jew or an Auvergnat” (52). Rémonencq’s cheapness, as apparent in his worn clothing, is a further similarity: “After eleven years Rémonencq had not yet outworn his corduroy coat, waistcoat and trousers; but these garments, to which Auvergnats are partial, were riddled with holes, which Cibot had patched up free of charge. As can be seen,” asserts Balzac, “all Jews do not come from the ghetto” (122). So inseparable are Jews from their miserliness and obsession with money that the word “Jew” can serve as shorthand for any group of people who demonstrate these traits. And just as Jews’ greed is seen as an inherent trait, so for Balzac, some rural peasants’ obsession with making money seems less the result of their isolated and impoverished living conditions than an innate character trait. Balzac links Jews to the people of three regions: “There are four breeds of men—Jews, Normans, Auvergnats and

Savoyards—who have the same instincts and get by on the same methods. They spend nothing, make small gains, heap up interest and profits; such are the clauses of their charter” (121). Balzac’s repeated linking of Jews with rural peasants is worth further consideration. Outside of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, Jews were associated not with the countryside or the shtetl but with an urban environment. What was it that connected the two in Balzac’s mind? Both are outsiders to Parisian society. Both have a history of impoverishment. Both must, therefore, struggle against animus and stereotype, must replace the social ties and conventions they are denied with intelligence, with slyness and cunning, behaviors Balzac sees as intrinsic to these groups rather than as a necessary response to a system that was rigged against them.

Balzac’s habit of identifying people by national or ethnic or regional traits is not limited to *Cousin Pons*. In its companion novel *Cousin Bette*, written at the same time, Balzac often, sometimes in the voice of a character, sometimes in the narrator’s voice, equates national and ethnic identity with character traits. For instance, a character in *Cousin Bette* describes the Jewish singer and mistress Josepha Mirah “develop[ing] the first Hebrews’ instinct for gold and jewels, for the Golden Calf” (17); Slavs have an instability “which, though it endows them with heroic courage . . . makes their behaviour incredibly inconsistent and gives them moral flabbiness” (67); for another character, being in love arouses his “Polish animation, the intellectual liveliness typical of [inhabitants of the French region of Gascony], the attractive high spirits characteristic of the Frenchmen of the North” (181); still another character refers to Jews, Cossacks, and peasants as “wild beasts wrongly classed with humankind” (118); and in general “one of the ingrained ideas of country people is never to give up their means of livelihood; in this they are like the Jews” (167).

While some of these comments can be dismissed as a character’s, not Balzac’s own opinion, the consistency of such views here—and in *Cousin Pons*—likely conveys Balzac’s own belief in inherent regional and ethnic traits. To be fair to Balzac, this reliance upon stereotypes was common in the 19th century, in novels as well as on the popular stage. In the 19th century, the depiction of almost any population group was based upon exaggeration and stereotype. And these depictions in turn became commonly used metaphors to describe behaviors and appearances even within the dominant group: someone behaves “like a German,” “like an Auvergnat,” etc.

Like a Jew, then, Remonencq, wears clothes riddled with holes and patches when he greedily convinces Madame Cibot of Pons’s wealth. She, therefore, joins Schmucke in taking care of the sick Pons, asking him repeatedly if he’d had affairs, if he’d gotten lovers pregnant, to which Pons responds, exasperated, that no one but his mother and Schmucke has ever loved him because he’s “always been as ugly as a toad” (126). She asks Schumcke the same questions and receives similar replies. Discovering that they have no children or close relatives or friends, Madame Cibot thinks her fortune’s made: she can inherit some of Pons’s wealth. To confirm this prediction, she visits a 78-year-old woman, Madame Fontaine, sitting in a rocking chair by a fireplace, a sleeping toad on one side, a black hen in an open cage on the other. “Seven or eight minutes went by,” writes Balzac, “while the sorceress opened a book of spells and read aloud from it in a sepulchral voice. She studied the grains the hen had left and the path the toad was taking as it hopped away. Then, with the whites of her eyes still showing, she scanned the [Tarot] cards and made out their meaning” (139). And she proceeds to reveal Madame Cibot’s future:

“You will get what you want!” she said. “And yet nothing will turn out as you think. You will have a great deal of intriguing to do. But you will reap the reward of your labours. You will behave very badly, but it will be with you as it is with all those who tend sick persons and covet a share in the money they leave. In this evil task you will have the support of important people. . . . Later on the pangs of death will bring you to repentance, for in the village to which you will retire with your second husband you will be murdered for your reputed fortune—murdered by two escaped convicts, a short man with red hair and an old man with no hair at all. . . . There, my daughter, you are free to take action, or to leave well alone.” (139)

This appearance of Tarot and toad might seem a Gothic intrusion into an otherwise realistic novel. However, fortune-telling (if not sleeping toads and wandering hens) was quite popular in 19th century France. Balzac identifies Madame Fontaine as “the undisputed oracle of the Marais” after the passing of her decades-long rival Mademoiselle Lenormand (130). Marie Anne Lenormand was an actual fortune-teller whose renown an English visitor, Frances, Lady Shelley, describes in her diary: “I consider my knowledge of Paris incomplete without visiting so remarkable a personage. Madame Le Normand is clever enough to impose upon half the continent of Europe, and is consulted by crowned heads, and all the *beau monde* of Paris.” Lady Shelley goes on to describe her fortune-telling session with Mademoiselle Lenormand:

She . . . introduced me into a dimly lit [study]. On a large table, under a mirror, were heaps of cards, with which she commenced her mysteries. She bade me cut them in small packets. . . . She then inquired my age . . . the day of my birth; the first letter of my name; and the first letter of the name of the place where I was born. She asked me what animal, colour, and number I was most partial to. . . . After about a quarter of an hour of this mummary, during which time she had arranged all the cards in order upon the table, she made an examination of my head. Suddenly she began, in a sort of measured prose, and with great rapidity and distinct articulation, to describe my character and past life, in which she was so accurate and so successful, even to minute particulars, that I was spellbound at the manner in which she had discovered all she knew. (208-09)

Her skill at presenting an occultish scene, of knowing about her sitters’ lives, and of telling believable fortunes made Madame Lenormand popular among members of the elite like Lady Shelley. Balzac acknowledges as much, saying that “belief in the occult sciences is much more widespread than is imagined” and that “more than one statesman has recourse to card readers” (131). But it was most common among the poor. “It is difficult to imagine how important fortune-tellers are to the lower classes of Paris,” he writes, “or what a tremendous influence they exert in helping illiterate persons to make up their minds. For cooks, concierges, kept women, workmen and all those people in Paris who live on their hopes, come to consult those privileged beings who possess the strange inexplicable power of foretelling the future” (130-31). William G. Pooley, Senior Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Bristol agrees, finding there was some truth to the stereotype “that cartomancy was practiced by women, for other women, especially for young servant girls” (13).

As detailed by Pooley, the vogue for Tarot card reading in France began in the 1770s, and Tarot cards themselves were alleged to have had their beginnings in ancient Egypt and were “variously connected to hermeticism, Kabbalah, and ritual magic” (2). The truth was far different: “Originating in Renaissance Italy, Tarot was designed as a card game, and it was only in the late eighteenth century, when relatively few people in France still played games of Tarot, that it came to be associated with fortune-telling” (Pooley 7). Cartomancy, divination by cards, was especially popular during the period of the French Revolution, given the many uncertainties and anxieties it raised. According to David Allen Harvey, Professor of History at the New College of Florida,

the Revolution itself, and its aftershocks felt in France across the nineteenth century, convinced a number of Frenchmen that their society was fundamentally out of balance, and the failure of either revolutionary republicanism or reactionary monarchism to bring stability to post-Revolutionary French society led them to look elsewhere. . . . Amid so much tumult and uncertainty, a small but not insubstantial number of Frenchmen sought in the supposedly ancient wisdom of the occult tradition a vision of harmonious order, of a return to wholeness, and an organically united society. (“Beyond,” 666)

Despite its popularity (or maybe because of its popularity) the Napoleonic Code established that fortune-tellers—“those who make a profession of divination and prediction, or the explanation of dreams”—could be punished with fines, imprisonment, and the confiscation of “all instruments, tools, and costumes serving, or

intended for the practice of the profession of fortune-teller or interpreter of dreams” (qtd. in Harvey, “Fortune-Tellers” 133). Several times Lenormand was herself briefly imprisoned. A minor historical figure, she has persisted in legend in ways she could never have predicted: in a type of Tarot deck called Lenormand Cards, which in various versions remain popular with psychics and card-readers, and she has hasbeen immortalized as a character in the *Assassin’s Creed* video game series.



[Engraving](#) from *The Prophetic Memories of a Sibyl on the Secret Causes of Her Arrest*, by Marie Anne Le Normand, 1809. My loose translation of the caption: “You are shocked by our visit?” “On the contrary, it was in the cards.”



[Marie Anne Lenormand](#) from *Assassin’s Creed*

Having had her fortune read, Madame Cibot dismisses its ominous predictions and focuses on the good: she will get what she wants. And what she wants is money enough to purchase a small house in the country. She had been genuinely interested in taking care of her two boarders, Schmucke and Pons. But Remonencq’s revelation of Pons’s wealth “hatched out in this woman’s heart a serpent—the lust for wealth—which had been contained in its shell for twenty-five years.” “We shall see,” Balzac forewarns us, “how far she carried out the advice which this serpent whispered in her ear” (150). She agrees with Remonencq to get an expert opinion about the value of Pons’s collection. And so, of course, they turn to a Jew, the 75-year-old Elias Magus, a successful dealer in objets d’art. “This Jew,” writes Balzac, “had given up business in 1835 without giving up his squalid appearance [which] he maintained, in accordance with the habits of most Jews.” To avoid persecution in the Middle Ages, Balzac asserts, Jews went about “in rags, perpetually

complaining, whining and pleading poverty. What was once a necessity has become, as is always the case, an ingrained racial instinct” (141). Magus has followed this habit, wearing rags all through the buying and selling of diamonds and pictures “and lace, rare curios and enamels, delicate carvings and antique jewelry” (141) and becoming immensely wealthy.

“The old Jew,” in Balzac’s words, “had decided in breach of Israelite practice, to become a house owner” (142). Displayed in this house are the one hundred paintings Magus has collected and obsessively admires. For Balzac, so odd is it to see a ragged, old Jew admiring fine art that it’s self-evidently comical, saying, with tongue in cheek, “The sight of a Jew with a three million treasure around him will always be one of the finest spectacles the human race can offer” (146). What’s funny about this scene is its odd juxtaposition. It’s comically unnatural, to Balzac and his readers, to imagine a Jew possessing and admiring great works of Western—and Christian—art, such as Titian’s *The Entombment of Christ*. The appropriation by Jews of traditional art, though, could sometimes be found not funny but objectionable, as was the case with the Jewish actress Rachel Félix who performed leading roles in classic French plays by Racine and Corneille at the elite Comédie-Française. This casting, writes Maurice Samuels, Professor of French at Yale University, “provoked one of the first public campaigns of antisemitism in modern French history. From the beginning of her career, Rachel was denounced as an interloper, a foreigner, a Jew. And for certain critics, a Jew like Rachel could never truly understand the characters that Racine and Corneille had created—even when these characters, like Esther (or Bérénice), were supposed to be Jews” (51).

On the other hand, according to Samuels, Felix’s performances “occasioned an outpouring of philosemitism on a scale never seen before, or possibly since” (51). In the background of Balzac’s depiction of the Jew Magus, then, is a culture war about the place of Jews within French society. According to Samuels, more than their rise to “the highest levels of banking and business, and even politics. . . . What proved . . . amazing and . . . disturbing to observers at the time was the truly new prominence of Jews in the cultural life of the French nation beginning in the 1830s. Rachel was hardly the only Jewish artist of the period to capture the public’s attention” (53). Similarly, for Balzac it remains unnatural to see a Jew, whose defining characteristic is the appreciation of money, appreciate art instead, in other words, to see the Jew receive perhaps more pleasure from aesthetic value than monetary value. Balzac’s habit here and throughout the novel of referring to Magus not by name but as “the Jew” emphasizes Jews’ outsider status, their racial, rather than their French identity, and demonstrates their ongoing struggle to be accepted as part of French society.

With Pons bedridden, Madame Cibot sneaks “the Jew” and Remonencq into Pons’s apartment to view his collection, which Magus already knows rivals only his own, filling a room “twenty-five feet wide, thirty feet long and thirteen feet high” (161) and containing sixty-seven paintings hung on the walls, fourteen statues on pedestals, curios in ebony cabinets and on a row of tables “display[ing] the rarest products of human art: ivories, bronzes, wood-carvings, enamels, goldsmith’s work, porcelains and so on” (161). But “once the Jew was in this sanctuary,” says Balzac, “he went straight to four Renaissance masterpieces which he recognized as the finest in this collection.” In discussing these works, Balzac demonstrates his own connoisseurship, noting, for example, that Sebastiano del Piombo was “a brilliant node in which . . . three schools [Venetian, color, Florentine composition, and Raphaellesque technique] converged, each contributing its outstanding qualities” (162).

Magus’s great admiration for these paintings so disturbed his intelligence and avarice, writes Balzac, that “the Jew in him was quite submerged” (165), allowing Madame Cibot to successfully negotiate a generous commission since she’s needed to gain access to this art and to manipulate its owner. Their negotiations, though, are interrupted by the sound of a falling body. It’s Pons, who’s been awakened by the sound of voices in his private museum and who is found by Madame Cibot “stretched full-length on the floor, in a faint” (166). She carries him to bed and tries to awaken him by burning feathers under his nose and rubbing his temples with eau de Cologne. This care of Pons is part of her scheme to steal from him, working hard to

convince him of her maternal love, of how much she's sacrificed to take care of him, of how a nurse would try to take advantage of him, and of how essential, therefore, she is to his well-being—all a stratagem to be included in his will.

When he regains consciousness, she reproaches: "No slippers! Nothing on you but a shirt! You might have caught your death! And why do you distrust me, Monsieur Pons? If that's how things are, it's all over between us" (167). The weak and confused Pons is "full of remorse, admiring the strident devotion of his sick-bed attendant [and] heaping reproaches upon himself" (167). When Schmucke comes to visit Pons, Madame Cibot, needing to hide the true reason Pons left his bed (because someone was in his museum), says that he was out of his mind, that he got out of bed with nothing on and tried to follow her. She converts herself into a heroine who has sacrificed her own health when helping Pons return to bed. "I gave myself such a strain," she recounts, "that I shan't get over it for the end of my days! . . . She clutched the bannisters and lumbered downstairs with a great many contortions and plaintive groans, which startled all the other tenants. . . . The whole house, the whole district, soon heard of Madame Cibot's splendid heroism" (168). When Dr. Poulain treats her "alleged infirmity," his phony miracle cure enhances his reputation throughout the Marais, while she continues to dramatize her suffering, saying the Doctor kept her out of her coffin. All the while she's collecting IOUs from Schmucke for the costs of Pons's medical care, as well as Schmucke's food and rent and other incidentals.

Dr. Poulain has served the poor neighborhood in the Marais without reward, as is evident in his residence, a "flat [that] had undergone no change for forty years; paint, wallpaper and decoration were all redolent of Imperial times. Forty years of grime and smoke had tarnished the mirrors and their frames, the patterns on the wallpaper, the ceilings and the paint" (171). One of Balzac's great skills is this reading of social codes and cues, his recognition of the meanings found in the details of life, in buildings and rooms and clothing and possessions. His descriptions often read as if written by a social historian finding meaning within the overlooked details of daily existence. At times in *Cousin Pons* Balzac seems almost weary with their familiarity, with these inescapable signs of social disadvantage and struggle. "On entering the building," he tells us, "one sensed the respectable poverty which reigned in this dreary flat." There's nothing unusual here, only the all-too-predictable possessions of a lower-class Parisian. As Balzac puts it, "One could guess at the contents of the cupboards: scraps of musty pie, chipped platters, long-serving corks, table-napkins lasting the whole week, in short all the squalid but excusable objects one finds in small Parisian homes, fit only to pass from there into the rag-and-bone merchant's sack" (173). There's nothing distinctive about these residences, just as there's nothing distinctive about their inhabitants with their predictably worn-down appearances, shallow beliefs, crude tastes, and loose morals.

Because most in the lower class long above all for wealth, they equate financial success with talent and intelligence. Thus, Dr. Poulain's lack of distinction and apparent penury have caused people not to "credit him with talent" (172) as a physician. In a culture "where money is the preoccupation of every mind and the topic of every conversation" (173), his poverty has caused the thirty-year-old doctor to remain a bachelor living with his self-sacrificing mother. The seemingly inescapable position he finds himself in has worn away the Doctor's greater ambitions, an existential despair which Balzac describes in terms more common to the Prufrocks and Gregor Samsas of twentieth century literature: "A man shapes himself to his lot and accepts the humdrum nature of life. And so, after ten years in practice, Dr. Poulain still carried on with his Sisyphean labours" (273). Writing at a time when the modern state and the faceless bureaucracy and the impersonal corporation were just developing, Balzac is remarkably prescient about their human consequences, about the routinization and anonymity of the lives of urban professionals: "A briefless junior barrister and a young doctor without patients are the two most notable examples of that respectable despair peculiar to the city of Paris: that mute and cold despair which wears a frock-coat [and] black trousers. . . . An elegiac poem, sombre as the solitary confinement cell in a state prison!" (175).

To escape his prison, Dr. Poulain holds on, barely, to the unlikely dream that he'll cure a rich patient and gain credit enough to "obtain a post as senior doctor in a hospital, as a prison health-officer, as a consultant to the boulevard theaters or to a Civil Service department" (174). This desire led the Doctor to pretend Madame Cibot's ailment was real. To gain renown throughout the district, "he subjected [her] to spurious remedies and a fictitious operation. His efforts were crowned with complete success!" (176). Seeing in him a potential co-conspirator, Madame Cibot visits the good doctor, telling him how much she's sacrificed in the care of Pons and asking him to speak to Pons about adding her to his will. Faced with his resistance, she reminds him that he had committed a crime by accepting a fee for treating a fictitious ailment, so he agrees to her request. And when she suggests that they split the inheritance, Doctor Poulain, rather than resisting, recommends a lawyer, his friend Monsieur Fraasier.

"And here begins the drama," Balzac writes at the end of Chapter 17, "or if you prefer, the terrible comedy of the death of a bachelor delivered . . . by the rapacity of covetous people assembled round his bed. . . [a] comedy, for which the preceding part of the story has served . . . as a curtain-raiser" (181).

Chapter 18-Conclusion

The novel changes in tone at this point, growing ever darker. The focus shifts from detailing Pons's misfortunes to stealing Pons's fortune. It becomes a narrative of con-artists conning each other to get their hands on Pons's art. Pons, meanwhile, remains bedridden, cared for by an innocent Schmucke and a conniving Madame Cibot. To aid in her plan, she visits the new player in this game, the lawyer Fraasier. He resides in "one of those houses inhabited by erstwhile lower-middle-class people. . . . The whole house appeared to be suffering from leprosy" (183). To meet Fraasier, Madame Cibot must climb "The muddy stairs [which] bore the marks of every known trade, strewn as they were with brass chippings, broken buttons, scrapes of gauze and shreds of [course] straw" (183-84). As revolting as the staircase's dirty appearance is the foul smell emanating from it: "the drain into which the household slops were discharged added its quota of nauseous odours to the stairway" (185). At the top of the stairs, she encounters Fraasier's mistress/servant Madame Sauvage, "a woman five feet six inches tall, with the face of a trooper and much more of a beard than Madame Cibot" (185). Alerting us to the moral Hellscape we are entering and in which much of the rest of the novel takes place, Balzac describes her as a "female Cerberus," the hound guarding Hades. And he calls her one of those hags who appears in the painting *Witches Setting out for the Sabbath* (Balzac attributes this painting to the 17th century Dutch artist Adrian Brauwer, but I, without the expertise of a Pons or a Magus, could find no evidence of its existence). Madame Sauvage, whom Balzac calls "Fraasier's half masculine domestic," throws open the door to the lawyer's office, where "boxes smell of the frolics of mice and the floor is grey with dust and the ceiling yellow with smoke" (186). At last we meet Fraasier himself, "a shriveled and sickly looking little man with a red face covered with spots which spoke of impurities in the blood . . . and whose wig, pushed far back on his head, incompletely concealed a sinister-looking, brick-coloured cranium" (186).

Balzac uses an aesthetic of social realism that emphasizes the awful surroundings and physical ill-health of the lower-middle class, conditions which both shape and reflect their characters. While maintaining this aesthetic, though, Balzac creates something of a Gothic atmosphere: a fortune-teller and her curse, a toad, a hell-hound, witches, a half-masculine woman, a shriveled and sinister-looking old man, and a house suffering from leprosy. He continues this sense of morbidity by telling us that "the office reeked so strongly of Fraasier that you might have thought that a pestilence reigned in the very atmosphere" (186) and by having him "taken with what is commonly called a 'churchyard cough'" (188). The many references to disease—Pons's decline, a leprous house, Fraasier's cough—are symptoms of the moral decay that, for Balzac, defines bourgeois Paris.

In his consultation with Madame Cibot, Fraasier emphasizes the risks of trying to acquire Pons's riches against the interests of his powerful relatives, Monsieur and Madame Camusot, the former being the President of the Chamber of Indictment at the Royal Court of Paris, the latter being notoriously vindictive and ambitious, someone "who manages her husband like a child whipping a top." "If you came face to face with her," he warns, "you'd shake in your shoes, just as if you were already at the floor of the scaffold" (190). In attempting to access Pons's wealth, which the Camusots will believe, as blood relatives (however distant) is their own, Madame Cibot risks the guillotine, he tells her, especially since they're desperate for money, having, in the wake of the Fritz fiasco, given away much of their wealth to ensure their daughter's marriage to the son of the finance minister Monsieur Popinot. Even if Madame Cibot were to pursue this wealth on the sly, there's always the possibility of an informer. So she'd be better off, he advises, to take the 30,000 francs he can assure her of, than to pursue Pons's fortune. Although frightened by the image of the guillotine, Madame Cibot, seeing "the venom of an adder" in his glance, realizes that Fraasier himself might be [that] informer" (193).

Madame Cibot's insight is correct. Continuing his use of the Gothic, Balzac tells us that she was "a fly blundering into a spider's web, and she was to remain there, immeshed and entangled—a meal served up for the lawyer's ambition. . . . [He] hoped to draw sustenance for his old age" 195). The feel of Fraasier's hand, to Madame Cibot, is "cold as a serpent's skin." She felt that Madame Fontaine's "toad . . . was less dangerous to handle than this man with his red wig and corncrake voice, this alchemist's vial of poison" (197). She sees through Fraasier's conniving self-interest and attempt to frighten her. Thus, in spite of the skill with which Fraasier spins his web, Madame Cibot, "although she had not recovered from the shock of this consultation and was still terrified at the prospect of the scaffold" (200), disentangles herself and "came to a very natural decision" (199): she needed no additional partners and could feather her own nest.

The first step in her plan is to increase Pons's and Schmucke's indebtedness to her, both as creditor and caregiver, which she does by emphasizing how much care she's thanklessly giving, often in the face of Pons's anger, and by cancelling Schmucke's lessons with music students and Pons's work as conductor and composer at the theater—under the pretense that Schmucke needs to devote his energy to caring for Pons, while Pons is too ill to complete his duties. In reality, she's eliminating the sources of their income in preparation for increasing their financial indebtedness while presenting herself as an "angelic creature rais[ing] her eyes to heaven, so as to show the tears swimming in them" (202). The terror of accumulating debt, of having this fiscal blade dangling above one's neck, is a reminder of the great debt Balzac owed which forced him to write almost obsessively to the detriment of his health. Madame Cibot, though, wants this debt not to loom above but to be disguised from the naïve Schmucke. She, therefore, responds to Pons's accusations against her by saying that these are the product of his illness, his dementia: "He hasn't been in his right mind. . . . He's just raving" (209). Balzac summarizes her plan:

[She] withheld all the payments due to the two friends She had also robbed them of their existence in the eventuality of Pons recovering his health. In a few days time this perfidious manoeuvre was to bring about the desired end: the sale of the pictures coveted by Elias Magus. In order to carry out this initial spoliation, she had to hoodwink the terrible collaborator she had engaged, the advocate Fraasier, and ensure absolute discretion on the part of Magus and Remonencq. (210)

She succeeds in this plan, convincing Schmucke, with a court injunction, that he and Pons must pay thousands of francs owed to her. To do so, Schmucke, ignorant of their true worth, reluctantly agrees to sell some of Pons's paintings, including the four most valuable ones. In turn, Madame Cibot, realizing that once Pons is dead neither Fraasier nor the Camusots nor anyone else will know how many paintings he had, sells these paintings to Magus for a large commission.

At the same time, Remonencq has slowly developed his own plans. Physically attracted to Madame Cibot (an attraction promoted by the likelihood of her becoming wealthy through her Pons plots) and imagining

the two of them managing a lucrative art and curio business, Remonencq begins to fantasize about taking her away from her husband, to live with her in “a sort of bigamous union,” which, Balzac asserts, is “more frequent than one imagines among the lower classes in Paris” (210). The reason for the frequency of bigamy among the lower classes is quite simple. Legalized in 1792 under the Revolutionary government, divorce was made illegal in 1803 under Napoleon, it remained illegal in the 1840s, the time period of the novel, and it would not be finally legalized until 1884. There were, however, forms of judicial separation in cases of adultery or serious violence. But, as A.R. Gillis, Professor Emeritus in Sociology at the University of Toronto, explains, such separations “did not permit remarriage or even infidelity, technically” (1279). Facing these and other obstacles, Remonencq moves from a fantasy of bigamy to something much darker: “wishing for the little tailor’s death. In this way his capital would be almost tripled, and he told himself what an excellent saleswoman La Cibot would make and what a fine figure she would cut in a splendid shop. . . . stock[ed] with the finest articles from the Pons collection” (211). “Regard[ing] this stunted little tailor with his sallow, almost coppery complexion as the only obstacle to happiness,” writes Balzac, “he began to wonder how to get rid of him” (211). While Madame Cibot seems still to have feelings for her husband, Remonencq’s “growing passion filled [her] with pride,” writes Balzac, “for she was reaching the time of life when women begin to realize that it is possible to grow old” (211).

Meanwhile, to plot his own exploitation of Pons, Fraasier, in a new wig and new suit of clothes, meets Madame Camusot. They see in each other an image of themselves. As Balzac puts it: “These two vipers had been hatched from the same egg and recognized their kinship” (226). He confesses to her about his past sins, that as a lawyer in the village of Mantes he had been discovered representing both sides in a legal dispute, a practice he describes as “slightly unprofessional and done in Paris in certain circumstances but which caused him to lose his practice and return to Paris to start over” (228). He then tells her that her “cousin” Pons is deathly ill and that his collection is worth more than 700,000 francs, causing Madame Camusot to regret her mistreatment of him, until Fraasier says she should have no such regrets since this very mistreatment led to his illness, which will lead to his death, which will in turn lead to her inheriting his fortune. “Were it not for that quarrel,” he explains, “he would be as chirpy as a sparrow and would outlive us all,” to which Madame Camusot replies, “The ways of Providence are inscrutable; let us not look into them too closely” (220). They soon come to an agreement. Fraasier will make sure that the Camusots inherit Pons’s fortune, while keeping her and her family removed from these crooked dealings. In return, he will be given a position as justice of the peace in Paris and his friend Dr. Poulain as senior medical officer in a hospital. And they both fantasize about the rewards of this deal: “Fraasier already saw himself as justice of the peace. He looked twice his size. He was filling his lungs with deep draughts of happiness and the balmy breeze of success” (224); “How providential!” thought Madame Camusot. . . . “I shall be rich. Camusot will be elected deputy. . . . What a useful tool [Fraasier] will be!” (225).

To fulfill his role, Fraasier accompanies Magus and Remonencq, led by Madame Cibot, into Pons’s treasure chamber, examining the 1700 objects in his collection, “sniffing around like carrion crows around a corpse” (238). (Pons is asleep, given a double dose of sedative by Cibot). Magus (or in Balzac’s words, “the shabby old Jew” [238]), declares that every object is worth a thousand francs, meaning that the collection is worth 1,700,000 francs but that, given the exigencies of the market, he’d be willing to pay 700,000 francs for it all. Realizing that there are further treasures—snuff boxes, stained glass, miniatures—in Pons’s bedroom, the men sneak in, “three varieties of miser, thirsting for gold just as devils in hell thirst for the dew of paradise” (239), only to hear a suddenly woken Pons crying out, “Thieves! . . . Look at them! . . . Call the police . . . Help! . . . Murder!” (239). Caught in the act, Fraasier tells Pons he’s come because the concerned Camusots want to take him to the country to recover, nursed by Cécile. But Pons is having none of it. “My kind relatives won’t have long to wait for my inheritance,” he responds, “They’ve given me a good nudge forward” (240). Much in the following chapters details the back-and-forth machinations of, on one side, Pons and Schmucke, and on the other Madame Cibot, Magus, Fraasier, and Rémonencq.

Eager to gain Madame Cibot as business and marital partner, Rémonencq plots the demise of her husband by poisoning his herbal tea. He visits Monsieur Cibot every day, soaking a copper disk into his tea while his wife is taking care of Pons. Here's Balzac's explanation of this scheme:

he let the copper disc soak in the liquid, pulling it out by the string as he went away. This slight addition of copper, coated with the deposit commonly known as verdigris, secretly introduced a noxious ingredient into the beneficial decoction, but in such homeopathic proportions as to cause incalculable harm. This criminal homeopathy produced the following results: after three days, poor Cibot's hair started falling out, his teeth trembled in their sockets, and the whole balance of his constitution was upset by these imperceptible doses of poison. (248)

Dr. Poulain suspects "some destructive agent was at work" (248) but, finding no such agent concludes Monsieur Cibot's decline due to lack of exercise and a toxic environment. Or as Balzac has it, "the tailor's blood was in the process of decomposition, and . . . he was suffering from the effects of a sedentary life in a damp lodge, squatting on a table in front of a latticed window, taking no exercise and perpetually inhaling the emanations from a stinking gutter" (249). The rue de Normandie on which sits the residence of Pons and Schmucke and the Cibots "is one of those ancient streets with a runnel down the middle," Balzac explains, "the municipal authorities have installed no street fountains in it, and a noisome gutter sluggishly carries off all the household slops which filter through the cobbles and produce the kind of sludge peculiar to Paris" (249). From the slops excreting onto the staircase at Fraiser's residence to this stinking gutter, Balzac smears the latter pages of the novel with the moral stink of Paris and of his characters as they sniff around Pons's collection. The metaphorical meaning of this waste is made evident when Pons describes the awful workings of the justice system: "You don't know what the Law Courts are like," he complains to Schmucke, "They are the sewers into which all moral infamy is poured" (245).

Rémonencq is a particularly fetid example of Paris's peculiar sludge. While there's a poetic justice—or rather, poetic injustice—to Rémonencq's poisoning Cibot by copper to satisfy his greed, copper's not the murder weapon. Verdigris is. Verdigris is the bluish-green patina that forms on copper due to oxidation. For years, it was used as a pigment in painting. "Verdigris was the most brilliant green readily available to painters," writes Katy Kelleher in the *Paris Review*, "In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, artists commonly manufactured verdigris by hanging copper plates over boiling vinegar and collecting the crust that formed on the metal. This was mixed with binding agents, like egg white or linseed oil, and applied to canvas, paper, or wood." The irony of poisoning by pigment to gain riches from paintings is not noted by Balzac. As a connoisseur, he likely knew of the use of verdigris and of its toxicity since "by the 19th century, verdigris had fallen out of fashion—mostly due to its poisonous nature" (Imbler). If he hadn't known of its toxicity, he might have learned about it from a recent story. In 1843, the British medical journal *The Lancet* reported on a case of verdigris poisoning in the Bourdeaux region of France. An autopsy revealed that a workman who had killed himself had consumed a considerable quantity of verdigris in powdered form, leaving a noticeable green tint in his stomach and intestines. Since apparently he did not vomit out this poison, *The Lancet* concluded that the verdigris was taken in small quantities and thus "the poison was suffered silently to erode the mucus membrane, and gradually to produce the apoplectic phenomena which destroyed life" ("Poisoning").

As he's destroying the life of Monsieur Cibot, Rémonencq is pursuing a life with Madame Cibot, letting her know he wants her to be his wife and that, with the money he's saved and the money she's recently acquired, they can set up a profitable curio shop in a fancier part of the city. And, he tells her, if she marries him, he'll sell the several pieces she's stolen from Pons for much more money than she'll make doing the same: "Look, if you promise to marry me within a year of being a widow, I undertake to get twenty thousand francs for it from Elias Magus. If you won't marry me, you'll never get more than a thousand francs" (273). But Rémonencq's proposal is interrupted, writes Balzac, "by harrowing cries from the little tailor, whose death agony was beginning" (274).

While Monsieur Cibot is dying from verdigris poisoning, Pons, confined to his bed, is dying from complications caused by his fall. These complications are variously explained. He's dying from "vexation, jaundice, liver, not to speak of lots of family worries" (207); he "stumbled from one sickness to another. Since he was of a bilious-sanguine temperament, the bile invaded his bloodstream and he had a violent attack of hepatitis" (114); "the sick man will inevitably contract hardening of the liver; gall-stones are forming at this very moment, and the extraction of them will entail an operation which he will not be able to stand" (222).

Whatever its cause, Pons's nearness to death has changed his priorities. Whereas before "the sight of his beloved pictures, statues, Florentine bronzes and porcelains put new life into him" (242), now, on his deathbed, Pons "had bidden farewell as a Christian to the pomps and vanities of art, to his collection itself, to his love for the creators of so many beautiful things" (256). He has also composed a will, which Fraasier and Madame Cibot have discovered, a will that leaves nothing to the latter, despite her posturing and pleading, leaves an annual annuity to Schmucke, leaves his collection to the Louvre, and, as a final gesture of revenge, leaves a painting of a monkey's head by Goya to Monsieur Camusot. The lawyer Fraasier realizes that they're been defeated in their attempt to contest the will since "they can't go to law against the State!" (268). As a solution, without Madame Cibot seeing him, Fraasier keeps the will and places in its sealed envelope a blank sheet of paper. After Fraasier leaves, Madame Cibot is about to burn what she thinks is the will when she's caught by Pons and Schmucke. With the will in hand, Fraasier knows he's guaranteed his deal with Madame Camusot, for he could expose the will which would deny her her inheritance. But he doesn't know that the next day Pons cancels the first will and makes another in which he leaves all to Schmucke. However, Fraasier is smart enough to arrange for his servant Madame Sauvage to be installed in the Pons flat, replacing Madame Cibot as cook and servant, but most importantly serving as his spy.

While these machinations are going on, Schmucke tries to hold on to Pons. Condemning the self-serving and deceitful and greedy society of bourgeois Paris, Balzac presents us with one exception, one relationship built on honesty and genuine affection: the bond between Pons and Schmucke. This bond is broken when, at last, Pons dies. But Schmucke literally can't let go, having to be told to let go of his friend's hand since "if a dead man isn't got ready while he's still warm you have to break his limbs later on" (282). "The grief he felt at seeing his friend packed up like a bale of goods," writes Balzac, "was enough to deprive him of all capacity to think. . . . this man was Pons, his only friend, the only person who had understood him and loved him" (282). Balzac further documents Schmucke's grief:

Having sunk into an almost cataleptic condition, he could not take his spellbound gaze from Pons's face, which was now softening into purer lines in the absolute repose of death. He himself longed to die; nothing else mattered now. . . . The priest found Schmucke lying alongside his friend on the bed and holding him in a tight embrace. The authority of religion was needed to separate Schmucke from the corpse. (284-85)

Schmucke is also overwhelmed by the various schemers and salesmen who attempt to exploit his grief. Balzac gives us the context for this exploitation:

In former times all the contractors for funeral monuments clustered around the famous cemetery of Père-Lachaise, where they occupied a whole street which would well merit the name of "Tombstone Street" and rushed at inheritors as they were standing round the grave or leaving the churchyard. But little by little the spirit of competition and speculation has enabled them to gain ground, and today they have swarmed down into residential areas. . . . Moreover, their representatives often worm their way into the homes of the bereaved with a design for a monument in their hands. (288)

The Père-Lachaise cemetery, on 110 acres in Paris, opened in 1804, and was the first large urban garden cemetery; it influenced the construction of urban cemeteries in Western Europe and North America. Its development occurred in response to fears of contagion from mass burials (most of the dead in Paris had been buried within “a mass grave adjacent to their parish church” [Legacey 20], from a lack of space within church gravesites, and from Revolution-era anti-clericalism. To this need for newer burial sites, explains Erin-Marie Legacey, Associate History Professor at Northwestern University, “revolutionaries added conceptual concerns, including the role of religion, the tension between equality and hierarchy, and the place of the past in Paris’s new spaces for the dead” (19). In one notorious instance, as part of the Revolution’s attempt to de-Christianize the nation, a law was passed in the city of Nevers that required a sign be posted at the city’s cemetery saying “Death is an eternal sleep,” while the funeral shrouds on corpses were to be painted with an “image of sleep” (Legacey 36) instead of the usual Christian images and inscriptions.

Although proposed, no such restrictions were forced upon the Père-Lachaise cemetery. Its design was influenced by the 18th century English landscape garden, especially those laid out by the landscape architect “Capability” Brown, with their natural rather than formal settings which included occasional constructed



Père-Lachaise cemetery, Paris ([Explore France](#)).

features: pavilions, temples, monuments, grottoes, rotundas, statues, etc. These parks suited the Romantic spirit of the early 19th century. (Now, though, Père-Lachaise looks less like a garden than a crowded necropolis interrupted by inconveniently planted trees.) As a municipal facility open to all, rather than a church space restricted by religion, Père-Lachaise (and the other municipal cemeteries that would follow) presented a means of remembering and honoring the deceased in ways not available in church graveyards. The elaborate headstones and memorials and tombs could be, in effect, a status symbol, an assertion of a family’s wealth and position. And these often rendered a literal embodiment of the bourgeois way of life. According to Thomas Laqueur, History Professor Emeritus at the University of California,

The communal place of the Christian dead gave way to the bourgeois space of the cemetery. . . . In the new cemeteries, the living came to imagine their dead selves and their loved ones in “a cool sweet grave” quietly slumbering. . . . The dead needed the same amenities as the living might want for themselves: graves with all the privacy, comfort, and honor of bourgeois life; a comfortable bed in quiet surroundings far from noise and hubbub, where they could be cared for and rest undisturbed. (216-17)

Balzac notes that the mortuary business, initially located next to the cemetery, spread out to other parts of the city to prey more directly on the grieving: "Almost all those who lose their fathers, mothers, wives or children are immediately pounced upon by funeral touts who batten upon their distress by bullying them into giving an order" (288). For instance, a dealer in burial plots tells Schmucke he should show proper respect for Pons's memory by sparing no expense on his memorial: "Monsieur Pons was such a lover of the arts! It would be a great pity not to put three full-length weeping figures on his monument, representing Music, Painting, and Scripture" (287). We learn later that this particular monument is a repurposing of a pre-existing design made for a Prime Minister (with the three figures representing the three days of the July Revolution of 1830, which was rejected, then transformed into the figures of Army, Finance, and Family for a deceased banker, also rejected, and now transformed, in honor of Pons, into Music, Sculpture, and Painting). Sculpted from marble, this monument will cost twelve thousand francs. A coffin maker presents his offerings to Schmucke: "Deal, oak, or oak with lead lining? Oak with lead lining is what most people think proper" (292). In response, "Schmucke gave the man the sort of look a madman gives before he launches an attack" (292). Schmucke is also accosted by a young man in black who exclaims, "we are indebted to Dr. Gannal for a wonderful discovery. . . . he has renewed the miracles performed in ancient Egypt. . . . so, if you wish to see your friend once more as he was in life. . . . the power of speech alone will be lacking. . . . But he will remain for eternity as you see him after the embalming process" (290). The man Balzac refers to is Jean-Nicholas Gannal, a well-known industrial chemist who in the late 1830s developed an improved method of embalming which injected preservatives into a corpse's arteries. Pons responds angrily to this offer: "Go to ze Tefil! It iss Pons's soul zed matters, unt hiss soul iss in Hefen" (291), causing the embalming salesman to loudly protest and causing Madame Cibot, who has had her deceased husband emblamed, to assert, "He's coming into money. . . . Once they've made their bit, death doesn't mean a thing to him and his like" (291).

The appeal this man makes is based on the assumption that in preserving the body one may preserve the connection between living and dead. Trying to maintain this bond, briefly in early 19th century France some parents of deceased children would preserve them within a glass coffin which they would keep in their home. The naturalist Pierre Boitard, who wrote a prehistoric novel titled *Paris before Man* and who gave the Tasmanian devil its taxonomical name "Sarcophilus harrisii, or Harris's flesh-lover," after Lieutenant G. Harris who had first described the new species, explains the appeal of this practice:

The feeling guiding a family when it was determined to embalm one of its members. . . . was sometimes pride, but more often affection. . . . One could not get separated from a cherished object, but rather rescue it from the tombstone's void to keep watching, talking to and loving it. One would be pleased to keep wishful thinking, reanimate through thought those insensitive remains, to awaken them with love, to return them the affective sensitivity of memories. . . . As a result, embalmers would often be imposed to not let the face be covered, to not open it, to not separate any parts from the body, and finally to preserve the face, as much as possible, with the appearance of life. (qtd. in Carol, 185).

There's no embalming or glass coffin for Pons or any other fancy options thanks to the appearance of Topinard, who worked at the theater, the only person who has come to Pons's residence upon word of his death, remembering that Pons, who knew he had a family to support, gave him an extra five francs each month. He, therefore, seeks now to protect Schmucke from being a victim of the French way of death and the French legal system, "promis[ing] himself that he would protect the unsuspecting musician from any other traps which might be set for him" (305). Seeing his interference in this process, Madame Sauvage, who has been offered a commission from these funerary peddlers, identifies Topinard to Fraasier as a "sort of righteous busy body who proposes to poke his nose into Monsieur Schmucke's affairs" (306). Topinard is also the only person other than Schmucke to attend Pons's funeral, unlike the large crowd which attends the funeral of Monsieur Cibot. Topinard's attempt to help Schmucke hold onto the fortune left him by Pons, though, is thwarted by his employer who has been warned of Topinard's actions by one of the

theater's investors, Monsieur Popinot, father-in-law to the newly married Cecilé Camusot. Says Gaudissart, theater manager-director, "You would certainly lose your post here if you meddled in the concerns of the worthy Monsieur Schmucke. . . . I urge you to leave this worthy German to muddle along by himself" (309).

And muddle along he does. When Fraasier, pressuring Schmucke to give up his inheritance, threatens to have him evicted because the lease was in Pons's name only, Schmucke doesn't fight back. Instead, he moves in with Topinard and his family "in one of these frightful slums which must be called the plague-spots of Paris," writes Balzac, where "dwells the factory population, intelligent in its use of its hands, but with no intelligence to spare for other things" (317). Topinard, his wife, and their three children live in a sixth floor apartment with a kitchen and two bedrooms: "The children's bedroom, across which clothes-lines were stretched, was gaudy with theatre-posters and prints cut out of newspaper" and the parents' bedroom was a private sanctuary in which the children were not allowed (318).

Climbing to the sixth floor, "Schmucke was so steeped in his grief that he was not even aware whether he was going up or down" (319). As he is introduced to the family, Schmucke notices Topinard's five-year-old daughter who reminds him of a little German girl and hence of his own uncomplicated past. Schmucke is given the attic, which will require the purchase of a bed, mattresses, a wash basin, etc., which neither the Topinards nor Schmucke can afford. So Schmucke approaches Monsieur Gaudissart, the theater manager, who realizes he will prosper, may even become Councillor of State someday, if he can arrange an immediate settlement between Schmucke and the Camusots. Gaudissart runs down all of Schmucke's regular expenses in order to agree upon a settlement. But all Schmucke says he wants is money to buy his immediate necessities and an annual annuity for Topinard and for his daughter. Schmucke explains: "Zere is only von man who has vept viz me for Pons. He hass a lofely girl vis vonterful hair. Ven I lookt at her I sought I was lookinik on the tchenius of my Vaterlant. I shoulte nefer haf left it . . . Paris is not kint to Tchermans. . . ." As he said this (not my invention, the German accent appears in my translation of *Cousin Pons*) he gave the wise little nod of a man who has got to the heart of things in this sad world" (322). Although Topinard wishes to resolve Schmucke's jam, Schmucke himself makes no attempt to defend the will that made him sole heir. These legal affairs are alien to him, especially as a German, and they are expensive. But the main reason he refuses to fight is that Pons's death has destroyed him. Thus, he surrenders the will to Pons's fortune and his own will to live, repeatedly saying he is going to die. He lives up to this prediction and is "given a quiet burial beside Pons, through the offices of Topinard; he alone walked behind the hearse of this son of Germany" (331).

Near the end of the novel, Balzac notes that some complain that historians of manners overlook the intervention of Providence in human affairs. As a historian of manners, Balzac is guilty of this charge. There's no providential ending here, nothing to suggest, as we so often see in Victorian novels, some version of the good being rewarded and the bad being punished. Balzac asserts in *Cousin Bette* and *Cousin Pons* that it's not providence but character which is "the main driving force in society" (331). By "character," I assume he means the way someone thinks and behaves, their moral identity. The novel's few good characters—Pons, Schmucke, and Topinard—suffer, as does one of its bad characters, Rémonencq. But other bad characters, especially those with access to money and power—Fraasier and Madame Camusot—thrive and prosper, as seems inevitable in the degraded bourgeois Paris whose immorality Balzac so finely dissects.

Denied by Fraasier any new commissions from Pons's fortune, her husband deceased, the few items she stole from Pons sold for her by Rémonencq, Madame Cibot has not, as she planned, moved to the country. Instead, she and her new husband Rémonencq operate an antiques shop in a good part of town, on the Boulevard de la Madeleine, which, by the way, in the 1960s was both the title of an album and a song by the Moody Blues who sang, "There's no girl standing there / And there's no one who cares / And the trees are so bare / On the boulevard de la Madeleine." This boulevard is an equally sad setting for Madame and Monsieur Rémonencq, for he has devised a marriage contract in which all possessions go to the surviving

partner. Consequently, counting on a mishap, he leaves a liquor glass filled with a poisonous substance, “vitriol,” probably copper sulfate, whose “lethal dose can be as small as 10 grams” (Gamakaranage, et al.). But Madame Rémonencq, formerly Madame Cibot, presumably recognizing this ploy, “with the best intentions in the world,” writes an ironic Balzac, “moved it to another spot . . . Rémonencq drank it” and died (333). While it seems that Madame Cibot, inheriting Rémonencq’s wealth, goes unpunished, we should remember part of her predicted future: “you will be murdered for your reputed fortune—murdered by two escaped convicts.”

It seems, then, that some of the immoral, thieving characters suffer but only those who are of the working class. In *Cousin Pons*, those with money, with power, with some connection to the upper class, prosper. They have the skill and connections and influence to avoid the consequences of their actions. Dr. Poulain becomes chief medical officer for the Hospital of the Blind. The lawyer Fraisier becomes a justice of the peace after arranging that the Camusots inherit Pons’s collection and then arranging the sale of this collection to Magus. Monsieur Camusot, due to this newly acquired wealth, becomes a member of the Chamber of Deputies. The law at the time actually required that deputies be wealthy. As Patrick and Trevor Higgonnet explain, “all deputies were perforce fairly rich men, since the law defined as eligible for election only those who paid at least 500 francs in property taxes. . . . it is useful to recall that a tax of 500 francs represented an unearned income of 2500 to 5000 francs when the average annual wage of a worker was at best 750 francs” (210). Balzac points out throughout the novel how thoroughly the French political and legal establishment during the July Monarchy was corrupted by money and how this corruption flowed down to the lower classes. A culture so corrupted by money, of course, can’t acknowledge its corrupt nature and so denies this nature by adhering to disingenuous social codes, as in Madame Camusot’s public repudiation of Pons. This insincerity is plain to see in her statements about Pons, the man whose life she destroyed, after he’s deceased and she’s benefitted from his riches: “He was a charming man. . . . full of wit, eccentric, but a man of great feeling” (332).

The few good people in the novel are not similarly rewarded. The decent Topinard, recognized by Schmucke as the only other person who loved Pons, and his daughter who reminded Schmucke of a German girl, have received small annuities, the only stipulation Schmucke required in agreeing to transfer Pons’s art to the Camusots. Nonetheless, watching the honest but broken-spirited Schmucke suffer, learning that his society is inescapably corrupt, recognizing his own powerlessness, and seeing the immoral triumph, Topinard lives a different, a disillusioned life. He “has become sombre, misanthropic, and laconic” and he is “relegated to below stage activities in a boulevard theatre” (333). The novel’s two principal characters, the unoffending Pons and the humble and loving Schmucke, of course, are dead, their spirits killed by others’ greed long before their bodies gave way.

On August 19, 1850, four years after finishing *Cousin Pons*, his last major work, Balzac died at age 51. Overweight, experiencing shortness of breath, his legs swollen with fluid and marked by abscesses, Balzac knew his death was imminent. The novelist Victor Hugo, who had already published *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* but wouldn’t publish *Les Misérables* for another dozen years, visited Balzac the day before he died. He attributed Balzac’s death to gangrene (“Death”). Others have suggested renal failure. Popular myth says he died from excessive consumption of caffeine. More recently scholars have suggested that all of these were contributing factors to his death from congestive heart failure (Perciaccante, et al, 933) Balzac was buried where Pons and Schmucke were buried, Père-Lachaise cemetery, which Thomas Laqueur sees as “a genuinely new and spectacularly versatile stage for the work of the dead in the making of memory and community and the recollection of a history” (213). Balzac was memorialized in the method Schmucke rejected, with an expensive mausoleum and a striking monument, a tall plinth topped by an heroic bust.

At Balzac’s funeral Victor Hugo declared, “All his books form but one book,—a book living, luminous, profound, where one sees coming and going and marching and moving, with I know not what of the formidable and terrible, mixed with the real, all our contemporary civilization;—a marvelous book which the

poet entitled ‘a comedy’ and which he could have called history” (“Honoré”). Although hugely successful and critically acclaimed as one of the founders of the realistic novel, admired by writers ranging from Gustave Flaubert to William Faulkner, and having inspired at least forty motion pictures, Balzac’s fiction is little taught, unknown to most English-speaking readers, and barely known to non-French literary scholars who, at best, may have read one or at most two of his novels. As Morris Dickstein, Professor Emeritus of English at the City University of New York correctly (and sadly) concluded, “Out of the more than ninety novels that make up the so-called Human Comedy of Honoré de Balzac, only a handful are still widely read or assigned in schools, at least in the Anglo-American world: *Père Goriot*, *Eugénie Grandet*, *Lost Illusions*, perhaps *Cousin Bette*” (vii).

Balzac’s place in the publishing industry has similarly declined. Penguin and Oxford continue to publish several of his works, although the Penguin paperback edition of *Cousin Pons* I’ve relied on, its yellowed pages falling out, was published in 1968 and is now out-of-print. One can find digital copies of his works through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive and uncorrected and unedited republications of earlier editions through Amazon. If you’re lucky enough to have access to a university library, as I do, you may be able to read some of his more obscure titles. Otherwise, his less well-known books are difficult to find (besides Oxford and Penguin, the Balzac titles I own come from the publishing arm of the *New York Review of Books*, W.W. Norton, Carroll & Graff, and Northwestern University Press). It’s surprising that more university presses haven’t compensated for the diminishing availability of Balzac’s works from commercial publishing houses. One would think that for its literary importance and its value as documents of 19th century France, not to mention its appeal to current scholarly interests in gender and class, Balzac’s fiction would demand more attention from scholars. Sadly, the most recent complete English language translation of the *Comédie Humaine*, edited by the literary critic George Saintsbury and translated by three women, Ellen Marriage, Rachel Scott, and the remarkable Clara Bell, who was fluent in French, German, Danish, Dutch, Italian, Norwegian, Russian, and Spanish, was published more than a century ago. In whatever trifling way, therefore, I hope my podcast can bring attention to Balzac’s work and help keep it from suffering the fate of Sylvian Pons’s once admired songs, what Balzac refers to as “the well-known ballads that our mothers used to warble” (23).

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