

## Celibacy on Display in Two Texts by Balzac:

### *Le Cabinet des Antiques* and the Preface to *Pierrette*

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The general context of this article is my interest in how representations of celibacy in *La Comédie humaine* fit into Balzac's portrayal of marriage as a social institution.<sup>1</sup> Its specific focus is a brief comparison of the discourse of celibacy in two nearly contemporaneous texts, the well-known 1840 preface to the first edition of *Pierrette* and an under-discussed novel, *Le Cabinet des Antiques*. The latter was first published in volume form by Souverain in 1839; a significant amendment, from the point of view of the argument that follows, was introduced when it was republished in 1844 as part of *La Comédie humaine* and Émile Blondet, already a minor character in the story, was conflated with the intermittently appearing, anonymous, intradiegetic narrator. Chronologically, these two editions of the novel frame the preface to *Pierrette* and it is *Le Cabinet de Antiques*, rather than *Pierrette* itself, that I shall juxtapose with the sustained and sarcastic diatribe against celibacy that occupies the first half of the preface. This generalized onslaught, which concludes with a first mention of *Pierrette* — '*Pierrette est due à ce système de dénonciation sociale, politique, religieuse et littéraire*' — is followed by a humorous disclaimer in which the author exonerates himself from preconceived hostility towards the unmarried: 'il n'est pas célibatairophobe' (4: 24). In line with the feigned misogyny that marks long sections of *La Physiologie du mariage*, it is easy enough to see that the *préfacier's* assumed *célibatairophobie* has parroted the social hatred inherent in a received social discourse.<sup>2</sup> Yet Michael Lucey, for all his awareness of 'a long discursive tradition' (68) behind the preface to *Pierrette*, appears to hold Balzac responsible for the 'symbolic violence' (66) it enacts. If Lucey, whose approach to family structures in Balzac is broadly 'sociological', may seem to read the preface too literally,<sup>3</sup> Franc Schuerewegen, on the other hand, analyses its ironic, rhetorical strategies without a single reference to its content: a discourse on celibacy. My own view is that the rhetorical structure of the preface to *Pierrette* is in dialogue with its thematic content. Similarly, in the final version of *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, the narrative structure interacts with the novel's representation of celibacy.

In the preface to *Pierrette*, Balzac launches his noisy attack on celibacy as follows: 'Ceci part d'un principe. Ce principe est la haine profonde de l'auteur contre tout être improductif, contre les célibataires, les vieilles filles et les vieux garçons, ces

bourdons de la ruche! Aussi, dans la longue et complète peinture des mœurs, figures, actions et mouvements de la société moderne, a-t-il résolu de poursuivre le célibataire' (21–2). Only two subgroups of fictional celibates are to be spared: first, the selfless exceptions (priests, soldiers and a few rare cases of self-sacrifice); second, those young men in a transitional state of bachelorhood along life's rich path to marriage ('attribuez-les à cette nécessité à laquelle nous avons tous obéi d'avoir vingt ans'). As for the rest — 'les célibataires sérieusement célibataires, volant la civilisation, et ne lui rendant rien' — they will be exposed, relentlessly, as selfish and sterile: 'l'auteur a l'intention formelle de les flétrir, en les piquant sur le coton, sous verre, dans un compartiment de son Muséum, comme on fait pour les insectes curieux et rares' (24). The image of the celibate pinned out in a glass display case of Balzac's natural history museum is striking for its similarity to the controlling metaphor of the *Cabinet des Antiques*. The title of Balzac's novel derives from the local *sobriquet* for the anachronistic aristocratic oasis that is the Marquis d'Esgrignon's salon in Alençon;<sup>4</sup> the metaphor is reinforced, however, by Blondet's description of the 'Cabinet des Antiques' as, almost literally, a glass cage:

'L'hôtel d'Esgrignon donnait sur deux rues à l'angle desquelles il était situé, en sorte que le salon avait deux fenêtres sur l'une et deux fenêtres sur l'autre de ces rues, les plus passantes de la ville. [...] Ce salon était alors comme une cage de verre, et personne n'allait ou venait dans la ville sans y jeter un coup d'œil.' (iv. 975)

'Nous nous proposons souvent entre nous, écoliers de huit à dix ans, comme une partie de plaisir, d'aller voir ces raretés sous leur cage de verre.' (977)<sup>5</sup>

Blondet's adult memories ('"la poésie divagante de ces femmes, qui reviennent dans mes rêves et grimacent dans mes souvenirs"') are interwoven with his perceptions as a child ('"je voyais à travers les carreaux"') (976). Thus the retrospective 'telling' of the speaking adult tends to foreground what was seen through the windows by the child, just as Blondet's representational metaphors — drawn from painting, fantastic literature, tapestry, waxworks, theatre and sculpture — serve to reinforce the initial spectacle in which the living dead of this "'grandissime salon"' merge with its faded tapestries and with the outmoded furniture and ornaments that have been bought up by the faithful Chesnel, appropriately enough from 'les débris de châteaux qui se vendirent de 1793 à 1795' (975).<sup>6</sup> That the most prized of the museum pieces described by Blondet should be Armande d'Esgrignon, vieille fille par excellence, may seem further to reinforce the connection with the preface to *Pierrette*.<sup>7</sup>

Armande d'Esgrignon might have been expected to escape Balzac's criticism as a straightforward case, if ever, of a noble and generous 'dévouement'. When, at around thirty years of age, she turns down of her own volition a second proposal of marriage

(which unlike the first, from du Croisier, would have led to an acceptable match with monsieur de La Roche-Guyon), her melodramatic last word on the matter — “Je mourrai mademoiselle d’Esgrignon” (971) — is said to crown eleven years of ‘noble conduite’, of deeds stamped with ‘[le] dévouement le plus pur’ (971). This willing assumption of celibate status has a historical context, however, for we are also told that for thirteen centuries the female descendents of the House of Esgrignon have been sacrificed — married without dowries, or dispatched to convents — for the sake of a single male line. Armande’s refusal of marriage is apparently motivated by her willingly assumed role of substitute mother to her nephew Victurnien, ‘bel enfant de cinq ans’ (971), idolized only son of the current Marquis whose beautiful and thoroughbred young wife, ‘épous[ée] pour continuer sa maison’ (968) — the d’Esgrignons have been all but destroyed by the Revolution — had died in childbirth. Armande herself, half-sister of the Marquis, derives from what her family had considered ‘une horrible mésalliance’ (971); fiercely proud of its direct descent from the Frankish conquerors of Gaul, the family was less than impressed by the enobling of Armande’s maternal great-grandfather during the reign of Louis XIV. Not that this misalliance had done too much damage in that, fortunately for the family line, ‘il n’en était résulté qu’une fille’ (971). Armande, we are told, ‘savait cela’, and thus feels ‘légitim[ée]’ when the proud head of this dwindling House of Three, fond of his sister but regarding her as something of an outsider, seals her overdetermined sacrifice with an emotional decree: “Vous êtes une d’Esgrignon, ma sœur!” (971). For Armande, generosity to the point of selflessness may bring its own rewards (self-definition of a sort through recognition in terms of the gendered values of a caste); for Balzac, who contextualizes her behaviour by placing her in this near-parodic, ancient patrilinear family — for whom caste itself is the only value<sup>8</sup> — female self-negation combined with limited intelligence amounts to a case history of female alienation.<sup>9</sup> The idolatrous upbringing of Victurnien, in which Armande is thoroughly complicit, predictably hastens the collapse of the House of Esgrignon; it is therefore for nothing that she has sacrificed her own social, affective and sexual possibilities. The harm done — ‘ce que, faute d’intelligence, les vertus les plus pures peuvent avoir de nuisible’ (973) — is not least to herself. It is in this sense that I choose to interpret the evaluation of Armande proffered by the extradiegetic narrator: ‘Mlle d’Esgrignon est une des figures les plus instructives de cette histoire’ (973).<sup>10</sup>

For all that Armande has cast herself as an eternal *vieille fille*, she is by no means represented in the novel as an asexual specimen of the genre. Blondet’s account of the ‘Cabinet des Antiques’ as a glass case filled with rare specimens is explicitly framed in references to Armande as object of his childish desire: “mon respect, dois-je dire mon amour pour Mlle Armande” (975); “aussitôt que je voyais la suave Mlle Armande, je tressillais” (977). This is the second of Blondet’s three narrative interventions in the novel, each of which, though limited to a single, long paragraph, is carefully positioned. The first, entirely devoted to a detailed elaboration of the origins and development of his love for Armande, directly follows the grand scene of her pronouncement of lifelong celibacy. Like Blondet’s later depiction of the ‘Cabinet des Antiques’, this

brilliantly evocative account is a powerful conflation of narrative ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. Showing is filtered through the eyes of a pre-adolescent child with a mixture of long shots (“Quand je la voyais venant de loin sur le Cours”), and extraordinary close-ups (“ses joues étaient couvertes d’un très fin duvet à reflets argentés que je me plaisais à voir en me mettant de manière que la coupe de sa figure fût illuminée par le jour”) (972). ‘Telling’ constructs a dense temporal layering of memories and progressive understanding as the child of the past grows up — “Plus tard, quand ces folles idées s’en allèrent une à une [...]; puis, encore plus tard, quand je songeais gravement” (972) — to become the man who speaks in the present: “Aujourd’hui jamais ma folle imagination ne grimpe l’escalier en colimaçon d’un antique manoir sans s’y peindre Mlle Armande comme le génie de la Féodalité.” (973) Finally, childhood and adulthood, showing and telling are merged in the concluding sentence: “Cette céleste figure, entrevue à travers les nuageuses illusions de l’enfance, vient maintenant au milieu des nuées de mes rêves” (973). And although Blondet stresses the naivety of the child’s reactions — “je l’admirais comme on prie à mon âge, sans trop savoir pourquoi” (972) — the effect of his adult retrospection is strongly to sexualize the child’s admiration, expressed as it is via explicit erotic details of which he claims not to have been conscious. His behaviour is in fact fetishistic and voyeuristic: he pretends to be playing when he rolls on the grass in front of Armande, “mais je tâchais d’arriver à ses pieds mignons pour les admirer de plus près” (972), he deliberately attracts her attention despite the coyness of his behaviour when she responds: “‘Que fais-tu là, petit? Pourquoi me regardes-tu?’ Je venais, je me tortillais, je me mordais les doigts, je rougissais et je disais: ‘Je ne sais pas’ ” (972). And when, sometimes, there is even physical contact between the two (she would ruffle his hair and ask his age), he then runs off at speed, “en lui répondant de loin: ‘Onze ans!’ ” (972). The child’s fascination is even more openly sexualized where Blondet borrows the narrative perspective of the local men (“Mlle Armande, pour laquelle les hommes se dérangeaient respectueusement sur le Cours afin de lui faire place, et qui contemplaient les jeux de sa longue robe brune jusqu’à ce qu’ils l’eussent perdue de vue” (972)), before admitting that this viewpoint was his as well (“Ses formes exquises, dont la rondeur était parfois révélée par un coup de vent, et que je savais retrouver malgré l’ampleur de sa robe” (972–3)), and that the memory of her body had marked his adolescent fantasies. And although his later reflexions stress an aesthetic impression in which moral qualities predominate, when he reads historical chronicles it is with the features of notorious royal mistresses that she looms up from the page: “elle est tour à tour Agnès, Marie Touchet, Gabrielle, je lui prête tout l’amour perdu dans son cœur, et qu’elle n’exprima jamais” (973).<sup>11</sup>

Thanks to Blondet, Armande’s celibacy finds a place in the overall sexual economy of the novel. The third and last of Blondet’s direct-speech passages is the final paragraph of the novel, which brilliantly seals the quasi-mythical status of this provincial celibate, not least by inscribing her once and for all in her provincial setting. The penultimate paragraph has described the outcome of her nephew’s financial ruin of the family, with the long-delayed but inevitable marriage, once his father has died in 1830,

of the new Marquis to the niece of du Croisier, the very *parvenu* whose proposal of marriage the d'Esgrignons had unceremoniously rejected 28 years previously.<sup>12</sup> For Armande, who has internalized the relative inferiority of her own bloodline, the prospect of seeking out a rich bourgeois heiress amounts to “une seconde mésalliance” (1092). For an evaluation of celibacy in the novel, this marriage both is and is not a denouement in that Victurnien, almost a cliché of the Balzacian provincial aristocrat rushing to destroy himself in Paris, ends up as much a mythical *célibataire* as his aunt. As his actions move into the present tense, the reader is invited to watch out for him every winter in Paris, ‘où il mène la joyeuse vie des garçons, n’ayant plus des grands seigneurs d’autrefois que son indifférence pour sa femme, de laquelle il n’a nul souci’ (1096).

In giving the last word to Blondet, Balzac uses his final paragraph to close the novel with an image of the female celibate as a shadow of her former self. The sexual politics of celibacy are foregrounded — the alienation of the female celibate in this particular conjugal economy — thanks to the preceding description of her nephew, new head of his ancestral family, but fixed, despite his marriage, in the mould of a selfish, misogynistic, eternal bachelor. We are not told, but are left to suspect, that he will be the last of the line: “Quant à mademoiselle d’Esgrignon, disait Emile Blondet à qui l’on doit les détails de cette aventure, si elle ne ressemble plus à la céleste figure entrevue pendant mon enfance, elle est certes, à soixante-sept ans, la plus douloureuse et la plus intéressante figure du Cabinet des Antiques où elle trône encore” (1096). We learn that Blondet has come face to face with Armande on his most recent trip home from Paris, precisely while taking a walk round the town. As ever, her physical presence has made an impression upon him: “En faisant un tour par la ville, je rencontrai mademoiselle Armande qui m’apparut plus grande que jamais! Il m’a semblé voir Marius sur les ruines de Carthage” (1096). But what interests me in this fine closing paragraph is the juxtaposition of Blondet’s sighting of Armande with the reference to his own forthcoming marriage: “Je l’ai vue au dernier voyage que je fis dans mon pays, pour y aller chercher les papiers nécessaires à mon mariage” (1096). Moreover, the encounter with Armande frames a brief digression recounting the reaction of Blondet’s legal father to this marriage: “Quand mon père apprit que j’épousais, il demeura stupéfait, il ne retrouva la parole qu’au moment où je lui dis que j’étais préfet. ‘Tu es né préfet!’ me répondit-il en souriant” (1096). The identity of Blondet’s biological father — the local prefect — is an open secret, as in a different context is his own adulterous affair with Mme de Montcornet, née Virginie de Troisville, now widowed and free to marry him. The exchange between father and son, though amusingly recounted, compresses issues of marriage, adultery, illegitimacy, inheritance and class, all of which provide a context for an attempt to situate celibacy within Balzac’s fictional portrayal of the institution of marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Émile Blondet’s dual role in the novel is never very clearly explained. He is at once valorizing viewpoint on Armande as provincial celibate and Paris-based dandy-bachelor, a friend of de Marsay and Rastignac, complicit to some extent in the corruption of Armande’s nephew, the latest aristocratic arrival from the provinces. This

slight clumsiness is due, no doubt, to the evolution of the text, from the *préoriginales* of 1836 and 1838, to the *Souverain originale* of 1839, to the Furne publication in 1844 as part of the *Comédie humaine*. As mentioned in my introduction, it is only in 1844 that Blondet, already a named character in the inner Parisian episode, is identified as the source of the three interventions in direct speech, all of which belong to the provincial framework and concern Mlle d'Esgrignon (the last paragraph of the novel, and the speech marks around all three passages, were added in 1839).<sup>14</sup> Yet many intriguing overall effects of the *Comédie humaine* derive from similar textual histories, from imperfect coordination of reappearing characters and plots, as well as from the fact that some novels remained unfinished, or were never written at all. The result is that plots that were promised in private plans, or in public prefaces and prospectuses, have passed into critical and scholarly discussion of *La Comédie humaine*, but without necessarily existing in the actuality of Balzac's published texts. Blondet's marriage, planned for the unfinished *Les Paysans* but never actually recounted by Balzac, is an interesting case in point. Within the plot of *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, Blondet's civil status is that of a bachelor (in the vocabulary of the *Physiologie du mariage* he is even an ex-'minotaur', every husband's supposed nightmare). By the time of his closing narrative intervention Blondet himself is shortly to be married. However, the marriage has not yet taken place and, like the forthcoming marriage of Maxime de Trailles that is announced in the preface to *Pierrette*, 'ce mariage ne coûte qu'une promesse de la liste civile, c'est bien peu de chose' (23).

This is a further reason for my juxtaposition of *Le Cabinet des Antiques* with the preface to the first edition of *Pierrette* (a preface destined to disappear once the novel was absorbed into *La Comédie humaine*)<sup>15</sup>. If Armande's celibacy frames the main plot-line of her nephew's involvement with some of the best-known characters of *La Comédie humaine* (de Marsay, Rastignac, Diane de Maufrigneuse, et al.), the social and sexual-political significance of that celibacy must derive from the wider picture it paradoxically contains. The pivot of Balzac's representation of celibacy in *Le Cabinet des Antiques* is the modest figure of Blondet, occasional narrator and occasional protagonist, sincere admirer of Armande as female celibate, himself, by the time of his concluding intervention, a male celibate-about-to-be-married. For all the difference in genre and tone, the preface to *Pierrette*, which does not refer to Blondet but logically might have done so, brings a similar set of issues into a single frame. It does so by combining a general overview of celibacy as a 'riche trésor de figures' — 'des types portant au front un sens social ou philosophique' (22) — with a superficially bizarre digression on Balzac's familiar trio of leading bachelor-lions: de Marsay, Rastignac and Maxime de Trailles.

'L'un de nos plus terribles célibataires, Maxime de Trailles, se marie' (22). The connection with the dark plot of *Pierrette* is far from apparent, for all the latter's exploration of the pathological behaviour of the celibate siblings, Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis Rogron. However, in 1839 and 1840 Balzac was working on *Une élection en province*, a novel of which only the opening part would ever be published, and that not until 1847 (as a *feuilleton* under a new title, *Le Député d'Arcis*).<sup>16</sup> The plot of *Une*

*élection en province* was indeed programmed to include the marriage of Maxime de Trailles — ‘le prince des mauvais sujets de Paris’ (8: 803) — and Balzac had toyed, for this very reason, with classifying it as one of his series *Les Célibataires*.<sup>17</sup> Hence his claim in the *Pierrette* preface: ‘ce mariage est en train de se conclure dans *Une élection en province*, scène qui se prélassa entre deux des compartiments d’acajou qui contiennent les scènes inédites et qui ne ressemblent pas mal à des coulisses de théâtre’ (22). But it was here that the bulk of the novel remained, despite Balzac’s promise: ‘Vous verrez cet épisode de nos mœurs politiques, d’ici à quelques mois: les mariages et les élections se font plus vite qu’ils ne se racontent’ (23).<sup>18</sup> The humour of the passage derives from Balzac’s sustained exploitation of the figure of metalepsis, the transgression of diegetic boundaries between the fictional world of the characters and real world of author, readers and critics. Thus the story of Maxime’s marriage must be published ‘dans l’intérêt des familles qui grouillent entre les mille pages de cette longue œuvre et qui s’alarmaient en sachant Maxime toujours affamé’, but also to silence the real-life critics of Balzac’s *Études de mœurs*:

— *Il le fallait!* a dit l’auteur en se drapant dans sa robe de chambre [...].

Il-le-fal-lait! Que voulez-vous! Il s’élevait mille accusations contre les dandies des *Études de mœurs*. Une critique imbécile et lâche en voulait à Maxime de Trailles! On le travaillait dans les journaux, on le prétendait trop immoral, d’un dangereux exemple, on allait jusqu’à nier son existence! Pour en finir, son père a fini par le marier. (22)

Once married, once himself a *père de famille*, once in the service of the new régime, Maxime will find people to defend him; besides, he will be rich enough to buy a good press (‘il pourra payer quelques flatteurs et s’abonnera sans doute à quelques rédacteurs, ce qui est plus utile que de s’abonner à des journaux’ (23)). Even so, ‘beaucoup de femmes’, fictional victims of Maxime de Trailles, protest directly to the author:

Comment! Vous mariez ce monstre qui nous a fait tant de mal, qui a séduit et quitté Mme de Restaud, [...] et vous le faites heureux, père de famille? Ce sera un horrible exemple, il fallait qu’il finît très mal, comme Faust, ou comme Don Juan, ou comme les vieux garçons qui ont *fait des siennes*, avec d’horribles souffrances, ayant plus ou moins de névralgies, d’apoplexies, de paralysies.

‘Que voulez-vous, ce diable de Maxime se porte bien, a dit l’auteur. Puis où est le danger? Le proverbe: *la mauvaise herbe croît toujours*, mentirait donc?’ (23)

The women, we are told, being ‘des femmes d’esprit’, take the point and change their

minds about Maxime's marriage, in any case a mere 'promesse de la liste civile'. But the *préfacier* is incapable of leaving things there, and returns to Maxime's reformed future to say that he is developing into an excellent *député*, so much so that the prime minister is creating a post for him. In the same way, the author has been forgiven for creating de Marsay, though partly because he has taken the precaution of killing him off in his prime. Moreover, de Marsay's fine political career, which was to redeem his dreadful past as a bachelor, has the same dilatory status as Maxime's marriage: 'il a fait de grandes choses, il avait du moins l'intention de les faire: ses titres à l'estime de son pays, le rachat des fautes de sa jeunesse, toute sa belle vie est dans les scènes de la vie politique'. Unfortunately, 'ces trop célèbres scènes' are as yet in the aforementioned mahogany compartments, awaiting their turn to 's'élaner dans la vie du cabinet de lecture' (23).

Franc Schuerewegen has skilfully analysed the use of metalepsis in the preface to *Pierrette*, but he does so in the context of an argument about the status of realism and the will to totality in Balzac's metadiscourse on the *Comédie humaine*. Like so many critics in recent years, he homes in on the holes in Balzac's project, in this case by comparing the dilatory rhetoric of this 1840 preface with that of the 1842 *Avant-Propos*. Yet, as I indicated earlier, he makes no comment at all on the content of the preface to *Pierrette* — not even on the missing content of its holes — in terms of its pronouncements on celibacy. What interests me specifically is the relation between rhetoric and content: the way Balzac's self-conscious postponements discursively project Maxime de Trailles's marriage into a receding future. Armed with the twelve Pléiade volumes of *La Comédie humaine*, theoretically we can fill in the gaps and can establish that the three members of the bachelor trio are about to marry (de Marsay in *Le Contrat du mariage*), that they do marry (Maxime de Trailles in the third part of *Béatrix*), or that they have married (Rastignac in the published fragment of *Le Député d'Arcis* and in *La Cousine Bette*). The fact that in practice it is difficult to remember which of these characters actually marries, and when and where they do, simply underlines Balzac's strategy. All three have the mythical status of rampaging bachelors (indeed the single reference to Maxime de Trailles in *Le Cabinet des Antiques* includes him, with De Marsay and Rastignac, in a list of Parisian *roués*).<sup>19</sup> By positing on the horizon marriages that purport to atone for the behaviour of his fictional dandies, Balzac highlights the typically provisional dimension of male celibacy as the obvious starting point of a sexual-political analysis.<sup>20</sup>

One of the earliest rhetorical moves of the *préfacier*, sworn enemy of unproductive celibates and 'father' of Maxime de Trailles, is to declare that he writes as a bachelor. Recalling that the Convention had debated the possibility of introducing a tax rate for celibates that would be double the married rate, the advantages for the public purse, for girls looking for a husband, for married couples, and for the perks of tax collectors are rehearsed with ironic altruism: 'La publication de cette idée, renouvelée des cartons de la Convention, est d'autant plus courageuse que celui qui la soulève est garçon; mais il y a des cas où les intérêts sociaux doivent l'emporter sur les intérêts particuliers' (21). Balzac repeats here the ploy exploited some ten years earlier

where the author of *La Physiologie du mariage* withholds his name, identifying himself simply as ‘un jeune célibataire’ (11: 1763). That the author of this purportedly learned disquisition on marriage and adultery — *Méditations de philosophie éclectique sur le bonheur et le malheur conjugal* — should be a young bachelor may seem comically incongruous; however, by the end of the book it has been proved that a *jeune célibataire* will write *en connaissance de cause*. Statistics, historical digressions, aphorisms and anecdotes all point to an ineluctable conclusion: that marriage, for a man, is but a rite of passage from celibacy to cuckoldom, for there is always another bachelor following along behind. The reader’s attitude to the *Physiologie* will be determined, therefore, by the position ‘he’ occupies in this chronologically cyclical structure. ‘*Physiologie, que me veux-tu?*’, asks the anonymous reviewer of *Le Mercure de France au XIXe siècle* (11: 1760–62), quoting the opening line of the first ‘meditation’. The reviewer is none other than Balzac, now at two removes from his real self but still playing, from beginning to end of the review, with the issue of his own conjugal status: ‘Je suppose, en faisant cette exclamation, que je suis marié avec une femme jeune ou vieille, laide ou belle, vertueuse ou non; je suppose encore que j’ai des enfants qui me ressemblent ou ne me ressemblent pas; le cas peut se rencontrer conjugalement’ (1760–1). Were he married, he would avoid reading the young bachelor’s meditations (‘*méditations que chaque mari doit faire au moins par humilité une fois par semaine*’ (1761)), either from resigned familiarity with their content, or from anticipated failure to cope with the horrible truths to be revealed. Were he celibate — ‘*si je suppose, au contraire, que je goûte les douceurs du célibat*’ — the *Physiologie*, denounced as heretical and schismatic, could not but seem ‘fort orthodoxe’: ‘*C’est donc à titre de célibataire, ou me supposant tel, que je louerai la Physiologie du mariage, sans restriction et sans arrière-pensée*’ (1761). Having proved, twice over (if with somewhat slippery logic), that the cynical analysis of marriage is accurate (a bachelor should and will know), and having underlined that the bachelor in question seeks radical reform of the institution (‘*Pourquoi pas? On a bien fait le Code Napoléon*’), the reviewer reaches the nub of the author’s dilemma, given the existing state of affairs: ‘*ce qui est merveilleux, c’est sa perspicacité à voir la paille dans l’œil d’un prédestiné. C’est le nom poli qu’il donne à la plupart de ceux qui ont cessé d’être célibataires. Dieu lui fasse la grâce de ne pas changer d’état!*’ (1761). But this is a reviewer aware that time is a factor in the male conjugal equation: ‘*Nous attendons l’auteur au jour de ses noces, si tant est qu’il ose se marier, passé l’âge des physiologies*’ (1762).

His conjectures in fact echo those that frame the ‘Post-scriptum’ of the *Physiologie*, where ‘la duchesse à qui l’auteur venait de lire son manuscrit’ asks the latter what personal lesson he has drawn from his book:

— ‘Et, vous marierez-vous?...’ [...]

‘Certainement, madame, répondit-il. Rencontrer une femme assez hardi pour vouloir de moi sera désormais la plus chère de toutes mes espérances.

— Est-ce résignation ou fatuité?...

— C'est mon secret. (11: 1201–2)

It is at this point that she intervenes with an anecdote: ‘ — Eh bien, monsieur le docteur ès arts et sciences conjugales, permettez-moi de vous raconter un petit apologue oriental que j'ai lu jadis dans je ne sais quel recueil' (1202).<sup>21</sup> It is the story of a quick-witted wife who, in order to get the better of two men — her jealous husband and a would-be seducer — stages a bogus scenario of adultery. The seducer is a complacent ‘philosophe’ who believes himself protected by his *recueil* of ‘toutes les ruses que les femmes ont inventées’; inevitably, he ends up with a final trick for his collection: “Monsieur le docteur, n'oubliez pas ce tour-là dans votre recueil.” Similarly, the author of the *Physiologie* has promised, in return for its telling, to include the Duchess's anecdote ‘à la fin de [son] ouvrage...’ (1202). He has done so, of course, before rounding off the book as a whole with a more nuanced reply to the question ‘will he marry?’. Certainty is replaced by possibility, and fatuousness by ironic resignation: ‘Madame, dis-je à la duchesse, je comprends! Si je me marie, je dois succomber à quelque diablerie inconnue; mais j'offrirai, dans ce cas, soyez-en certaine, un ménage modèle à l'admiration de mes contemporains’ (1205). The playful ending to the *Physiologie* is thus held together by the issue of the *jeune célibataire's* conjugal future: the authorial persona (a mask that happens to coincide with the reality<sup>22</sup>) is that of a bachelor who may well marry one day, but will do so with knowledge — now complete — of what marriage entails.

The ‘Post-scriptum’ of the *Physiologie* employs *mise-en-abyme* to short-circuit discursive and narrative levels. At the centre of this ironic vortex, as at that of the preface to *Pierrette*, lies the serious matter of the relationship between marriage and celibacy. The opening declaration of the preface — ‘L'état du Célibataire est un état contraire à la société’ (4: 20) — is a clear echo of the first line of the *Physiologie*: ‘Le mariage ne dérive point de la nature’ (11: 903). The words quoted are Napoleon's; the context is the formulation of the *Code civil* by the *Conseil d'État*. For all the pretence of debating family and inheritance structures from first principles, marriage was rapidly reconfirmed by the *Conseil d'État* as the ‘natural’ underpinning of civil society. Hence the paradoxical status of states that could be viewed as ‘socially unnatural’, a status acutely pinpointed by Balzac's reminder, in the *Pierrette* preface, that the so-called natural foundations of marriage need their legal and fiscal props. To return to my starting point — the contrasting critical approaches of Lucey and Schuerewegen to the preface to *Pierrette* — *La Physiologie du mariage* might be thought a bizarre absence in both of their arguments. Lucey's very welcome account of ‘the social forms of sexuality’ (‘the ways in which Balzac's novels construct a relation between individuals and family forms and systems of law, of inheritance, and of sexuality’ (xv)) pays surprisingly scant attention to marriage; moreover, there is no reference anywhere in *The Misfit of the Family* either to *La Physiologie du mariage* or to *Petites Misères de la vie conjugale*. Schuerewegen, if I have understood him correctly, argues that Balzac uses the rhetoric of his prefaces strategically; the point is to create holes that he can fill with his own discourse and thereby collapse the distinction between preface and texts to come. In the case of the *Avant-propos*, he concludes with

the suggestion that this preface to the *Œuvres complètes* replaces the non-existent *Études analytiques* it announces (147). To play down the importance of the one *Étude analytique* that does exist (*La Physiologie du mariage* is, at the very least, both chronological starting point and structural endpoint of *La Comédie humaine*), and to do so in the context of discussing the preface to *Pierrette*, requires a high level of disinterest in Balzac's analysis of marriage.

Though irony can seem a way of avoiding saying anything serious, my argument has been that Balzac employs it to gain some purchase on the social significance of celibacy. One of the difficulties of discussing celibacy in any context is that it is effectively impossible to conceptualize other than in relation to marriage. The scenario of the male *célibataire-qui-va-se-marier* leaves no place for female celibacy, as my brief analysis of *Le Cabinet des Antiques* attempted to show. Male celibates, it seems, sleep with married women and eventually get married. Female celibates either marry or, in the conjugal economy described by Balzac, fall out of the picture altogether. At best, they exist in a state of alienation; at worse, in a state of dereliction, both social and linguistic: they are not even objects of exchange. I leave for elsewhere a more wide-ranging discussion of Balzac's discourse of female celibacy in other texts of *La Comédie humaine*, not least the many examples where his irony may seem straightforwardly offensive.<sup>23</sup> Arguably, Balzac's attempted humour goes more easily astray in texts that depict celibacy but lack the ironic foregrounding, evident in the *Physiologie* and the preface to *Pierrette*, of the gender and civil status of the authorial persona. In *Le Cabinet des Antiques*, the only novel discussed here, that self-conscious role is delegated to Blondet as intradiegetic narrator, whence — perhaps — an overall portrayal of female celibacy that is both 'sympathetic' and analytically acute. In my view, the gendering of celibacy is a powerful lever for opening up the sexual politics of *La Comédie humaine*. Like Balzac's *préfacier*, however, I leave matters there for the time being: 'Le sujet ne sera pas encore épuisé, mais il y aura bien assez de célibataires pour le moment' (4: 27).

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<sup>2</sup> As so often, an entry by Flaubert in *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues* underlines the point: 'CÉLIBATAIRES. — Tous égoïstes et débauchés. On devrait les imposer. Se préparent une triste vieillesse' (339).

<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, Lucey sets out to explore 'the Balzacian novel's active relation to a sociological knowledge of sexuality' (xvii). For his discussion of *Pierrette*, see 65–81. In his reading, 'the exact degree of humor and irony that Balzac employs in his preface is a bit hard to ascertain. [...] Whatever ambiguity, humor, irony may be present in Balzac's preface, it is worth insisting on the symbolic violence it also contains — its effort to justify the exclusion of certain people from full participation in the social domain, to refuse them equal treatment before the law. [...] What is this supposed monarchist doing having recourse to the proposals of Revolutionary legislators to justify his proposed social program?' (65–66). Lucey then sets the preface against the 'sociological analysis' (69) performed by the novel itself: '*Pierrette* has thus been concerned with the social form of marriage and the ways that form's links to biological reproduction are theorized, calculated, spoken of, experienced, controlled, manipulated, believed in, or disbelieved. [...] Clearly, this analytical interest in the way reproductive ideology functions exists in tension with the celibatairophobic discourse the novel lays out in its preface and then continues to emit at various moments. In its analytic project, the novel seems to objectify its own use of celibatairophobic discourse, and to begin to question the interests that such discourse furthers' (80–1). Unless I have misunderstood him, Lucey seems not to ask whether the preface itself might be part of that critical project.

<sup>4</sup> The close relation with *La Vieille Fille*, and explicit references to the novel elsewhere in *La Comédie humaine*, indicate unambiguously that ‘une des moins importantes préfectures de France’ (965) is Alençon.

<sup>5</sup> As from the Furne edition, ‘sous leur cage de verre’ replaced the earlier ‘dans leur cage de verre’ (1534).

<sup>6</sup> The extradiegetic narrator exploits similar imagery elsewhere in the novel. The Marquis is ‘cette admirable ruine [qui] avait toute la majesté des grandes choses détruites’ (974), the Marquis and the Chevalier are ‘ces deux débris du siècle précédent’ (993), and Victurnien is ‘ce charmant débris d’une vieille famille’ (1009).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘vieille fille’ as an ironic quotation from Balzac’s preface. By his initial classification of ‘les vieilles filles et les vieux garçons’ into the single, sterile category of ‘drones in the hive’, Balzac usefully draws attention to the fact that in French, linguistically at least, the gender values of celibacy are not loaded against women. This is not the case in English, where it is notoriously difficult to find an acceptable female equivalent for the male ‘bachelor’. In an attempt, no doubt, to avoid the offensive term ‘old maid’, Lucey produces an unfortunate translation of ‘les célibataires, les vieilles filles et les vieux garçons’ as ‘all unmarried people, elderly spinsters and unmarried men’ (66).

<sup>8</sup> In common with eight or nine local families, ‘l’antiquité, la conservation de la race était tout pour [elle]’ (974).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the description of Armande reading her nephew’s letter from Italy (‘une lettre charmante d’hypocrisie’), where he is travelling with Diane de Maufrigneuse (‘l’amour respirait dans toutes ses phrases’): ‘Mlle Armande savourait cette lettre à longs traits, comme le devait une fille sage, mûrie au feu des passions contraintes, comprimées, victime des désirs offerts en holocauste sur l’autel domestique avec une joie constante’ (1029).

<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the very different class values at stake, I am reminded of Roland Barthes’s fine analysis of Marguerite Gautier’s self-sacrifice in the play *La Dame aux camélias* (202–4): ‘Marguerite a d’abord été touchée de se sentir reconnue par Armand, et la passion n’a été ensuite pour elle que la sollicitation permanente de cette reconnaissance; c’est pourquoi le sacrifice qu’elle consent à M. Duval en renonçant à Armand, n’est nullement moral (en dépit de la phraséologie), il est existentiel [...]. En dépit du grotesque de l’affabulation, un tel personnage ne manque pas d’une certaine richesse dramatique: sans doute il n’est ni tragique (la fatalité qui pèse sur Marguerite est sociale, non métaphysique), ni comique (la conduite de Marguerite tient à sa condition, non à son essence), ni encore, bien entendu, révolutionnaire (Marguerite n’exerce aucune critique sur son aliénation). Mais il lui faudrait bien peu de chose pour atteindre au statut du personnage brechtien, objet aliéné mais source de critique. Ce qui l’en éloigne — irrémédiablement — c’est sa positivité: Marguerite Gautier, “touchante” par sa tuberculose et ses belles phrases, empoisse tout son public, lui communique son aveuglement: sottise dérisoirement, elle eût ouvert les yeux petits-bourgeois’.

<sup>11</sup> On an imaginary plane at least, Armande invents herself as a subject of desire through her vicarious sharing of Victurnien’s affair with Diane de Maufrigneuse: ‘Mlle Armande aimait fantastiquement ce beau couple’ (1029). Responding to her nephew’s first letters from Paris, ‘Mlle Armande semblait être de moitié dans les plaisirs de Mme de Maufrigneuse’ (1020); later, projecting herself from Alençon to Venice: ‘elle y était dans la gondole de Victurnien qui lui disait combien il avait été heureux de sentir dans sa main la belle main de la duchesse’ (1030). When she turns up in Paris to rescue Victurnien, ‘[elle] pleurait comme une Madeleine: on eût dit la complice des fautes de son neveu’ (1042); finally, in the set-piece confrontation with Diane that takes place in Armande’s cold, bare bedroom — ‘vous

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eussiez dit de la cellule d'une religieuse' — Armande rises to the occasion as follows: 'D'ailleurs, en vous voyant, tout se conçoit, même le crime!' (1090).

<sup>12</sup> An interesting result of Victurnien's marriage is that he will inherit the fortune of Mme du Croisier, Armande's friend and the eponymous *Vieille Fille* of the novel of that name. Through a curious oversight, when Balzac grouped the two novels in *La Comédie humaine* (under the umbrella title *Les Rivalités*), he failed to conflate du Bousquier of *La Vieille Fille* with du Croisier of *Le Cabinet des Antiques*.

<sup>13</sup> As soon as his wife dies, the apparently tolerant Blondet père vents his hatred for the adulterine son. Émile is thrown out of the house and sent to Paris to fend for his own future; paternal love is blindly lavished on the biological son, the 'lourd et laid' Joseph (1065): 'Sa vengeance, assez légitime, consistait à faire passer cette maison, les terres et son siège, à son fils Joseph et la ville entière connaissait ses intentions. Il avait fait un testament en faveur de ce fils, par lequel il l'avantageait de tout ce que le Code permet à un père de donner à l'un de ses enfants, au détriment de l'autre' (1066).

<sup>14</sup> Given its importance to my argument, I quote in full the very detailed textual history that Nicole Mozet traces in her introduction to the Pléiade edition of *Le Cabinet des Antiques* (4: 945–6): 'dans le texte de 1836, Balzac parle spontanément à la première personne. C'est dans l'édition originale (1839) qu'il introduit un narrateur, d'abord anonyme, sans que le personnage d'Émile Blondet soit encore né. En effet, le Blondet de 1838 (dans la version du *Constitutionnel*), bien loin d'avoir déjà le statut de narrateur, n'était qu'un personnage épisodique — l'un des convives du dîner parisien au *Rocher de Cancale*; n'ayant pas encore d'état civil, il n'était qu'un écrivain parisien sans attaches provinciales. C'est seulement dans l'édition de 1839 que Balzac a pensé à en faire le fils cadet du vieux juge d'Alençon. Celui-ci, qui n'existait d'ailleurs pas dans les textes préoriginaux, a été lui-même créé en deux temps: 1° Blondel, 2° Blondet, et c'est au vieux Blondel que Balzac prête d'abord la dernière vision de Mlle Armande qui achève le roman. Ce n'est qu'après avoir doté le vieux juge d'une biographie — avec passage de Blondel à Blondet — que Balzac pense à mettre l'ensemble de la narration au compte de son 'confrère' d'Alençon, le journaliste Blondet. Les dernières corrections, dans l'édition Furne, ont confirmé ce projet et lui ont donné plus de cohérence en introduisant le nom d'Émile Blondet dès les premières pages du roman: l'auteur disparaît complètement derrière le prétendu narrateur. Le seul 'je' du texte est désormais celui d'Émile Blondet'. Mozet aptly likens this refocusing of the novel to 'une sorte de mise en orbite: le texte est détaché de son origine réelle pour être rattaché à la sphère d'un des personnages' (946). Her claim that Balzac devolves narrative responsibility to distance himself from his sources — one or more real-life cases of provincial young men sentenced to hard labour for fraud (945–46) — strikes me as less interesting than his choice of Blondet for this role.

<sup>15</sup> In the Souverain edition the preface was placed inside the text of *Pierrette*, after the title and between the dedication and the first chapter. See Balzac's general comment at the end of his preface to the 1839 edition of *Le Cabinet des antiques*: 'ces avertissements et ces préfaces doivent disparaître tout à fait lorsque l'ouvrage sera terminé et qu'il paraîtra dans sa véritable forme et complet' (964). The Pléiade edition gives an ambivalent status to Balzac's prefaces to both first editions by placing them between the editor's introduction and the title that marks the beginning of Balzac's text, rather than with the notes and other editorial material grouped at the end of each volume.

<sup>16</sup> It was completed after Balzac's death by Charles Rabou, and became the first novel of an apocryphal trilogy consisting of *Le Député d'Arcis*, *Le Comte de Sallenaue* and *La Famille Beauvisage*. The first subsumed the text of the *feuilleton* published by Balzac in 1847; the sequels were entirely invented by Rabou.

<sup>17</sup> The alternative was to include it in *Les Provinciaux à Paris* for its theme of provincial wealth seeking political power in Paris. The embryonic *Une élection en province* was a *Scène de la vie de province*; the incomplete *Député d’Arcis* (1847) was reclassified as a *Scène de la vie politique*. For the textual history of *Le Député d’Arcis*, see Colin Smethurst’s very useful editorial material (8: 699–714 and 1587–1601).

<sup>18</sup> The 1847 *Député d’Arcis* (written in 1839) breaks off after the two chapters to which the *préfacier* of *Pierrette* is referring in his digression on the three reformed bachelors. Maxime’s desire for a new life (‘il pensait à faire une fin, à se marier’ (8: 806)) is interwoven with information on the political career and early death of de Marsay, and on the financial, social and political capital of the recently married Rastignac. The seeds of Maxime’s future career, marital and political, are sown over a late-night cup of tea *chez* Mme d’Espard where, in a quintessential homosocial exchange, Maxime seeks Rastignac’s protection: “‘La vie que je mène m’ennuie et je veux une retraite. Voyez à me seconder dans la conclusion d’un mariage qui me donne un demi-million; une fois marié, nommez-moi ministre auprès de quelque méchante république d’Amérique’” (810). The countdown to Maxime’s marriage can be traced in the last part of *Béatrix* (1845): “‘Voici la dernière intrigue de ma vie de garçon’” (2: 911); “‘C’est désespérant, nous nous marions tous’” (919); ‘Maxime l’écoula gravement, il pensa à son mariage qui se célébrait dans huit jours’ (934); “‘je suis marié d’hier, je serai fidèle à ma femme’” (940). For evidence of Maxime’s political career, see his cameo appearance in *Les Comédiens sans le savoir*; this “‘ex-coquin en train de devenir ambassadeur’” (7: 1201) has apparently taken to parliamentary intrigue like a fish to water.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Pour son malheur, [Victurnien] tomba dans le monde des roués Parisiens, des de Marsay, des Ronquerolles, des Maxime de Trailles, des des Lupeaulx, des Rastignac, des Vandenesse, des Ajuda-Pinto, des Beaudenord, des la Roche-Hugon et des Manerville’ (4: 113).

<sup>20</sup> Balzac’s analysis of Maxime in *Le Député* is attentive to what he calls the *Code-Homme*: ‘Pour cet homme, les femmes ne furent jamais que des moyens, il ne croyait pas plus à leurs douleurs qu’à leurs plaisirs; il les prenait, comme feu de Marsay, pour des enfants méchants. [...] Le comte Maxime de Trailles savait seul combien de désastres il avait causés; mais il s’était toujours mis à l’abri du blâme en obéissant aux lois du Code-Homme’ (8: 804). Such values, along with the cynical marriage that is programmed into them, are comically rehearsed in *Béatrix* where Maxime, about to abdicate as king of the dandies, recruits La Palférine, a rising star of the new generation: ‘— Si je dois sortir de l’esthétique, c’est tout à fait impossible, dit La Palférine. J’ai, voyez-vous, à l’endroit des femmes une certaine probité, nous pouvons les rouer, mais non les... — Ah! l’on ne m’a donc pas trompé, s’écria Maxime. Crois-tu que je sois homme à proposer de petites infamies à deux sous?... Non, il faut aller, il faut éblouir, il faut vaincre. Mon compère, je te donne vingt mille francs et dix jours pour triompher. [...] En cas de succès tu te trouveras de si puissantes protections que tu pourras, comme moi, te retirer dans un beau mariage, quand tu t’ennuieras de ta vie de bohème’ (2: 916–17).

<sup>21</sup> As even the duchess admits, this parodically Oriental anecdote, like others in *La Physiologie du mariage*, is secondhand; what is fascinating is the context in which Balzac exploits it. For comparison with Balzac’s source, see Smethurst and Tolley.

<sup>22</sup> The biographical parallel of a life-long bachelor whose marriage is deferred to the last possible moment is uncanny. Such is the mythical resonance of Balzac’s eleventh-hour marriage that it is difficult to think of his civil status as an open-ended set of possibilities.

<sup>23</sup> For an earlier and rather different attempt to evaluate Balzac’s depiction of female celibacy (based on a reading of *La Cousine Bette*), see Knight.