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CHAPTER 6

Balzac's Honorine, or, The Rape of the Independent Woman

Diana Knight

'"'Est-ce jamais un homme qui me comprendra!...'" '

[' "Could a man ever understand me!..." '][1]

The independent woman of my title is the eponymous heroine of Balzac's short fiction Honorine (1843). If, as will be seen, Honorine's independent existence in the rue Saint-Maur is in some ways illusory — a fiction to the second degree — the rape of that independence at the hands of a male conspiracy is all too real. In her essay 'Women's Time: Simone de Beauvoir and the Independent Woman', Elizabeth Fallaize highlights the ambivalences and historical limitations of the 'femme indépendante' in Beauvoir's analysis: no longer a vassal, but by no means yet a 'femme libre' [free woman].[2] As it happens, the penultimate chapter of Le Deuxième Sexe upon which she focuses opens with the working woman — which is what Balzac's Honorine, who has run away from her marriage, wanted but was not allowed to be — and ends with the woman writer, a category represented in Balzac's story by Camille Maupin, pen-name of the celibate aristocrat Félicité des Touches.[3] Camille, who is travelling with two equally famous men, is one of the gathering of distinguished guests who, on a terrace overlooking Genoa, will be asked to respond to a story told by their host, the French Consul. What is more, Balzac has chosen this complex independent woman as the Consul's privileged narratee.[4]

The structure of Honorine is that of an archetypal story within a story, whereby the internal narrator, and what little is known of him, is described by an extra-diegetic narrator before the text gives way to his first-person narrative. Maurice de l'Hostal, initially reluctant to marry, despite the passion he has inspired in a beautiful Genoese heiress, withdraws his initial refusals 'à cause d'un événement inconnu' (p. 528) [because of an unknown event]. Aware that Maurice must be in love, Onorina Pedrotti 'fit de son amour une consolation, elle berça ces douleurs inconnues dans un lit de tendresses et de caresses italiennes' (p. 529) [consoled him with her love, cradling these unknown sorrows in a bed of tenderness and Italian caresses]. Curiosity about this 'beau ménage' [attractive couple] has been focalized for the reader through Camille Maupin ('Mlle des Touches trouvait au consul un air un peu trop distrait chez un homme

parfaitement heureux' [Mlle des Touches thought the Consul appeared rather too distracted to be a completely happy man]), when an after-dinner discussion of adultery — 'qui, de la femme ou de l'homme, avait tort dans la faute de la femme?' (p. 530) [who, of the woman or the man, was to blame for female infidelity?] — motivates the inevitable confessional récit.

The Consul removes his wife from the audience by asking her to put the children to bed and to send him, via the maid, ' "le petit portefeuille noir qui est sur mon meuble de Boulle" ' (p. 531) ['the little black pocket-book that is on my Boulle cabinet']. If the device is almost parodic (the pocket-book contains letters which will play a key role in the narrative), so too is the narrative rhetoric: ' "Je vais vous raconter une histoire dans laquelle je joue un role" ' ['I am going to tell you a story in which I played a part'].[5] A story is promised which will refuel the debate on woman's virtue which had risked running out of steam, and will offer a genuine case history for analysis, ' "car il me paraît puéril de promener le scalpel sur un mort imaginaire. Pour disséquer, prenez d'abord un cadavre" ' ['for I find it puerile to run the scalpel over an imaginary dead person. If you want a dissection, start with a corpse']. Here, in the promise of a corpse (though it is as yet ungendered), is a key pointer to the archetypal French confessional récit so tellingly analysed by Naomi Segal: the man's story, in the first person and typically framed, is that of his failed life; the cause of that failure is invariably a woman who has been loved too much or too little, and who 'usually ends up dying, while the man lives on to tell "his" tale'.[6] But whereas, in Segal's model, the story will be told to a man or men, the consul's élite audience contains two women. Indeed, in the discussion that provokes the tale, opinion had split along gendered lines: 'Les trois femmes présentes, l'ambassadrice, la consulesse et Mlle des Touches, ces femmes censées naturellement irréprochables, furent impitoyables pour les femmes' (pp. 530–31) [The three women present, the wives of the Ambassador and the Consul and Mlle des Touches, women naturally assumed to have spotless reputations, were merciless in their condemnation of the women]. The six men, however, had tried to prove to the women 'qu'il pouvait rester des vertus à une femme après sa faute' (p. 531) [that a wife could remain virtuous despite having erred]. For this reason, it is quite specifically to the two female guests that Maurice, drawing to a close his test case of an adulterous woman, will address his question: ' "Etait-elle vertueuse?" ' (p. 595) ['Was she virtuous?'].

The effect is to draw all the more attention to the strictly male gendering of the second story-within-a-story: the confession of Count Octave, recounted one evening to his secretary Maurice, and somewhat theatrically staged as part of the latter's own narrative: ' "Nous passâmes quelques jours en observation, car les grandes souffrances ont leur pudeur; mais enfin, un soir, le comte me dit d'une voix grave: 'Restez!' Voici quel fut à peu près son récit" ' (p. 550) ['We spent a few days weighing each other up, for great suffering can be reticent; but one evening, the Count finally said to me in a solemn tone: "Stay!" This, more or less, is the story he told']. Here, then, is a perfect example of a man-to-man narrative concerning a woman who, it will turn out, has been loved somewhat too well.[7] However, within Octave's story, Honorine is not really dead, other than in the public fiction of her loss in a shipwreck. In fact she had left him after three

years of marriage for reasons Octave purports not to understand. Similarly, he cannot understand why, abandoned in her turn by her lover, and having lost the child born of her adultery, she remains in hiding from her husband.

Just as an exchange of views on adultery was the trigger for Maurice's story — its ostensible aim to lay out in narrative form an example of female infidelity — so, within Maurice's narrative, Octave's confession follows a Parisian dinner-table discussion of adultery. This takes place between Octave and his colleagues Grandville and Sérizy (statesmen and legal experts like himself), and two celibate priests, one of whom is Maurice's uncle and guardian, the saintly but well-connected Curé des Blancs-Manteaux. Unlike the framework debate with its gendered posturing by male and female guests alike, this decidedly all-male affair turns on legal, religious and social considerations. It is when Grandville unthinkingly jokes about the privileged insider knowledge of the three Counts, all of whom can boast of disastrous marriages, that Octave's carefully guarded secret, long the object of Maurice's active curiosity, is revealed. This episode reflects, en abyme, the structure of the introductory Genoese frame: the supposed case history contains a second debate on adultery, which in turn triggers a second first-person confession. However, the motivation of Octave's inner narrative is to influence rather than illustrate: the Count aims to enlist his employee as an accomplice in a plot to prise Honorine from her solitary retreat in the rue Saint-Maur.

From the moment that Maurice, thanks to his uncle's influence, becomes Octave's secretary, the two men enter into a quintessentially homosocial relationship. Indeed, the floating vocabulary used to describe that relation serves only to confirm its underlying character. ' "'Tu seras là comme chez un père'" ' (p. 532) [' "It will be like living with a father" '], the curé had suggested; ' "'tu n'auras pas un maître [...], tu auras un ami dans le comte Octave'" ' (p. 535) [' "you won't have a master [...], you'll have a friend in Count Octave" ']. Already, at their first meeting, Maurice's ' "bienfaiteur" ' (p. 537) ['benefactor'] gazes at him affectionately as he asks whether he likes his new apartment. After a month of close observation of the Count's habits, personality and professional requirements, Maurice describes the interdependence of employer and secretary as ' "à la fois plus et moins qu'un mariage" ' (p. 539) ['at once more and less than a marriage']; indeed, he is expected to put up with the Count's bad moods somewhat like a wife tolerant of a manipulative husband: ' "Si les écarts de cette humeur me blessaient, il savait revenir sans me demander le moindre pardon; mais ses manières devenaient alors gracieuses jusqu'à l'humilité du chrétien" ' (p. 542) ['If these bursts of ill humour offended me, he would make up for them, not at all by begging my pardon, but by letting his manners become gracious to the point of Christian humility']. After a year of working for Octave, Maurice sees that he has been thoroughly tried and tested, and that they are as close as two men can be when one is subordinate to the other. The day Maurice produces a piece of work that his employer could pass off as his own marks a new stage in their relationship:

> 'il en eut une joie qui me servit de récompense, et il s'apercut que je la prenais ainsi. Ce petit incident si rapide produisit sur cette âme, en apparence sévère, un effet extraordinaire. Le comte [...] me prit par la tête et me baisa sur le front. "Maurice,

> s'écria-t-il, vous n'êtes plus mon compagnon, je ne sais pas encore ce que vous me serez; mais, si ma vie ne change pas, peut-être me tiendrez-vous lieu de fils!" ' (p. 543)
>
> ['his evident pleasure served as my reward, and he noticed this reaction. This little incident, fleeting as it was, had an extraordinary effect on this outwardly stern soul. The Count [...] took my head in his hands and kissed me on the forehead. "Maurice," he exclaimed, "you are no longer my companion. I don't yet know what you will be to me, but if there's no change in my life perhaps you will take the place of a son!" ']

Clearly, Octave has nurtured this relationship, so that his narrative of Honorine's desertion, and of his ongoing, clearly neurotic love for her, elicits from Maurice an empathetically emotional response: ' "comme lui, j'avais en l'écoutant les joues sillonnées de larmes! Jugez de mes impressions, quand après une pause pendant laquelle nous essuyâmes nos pleurs; il acheva son récit par cette révélation" ' (p. 554) ['as I listened to him my cheeks, like his, were wet from crying! Imagine my reaction when, after a pause in which we wiped away our tears, he finished his story with this revelation']. Indeed, the manipulation is openly spelled out in the text, as is the success of the strategy: ' "'Je suis bien ridicule, reprit-il après une fort longue pause, en venant quêter un regard de compassion. — Non, monsieur, vous êtes bien malheureux...'" ' (pp. 558–59) [' "I am quite ridiculous," he continued as he approached after a long pause, looking for compassion in my eyes. "No, monsieur, you are very unhappy..." ']. For all the Count's veneer of charm and disinterested generosity, his confessional récit, though provoked by his colleague Grandville's indiscretion, follows months of careful probing of Maurice's potential as mediator between husband and estranged wife. Its climax is the question to which Octave has already pre-programmed the answer: ' "'Avez-vous pour moi assez d'affection pour m'être romanesquement dévoué?...'" ' (p. 559) [' "Could your fondness for me extend to romantic devotion?..." ']. In fact, all is already prepared for a positive response: Maurice's declared fear of falling in love with his employer's wife is countered by the enticement of marriage to Octave's second cousin. Even as they speak, up rolls a carriage containing Amélie de Courteville ' "dont toutes les beautés étaient mises en relief par une de ses savantes toilettes que les mères font faire à leurs filles quand il s'agit de les marier" ' (p. 560) ['whose beauty was set off by one of those skilful toilettes that mothers create for their daughters when a marriage is in the offing']. A barrage of material bribes completes the inducement: ' "'Baron, maître des requêtes, référendaire au Sceau en attendant mieux, et ce vieil hôtel pour dot, aurez-vous assez de raisons pour ne pas aimer la comtesse?'" ' (p. 560) [' "A Baron, Master of Appeals, Referendary with the expectation of something better, this ancient hôtel as a dowry, will those be good enough reasons not to love the Countess?" ']. The narrative pause with which Maurice rounds off the intercalated confession — ' "Ne parlons-pas de moi, dit le consul en faisant une pause" ' ['Let's not talk about me', said the Consul, pausing for a moment] — implies his acceptance of all aspects of the deal.

When the inevitable happens and Maurice, despite the Count's precautions, must

confront the fact that he is in love with Honorine, it is the protégé, of course, who will sacrifice himself to his protector by taking ' "une résolution virile" ' (p. 584) ['a manly decision'], withdrawing from marriage with Amélie, and requesting Octave's help in obtaining an immediate consular posting abroad. When the Count suddenly senses Maurice's status as rival, the go-between is able to reassure him that he will honour his commitments: ' "'Oh! soyez sans inquiétude, repris-je en lui voyant faire un haut-le-corps, j'irai jusqu'au bout de mon rôle...'" ' (p. 585) [' "Oh! don't worry," I continued, seeing him start, "I'll play out my part to the end" ']. ' "'Pauvre enfant!...'" ' [' "Poor child!..." '] is the Count's response as he clasps and shakes Maurice's hand, the tears that he holds in check revealing that he accepts a sacrifice which confirms — indeed crowns — their relationship. By choosing male friendship and loyalty to Octave over love, friendship and loyalty to Honorine, it is of course Honorine, and not just his own happiness, that Maurice will help to destroy. If Honorine's death rounds off Maurice's narrative — ' "Et, dit le consul en serrant les lettres et refermant à clef le portefeuille, la comtesse est morte" ' (p. 595) ['And the Countess died', said the Consul, putting away the letters and relocking the pocket-book] — the closing frame ties up the ends with an account of the two men saying their farewells on a steamship that will take Octave from Genoa to Naples: ' "Dieu sait combien l'on aime le confident de notre amour, quand celle qui l'inspirait n'est plus! 'Cet homme possède, me disait Octave, un charme, il est revêtu d'une auréole.'" ' (p. 595) ['God only knows how much we love the confidant of our love, when the woman we loved is no more! "That man has a charm," Octave told me, "he's clothed in a sort of halo." '] As in the classic homosocial paradigm described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the bond that links the male sexual rivals, as they lament together over the 'ruined carcase' of the loved woman, is as strong as that of either of them with the woman herself.[8]

Maurice's idealization of his employer is such that it blinds him to the reality of his character. When Maurice first discovers that Octave has been left by his wife, he is already so attached to him that he projects onto the promised narrative the most naïvely positive of interpretations:

> 'Je pressentis un drame étrange en comprenant qu'il ne pouvait y avoir rien de vulgaire entre une femme que le comte avait choisie et un caractère comme le sien. Enfin les événements qui avaient poussé la comtesse à quitter un homme si noble, si aimable, si parfait, si aimant, si digne d'être aimé, devaient être au moins singuliers.' (p. 549)
>
> ['I sensed a strange drama, for I knew that nothing vulgar could have intervened between a woman the Count had chosen and a character such as his. The events that had driven the Countess to leave a man who was so noble, so likeable, so perfect, so affectionate, who was so worthy of love, must have been singular to say the least.']

Yet Octave's conjugal violence, and its role in Honorine's refusal to return to him, were never more than half buried in his tale. 'Ne commencez jamais le mariage par un viol' (CH, XI, 955) [Never begin your marriage with a rape] is Balzac's famous advice, in his 1829 Physiologie du mariage [Physiology of Marriage], to husbands not wishing to propel their innocent and often very young wives into the arms of a lover. If they do so,

through selfishness, ineptness or lack of self-control, they will have only themselves to blame. In the Physiologie, such behaviour is ironized from a male perspective through a crudely allegorical anecdote about a monkey venting his rage on a violin when his clumsy playing fails to produce a tune
(pp. 953–54). However, it is explored very seriously in La Femme de trente ans (1834) [The Woman of Thirty], where Balzac adopts the young wife's point of view.[9] For the frequenter of Balzac, the profound aversion to Octave that develops in Honorine after her marriage is fairly explicitly linked to the sexual violence of marital rape. Octave himself is intermittently lucid: ' "'Sait-on, pendant les jours de bonheur, à quels préceptes on a manqué?...'" ' (p. 551) [' "who knows what precepts have been forgotten in the days of fulfilment...?" ']; ' "'je reprends un à un les plaisirs pour lesquels sans doute Honorine fut sans goût'" ' (p. 552) [' "I recall one by one the pleasures for which Honorine perhaps had no liking" ']; ' "'J'ai compris que j'avais fait de ma femme une poésie dont je jouissais avec tant d'ivresse, que je croyais mon ivresse partagé'" ' [' "I understood that I had turned my wife into a poem, one I delighted in with such intoxication that I assumed it was shared" '].[10] But moments of self-condemnation — ' "'un amour sans discernement est, chez un mari, une faute qui peut préparer tous les crimes d'une femme!'" ' (pp. 552–53) [' "a husband's undiscerning love is a mistake that lays the ground for all his wife's crimes!" '] — are accompanied by waves of bad faith: ' "'Cette horreur de moi m'épouvante et me confond, car je n'ai jamais fait le moindre mal à Honorine'" ' (p. 557) [' "This horror of me frightens and dismays me, for I have never done Honorine the slightest harm" '].[11]

Octave also confesses to Maurice that he has fantasized rape as a means of reconquering his wife: ' "'J'ai médité sérieusement, il y a quelques jours, le dénouement atroce de Lovelace avec Clarisse, en me disant: si Honorine avait un enfant de moi, ne faudrait-il pas qu'elle revînt dans la maison conjugale?'" ' (p. 558) [' "A few days ago I seriously considered the atrocious denouement that Lovelace determines for Clarissa, saying to myself: if Honorine had a child by me, wouldn't she have to return to the marital home?" '].[12] While this may seem as illogical as Lovelace imagining that Clarissa will marry him because he has raped her, the cynical deception in Richardson's novel whereby what is actually a brothel (the scene of the rape) is passed off by Lovelace as respectable middle-class lodgings — a fiction that involves a whole cast of actors to get Clarissa to believe in it — is echoed in the elaborate charade of Honorine's independent existence. As Octave somewhat menacingly puts it: ' "'Depuis cinq ans, je la tiens, rue Saint-Maur, dans un charmant pavillon'" ' (p. 555) [' "I've had her in my grasp for five years, in a charming villa in the rue Saint-Maur" ']. While Honorine believes she is supporting herself by the creation and sale of artificial flowers and bonnets, in fact every aspect of her material existence is controlled by Octave through his own troupe of actors (doctor, gardener, cook, merchants and so on), whose real salaries are paid by himself.[13] The Count, the real purchaser of Honorine's flowers, is also her real landlord. Indeed the pretty villa, with its house-of-cards appearance (it is a

hundred feet wide but just thirty feet deep) and its painted façade (an imitation trellis of flowers reaches up to the first floor), seems appropriately like a piece of stage scenery. Moreover, it is an ' "ancienne maison de plaisir" ' (p. 561) ['former pleasure-house'] and its Rococo interior is described by Maurice as ' "bien la bonbonnière inventée par l'art du dix-huitième siècle pour les jolies débauches d'un grand seigneur" ' (p. 566) ['the very type of the bonbonnière devised by the artistry of the eighteenth century for the dubious excesses of some great lord'].[14]

In short, Octave 'keeps' Honorine, whose decision to support herself from paid work he cannot bear: ' "'Honorine a voulu gagner sa vie! ma femme travaille!...'" ' (p. 555) [' "Honorine resolved to earn her living! my wife works!..." '].[15] Fortunately for Octave, his wife is ignorant enough of economic realities to believe that she owes the luxury of her lifestyle to her own labour. For all the subjective delights he gains from some aspects of this disguised protection, Octave's motivation is hardly benevolent: ' "'Reconquérir ma femme, voilà ma seule étude; la surveiller dans la cage où elle est, sans qu'elle se sache en ma puissance'" ' (p. 554) [' "To win back my wife is my constant concern; to keep her under surveillance in the cage she occupies, without her realizing she's in my power" ']. However, despite establishing the housekeeper as a faithful spy who recounts to him nightly all the intimate details of Honorine's day (' "'car une seule exclamation peut me livrer les secrets de cette âme qui s'est faite sourde et muette'" ' [' "for a single exclamation might deliver up to me the secrets of that soul which has made itself deaf and dumb" ']), Octave has made no further progress: ' "'Il m'est donc impossible de pénétrer dans ce cœur: la citadelle est à moi, mais je n'y puis entrer'" ' (p. 557) [' "it's impossible for me to penetrate that heart; I own the citadel, but I can't get into it" ']. It is to achieve this aim — to infiltrate Honorine's citadel by worming his way into her confidence — that Maurice, disguised as an eccentric dahlia enthusiast, is dispatched to live next door to her in the rue Saint-Maur.

The role in which Maurice is cast may seem more engaging than those meted out in Clarissa to Lovelace's sinister accomplices — Mrs Sinclair, Captain Tomlinson, et al. — but its charm is arguably superficial. Despite falling in love with Honorine, not least through watching her at work in the poetic intimacy of her workshop, Maurice will espouse, in his own way, Octave's violence. His earliest steps towards violation of Honorine's private space are marked by a vocabulary of force (' "Je brisai le palis" ' (p. 562) ['I broke apart the paling']), of provocative occupation of her territory (' "À quoi sert une porte?" ' (p. 566) ['What good is a door?']), and of penetrative entry (' "Je pénétrais donc enfin dans ce sanctuaire" ' ['And so I finally penetrated this sanctuary']). Yet Honorine herself remains stubbornly impenetrable, especially when Maurice tries to trick her onto ' "le terrain des aveux" ' (p. 570) ['the territory of confidences']. Indeed, after a three-month struggle between ' "deux diplomates cachés sous la peau d'une mélancolie juvénile et une femme que le dégoût rendait invincible" ' ['two diplomats hiding under a mask of juvenile melancholy and a woman whose distaste for life made her unassailable'], Maurice feels he has reached a dead end: ' "je

dis au comte qu'il me paraissait impossible de faire sortir cette tortue de dessous sa carapace, il fallait casser l'écaille" ' (p. 571) ['I told the Count it was impossible in my view to persuade this tortoise out from under its carapace — the shell would have to be broken'].

The catalyst of this new approach is Honorine's declaration of allegiance to Lucretia: ' "La veille, dans une dernière discussion tout amicale, la comtesse s'était écriée: 'Lucrèce a écrit avec son poignard et son sang le premier mot de la charte des femmes: Liberté!'" ' (p. 571) ['the previous day, in a final and perfectly amicable exchange of views, the Countess had exclaimed: "Lucretia wrote the first word of women's charter with her dagger and her blood: Freedom!" ']. Maurice responds in kind, choosing for his moment of attack one Saturday evening when, ironically, Honorine is fingering with pride her week's earnings (actually Octave's money) and relishing her independence: ' "'Gagner sa vie en s'amusant, dit-elle, être libre, quand les hommes, armés de leurs lois, ont voulu nous faire esclaves! Oh! chaque samedi, j'ai des accès d'orgueil'" ' (p. 572) [' "To earn your living doing something you enjoy, to be free, when men, armed with their laws, have tried to turn us into slaves! Oh! every Saturday I'm overcome with pride" '].[16] In an act of calculated cruelty (the proposed smashing of the tortoise's shell), Maurice, given ' "carte blanche" ' (p. 571) by the Count who had previously planned his every move, steers the conversation to motherhood and forces Honorine to confront the memory of her dead child. By the next evening, admitted for the first time to the inner sanctum of Honorine's bedroom, Maurice reveals to her the supposed ' "'inventions d'une générosité sublime, sublimes depuis sept ans et à toute heure'" ' (p. 576) [' "inventions of a sublime generosity, sublime for seven years and at every moment of the day" '] that are Octave's financial protection and the charade of every aspect of her life in the rue Saint-Maur: ' "elle pleura, non pas qu'elle fût touchée, elle pleura de son impuissance, elle pleura de désespoir. Elle se croyait indépendante et libre, le mariage pesait sur elle comme la prison sur le captif." ' (pp. 576–77) ['she cried, but not because she was touched; she cried because she was powerless, she cried in despair. She thought she was independent and free; she was weighed down by marriage just as a prisoner is weighed down by his jail.'] After this episode, in a curiously displaced echo of Lovelace's drugging of Clarissa prior to her rape, we learn that both husband and wife have taken narcotics: the impatient Octave to get him through the day, the distressed Honorine needing to sleep after staying up all night to write to Maurice. Only Maurice, it seems, is awake. Indeed, when the go-between crowns his various manoeuvres by telling Honorine that her letter to himself is in Octave's hands, the shock and pain she experiences is likened by Maurice himself to the metaphorical violation of ' "un coup de poignard" ' (p. 586) ['a dagger blow'].

Maurice's complicitous violence has been disguised, from the first moments of Octave's confession, by a psychic investment in the Biblical story of the woman taken in adultery: ' "Je ne me rappelle que les masses dans les reproches que s'adressa le comte [...]; mais sa clémente indulgence me parut alors vraiment digne de celle de Jésus-Christ quand il sauva la femme adultère" ' (p. 551) ['I remember only the gist of the reproaches the Count addressed to himself [...]; but his merciful indulgence seemed to

me at the time truly worthy of that of Christ when he saved the woman taken in adultery']. Honorine has no desire to accept her husband's forgiveness, but her long letter to Maurice, describing the physical fulfilment of her adulterous affair, leads directly to Maurice's decision to break off his marriage with Amélie de Courteville. This is because, mentally comparing the two women, he finds himself more strongly attracted to ' "la femme en faute" ' ['the fallen woman'] than to ' "la jeune fille pure" ' ['pure girl']: ' "La femme épuisée, quasi morte, la pécheresse à relever me semblait sublime, elle irritait les générosités naturelles à l'homme, elle demandait au cœur tous ses trésors, à la puissance toutes ses ressources" ' (p. 584) ['The worn-down, almost dead woman, the sinner to be returned to virtue seemed to me sublime, she appealed to man's natural generosity, she asked of the heart all its treasures, of strength all its reserves']. The culmination of this fascination with the woman taken in adultery is his idea of recruiting his uncle to play the role of Christ. Maurice has already prepared the way by telling Honorine: ' "'S'il est sévère sous l'étole, mon oncle sera devant vos fleurs aussi doux qu'elles, et indulgent comme son divin maître'" ' (p. 579) [' "If my uncle is stern under his stole, in the presence of your flowers he will be as gentle as they are, and indulgent like his divine master" ']. The uncle's theatrical entry bearing Octave's letter is clearly stage-managed by Maurice:

> 'Je ne sais rien, dans les souvenirs de toute ma vie, de plus formidable que l'entrée de mon oncle dans ce salon Pompadour à dix heures du soir. [...] "M. le curé des Blancs-Manteaux! dit la Gobain. — Venez-vous, mon cher oncle, avec un message de paix et de bonheur? lui dis-je. — On trouve toujours le bonheur et la paix en observant les commandements de l'Eglise", répondit mon oncle en présentant à la comtesse la lettre suivante.' (pp. 586–87)
>
> ['I can think of nothing, in the memories of a lifetime, more formidable than my uncle's entry into this Rococo sitting room at ten o'clock in the evening. [...] "Monsieur the Curé des Blancs-Manteaux!" said Mme Gobain. "Dear Uncle," I said to him, "do you come bearing a message of peace and happiness?" "Peace and happiness are always to be found in obedience to the Church's commandments," replied my uncle as he handed the Countess the following letter.']

In fact, to trick Honorine into accepting a letter from the Count has been the single aim of the conspiracy so carefully prepared over a period of months. If the Rococo sitting room has been transformed into the Biblical temple, the 'Go, and sin no more' acted out by the curé means one thing only: 'Go back to your husband'.[17] Maurice has staggered through to the end of his part and will flee from Honorine with a last violent gesture: ' "en lui serrant la main à la faire crier" ' (p. 589) ['squeezing her hand so hard that she cried out'].

Honorine's testamentary letter to Maurice reveals her awareness of the alliance of husband, secretary and priest behind what I am tempted to describe as a gang rape: ' "'Jusqu'au dernier moment, vous le savez, j'ai crié dans votre cœur, au confessionnal, à mon mari: "Ayez pitié de moi!..." Tout fut sans pitié. Eh bien, je meurs'" ' (p. 593) [' "Up to the very last moment, as you know, I cried out to your heart, I cried out in the confessional, I cried out to my husband: 'Have mercy on me!...' There was absolutely no

mercy. And that's why I'm dying" ']. Inevitably, the rape of Honorine's independence is crowned by a renewal of marital rape, as Octave will confess to Maurice:

> ' "quelle est cette irrésistible puissance qui nous fait sacrifier au plus fugitif de tous les plaisirs, et malgré notre raison, une divine créature? ... J'ai, dans ma conscience, entendu des cris. Honorine n'a pas crié seule. Et j'ai voulu! ... Je suis dévoré de remords! Je mourais, rue Payenne, des plaisirs que je n'avais pas; je mourrai en Italie des plaisirs que j'ai goûtés! ..." ' (p. 595)
>
> [' "what is that irresistible force that leads us, despite our own best judgement, to sacrifice a divine creature to the most fleeting of pleasures?... I could hear cries from my conscience. Honorine wasn't the only one to cry out for help. Yet I insisted!... I'm consumed with remorse! In the rue Payenne, I was dying of the pleasure that was denied to me; I shall die in Italy of the pleasure I've enjoyed!..." '][18]

Yet Maurice had warned Octave that ' "'La comtesse est de ses Lucrèces qui ne survivent pas à un viol, même quand il vient d'un homme à qui elles se donneraient'" ' (p. 579) [' "The Countess is one of those Lucretias who do not survive a rape, even one inflicted by a man they would give themselves to" ']. The Honorine who had preferred ' "'l'enfer où Dieu ne m'empêchera pas de le bénir'" ' [' "the Hell where God will not stop me from blessing him" '] to ' "'l'enfer qui m'attend chez le comte Octave'" ' (p. 583) [' "the Hell which awaits me if I go back to live with Count Octave" '], was no longer the nineteen-year-old girl who had married with no idea of what awaited her. As Maurice had also advised Octave, even as he betrayed Honorine by handing over her letter: ' "'Tâcher de rassurer la Pudeur instruite. C'est un peu plus difficile que de surprendre la Pudeur qui s'ignore et que la Curiosité vous livre'" ' (p. 584) [' "Try to reassure a Pudeur acquired through experience. It's rather harder than surprising an unknowing Pudeur that's been handed over to you by Curiosity" ']. In short, Balzac has displaced the mythical rape of Lucretia — and its variant, the rape of Clarissa — to a plot based on rape within marriage, and to the violation of Honorine's pudeur when, after a long struggle, she is manipulated into returning to a husband she cannot love: ' "'L'intimité sans amour est une situation où mon âme se déshonore à toute heure. [...] Je suis comédienne avec mon âme, et voilà peut-être pourquoi je meurs!'" ' (pp. 593–94) [' "Intimacy without love is a situation that brings dishonour to my soul at every instant. [...] I am making my soul act a part, and that perhaps is why I am dying!" '][19]

In the earliest manuscript version of Honorine, which lacked the narrative frame and ended in a successful reconciliation of husband and wife, Octave writes to Maurice to thank him for his sacrifice and to hope that he might find a second Honorine.[20] On the one hand, Balzac's extension of the plot to include Maurice's marriage to a Genoese heiress continues the theme of homosocial patronage. Having cast aside the Count's second cousin like a discarded pair of gloves — preferring to burn his fingers with Honorine[21] — Maurice is eventually persuaded to marry Onorina by Octave, Sérizy and Grandville, his powerful Parisian 'protectors'. Moreover, for all his post-conjugal melancholy, he will accept the rewards that rain down on him from afar: 'Selon la promesse de l'ambassadeur au beau-père, le consul général fut créé baron et fait

commandeur de la Légion d'honneur' (p. 529) [As the Ambassador had promised the father-in-law, the Consul was made a Baron and a Commander of the Legion of Honour]. On the other hand, in an obvious parallel with the two Isoldes of the Tristan legend, Onorina is literally a second Honorine.[22] It is for this more psychic replacement that Camille Maupin, having dismissed Octave's role in Honorine's death with a summary judgment — ' "Connaissait-il sa position assassin?" ' (p. 595) ['Did he realize he was a murderer?'] — will maintain her critical attention to Maurice's marriage:

> 'Les hommes ne sont-ils pas coupables aussi de venir à nous, de faire d'une jeune fille leur femme, en gardant au fond de leurs cœurs d'angéliques images, en nous comparant à des rivales inconnues, à des perfections souvent prises à plus d'un souvenir, et nous trouvant toujours inférieures?' (p. 596)
>
> ['Are men not guilty too when they come to us and make a girl their wife, all the while keeping angelic images buried in their hearts, comparing us to unknown rivals, to perfections often gleaned from more than one memory, and always finding us inferior?']

Her accusation brings Onorina back into the frame, as it happens quite literally, for on seeing Maurice's wife reappear once he has finished his story, Camille realizes that she must have been eavesdropping. But whereas Isolde of the White Hands becomes jealously destructive when she overhears the confession of Tristan's adulterous love for the first Isolde (and thereby understands her unconsummated marriage), there is no reason to accredit Camille's apprehension on Maurice's behalf: ' "sa femme l'a écouté, le malheureux!" ' (p. 596) ['his wife was listening to him, poor chap!']. After all, the reader has been told that Onorina, imbued with a generous female solidarity, had loved her husband no less, and possibly more, 'en le sachant amoureux' (p. 529) [knowing him to be in love].

Even though her reaction is not described, Onorina's emergence in the closing frame as a 'hidden reader' broadens the sexual-political scope of the text.[23] The reception of Maurice's case history of an adulterous wife is delegated by Balzac to two significant female narratees; each complements the other through the very different way in which she serves to contextualize Honorine's disastrous marriage. One is an affectionate Italian wife and mother who has actively chosen the husband whom, crucially, she both loves and desires (her six-year-old son is 'beau comme le désir d'une mère' (p. 530) [beautiful like a mother's desire]). The other is a celibate French woman writer (her civil status foregrounded by references to 'Mlle des Touches') who has placed herself from choice outside of the marriage economy. ' "Est-ce jamais un homme qui me comprendra!..." ' (p. 577) ['Could a man ever understand me!...'], exclaims Honorine in one of her final exchanges with Maurice. Some hundred years later, discussing Balzac in the chapter of Le Deuxième Sexe on 'La Femme mariée' ['The Married Woman'], Beauvoir will ask: 'Balzac ignore-t-il vraiment qu'un amour non partagé, bien loin de séduire inéluctablement, importune au contraire et dégoûte?' (II, 240) ['does Balzac really not know that an unshared love, far from ineluctably seducing, on the contrary, annoys and disgusts?' (p. 466, translation amended)]. Had Beauvoir read Honorine, this multi-

layered narrative of a wife's plight would surely have challenged her representation of Balzac's analysis of nineteenth-century marriage. As it is, Beauvoir fails to see past the ironic mask of the young bachelor in Physiologie du mariage, and visibly misunderstands that part of the plot of Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées that would explain passages she finds contradictory (II, 239–42 [pp. 465–67]). Doubtless these influential denunciations of Balzac as misogynist are based on over-hasty (mis)reading of two texts with marriage in their title. Whatever its cause, the missed encounter of Beauvoir with Balzac on the terrain of women's lived experience, and of the male myths of woman that can mask or reveal that experience, has emerged from the hinterland of this essay as the starting point of a project to read all of La Comédie humaine through the lens of Le Deuxième Sexe.

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Honoré de Balzac, Honorine, ed. by Pierre Citron, in La Comédie humaine, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex and others, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1976–81), II, 505–97 (p. 577). All translations from La Comédie humaine (henceforth abbreviated to CH) are my own (I am very grateful to Sheila Perry for some helpful suggestions).
2. See Simone de Beauvoir, 'La Femme indépendante', in Le Deuxième Sexe, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1976 [1949]), II, 597–641; The Second Sex, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), pp. 737–68. For Fallaize's essay, see this volume.
3. The unusual life-story and psychology of Félicité des Touches, one of the most frequently reappearing characters in La Comédie humaine, is fully developed in the novel Béatrix (1839). In Honorine, the women of Genoa purportedly view her as something between a celebrity and a freak ('curieuses de savoir si la virilité du talent de Camille Maupin nuisait aux grâces de la jolie femme, et si, en un mot, le haut-de-chausses dépassait la jupe' (p. 528) [curious to discover whether Camille Maupin's manly talent detracted from the charms of the attractive woman and whether, in short, the trousers showed beneath the skirt]).
4. My reading of Honorine will therefore inscribe various aspects of Elizabeth Fallaize's research: Beauvoir, short fiction, feminist readings, and the gendering of narrators and narratees. Their inscription is grounded in memories of discussions with Elizabeth, dating back to 1986, about the intersections of ideology and narrative voice in Beauvoir's fiction. Some fifteen years later, working on Balzac and a privileged tenant in Elizabeth's new flat in the rue Saint-Maur, I read Honorine for the first time and discovered that it is precisely in the rue Saint-Maur that Honorine establishes her secret retreat and attempts to maintain her independence as a working woman. I gave Elizabeth a copy of the text which was inscribed, as I remember it, 'to Elizabeth and the rue Saint-Maur'. Needless to say, this memorial essay bears the same dedication.
5. Earlier versions of the text included a passage in which Balzac drew ironic attention to the clichéd narrative devices on offer for a framed story of this sort. See 'Notes et variantes', CH, II, 1415–16.
6. Naomi Segal, Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 9.
7. A comparable episode in La Comédie humaine is Dr Benassis's tear-strewn confession to his new friend Genestas in Le Médecin de campagne (1833). Their shared emotion prompts the soldier Genestas to recount his own sorry tale in return. See CH, IX, 540–83.
8. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 76.
9. In La Femme de trente ans, Julie d'Aiglemont writes to a schoolfriend to warn of the horrors awaiting her on her wedding night (CH, II, 1063–64); see too her confession to her husband's elderly aunt: ' "j'ai honte de souffrir en voyant Victor heureux de ce qui me tue" ' (p. 1066) ['I'm ashamed to

suffer so when I see Victor made happy by what I cannot bear’].

10. In the 1842 Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées [Memoirs of Two Young Brides], Renée de L’Estorade, feeling no desire for her husband, tries to control their sexual relationship, initially by delaying its consummation until three months into the marriage. However, she fares no better than Balzac’s other physically humiliated wives. Intercourse continues to be an ordeal tolerated through a gamble on the future fulfilment of maternity; meanwhile, like Octave, her husband crassly assumes she shares his own pleasure.
11. In Physiologie du mariage, Balzac grounds the husband’s blindness in a positively Beauvoirian analysis of the newly married wife as both victim and accomplice: ‘Livrée avec toutes ses ignorances et ses désirs à un homme qui, même amoureux, ne peut et ne doit pas connaître ses mœurs secrètes et délicates, cette jeune fille ne sera-t-elle pas honteusement passive, soumise et complaisante pendant tout le temps que sa jeune imagination lui persuadera d’attendre le plaisir ou le bonheur jusqu’à un lendemain qui n’arrive jamais? [...] Quel homme ne serait pas la dupe d’une déception préparée de si loin, et de laquelle une jeune femme est innocente, complice et victime?’ (CH, XI, 978–79) [Handed over with her totally naïve desires to a man who, even if he is in love, cannot be aware (nor should he be) of her most secret and delicate feelings, is not this young girl bound to be shamefully passive, submissive and accommodating for as long as her youthful imagination tells her to wait for pleasure and fulfilment until a tomorrow that never comes? [...] What man would not be taken in by a deception that reaches back so far, and of which the young girl, a victim in her very complicity, remains unaware?]
12. Balzac knew Clarissa well and references to the title, as well as to Lovelace and Clarissa (whose conception he especially admired) are scattered through La Comédie humaine. In letters to Mme Hanska of 1838 and 1844 he refers to having just reread the whole novel (see Balzac, Lettres à Madame Hanska, ed. by Roger Pierrot, 2 vols (Paris: Robert Laffont (Bouquins), 1990), I, 449 and 849).
13. Octave appears to revel in the power that allowed him to track down his wife: ‘ “‘pour découvrir l’asile de ma femme, il me suffisait de vouloir’” ’ (p. 555) [‘ “to discover my wife’s hiding place I had only to resolve to do so” ’]). Similarly, he exploits his position to maintain the zeal and discretion of his squad of accomplices: ‘ “‘ils sont sous la terreur que cause le nom du préfet de police et dans la vénération du pouvoir d’un ministre’” ’ (p. 557) [‘ “they are kept in a state of fear by the name of the Prefect of Police and respect for the power of a Minister” ’].
14. When Octave tells Maurice that he it has cost him 150,000 francs to establish Honorine in this villa in the rue Saint-Maur, one thinks of Hulot, Crevel or the duc d’Hérouville variously setting up their mistresses in La Cousine Bette.
15. Later, when Honorine finally agrees to receive him in person, almost his first words are to beg her to give up working: ‘ “‘Accordez-moi la grâce de ne plus travailler comme vous l’avez fait. [...] S’il vous plaisait de rester ici [...], et de garder votre indépendance, ne travaillez plus...’” ’ (p. 590) [‘ “I ask you as a favour not to go on working as you have been doing. [...] If you would like to stay here [...], and to keep your independence, give up working...” ’]. That Octave sees no connection between Honorine’s paid work and her idea of independence is made clear by his claim that, had she read his letter sent five years previously, she would have saved herself ‘ “‘cinq années de travail inutile’” ’ (p. 587) [‘ “five years of useless work” ’].
16. In an interesting discussion, Richard Bolster reads the rallying cry of this ‘ouvrière aristocratique’ [aristocratic working woman] as an ironic allusion to the demands of 1830s Saint-Simonian feminists (Stendhal, Balzac et le féminisme romantique (Paris: Minard, 1970), p. 126). Equally striking, however, is the parallel with Beauvoir’s existential feminism of 1949: ‘C’est par le travail que la femme a en grande partie franchi la distance qui la séparait du mâle: c’est le travail qui peut seul lui garantir une liberté concrète. [...] Productrice, active, elle reconquiert sa transcendance; dans ses projets elle s’affirme concrètement comme sujet, par son rapport avec le but qu’elle poursuit, avec l’argent et les droits qu’elle s’approprie, elle éprouve sa responsabilité’ (Le Deuxième Sexe, II, 597) [‘It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom. [...] When she is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility relative to the goals she pursues, and to the money and rights she appropriates’ (The Second Sex, p.

737)].

17. In the discussion over dinner of female adultery that led to the revelation of Octave's secret (its participants a veritable gathering of scribes and pharisees), the curé had criticized Napoleon's Conseil d'État for its excessive indulgence: ' "'Ne fallait-il pas [...] envoyez au couvent pour le reste de ses jours, comme autrefois, l'épouse coupable?'" ' (p. 547) [' "Shouldn't the guilty wife have been banished to a convent for the rest of her life, as used to happen?" ']. See too Owen Heathcote's comment on Maurice's uncle: 'Like many of Balzac's priests, Loraux crosses and confuses public and private, sacred and secular, as he shuttles between Octave, Maurice and Honorine, arranging careers, meetings, and reconciliations.' ('Balzac's Go-between: The Case of Honorine', Nineteenth-Century French Studies, 22.1/2 (1993–94), 61–76 (p. 64).)
18. Does Balzac allude yet again to Lovelace, who will expiate the rape and subsequent death of Clarissa by himself dying in Italy of wounds sought out in a duel? For Lovelace's last words (' "Let this expiate!" '), see Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady, 4 vols (London: Dent (Everyman), 1976), IV, 530.
19. For a detailed overview of the literary, philosophical and visual reception of the Lucretia myth, see Ian Donaldson, The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and its Transformations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). Donaldson devotes a chapter to a reading of Richardson's Clarissa (pp. 57–82). As he shows, the ethical dilemma of the woman who survives rape has always been integral to the myth: does she really need either to commit suicide (like Lucretia), or to acquiesce in death through some passively chosen illness (like Clarissa and Honorine)?
20. ' "J'espère que Dieu, dans sa clémence, aura fait deux femmes semblables et que vous saurez trouver la seconde" ' ['I hope that God, in his mercy, has created two identical women and that you will be able to find the second one'] (see Citron's introduction, CH, II, 518). According to Armine Kotin Mortimer, there would have been little to say about Honorine had Balzac not transformed this original ending. See La Clôture narrative (Paris: Corti, 1985), pp. 158–61.
21. ' "'Vous m'aviez donné des gants, [...] je ne les ai pas mis, voilà tout'" ' (p. 585) [' "You gave me a pair of gloves, [...] it's just that I didn't wear them" '].
22. On the Tristan parallels, see Hava Sussmann, 'Honorine: Un avatar du mythe de Tristan et Yseult', Année balzacienne (1981), 297–99.
23. See Victor Brombert, 'Natalie, or Balzac's Hidden Reader', in The Hidden Reader: Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 23–36. Brombert explores the function of Natalie de Manerville's famously devastating response in Le Lys dans la vallée (1835–36) [The Lily of the Valley] to the confession of Félix de Vandenesse (CH, IX, 1226–29). However, if Maurice is an interesting parallel to the Félix who admits ' "oui, ma vie est dominée par un fantôme" ' (p. 970) [yes, my life is dominated by a ghost], Onorina has been established by Balzac as an anti-Natalie who willingly lavishes caresses upon her husband's emotional wounds.