

Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Bette*

Part One

Introduction

We now, at last, journey from Britain to the continent. It's 1846. Luckily, a rail line, the South Eastern Railroad, running from London to the port cities of Dover and Folkestone, was completed two years ago. Departing from London Bridge station, we arrive in Folkestone in an hour ("South"), from where just last year the rail company started operating the South Eastern and Continental Steam Packet Company ("About"), offering passengers reduced rates for a combined sea and rail ticket (Sennicle, "South"), fares depending on whether passengers want a cabin or a deck seat and whether they are adults, children, or servants (Sennicle, "Packet"). After a channel crossing of two to three hours (Allen), in a small boat crowded with 300 passengers (Jay 52), we arrive in the French town of Boulogne-sur-mer. (For those of you who have listened to earlier episodes, this is the same town which Lady Isabel Vane retired to for her health and where she encountered the arch-seducer Francis Levison in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*.)



Departure of the Folkestone Steamer (1869), by Édouard Manet

Once on shore and having passed through customs, we find our journey slowed: in 1846 there are no railway lines from either Boulogne or Calais to Paris. France's dilatory construction of a rail system had many causes, particularly its slow-developing industrialization, its ineffective banking system, its notably sclerotic bureaucracy, and a late-1830s economic depression. In 1848, there were only 1092 miles of rail in France (Baxter 569), compared to more than 4000 miles in Britain (Shaw-Taylor and You). "By the end of 1851," writes 19th century British economist R. Dudley, "France had opened 2,124 miles, against 6,889 opened in the United Kingdom" (569). Thus, for the final leg of our journey, we must travel the 172 miles to Paris in a horse-drawn carriage, spending nights in inns along the way. At the time, the main such conveyance was a "diligence coach." The English barrister and travel writer John Carr, in his 1803 book *The Stranger in France*, describes this conveyance:

A more uncouth clumsy machine can scarcely be imagined. . . . The inside, which is capacious, and lofty, and will hold six people with great comfort, is lined with leather padded [sic], and surrounded with little pockets, in which the travellers deposit their bread, snuff, night caps, and pocket handkerchiefs, which generally enjoy each others [sic] company in the same delicate depository. From the roof depends a large net work, which is generally crowded with hats, swords, and band boxes, the whole is convenient, and when all parties are seated and arranged, the accommodations are by no means unpleasant.

The roof . . . is generally filled with six or seven persons more, and a heap of luggage, which . . . generally presents a pile, half as high again as the coach, which is secured by ropes and chains. . . . The body of the carriage rests upon large thongs of leather, fastened to heavy blocks of wood, instead of springs, and the whole is drawn by seven horses. . . . With a long lash whip in his hand . . . the merry postilion . . . can reanimate by a touch, each halting muscle of his lagging animals, can cut off an annoying fly, and with the loud cracking of its thong, he announces, upon his entrance into a town, the approach of his heavy, and clattering cavalcade.



A French Diligence of 1830, by Charles Cooper Henderson

It's difficult to estimate the duration of a carriage ride from Boulogne to Paris. In 1828, it took Honoré de Balzac four days to travel the two hundred miles from Paris to Fourgoures in Brittany (Robb 145). The time for such a trip could be affected by weather and road conditions (although the main roadways in France—with “solid foundations, hard surfaces, [and] effective drainage” [Pinkney 52]—were some of the finest in Europe). David Pinkney, emeritus History Professor at the University of Washington, asserts that stagecoach travel from Calais to Paris took about 28 hours (53), while Elisabeth Jay, Professor of English and Assistant Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Oxford Brookes University, tells us that “Since direct rail connections [in France] remained scanty, this latter part of the journey could . . . take anything between 24.5 and 39 hours” (52). At best, then, we arrive in Paris 30 hours after leaving London. No wonder that, according to Jay, “The journey between the two capitals was sufficiently arduous to sear itself on the imagination [of British travelers] as an essential element of the Parisian experience” (51).

Travel times would be shortened considerably by the railroad, stagecoaches at best reaching six miles per hour, locomotives 30 (Pinkney 52), reducing the Boulogne to Paris journey from 33 to 5 hours. Charles Dickens, making this journey in 1851 and able to travel from Boulogne to Paris by train, expressed his

astonishment at the speed of modern travel: “So, I pass to my hotel, enchanted; sup, enchanted; go to bed, enchanted; pushing back this morning (if it really were this morning) into the remoteness of time, blessing the South Eastern Company for realising the Arabian Nights in these prose days, murmuring, as I wing my idle flight into the land of dreams, ‘No hurry, ladies and gentlemen, going to Paris [from London] in eleven hours. It is so well done’” (533).

In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo describes a carriage such ours as it lumbers through the Paris streets: “some huge vehicle, painted yellow and black, heavily loaded, noisily harnessed, distorted with mails, awnings, and valises, full of heads that were constantly disappearing, grinding the curbstones, turning the pavements into flints, rushed through the crowd, throwing out sparks like a forge, with dust for smoke, and an air of fury” (141).

Once in Paris, we leave our diligence and hire a fiacre, a four-wheeled horse carriage with driver, or if we want to save money we hop aboard a horse-drawn omnibus, a large carriage with room for 12 to 18 passengers (“Transport”), “the first vehicle of mass transit in Paris” which would remain a feature on Parisian streets into the early 20th century (Belenky 2). We are headed for 19 Rue Basse (now 47 Rue Raynouard), on the Right Bank of the Seine, in the Passy neighborhood, about a half a mile from the Eiffel Tower, which we can’t see because, of course, it won’t be built for another 40 years.

The Paris on whose cobblestone streets our carriage cavorts is quite different from the Paris of the popular imagination, an old city that will be demolished and built anew, beginning in 1850. According to the author and journalist Jess McHugh, the architect Baron Haussmann tore “open what had been a dark maze of a city . . . replacing it with light, uniform modernity. He tore down nineteen thousand buildings, including thousands of homes constructed in the medieval era. In their place he erected thirty-four thousand new buildings, twenty-seven parks . . . eighty-five miles of new boulevards.” But we are in the old Paris, where we see “blood running from the slaughterhouses, the squalid living conditions of the poor, and . . . raw sewage glistening in the streets” (McHugh). Visiting in 1851, Dickens saw “all these high houses, all these haggard-looking wine shops, all these billiard tables, all these stocking-makers with flat red or yellow legs of wood for sign-board, all these fuel shops with stacks of billets painted outside, and real billets sawing in the gutter, all these dirty corners of streets, all these cabinet pictures over dark doorways representing discreet matrons nursing babies” (532).

Even before Haussmann deconstructed this old Paris, the city had begun to change, as one would expect of a town being industrialized and experiencing rapid population growth, doubling from the beginning of the century to 1848, when for the first time it topped one million residents (“Ville”). However modest, these changes made Balzac mourn for what was being lost through greater population density and the consequent surge in cheap and shabby construction, as detailed by Balzac biographer Graham Robb: “Yellow plaster tenements were springing up, ceilings were being lowered, gardens obliterated, the wall of private life demolished. Picturesque trades were becoming extinct, and even the ‘unspeakable horrors’ of prostitution that had fascinated the adolescent Balzac [and had inspired many of Dickens’s travels to Paris] were being brought under official control” (393). Yet whether the filthy medieval city or the slowly modernizing one, a city without its now landmark broad boulevards and attractive cream-colored apartments, Paris had the power to charm, Dickens admiring “The crowds in the streets, the lights in the shops and balconies, the elegance, variety, and beauty of their decorations, the number of the theatres, the brilliant cafés with their windows thrown up high and their vivacious groups at little tables on the pavement, the light and glitter of the houses turned as it were inside out” (533).

Passing these pleasant diversions, we arrive at our destination. We’re on the outskirts of Paris, in Passy, a small town with a cotton mill and a sugar beet refinery (“Delessert”), with a spa and springs to which wintering wealthy English ladies and gentleman come, a township (or in administrative French, a “commune”) of, in 1841, 4,545 inhabitants living in houses scattered among fields (“Passy”). In one such

modest house, now a museum next to the Turkish embassy and across the street from a Pizza Hut, we will find the novelist Honoré de Balzac. Due to long-standing debt that began with investment in a failed printing venture (Robb 126) and was exacerbated by a luxuriant lifestyle, there's no such name on a doorplate, no evidence that the renowned author lives here. He is, in fact, living under an assumed name to avoid creditors, requiring guests to identify themselves with a series of passwords. This precaution predated his current situation. A decade earlier, writes Robb, "Callers were required to memorize a series of passwords: 'Plums are now in season' placated the concierge; in the hall, 'I bring some Belgian lace,' whispered to the servant, and finally, to the maid, 'Mme. Bertand is in good health'" (264).

If we manage to bypass this home security, we will discover what the Romantic poet and novelist Gerard de Nerval called an "upside down" house (Robb 343). Upon entry, we are in a one-story house but as we walk further inside we discover that we are on the second story: there is a floor below us. In other words, this house is a kind of split-level built on a hillside that declines to the Seine. Balzac resides on the upper level, which provides him a particular advantage: the house has both a front and rear exit, the latter hidden from the street and accessible via a private stairway, a feature useful for fleeing from debt collectors (Maurois 388).

At last, we approach Balzac's study. The journalist Felix Solar recounts his entrance into this sanctuary: "the first thing I saw was an enormous bust of [Balzac], a magnificent work in the finest marble, standing on a pedestal. . . . A glass-paned door, giving on to a small garden . . . lighted the room, of which the walls were covered with pictures without frames and frames without pictures. . . . There [were two] bookcase[s]. . . . In the middle of the room was a small table, the writing-table no doubt, on which lay a single volume—a French dictionary" (qtd. in Robb 389). Robb fills in the remaining details: "the study . . . had an oak-ceiling, a red carpet, and walls covered in red velvet with vertical bands of black silk" (343).



[Maison de Balzac](#)



[Balzac's Study](#)

If we're lucky, we'll encounter the man himself, standing at his writing desk, scribbling intensely and drinking a cup of coffee. We're most likely to meet him there if we've arrived late at night, for Balzac's habit was to begin writing at midnight and conclude by six or eight AM, although he would often take more time, writing for as much as eighteen hours straight, novelist and biographer Andre Maurois describing him as "the hermit of Passy, who could turn out a novel in twenty days, living without sleep in a sea of proofs and printer's ink" (395). Or as he wrote to a family friend in the midst of one creative frenzy: "I have not left my desk for a month. . . . I live under the harshest of despotisms, that which we inflict on ourselves. I work day and night. . . . No amusements. . . . I'm a galley slave of pen and ink" (qtd. in Maurois 194).

Hence the cup of coffee in his hand. According to legend, Balzac was an epic coffee-drinker, supposedly downing as many as fifty cups a day. The journalist Victor Ratier watched Balzac at work, describing him as “dining invariably on consommé, a steak and a salad, with a glass of water, followed by a whole string of cups of coffee” (qtd. in Robb 164). But we should be skeptical about the 50-cup figure. For one thing, Balzac wasn’t drinking Starbucks *ventis*. Most likely, he was drinking coffee from a demitasse. Additionally, there seems to be no direct source for the 50-cups-a-day claim. In his biography of Balzac, the novelist V.S. Pritchett estimates that Balzac consumed 50,000 cups of coffee in his lifetime (111), which might have metastasized into the 50-cups-a-day legend, which Freddie Moore, a freelance writer, averages to a mere 4-5 cups a day. We do know that Balzac was something of a coffee snob, Robb explaining that “Balzac’s special blend of coffee required a visit to several Parisian grocers and half a day’s shopping” (206), and Pritchett saying he “brewed the strongest black coffee he could find, made from the beans of Bourbon, Martinique, and Mocha” (111).

At last, we turn to the artist himself, attired in his ritual writing apparel—a white monastic robe (Robb 176). For someone whose literary achievement is so great, his presence, even in this striking garment, is decidedly unprepossessing. He’s about 5 foot 2, rotund, with a huge head, one woman remembering that “when he took off his hat, everything else disappeared”: he had ‘a broad forehead which, even in the daytime, seemed to reflect the light of a lamp,’ [and] ‘an enormous mouth, always laughing in spite of its dreadful teeth’” (qtd. in Robb 148). Thanks to a life of indulgence and sleep deprivation, he looks much older than 47. His physician diagnosed him with “An old heart complaint, frequently aggravated by working through the night and by the use or rather the abuse of coffee” (qtd. in Robb 401). Despite physical ailments and financial woes and despair over his own and what he sees as French civilization’s decline, Balzac is writing the final installment of the serially published *Cousin Bette*, which, along with the novel *Cousin Pons* which he is writing concurrently, will be the last works he completes in his *Comédie Humaine*, a vast assortment of more than 90 novels, plus short stories, documenting French society in the first decades of the 19th century. So let’s leave this berobed wizard to luxuriate in what he describes as “the wild delight of . . . invention, with its flower-like colours and perfumes and the sweet-tasting juices of a fruit savoured in anticipation.” “Conceiving a beautiful work of art,” he exults, “is like smoking magic cigars” (qtd. in *Cousin* 218). Exiting this cloudy world of creation, we enter his imagined world, stepping not into Paris of 1846 but Paris, as Balzac places us in the novel’s opening sentence, “towards the middle of July in the year 1838” (5).

Chapters 1-17

The novel begins with the arrival—by private carriage “at the door of a large house recently built on a section of the courtyard of an old mansion” (5)—of Celestin Crevel, a pear-shaped 52-year-old man wearing the Legion of Honor on the uniform of a captain of the National Guard, a citizen militia who “paid for their own arms and uniforms which they kept at home, turning out for duty when summoned as well as reporting as often as once a month for guard duty. . . . some elite companies . . . dressed in special uniforms including tall bearskins reminiscent of Napoleon’s old guard” (James). He has come to the home of “Monsieur le Baron Hulot d’Ervy, Commissary-in-Chief under the Republic, former Intendant-General of the army [in Spain] and at that time head of one of the most important departments of the War Ministry” (6). That a middle-aged man wears a kind of toy-soldier uniform and the other once served as head auditor of the French army in Spain and continues to serve the War Ministry demonstrates the persistence of martial ranks and honors and of a substantial military bureaucracy thirteen years after Napoleon’s exile, even to the point of farce. As Northwestern University Professor of History Sara Maza explains, “Crevel commanded a ceremonial company of rich urban commoners whose main function besides the occasional maintenance of order was showing off to each other in their expensive pseudo-military get-ups” (22).

In Crevel and Baron Hulot, we see much of this laughable display of male vanity and superficial demonstration of male power. What Balzac emphasizes about these two men, though, is their difference,

Crevel a member of the bourgeoisie, Baron Hulot the nobility. However, the latter designation can be confusing. What does it mean to be a noble in the slowly democratizing France of the 1830s? The French nobility had existed as a distinct hereditary class from the Middle Ages to its abolition in 1790 during the Revolution. It was revived in 1808 with the rewarding of noble titles, but without noble privileges, under Napoleon's reign. The return of the monarchy in 1815 brought with it a return of the nobility, the Royal Charter under Louis XVIII specifying that "the new [i.e., Napoleonic] nobility keeps its titles and the old nobility regains its titles. The king creates nobles at will, but he grants them only ranks and honors" (qtd. in Velde). While new nobles received neither money nor land, established nobles were compensated for lands confiscated during the Revolution (Popkin 87). And they retained substantial wealth: it's estimated that "60 percent of the richest 670 families in France in the 1820s were Ancien Régime aristocrats, including 90 percent of the 500 richest landowners" (Magraw 26). Not the elite of the Ancien Régime, both Baron Hulot and his brother Count Hulot acquired their titles for service to the Emperor. Baron Hulot "called himself d'Ervy, the name of his birthplace, so as to be distinguished from his brother, the famous General Hulot" (6). But adding his birthplace to his name with the "nobiliary particule" "de" is also meant to emphasize his noble status, to suggest a connection to the established nobility.

Honoré de Balzac himself, born Honoré Balzac, added this affectation, following the lead of his father who had changed his surname from Balssa to the more aristocratic-sounding Balzac (Robb 4). His father had also jokingly suggested that the family was descended from "the ancient knightly family of Balzac d'Entragues" (Zweig 2), an assertion his son took to heart. "Books, furniture, ornaments, china, watches, writing-paper and seals, even the door-panels, cushions and drivers seat of the coach he later acquired," explains Robb, "were emblazoned with the Entragues coat-of-arms" (168). While Balzac's fabrication of a noble lineage seems comically self-aggrandizing, it was not uncommon for "commoners," especially members of the rising middle-class, to add the nobiliary particule to their name. "The adoption of the particule (de)," writes Roger Price, History professor at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, "gave at least the appearance of nobility. However, the pretension to nobility was more important than the legal validity of titles. Those bourgeois families who . . . add[ed] the particule and the name of a place to their patronyms were determined to adopt the opinions and life-style of their chosen class" (103-4). This family rebranding through a "nobiliary particule" such as "de" occurred elsewhere in Europe: "von" in Germany and Austria (as in the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck), and "de" in Spain and Portugal (as in the conquistador Hernando de Soto). This device usually referred to a geographical location long associated with a family; however, in Portugal it could also refer to a nickname, as in the son of the 13th century King Alfonso X. Born with a prominent hairy mole, he was named Fernando de la Cerda—"Fernando of the Bristle" ("Nobiliary"). Likewise, the "di" (or "de" or "da") in Italy could refer to a placename (as in Leonardo da Vinci—of the town of Vinci), a father's name, a nickname, or a profession, as in another Leonardo: "Leonardo DiCaprio," a surname derived either from the Latin word for goat or the Greek word for wild boar, thus either an occupational name (goatherd or swineherd) or "or a nickname for someone thought to resemble a goat or boar" ("DiCaprio").

Unlike Baron Hulot, his antagonist Celestin Crevel, who self-deprecatingly describes himself as "a grocer, a shopkeeper, a former dealer in almond paste, Portuguese water, and cephalic oil" (11), has not affected a noble lineage through the Napoleonic awarding of titles or the appropriation of the noble particule. Yet Madame Adeline Hulot responds anxiously to his arrival, "jump[ing] up as if she had received an electric shock," while her daughter Hortense respectfully "dropp[ed] a graceful curtsy to [him]" (6). Madame Hulot's response to his appearance is due not to his noble but to his financial stature, an increasing concern for the declining Hulot family. In their home Crevel sees clear evidence of their monetary struggles: "silk curtains which had been red but were now faded violet by the sun and worn threadbare at the folds by long use . . . a carpet whose colours had vanished . . . chairs which had lost their gilt and whose stained silk covers were worn out in strips" (8). Crevel is here at Madame Hulot's invitation to discuss his interference with her daughter Hortense's engagement: he had revealed that she has no dowry. Admitting this misdeed, Crevel offers Madame Hulot three options for marrying a dowryless daughter—1) to find "a very rich,

childless old man of 60 who would like to have children” (23) or simply wants a young girl; 2) to find “some energetic fellow who will fall in love . . . and marry . . . without caring about the wedding present” (23); or 3) for Madame Hulot to become his lover, which will ensure his silence, a proposal she scornfully rejects, explaining that, “at my age, a woman’s folly has to be justified by good looks, or youth, or fame, or ability, or some of the brilliance that dazzles us to such an extent that we forget everything even our age. You may have an income of fifty thousand livres, but your age outweighs your fortune. So, of everything that a woman requires, you possess nothing at all” (9).

That a man threatens to interfere with a young woman’s marital chances unless her mother agrees to sleep with him and that this 47-year-old woman identifies, however jokingly, those male qualities which might persuade her to commit adultery is evidence we’re not in England anymore. Attitudes toward sexuality were much franker in France. Nonetheless, during this time women’s identity in France, just as in Britain, was becoming increasingly tied to domesticity. “Historians now generally accept the view that the ideology of domesticity was created by the middle classes,” writes Dartmouth University Emerita History Professor Margaret Darrow, “and they associate its spread with changes in economic relations. . . . the commercial middle class initially developed domesticity in the seventeenth century and actively proselytized for it in the eighteenth. Gradually, as market capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization transformed society, the domestic ideal spread into the working classes and the elites” (42). Darrow goes on to argue that upper class embrace of domesticity was different in France because of this elite’s fear that revolutionary terror had not been fully quashed: “The aristocracy appropriated domesticity as a class ideal in an effort to answer middle-class criticism of the nobility and, consequently, to forestall the political triumph of the bourgeoisie during the [post-Napoleon] Restoration” (42) beginning in 1815. Caring for her children, revering her husband, and maintaining the family home, Madame Hulot is a model of the female domesticity that was becoming more and more the social norm in France.

Spurned by Madame Hulot, Crevel seeks to destroy her affection for her husband by detailing the Baron’s adultery. Crevel begins by recounting his own relations with the “marvelously beautiful” Josépha Mirah a 15-year-old cashier who had worked in his perfumery and for whom he furnished a set of private rooms, explaining that he “wanted to be, at one and the same time, her father, her benefactor, and, not to mince matters, her lover, to kill two birds with one stone, to do a good deed and have a nice mistress” (14). Crevel keeps this bird in her gilded cage for “five years of happiness,” providing her with singing lessons and attending the opera with her on days when he’s not attending with his daughter Celestine. Thinking he has bound Josépha to him for life, he allows her to spend time with the actress Jenny Cadine, who has had a similarly intimate relationship with Madame Hulot’s husband. The two men bonded through their sexual escapades, even determining that Crevel’s daughter would marry Hulot’s son. However, unlike Crevel’s affair which began when Josépha was 15, Baron Hulot, “that . . . monster of a husband,” asserts an outraged Crevel, “was *protecting* Jenny when she was 13” (15). To the assertion that her husband, who at the time was 42, had had a 13-year-old mistress, Madame Hulot replies, “Well, Monsieur, and what of it?” (15).

To listeners of this podcast, the cavalier attitude expressed here, the casual acceptance of middle-aged men having sexual relationships with barely pubescent girls, Crevel even saying he wants to be both father and lover, is undoubtedly disturbing. But neither Crevel nor Baron Hulot is violating the law: the age of consent in France in the 1830s, which had been established in the Napoleonic codes, was eleven. In this matter, France was no outlier: in Britain, the age of consent was 12; in the U.S., the age of consent ranged from 10 to 12, depending on the state (Robertson). One positive consequence of the rise of bourgeois domesticity in 19th century Europe was the concurrent rise in age of consent. By the end of the century, the age of consent in France had been raised to 13, in Britain to 16 (Robertson). In the United States, age of consent depended on the state, which could lead to surprising anomalies such as Delaware whose legislature in 1871 *lowered* the age of consent from 10 to 7, a statute which remained on the books until 1972 (Lindenmuth).

Struggles to determine the age of consent were particularly tangled in France. Unlike Britain, which didn't repeal its "buggery" laws until 1967 ("Sexual"), France removed criminal penalties for homosexual conduct during the Revolution and reinforced this policy in the Napoleonic codes (Sibalis 301). However, under the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy government, the age of consent for heterosexuals remained 13 but was raised to 21 for homosexuals (Sibalis 301). The new penal code said that anyone who "to satisfy his own passions, commits one or several shameless or unnatural acts with a minor of his own sex under the age of twenty-one" could be imprisoned for from six months to three years (Sibalis 301). After the war, the age of consent for heterosexuals was raised to 15 but remained 21 for acts of sodomy and other "sexual relations against nature" (Bérard and Sallée 100). Thanks to the efforts of gay activists and feminists, including the signing of a petition by a who's who of French intellectuals, including Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jean-François Lyotard, in 1982, the distinction between sodomy and other sexual acts was removed from the statute.

However praiseworthy this goal, it should be noted that open letters following this petition, signed by many of these same intellectuals, dismissed, in the name of sexual liberation, the application of "consent" to minors, arguing that "French law contradicts itself if it recognizes a capacity for discernment in thirteen and fourteen year olds, so as to be able to try and sentence them, but denies them the same capability with respect to their emotional and sexual life" (Aragon, et al.). That is, the imposition by the state of an age of consent was said to deny sexual freedom to young people. Noah Percy, in an undergraduate thesis at Columbia University, asks, "Why, and under what logic, did a generation of French intellectuals obsess over, at best, the sexuality of teenagers, or at worst, the legalization of pedophilia?" The answer, in part, Percy argues was that "to deny even young adolescents the possibility of consensual sex rejected their personhood and subjected children to second class citizenship" (42). This attitude persisted until recently in France, with the law having no concept of statutory rape, meaning that sexual relations with a person under 15 were not considered rape unless involving direct force and violence. Children under 15 were perceived as capable of consenting; non-violent sex between a child under 15 and an adult was not automatically viewed as rape but as misdemeanor sexual assault. Not until 2021, after a series of well-publicized cases involving sex with minors, did France modify its laws of consent and rape. As the *New York Times* explains, "The French National Assembly adopted legislation . . . that characterizes sex between adults and minors under 15 as rape, a move made after years of debate and rounds of sexual abuse scandals gradually pushed lawmakers to bring the French criminal code closer to that of most other Western countries" (Méheut).

Crevel's outrage is not really about Baron Hulot's seduction of a 13-year-old versus his more acceptable seduction of a 15-year-old but about Baron Hulot's taking his mistress away. His desire to make Madame Hulot his mistress is an act of revenge. To engage in this private intercourse with Crevel, Madame Hulot has had her cousin Bette and daughter Hortense wait in the garden. Here, Balzac contrasts the beautiful 21-year-old Hortense with the spinsterish 43-year-old Bette. Hortense's "youthful animation, her fresh vitality, her abundant good health," writes Balzac, "all seemed to vibrate and to radiate electric waves around her. . . . When her deep-blue eyes, with their pure, innocent look, fell on a passer-by, he would feel an involuntary thrill" (33). Bette, in comparison, wore a dress that "turned her into an old maid from head to foot" (39); she was "a dried up old maid who . . . looked exactly like a daily sewing-woman" (7). This contrast repeats the novel's formative episode, when the young Bette Fischer is marginalized in favor of her cousin Adeline Fischer—the future Madame Hulot. Balzac describes the sixteen-year-old Adeline:

She was one of those perfect, dazzling beauties . . . whom Nature fashions with particular care, giving them her most precious gifts, distinction, nobility grace, refinement, elegance, an incomparable physique. . . . [she] had the willowy figure, the seductive fabric of those women born to be queens . . . the bearing of an empress, an aristocratic air, a majestically contoured profile, and

the modesty of a village girl [which made men stop and look at her] charmed as art-lovers are before a Raphael. (27)



Raphael, ["Portrait of a Young Woman with Unicorn"](#) (1505-6)

Few women could compare with this goddess, let alone Bette, “a peasant woman from the Vosges in the full meaning of those words, thin, dark, with shiny black hair, thick eyebrows joined by a tuft of hair, long, strong arms, large feet, one or two warts on her long, monkey-like face” (34) who was called “Nanny Goat” by Hulot. Vosges, by the way, is a region in northeastern France near the German border from where the three Fischer brothers, including Bette and Adeline’s fathers, had been conscripted by the post-Revolution Republic to serve in the Army of the Rhine against the Austrians and Prussians. In 1799, Adeline’s father continued his service in the French Army under Napoleon, while Bette’s father, wounded in an unspecified battle in 1797, remained behind, raising both his and his brother’s daughters. Recognizing the superior beauty and thus greater monetary value of Adeline, Bette’s “family, who lived as one household, . . . sacrificed the plain girl to the pretty one, the sharp fruit to the brilliant flower. [Bette] worked in the fields while her cousin was spoiled” (34). Bette understandably fought with her privileged cousin and attempted to spoil both her beautiful face and beautiful wardrobe. This rejection, this preference for her cousin by her own parents, permanently deformed Bette’s character: “Jealousy,” Balzac writes, “was the fundamental feature of her character” (34), and it is the driving force for much of the narrative.

For parents to reject their daughter for the sake of a more beautiful cousin seems heartless, if not unnatural. To understand this choice, we must understand the situation of the Fischer family. At the beginning of the 19th century, France was overwhelmingly rural. “Most of the population,” notes Roger Price, “remained isolated by poor communications and low levels of functional literacy” (143). Marriages were arranged within these narrowly bounded geographical spaces, Price explaining that marriage partners were commonly selected from within “the distance a man could travel on foot and return home the same day” (144). Their sheltered backgrounds and lack of sophistication made rural peasants wary of even *visiting* more urban locales. According to Price, “peasants in Alsace were, for example, reluctant to visit ‘large’ towns like Wissembourg or Hagenau, which had populations of 11,000 and 7000 respectively in 1846. In them they encountered the ‘authorities’ and the well-dressed bourgeoisie and workers who laughed at their awkwardness. There they risked being cheated by merchants and innkeepers” (144).

In this context, isolated, uneducated, and with little opportunity for social mobility, Bette’s parents wagered on Adeline’s beauty. And their bet paid off. In 1799, Hulot d’Ervy, officer in charge of Military Transport,

who had helped the Fischer brothers gain employment in the military supply system, came to Strasbourg, saw Adeline, and “made her his wife as soon as the law allowed, to the great astonishment of the Fischers, who had all been brought up in awe of their superiors. . . . this marriage was like an Assumption. The beautiful Adeline went directly from her village mud to the paradise of the Imperial Court” (28). Adeline’s marriage and move from mud to metropolis are compared to the Virgin Mary’s bodily assumption into Heaven. The Virgin Mary will be reunited with her soul in Heaven; Adeline will be united with Baron Hulot in Paris. Her beauty and bearing elevate her in this world as well. She has “nobility, grace, refinement, elegance,” “the bearing of an empress, an aristocratic air, a majestically contoured profile” (27), and her daughter Hortense has “a noble bearing equal to her mother’s” (33). For an aesthete such as Balzac, beauty, whether natural such as Hortense’s or artistic such as Raphael’s, is a kind of nobility, something to be worshipped.

This equating beauty with wealth was not just metaphorical. Beauty was enhanced by wealth: by wigs and cosmetics and new, flattering, colorful clothing. We take the availability of affordable clothing for granted. But it wasn’t until the 1840s, with the production of low-cost textiles, that the middle classes could begin to afford more attractive apparel. Notes was David Pinkney, in the 1840s “Flowered cotton dresses . . . began to replace the traditional black woolen dresses kept for ten years, and more slowly cotton clothes replaced the rough canvas smocks and trousers of peasants” (90). The wealthy also had the advantage of simple cleanliness and good health. For unlike the wealthy, the poor suffered from work and diets and environments and illnesses that could damage their health and mar their appearance. “Much of the population,” details Roger Price,

lived in a filthy, infected environment. Poor diet and germ-ridden surroundings inevitably caused poor health. Hard and often dangerous work, frequently in the open, whatever the weather, compounded the damage—reducing much of the population to a state of physiological misery, made all the worse at the beginning of the century by the wars and subsistence crisis of the closing years of the Napoleonic Empire. (62)

Bette’s parents must have been aware of the “physiological misery” that resulted from a peasant’s labor. They knew that Bette’s appearance would be damaged by working in the fields, while Adeline’s beauty would be preserved by remaining at home. This equation of female beauty with wealth was true in yet another sense: beauty, as Adeline’s marriage demonstrates, was almost the only power poor women possessed, was the only way a rural peasant woman could escape her impoverished environment, her noble beauty lifting her to noble wealth.

It’s this social background that has made Adeline revere her husband. “For Adeline,” Balzac tells us, “the Baron was . . . a kind of god who could do no wrong. She owed everything to him: fortune—she had a carriage, a townhouse, and all the luxury of the time; happiness—she was openly loved; a title—she was a baroness; celebrity—in Paris she was called the beautiful Madame Hulot” (29). Although her husband’s infidelities upset her, she accepts his misbehavior, reminding herself, after thirty years together, to be grateful for his fidelity in the early years of their marriage, as well as for his continuing to love her:

Instead of feeling a pang in the heart on seeing how pretty [her husband’s] mistress was, Adeline had said to herself, ‘That rascally Hector must be very happy.’ Nevertheless, she suffered; she gave way in secret to frightful attacks of rage. But whenever she saw her Hector, again, she would always recall her twelve years of undiluted happiness and lose the power to utter a single complaint. (30).

This subservience, Balzac asserts, is due to her peasant background. A wellborn wife would “torment [her] husband,” would speak “in biting words . . . in a diabolical spirit of vengeance,” whereas Madame Hulot responds passively, with “excessive delicacy” because of her roots in “the people who know how to receive blows without returning any” (30). She even dismisses her husband’s squandering their wealth, his spending

their daughter's dowry on his mistress, because she has "profound faith in the power and great merit of her husband, in his abilities and character" (32). Such is the power of patriarchy and class.

Learning at an early age that she was unattractive and that no one would provide for her, neither parents nor husband, learning, in other words, about the power of patriarchy and class, Bette developed a cunning intelligence and ruthless pursuit of self-interest. Arriving in Paris in 1809, twenty-nine years before the novel's opening scene, brought to the city by her cousin Adeline who sought to rescue her from poverty and arrange a marriage for her, "this dark-eyed girl with coal-black eyebrows, who could neither read nor write" (35) and who had no dowry to offer a suitor, was unlikely to be marriage material. So Baron Hulot had her apprenticed to a firm of embroiderers for the Imperial Court where in two years "the peasant girl had become a rather pleasing, skillful, and intelligent forewoman" (35). The firm she worked for depended on the martial attire that prevailed in Napoleonic times, "epaulettes, sword-tassels, and shoulder knots, in short the countless brilliant decorations which glittered on the rich uniforms of the French army and on civilian dress . . . on the gold and silver embroidered on the seams of the uniforms of everyone in [Napoleon's] service, and his Empire contained a hundred and thirty-three departments" (35). In 1815, business declined with the fall of Napoleon. Bette's father was killed fighting for Napoleon during his 100-day return to France; Adeline's father was court-martialed and sentenced to be executed for an unspecified offense—perhaps continued support for the Bonapartists—but escaped to Germany; and Bette became a common worker, giving up "all rivalry and comparison with Adeline" in recognition of "her cousin's various kinds of superiority." Nonetheless, "envy remained hidden in the depths of her heart, like the germ of a disease" (36). Much of the rest of the novel will show this germ festering and spreading a contagion resistant to any sense of proportionality, decency, or morality.

Bette is resigned to—in fact, proudly asserts her independence by—severing herself from society, "pruning [her life] of all material cares" (37), wearing old-fashioned apparel that "turned] her into an old maid from head to foot, made her so ridiculous that . . . no one could receive her at formal parties" (39), "made her look so odd that sometimes she resembled those monkeys, dressed up as women" (41). Bette resides in a neighborhood that suits her antisocial personality, a neighborhood of ten or so houses whose "owners carry out no repairs and they are the remains of the old quarter which has been in process of demolition since the day Napoleon decided to complete the Louvre. . . . The darkness, the silence, the icy blast, the low-lying, cave-like site, all combine to make these houses seem like crypts, living tombs" (57). "These demolition projects dated back to the attack on rue Saint-Nicaise in 1800" ("Dans l'impasse"), Napoleon barely escaping an assassination attempt that killed five and wounded twenty-six ("Plot"), and "following which Bonaparte had decided, for greater security, to demolish part of the small streets and tightly packed buildings that were piled up between the Louvre and the Tuileries" ("Dans l'impasse").

Yet before its demolition in the 1850s, this was a popular bohemian neighborhood: "The district was during the first half of the 19th century a vast demolition-reconstruction site whose charm and modest rents attracted [writers such as] Théophile Gautier [and] Gérard de Nerval" ("Dans Impasse"). The novelist Frances Trollope, mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope, writing about this area circa 1835 complained about the appearance of these bohemians. "One of their most remarkable newly-acquired rights," she mocks, was "the privilege of presenting themselves dirty, instead of clean, before the eyes of their magnates" (21). "In days of yore," she recalls, "the spectacle at the Louvre" . . . [of ladies] in their "pretty costumes" . . . [and] the spruce neatness of the men. . . . added greatly to the pleasantness and gaiety of the scene. But now," she continues "dingy jackets, uncomely [caps], ragged *blouses*, and ill-favoured roundeared caps, that look as if they did duty night and day, must all be tolerated; and in this toleration appears . . . the principal external proof of the increased liberty of the Parisian mob" (21-22).

One of the pleasures of reading Balzac is his depiction of the shifting attitudes and appearances of Parisians and the shifting cityscape of Paris itself. As Owen Heathcote, Reader of Modern French Studies at the University of Bradford, maintains, "Balzac took pride in charting the changes taking place in the urban

landscape around him and his characters reactions to them . . . Balzac became the chief exponent of Paris both as document and as myth” (72). The historian Philip Mansel explains that “Balzac was familiar with almost every aspect of the city, from embassies to prisons. He considered Paris the capital of pleasure, vanity, ideas, thought, and chance, a monster with a thousand paws (Mansel 318), ‘an astonishing assembly of movements . . . the head of the world, a brain exploding with genius, the leader of civilization. . . . the most adorable of all [confections].’ He also called it ‘a torrent, an ocean, a Vesuvius in perpetual eruption, and a hell” (Mansel 318). But Balzac finds nothing charming in this abandoned setting, wondering “who can live there, what must happen there after dark, when the lane becomes a haunt of criminals and when the vices of Paris, wrapped in the cloak of night, indulge themselves to the full” (57).



Charles Marville, [Rue Estienne from the rue Boucher](#) (First Arrondissement)
1862-1865, Metropolitan Museum of Art

What gives Bette’s life meaning within her demeaning circumstances is the 29-year-old sculptor and silversmith Wenceslas Steinbock, a Polish refugee who had fled his native Poland as its war for independence (joined by Lithuania, Belarus, and parts of Ukraine) was being crushed by the Russian army. Many, like Steinbock, fled to France, that home of the Revolution, which inspired other uprisings in the 1830s, which in turn generated more refugees escaping to France and caused the July Monarchy to develop a “set of administrative policies to deal with . . . 6,000 Spanish, Italian, and Polish refugees, isolating them in towns well away from the border” (McPhee 116).

Almost 200,000 Polish citizens, soldiers and civilians were shipped off to Russia, according to Cambridge University History Professor Richard Evans, with many imprisoned rebels “still in jail or exile in Siberia a quarter of a century later” (51), a policy reminiscent of the treatment of captured Ukrainians by Russia under Vladimir Putin: in June 2022, as reported by Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine’s deputy prime minister claimed that 1.2 million Ukrainians had been forcibly taken to Russia, including 240,000 children” (“We”). Decreeing that “everything that has historical or national value” should be removed from Poland, Czar Nicholas I, writes Evans, “abolished the Polish constitution . . . The universities were closed down and the [Warsaw] library was seized. From 1839 study abroad was banned, and the publication of books on history and social studies was halted, the works of national poets were suppressed” (51), eerily reminiscent of Russian policies in occupied Ukraine, in which, according to the UN Human Rights Office, “Cultural

resources—such as repositories of Ukrainian literature, museums, and historical archives—are being destroyed, and. . . efforts are being made to erase local culture, history, and language in cultural and educational institutions and to forcibly replace them with Russian language and with Russian and Soviet history and culture. Ukrainian history books and literature deemed to be ‘extremist’ have been seized from public libraries. . . . and destroyed” (“Targeted”).

Due to the democratic legacy of the French Revolution, to its generally liberal culture, and to the promise of the July Monarchy, many Poles fled to Paris. As Mansel notes, “Paris received about 4,000 Polish refugees, and acquired a new role, as capital of Poland in exile” (274). Among the Poles who made their way to Paris was the celebrated composer Frederic Chopin. Steinbock’s career was far less successful. Having traded Russian persecution for life in a Paris attic, destitute and despairing, Steinbock attempted suicide but was saved by Bette and became her pet project—a male companion, a surrogate child, a prisoner, and an almost lover. Hortense and Madame Hulot doubt the existence of Bette’s admirer until she shows them his handiwork, a silver seal representing Faith, Hope, and Charity, which Bette exchanges for one of Adeline’s shawls. “Bette had been eaten up with admiration for cashmere shawls,” Balzac writes, “and had become obsessed with the idea of having the yellow cashmere shawl which the Baron had given his wife in 1808” (45) and which had been passed down to Hortense. Why this cashmere carving? Adeline’s husband had purchased this expensive and fashionable shawl for *her*. In wearing the shawl Bette was in a way becoming the favored daughter with the fine clothes and the noble husband. Cashmere was a fashionable sign of wealth; it had become a much-desired luxury item when she was girl, when it was brought to France from Egypt by Napoleon’s troops. Cashmere became a marker of status and, paradoxically, of both female sexuality and female virtue. Susan Hiner, Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Vassar College, explains what made cashmere so captivating:

[It functioned well] in the new, simpler fashions of the first Empire, which necessitated warm coverings for exposed *décolletages* and gauzily-clad limbs. . . . An erotic vestimentary sign because of its warmth and delicacy, the cashmere shawl permitted fashionable ladies to dress scantily in public and still remain decorously covered. . . . every fashionable lady required a shawl to complete her wardrobe and signal standing among the social elite of early nineteenth-century Paris. The *cachemire* was a marker of economic status, and one’s correct use of it a marker of class. . . . *cachemire* was linked not only to social and economic status, but also to feminine virtue. . . . Traditionally a trousseau item, a *cachemire* was often handed down from mother or purchased at great expense before her wedding. . . . In short, as fashion journals imply and as novels make explicit, the *cachemire* was reserved for married or marriageable women. (77-9).

This context further explains Bette’s cashmere compulsion. It’s an emblem for all she’s been denied—beauty, fashion, wealth, love. It harkens back to the Empire, the time of her youth when she could believe in possibility. Acquiring the shawl in trade with Hortense for a sculpture, Bette likely associates the shawl with Steinbock and with a bride’s trousseau. Little does she realize that in giving this gift to Hortense she has, rather than initiated her own pseudo-nuptials to Steinbock, furthered Hortense’s interest in him. Upon receipt of Steinbock’s handicraft, Hortense swoons with an outsized Romantic passion, fantasizing about this poor, young, handsome, exiled, lonely, struggling genius. She “was overcome by the love that is experienced by all girls, love of the unknown. . . . The seal which she held in hand, a kind of Annunciation in which genius glowed like light, had the power of a talisman. Hortense felt so happy. . . . Her blood was in a ferment and she laughed madly to put her cousin off the scent” (49). This conflation of sexual desire (“her blood was in a ferment”) and religious feeling (the seal was a kind of Annunciation which glowed like light) reveals Hortense’s confused emotions, a mixing of the spiritual and the sexual, in the manner of a young girl raised in a religious environment and caught up in the romantic spirit of the age.

Gathered together, the Hulot family, with Bette and Baron Hulot’s older brother, the respected and successful Marshal Hulot, present a scene of domestic perfection, “where no disagreement ever arose and

where brothers and sisters reciprocated each other's affection. . . . [a] family united by such genuine affection" that Madame Hulot could think "This is the most secure kind of happiness, and who could take it away from us?" (55). Foreshadowing the troubles to come, Balzac suggests this scene's instability, the fragile nature of an haute bourgeois family in the 1830s, when he tells us: "Anyone looking at this domestic scene would have found it hard to believe that the father was in dire straits, the mother in despair, the son eaten up with anxiety about his father's future, and the daughter in the course of stealing an admirer from her cousin" (56). In many ways, Balzac's novel seeks to answer Madame Hulot's question: "who could take it away from us?" Or in paraphrase: How can the nuclear family survive as, in the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch's words, "a haven in a heartless world," in a society ruled by the ruthless logic of capital?

Throughout his *Comédie Humaine*, Balzac will mercilessly answer Madame Hulot's question, exploring how individuals and families survive (or fail to survive) in a culture dominated by a materialist bourgeois ethos. Influenced by the historical novels of Walter Scott, Balzac began this ambitious project with the intention of detailing French history from the Middle Ages to his own time (Lukacs 83). But like many an initial thesis, this plan was far too broad and ambitious. Instead, he narrowed his focus to French society from 1799 to 1847, from the end of one revolution to the cusp of another. Here's a rough outline of the historical period Balzac documents: he begins with the French Republic of 1799, when Napoleon served as first consul, continues through Napoleon's rise and his fall in 1815, which was followed by the return of the monarchy under, first, Louis XVIII and, second, his brother, Charles X. The latter sought to undo changes implemented by the Revolution and Napoleon, to return, in other words, to an absolute monarchy. This hubris led to his downfall in 1830 in what has become known as the July Revolution and to the ascent of a new king, Charles X's cousin, the liberal Louis-Phillipe, in what has become known as the July Monarchy. But for some flashbacks, *Cousin Bette* takes place during Louis-Phillipe's reign, which Jeremy Popkin, History professor at the University of Kentucky, details, providing a vivid picture of French society in the 1830s and 40s and of the social changes to which Balzac was responding:

The new regime was seen from the start as a "bourgeois monarchy." . . . [whose] leaders . . . included many with aristocratic titles—some from old families that accepted the new order . . . and others who had been ennobled under Napoleon. . . . Bankers were especially prominent in the early years of the regime, and the economic expansion of the period propelled many industrialists into the ranks of the dominant class. . . . But this haute bourgeoisie . . . remained a small minority, set off from the rest of French society by its wealth and its style of life. . . . Below [them] was a large and diverse middle group. . . . [which] included educated professionals. . . . At the lower boundary of the middle class, shop-keepers [such as Crevel] and master artisans [such as Wenceslas Steinbock] struggled to distinguish themselves from the urban working classes. Dazzling ascents from rags to riches were the exception, but access to the more modest levels of the middle class . . . was fairly open. . . . The common characteristics of the haute bourgeoisie and the middle classes were the possession of some form of property . . . a certain degree of education, and a style of life that increasingly set them apart from the poorer sections of the population. . . . Successful bourgeois families also spent money to acquire the proper trappings for their preferred style of life. In Paris, old noble hôtels that had housed a single aristocratic clan were now subdivided into apartments for the increasingly numerous bourgeois [or as in the case of the Hulots, "a large house recently built on a section of the courtyard of an old mansion" [5]) who filled them with a clutter of furniture and decorative objects. (305-07)

What's driving social change and destabilizing tradition at this time is, essentially, the growth and power of capitalism—as the cultural critic Roland Barthes explains, Balzac was writing "at the precise moment when a new economic structure is joined on to an older one, thereby bringing about decisive changes in mentality and consciousness" (18). The Marxist literary scholar Georg Lukacs describes this clash of economic structures more precisely: "The great experience of Balzac's youth," he writes, "is the volcanic character of social forces, concealed by the apparent calm of the Restoration period. [Balzac] recognized with greater

clarity than any of his literary contemporaries the profound contradiction between the attempts at feudal-absolutist Restoration and the rapidly growing forces of Capitalism” (84). That is, Balzac intuited that the attempt by the monarchy, during the post-Napoleon restoration, to reinstitute a pre-capitalist economic system was at odds with a new and an increasingly hegemonic capitalism.

How would this tension be resolved? According to Lukacs, “these antagonisms exploded in the July Revolution [of 1830], and the apparent balance between them in Louis Phillippe’s ‘bourgeois monarchy’ was such an unstable equilibrium that the contradictory and vacillating character of the entire social structure inevitably became the focus on Balzac’s conception of history” (84). In other words, the attempt to reconcile these two economic models, as exemplified by the bourgeoisie and the monarchy, created an unstable political and economic system, which unsettled the lives of people like the Hulot family and which would culminate in the 1848 revolution. University of Cambridge Emeritus Fellow in French Michael Tilby makes a similar argument: “What *La Comédie Humaine* shows . . . is the rapidity of social change occurring during the July Monarchy and its basis in a new economic reality. . . What Balzac had grasped was that the new capitalist era in which he lived was one in which every sphere of private life was infected by the law of economics” (3). Tilby goes on to argue that in Balzac’s fiction, “the individual is shown as caught up in an irreversible process. Through the lives of his characters Balzac is therefore led to confront the contradictions that are the inevitable product of a system rooted in the cultivation of individual [greed]” (4).

The destructive greed associated with capitalism, for Balzac, was embodied by the bourgeoisie, the striving middle class willing to forsake tradition and morality and beauty for economic gain and social status. According to Elisabeth Gerwin, Associate Professor of French at the University of Lethbridge in western Canada, “Above all, Balzac examines the dramatic, brilliant, and ruthless rise of the bourgeoisie—bureaucrats, merchants, professionals—concerning whom he was famously ambivalent, delighting in their innovation but lambasting the self-interest that motivated their push for progress” (18). This depiction of how the bourgeoisie’s obsessive pursuit of wealth in an increasingly materialist culture has been praised for its insight by many on the left, Friedrich Engels in 1888 admitting, “I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together” (qtd. in Watts 3) and Karl Marx, in *Das Kapital*, praising Balzac for being “remarkable in his profound grasp of reality” (26). Indeed, Marx and Engels’s critique of the bourgeoisie in *The Communist Manifesto* (written only about a year after *Cousin Bette* and based in part on Marx’s observations of Paris, where he had lived from 1843 to 1845—before being expelled from France) is nearly identical to Balzac’s criticism. “The bourgeoisie,” write Marx and Engels, “has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest. . . . It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. . . . In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (222).

But Balzac criticizes bourgeois society from the opposite end of the political spectrum, as a supporter of the monarchy and the Catholic church, of crown and altar. “I write under the light of two eternal truths,” he announces, “Religion and Monarchy; two necessities, as they are shown to be by contemporary events, towards which every writer of sound sense ought to try to guide the country back.” He goes on to reject electoral politics since it “gives us government by the masses . . . under which tyranny is unlimited.” And he regards “the family and not the individual as the true social unit” (Balzac, “Author’s”). He believes in monarchical rule but sees the current aristocracy as inadequate, as having surrendered its powers to the bourgeoisie. “Under the Restoration,” he writes,

the aristocracy never forgot that they had been defeated and robbed, and so, with a few exceptions, they became economical, prudent, and careful, in a word, middle-class and devoid of grandeur. Since then, 1830 has completed the work of 1793. In France, from now on, there will be great names but no more great families, unless there are political changes which are difficult to foresee.

Everything bears the stamp of the individual. The fortune of the most prudent lasts only for a lifetime. The family has been destroyed (115-116).

In other words, traumatized by the Revolution, the aristocracy learned to disguise their wealth and moderate their lifestyles. It's not so much that family values in general have been destroyed by the advent of a bourgeois society but the *material* value of *aristocratic* families that has; their grand and glorious lives have been reduced to fit the inferior constraints of the dominant bourgeois culture.

This sentiment, that the greatness of the nobility has vanished, is reflected in the nearly total absence of the old aristocracy in *Cousin Bette* and by Balzac's focus on the immoral intriguing of the bourgeoisie. While I earlier contended that Crevel represented the bourgeoisie, Hulot the nobility, it would be more accurate to say that both belong to the bourgeoisie, one the nouvelle riche, the other the nouvelle noblesse. Pinkney describes the this class as "composed of professional men—lawyers, doctors, professors, scientists, publishers, higher civil servants [such as Hulot], bankers, wholesale merchants [such as Crevel], and only a few manufacturers" (19). Balzac's sympathy is not with those nobles, like Baron Hulot, awarded titles by Napoleon but with the titled elite of the Ancien Régime. But it's the crass Crevel, the newer arriviste, with none of the aristocratic bearing or polished grace of Hulot, who personifies the ugly destructiveness of the bourgeoisie. In his attempt to climb the social ladder, Crevel renounces his past as do many such strivers, Balzac asserting that "all retired shopkeepers call themselves *former merchants*" (124). Balzac further undercuts Crevel's self-importance by explaining that three-quarters of his fortune came from the inheritance of his now deceased wife, the daughter of a miller" (161). And so whatever uniform or fancy clothes he wears, whatever distinguished position he attains, Crevel's class roots, as with others of his class, are ever evident and are most apparent in the grubby pursuit of and gross display of wealth, which Balzac sees as a great falling off from the taste and decorum and sensibility of the established families of the Ancien Régime.

Chapters 14-32

With an important job in the government and a bearing shaped by his military service, Crevel's nemesis, Baron Hulot, is more respected and admired. We meet him again as he accompanies Cousin Bette through the darkened streets to her apartment. It's there that he sees "a small, slim, pretty, very smartly dressed young woman, exuding an expensive perfume, [pass] between the carriage and the door, to enter the same house" (58). Slowly climbing into his carriage, Hulot "allow[s] his eyes to follow the young woman, whose dress was swaying agreeably over something other than those frightful, deceptive, crinoline petticoats" (58). This form of petticoat isn't the stiff whalebone hoopskirt of our historical imagination, which wouldn't appear until the 1850s, but instead is a quilted horsehair petticoat designed to provide a bell-shape to a woman's skirt. (The word "crinoline" is derived from the French word for horsehair, "crin.")

While decrying the deceptive and obscuring petticoat, Hulot still sees "an attractive little woman whom I should be very glad to make happy, for she would make me happy" (58-9). And this attractive little woman is pleased to be the object of Hulot's gaze, to see him "rooted to the spot with admiration and consumed by desire" (59). In what most women would now object to as verbal harassment, Balzac sees as simple flattery. Women are pleased by such encounters, he reports, which are "like a flower which all Parisian women delight to smell when they find one in their path. . . . Some women come home quite out of humour if they have not collected their nosegay in the course of their outing" (59). More than simply being appreciated and flattered, this woman signals her interest in Hulot by opening the window of her second-floor flat and being seen "in the company of a gentleman whose bald head and not at all angry look showed that he was her husband" (59). "How knowing and clever such young women are," Hulot tells himself, "That's her way of showing me where she lives" (59).



[Horsehair Crinoline Petticoat](#), 1840s



A.E. Chalon, "[Mademoiselle Fleury / La jolie Fille de Gande](#)" (1844)

From his second-floor window, the husband recognizes Baron Hulot as the head of the department that oversees his office, “a Councillor of State who’s the big boss at the ministry” (60). Husband and wife surmise that “the old maid on the third floor . . . who lives with [a] young man” [i.e., Wenceslas Steinbock] must be Hulot’s cousin (60). The fact that the Marneffes live on the second floor, Bette on the third, and Steinbock in the attic is a sign of their relative economic status. Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the Institut Catholique de Paris, explains: in Paris, “the various classes were distinguished by the various floors of buildings—the higher the class and the rents, the lower the floor in a day when elevators were unknown” (259). Although this married couple, Valérie and Jean-Paul-Stanislas Marneffe, live on the second floor and are thus better off than Bette and Steinbock, they are not well off. Instead, they survive on the husband’s meager salary as clerk for the War Ministry. Balzac, as he regularly does, identifies their class position through a detailed description of their rooms and possessions. Their flat, he writes,

typical of many Parisian couples, gave the deceptive appearance of pseudo-luxury that is prevalent in many homes. . . . the furniture was upholstered in shabby cotton velvet, the plaster statuettes imitated Florentine bronzes, the chandelier, badly carved and merely painted over, had moulded glass sconces, and the cheapness of the carpet was [apparent in] . . . the cotton . . . which had become visible to the naked eye. All these things . . . proclaimed the poverty like a poor man in rags at a church door. . . . Monsieur Marneffe’s room . . . was faded and worn like himself and cleaned once a week. This horrible room, where everything was left lying about, where old socks were hanging on horsehair chairs whose floral patterns were outlined by the dust clearly proclaimed a man who cared nothing for his home and who was always out and about, in gaming rooms, in cafes, or elsewhere.

Madame’s room was an exception to the degrading slovenliness. . . . These rooms, with their elegant chintz hangings, rosewood furniture and a carpet, proclaimed the pretty woman and, to be frank, almost the kept woman. On the velvet-covered mantelpiece stood a clock of the style

fashionable at the time. There was a little cabinet quite well filled with trinkets and Chinese porcelain flower-baskets on expensive stands. The bed, the dressingtable, the wardrobe with a long mirror, the small settee, the obligatory knick-knacks were in accordance with the styles and fancies of the day.

Although it was third-rate as far as richness and elegance were concerned, and everything was three years old, a dandy would have found nothing to object to, unless it was this luxury had a middle-class stamp. Art, and the distinction which stems from the things that taste knows how to select, were totally lacking here. A doctor of social science would have detected the existence of a lover by some of those useless pieces of expensive jewelry which can come only from that demi-god who is ever-present through ever-absent in a married woman's establishment. (61-2)

Here we see an example of Balzac's realism, his use of detail to convey an accurate picture of the living conditions of a lower-middle-class Parisian couple. But Balzac's doing more than describing living conditions. Although individualized, Madame and Monsieur Harnaffé represent others like them, members of the lower bourgeoisie. This scene, then, serves as a critique of the class these two represent while simultaneously revealing elements of their individual characters. Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*, his classic text on literary realism, explains Balzac's method:

He not only . . . places the human beings whose destiny he is seriously relating, in their precisely defined historical and social setting, but also conceives this connection as a necessary one: to him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux. . . . he did this best and most truthfully for the circle of the middle and lower Parisian bourgeoisie. (473)

In this scene, Balzac emphasizes the couple's failed—and as he sees it their somewhat pitiful—attempt to signal to others and to themselves that they are of a higher class than, or at least that they possess a sensibility superior to, their economic status, by adopting what he labels “the deceptive appearance of pseudo-luxury,” thus their plaster statuettes imitating Florentine bronzes and their porcelain flower baskets “on expensive stands.” In addition, for Balzac, the fact that these possessions are contemporary, “a clock of the style fashionable at the time” and “knick-knacks . . . in accordance with the styles and fancies of the day,” is itself evidence of their cheapness and vulgarity since virtually all products of this burgeoning consumer culture lack artistry and soul. More than a sign of middle-class tastelessness and socioeconomic aspiration, these items, to Balzac, are evidence of the precipitous decline of French culture. They're also clues about character. Like a detective or, as he writes, “a doctor of social science,” the narrator reads this apartment, finding evidence that Monsieur Marneffe is physically weak and that this weakness is due to his dissolute lifestyle and that Madame Marneffe has acquired fine jewelry through infidelities. Both husband and wife, in other words, are entrapped by money and marriage and seek solace elsewhere, one through purchasing sexual pleasures, the other through selling sexual favors.

Baron Hulot, too, has been purchasing sexual pleasures. But Josépha, having drained his finances, has left him for a sweeter sugar-daddy, the Duc d'Hérouville, who has given her “a pretty modern house . . . with double doors where everything . . . proclaims luxury” (80). He has purchased this house with profits gained from financial speculation. “Only the great lords of the old family,” she explains, “can change coal into gold like that” (82). Here we see the tasteful and expensive display of the wealthy nobility, the Ancien Régime. “Dazzled, dumbfounded, by this drawing-room whose windows looked on to an enchanting garden, one of those gardens with soil specially brought in and transplanted flowers,” Baron Hulot “admired not only the studied elegance, the gilding, the very expensive carving in the so-called Pompadour style, the marvelous fabrics . . . but even more, those things that only princes have the discrimination to select, find, pay for, and

give away”: paintings by Watteau, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Holbien, Titian, and others (81). This display, with its Renaissance paintings and its style à la Madame Pompadour, Louis XV’s mistress, conveys old money and an old title, and hence, for Balzac, something genuine and beautiful. In this elevated setting, Josépha addresses Hulot, asking impudently, “Well, now you understand, old boy? . . . How stupid explanations are. . . . Look, have you got the six hundred thousand francs that the house and furniture cost” (81-2). And she dismisses him by saying he should thank her since he’ll no longer be squandering his wife’s future and his daughter’s dowry. She concludes by letting him know that he can pick up his things at her previous residence: “your cotton night-cap, your boot-jack, your corset, and your moustache-wax” (83).

This rejection by his lover, and probably more painful for Hulot, this recognition of his inferior status upsets him to the point of tears, and so he “went home, striding along like a madman, talking to himself” (83). When his wife greets him, rather than hiding his distress, he complains of the infamous way he’s been treated by his mistress. And rather than criticizing his selfish and destructive infidelity, Madame Hulot consoles him, assuring her husband that if he possessed the fortune of the Duke, he’d have retained possession of Josépha. She also offers him some gentle advice: “if you must have mistresses, why don’t you . . . take inexpensive women. . . . We’d all benefit” (84). Now seeing her as superior to his mistress, Baron Hulot compliments his wife and decides to spend a rare night playing cards with his family, telling her, “I must apply myself to my job as a family man, arrange a marriage for Hortense, and bury the libertine” (84).

The very next day, though, the libertine is resurrected when he again encounters Valérie Marneffe outside her apartment. He had been accompanied by his daughter Hortense, who has gone off ostensibly to browse for antiques but actually to seek out Steinbock. “Pretty woman!” Hulot exclaims, “One for whom a man would commit many follies” (86). Valérie replies that rather than commit follies he should promote her husband, and she then departs, Baron Hulot studying “the swaying movement of her dress, to which she gave perhaps an exaggerated gracefulness” and wondering where she’s coming from so early: “She looks too tired to be coming back from the baths and her husband is waiting for her. It’s inexplicable and provides much food for thought” (87). Presumably, Madame Marneffe is returning from a night swapping sexual for financial favors. An additional exchange seems to be tacitly offered here, signaled by the “exaggerated gracefulness” of Valérie Marneffe’s hips: her sexual favors for her husband’s promotion.

This sudden reversal, pursuing a new mistress one day after renouncing his libertinism, raises the question: Why does Baron Hulot so obsessively pursue a mistress? The obvious answer—for sexual pleasure—is insufficient, for if that’s all he sought, he could visit one of the plentiful Parisian brothels; these were licensed, their prostitutes registered and required to undergo weekly medical exams (Harsin 321). But relations with prostitutes, for Hulot, would have been too low-class and too overt a commercial transaction. And these women would not hold the allure of a prominent singer or actress desired by other upper-class males. In his 1836 study of Paris’s prostitutes, the pioneering physician and hygienist Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet “found that almost all Parisian prostitutes were young working-class women, typically illiterate, who had been driven into prostitution by their economic circumstances” (Ó Gráda and Kelly). Sleeping with such a woman, which required no competition, no seduction, no possession, no public display, simply would not satisfy Hulot’s vanity.

Nor does Hulot’s obsessive pursuit of a new lover derive from a need for emotional connection and intellectual engagement, given that his relationship with a previous mistress began when she was 13. For Hulot, Crevel, and other men of their class, maintaining a sexually exclusive relationship with a mistress, a courtesan, is an expression of status and power, a demonstration that they can support a kept-woman, an instance of their superiority to and vanquishing of other suitors, just as Hulot stole Josépha from Crevel and the Duc d’Hérouville has stolen her from Hulot. In other words, Baron Hulot’s sexual desire is inseparable from his vanity. Seducing a woman and maintaining her as his mistress reinforces his self-image as wealthy and successful, as, in contemporary terms, an alpha male. Since in reality a minor government official struggling financially, Baron Hulot needs a mistress as much for ego as for sexual gratification. The role of

courtesan, Balzac explains, is to “have such good breeding that it flatters a man’s vanity. . . . [and] she must arouse the desire of libertines by appearing to be faithful to one, whose happiness is then envied by others” (156). We should not overlook that the 60-year-old Hulot is experiencing, to use another modern term, a mid-life crisis. His obsessively seeking, controlling, and trying to satisfy a young and desirable mistress is an attempt to fend off the sundry physical and psychological woes of aging.

Meanwhile, Baron Hulot’s daughter Hortense is pursuing her own partner, the Polish metal artisan and sculptor Wenceslaus Steinbock. Her desire is similarly delusional, stimulated by Bette’s narrative about this mysterious lonely suffering man and by evidence of his artistic skill: the silver figurines he crafted representing Faith, Hope, and Charity. He fits the model of the neglected and suffering genius who needs only a woman of virtue and compassion to save him. “She was overcome,” writes Balzac, “by the love that is experienced by all girls, love of the unknown.” This is the kind of romantic delusion that Jane Austen satirizes in her mock Gothic novel *Northanger Abbey*, in which one young girl swoons over a man simply because of his temporary absence: “This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero,” Austen writes, “threw a fresh grace in [her] imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him” (21).

Hortense’s vision of Steinbock as a Romantic hero, which is linked to his artistic genius, is increased by his association with Polish nationalism. “The cause of Poland,” notes William Fortescue, Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Kent, “became a moral crusade embracing radical republicans and conservative Catholics. This led to . . . the formation of ‘Polish committees,’ the support of Polish subscriptions and the organization of various protests on behalf of the Poles” (87). Hortense’s heroizing of Steinbock is affirmed, though, when she sees him for the first time: “His brow is suffused with melancholy. The sun of genius shines in his grey eyes. And how distinguished he looks!” (93). And he is physically attractive: “She was lost in admiration of the red well-shaped mouth, the small delicate chin, and the silky chestnut hair typical of Slavs” (89).

Likewise, Steinbock is overwhelmed by Hortense’s beauty: she offers him “a glimpse of Paradise at the sight of one of the Eves who had fallen from it” (90). Initially, Baron Hulot is unmoved by Hortense’s confessing, in a line that might have been exclaimed by one of Jane Austen’s naïve heroines, “I loved him before I knew him, but I’ve been madly in love with him since I saw him an hour ago!” (93). Hulot is hesitant to have his daughter marry an impoverished sculptor. “It’s an art without a market today,” he tells Hortense, “when there are no people living in great splendour or with great wealth, no entailed mansions or estates. We can only house small pictures and statues, and so the arts are endangered by small-mindedness” (91). In the Baron’s words we hear Balzac’s lament over the disappearance of the Ancien Régime, especially its appreciation for the rare and the beautiful, an appreciation which has been replaced by the petty tastes of the petit bourgeoisie. Ultimately, with the Baron’s “confirmation of Steinbock’s rank and status,” with his wife’s appreciation for “his character and manners” (104), and with Hortense’s love for Steinbock and the need for only a small dowry, the marriage is agreed to.

While his daughter arranges her marriage, Baron Hulot plots his affair with Valérie Marneffe. First, he will set her and her husband up in a new home, moving her from the ugly neighborhood of the Rue du Doyenne to the more upscale Rue Vaneau. The street name “Vaneau,” spelled with one “n,” is the French word for “lapwing,” a bird “noted for its slow, irregular wingbeats in flight and a shrill, wailing cry. (A group of lapwings is called a ‘deceit’ [“Lapwing”]). In an attempt by a “right-wing Republican government . . . to reinforce its shaky legitimacy” (“Rue Vaneau”), an additional “n” was added to “Vaneau” in 1873 to honor a 19-year-old student at the Ecole Polytechnique, Louis Vanneau, who was killed leading a charge of insurgents during the July Revolution of 1830. In 1843, the then little-known Karl Marx lived on this street. In the twentieth century, the writer Andre Gide lived here, where, in 1944, he hid Albert Camus from the Nazis (“Rue Vaneau”).

The most striking feature of this neighborhood is the Hôtel Matignon, built in 1722 and once the residence of the Italian Anne Éléonore Franchi, a professional dancer who became the mistress of the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, until exiled from the Habsburg Empire at the command of the empress Maria Theresa (“Hôtel”). In Paris, she married an Irish officer named Sullivan and traveled with him to India where she, now Éléonore Sullivan, became the mistress of the Englishman Quentin Crawford, who had made his fortune in service to the British East India Company, the two returning to Paris in 1780. Beginning in 1789 and lasting for a decade, she had an affair with a Swedish count, Axel von Fersen the Younger, who is alleged to have been a lover of Marie Antoinette. In 1791, Crawford and Sullivan assisted in the Flight to Varennes, the ill-fated attempt by Louis XIV and family to flee the Revolution. Crawford and Sullivan themselves fled France but returned several years later and in 1802 purchased the Hôtel Matignon (“Eleanore”).

In subsequent years, it would be owned by the diplomat Talleyrand, the sister of King Louis Phillippe, a Genoese duke, and the Austro-Hungarian emperor for whom it would serve as embassy. During the first world war, it was taken over by the French, who were fighting both the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians, which resulted in the confiscation of the stamp collection of Philip Ferrari de La Renotière, “probably the most complete worldwide collection that ever existed, or is likely to exist (“Hotel”). Among his extremely rare stamps were the unique Treskilling Yellow of Sweden and the 1856 one-cent ‘Black on Magenta’ of British Guiana.” Only one copy of each exists (“Philipp”). Philip Ferrari’s collection was auctioned off by the French government in the 1920s (“Philipp”). The “Black on Magenta” was purchased in 2014 by the shoe-designer and entrepreneur Stuart Weitzman for \$9,480,000 (“British”). Since 1958, the Hôtel Matignon has served as the French Prime Minister’s residence.

Before he establishes her in her new digs near the Hôtel Matignon, Hulot visits Madame Marneffe in her run-down apartment. Anticipating his arrival, Valérie has “clean[ed] the furniture and polish[ed] even the smallest items, washing, brushing, dusting everything [because she] wanted to be in fresh, bright surroundings in order to attract Monsieur le Directeur, and to attract him enough to give her the right to be cruel, to hold the prize out of reach like a sweet child, using all the resources of modern tactics” (102). These modern tactics, “the right to be cruel,” Balzac suggests, is a new way of love that has developed only recently, presumably in conjunction with the decline of the nobility and the rise of the bourgeoisie, but also inspired by the emotionalism of Romanticism, as expressed in works such as Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*.

In modern love, Balzac explains, the woman portrays herself as “the victim of her lover’s desires, a kind of sister of charity tending wounds, a self-sacrificing angel” (102). In this new world, “lovers aspire to the ideal, to the infinite, and both parties want to become better through love.” For Balzac, this romantic ideal, this emphasis on a woman succumbing to a grand love, is pretext, is “hypocrisy, characteristic of our age [that] has debased the art of love. Lovers claim to be two angels but they behave like two devils if they have a chance” (102-3). Used to a more straightforward, a more transactional accommodation between lovers, Baron Hulot is vulnerable to the novelty of such excessive emotionalism, a vulnerability that Madame Marneffe recognizes and exploits: “Valérie had made her plans and . . . [and] the trial she made of her power . . . answered all her hopes” (103). She obtained the post of assistant manager for her husband, “thanks to her sentimental, romantic, simpering manoeuvres” (103). The Baron has been used to relationships based on his physical desire for and his control over his mistress. But Valérie Marneffe is able to control him by manipulating him emotionally. Within a month “he was thinking of giving her the half of his life which belong[ed] to his legitimate wife. . . . He spoke of leaving his wife without scandal once his daughter was married” (107).

And what of the eponymous Cousin Bette? For four years, she has been consumed with her maternal role, mothering and smothering Wencelas Steinbock. She wants him to appreciate the value of hard work and, just like her, to deny himself any pleasure or diversion. Having worked her way from rural peasant to the

lower-middle class, Bette believes that those who work hard and spend little in the thriving environment of Paris can achieve success, telling him “that Paris offered so many opportunities that any determined man was bound to be able to make a living there. People of courage never failed to survive there if they possessed an adequate stock of patience” (70). With his talent, with the money she lends him for an apprenticeship (so long as he keeps the receipts and pays her back), she believes he can prosper, especially if he relinquishes his inexplicable desire to create art. Another possible obstacle to his becoming prosperous are his Polish roots since, although they are courageous on the battlefield, Slavs, Balzac claims, in one of the novel’s several assertions about innate national and ethnic traits, have a “moral flabbiness” whose causes “ought to be studied by physiologists” (67). That Steinbock might be a slothful Slav raises the possibility that her investment in him can be lost. And so Bette has Steinbock sign a legal document guaranteeing he’ll pay her back with interest. Should he fail to do so, he could face life imprisonment.

Besides guaranteeing her savings, this document, more important to Bette, guarantees that Steinbock will remain close. This dynamic, keeping him close or having him imprisoned, reveals the essence of Bette’s character. Scarred by her parents’ transfer of affection to Adeline, restricted by her ugliness, pained by her lack of a companion, she craves for this human connection. However, her desperation destroys their relationship, changing it from one of benevolence and gratitude to one of demand and grievance. Bette holds the threat of punishment over him, requiring him to live humbly and work diligently. This readiness to punish Steinbock should he default on his ties to her is evidence both of her cruelty and her vulnerability: should he leave her, Bette will replace the pain of abandonment with the pleasure of revenge.

Her treatment of him has been shaped by her powerlessness: as an abandoned daughter, a lower-class worker, an unmarried woman. Because she has been powerless, in other words, she loves to dominate, and the unequal terms of this relationship give her a rare opportunity to do so: “She could satisfy her pride and her need for action,” Balzac writes, with “a human being all to herself, to scold, to guide, to flatter, to make happy, without any fear of a rival” (76). She “watched over [him] with a mother’s tenderness, a wife’s jealousy, and a dragon’s skill” (78). But in enslaving the Slav she has herself become trapped by her “fierce jealousy [and] the happiness of having a man.” Simultaneously, she desires him and wishes to destroy him: “she cherished the crazy hope of making this inconsequential, aimless life last for ever” while at the same time “aveng[ing] herself on the young man for the fact that she was neither young, nor rich, nor beautiful” (78). Her avenging self is inspired by the recognition that life with Steinbock cannot last. Thus, while she savors their impoverished and cloistered life, she foresees “that the slightest love-affair would snatch her slave from her” (79). But her need to confine and control him, and thereby to protect herself, have, predictably, the opposite effect: they drive him into the arms of Hortense Hulot. It’s this aspect of Cousin Bette, this psychological complexity, her instinctual self-preservation and her compulsive self-destruction, her inability to control her need to control, that makes her such a memorable character and that gives the narrative its fatalistic force.

This force builds through the unlikely relationship that develops between the beautiful, young Valérie Marneffe and the middle-aged spinster Bette, more specifically, through Baron Hulot’s encouraging Bette to befriend Madame Marneffe “so that he could have a spy in her household” and to Madame Marneffe’s “wanting to be informed about the Hulot family” (105) to retain her power over the Baron. And so the two will conspire together, which begins with Valérie revealing that Steinbock is to marry Hortense. Bette explodes in rage at this news and its painful reminder of her past, protesting to Valérie, “my soul has been wounded! You don’t know that ever since I was old enough to feel, I’ve been sacrificed to Adeline. They smacked me and caressed her. I was dressed like a scullery maid, and she was attired like a lady. I used to dig in the garden and peel the vegetables, and she never lifted a finger except to arrange her finery” (110). She goes on: “Adeline is robbing me of my happiness! Adeline! Adeline! I’ll see you in the mud, fallen lower than I am! . . . I’d like to grind the lot of them. Adeline, her daughter, and the Baron all to dust” (111-12).

After hearing Bette's confession about her strange motherly desire for Steinbock, Valérie opens up about her own life. Balzac has already told us that she was the daughter of a Lieutenant-General who had been awarded the title of Count. With a dowry of twenty thousand francs, she had married "a minor official at the War Ministry" whose career had advanced due to her father's influence, until, writes Balzac, "this pen-pusher had reached the un hoped for position of head-clerk in his office. But on the point of being made assistant-manager" (60), her father died, dashing the couple's hopes and trapping them in a life of penury and overwhelming debt. Just like today, a government job was seen as providing a reliable if modest income. "Government employment," Pinkney writes, "had the appeal of conferring a measure of security and many from the middle class sought it as refuge against the threat of proletarianization." Such jobs, though, offered security without prosperity. "The mass of civil servants," according to Pinkney, "were ill paid, bound to long hours and tedious work, unsustained by hopes for advancement, and they lacked the prestige of office that their forbears had enjoyed" (77-8). Bette's well aware of these circumstances. "It's barbarous of the Government," she says, "to expect an official who has a wife and family to live on" an assistant-manager's salary.

Bette and Valérie are bound by more than pity and poverty. Valérie tells Bette that once her father married out of ambition, he "almost forgot about her [his illegitimate daughter], after idolizing [her] and bringing [her] up like a queen's daughter" (113), a narrative that resonates with Bette's own parental abandonment. Valérie's mother, "who [had] lulled [her] with the loftiest dreams from the cradle, died of grief when she saw [her daughter] married to a petty official . . . a cold-blooded rake at 39, as corrupt as a gallery of convicts, a man who saw in [her] only . . . a means of advancement" (113). Valérie also declares ironically that her husband is "the best of husbands. Since he prefers the filthy street-corner sluts to me, he leaves me free. If he spends all his salary on himself, he never asks me how I got my income" (113). Forsaken by men and parents and struggling to support themselves, Bette and Valérie have grown bitter and resourceful, recognizing the hardness of life, Valérie declaring that "One must only try to get all the hay one can for oneself from the haystack. That's life in Paris. . . . one must get as much as one can out of it and use others for one's own advantage" (112). Twenty-three years old, the mother of a child we barely see, wife of a minor bureaucrat wasting away from syphilis, Madame Marneffe is an able schemer, a woman who recognizes the unique advantages Baron Hulot offers, a woman "who spends her time lying on a sofa, turning the lantern of her observation on all the dark corners of human hearts, feelings, and intrigues" and who understands that she can turn Bette's desire for revenge to her advantage and turn Bette into her accomplice, finding "both an Iago and a Richard III in an old maid who was apparently so weak so humble, and so inoffensive" (116).

As Valérie gains Baron Hulot, Bette loses Steinbock. He tells her he is committed to another, causing her to gaze "despondently at the young man's distinguished good looks, at his artist's brow and beautiful hair, at everything which aroused her repressed feminine instincts" (134). She turns against him, but her plan to have Steinbock imprisoned for unpaid debt confines him only for a day. It seems, at first, an odd narrative choice by Balzac to build up the dire fate that Bette has set for Steinbock only to have this plot dissolve suddenly, almost inexplicably. I suspect this choice was shaped by the episodic rhythm of narrative suspense and resolution required by serial publication. One might fault Balzac for lacking the storytelling skill of a Dickens, who would not have let such a dramatic episode pass by so undramatically. On the other hand, while such resolution lacks the narrative satisfaction of Dickens, the plans and snares and traps set in *Cousin Bette* resolve in unpredictable and unsatisfying ways that feel truer to the randomness of real life than does Dickensian melodrama. Surprised by the failure of her plans and the sudden appearance of a freed Steinbock embracing his fiancé Hortense, Bette coolly pretends to be happy for the young couple and to have been responsible for his release rather than his arrest, "play[ing] the part of the good angel of the family" (138), a part she will maintain as she continues to plot the ruin of Adeline, Hortense, and Hector Hulot.

Chapters 33-37

Between the money he spent on Josépha, the money he is spending on Valérie Marneffe, the dowry he must provide for his daughter, and the maintenance of his lifestyle, Baron Hulot has come close to bankruptcy and has been forced to take out loans and cash advances and has had Adeline and Bette's uncle Johann Fischer sell his grain and forage business to a War Ministry clerk for 40,000 francs. Fischer, who had been wounded fighting for the French Republic against an army of Austrians, Bavarians, Hessians, and Prussians during the 1793 Battle of Wissembourg (which sixty years later would be the site of the first battle of the Franco-Prussian War) and who "adored Napoleon and everything connected with the *Grande Armée*" (28), uncritically admires Hulot, an official in the War Ministry, because of his service to Napoleon and his having established Fischer in his business providing supplies to the army. Consequently, he agrees to give Hulot 30,000 francs while he takes the 10,000 remaining from the sale to set up in Algeria where he will pursue Hulot's scheme to profit from military grain contracts. As Hulot explains,

You will buy your supplies in the country for 70 per cent less than the price you will enter on your accounts to us. . . . [You will get these supplies] by raids and levies, and from the caliphates. . . . There is a lot of fighting over grain, but no one knows how much has been stolen on both sides. . . . The Arab chiefs, as well as our Spahis [i.e., Arab and Berber cavalry serving in the French army] prefer cash and so sell these crops at a very low price. But the Army administration has fixed requirements, so it sanctions purchases at exorbitant prices. . . . That's Algeria from the Army contractor's point of view. It's chaos modified by the scribblings of every new administration. (144-45)

The struggle between France and Algeria began in 1827 when, during a dispute over payment for grain supplies, the Algerian governor hit the French consul with a jeweled flyswatter—the so-called "Fly Whisk Incident"—leading to a French naval blockade and declaration of war (Spencer 35). However farcical its beginning, the tension between France and what had once been part of the Ottoman Empire was real and soon developed into a serious military conflict. The French invaded Algeria in 1830, in what historians view as a desperate attempt by King Charles X to gain public support and retain his crown. Justifying his proposal to seize Algiers, Aimé-Marie-Gaspard, comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, minister of War from 1828 to 1831, explained, "it is useful sometimes to remind France that military glory survived the revolution and that a legitimate monarchy . . . also knows how to float its battle flag in far-off countries" (qtd. in Bower 9-10). As Jennifer Sessions, Professor of History at the University of Virginia, further explains, "Designed to rally the nation to the monarchy and reinforce its legitimizing principles, the public spectacles orchestrated around the expedition sought to demonstrate the power of sacred kingship to protect civilization from barbarism, Christianity from Islam, and freedom from tyranny" (28). Only three weeks after the taking of Algiers, however, Charles abdicated and the July Monarchy of King Louis-Phillipe, so disliked by Balzac, came to power. Louis Phillipe continued the war in Algeria for much the same reasons as his predecessor: according to Benjamin Claude Bower, History professor at UT-Austin, "having come to power on the barricades, Louis-Phillipe faced troubling questions about his legitimacy, and foreign conquests offered him a valuable tool to consolidate power. Algeria provided the luster of imperial conquest necessary for his family to hold on to the throne" (13).

Given his belief in the monarchy and Catholicism, it should come as no surprise that Balzac supported the war in Algeria. Yet despite the encyclopedic goal of his literary project, to document all of French life, Balzac, did not depict the French in Algeria. Although a years-long guerilla war was being fought by the French, who would commit 100,000 troops to the conflict (Sessions 83), in the novels that comprise *La Comédie Humaine*, Algeria exists merely as a distant reality. It is, writes U.C. Santa Cruz English professor Dorian Bell, "An absent setting that never attracts the Balzacian narrator's famously topographic eye. . . . Algeria lingers there with the ontological strangeness of something missing but still felt: a phantom limb, as it

were, and a big one” (35). It’s not as if French culture was ignoring this distant war. On the contrary, as Sessions reports,

From the early 1830s, the conquest was integrated into the three-day national holiday held on the anniversary of the July Days. . . . incorporate[ing] references to the Armée d’Afrique and the ongoing war in Algeria. . . . Military parades frequently included] famous African units, while scenes from the Algerian war were incorporated into the popular diversions. . . . Costumed “Bedouins” performed for Parisian festival-goers as early as 1831, and in the 1840s scenes set in Algeria were featured among the military pantomimes presented on temporary stages erected around the city to entertain the populace. The conquest became a theme for the capital’s elaborate pyrotechnic displays, as well. In 1836, the grand finale of the fireworks capping the three-day holiday simulated the siege of a “Moorish” fort In the 1840s, public buildings were illuminated with “Oriental” or “Moorish” arches and even, in 1845, emblazoned with colored lights spelling out “Afrique française.” (89)

At the same time that this conflict was being celebrated and exoticized, though, it was being criticized for its cost and cruelty. According to Sessions, “As the occupation grew, liberal lawmakers objected to its financial costs, while parliamentarians, journalists, and citizens of varied political stripes questioned the extreme violence that characterized antiguerilla warfare in North Africa” (83). The cruelty of the war could be seen in its initial stages when, soon after the fall of Algiers in 1830, French soldiers took part in what Bower, calls “the brutal sack of Blida,” which saw “Pell-mell executions of people assembled as prisoners . . . includ[ing] firing squads and sabering and bayoneting of those who survived. This improvised slaughter dragged on for more than six hours. . . . French troops descended on one neighborhood and killed everyone. Eight hundred Blideans were slaughtered as recompense for the twenty-one French soldiers killed in action that day” (Bower 16). A French army publication concluded that “This unfortunate town can be considered no longer to exist” (qtd. in Bower 16).

Scenes of such barbarity occurred throughout the war. In 1845, just a year before Balzac began *Cousin Bette*, a French army, having trapped a rebellious Arab tribe, set fires to smoke them out of their mountain caves. William Gallois, History Professor at the University of Exeter, describes the result: “What those soldiers who advanced found in the cave were around six hundred villagers. Almost all of them appeared to be dead, but after dragging the bodies from the smoky caves into clearer air, it became clear that perhaps fifty or a hundred of the tribe had survived, able now to make peace with the French army” (94). This “gassing . . . in caves [was] a tactic of irregular warfare employed by the French on several occasions during the Algerian campaign” (“Aimable”).

Yet in *Cousin Bette*, while the remote Napoleonic wars linger, the ongoing Algerian war is absent but for the war-profiting opportunity it offers Baron Hulot. Admittedly, the war provided many opportunities for profiteering: in 1840 alone, Algeria cost the War Ministry 58 million francs, and between 1831 and 1840, 305 million francs (Browder 33). Other than its corruption, Balzac only briefly and in passing refers to the war. Hulot’s brother, the Marshal, comments that Hulot is “overwhelmed with work because of the Algerian situation” (179). And, as noted earlier, Hulot tells his brother-in-law they can profit “by raids and levies,” and “there is a lot of fighting over grain” (144). Bower provides the context that Balzac passes over:

The purpose of such raids was to break the rural economy and consequently the capacity of people to resist. French troops burned crops, emptied silos, stole herds, and cut down fruit and olive trees, thereby ensuring economic ruin. Terror became the army’s most important weapon . . . kidnapping, summary executions, outright murder, torture, and sexual assaults produced . . . the sense of ‘terrible fear’ that commanders thought would destroy existing social bonds and result in a docile population. (22)

In *Cousin Bette*, however, there's no indication of the military's use of terror, no explanation of what "raids" consisted of. Likewise, the vague reference to "a lot of fighting" occurring over grain ignores the French strategy of confiscating and destroying grain and other crops as part of a strategy to destroy the region's social infrastructure.

Why does none of this background appear in the novel, especially given that, as Michael Tilby argues, "The lives and fortunes of individuals and families in *La Comédie Humaine* are profoundly rooted in the socio-political realities of the precise moment at which they are observed" (2-3). One could argue that shifting attention to Algeria might lessen the novel's thematic focus on bourgeois materialism and its impact on the family and the larger society. Yet Balzac includes several references to the war for Polish independence. It's odd that while working for the War Ministry Baron Hulot makes no mention of this war other than his scheme to profit from it. In fact, there's more discussion of the Polish fight for independence against Russia in *Cousin Bette* than of the Arab fight against France in Algeria.

For Balzac in *La Comédie Humaine* overall the Algerian war likely seemed peripheral and ephemeral and distracting since it had little obvious impact on the way people lived in France. Instead, for novelists such as Balzac, "the colonial territories are realms of possibility" associated with, according to the influential post-colonial scholar Edward Said, "fortune-enhancing or fantasized activities like emigration, money-making, and sexual adventure." In other words, like most 19th century novelists, Balzac seems incapable of, in Said's words, "regard[ing] imperial concerns as constitutively significant to the culture of the modern West" (66). And yet Said finds "one of the quiet themes running through French fiction from Balzac to [the end of the century] is precisely this abuse of Algeria and the scandals deriving from shady financial schemes operated by unscrupulous individuals for whom the openness of the place permitted nearly every conceivable thing to be done if profit could be promised or expected" (182).

Another possible explanation for the absence of details—or even of any discussion—about French occupation of Algeria, especially from an upper-level administrator in the War Ministry such as Hulot, is that it demonstrates his moral corruption. He is interested only in his own pleasures and his financial well-being. In some ways, then, his lack of curiosity about the war and its impact on French soldiers is representative of a bureaucratic mindset that, too, was mostly concerned with the war's expense. During the period covered by the novel, approximately 50,000 French soldiers died in Algeria. To put this in context, this number is roughly the same as the number of American soldiers who died in the former French colony of Indochina. At one time, "one of the most able administrators of the Napoleonic regime," Baron Hulot is now one of these "unscrupulous individuals," his passions leading him into a terrible maze: "misappropriation of public funds in order to pay for usury, usury required to pay for his passions and for his daughter's marriage" (147). To put it another way, Hulot is using the cover of war to steal from the Arabs to steal from the French to pay for his mistress. An official like Baron Hulot would have been just one of many military and political leaders profiting from the war, and Algeria is just one of a number of schemes he contrives to preserve his class position and maintain his mistress, which includes "tak[ing] out an insurance policy on his own life, with a term of three years and a benefit of 150,000 francs, which he uses as security for a loan of 70,000 francs. . . . [which] will be repaid either by 80,000 francs from the proceeds of the insurance policy should Hulot die, or by Hulot's entire salary over the three-year period" (Raphael 463).

"All these efforts," Balzac explains, "were expended to appear great in the eyes of Madame Marneffe" (147), who will move into her new flat (and thus have sexual relations with Hulot for the first time) on the day of his daughter's marriage. Valérie insists on attending the wedding. So to disguise his interest in her, Hulot must invite the entire 200-member staff of his department in the War Ministry. However, he makes the mistake of giving her "a dress far too splendid for the wife of an assistant-manager" and of not "conceal[ing] his delight at seeing [her] success," thereby causing the other wives to "whisper behind the fans" about their possible intimate connection (153), a scene that Valérie exploits, playing upon Hulot's guilt

over her alleged loss of honor. “How do you expect a poor woman not to be thoughtful,” she complains to Hulot, “when she has her first lapse from virtue. . . . Do you think that I have no feelings, no faith, no religion? Your joy this evening was extremely indiscreet. . . . What woman does not value her reputation? You have ruined me. Oh, I’m certainly yours now. And the only way I can excuse my fault is by being faithful to you” (153). She then tells him that she had stopped sleeping with her husband after three days of marriage and ever since “had lived like the most virtuous of maidens” (154).

It’s this overcoming of her honor that feeds Hulot’s ego, hence his sexual desire. “He had never before known the charms of a resisting virtue,” Balzac writes, “and the timid Valérie enabled him to enjoy them” (107). Balzac further explains that “Madame Marneffe had finally so fascinated the old Empire beau that he thought he was the first to persuade her to be unfaithful and had aroused in her a passion strong enough to make her forget all her duties.” He is “blissfully happy—for in Valérie he had found all the innocence of a young girl combined with the most consummate devilry” (154). Valérie, then, who is only 23, offers Hulot the perfect combination of innocence and experience. Her sexual expertise, or what Balzac calls “consummate devilry,” offers Hulot the allure of domestic virtue degraded. This scene, taking place in the house on Rue Vaneau which Baron Hulot has purchased for Valérie occurs while his daughter’s wedding party continues. Balzac is surely commenting on male sexual desire, on the nature of marriage and family, on female inconstancy and prevarication, on the costs of maintaining one’s social position. But at this point, with father newly adulterous and daughter newly married, Balzac interrupts the narrative to announce, “Here ends what is, in a way, the introduction to this story” (155). So, following Balzac’s lead, we’ll stop and pick up in our next episode.

Part Two

Chapters 38-48

Cousin Bette picks up again three years later in 1841 with the increasingly indebted Hulot paying twice as much to maintain Valérie Marneffe as he had his previous mistress. And, without Hulot’s knowledge, Crevel, in exchange for her sexual delights, has arranged an annual income of six thousand francs for her. Given his proletarian background, Crevel is especially attracted to this respectable bourgeois wife and mother. In the past, when “with the most respected society women, he would see them to the door with the servile bows of a shopkeeper, while admiring their grace, their way of wearing fashionable clothes, and all the indefinable signs of what is called good breeding. To reach the heights of one of these queens of society,” Balzac writes, “was a desire which had been conceived in his youth and laid buried in his heart ever since” (162-63). Now, with Valérie Marneffe, this desire has been reanimated, Crevel’s cravings consummated.

Just as she does with Baron Hulot, Valérie manipulates Crevel emotionally, offering him “sophisticated pleasures that he had never before experienced . . . [and] deceiv[ing] completely a man in whom she saw an inexhaustible cash-box” (162). She plays the coy lover, making Crevel believe “he had to conquer a kind of coldness. . . . she seemed to yield to the shopkeeper’s violent passion. But, as if ashamed, she would always reassume her proud airs of virtuous respectability, neither more nor less than an Englishwoman, and always crushed Crevel beneath the weight of her dignity” (162). She entices him by making him think he has to overcome her resistance and then by playing the virtuous woman reasserting her dignity, reinforcing his fantasy of a servile shopkeeper ravishing a queen of society, her pretended post-coital guilt bolstering this role-playing. But, of course, this wouldn’t work were it not for her sexual expertise. Madame Marneffe, we are told, demonstrates her talents equally in drawing room and boudoir. While in public she presented a “combination of modest, pensive innocence, of impeccable propriety. . . . in private she outdid the courtesans; she was amusing, entertaining, and richly inventive” (162). “Moreover,” Balzac writes, “Valérie had love-making skills which made her indispensable to Crevel” (162).

In these scenes, in the acknowledgment of Valérie's lively sexuality (she's sleeping with Baron Hulot, with Crevel, and with her husband; soon, she'll be sleeping with two more men), in the complete absence of any domestic impulses (she has a child we never see her with), in Crevel's and Baron Hulot's degradation, and her husband's degeneracy, we are far from the world of the respectable Victorian novel. Balzac's reference to Englishwomen's virtuous respectability presupposes a distinctly English prudery and points to a common criticism of French novels: they were immoral. The perception that there was a fundamental difference between French and English views on vice, that the English view was superior (and the French view a threat to the social order), that as a result French novels were immoral, and that these should be kept from impressionable Englishwomen were familiar refrains in early-to-mid Victorian literary culture.

In the most notorious criticism of French novels, published in 1836 in *Quarterly Review*, its author, John Wilson Croker, claimed these novels revealed a "moral degeneration" which began in the French Revolution and was revived in the July Monarchy by a generation educated during and with values shaped by the Revolution. (Such generational blame is reminiscent of American conservatives' perpetual demonizing of the 60s generation and the younger generations taught by these tenured radicals. (This anti-60s ideology now flourishes as anti-wokism and anti-critical race theory.) For Croker, the July Monarchy and the French novels of this period revived the radical ideologies and immorality of the Revolution (and thus like the Revolution itself was a threat to Britain).

This perception was similar to Balzac's own, Ronnie Butler asserting that "What essentially interested him are [the Revolution's] effects on French society in the first half of the nineteenth century. . . . It is against the background of this continuing historical analysis, with its starting-point in the Revolution, that Balzac's judgment of each successive regime is made" (167). Ironically, as Croker saw it, Balzac, who hated the July Monarchy and its continuation of Revolutionary ideologies, profited from its moral permissiveness. In particular, Croker complained about "the extreme laxity of female morals which [the French novel] exhibits; and, secondly, the extreme grossness with which such instances are detailed" (129). Croker sounded the alarm about the moral ruin these books impended, worrying about the consequences if they fell "into the hands of persons wholly or partially ignorant of their real character—nay, into ladies book clubs" and alerted those who do not read "what they consider as mere harmless trash" not to allow "these conductors of moral corruption to infect their dwellings" (66). Not limited to corrupting women, the French novel, Croker feared, "threatens the whole fabric of European society" (66). Croker criticized popular French novelists such as Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, George Sand, and Paul de Kock, while directing especial ire at Balzac. Acknowledging that he is "the cleverest, the most prolific, and the most popular of all these novelists, (95), "a baser, meaner, filthier scoundrel," Croker wrote, "never polluted society" (69).

While in accord with other Victorian voices, Croker's assault on the French novel was so excessive that it led to criticism by some members of the British literary establishment. It should be noted, too, that Croker was an extremely conservative member of Parliament who resigned his seat rather than serve in a government that modestly expanded the franchise with passage of the 1832 Reform Act. A notoriously belligerent critic, the fittingly named Croker was, alleged by both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, to have been responsible for the death of the poet John Keats. Shelley compared Croker to a poisonous snake, a "deaf and viperous murderer" and "nameless worm" ("Adonais," lines 317-19). Or as Byron put it in his epic satire *Don Juan*, "John Keats, who was killed off by one critique, / Just as he really promised something great, / . . . / Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate:— / 'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article" (LX, p. 329). Less fatally, Croker's review, titled "Hang, draw, and quarterly," of Arthur Tennyson's first volume of poetry seems to have traumatized the poet, who wouldn't publish another volume of poems for nine years. If Croker's attacks were extreme, his criticism did reflect a commonly held view among the British cultural elite, University College London English professor Juliette Atkinson asserting that "Victorian critics . . . denounced French novels in the most hysterical terms and clung to the notion that such works would never be tolerated in England" (6).

Eight years after Croker's attacks, similar criticism of Balzac and the French novel appeared in an anonymously published article in *The Monthly Review* whose author acknowledged the problem of English prudery but saw a much greater threat posed by French immorality: "From the standing point of public morality, all we can reproach the English with is their too reserved manners and coldness, which they carry, perhaps, rather to excess; while the French frivolity leads to something worse, to corruption of innocence, fancy, manners, and even the heart" ("Novels" 548). French novelists, according to this reviewer, demonstrated an "inclination towards obscene scenes, the amalgamation of voluptuousness and cruelty. . . . Balzac, Sue . . . and the whole host of their own imitators, all vied in the representation of human vices and torments in their worst aspect." These writers sought to display "abominations, tyranny, despotism, and cruelties of the worst kind. Neither did they forget to interlard them with . . . free-thinking, and ridicule of marriage and other sacred morals," opening up, "In the midst of peace, and the blessings of civilization . . . [an] abyss of corruption and demoralization hardly to be conceived" ("Novels" 549). Expressing a view common among Victorian readers and critics, this reviewer accused writers such as Balzac of too realistically depicting human vices, while ridiculing the sanctity of marriage, thereby threatening the foundation of the very civilization in which they thrived and from which they profited.

Another reviewer writing in 1848, George Henry Lewes, common-law-husband to the novelist George Eliot, complained similarly that Balzac was too benign in his depiction of adultery: in Balzac's works it seemed that "all wives are unfaithful and their fidelity is looked upon as only an insult to their husbands, never as a crime against society. . . . he has written scarcely a story in which love forms the principal element, in which adultery is not introduced. . . . He never betrays the least consciousness that his hero or heroine are guilty" (147). Lewes concluded that "Balzac, on the whole, is a very dangerous writer. . . . [his novels] are all dangerously insidious. They want delicacy, both of taste and feeling. They imply that natural manners and natural ideas are ridiculous; and that Parisian refinement alone can make a human being estimable. . . . he corrupts the taste of his admiring reader. He should be strictly forbidden to young women" (149). Several years later, writing in *Bentley's Magazine*, an anonymous reviewer claimed that Balzac's works would "never become popular in England . . . for the doctrines they generally inculcate are quite subversive of those ideas of morality" held by the English. "Every work written by . . . Balzac," this writer asserted, "gave one more blow to French morality and . . . the deplorable condition of society in that country is in great measure owing to the success of the school of which he was the arch teacher. . . . the terrible influences his pernicious doctrines exercised upon society" would persist as long as people continue to read his books ("Honore" 156).

Contrary to this writer's desire, Balzac's influence in Britain grew, as did admiration for his fiction. Writing in 1932, Clarence R. Decker, author of *The Victorian Conscience* and owner of a remarkably varied academic career (chairman of two English departments; university president; Assistant Director for the Far East, Mutual Security Agency; member of the Advisory Committee for the Truman Library and of the White House Conference on International Cooperation; and author of two books on international relations), charts the trend of British critical responses to Balzac: "From [1842] to the end of the century . . . Balzac's writings appeared regularly either in the monthly or annual magazines or in book form. English critics were at first hostile to these translations, but as the century advanced became more and more favorably impressed with Balzac's work" (1150).

So impressed, in fact, that Balzac's novels—and other French novels—inspired an entire genre, the sensation novel, labelled by one writer a "plant of foreign growth" (qtd. in Atkinson 244). "Not only individual novels," Atkinson writes, "but the [sensation] genre as a whole was identified as profoundly French" (Atkinson 243). The influence of French fiction upon the sensation novel is evident in writers such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon who, while consistently praising Balzac and Flaubert, depicted in the quintessential sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, a character, Robert Audley, who seemed not to travel anywhere without a stack of French novels. The criticism of sensation novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* was consistent

with the criticism aimed at its inspiration, the French novel. As Victorian culture changed, though, it seems, so did its tolerance for “immoral” literature. To an anonymous reviewer writing in *Dublin University Magazine* in 1864, “Balzac is not wholly free from the vices peculiar to French novelists, yet we may safely assert that there will be found in his works very little of that which some fastidious reader of a modern sensational novel would term ‘objectionable’” (620). To this same reviewer, “The forty-five volumes . . . [of] *La Comédie Humaine* . . . contain a more subtle analysis of human life and passion, a more vivid picture of men and manners, than anything that has been transmitted to posterity by the pen of one single man since the days of Shakespeare” (“Style” 620). By the 1860s, then, for some Victorians, Balzac’s fiction could be recognized as a substantial achievement, signaling a cultural shift from concerns about its immorality to claims about its literary immortality.

In 1886, Oscar Wilde expressed his admiration for Balzac, affirming that “after Shakespeare, Balzac is our most important magazine of documents of human nature” and the *Comédie Humaine* is . . . the greatest monument that literature has produced in our century.” To the attacks on Balzac’s immorality, Wilde argued, “the morals of the personages of the *Comédie Humaine* are simply the morals of the world around us. . . . He sees life from every point of view. He has no preferences and no prejudices” (“Balzac” 35). Wilde also praises Balzac’s creation of character, singling out, among others, Baron Hulot and Madame Marneffe, for having “a fierce vitality about them: their existence is fervent and firey-coloured: we not merely feel for them but we see them—they dominate our fancy and defy scepticism” (“Balzac” 36).

It’s hard not to see in Wilde’s appreciation for the fierce vitality of these characters an appreciation for these characters’ violation of social and especially sexual conventions. They enjoyably disregard the culture’s conventions on marital fidelity and monogamy, on female chastity and adolescent sexuality, maybe even on female homosexuality. Valérie and Hulot pursue pleasure for its own sake, having multiple and often secret sexual partners—a lifestyle that surely would resonate with Wilde’s own life. Wilde would probably also be sympathetic to Balzac’s dismissal of the cheap and ugly style of the bourgeoisie and Balzac’s fondness for objets d’art. On his lecture tour of the United States, for instance, Wilde lectured on the subject of House Decoration, confessing, “I did not imagine, until I went into some of your simpler cities, that there was so much bad work done. I found, where I went, bad wall-papers horribly designed, and coloured carpets, and that old offender the horse-hair sofa, whose stolid look of indifference is always so depressing. I found meaningless chandeliers and machine-made furniture . . . which creaked dismally” (“House” 161). He implored his audience to appreciate and incorporate into their lives and to promote among handicraftsman the creation of objects of genuine beauty. “What your people need is not so much high imaginative art,” he implored, “but that which hallows the vessels of everyday use” (“House” 161), a sentiment that would surely agree with Balzac’s aesthetics.

But let us leave Mr. Wilde and return to the 1840s setting of *Cousin Bette*, returning to the immoral and definitionally French world of adultery and deception and female sexuality in which Barol Hulot thinks he has Valérie Marneffe to himself and Crevel thinks he is cuckolding the Baron without perceiving his own cuckoldry, while behind the scenes schemes the ever-vengeful Bette. Their plots conjoined, Bette and Valérie have established a close conspiratorial partnership, one whose closeness Balzac feels he must comment on, letting us know that this closeness is not evidence of their having a sexual relationship. “Lisbeth and Valérie offered the touching sight of one of those friendships between women which are so close and so unlikely that Parisians, always too quick to jump to conclusions, immediately dismiss them as scandalous,” he writes, “The contrast between the cold, masculine temperament of the Lorraine peasant and Valérie’s warm créole nature gave substance to the calumny” (166).

Contemporary readers, in a post-Freud, post-Foucault, post-feminist world, are likely to suspect that any close same-sex relationship such as this, if not explicitly sexual is evidence of latent homosexuality and repressed homosexual desire. One shouldn’t assume, though, that readers in the 1840s would share these expectations, nor, faced with a close relationship between two women, would reach this conclusion. So why

does Balzac make this authorial intrusion? A Victorian novelist would feel no such compunction, would not anticipate this readerly reaction, perhaps not even make this connection him/herself. Victoria Thompson, History Professor at Arizona State University, offers a plausible explanation, asserting that during “the July Monarchy . . . a period of tremendous social upheaval, sexuality and gender often appeared as fluid” (103) and that during this period, “cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, and same-sex love were hot topics” (104), topics, in fact, that Balzac wrote about in other works. In addressing his readers’ suspicions, however, Balzac doesn’t actually deny a lesbian relationship between Bette and Valérie. He says that Parisian gossips would read this relationship as sexual, especially because of the contrast between the two women, the butch Bette and the femme Valérie. But he doesn’t say that these gossips’ gossip was wrong. 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” (172). Yet even here the relationship is hard to classify, daughter, friend, beloved. Ultimately, Balzac leaves the nature of this relationship ambiguous. In doing so, by not defining their relationship, Balzac, it could be argued, is sympathizing with the flexible sexuality that, to some degree, existed in the 1840s when “there arose,” writes Thompson, “an opportunity . . . [to] imagine . . . same-sex sexuality in a more fluid, and more positive, manner” (122). Similarly, Michael Lucey, UC-Berkeley Professor in French Literature, suggests that by not resolving this question, Balzac is implying that “sentiment and affect and sexuality, once produced, exceed the structures that are meant to contain them” (161).

Contrasting the two women, Balzac refers to Bette’s “cold, masculine temperament of the Lorraine peasant and Valérie’s “warm créole nature” (166); she has “the docility of the créole, the yielding nature of the voluptuary” (172) and “a wit enhanced by courtesy, grace, and charming créole manners” (162). At the time, “créole” had two meanings: either a person of mixed white European (mostly French or Spanish) and black African descent born in the West Indies, or a white person of European ancestry who grew up in a French or Spanish colony. There’s no indication from her appearance that Valérie Marneffe is of mixed race—and no indication that she grew up in a French colony. My best guess, with a nod of thanks to the French translator Jane Kuntz, is that Valérie’s father, Count de Montcomet, a general in Napoleon’s army who served in Spain, Poland, and Germany, may have spent time in the army in the French colonies, meeting Valérie’s mother there.

Whatever her family background, the voluptuary créole Valérie proceeds to emasculate and dominate Baron Hulot by contriving to have him look his age. The vain Hulot, at Valérie’s urging, stops using make-up, wearing a tight waistcoat, dying his whiskers, and he removes his hair-piece., upon which she tells him he “look[s] infinitely nicer” (163). In truth, “his stomach sagged, his obesity became obvious. . . . [he had] bush tufts of hair in [his] ears and nose and on the fingers. . . . like . . . moss growing on the almost everlasting monuments of the Roman Empire” (164). Hulot’s identity is based on appearances—the appearance of prosperity, the appearance of power, the appearance of virility—all of which Valérie unwraps to reveal a man, naked, unprepossessing, grotesque, and farcical. She tells him it’s his true self that she loves when in truth she has him remove this outer self (and expose his inner self) to make him more vulnerable and controllable. Enraptured and addicted, Hulot dines with Valérie every night. He goes nine months without giving his wife any money and a full month without seeing her (190-1). Because her husband has spent their family money on his mistresses, Adeline now lives in a smaller space which she has had to furnish “with the relics of her splendour” and “the best of the worn-out furniture” from her previous residence (174). She consoles herself by recalling how her husband raised her from her humble beginnings: “Even though my Hector has banished me here, he has still given me a much better life than [sic] a simple peasant woman has any right to expect,” she tells herself, “I am Baroness Hulot, the sister-in-law of a Marshal of France. . . . I can wait for death wrapped in the immaculate veils of a virtuous wife in the crape of my vanished happiness” (174). Despite this pledge, we learn that “Every time the bell rang, she used to rush to the window. But for the last five days she hasn’t left her chair” (175).

What should we make of this aggressively submissive Adeline, doglike in her devotion? If this were a Victorian novel, there's no doubt her self-sacrifice and continued loyalty to and love for an adulterous husband would be praised as a display of the Christian virtues—self-sacrifice, fidelity, belief in redemption—expected of an angel in the house. But “to the modern reader,” notes Princeton University Professor of French and Italian and Comparative Literature David Bellos, “she may seem unbelievably spineless; [especially] to . . . women readers . . ., she may seem repellently acquiescent in the asymmetric social, financial, and sexual rights of nineteenth-century males” (xiv). But what of Balzac? Does he want us to admire this passive martyr?

To University of Denver Professor of French and Francophone Studies James Gilroy, “Though he spares no praise for this noble woman and even compares her to the Blessed Virgin and to Christ, Balzac cannot help reproaching her for her ‘fanatical’ devotion and must class her among the monomanes . . . whose obsessive absorption in a single sentiment is as destructive as it is grand” (108). “We may see in Adeline's religiosity, her assertions of faith in a moral order, Balzac's sense of an alternative way of living characterized by a redeeming spiritual poise and tranquility,” argues Christopher Prendergast, University of Cambridge Emeritus French Professor, “On the other hand, given the actual course of events in the novel, we may be inclined to see her moral and religious piety as the sign of a colossal naivety, a radical failure of comprehension, an inability to cope with the real issues that is almost as damaging in its human consequences as the more obviously disruptive activities of those opposed to her” (321).

Hélène Ortali complicates this view, suggesting that Adeline is not as moral and selfless as she seems. Like Valérie, Adeline succeeds not through her moral beliefs but through her physical charms. “When things go well for her,” explains Ortali, “she does not realize that it is because her society places a high value on beauty and sexual attractiveness. Instead, she attributes her good fortune to [her husband], who appears as an ‘infallible’ ‘God’ and ‘creator.’ When [Hulot] leaves her, she fails to see that this, too, is in accordance with the social scale of value” (201). In addition, her essential characteristic—selflessness—to Ortali is actually self-interest in disguise: “family being an extension of her own personality, what she does for Family she does for herself. And she does precious little that is not for Family. Adeline's selflessness is thus highly questionable” (200). Far from opposites, Bette and Adeline, on Ortali's reading, share similar motivations: “both women are possessive and egotistical, which adds to the tragic, the sadistic tone of the novel through their vulnerability and acute sensitivity to matters relating to themselves” (197). It's her own faults, then, not her husband's, that cause her downfall. Thus, Duke University Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Institute for Critical Theory Fredric Jameson argues that “Balzac thought of his novel rather naively as an object lesson: a warning against the kept mistress as the scourge of the legitimate family, [and a] demonstration of the supreme responsibility of the wife, who ought to know how to be both wife and mistress in one” (242).

Chapters 49-56

Valérie Marneffe, scourge of the family, has contempt for the men she manipulates, complaining to Bette, “I have spent two hours with Crevel this morning. . . . Belonging to those two old men! There are moments when I'm ashamed of myself! Oh, if my poor mother could see me!” (170-1). Bette sympathetically responds, “Marneffe is a corpse they have forgotten to bury. The Baron is virtually your husband. Crevel is your admirer. As I see it, that's perfectly in order for any married woman” (171). Valérie, though, is not completely cynical about men. Bette has been conniving to have Valérie steal Steinbock from Hortense to hurt the Hulots by having affairs with both her cousin's and her niece's husbands. Valérie is impatient for the affair to begin, admitting “lov[ing] Wenceslas so much that it's making [her] grow thin” (171). And she knows she has charms superior to Hortense's. “What's his wife,” she asks, “A pretty piece of flesh! Yes, she's beautiful, but I, I know it instinctively, I am more seductive” (171). Just like her mother, Hortense, in Jameson's words, fails to meet “the supreme responsibility of the wife, who ought to know how

to be both wife and mistress in one.” While she balances the interests of two regular lovers and a husband and plots to seduce Wenceslas, there appears in her “drawing-room . . . full of her faithful adherents” (183) a fifth man: Monsieur le Baron Henri Montès de Monténjanos, a former lover, her “only one real love, one happiness,” she had told Bette, “a rich Brazilian, who went away . . . to sell his property, to realize all his assets so that he could settle in France” (114). Expected to have been gone for just a year, Montès, Valérie joked, “Perhaps . . . [had] been shipwrecked, too, like my virtue” (114).

Unlike the fat Hulot, the aging Crevel, and the decrepit Monsieur Marneffe, Montès is physically attractive, a man “on whom the equatorial climate had bestowed the kind of physique and complexion that we all ascribe to the stage Othello” (183). He has returned to Valérie wealthy and desirable: he wears “a huge diamond . . . which shone like a star in his sumptuous silk cravat, worn with a half-open white waistcoat, revealing an incredibly fine-textured shirt. His forehead, bulging like a satyr’s, a sign of stubborn tenacity in passion, was surmounted by jet-black hair . . . beneath it gleamed a pair of light-coloured eyes, so wild and tawny that you would have thought the Baron’s mother had been frightened by a jaguar when she was carrying him” (184). He was, in short, a “magnificent specimen of the Portuguese in Brazil” (184). Despite his formidable appearance, “he had a very gentle and affectionate nature, which predestined him to the kind of exploitation that weak women practice on strong men” (184). In other words, unafraid of his strength, Valérie manipulates him into pretending to be her cousin. By contrast, Hulot and Crevel, “these two genuinely passion-stricken men” (184), are intimidated by Montès’s physique and virility: they respond to his dramatic entry into the drawing room with “identical feelings of curiosity mingled with anxiety . . . [and] foreboding” (184).



[Illustration by Georges Cain](#), 1900 (Valérie Marneffe and Henri Montès de Monténjanos),

What follows has the spirit of a drawing room farce. Montès the Brazilian is said to have departed with the other guests, but he actually hides in Valérie’s dressing-room while Hulot confronts her about her so-called cousin. “When he came in,” whines Hulot, “I felt as if a knife had stabbed my heart. However blinded I may be, I’m not that blind. I read your eyes and his. In short, sparks were emitted from that ape’s eyes which were reflected in you and your look.” He goes on to complain about what he now understands about her relationship with Crevel: “that lump of stupid flesh loves you and you receive his attentions favourably

enough for this idiot to reveal his passion to the whole world.” Valérie haughtily replies, “Well, love me with all my faults or leave me” (191). When she gets up, Hulot grabs her arm and makes her sit down. “The old man was no longer able to replace Valérie,” writes Balzac, “She had become a need for him, more overwhelming than the necessities of life, and he would rather remain in uncertainty than be given the slightest proof of Valérie’s infidelity” (191-92). When he asks for an explanation, Valérie tells him to wait for her downstairs.

“Once the door was bolted,” narrates Balzac, “the Brazilian came out of the dressing-room where he had been waiting, and he appeared, his eyes full of tears, in a pitiable state. Clearly, Montès had heard everything” (192). And so he confronts Valérie, asking why she doesn’t leave everything behind and join him. She explains that she can’t leave Baron Hulot until her husband is appointed office manager, giving her a larger income upon his death, which she imagines will happen within five years but probably much sooner. She promises to marry Montès and has him promise, “by [his] mother’s ashes and by her eternal salvation, by the Virgin Mary, and by [his] hopes as a Catholic” (194) to take her as his wife after her husband’s death. “Valérie knew that the Brazilian would keep his oath,” Balzac writes, “even if she were to sink to the depths of the filthiest social mire” (194). His submission to Valérie’s wishes is reinforced by the fact that he’s kneeling before her, taking the solemn oath with “his nose almost touching Valérie’s white bosom and his eyes fascinated” (194). It’s her sensuality, their passionate past, and this créole’s whiteness that keeps Montès in her thrall.

Although remaining with her husband to increase her wealth through his pension, Valérie is otherwise becoming wealthy. Crevel has been supplementing her income and has doubled her savings in two months (201), just as Josépha’s wealthy lover, the Duc d’Hérouville, increased her wealth through speculation. If Hulot had had the expertise and the capital to speculate, he might have kept Josépha or Valérie, whose lovers took advantage of what Pinkney identifies as “an extraordinary phase of acceleration in the period 1835/1840 to 1860” (23). In his accounting of Valérie and Crevel’s and the Duc’s financial speculations, Balzac accurately shows how the rich got richer in 1830s France. Taking advantage of this economic climate, the Duc d’Hérouville generates money for his mistress by, in her words, “turning coal into gold.” Pinkney explains that in the mid-1830s, “the demand for coal . . . stimulated the creation of many new companies and a feverish search for untapped coal deposits” (28). Crevel has provided for his mistress through purchasing railway shares. If the 1830s saw a growth in coal companies and increased speculation, according to Butler, “the 1840s saw a corresponding proliferation in railway companies, accompanied by a similar wave of speculation” (228-29). Popkin provides further context: “Railroad projects were too costly to be handled by traditional family firms; they demanded joint-stock companies and encouraged the growth of the capital market—along with a great deal of speculation, corruption, and fraud” (104). The construction of railroads was part of what Popkin calls France’s “first true industrial boom from 1842-1845” (104), which paralleled—and was helped by—a rise in financial speculation and investment. We take for granted the existence of financial markets (and the upper class’s exploitation of these). But although the Bourse was created in the mid-18th century, it didn’t take off and become a central part of the French economy until the growth of the bourgeoisie and the rise in industrialization that took place in the 1830s and 1840s. “The number of firms whose shares were quoted on the ‘Bourse’ rose from eight in 1816 to 42 in 1826 and to 88 in 1836,” Butler explains, “after which they increased dramatically to reach 260 by 1841” (228).

To his romantic and financial misfortune, Hulot is unable to take advantage of this economic growth. But Valérie does, Butler asserting that “under [Crevel’s] guidance she quickly acquires an expert knowledge of the workings of the ‘Bourse’” (229). That she gains skills in this area should come as no surprise since her life as wife and courtesan and mistress depends on cold-hearted calculation, predicting when a lover will run out of money and when a husband will die, and on her talent at deception and prevarication, on ruthlessly pursuing self-interest with no concern for its harmful consequences, even made joyful by the suffering of her male victims. Ultimately, Valérie’s well-being relies on speculating about the men in her life. She speculates that, only 26 years old, she will retain her value for several years to come. She is in great demand and has an

excess supply of suitors. She sees that Crevel, with substantial wealth, has a competitive advantage over the increasingly disadvantaged Hulot. She calculates that her husband will likely die within five years, Crevel within ten. The bottom line: she will simplify her assets by disposing of Hulot, will, after her husband's demise, marry Crevel, will continue to merge with Montès and marry him after Crevel's final collapse, and will maintain a silent partnership with Wenceslas Steinbock. These two men, Steinbock and Montès, "are [her] only two passions. One is love, the other is just a whim" (215). Valérie calculates her romances precisely: since Crevel will leave her an income of about thirty thousand francs and he'll die by the time she turns 33, she can, in Bette's words, "marry your Brazilian and cut a fine figure with sixty thousand francs a year of your own." When Valérie worries that as a foreigner Montès is unlikely to succeed in France, Bette reminds her that they "live in an age of railways, when foreigners in France end up occupying high positions" (215).

In treating the men in her life as commodities to be bought and sold, traded and possessed, Valérie is imposing upon them the same value system women like her faced in 19th century France. And these men feel similarly aggrieved. Crevel's attraction to Valérie is itself based on her cultural capital. "If Valérie doesn't see to my education," he bemoans, "I'll never be anybody. And I'm so anxious to give the impression of being a real lord. Oh, what a woman. She upsets me like an attack of colic when she looks at me coldly! What grace! What intelligence!" (204). He shows Hulot the apartment he has purchased for her on the fashionable Rue de Dauphin (the street, a century later, where Picasso would paint his masterpiece, "Guernica"). and tells him that they've been having sexual relations there almost as long as Hulot has been with Valérie in the apartment he purchased for her. The disillusioned Hulot responds, "Why, out of ten beautiful women, are at least seven depraved?" (209). Balzac seems to have had seven women on his mind: Franz Liszt told his lover, the Comtesse d'Agoult, that Balzac believed "'a man is not truly complete unless he has seven women: one for the home, one for the heart, one for the brain, one for the household, one for whims and follies, a woman to hate, and the woman one pursues but never catches" (qtd. in Robb 249). Valérie's calculating behavior with her lovers mirrors much of Balzac's own juggling and plotting of romances and affairs.

It might be presumed, given his conservative politics, that Balzac behaved in a manner that respected marriage and monogamy. At times in the novel he seems to show a religious reverence for women, describing the angelic qualities of Adeline and Hortense. And he suggests that "virginity . . . has its own special richness, its own absorbing grandeur," suggesting that in conserving energy, virginity enriches the brain. "When chaste people need their bodies or their minds," he writes, "they find that their muscles are of steel or that their minds have been infused with intuitive wisdom; they have diabolical strength or the black magic of the will." The Virgin Mary, he continues, "as a symbol eclipses in her greatness" all other deities. Virginity is "the mother of great things . . . [which] holds the key to higher worlds in her beautiful white hands" (117).

At the same time that he praises virginity, though, he sees it as abnormal, a condition that has deformed but also strengthened Cousin Bette. Balzac was himself quite the libertine, having many mistresses and long-term lovers, many of whom were married. He attracted a female following after the publication of *The Physiology of Marriage*, which was the first of his commercially successful books. "Its publication in 1829," remarks V.S. Pritchett, "made him notorious if not famous, and established him in the minds of a large number of women readers. They might be angry, they might be admiring, they wrote hundreds of letters arguing, confessional, or ecstatic letters to the writer who was so much on their side and who had the gift of intimacy" (101). The "physiology" in the title refers to a form of social satire that "suddenly appeared in a great profusion in the early 1840s. The authors of these lampoons," explains Jo Burr Margadant, History Professor Emerita at UC-Santa Clara, "specialized in identifying social types to mock" (1487). Even recognizing its satiric intent, Balzac's *Physiology* is an odd book, a mock treatise on female infidelity with a long section written directly to male readers offering advice on how to keep their wives from cuckolding them. The tone is serious, but the advice is clearly ironic. And yet, as is often the case with irony, the

mockery doesn't obviate the book's real concern. In other words, Balzac mocks the advice he gives men to guard against wifely infidelity while simultaneously conveying a belief that wives are often unfaithful. So what made this book so popular with women readers? Balzac's premise, that marriage goes against nature, that romance fades, and that wives will seek pleasure elsewhere, resonated with women who often married an older man for financial reasons, who were supposed to see marriage and family as the culmination of their lives, and who were to accept the infidelity of their husbands while themselves remaining faithful.

Thus, Valérie's sexuality, her desire for Montès and Wenceslas, to Balzac, are normal and healthy. What's unhealthy is how she uses her sexuality for gain, which we see most vividly in Hulot and Crevel. At the whim of Valérie's desires, these two men, though competitors, bond over their similar fates. "Was there ever a woman more worthless, more vicious, more treacherous?" asks Hulot, to which Crevel replies, "She's a good-for-nothing . . . a scoundrel who should be whipped" (209). And they complain to each other about the expense of keeping Valérie as mistress; Crevel recognizes that their relationship is a financial transaction just like his commercial speculations: "We've been tricked like . . . shareholders! . . . All women of her sort are limited liability companies" (210). Yet they cannot divest themselves of such women: as Hulot asks, "how are we to give up the sight of these lovely creatures undressing, fingering their curls, looking at us with a knowing smile as they fix their curl-papers, putting on all their little tricks, reeling off their lies, saying they are unloved when they see us harassed by business affairs and entertaining us in spite of everything?" "Yes," agrees Crevel, "it's the only pleasure in life" (211).

Chapters 57-83

Cousin Bette continues to plot against her relatives, promoting a sexual relationship between Valérie Marneffe and Hortense Hulot's husband Wenceslas Steinbock. Married for three years, Hortense and Steinbock (and their son little Wenceslas) are struggling financially. Balzac reinforces their financial as well as their marital struggle through his description of their apartment. While "once in harmony with the honeymoon, [it] now had a half-new, half-faded look which could be called the autumn of furnishings. . . . The chintz hangings of Hortense's room . . . were like the carpet, constantly exposed to the sun and so had faded. The curtains had not been washed for a long time. The smell of Wenceslas's cigar pervaded the room . . . he dropped tobacco on the arms of chairs, on the prettiest pieces of furniture" (216). To help resolve their financial issues (and to exacerbate their marital woes), Bette explains to Hortense that Steinbock needs to forego his dreams of artistic success and instead pursue his skill as a craftsman, making everyday items rather than large-scale sculptures and take advantage of Valérie's new wealth. In a statement that encapsulates her and Valérie's (and to Balzac, bourgeois culture's) guiding philosophy, Bette advises, "You must look on people in society as tools you make use of, that you pick up or lay down according to their usefulness" (228). Needless to say, Hortense, whose father has been squandering his family's inheritance upon Valérie, is horrified by this advice, warning Steinbock "never go to that house. . . . It's hell . . . that woman's a demon. All the men who see her, adore her; she's so enticingly corrupt" (229).

But financial exigencies rule the day: Wenceslas goes to see Valérie Marneffe, whom he instantly perceives, enticed by her corruption, is superior to his wife: "Hortense was a lovely morsel of flesh . . . but Madame Marneffe had a spirited demeanour and the piquancy of vice" (236). Valérie entices him by feigning indifference, by having him stay late, by getting close enough to him that he sees "the little rosebud which decorated her bodice" (240), by commissioning him to create a bronze sculpture of Delilah with the luckless and lockless Samson, by agreeing to pose as Delilah, by being, as one of the male guests gushes, "the cleverest and most attractive woman. . . . It's so rare to see wit together with beauty" (242). Her seduction takes place over, of all things, a tea service:

Valérie herself brought Steinbock a cup of tea. This was more than a mark of attention; it was a special favour. There is a whole language in the way a woman performs that office, and women are well aware of this. . . . From the question 'Do you drink tea?' 'Would you like some tea?' . . . asked

coldly, and the order to the nymph presiding over the tea-urn to bring it, to the eloquent poem of the odalisque coming from the tea-table, cup in hand, and offering it submissively to her heart's pasha, in a caressing voice and with a look full of voluptuous promise. . . . In this situation a woman can, at will, make herself disdainful to the point of insult, or as humble as an oriental slave. . . . Valérie was more than a woman; she was the serpent in female form. She completed her devil's work by coming up to Steinbock with a cup of tea in her hand.

"I'll take as many cups of tea as you'd like to give me, for the sake of having them offered to me like this," the artist whispered to Valérie, getting up and lightly touching her with his fingers" (242-43).

Balzac sees the ritual of tea service as comical and describes it in the language of the mock-epic. But behind his mockery, he perceives meaning in this ritual which he conveys through trough images—odalisque (that is, a concubine in a harem), pasha (that is, a high-ranking Turk), and oriental slave—images of the exotic East (from where tea was imported). For Balzac, there's an intimacy, a seduction, in a lady, not a servant, serving a seated male guest, getting close to him and offering him oral gratification. This is a public act, the lady performing for her male guest, aware of and appealing to his gaze: "There is a whole language in the way a woman performs that office," Balzac writes, "and women are well aware of this. And so it is interesting to study their movements, their gestures, their looks, and the pitch and intonation of their voices, when they perform this apparently simple act of courtesy" (242). In a culture governed by ritual behavior and social codes, one must, as Balzac understands and as Steinbock is doing, analyze performative scenes such as this, must find the meaning conveyed through gesture and speech. In such scenes, Balzac asserts, "A physiologist can observe the whole range of feminine feelings" (242-43). Earlier, Balzac had identified the "moral flabbiness" of Steinbock and Poles in general and had suggested that, just like the tea service, the causes of this behavior "ought to be studied by physiologists" (67).

Physiology, then and now, refers to that branch of science which examines the biological workings of living things. To us, an ethnic "moral flabbiness" and "feminine feelings" and similar notions about ethnic and gender identity are not understood through physiology. These references to physiology suggest an impoverished intellectual environment—one without any developed theories of psychology or sociology. As a consequence, to explicate characters' actions Balzac must rely on a quasi-scientific, bio-determinist physiology. In the 1820s, the French biologist Henri Milne-Edwards "introduced the notion of physiological division of labor, which allowed [scientists] to 'compare and study living things as if they were machines created by the industry of man.' . . . Milne-Edwards wrote that the 'body of all living beings, whether animal or plant, resembles a factory . . . where the organs, comparable to workers, work incessantly to produce the phenomena that constitute the life of the individual'" ("Physiology"). Balzac alleges that close observation of natural phenomena, such as Steinbock's moral flabbiness and Valérie's tea-serving behavior, can be analyzed and explained biologically.

But he's actually analyzing characters from a sociological and psychological, not a physiological perspective.. It's just that these fields weren't available to him as explanatory categories. Thus, he notes the common practice of women to develop "a studied pose which makes them irresistibly admired. You can see them in a drawing room, spending their time looking at the lace of their bodices or adjusting the shoulders of their dresses, or else making play with the brilliance of their eyes" (243). This behavior, of course, is socially determined, a recognition by women of their need, in a male-ruled culture, to make themselves alluring commodities and thereby to gain some control over their fates. Valérie succeeds brilliantly in this endeavour, recognizing, after her tea seduction, that, she tells Bette, your "vengeance is complete. . . . Hortense will cry her eyes out and curse the day she took Wenceslas from you" (243). Having analyzed the uses of the tea-serving ritual, Balzac returns to the main narrative. Bette, we learn, arranges to have Steinbock return the following morning, ostensibly to arrange finances with Valérie, when Marneffe will be in his office and Valérie will be alone.

Meanwhile, a worried Hortense awaits Steinbock's return, afraid that her absent-minded artist husband might have had an accident or been assaulted by thieves. When at last he arrives home at 1:00 AM, he tells her he had been with his art colleagues. But the next morning, learning from Stidmann, one of Steinbock's acquaintances, that her husband had been at Valérie's, she faints, "seized with the horrible convulsions of a very severe nervous attack" (248). Her husband can't help her since it's discovered that he isn't in his studio. Hortense realizes that "He's at that woman's . . . He dressed very differently from the way he does when he goes to the studio" (249). It seems that Wenceslas and Valérie are having their first sexual intimacy just at the time that Hortense is having her nervous attack. Stidmann rushes off to Valérie's apartment where, their intimacy concluded, she is posing as that notorious seductress Delilah. Told that he should return home because his wife is dying, Steinbock leaves but remains in the grip of passion, saying to his friend that Valérie's "worth as much as fame, she's worth suffering misfortune for" (250).



[Illustration by Georges Cain](#), from *Cousin Bette*, 1900 edition, Paris.

When Adeline arrives to comfort her daughter, Hortense releases an outpouring of outrage: "he ought to respect my weaknesses, since they stemmed from my love for him . . . on first learning of an infidelity, I would be crazy enough to do anything, to take my revenge, to dishonor all of us, him, his son, and myself; and in the end, I might kill first him and then myself . . . Why take Wenceslas from me! I'll go to her house and stab her with a dagger!" (251). Her mother responds with calm, self-sacrificing wisdom, urging her daughter to "be gentle and kind" (251). Admitting that Baron Hulot's spending on his mistresses has ruined the family, she suggests that if she'd angrily confronted him about these affairs, he might have left his family and their ruin would have taken place a decade earlier. In a sentiment that could come directly from a Victorian novel, Adeline tells her daughter, "I've kept up this curtain, weeping behind it, without a mother or anyone to confide in, with no help but religion, and I've maintained the family honour for twenty-three years" (252). Moved by this example of extreme self-denial, Hortense "knelt before her, seized the hem of her dress, and kissed it as pious Catholics kiss the holy relics of a martyr" (252). Adeline explains to her daughter why men like Steinbock behave this way: "For the sake of their pleasure . . . men commit the most dastardly actions, infamous deeds, and even crimes. It's in their nature. . . . We women are doomed to sacrifice" (253). For his part, Steinbock denies any motive other than financial: Valérie is willing to lend money interest-free to help him pay down his family's debts. And he tells Adeline, "How could Hortense at 24, lovely, pure, and virtuous, she who is all my joy and pride . . . imagine that I would prefer to her—what!—a jaded, faded, seedy woman?" (254). Rebuked and regretful, Steinbock manages to stay away from the jaded, faded, seedy Valérie for all of three weeks.

During this marital crisis and emotional assault, Adeline gives her daughter tender care and advice. Balzac thus underscores the difference between Adeline's and Valérie's mothering, between Adeline's caring relationship with her daughter and Valérie's non-existent relationship with her son. Bette, attuned to

parental abandonment, remarks on Valérie's maternal shortcomings, views Valérie's son as a "poor little fellow" who Valérie hasn't seen for seven months. "At the school," observes Bette, "they think I'm the mother, for I'm the only one in the house who bothers about him" (258). But both Adeline and Valérie recognize the expense of raising a child, Adeline allowing the dowryless Hortense to marry Steinbock and her son to marry the abundantly dowried Celestine, Crevel's daughter, while Valérie sees nothing to gain from her son, "a child who costs us a hundred crowns every three months" (258). However, when she discovers she's pregnant, Valérie sees not a burden but a bonanza, sees the child not as an addition to her family but to her wealth, as a new financial instrument she can exploit by telling the several men in her life—Marneffe, Hulot, Crevel, Montès, Steinbock—that the child is theirs, getting Hulot to make "a formal promise to settle twelve hundred francs a year on the child to come" (260) and Crevel to say, "I'll work for that child; I want him to be rich" (265). "Thanks to her strategy based on the vanity of men as lovers," Balzac writes, "Valérie had at her table, all of them cheerful, lively, and under her spell, four men who thought they were adored by her and whom, including himself, Marneffe jokingly called the five Fathers of the Church" (266).

The fifth member of this quintet, Wenceslas Steinbock, succumbs to Valérie's manipulations, in particular, to a letter she writes apparently to him but which she actually means to be read by Hortense. In this letter, Valérie suggests it's the tyranny of Hortense that has kept Steinbock from her for three weeks, writing, "you're too great an artist to let yourself be dominated like this" and "you are a father, my adored Wenceslas. If you don't come and see me in my present condition, your friends will think you're a very nasty fellow. But I love you . . . madly" (259). To Hortense, reading this letter alleging her husband's patrimony, while "the cries of her little Wenceslas at play reached her ears . . . was more than a dagger-blow, it was death" (261). She immediately sends the letter to her husband with her own letter, telling him she's leaving him since, if she were to stay she might have an affair to spite him and, she writes, "Our home would become a hell, and I might lose my head to the extent of dishonouring you, of dishonouring myself, of dishonouring our child. I don't want to be a Madame Marneffe" but letting him know that "If you win fame and fortune by steady work, if you give up courtesans and an ignoble and defiling way of life, you will again find a wife worthy of you" (262).

Upon reading these impassioned words, Steinbock feels "joy mingled with sadness," recalling the "unsullied happiness he had enjoyed, Hortense's perfections, her purity, her innocent, wholehearted love." But he had also "found the family a heavy burden" and so "was happy to go back to Madame Marneffe's. . . [hoping] to show the extent of the disaster she had caused, and to cash in on his misfortune . . . by demanding pleasures from his mistress in compensation" (264). As throughout the novel, Balzac depicts the strangeness, the perversity of male desire. Steinbock wants more than Hortense's perfection and purity. He wants the imperfection and impurity of Valérie Marneffe. He, therefore, views the destruction of his marriage as a minor sorrow but more as a pretense he can exploit to demand special favors from the enthralling Valérie. To put it another way, the ruin of his family becomes for him a means of exchange, his sorrow payment for her sexual gifts.

When they meet, Valérie explains why she wrote the letter: he hadn't seen her for three weeks and, she sighs, "I was dying for want of you." She complains that he had broken the rules of their deal: "a gentleman owes consideration to a woman he has compromised" (265). Much entanglement and deception follow: Steinbock takes Valérie as his mistress; Bette pretends to be alienated from Valérie due to her affair with Steinbock, explaining to the Hulots, "I don't think Wenceslas is guilty but I think he's weak and I don't say he wouldn't succumb to such subtle coquetry. . . . I don't want to appear to have a share in my family's ruin, I who have been in that house for the sole purpose of preventing it" (276); the family agrees to help Bette marry the Baron's brother, the aged Marshal Hulot, whose wealth has become necessary for the family's survival; Baron Hulot continues his affair with Valérie and is led to believe that his son-in-law's relationship with her is purely professional; and Valérie threatens to end her relationship with Baron Hulot if he doesn't promote her husband to office manager.

Hulot's until now exemplary career is in jeopardy. He has received notice that the corrupt scheme he put in place with Adeline's uncle in Algeria is about to be exposed. Warned by his superiors about pushing forward the incompetent Marneffe's promotion, especially since there's been plentiful gossip about his affair with this employee's wife, Hulot denies Marneffe his promotion. Marneffe responds by barring Hulot from seeing his wife and feigning outrage over being cuckolded.

To promote Monsieur Marneffe's promotion, the couple scheme to blackmail Hulot by having Valérie meet him for a secret rendezvous at the house Crevel purchased for her. This plan works. At five in the morning, Hulot is in bed with Valérie when "the door opened. French law in all its majesty . . . appeared in the guise of a nice little police commissioner, accompanied by a long-legged justice of the peace, both ushered in by Master Marneffe" (291). The stage is set for the predictable melodrama: "Valérie opened her eyes in amazement, uttered the piercing shriek which actresses have invented to represent the onset of madness . . . and writhed in hysterics on the bed like a woman possessed of the devil in the Middle Ages" (292). To extricate himself from this delicate and dangerous situation, Baron Hulot offers Marneffe the position of office manager. However, an outraged Marneffe, confident in his power over his compromised superior, declares he has discovered on the writing table a letter in Valérie's hand that proves Hulot is the father of the child his wife is carrying. With this evidence in hand, Marneffe gives Hulot two days to make the promotion official. After telling Valérie that he's "come to an agreement on all points with the Baron" (294) Monsieur Marneffe and Valérie, "contin[ing] to weep bitterly" (294), depart, leaving behind a distraught Hulot and a dismayed police commissioner who reveals to Hulot this scene was obviously fabricated, that he recognized the collusion between husband and wife, and that the letter Marneffe conveniently found, which had been in Hulot's wallet, must have been placed on the writing table, according to prior arrangement, by Valérie. Nonetheless, he explains, "This last episode will cost you dear. That scoundrel of a husband has the law on his side" (297).

Just as he had when spurned by Josépha, Hulot returns home, "sobbing like a child whose toy has been taken from him," to the ever-sympathetic, ever-hopeful, ever-deluded Adeline who "saw her husband settled for good in the bosom of his family" (297). Believing her husband's habitual adultery must be due to her deficient sexual skills, she says she's willing to learn to please him. "Tell me," she implores, "how these women behave so that they bind you to them so firmly. I'll try . . . Why haven't you taught me to be what you want? . . . Men still think I'm beautiful enough to be courted" (298). Her husband doesn't respond. But Balzac does, explaining that "Love . . . the manly, serious pleasure of great hearts, and sensual pleasure, the vulgar commodity sold on the marketplace, are two different aspects of the same thing." It's rare for a woman to be able to "satisfy those two great appetites of the two sides of human nature. . . . Men . . . feel the need both of the ideal and of sensual pleasure" (298). Curiously, although in his *Physiology of Marriage* Balzac suggests women have an almost unquenchable need for pleasure and in his portrait of Valérie Marneffe shows a woman openly expressing sexual longing, Balzac, who thus recognizes female sexual desire, gives no thought to Adeline's needs, her only desire being to satisfy her husband's desires. While he recognizes husbands' and wives' boredom with their spouses and with the drudgery of marriage, which he sees as a restriction on natural sexual desire, Balzac distinguishes here between male and female desire. He seems to believe that women almost never combine the two traits sought by men: the beloved ideal and the sensual temptress. Women fall into either one of the two categories: as a feminine ideal, then, Adeline is incapable of imitating Valérie's sexual debauchery. And Hulot, like most men, requires both, a wife's comforting love and devotion and a mistress's unrestrained passion.

But that leaves unanswered the question of why a woman can't be both the ideal and the sensual. It's tempting to say that to Balzac these traits are innate, Valérie's sensuality, perhaps, part of her créole nature, Adeline's modesty due to the "cold . . . temperament of the Lorraine peasant." Yet in the *Physiology of Marriage*, Balzac suggests that women, like men, long for both spiritual and physical intimacy. Married women, he writes, desire "the poetry which should be the outcome of two souls in harmony with pleasure."

When this bond fades, a woman “feels instinctively the void which [her husband’s] languishing passion is leaving. She divines that only with a lover can she regain with all its enchantments the exercise of her free will in love” (94). However, in *Cousin Bette* Balzac offers a more conventional and constrained understanding of female sexuality.

To Balzac, men and women want love combined with sex. Women, Balzac suggests, can achieve this with a partner in marriage—until, inevitably, the passion fades and the harmony is broken. Men are less likely to find this harmony since most women, according to Balzac, can’t combine the ideal and the sensual, and so men see women as either one or the other. Men’s passion withers as the sensual dissolves into the domestic, lover becoming the ideal, the housewife and mother, causing them to look elsewhere for sexual gratification. This act of splitting women into either wife or mistress, which denies women a full existence, is an act of male control. “Balzac’s opposition between housewife and harlot,” believes Yeshiva University Professor of English and French Rachel Mesch,

reflected a deeply felt cultural anxiety about the integration of female sexual desire into a broader female identity. It was an anxiety that stemmed in large part from the likely diffusion of the husband’s power over the wife resulting from the expansion of her identity. . . . if the husband started out by having complete authority over his honest and submissive wife, he had only that power to lose were she to embrace some of the mistress’s sexuality, which signaled independence and autonomy. (73)

I agree with Mesch about the repressive consequences of the housewife/harlot binary. But in *Cousin Bette* things aren’t quite so straight forward. Men, too, are victims of this categorizing of women. A man like Baron Hulot suffers (and causes his wife and family to suffer) because he is unable to reconcile these opposites, unable to see Adeline as anything other than wife and mother. It can plausibly be argued, therefore, that rather than uncritically reproducing this constraining binary, Balzac is critiquing it, showing the harm done to women and men by men’s inability to join the ideal with the sensual.

He seems, in other words, to anticipate Sigmund Freud’s psychological explanation for this male division of women. Freud even uses language similar to Balzac’s (or, rather, Freud’s translator and Balzac’s translator use similar language), Freud referring to “two currents of feelings,” “the tender, affectionate feelings and the sensual feelings” (49). Freud, who was regularly treating patients suffering from impotence with their wives but who had sexual intercourse with prostitutes, concluded that men tend to view their wives as saintly and virginal like their mothers and thus as non-sexual objects, or in Balzac’s term, the ideal, whereas prostitutes (and mistresses) do not elicit the sexually deflating image of dear old mom. At times, it seems that Balzac’s division of women is rooted in biology: some women are by their nature domestic, some debauched. At other times, it seems he’s suggesting that this categorizing is a product of a destructive male psychology that has been writ large as social convention. This confusion might be due to Balzac’s own contradictory views, combined with his Catholic upbringing, or it might be due to his inability to draw from the then undeveloped science of psychology to better understand the varieties of male and female desire. In either case, *Cousin Bette* describes a world in which men are driven by sexual impulses they don’t understand and can’t control, a world, in other words, much like our own.

Part Three

Chapters 84-91

Three months shy of his seventieth birthday, Baron Hulot faces career and financial ruin. He has mortgaged his son’s home; scammed, through Adeline’s and Bette’s uncle (Johann Fischer), the French military in Algeria; and secured a loan with his life insurance policy. If the insurance policy isn’t collected, if,

that is, he doesn't die, the loan will be repaid by collecting in full three years of his salary. His career is in jeopardy, in part, because of his promotion of the immoral and incompetent Marneffe, who is known to be the husband of Hulot's mistress. Hulot is hanging on to his position thanks to his ties with the War Minister, who he has known since their days serving Napoleon. Meanwhile, he has received a letter from Algeria: their plot discovered, Johann Fischer explains that unless he receives 200,000 francs to cover their bookkeeping scam, he will take his own life, his honor forbidding him to appear before any investigating tribunal. Hulot realizes he has no option other than to confess to his superior "and accept his broadside," he tells Adeline, "so that I can go under decently" (304). A desperate Adeline tells her husband that "it's not only ruin, it's dishonour" and that her "poor uncle will kill himself" (304). And she tells herself that there is one way to get this money: she can sell herself to Crevel. Sending her husband away, she promises she'll have the money when he returns, although she mysteriously declares, "your Adeline will be lost and you'll never see her again. . . . give me your blessing and bid me goodbye" (305).

And so Adeline, taking on the role of seductress, prepares to sell herself to Crevel. To get ready for her seduction, she admires herself in the mirror, proud of her beautiful bare shoulders. But unfamiliar with this new role, "she remained chastely dressed in spite of her little attempts at coquetry." She has no "new, gray silk stockings or satin shoes with built-up soles" since, Balzac writes, "she was totally ignorant of the art of putting out a pretty foot at the decisive moment a little beyond a slightly lifted dress, to open up horizons of desire" (307). Balzac's selection of bare shoulders and a pretty foot reflect those parts of a woman's body that, given the modesty of dress at the time, were enticingly erotic, key elements in the art of seduction. But the artless Adeline poses like a child, displaying her beauty without conveying the sexual promise this display should signal; she has no sense of sensuality, of connecting her appearance to the promise of sexual pleasure, to the horizons of desire. As we would expect, then, Adeline's seduction fails.

Seeing the noble Adeline, Crevel doesn't even realize she's trying to be seductive: when "she lowered her eyes, and then raised them, full of angelic sweetness . . . they had none of that enticing sensuality which sparkled in Valérie's" (312). Instead of a seducer, Crevel sees a woman who "seemed . . . like a lily near the end of its flowering and a vague thought came into his mind. But he respected this saintly creature so much that he pushed these suspicions back into the libertine side of his heart" (312). A desperate Adeline, her powers of seduction failing, realizes she must be more direct and so flings herself at Crevel's feet, kissing his hand, looking at him wildly, and exclaiming, "Be my saviour. . . . Save a whole family from ruin, shame, and despair! Save it from wallowing in a sea of filth where the mud will be made of blood!" (314). Adeline, a saintly and submissive lily, willing to make the greatest sacrifice of all—to surrender her honor to keep her husband and family from ruin—is the ideal Victorian heroine. Years earlier Crevel had offered to pay handsomely for this opportunity, in order to spite her husband. But he has no such interest now, his revenge having been sated by his three-years-long affair with Valérie Marneffe. And, he tells her, the money he had once offered her has been spent on Valérie. He explains that in bourgeois-dominated July Monarchy France, it's unlikely that anyone else will have 200,000 francs to give her since "everyone invests his money and speculates to his best advantage," that "money demands interest and it's always gathering it," and that it's not King Louis-Phillipe who reigns over France but "the holy, venerated, tangible, charming, gracious, beautiful, noble, young, all-powerful hundred-sou piece" (316).

Crevel here speaks for Balzac when asserting that religious faith (what's "holy" and "venerated") and aristocratic elegance, (what's "charming" and "gracious" and "noble") has been replaced by money. Even Crevel's relationship with Valérie has been shaped by the pursuit of wealth. He is attracted to her because she can teach him the ways of the upper classes: "She's sharpened my wits and refined my language. . . . she improves my wisecracks and helps me with words and ideas. I no longer say anything improper" (318). His investment in her helps him increase his investments. To a disappointed and desperate Adeline, Crevel offers a solution in the form of a rich acquaintance, "a hefty retired shopkeeper, "slow-witted and dull," has been kept "in a state of complete virginity as far as the luxuries and pleasures of Paris are concerned" (320). This man would give good money to make Adeline his mistress. But this gesture, this overt selling of

herself, wakens Adeline to the error of her ways. She thus decides to accept God's will, even if it means the deaths of her uncle and brother-in-law, the humiliation of her family, and the knowledge that the shame she now feels "will torment [her] until the end of [her] days" (321). She therefore renounces her behavior, telling Crevel it's not Madame Hulot speaking anymore but "the poor humble sinner, the Christian whose heart will in future contain only one feeling, repentance, and who will be entirely devoted to prayer and charity" (321). She recited this announcement with a "trembling . . . nervous tremor which, from that moment on, never left her" (321). And it is this, "the majesty of virtue with its celestial radiance," this sublimity "like the figures symbolic of Religions" (322) that astonishes Crevel and leaves him dumbfounded and causes him to agree to cash in some shares and return with her money.

Unfortunately for Adeline, on the way Crevel stops to see Valérie, who with her preternatural ability to read people and exploit situations immediately senses something wrong, recognizing "that he was under the sway of a strong emotion of which she was not the cause" (323). Determined to discover this cause, Valérie "took off her dressing gown, appeared in her slip, and fitted into her housecoat like an adder under its tuft of grass" (323); she jumps onto his lap and puts her arms round his neck; emphasizing her childlike weakness against his masculine strength, she calls him her "big darling" and calls herself his "little lovey-dovey" (324); she brushes her hair against his face and affectionately tweaks his nose. Crevel surrenders to this teasing, revealing that he's "just seen virtue in disrepair" (325) and expounding on the familial and financial crisis Adeline faces if not given 200,000 francs. At the mention of this money—money which might otherwise be hers—Valérie sets about to undermine Crevel's charity.

Her immediate response is to knock Adeline off her pedestal and to raise herself. First, she asserts that she, too, is religious, going to church secretly rather than, like Adeline, "mak[ing] a parade of [her] religion" (325). Second, recalling her own childhood innocence and purity, she expresses regret for having become, in her own words, "a slut" (326) who deceives her husband by selling herself to two disgusting old men. Third, she says she knows her adultery is wrong, but she can't help herself since she's so in love with Crevel. Fourth, she drops to her knees and asks God to save her from her fate as an "infamous adulteress" (327). Fifth, clutching him in a wild embrace, she imagines that God's punishment on her will be to end their relationship, causing her to sigh, "if I were to lose you . . . I'd die" (327). Sixth, she kneels again and fervently recites a prayer to Sainte Valérie, her patron saint, declaring that she "shall leave the path of wickedness . . . give up false joys, the deceptive glamour of the world, even the man I love so much. . . . No more lovey-dovey, Monsieur!" (327). Rejecting Crevel and the world he represents, she declares her duty is to remain at her dying husband's side and that as a result she and Crevel must part. She now desires only his esteem. In response, Crevel weeps bitterly.

Here we have another scene worthy of a Victorian novel. Even if her initial goal was to undermine Crevel's charity, in comparing herself to the saintly Adeline, Valérie has recognized her own sinful nature and has decided to repent, to follow the path of righteousness, denying the pleasures of Crevel and devoting herself to her dying husband. But this is no Victorian novel and Valérie no Victorian heroine. So contrary is this pose to her nature that she can't hold it. At the sight of Crevel's tears, she releases "a peal of diabolical laughter" and calls him a "big idiot" (328) for falling prey to this phony display. The scene she has just enacted, she tells him, was an imitation of the scene a woman like Adeline might play to solicit money under the guise of morality and religion. "These pious women," she explains, "sell their sermons. . . . And what tales they tell. . . . They think they can do anything for the Church. . . . to throw two hundred thousand francs into a holy water basin, to lend them to a religious fanatic deserted by husband . . . is a stupidity" (329). Far worse than a Victorian villainess, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon's notorious Lady Audely, Valérie Marneffe exemplifies a real evil, a narcissism and greed and a sadistic pleasure in denying Adeline her desperately needed charity. Her immediate refutation of Crevel's expression of Christian charity reveals her to be a skillful rhetorician and talented actress who easily exploits the power of her physical charms. In her mockery of the truly pious, in her diabolical laugh, in her being compared to a snake slithering off into

the brush, Balzac reveals her demonic evil, an evil that this society rewards, this immoral society in which, she tells Crevel, “Benevolence is not an option any more; it’s got no reputation now” (329).

Chapters 92-102

As she manipulates Crevel and wounds Adeline, so Valérie’s partner in crime furthers her goal of hurting the Hulots by setting herself up to marry the Baron’s brother, the Marshal who, under Bette’s care, “was living more comfortably and finding himself looked after like a child by its mother, [and who] had come to the conclusion that [she] was the match of his dreams” (333). If things are going well for him at home, not so at the office where the Marshal must confront his brother’s crimes. But first Baron Hulot confesses to his administrative superior, the Minister of War, Marshall, Prince de Wissembourg, a former military colleague who had helped organize the French army that was defeated at Waterloo and who has protected his friend and protégé from the consequences of his actions, including agreeing to promote the incompetent Marneffe. Now, however, he is unsparing in his criticism: “You have robbed the State; you have put yourself in the position of being liable to be tried in the law-courts. . . . You shamefully compromised our high-level administration. . . . And that, Monsieur, for two hundred thousand francs and a whore! . . . You are a Councilor of State, and the private soldier who sells regimental property is punished with death” (335). He recounts the story of a colonel who sold company belongings to buy his lover a shawl. Ashamed and dishonored, “he ground down the glass from a window and ate it, took ill, and died eleven hours later in the hospital.” He suggests that Baron Hulot “try to die of a stroke” to save his own honor (336).

When Marshal Hulot enters the discussion, he’s told his brother is “a dread scoundrel” (336). When he objects, he’s presented with a letter sent to the Minister detailing the bookkeeping scam and revealing that Baron Hulot’s accomplice, Adeline’s uncle, stabbed himself to death with a nail rather than be put on trial. In addition, a letter was discovered in which the uncle promised Baron Hulot that with no evidence against him and with the uncle’s suicide there would be no demand for the stolen 200,000 francs since it would be assumed he had acted alone. As a result of this evidence, the Minister explains, Baron Hulot will live “a life without honour, without his esteem, a life of degradation” (339). Exiled from the War Ministry, Hulot will have to live on his pension—except that he’s forfeited three years-worth to cover his debts. The Minister then brings in Monsieur Marneffe, accusing him of ruining Baron Hulot’s life and demanding he return the 200,000 francs the Baron had given his wife or else be sent to Algeria. In response, Marneffe resigns.

When Marshal Hulot returns home, he takes out a pair of fancy pistols presented him by Emperor Napoleon and says to his brother, “There’s your medicine” (343). A shocked Adeline asks what her husband has done to deserve this ultimate sacrifice. “He has dishonoured us all,” the Marshal replies, “He has robbed the State. He has made my name hateful to me; he makes me want to die; he has killed me. I have only enough strength left to make restitution [with my life savings]” (344). He condemns Baron Hulot for forsaking “the most angelic of women,” betraying her “for whores, streetwalkers, dancing girls, and actresses” (344). “A man who failed to appreciate Adeline,” he continues, “and who has extinguished in his heart the feelings of a true republican, the love of family, of country, and of the poor . . . that man is a monster, a swine. Take him away,” he commands, “for I hear a voice within me, crying to me to load my pistols and blow his brains out” (345). The Marshal even forbids his brother from attending his funeral and following his coffin to the cemetery. Admittedly, Baron Hulot has done many bad and destructive things for no reason other than to please his mistress. But the Marshal’s outraged feelings—to the point of wanting his brother to kill himself, even being tempted to kill his brother and all because of his embezzlement—seem a grossly disproportionate response.

To explain the Marshal’s response, we must understand the importance of maintaining male honor. Duels, though rarely fatal, continued to be fought in 19th century France. Pierre Dupont de l’Etang and Francois Fournier-Sarloveze, officers in Napoleon’s army who eventually climbed the ranks to become generals, exemplified the code of honor, engaging in 30 duels against each other over 19 years, a history

memorialized by Joseph Conrad in the story “The Duel,” which became the 1977 film *The Duellists*, directed by Ridley Scott and starring Harvey Keitel and Keith Carradine. Such a destructive compulsion, although uncommon, reveals the power of male honor in French society (“François”). Duke University Emeritus Professor of History and Cultural Anthropology William Reddy argues that post-revolutionary France was “a period whose politics consisted more than ever before or since of polemics based on insult and calumny, the period when it was first conceived that shame might be a strong enough emotion to cause temporary insanity, a period of extreme public sensitivity to slight and innuendo” (12). That the brothers Hulot, former officers in Napoleon’s Army, should speak of saving honor is understandable since the code of honor was an especial feature of the military, even if one can’t quite swallow Balzac’s tale of a glass-ingesting soldier.

Honor, according to Jo Burr Margadant, also helped disguise the corruption endemic in bourgeois society, helping, in other words, to perpetuate a belief that success was achieved through individual merit. Or as Margadant puts it, individual honor was important to male elites in order to maintain “their imagined meritocratic social universe. In fact, individual merit was not enough to get ahead. Family connections, exchange of favors, and deferential manners were crucial to success, a reality that nobody could honorably admit about himself but everyone imagined explained another’s triumphs” (1467). In plotting to get her husband a promotion, Valérie demonstrates her understanding of what’s essential for success in the corrupt state bureaucracy. When Balzac has the Marshall say that his brother has “shamefully compromised our high-level administration, which up till now has been the most unblemished in Europe” (335), he is surely being ironic, given that, as William Fortescue explains, “the political, social and economic systems [of the July Monarchy] were corrupt and immoral; and the elite too often combined corruption and decadence with a single-minded determination to exploit France in the interests of themselves” (85). The latter is a perfect restatement of the aim of Hulot’s scam in Algeria, to exploit France for his own interests. Hulot’s problem is not that he’s corrupt but that his corruption is too brazen, that he has ignored the harm done to his public persona and his loss of honor, and, ultimately, that he has been caught.

Unlike his brother, Marshal Hulot adheres to the code of honor, so much so that the shame he feels over his brother’s embezzlement kills him in three days. He’s eulogized as “The ideal of patriotism” at a funeral attended by a large crowd: “the Army, the Government, the Court, ordinary people, everybody came to pay homage to his noble virtue, his perfect integrity, and his unsullied renown” (348), everybody, that is, except his brother whose presence would have sullied this tribute. His death has also ruined Bette’s marriage plot, depriving her, not the Hulots, of the Marshall’s money. Balzac notes the irony that Valérie’s and Bette’s scheming has led to this outcome: Bette “had succeeded only too well. The Marshal died from the blows inflicted on his family by her and Madame Marneffe” (348).

Meanwhile, the Baron, who “had become as thin as a ghost” (349), tells his wife and son and daughter, “I am unworthy of family life. . . . [I am] a father who has been the murderer and scourge of his family, instead of being its pride and protector” (350). Ignoring Adeline’s plea to accept “divine pity . . . and make amends for everything by staying with [her]” (350), he says he can’t bear to stay and be seen everyday as a criminal who has “degrad[ed] paternal authority and destroy[ed] the family . . . an odious spectacle of a father devoid of dignity” (350). And so this odious spectacle leaves the suffering Adeline renting a splendid carriage which takes him to the doors of his former mistress Josépha’s fancy home. Upon seeing him, Josépha exclaims, “My word, you look like one of these twenty-franc pieces, clipped by German Jews, that money-changers won’t take” (353).

If it’s the 19th century and someone’s borrowing money or collecting debt, or in this case, just looks like a person ruined by debt, talk will likely turn to the Jews. For example, Crevel tells Adeline that Josépha is “the natural [i.e., illegitimate] daughter of a Jewish banker” (16); she is “eaten up with greed, wants to be rich, very rich” (17); she has developed “the first Hebrews’ instinct for gold and jewels, for the Golden Calf” (17). Monsieur Rivet, the owner of the lace and embroidery house where Bette works, refers to Jews,

Cossacks, and peasants as “wild beasts wrongly classed with humankind” (118). Even after teaming up with Valérie, Bette “continue[s] to do the most difficult pieces of ornamental embroidery” for Rivet because, Balzac explains, “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). And when telling Adeline that Paris is ruled by money, ruled by the “holy, venerated . . . hundred-sou piece” (316), Crevel analogizes the triumph of capital to the triumph of the Jew. “God of the Jews,” he tells her, “you prevail!” He riffs comically on the origins of capitalism in the *Book of Exodus*: “In Moses’ day, there was [speculating] in the desert. We have returned to biblical times. The Golden Calf was the first register of public loans. . . . The Egyptians owed enormous amounts borrowed from the Hebrews and they didn’t pursue God’s people, but financial capital” (316).

I’m not saying Balzac was anti-Semitic; these notions, after all, are expressed by characters, not the novel’s narrative voice. I’m merely pointing out how commonplace it was, when talking about money, to talk about the Jew, partly because of the Catholic Church’s calumny against Jews and partly because the Church’s restrictions on usury by its followers meant that money-lending was a profession that was disproportionately Jewish. This perception of the Jewish dominance of banking and finance, of course, has been and continues to be central to anti-Semitic conspiracies. In reality, according to Robert Wistrich, Professor of European and Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, “under the Monarchy of Louis Phillipe, la haute bourgeoisie protestante [i.e., Protestants of French, Swiss and German origin] were at least as prominent in banking as Rothschild & Co” (114). Balzac’s and his contemporaries’ reliance on Jewish stereotypes was also due to the geographical isolation of French Jews, which helped construct them as mysterious outsiders. At the time of the French revolution, only 500 Jews lived in Paris, with the largest percentage of the Jewish population—40,000, living near the German border in Alsace-Lorraine. The Jewish population of Paris would increase to 22,000 by 1866 (Green 135). In the early part of the century, argues Erika Vause, Associate Professor in History at St. John’s University, Balzac and his “contemporaries certainly believed usury to be a pressing problem. Usurers were ubiquitous figures in the era’s novels and plays. Countless pamphlets, often deeply anti-Semitic, portrayed usury as the ‘plague of the countryside’ and lamented the plight of the peasant expropriated from his land by ruthless lenders. Reformers portrayed the situation as only slightly less dire in the cities, where borrowers resorted to seedy discounters and the public pawnshop for loans” (105).

Yet, “in general,” writes Frances Grodzinsky, Professor Emerita in Computer Science at Sacred Heart University, “the French literature of 1800 to 1840 did not focus on the Jew. Stereotyped references to Jews did appear, but were so accepted that they were not intended or considered to be offensive” (5). About Balzac, Grodzinsky asserts, “Although his Jews display the common stereotypic traits of evil and avarice, Balzac was not a facile anti-Semite. . . . The Jews he portrayed were not the unidimensional minor characters commonly found in earlier literature. Rather, they were complex men and women who played major roles in his novels” (1). Balzac’s reactionary politics, though, his yearning for tradition and lamenting the rise of the bourgeoisie, could be subsumed by others into a critique of the harmful influence of Jews, with the rise of speculation and the destruction of French tradition.

According to Frederick Busi, Professor Emeritus of French and Italian Studies at the University of Massachusetts, the notorious anti-Semite, Édouard Drumont, author of the best-selling 1886 book *Jewish France*, declared “the main character in Balzac’s novels . . . is money. . . . it is a form of energy, a source of power to be used for the manipulation of men and society. Drumont was quite sentimental about what he viewed as the destruction and disappearance of old France. . . . He also lamented the passing of all the social types dear to Balzac’s readers. Only one . . . remained: Nucingen,” that is, Frederic de Nucingen, a prosperous banker loosely based on the Baron James Rothschild. To Drumont, while other French noble characters have disappeared, Nucingen, an immortal like Shylock, has become the true king. Drumont, writes Busi, “carefully selected and exaggerated the extremely rare anti-Jewish references found in the novels. . . . It was Drumont’s judicious exploitation of the imaginary world create by Balzac that helped in part to provoike the national debate over the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus” (185). In *Cousin Bette*, it’s the

Jewish Nucingen who finds a non-Jewish money lender, Vauvinet, “a little money-lender . . . one of those shady dealers who hang around large banking houses like little fish that seem to attend upon sharks” (147), with whom Hulot arranges his complicated scheme of life insurance and salary and loans. Nucingen makes an appearance in *Cousin Bette* as a witness to Hortense’s marriage to Steinbock and as the lender of 100,000 francs to Baron Hulot. This use of recurring characters, which we take for granted as a regular feature of popular culture and genre fiction, can be traced to Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*. More than twenty characters from Balzac’s other works are alluded to or make appearances in *Cousin Bette*. Josépha and Baron Hulot, though, appear only here.

Unlike what would be expected of a Jewess by an anti-Semite like Drumont, Josépha provides Baron Hulot with some money to live on, even though she’s well aware of what he’s done, which she summarizes: “you’ve killed your brother and your uncle, ruined your family, mortgaged your children’s house up to the hilt, and embezzled Government funds in Africa, for the benefit of the princess” (364). Despite this recital of damages, Josépha prefers Hulot because he ruins himself and those close to him because of his uncontrollable desire, unlike those men who destroy others for profit. “I prefer a spendthrift like you, who’s crazy about women,” she tells him, “to those cold, soulless bankers who are supposed to be virtuous but who ruin thousands of families with their railways that are gold for them but iron for their dupes” (354). Most remarkably, she recalls Hulot’s taking her as his mistress (when she was 16) with fondness and gratitude, saying, “You’re my father; you gave me my start in life” (355).

To show her gratitude for his profligacy, which prepared her for her relationship with the Duc d’Hérouville, she agrees to help him. Recognizing that he can’t live without women, she even arranges for the 72-year-old Hulot to take as his mistress Olympe Bijou, a girl of 16. Why would a young girl take as a lover a man fifty years her senior? Because Bijou works 16 hours a day embroidering; “she lives on potatoes . . . fried in rat fat, with bread five times a week”; she drinks water “out of the town’s pipes” (356-57). Thus, in making Bijou his mistress, Josépha explains, he’ll “be giving happiness to a whole family, made up of a tottering grandfather, a mother who’s wearing herself out with work, and two sisters . . . [whose labor is] ruin[ing] their eyesight” (358). When he meets Bijou, seeing her “innocent eyes with long lashes. . . . [her] complexion like fine porcelain . . . her mouth . . . like a half-open pomegranate. . . . her heaving bosom . . . and luxuriant black hair,” “a child unconscious of her worth,” Hulot “gripped once more by the claws of sensuality, felt all his life flowing out through his eyes. He forgot everything at the sight of this sublime creature” (359). Josépha assures him of her purity: “she’s guaranteed brand-new, virtuous” (319). And she suggests that in deflowering and partnering with Bijou, he can both redeem his sins and have a good time.

While Baron Hulot departs with his teenaged lover, his son Victorin receives from the War Minister* his late uncle’s 200,000 francs because he was “a true virtuous man, the worthy son of [your] noble mother, the true nephew of . . . the Marshal” (361). He’s also given an appointment as consulting lawyer in the War Ministry, while being allowed to continue his independent practice. And the Minister sees to it that Adeline can serve in a newly created post, Superintendent of Charities. For Balzac, these are generous gestures provided to deserving characters whose honest lives have been upended by Baron Hulot. Victorin and Adeline are rewarded because of the Minister’s profound ties with and respect for Marshal Hulot, ties established while serving Napoleon. Another way to view these acts, however, is not as justifiable rewards but as an example of the corruption that pervaded the French government bureaucracy under the reign of Louis-Phillipe, the very corrupt system that Valérie understood and attempted to exploit through Hulot.

The 200,000 francs that Baron Hulot had stolen from the Algerian enterprise and given to Valérie and which Marshal Hulot had given in recompense to the Ministry (and which his friend the Minister had refused to accept) now returned to Victorin is used to pay down his mortgage on a property he purchased in 1834, which contains two houses. In the wing of one, he will live with his mother and sister and Cousin Bette. This property, it turns out, was a good investment: situated in a popular and elite shopping district, it’s now beginning to generate substantial rental revenue. Near the Rue de la Paix, which saw a steady

increase in commercial establishments beginning in 1840, “with their splendid window-displays,” writes Balzac, “the money-changers’ gold, the fairy-like creations of fashion, and the unbridled luxury of the shops” (364). The trend Balzac identified here has become tradition, this street remaining a fashionable shopping area. Among the shops here at the time of Balzac’s writing were jewelers, a fan-maker, a luxury stationary and leather goods manufacturer. If you were to visit today, you’d find multiple jewelers, including Cartier, Chanel, and Dior, not to mention Bucherer, the world’s largest watch store, and Brielting, where you can purchase the Super Chronomat Bo1 44 watch for 26,000 dollars (excluding sales tax). If that sounds like too much, remember: there’s no charge for shipping.

Cousin Bette will not be shopping at these nearby luxury shops. Instead, she is running the Hulot household, “repeating the economic miracles she had performed at Madame Marneffe’s” as a way of further ingratiating herself into the family, thereby to better her chances of “wreaking her vengeance on [Adeline, Hortense, and Victorin], the objects of a hatred inflamed by the overthrow of all her hopes” (365). Her co-conspirator Valérie has lost her child through a miscarriage and her husband through the consequences of his debauchery, the latter stages of his life reported by Bette to the Hulot family: the doctor “said . . . the disgusting creature would be claimed by the hell that awaits him” (366). The other news: after the 10-month mourning period required by the Napoleonic Code, Crevel and Valérie are to marry.

Chapters 103-113

At this point, let’s take a step back to situate ourselves in Balzac’s narrative. Having left his wife and been given money by his former mistress, Baron Hulot has been living in Paris and helping run an embroidery shop with the now 18-year old Bijou. His wife, the now 55-year-old Adeline, “trembling incessantly as if afflicted with a fever” (371), is living in her son Victorin’s house, keeping a room ready for her husband’s return. Victorin is prospering as a lawyer and government official; he lives with his wife Celestine; both are appalled at the prospect of befriending Crevel’s wife-to-be. Hortense lives with her son in Victorin’s house; her husband Steinbock is kept in idle comfort by the widowed Valérie. While continuing her affairs with Steinbock and Montès, Valérie plans to marry Crevel. Cousin Bette, too, lives in Victorin’s house where she pretends to care for the Hulots all the while, with Valérie, conspiring against them.

Two and a half years have gone by since Baron Hulot disappeared, two and half years since Adeline last saw her husband, although she learns that he’s been seen at the Ambigu-Comique theater “with a dazzlingly beautiful woman and was behaving “towards this woman [in a way that suggested a clandestine, unofficial marriage” (371). The Ambigu-Comique theater (or Theater of the Comic Ambiguity) was situated on what was known as the Boulevard of Crime, not because of its felonious residents but because of the numerous theaters here on whose stages many crime melodramas were performed, a place where “more than 20,000 people came [every night] to walk, sing, laugh, and have fun” (“Boulevard”). This boulevard was the setting for Marcel Carné’s classic film *Children of Paradise*, which was produced in Nazi-occupied France, which was set during the July monarchy, and which told the story of a courtesan and her four lovers. In response to the news that the Baron was seen at the theater with a beautiful young woman, Bette tells Adeline, “He’ll have set up house with some little working-girl,” and she says he probably receives money from one of his former mistresses. In fact, Bette, as part of her revenge against the Hulots, has herself been secretly giving the Baron money to keep him from returning to Adeline. Bette also knows the secret of his whereabouts, a secret she keeps to herself because she “relish[es] Adeline’s tears” (374).

To find her husband, Adeline realizes she must violate propriety and sacrifice pride to visit her husband’s former mistress. Josépha, determined to impress her rival, aware that “vice must be under arms to face virtue” (375), dresses in her prettiest slippers, her flowered housecoat with abundant embroidery, and has her hair done “up in a way that would amaze any woman” (376). While Adeline’s aim is to learn about her husband, she can’t help but “satisfy her nagging curiosity, to see at close quarters the charm of such women

which enables them to extract so much gold from the meagre deposits in the Parisian soil” (377). These riches are on display in Josépha’s apartments. Whereas Adeline was “used to carpets with threadbare flower patterns, tarnished bronzes, and silk hangings as worn and faded as her own heart” (376), she beholds the rewards of Vice: “the figures, the statuettes, and the sculptures,” Balzac observes, “were all originals. The possession of things not vulgarized by two thousand wealthy bourgeois, who think luxury consists in displaying expensive items which cram the shops, that is the mark of true luxury” (377). Waiting for Josépha amidst such splendor, Adeline wonders if she will appear merely as “a blot on all this luxury” (377). Seeing her reflection, however, she perceives that “she carried herself well in her velvet dress . . . its beautiful collar of magnificent lace [and] her velvet hat of the same color.” She sees “herself still as imposing as a queen, still a queen even though ruined” (377). Her beauty, her elegant dress, and her moral purpose combine to give her the presence of royalty, a presence more than capable of standing up to this courtesan’s fancy décor and expensive furnishings.

When at last Judith makes her entrance, Balzac compares her to a painting of Judith and Holofernes by the Italian Renaissance artist Cristofano Allori, a painting Balzac must have seen on one of his trips to Italy, trips on which he met the composer Giacomo Rossini and the writer Alessandro Manzoni, author of the great Italian historical novel (and future podcast subject) *The Betrothed*, trips that made Italy, according to the biographer Graham Robb, Balzac’s “favorite country” (278). The painting, showing Judith holding the severed head of the Assyrian general Holofernes, is based on a story in the book of Judith, which is included in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles but not in the Protestant or the Hebrew Bible. In this story, Holofernes has led his army in a terror campaign across Mesopotamia and the Middle East, until reaching the land of the Israelites and the fortress town of Bethulia, who, perceiving their inevitable defeat, agree to surrender. The beautiful young widow Judith, though, recognizing that if Bethulia falls all Judea will fall, has a different plan. Accompanied by her maid, she walks into the Assyrian camp, cozies up to Holofernes, gets the general drunk and kills him. Or as the Bible records it, “The heart of Holofernes was in rapture over her and his passion was aroused. He was burning with the desire to possess her, for he had been biding his time to seduce her from the day he saw her” (Judith 12: 16). When they are alone together, and he is unconscious from drink, “She went to the bedpost near the head of Holofernes, and taking his sword from it, she drew close to the bed, grasped the hair of his head, and said, ‘Strengthen me this day, Lord, God of Israel!’ Then with all her might she struck his neck twice and cut off his head” (Judith 13: 6-8). With no general, his head displayed on a city wall according to Judith’s directions, the Assyrians, confused and leaderless, are defeated and Jerusalem preserved. The story was a frequent subject for Renaissance painters, notably by the female painter Artemesia Gentelleschi, whose particularly graphic depiction of the decapitation is seen by contemporary scholars as a proto-feminist expression of female rage and power and a reaction to the then 17-year-old Gentilleschi’s having been raped by the painter Agostino Tassi and having suffered through a subsequent trial which resulted in Tasso’s five year banishment from a Rome, a sentence never carried out.

All of which raises the question of why Balzac alludes to this painting to describe Josépha. Both Judith and Josépha use their beauty to destroy a man, the one literally, the other figuratively, acts of symbolic castration. While Josépha’s treatment of Hulot isn’t nearly as rageful, she does express, even after giving him money, regret that being his mistress destroyed her chance to attain respectability through marriage. Valérie’s posing as Delilah for Steinbock suggests a similar view of a man being controlled and symbolically castrated. On one reading, these passages suggest Balzac’s recognition of the social constraints imposed upon women which leave them little option other than to sell their bodies which in turn breeds misandry and anger. On another reading, Balzac’s reference to violently vengeful women suggests the power of female sexuality and women’s desire to avenge themselves against a repressive and exploitative patriarchy. Or perhaps the story is irrelevant. Perhaps Balzac chose Allori’s painting of Judith because he remembered this beautiful Jewess as he constructed the character of Josépha. His recall of this painting might have been inspired by the similarity in names, Judith and Holofernes, Josépha and Hulot. Yet once again Balzac fails to meet our expectations. Balzac’s account of the meeting of the demure Adeline and the dangerous J

Josépha, the angel and the Jewess, the Madame and the mistress is undramatic. The Jewish courtesan quickly surrenders to the noble Madonna, abandoning all ideas of vying with Adeline and instead humbling herself “before [Adeline’s] greatness” (378), even sinking respectfully to one knee. If Josepha surrenders to Adeline’s saintly presence, Adeline finds in Josépha “a young woman who . . . paid full and unqualified homage to the virtuous wife, the [Lady of Sorrows], and who placed flowers on her wounds, as in Italy, they place flowers on the Madonna” (380).



Cristofano Allori, [*Judith with the Head of Holofernes*](#) (1610-1612), Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Together, the women travel to the home of Bijou’s mother, where they learn that Bijou has separated from Hulot and has married “the owner of a big fancy-goods store” to become Madame Grenouville, while Hulot has become “very old and broken down” (381) and has been “thrown . . . into the gutter” (384). At this news, Josépha tries to raise Adeline’s spirits, promising that they’ll “find him again. And if he’s in the mire . . . he’ll wash it off. . . . [since] for well-bred people it’s a matter of clothes” (385). In other words, despite how far he’s fallen, Hulot’s class background will assert itself and lift him out of the mire. His seeming physical and psychological ruin can be overcome by his adopting the role he was bred to, by assuming the appearance and manners and lifestyle of his class position.

But at the same time that she attempts to lower Adeline’s fear, Josépha upbraids Adeline for failing to satisfy her husband. “If you’d had a little of our *savvy*,” she remarks, “you’d have stopped him gallivanting; for you’d have been what we know how to be: all kinds of woman to a man.” She goes on, presumably echoing Balzac’s own views, that this problem—the failure of marriages due to wives’ sexual ignorance—is a persistent one that might be corrected with proper sex education. “The government ought to set up,” she proposes, “a training school for respectable women. But governments are so prudish” (385). Thus, Josépha (and Balzac himself) praise the saintly and virtuous Adeline while criticizing the ascetic and passionless wife. Again, we see Balzac’s splitting women into either the sensual or the ideal. This duality depends upon Madonna worship, upon elevating ideal womanhood to the pinnacle of the holy virgin, which relies on the corollary of denigrating women who are sexually active, especially if they experience sexual desire and pleasure. Because of his Catholic faith, Balzac can’t not adore Mary, which he seemingly fails to perceive is essential for the division of women into the ideal and the sensual, an unhealthy division whose consequences he laments and whose persistence he decries.

Balzac's worship of Mary is due not merely to his Catholic orthodoxy but to the growth of Mary idolatry in the 19th century, especially in France, where several specific instances of Marian miracles occurred, leading the French historian Phillipe Boutry to refer to Mary as "la grande consolatrice de la France au dix-neuvième siècle" (qtd. in Carroll 148): "the great comforter of France in the 19th century." One such miracle occurred in Paris in 1830 when a novitiate of the Sisters of Charity at Saint Vincent de Paul, Catherine Labouré, experienced several apparitions of Mary during which, writes Michael Carroll, Sociology Professor at the University of Western Ontario, "Mary told Catherine to have a medal struck in her . . . honor [with] [t]he words "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee" around the figure of Mary." On the flip side, "should appear . . . a single large M surmounted by a cross resting upon a bar, all of which was to be set above two human hearts. One of the hearts was to be pierced with thorns and the other by a sword. Mary promised that those who wore the medal would receive an abundance of graces" (166). "The wearing of the medal proved immensely popular almost immediately," Carroll explains, "and it quickly became known as the 'Miraculous Medal' by virtue of the large number of cures associated with it" (168).



[Medal of the Immaculate Conception](#) (aka Miraculous Medal)

In 1846, the year *Cousin Bette* was published, two children herding goats in La Salette, a mountain village near the Italian border, received a warning from a woman who shone with a bright light that France would be punished unless its people changed their ways: stopping swearing, attending church, praying regularly, refraining from eating meat during Lent. Although there was some dispute about its validity within the church, in 1851 the local bishop declared the apparition true and agreed to the establishment of the cult of Our Lady of La Salette. Around the same time began the construction of a large basilica on the spot of the vision. In 2013, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this vision, declaring "La Salette is a message of hope, for our hope is nourished by the intercession of her who is the Mother of mankind" ("Our Lady").

The most famous of these Marian visions, of course, occurred in 1858 at Lourdes, a small market town near the Pyrenees. Between 1830 and the end of the century, at least nineteen other sightings of the Virgin occurred in France (Carroll 148). Carroll argues that it was the striking of the medal that initiated the movement to give ultimate sanctification of Mary in the doctrine of immaculate conception: "the great popularity of this medal in the 1830s and 1840s undoubtedly influenced the decision to proclaim a belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception an official dogma of the Church in 1854" (145). I suspect Mary worship developed at this time in France in large part because of the sanctification of the mother within the bourgeois family, because of the belief that girls should remain virgins until married, and because the miraculous would promote the Catholic faith within an increasingly secular France. Even within Balzac's idiosyncratic and contradictory faith, the discrepancy between his belief and his practice, he endorsed this enshrinement of Mary (and thus its corresponding opposite in sexually active women like Valérie), and with it he reinforced the confining enshrinement of women like Adeline.

Recognizing that Adeline—"the most beautiful and saintly image of virtue" (385)—should not be seen in her company, Josépha agrees to visit Bijou, now Madame Grenouville, to discover the whereabouts of Hulot,

and eventually to have him return home to Adeline. This plan, though, is thwarted by the evil Bette. To find Hulot in his hiding place, Bette must follow measures reminiscent of Balzac's own security system:

“Go to the Rue des Bernadins, number seven,” she told the driver. “It’s a house with an entrance drive and no porter. Go up to the fourth floor and ring at the door on the left, where you’ll read: ‘Mademoiselle Chardin, Laces and cashmere shawls repaired.’ When someone comes to the door, ask for the *gentleman*. The answer will be: ‘He’s gone out.’ Then say: ‘I know, but find him, for his *maid* is there in a cab on the quay and wants to see him!’” (392)

Successfully navigating this scheme, Bette greets the “old man, who looked about 80, his hair completely white, his nose reddened by the cold in a pale, wrinkled face like an old woman’s, his back bent, shuffle[ing] along in felt slippers” (392). She warns him that Adeline is on his trail, lies to him about the debt the family still owes, and gives him two thousand francs—all to keep him from returning home. Hulot agrees to remain in hiding for another eight months until he’s able to access his pension. Since Bijou left him, Hulot has been with another young girl, Elodie Chardon, who, with her brother, has been taking most of his money. But he’s recently “discovered [Atala Judici], a little angel, a kind innocent creature who’s not old enough to be deprived.” To elude creditors and to be close to Atala, Hulot tells Bette he’s moving to the Rue de Charonne “where there’s no scandal whatever you do” (393).

This street still holds something of its off-beat scandal-proof appeal. As one current writer describes it: “Since the ’60s, the street has attracted a mash-up of artisans, leather bars and underground nightspots. More recently, artists, designers, chic boutiques and a sprinkling of Paris’s best gastro-bistros have moved in, but the street still retains its neighbourhood feel and scruffy charm” (Ladonne). Over the years, this street also has had a connection, sometimes tragic, to French colonialism. It’s here, in 1917, that Ho Chi Minh lived when first arriving in Paris (“Rue de Charonne”) to promote Vietnamese independence among the nearly 50,000 Vietnamese workers brought to France to serve in the war industries and the 42,000 Vietnamese serving on the Western Front (Brocheaux). It’s here, in 1962, that

trade union and left political party demonstrators against the OAS [a far-right paramilitary terrorist organization] and in support of Algerian independence were viciously attacked by the Parisian police as they sought shelter in the metro station Charonne. Maurice Papon, Paris police chief [and one-time Nazi collaborator who 36 years later would be found guilty of organizing death trains and otherwise committing crimes against humanity] with the backing of the President de Gaulle ordered the police to disperse the illegal demonstration. Six men and three women were killed and some 250 wounded (“Rue de Charonne”).

And it’s here, on the Rue de Charonne, in 2015, that 19 people were killed and 14 wounded as part of a string of bombings and shootings by Islamic extremists, leaving 130 people dead and more than 400 wounded (“Rue de Charonne”).

To hurry Hulot to the Rue de Charonne, Bette volunteers her carriage. After ridding himself of his current lover—he “drop[s] Mademoiselle Elodie without bidding her goodbye, like a novel one has finished reading”—Hulot talks of nothing but his new lover, the 15-year-old Atala, “for,” writes Balzac, “he had gradually come to be possessed by one of the rightful manias that ruin old men.” With two thousand francs and an assumed name, he arrives in the Rue de Charonne in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, his “face . . . lit up with the joy of a quite new happiness to come” (393).

Podcast listeners must wonder, given Hulot and Crevel’s relationships with barely pubescent girls, what Balzac’s own view was toward this behavior. He wouldn’t look at these with the same outrage we would. After all, Josépha and Jenny Cadine and Bijou show no signs of trauma or regret. On the contrary, they’re grateful since Hulot served as an entree into the world of courtesans, with its rich suitors and luxurious

surroundings. Their relationships with Hulot helped them connect with richer lovers and even husbands. They show a fondness for Hulot, for his unbridled passion and, especially, his unrestrained spending. This lingering fondness and sympathy explain Josépha's generosity. Yet Balzac does not wholly endorse these relationships. Both Crevel and Hulot are comically unable to control their desires and consequently their spending such that these financially successful and socially respectable men are often dominated by the whims of their much younger lovers. Balzac himself almost certainly had sexual relationships with young girls. But his long-term relationships were with older, sometimes married, often aristocratic women, for instance, as a 23-year-old having an affair, which would last for a decade, with a 45-year-old, and simultaneously having a long affair with a 42-year-old duchess. He would maintain a long-term and long-distance relationship with a married Polish noble woman living on an estate in Ukraine who was close to his own age until, following the death of her husband, they married in 1850, just before his own death.

Whereas Balzac was marrying into money, Crevel, in marrying Valérie, is giving much of his fortune away. He's also willing, for the sake of Valérie, to ruin his family. While Adeline attempts to find her husband and thereby reassemble the Hulot family, Crevel risks destroying his own by trying to insinuate Valérie into his family, converting the mistress who ruined Hulot and stole Hortense's husband into a respectable step-mother and aunt. Crevel threatens to withhold his money from his daughter Celestine and her husband if they don't welcome this mistress into their family, which leads to this indignant reply from Victorin: "you are about to marry a woman who is laden with spoils from my father and who has cold-bloodedly led him into his present situation; a woman who, after ruining the father-in-law, lives with the son-in-law, and is the cause of my sister's grievous sorrows. . . . You have no family feeling; you don't understand the strong tie of honour that bonds its different members to each other" (396). When Victorin reveals to his father-in-law that Valérie's true passion is not for him but for Steinbock, who "is loved, very much loved, frequently loved," Crevel answers angrily, "It's cowardly and dirty and petty and vulgar to slander a woman" (396). Crevel doesn't know that in addition to being s in love with Steinbock Valérie is continuing her affair with Baron Montès, although she's afraid that if Montès learns she's marrying Crevel, he might kill her, given his "almost primitive nature" and, in the first of many allusions to *Othello*, the potentially murderous jealousy of this "Moor of Rio de Janeiro" (399).

Unaware of his fiancé's flings, Crevel persists and the Hulots resist, refusing to visit Valérie at her home or to receive her at theirs. "Gripped by a longing to humble the proud stance taken up by all the Hulots" (403), the poker-faced Bette plays her trump card, hinting that Valérie has "some weapon" she has threatened to use against them, "some story of two hundred thousand francs connected with Adeline" (403). She's alluding to Adeline's failed attempt to sell her sexual favors to Crevel to pay off her husband's debts. At this allusion, Adeline, "seized with an appalling attack of convulsions" (403), tells her son, daughter, daughter-in-law, and cousin to receive Valérie, calls Crevel a vile wretch and a monster and collapses. Her nervous disorder requires the sedative effects of opium and, several doctors conclude, "drastic measures to lure the flow of blood away from the brain" (404). In her stupor, all Adeline can say is "a whole lifetime of virtue . . ." (405).

Outraged by his mother's suffering, Victorin turns to a solution that had been previously offered to him. He had been visited by the 75-year-old Madame de Saint-Esteve, "a living image of the Terror" with "the bloodthirsty greed of tigers gleam[ing] in her eyes," with "nostrils . . . breathing hellfire," with a "genius of intrigue . . . manifest on her low, cruel brow," with hairs that had "grown at random in all the furrows of her face, indicat[ing] the masculine quality of her undertakings." She has, Victorin perceives, "the face of Mephistophles" (386). "Madame de Saint-Esteve" is actually an alias used by Jacqueline Collin, a character who embodies, as this passage suggests, the evils of the Revolution. Balzac explains in another novel that she was a mistress of the revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, that she spent two years in prison, and that she became an expert in both disguises and poisons. She is a leader of the Paris criminal underground who "had launched," Balzac tells us, "A hundred or so courtesans . . . in the horrible career of vice" (417). She came to Victorin to help get rid of a woman "who'll ruin a whole respectable family and give [an] enormous

fortune to the child of some lover by speedily getting rid of her old husband” (387). She offered to kidnap and murder Valérie before she married Crevel. And she had told him that in three months a poor priest, pretending to be soliciting for charity, would come to collect the 40,000 francs for this murder. Victorin, revolted by this suggestion, ushered “this horrible stranger, who had emerged from the caverns of the secret police as a monster rises from the lowest depths of the Opera house” (389) out of his home.

When Victorin complained to a police chief, he was told there is a series of prohibitions on the use of such agents, comments that read like plausible deniability and that ignore the fact that the head of the secret police, Jacques Collin, is the nephew of the Mephistophelian Madame Sainte-Esteve and has an extensive criminal background, documented in several other of Balzac’s novels and has been known by several other names, Vautrin, Carlos Herrera, Monsieur Jules, and William Barker. The secret police force and the criminal underground are deeply entangled. The police chief says nothing about this, instead ranting about the decline of policing during the July Monarchy. “The police have rendered immense service to families, especially between 1799 and 1815,” he explained, “Since 1830, the press and constitutional government have totally changed the conditions of our existence. . . . Today everything has changed. We are diminished, disarmed. . . . We’ll be regretted by those very people who have destroyed us, when, like you, they are faced with some moral monstrosity that we ought to be able to clear away as we clear away mud” (390).

The police chief (and presumably Balzac) are complaining about, essentially, the defunding of the police and subsequent rise in crime. This fear seems overstated: the system of policing which had been established during Napoleon’s reign continued with minor changes through the July Monarchy and expanded during the Second Empire under Napoleon III. “From the ruins of Napoleonic rule in 1815, nineteenth century France retained, in only partly modified form, a highly-centralized administrative machine. . . . As developed by Napoleon for dictatorial control over the French Empire, the administration was interwoven with a national police structure for purposes of political surveillance and repression,” argues Washington State University History Professor Howard C Payne. “Though de-emphasized after 1815,” Payne continues, “police power remained relatively centralized. When Louis-Napoleon . . . transformed that republic overnight into a dictatorship by his dramatic coup d’état of December 2, 1851, he succeeded largely by judicious manipulation of the extensive police powers wielded by the administrative bureaucracy” (377). With his mother’s near demise, Victorin’s principles are overturned, and he takes advantage of the murderous skills of the secret police and the criminal underground to rid his family of the vile Valérie and the cruel Crevel. “With a single sentence,” he tells Madame Sainte-Esteve, Valérie “has endangered my mother’s life and reason. So get going” (405). He’s told that she and her associates have already bribed Valérie’s maid, that “there’s poison in the rat-trap,” and he’ll find out the next day “if the mouse is poisoned” (406).

Chapters 113-132

At this point in the narrative, we return to someone we’ve only met briefly, Baron Montès, and are taken into the world of the courtesan, more specifically to the home of Carabin, a woman “Of ready wit, dashing manners, and impish brazenness, who held many successful receptions. . . . Artists, men of letters, and society favorites were among her frequent visitors” (Cerferr and Christophe), a woman who “displayed the dazzling beauty of her shoulders, unrivalled in Paris, her neck looking as if it had been turned on a lathe, it was so smooth, her face full of fun” (408). Within this set, adultery is so common that Montès’s monogamy, his fidelity to Valérie, is an enigma and a joke. Because he “frequented no salon. . . . had never given his arm to a courtesan. [And] his name could never be linked to a courtesan,” he’s nicknamed “Combabus,” the name of a eunuch in a satire by the writer Lucian, who lived in Roman occupied Syria in the first century C. E. In this tale, Combabus is assigned by Seleucus, King of Syria, to accompany his wife, the beautiful Stratonice, on a long journey. Recognizing the conflict between his duty to the King and his desire

for the Queen, Combabus, unable to talk his way out of the journey, castrates himself. As Lucan narrates, “Chopping off his genitals he stored them in a small pot, with myrrh, honey and other spices. He then sealed it with the signet ring he wore and tended to his wound. Later on, when he had decided to begin the journey he came to the king before a great audience, gave him the pot and spoke as follows: ‘Lord, this great treasure was stored away in my house, and I used to love it very much. But now, since I am going on a great journey, I will deposit it with you’ (qtd. in Ogden 175). Linking Montès to Combabus, writes Balzac, “sent [the] guests into fits of laughter for a quarter of an hour, was the subject of a host of jokes, too spicy [both literally and figuratively] to be included in [this] work” (407).

This crowd assembles at a popular restaurant to which they’ve invited Montès “to find out, once and for all, if he has a mistress” (408). And there’s another guest: the 16-year-old Cydalise, arrived in Paris from Normandy and now, with the encouragement of Madame Sainte-Esteve, entering the world of courtesans and seeking a wealthy lover. Or as Balzac tells us, “she had arrived . . . to find a market in Paris for a heart-breaking youthful freshness, an artlessness that would arouse desire in a dying man. . . . The lines of her perfect face portrayed the ideal of angelic purity. Her milky white skin reflected the light as perfectly as a mirror. Her delicate colouring looked as if it had been applied to her cheeks with an artist’s brush” (409). Her beauty and innocence and youth have caught the attention of two of the women in this circle, Carabine and Madame Nourrisson, actually Madame Sainte-Esteve using another alias, who see Cydalise as “a necessary pawn in the game . . . against Madame Marneffe” (409). The two women plan to exploit Cydalise, Carabine to seduce Montès away from Valérie, for which she’s been compensated in the form of a picture by Raphael (paid secretly by Victorin), and Madame Nourrisson aka Madame Sainte-Esteve aka Jacqueline Collin, presumably, to arouse Montès’s murderous jealousy.

Gathered around a table where “there glittered a magnificent service of silver-plate . . . [where] floods of light produced . . . gleaming cascades. . . . [and served by] waiters whom a provincial would have taken for diplomats were it not for their youth” (408), having discussed “racing and horses, . . . Stock Exchange operations, . . . the comparative merits of social celebrities and . . . well-known scandalous stories” (411), the courtesans and their male cohort turn to the topic of love, which leads Josépha to praise Baron Hulot as “a great man . . . [with a] genius . . . in getting hold of money” (414). “And all that for little Madame Marneffe,” says one of the men, “She’s a cunning bitch, if ever there was one” (414). Another reminds them that Valeri’s going to marry Crevel. And a third says she’s crazy about Steinbock. “These three remarks,” writes Balzac, “were three pistol shots that struck Montès full in the chest” (414). Montès’s pained objections to these comments, calling the men “swine” and telling them they shouldn’t “mention the name of an honest woman in the same breath as the names of all [their] dissolute creatures” (415), lead to cries of “bravo” and a round of mock applause. In response, Montès implores the crowd not to slander the woman he loves. But Carabine offers “to give [him] proof in an hour’s time at [her] house” (416). Extricating herself from the table conversation, Carabine heads to an anteroom where Madame Nourrisson, veiled in black lace, asks, “Has he taken the bait?” “Yes,” Carabine replies, “the pistol is so well loaded that I’m afraid it’ll explode” (417).

An hour later, Carabine takes Montès and Cedalise to her drawing room, where she shows Montès a copy of a letter Valérie sent to Steinbock arranging an assignation for that evening. Montès, dismisses the letter and demands to see the two of them together. But Madame Sainte-Esteve (aka Madame Nourrisson) sees in Montès what she had been waiting for, an “instrument tuned to the pitch of murder” (419). She pretends that Cydalise is her niece and is in love with Montès. She, therefore, wants to know what he’ll do for her, this “woman [so] lovely [who] is worth a horse and carriage” (419), in exchange for presenting him with more direct evidence. Montès says if Valérie is found with another man he’ll take Cedalise with him to Brazil where he has “a hundred negroes . . . nothing but negroes, negresses, and little negroes bought by [his] uncle”; he calls himself a czar whose subjects can’t leave his kingdom which is far distant “from any other human habitation” (420), a remote slave estate (slavery wouldn’t be outlawed in Brazil for another 40 years) which he built for Valérie. He plainly declares he’ll kill Valérie if she’s cheating on him. He explains

the means of her destruction: “One of my negroes carries with him the most deadly of animal poisons, a terrible disease which is more efficacious than a vegetable poison and which can be cured only in Brazil” (422). Highly poisonous snakes and frogs can be found in Brazil, and antidotes for these poisons were likely found only in Brazil. So this detail is realistic. Not realistic, however, is the method by which this poison will be delivered. Carol Colatrella, literature professor at Georgia Tech, offers a concise summary of how this poison is to work: “The method of poisoning is complicated, demanding that the [negro] administer it to Cydalise . . . After Cydalise infects [Montès], he [will transmit] the disease to Valérie, who [will pass] it on to Crevel.” Montès, presumably with Cydalise, will return “to Brazil to receive the rare antidote” (250). This passage seems to indicate that the poison can be transmitted only by contact with infected individuals. But the means of this transmission is not clear. Since it moves from male to female and female to male it would seem to be transmitted sexually—Cydalise to Montès, Montès to Valérie, Valérie to Crevel—although I’m only speculating. The mysterious trail of poison and contagion that Balzac sketches out can be attributed to the limited scientific knowledge of the time and to a common belief in the dark knowledge of primitive peoples in remote locales such as Brazil.

Madame Nourisson, to convince Montès of Valérie’s infidelity, takes him and Cydalise to “a paradise used by many people, consist[ing] of a fourth-floor room opening on to the staircase in a house in the same block as the Italian Opera” (425). Balzac describes Steinbock and Valérie’s post-coital, pre-interruption moment in this paradise:

Valérie, standing in front of the fireplace . . . was having her stays laced up by Wenceslas. . . . the slender, elegant Valérie appears divinely beautiful. The pink-tinted, dewy flesh invites a glance from the sleepest eyes. . . . The lines of [her] body . . . are so clearly defined by the striking folds of the petticoat and the material of the stays. . . . Her happy, smiling face in the mirror, her foot tapping impatiently, her hand busy repairing the disorder of her curls and her badly rearranged hair, her eyes overflowing with gratitude, the glow of contentment . . . everything makes that moment of mine of memories. (426)

For a novel whose plot revolves around adultery, and many of whose characters’ lives are determined by sexual desire, there’s little actual depiction of this desire. This passage is as close as the novel comes to something we might label a “sex scene.” I suspect Balzac felt the need, at least once, and especially before a conclusion that’s going to bring in the heavy hand of morality, to show the pleasures of sex. Interestingly, he shows not the build-up but the resolution, a couple—a man married to another, a woman about to marry another and involved in an ongoing relationship with a third man—gently and sensuously bonding. More than a passing pleasure, the emotional power and erotic charge of such scenes give meaning to the moment and linger in our memories. This vivid sensual scene, therefore, helps us understand, although not excuse, “the follies of the Hulots and the Crevels” (426).

In this quiet and tender moment, as Steinbock is lacing up Valérie, into the room enter Cydalise and Montès. Rather than run away or apologize, Valérie, with her preternatural gift for turning would-be guilty scenes to her advantage, seeing Montès with the young and beautiful Cydalise, goes on the attack. As Balzac puts it, “The dignity of a woman outraged effaced the impropriety of her half-clothed state” (417). Valérie alleges Montès has been having an affair with Cydalise, and she calls him out for his duplicity in discovering her post-flagrante delicto: “you’ve spied on me; you’ve bought every step of that staircase, and the mistress of the house, and the servant. . . . Oh, that’s a fine thing to do!—if I had a spark of affection left for such a coward” (427). She has Steinbock hand her her dress; she “put it on, studied herself in the mirror, and calmly finished dressing without looking at the Brazilian, absolutely as if she were alone” (427). She tells him she’s about to marry Crevel and she sees that she has gained control over him: “she thought that in his pallor she saw signs of the weakness which makes such strong men captive to the fascination of women. . . . Valérie . . . saw he [the slave owner] was her slave again” (428).

Two days later, Valérie and Crevel marry. Montès attends the reception, invited by Crevel “in a spirit of boasting triumph” (429). When, two months into her marriage, Valérie arranges for a rendezvous with Montès—“to give the Brazilian reasons which would redouble his love” (430)—she’s warned by her maid not to trust him: “He frightens me, that nigger,” she says, “I think he might do anything” (430). But Valérie, confident in her seductive powers, blithely responds, “Don’t be silly! It’s for him you should be afraid when he’s with me” (430). At the same time, Valérie has broken with Steinbock because he incessantly “demand[ed] explanations from her about Henri Montès” (449). Steinbock, “thin, ill, and badly dressed” (431) has returned to Hortense. Meanwhile, as predicted, a “so-called pilgrim hermit with a suspicious eye” appeared to collect from Victorin the money owed for Valérie’s murder, telling him, “if you prefer not to pay till the funeral is over. . . . I’ll be back in a week. . . . Steps have been taken . . . death moves fast in Paris” (433).

Ahead of this expeditious demise, a doctor, who has come to treat Bette’s bronchitis, unknowingly reveals that these steps have indeed been undertaken. He discusses the lamentable condition of two of his patients, the newlyweds Valérie and Crevel. Valérie “is horribly ugly, if she can be said to be anything at all. Her teeth and hair are falling out; she looks like a leper; she’s an object of horror to herself. Her hands look revolting; they are swollen and covered with greenish pustules. Her loosened nails remain in the sores that she scratches” (436). The doctor believes the cause is “the rapid deterioration of the blood.” Adeline believes “this is the hand of God” (436). Hortense believes “God was very just,” that she and her brother are avenged, that “that venomous creature must have bitten herself” (437). And Victorin, dizzy and trembling, believes that he is a murderer. Overhearing this discussion, Bette “broke out into a cold sweat; she gave a violent start, which revealed the depth of passionate attachment to Valérie” (437), and she “set off [to see Valérie] as if impelled by an irresistible force” (438).

To a depressed Bette a decomposing Valéry says, “I haven’t a body any more. I’m a heap of mud. They won’t let me look at myself in a mirror.” Bette tells herself, “I can’t recognize her eyes or her mouth. Not one of her features remains” (439). The complete disintegration of Valéry’s beauty, her utter dehumanization, is, of course, meant as poetic justice. The gift of her beauty, the power behind her social climbing and manipulation and deceit, has become a curse of ugliness. Even her aroma, “those powerful, beloved perfumes that intoxicate men in love” (428) has become “a stench . . . so great that, in spite of the open windows and most powerful perfumes, no one could stay long in [her] room” (439). Her moral decay has become a physical decay. She who has lived in the social mire has become mud. Valéry’s response to her fate is what we would expect of the heroine in a 19th century novel: she painfully and sincerely repents. As Balzac explains, “Repentance had made inroads into that perverse soul in proportion to the ravages that the wasting disease had wrought in her beauty” (439). She implores Bette to follow her example, saying, “I’d like to undo all the harm I’ve done so that I could receive mercy. . . . If you love me, follow my example and repent! . . . give up all idea of revenge” (439-40). Bette’s reaction to this deathbed confession is not to learn and repent but instead to deny, to believe that such cant is evidence that “her mind has gone” (439), that “she’s delirious” (440). Bette has built her life on avenging herself against her cousin and the Hulot family, a desire she sees as entirely natural. “I’ve seen vengeance everywhere in nature,” she explains, “Insects die to satisfy their need for vengeance when they’re attacked” (440). The knowledge that Valérie’s death is the result of Montès’s revenge in no way modifies Bette’s vengeful nature. On the contrary, it’s Christian charity and sacrifice and humility that, to Bette, are unnatural; they have no place in her life, even when she’s confronted with the death of her closest friend.

Bette at least feels sorrow for Valérie’s demise, unlike the doctors treating her who see her as an interesting case. One believes her condition “was a case of poisoning and . . . private revenge,” the others thinking it “a reappearance of the disease known in the Middle Ages” (438) or “a decomposition of the lymph and the humours” (438) or “a degeneration of the blood due to some unknown morbid factor” (438). One of the doctors notes that “there’ll be a splendid post-mortem examination . . . and we’ll have two specimens, so that we’ll be able to make comparisons” (441). Ultimately, it’s only the Church, as manifested in an

attending nun and priest (the latter from Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin, a church used as munitions factory during the Revolution and "designated as the site of the future revolutionary museum of the history of artillery" before being converted back to a church during Napoleon's reign ["Saint"]), only the Church which responds to Valérie's fate with compassion: "The Catholic Church," Balzac explains, "that divine institution, always inspired by the spirit of sacrifice in all things, in its dual form of spirit and flesh, came to the aid of the revolting, putrid dying woman, lavishing its infinite compassion and its inexhaustible wealth of pity" (438-9). And it's to the Church that Valérie offers her last words: "Leave me completely to the Church. Now I can be attractive only to God. I'll try to be reconciled with him. That will be my last flirtation" (441).

Her lover and new husband Crevel, on the other hand, renounces the Church, turning away a priest sent by Valérie and pled for by his children, arguing that he'd "sucked the milk of Revolution" and is a "child of Voltaire and Rosseau" (442). He says he possesses the strength of mind of Baron d'Holbach, an Enlightenment philosopher and critic of Christianity. In his most well-known work, *Christianity Unveiled*, Holbach offers this critique:

religion, which boasts of having brought peace on earth, and good will towards men, has for eighteen centuries caused more ravages, and greater effusions of blood, than all the superstitions of heathenism. . . . The followers of a God, who was unjustly offended at mankind, became as unjust as he. The servants of a jealous and vindictive God, conceived it their duty to enter into his quarrels and avenge his injuries. Under a God of cruelty, it was judged meritorious to cause the earth to echo with groans, and float in blood. (134)

That a dying Crevel spurns a priest and cites a notorious skeptic like Holbach makes his son-in-law gaze sadly and wonder at the power of "folly and vanity" (443) in causing a person near the end of his life to deny God. For Balzac, Crevel's denial of religion and belief in material wealth make him a man typical of this era of greed and selfishness and corruption. The doctor treating Valérie serves as a spokesman for Balzac when he identifies the cause of the evil, embodied by Crevel, that has overtaken society:

Lack of religion and the perversion everywhere of finance which is nothing but the concrete manifestation of selfishness. . . . In the old days, money was not everything; it was recognized that superior values took precedence over it. There was nobility, talent, and service to the state. But today the law makes money a general yardstick. It has made it the yardstick of political qualification. . . . Well, between the necessity of making money and crooked scheming there is no barrier, for there is a dearth of religious feeling in France, in spite of the praiseworthy efforts of those who are striving for a Catholic revival (434-5).

Although Balzac's views on Catholicism were idiosyncratic—Graham Robb, for instance, asserts that "Salvation through sexual intercourse is one of the themes of his life and work" (115)—his wish for a revival of the Church in France to reinforce a traditional morality and social order was shared by many counter-revolutionary conservatives. One of the most influential was Joseph de Maistre, who condemned the moral godlessness of post-Revolution secular France as essentially evil: "There is a satanic quality to the French Revolution," he writes, "the mere omission . . . of the great Being in any human endeavour brands it with irrevocable anathema. Either every imaginable institution is founded on a religious concept or it is only a passing phenomenon" (41). "What," he asks, "are we to think of the new French structure and the power that produced it? For myself, I will never believe in the fecundity of nothingness" (42). Another important conservative, Louis de Bonald, writing in 1810, described Ancien Regime nobles as "landowners of a large property, among whom sentiments were elevated, characters generous, and habits martial. They made war to exercise their strength and to uphold their dignity rather than to enlarge their possessions" (65). Unfortunately, power "passed into the hands of a second order of citizens" (i.e., the bourgeoisie) for whom "there was no longer any interest except in manufacturing, commerce, and the circulation of money" (66). This transformation and its emphasis on financial speculation "took away every fixed foundation from

society, and all security from private fortunes, and sapped the foundations of public and private morals” (67). Whereas, according to Bonald, war was once caused by the need to uphold noble dignity, “there has never been a more active cause of bloodier or more intractable wars” than commerce (67). Manfred Steger, Professor of Sociology at the University of Hawai-Mānoa, summarizes the ideology of 19th century conservatives like Maistre and Bonald: “French conservative views tended to coalesce around their common aspiration to reconstruct the fallen nation of 1789. . . . France was assured continued greatness as long as the old ruling/ classes remained the guardians of its national spirit. . . . such traditionalist inclinations . . . stood in direct opposition to liberalism: anti-individualism, antirationalism, anticapitalism, Providence . . . resistance to change, and inequality” (61-2).

Balzac believed most of these principles. But his politics were inconsistent, if not incoherent. He believed in the superiority of the traditional nobility but had no noble lineage, a deficiency he tried to overcome by adding the “de” to his name, by marrying and having affairs with aristocratic women, by seeing himself as noble because of his talent, by spending well beyond his means. Much of the failure of French society, he believed, could be attributed to rule by the bourgeoisie, the class he belonged to. He consistently criticized the triumph of materialism yet was a profligate spender on items such as clothes, accumulating debt, while telling people, for instance, that “his ambition was to possess 365 waistcoats” (Robb 262). V.S. Pritchett recounts a dinner party Balzac gave for the visiting Rossini: “He had his dining room redecorated and bought new furniture for the occasion—all on credit. He owed the butcher alone 850 francs . . . Rossini had been amazed by his silver, his bronzes, his dishes, his furniture, and his carpets and clothes” (154). Balzac revered unique artifacts, especially paintings, and derided tawdry, mass-produced goods, yet his boudoir was a showroom for faux luxury and bad taste: “a 50-foot Turkish divan, red and black wallpaper imitating silk with a Corinthian column design, candelabra on the walls, a chandelier on the ceiling, white marble ornaments, chairs covered in cashmere, a rug pretending to be Persian.” As Robb comments, “An estate agent might have sold it as a brothel” (264). These items presumably were meant to elevate his residence, to give it the appearance of wealth with what resembled precious and unique artifacts but were evidence instead of a haute bourgeois arriviste trying too hard to overcome his class roots. Ironically, a desire like Balzac’s to possess one-of-a-kind artifacts, would become a commonplace commercial appeal in the very market economy Balzac repudiated.

Most of the novel examines characters who, like Balzac, aspire to wealth and position. These characters may have bad taste, they may be unscrupulous, they may be accumulating debt, they may be exploiting others—but they’re all essentially members of the bourgeoisie striving to rise in class. Lower class characters—the factory workers and criminals and beggars and prisoners and orphans who fill Dickens’s novel—are almost non-existent in *Cousin Bette*. Balzac here presents a thin slice of Paris society, rather than Dickens’s large cross-section of London. But toward the end of the novel, Balzac briefly expands his vision to include one of Paris’s poorer neighborhoods and its struggling residents.

At a time when people are far too concerned with negroes and petty offenders in the police courts to bother about the sufferings of decent people, this combination of circumstances means that a large number of respectable couples live together outside marriage. . . . [They live in a quarter where] the owners of certain houses, inhabited by manual workers without work, by unscrupulous scarp-merchants, and by down-and-outs engaged in risky occupations dare not collect their rents and cannot find bailiffs who are willing to evict the insolvent tenants. . . . the activities of speculators who aspire to change the face of this corner of Paris . . . will no doubt alter the character of the population, for in Paris the trowel is more of a civilizing instrument than is generally realized. By building handsome, attractive houses with porters’ lodges, laying pavements in front, and making shops there, speculative building, because of the high rents charged, drives away vagrants, families with no furniture, and bad tenants. And so these districts get rid of their dubious inhabitants and foul slums, where the police set foot only when the law requires. (445)

This passage suggests a continuity between French conservatism of the early 19th century and contemporary conservative beliefs: that social degeneration is caused by the absence of religion, by men and women cohabiting, by too great a concern for criminals and racial minorities over “decent people.” The solution offered here is what we now call gentrification. The social problems associated with an impoverished neighborhood can be resolved by forcing these problems elsewhere, which in this case is exactly what happened: this formerly poor and crime-ridden neighborhood, thanks to Hausmann’s reconstruction of the city, is now part of one of the fashionable and expensive 8th arrondissement. But there’s another way to address this problem, to help ensure that parents stay together and thus better the economic security of women and children: charities that provide them with some financial assistance—and promote a moral behavior in accordance with the teachings of the Church.

Adeline is doing just that, working in this downtrodden and dangerous neighborhood for a charity that encourages marriage, “founded,” Balzac informs us, “for the purpose of bringing poor couples back into line with the laws of Church and State, seek[ing] them out and find[ing] them all the more easily because it relieves their poverty before it ascertains their civil status” (444). The need for such charities was well understood at the time. According to San Francisco State University History Professor Sara Curtis, “As Paris transformed its physical structure and geographical limits during the July Monarchy and the Second Empire, women’s associations were on the front lines of the war against poverty and social revolution. . . . Through the ministry of charitable ladies, Catholics hoped not only to assuage the hardships of the urban poor but also to regain their allegiance to the church” (124). Given the immiserating poverty in which many lived, children were often neglected and abandoned and abused. According to Curtis, “Over a third of working-class births were illegitimate; suicides increased; prostitution, infanticide and child abandonment were rife in poor neighborhoods; and beggars and vagabonds wandered the streets” (125).

To help ameliorate this immiseration, Adeline, like many women of her class, sees a moral—and a Christian—responsibility to provide charitable assistance to the poor. “By the mid century wealthy and leisured Parisian Catholic women had no shortage of outlets for their philanthropic energies,” writes Curtis, “estimated by one historian as consisting of thirty-nine charitable associations, seventeen of which were entirely run by women, plus innumerable parish associations, that supported single mothers, primary and nursery schools, the sick, the aged, the infirm, home care, apprentices, prostitutes, convicts and the unemployed” (129). In making her rounds, Adeline checks in on an Italian stone-fitter and his family who she had saved from bankruptcy. “In a few months,” writes Balzac, “prosperity took over from poverty and religion entered hearts that formerly had cursed Providence” (446). After a brief discussion with this family, seeing that they’re doing well, Adeline asks if there are any others who might need her assistance. Or as Balzac puts it, “Adeline fulfilled her duty as a saintly spy by enquiring about any unfortunate people” the family might know (446).

That’s when she leans of a young girl, Atala, who needs “to be saved from perdition” (446) for cohabiting with a German letter-writer, the 80-year-old Monsieur Vyder, who rescued her when she had just turned 15 from a mother eager to sell her into prostitution or even worse, the theater. Encountering this girl, Adeline “sigh[s] deeply at the sight of this masterpiece of feminine beauty, sunk in the mud of prostitution, and she vowed to bring her back to the path of virtue” (448). She learns that this girl can neither read nor write, that she knows nothing of God, has seen Notre Dame cathedral from a distance but has never been inside a church. “There are no churches like that in the faubourg,” she explains to Adeline (449).

“Faubourg,” a term meaning something like “out-of-town,” designated populous areas on roadways leaving Paris that formed outside the city wall, which was demolished in 1701. The faubourgs were then incorporated into Paris as mostly poor, sometimes industrial neighborhoods. Their residents, too, remained outsiders. With “their ‘pale and livid complexion,’ filthy, ragged clothes and high mortality rates, the poor in Paris,” writes Mansel, “looked like a different race from the nobles and bourgeois, who indeed often referred to them as ‘savages,’ ‘nomads,’ ‘barbarians.’” Mansel records one Parisian journalist in 1831

asserting that “the barbarians who menace our society are neither in the Caucasus [sic] or on the steppes of Tartary; they are in the faubourgs” (384). This was a criminal class and a threat to the social order. According to Yale University History Professor John Merriman, “the term ‘faubourg’ thus began to take on a pejorative, even threatening meaning for urban elites. . . . Clearly in the early 1830s some stigmatization . . . can be seen in accounts emphasizing working-class unrest” (334). “The urban periphery,” Merriman continues, “was increasingly stigmatized as being beyond the law, policing, even beyond understanding” (336).

Atala has lived in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, an area near the Bastille notorious for its defiance of authority. In one incident in 1789, reacting to a reduction of wages in a factory that served as the royal manufactory of wallpaper, according to Parisian author and one-time volunteer doctor in Lebanon and Algeria Eric Hazan, “the faubourg devastated the plant . . . troops intervened, and this episode in which several dozen people died, is often seen as a prelude to the Revolution” (123). Thus, Merriman notes, “With the Revolution, the fear of the seemingly uncontrollable faubourg Saint-Antoine took on an increasingly political dimension” (332). The lack of religion that so shocks Adeline is likely a legacy of the Revolution’s radical anti-clericalism.

It’s because she lives in this faubourg, with its poverty and irreligion, that Atala has no sense of right and wrong, no sense of morality, and sees nothing improper about leaving her parents to live with an 80-year-old man. But given the desperation of her circumstances, it’s hard not to think this her best—maybe her only—option. She tells Adeline, “my father and mother had nothing to eat for a week. My mother wanted to make me something very bad, for my father beat her and called her a thief” (450). The something bad her mother wanted to make of her, presumably, was a prostitute, a profession a world away from the life of courtesans like Valérie and Josépha. “Prostitutes may have been common sights in the ‘consumer society’ of the eternal city,” Merriman remarks, “but ‘the worst’ sort of prostitute, down and out, often took refuge on the periphery. There she might avoid the degrading [and I’d add employment-disrupting] weekly or monthly checks for venereal disease” (336).

Adeline learns that Monsieur Vyder purchased Attalla by paying off her parents’ debts and giving them additional money. As she was taken away, her father cried. But Atala seems little bothered by this separation and is in fact fond of Vyder since he has bought her pretty dresses and underwear and a shawl, has dressed her like a princess. She doesn’t even have to wear wooden shoes anymore. Whereas before she survived on a diet of potatoes, now, she rhapsodizes, “He brings me sweets and sugared almonds. . . . I do anything he wants for a bag of chocolates” (450). He takes care of her, giving her a little money every evening, but telling her to go nowhere seemingly afraid she’ll leave him or he’ll be discovered. “He’s a love of a man,” she concludes, “so he does whatever he likes with me. He calls me his little puss” (450-51). When asked why they haven’t married, Atala explains that they have since Vyder told her she was his little wife. Under her breath, Adeline tells herself, “what kind of a monster can it be who could take advantage of such complete, pure innocence?” (451).

We know what kind of monster this is: Baron Hulot.

There’s no surprise in this account; we’ve already been given Atala’s name and her connection to Hulot. Balzac doesn’t play this scene for suspense because, even if he hadn’t alerted us, we’d easily figure out Vyder’s identity. The surprise here is not ours; it’s Adeline’s. Balzac’s use of dramatic irony—letting readers know details that Adeline doesn’t know—allows us to focus on Adeline, on how naively ignorant she remains and on the contrast between her noble charity and her husband’s immorality.

Before this revelation, though, Adeline attempts to persuade Atala of the necessity of marriage, asking, “How can you expect God to protect you if you trample divine and human laws underfoot” and telling her that a paradise awaits “those who obey the commands of his Church” (452), a paradise that “has all the

delights you can imagine. It's full of angels with white wings. We can see God there in his glory, we'll share his power and be happy there every moment for all eternity" (452-53), appeals Atala doesn't understand, so Adeline resolves at last to speak to this German, Monsieur Vyder. Given the address by the Italian stone-fitter, she heads off to the Passage du Soleil where he works as a letter writer and now lives with Atala.

This Passage du Soleil was one of the many covered passageways in Paris, "constructed so as to serve as shopping arcades filled with bookstores, independent boutiques, and eateries," explains travel writer Sophie Nadeau. While there were about 150 such passages by 1850, the rise of the department store and the fall of old Paris have left the current city with only about two dozen. These passages are the subject of the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin's unfinished book of cultural criticism, *The Arcades Project*. Down one such passage, a "recently constructed passage, with shops at a very modest rent" (454), walks Adeline until she comes to "a shop-window screened by green taffeta curtains" and "a sign with the words PUBLIC LETTER-WRITER on the door" (454). Adeline walks into the small shop and waits until "A heavy step shook the wooden staircase. . . [she] could not restrain a piercing cry when she saw her husband . . . wearing a grey knitted jacket, old grey flannel trousers, and slippers" (454).

An overjoyed Adeline tells an addled Hulot that Valérie's dead, that they're rich, that all his debts have been paid, that she's been looking for him for three years, that she has a home waiting for him. Remarkably, Hulot responds to his wife's joy and their reunion by saying, "I'm quite happy to go . . . but can I bring the little girl with me?" Even more remarkable is Adeline's patient response to her 80-year-old husband asking if he can bring his teenaged lover with him: "Hector, give her up. Do this for your Adeline. . . . I promise to give the child a dowry, to arrange a good marriage for her, and to have her educated" (455). Instead of outrage, Adeline feels sorrow for what her husband has gone through as she views the squalor in which he's lived and thinks of the filthy rags this once well-dressed man has worn.

As he prepares to leave, Hulot, too, is brought to tears, not out of happiness at being united with his wife or sorrow over his life's decline but at being made, he tells Adeline, to "leave the only creature whose love for me has been anything like yours" (456), seeming not to distinguish between a devotion based on preserving a family and the devotion based on wearing pretty dresses and consuming sugared-almonds. Atala, also crying, slips into their waiting carriage, begging not be taken away from Vyder, her benefactor, who gave her such lovely things, not be returned to a mother who beat her and called her "little bitch, or dirty hussy, or thief, or vermin" (451). Having Atala taken to her parents, Adeline turns gratefully to her husband: "Thank you for this sacrifice, my dear," said, Adeline, taking the Baron's hand and pressing it with ecstatic joy. "How you're changed! How you must have suffered! What a surprise for your daughter and your son!" (457). The transports of joy with which Hulot, now "looking like a centenarian, broken, bowed [and] coarsened" (457), is greeted upon his return "reconciled him to family life. He forgot little Atala Judici, for excessive indulgence in his passion had made his emotions as fickle as a child's" (457).

While the house is filled with joy, Bette is plagued by sorrow. It's the family's joy, in fact, that causes her sorrow. Not just sorrow. "Already quite wretched at the good fortune that was shining on the family," writes Balzac, Bette's health rapidly declined from tuberculosis until her doctor "gave her no more than a week to live" (458). She finds a last pleasure in duping the Hulots, feeling "the supreme satisfaction of seeing Adeline, Hortense, Hulot, Victorin, Steinbock, Celestine, and their children all around her in bed, mourning her as the good angel of the family" (458). But this is a Pyrrhic victory over Victorin, et al. Her life's goal, to destroy the Hulots, is destroyed. All of her tangled plans—to keep Steinbock to herself, to have Steinbock arrested, to have Steinbock taken from Hortense by Valérie, to marry Marshall Hulot in order to keep his inheritance from the Hulots, to keep Adeline from reuniting with her husband, to bankrupt the family, and to hold on to her one real friendship with Valérie have unraveled. Seeing that Adeline, who had been spoiled while she had worked in the fields, her family having "sacrificed the plain girl to the pretty one, the sharp fruit to the brilliant flower" (34), has been reunited with a now worshipful husband, hastens Bette's death. The sharp fruit decays, while the brilliant flower blooms.

And so Balzac wraps things up with a conventional ending. The villains of the piece, Bette and Valérie, as well as Crevel, are dead. Presumably Montès has returned to his slave plantation in Brazil, perhaps with Cydalise where, presumably, they recover from their poisoning. The family's debts are paid. Even Steinbock has returned to Hortense, although he's reached a creative impasse and can no longer pursue his craft. Or as Balzac puts it, he was "unable to make up his mind to start any piece of work. . . . he was a great drawing-room success; he was consulted by many art-lovers. In short, . . . like all ineffectual men who do not fulfill their early promise" (459), he became a critic or, if you like, a podcaster. Not only has Baron Hulot reunited with his ever-faithful, ever-sacrificing wife, he "seemed to have given up the fair sex. . . . He was invariably attentive to his wife and children; he went with them to the theatre and into society. . . . the reformed prodigal father gave his family the liveliest satisfaction. He was a pleasant old man" praised to the sky by wife and children (460). And that's where we end our story, the bad poisoned and tubercular, the angelic wife and daughter reunited with their loved ones, the virtues of marriage and family reaffirmed, good triumphant.

Well, that's where we would end if this were a Victorian novel. But it's a French one. Quelle difference!

Balzac gives us one more chapter. The Hulot family, now socially prominent and with a large home to manage, hires a chef and a kitchen maid. This maid, Agatha, is "a plump Norman girl . . . short, with solid red arms and a very ordinary face. . . . well-padded with fat as a wet nurse, look[ing] as if she would burst at any moment out of . . . [her] bodice" (460). One night, awakening to an empty bed, Adeline searches through the house for her husband, eventually climbing to the attic and into the servants' quarters. A light shines from Agatha's room from which Adeline hears her husband, "seduced by Agatha's charms and by the calculated resistance of," in Balzac's words, "that frightful slut" (461), making Agatha an offer: "my wife hasn't long to live," he tells her, "and if you like you can be baroness" (461). Hearing this apostasy, Adeline "utter[s] a cry, drop[s] her candlestick and [flees]" (461).

Three days later, fulfilling the Baron's prophecy, Adeline is on her death bed. To her husband she whispers these last words: "My dear, I had nothing but my life to give you. In a moment you'll be free and you'll be able to make a Baroness Hulot" (461). The family at her bedside notices a remarkable, if not miraculous sight: "tears falling from the dead woman's eyes" (461). Seeing the passing of his angelic wife, hearing her final loving reproach, and viewing what seems something like a miracle would assuredly touch the heart of any sinner in a Victorian novel. Not so Hulot. Three days after his wife's death, he departs with Agatha. Nearly a year later the family discovers that the 80-year-old Baron has married the plump kitchen maid. "The fierce persistence of vice," Balzac concludes, "had conquered the virtues of the patience of the angel . . . on the brink of eternity" (462). Vice triumphing over virtue, the adulterer unmoved by the dying angel—a conclusion we'd not see in a Victorian novel but as Balzac explains in the title of this last chapter: "An appalling ending but true to reality."

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