

Honoré de Balzac

Le Nègre

The Negro

**Translated with introduction and notes
by**

Michelle Cheyne and Andrew Watts

**Liverpool Online Series
Critical Editions of French Texts**

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Andrew Watts

Foreword

Balzac's lack of success as a playwright means that the attention paid to his novels tends to overshadow that given to his dramatic texts. Comparatively, his plays have been studied less, but in the interest of describing the full breadth of his literary career, scholars like Arrigon and Decazes produced studies sketching out Balzac's theatrical works in 1924 and 1960 respectively. Milatchitch's edition of *Le Nègre* (1930, reprinted 1973) made this text available to a wider academic audience, but was filled with errors and over-simplifications. Milatchitch's remark that 's'il [Balzac] avait pu [...] étudier, acquérir l'art et les procédés de la scène, il aurait pu devenir un grand dramaturge'¹ exemplified his view that Balzac's theatrical output lacked the richness and complexity of *La Comédie humaine*. However, despite the play's failure to be staged, *Le Nègre* articulates structurally and thematically the preoccupations that characterise Balzac's work as a whole and render this melodrama worthy of fresh attention. Following the Pléiade edition by Roland Chollet and René Guise (1990), recent scholarship in France, energised by the efforts of Agathe Novak-Lechevalier and Eric Bordas with the Groupe International de Recherches Balzaciennes (GIRB), has sparked a fresh appraisal of Balzac's theatre.² Isabelle Michelot and Olivier Bara have in turn insisted on the importance of considering how the plays composed by the young Balzac reveal a 'Balzac avant Balzac', a writer whose early works should be viewed as artistic achievements in their own right rather than mere apprentice pieces for the future *Comédie humaine*.³ New editions of Balzac's theatrical works in France are appearing. These present the opportunity of examining and re-assessing this novelist's lesser-known efforts at dramaturgy. Among the most notable of these critical reappraisals is the new edition of *Le Nègre* for L'Harmattan in the series *Autrement mêmes* produced by Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol in 2011.

The resurgence of interest in Balzac's theatre has highlighted the need for English translations of these texts. Indeed, until now, study of his early theatrical

¹ Douchan Z. Milatchitch, *Le Théâtre inédit de Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Hachette, 1930), pp. 380–81.

² The 2013 Journée d'Etude of the GIRB, 'Splendeurs d'un parent pauvre? Le théâtre de Balzac', organised by Agathe Novak-Lechevalier and Eric Bordas, invited a serious investigation of Balzac's theatre. It is expected that the proceedings from this event will appear with Classiques Garnier, although, at the time of the completion of this volume (September 2013), no publication date was yet available.

³ Isabelle Michelot, 'De l'essai à l'échec: les errances d'un rêveur de théâtre' and Olivier Bara, 'Le champ théâtral sous la Restauration: essais dramatiques et stratégies de conquête du jeune Balzac', in *Balzac avant Balzac*, ed. by Claire-Barel Moisan and José-Luis Diaz (Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 2006), pp. 109–21 and pp. 123–38, respectively.

Foreword

works remained impossible for non-francophone readers. This edition proposes an English-language version of *Le Nègre*. This text offers a fascinating object of inquiry for students and scholars in the fields of literary, cultural, theatrical, sociological, and gender studies. Balzac's script invites us to interrogate the complex issues raised by the impact of colonisation on the social norms and institutions that regulated sexuality and interpersonal relationships. This translation seeks to provide an accessible text complemented by an introduction, notes, and selected bibliography that will help readers to situate *Le Nègre* within the specific context of Balzac's work, within the more general context of nineteenth-century French theatre and culture, and within the still larger context of areas of interest for twenty-first-century criticism. When repositioned within the artistic and socio-cultural milieu that informs and shapes its creation, *Le Nègre* stands out as far more than an early *coup d'essai* by a writer ultimately elevated to canonical status. Indeed, the interweaving of issues of race relations, postcolonialism, gender roles, class mobility, social legitimacy, sexuality, motherhood, violence against women, patriarchal authority, commerce, and urban space in nineteenth-century Paris renders this melodrama a fascinating period piece that invites modern readers to interrogate the stereotypes and didactic theatrical conventions it articulates for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the nineteenth-century world and of Balzac's poetics. In keeping with the translation's goal of providing access to the text and showcasing its interest, the introduction, like the notes and bibliography, seeks to open avenues for further study and discussion rather than exhaustively addressing or responding to all of the questions it raises.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

Introduction

Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) stands as one of France’s most celebrated novelists and colourful nineteenth-century literary figures. Born in Tours, Balzac grew up in a respectable middle-class family. His father, Bernard-François, was a former secretary to the *Conseil du Roi*, while his mother, Laure, was the daughter of Parisian haberdashers. After spending six years at boarding school, Balzac moved to Paris with his parents in 1814. He completed his secondary education in the capital in 1816 and within two years was apprenticed to the legal chambers of Jean-Baptiste Guillonnet-Merville.¹ Balzac showed little enthusiasm for the legal profession and soon declared his ambition to become a writer. Supported by a meagre allowance, he began work on a five-act tragedy called *Cromwell* in 1819. Undeterred by the subsequent failure of this play, Balzac launched into a series of literary projects, writing novels, plays, poetry, and even etiquette manuals, some under pseudonyms and others in collaboration as well. In 1825, frustrated by his lack of success as an author, he established a printing and type-founding business. The venture was a financial disaster and forced him to return to literature with a renewed sense of urgency. In 1829, *Le Dernier Chouan ou la Bretagne en 1800* marked a significant turning-point in his career. This was the first novel that Balzac signed with his own name, which reflected his newfound confidence as an author. Over the next two decades, he established a reputation as one of the most compelling and prolific writers of his era. His main body of work, *La Comédie humaine*, consists of ninety-four novels and short stories. It remains an invaluable record of French society in the aftermath of the 1789 Revolution. Balzac’s fiction won admirers throughout Europe and the United States, including the Polish Countess, Eveline Hanska, whom he courted for eighteen years. The couple married in 1850, less than six months before Balzac died at his home in Paris.

Although Balzac’s prose works garner the most attention, *Le Nègre*, the melodrama that he penned in late 1822 under the pseudonym Horace Saint Aubin,² merits

¹ In taking this post, Balzac replaced Eugène Scribe who worked as a clerk for Guillonnet-Merville before making his own career as a playwright. On the connection between Balzac and Scribe, see Jean-Claude Yon, ‘Balzac et Scribe: “Scènes de la vie théâtrale”’, *L’Année balzacienne*, (1999), 439–49.

² For a discussion of Balzac’s use of this pseudonym, which appears more commonly in his early works in the form Horace de Saint-Aubin, see Joëlle Gleize, ‘Horace de Saint-Aubin, “triste héros de préface”’, in *Balzac avant Balzac*, pp. 79–93 and Christine Marcandier, ‘Horace de Saint-Aubin, de la figure à la fiction’ in *Balzac avant Balzac*, pp. 95–107. Neither of these scholars notes, however, the curious fact that ‘Saint-Aubin frères’ was also used as a collaborative pseudonym by Henry Dupin, Joseph-Adolphe-Ferdinand Langlois, and Claude-Louis-Marie, the Marquis de Rochefort-

examination. This adaptation of the *Othello* plot attests to his early ambition to succeed as a playwright and to his eagerness to broach one of the questions that would fascinate the Parisian public under the French Restoration: cross-racial desire.³ Today, drawing a parallel between these two areas of interest might appear surprising. Given the trajectory of Balzac's career, one may even question the extent to which these represent areas of personal interest or engagement for the young writer. In fact, it is imperative to resituate his ambitions and eagerness within the context of the economic imperatives and tastes of the time. Both represented potential revenue streams. In the 1820s, the stage was a venue that could ensure solvency, just as race was a subject that paid. From the boards of the prestigious Théâtre-Français (now the Comédie-Française) to the *tréteaux* of boulevard and *foire*, the theatre industry served as an important source of employment for writers, actresses, actors, critics, and journalists. Similarly, colonial and postcolonial subjects⁴

Luçay. These three men also wrote for the Gaité in the early 1820s, as Odile Krakovitch notes in *Les Pièces de théâtre soumises à la censure (1800–1830): inventaire des manuscrits (F/18/581 à 668) et des procès-verbaux des censeurs (F/21/966 à 995)* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1982), p. 111, p. 323. Is this pure coincidence, or could the young Balzac have hoped to trade on this fact?

³ While it remains a subject of speculation, analysis of *Le Nègre* does tend to add weight to the theory that Balzac wrote or collaborated with Auguste Lepoitevin de l'Égreville on the novel *Le Mulâtre* (1824), published under the pseudonym Aurore Cloteaux. This prose work explores the notion of cross-racial desire and its consequences, offering readers an exotic gothic novel that severely condemns interracial mixing as socially disruptive and deviant. On Balzac's possible authorship of this work, see Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol, *Le Mulâtre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, Autrement mêmes, 2009), pp. vii–xxvii.

⁴ The use of the term postcolonial might surprise readers used to thinking of this word as reserved exclusively to describe a period beginning around 1950. In the preface to *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/colonial Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Chris Bongie defines 'postcolonial' as an 'historical marker covering the last half of the 20th century describing certain societies that have been or still are under formal/informal control of another nation and cultural artifacts these societies have produced.' (p. 13). Bongie juxtaposes this term with 'post-colonial' used to convey a 'purely ideological hypothesis of a future that would be completely severed from colonialism' (ibid.). He proposes the 'neologism 'post/colonial' in which two words and worlds appear uneasily as one, joined together and yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity' (ibid.). Despite the opacity introduced by its subtle punctuation, Bongie's suggestion, insisting as it does on imbrication, offers a useful clarification in what Robert J.C. Young notes in *Postcolonialism, an Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) is a 'protracted and sometimes ingenious discussion' surrounding the term 'postcolonial' by a wide range of scholars (p. 57). Here, however, for the sake of maximum transparency, we will follow Doris Garraway's lead and use 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' to describe references in these texts to France and its colonies before France loses control over certain colonial territories, and after (see *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early*

offered writers a variety of highly reputable and less reputable means of profiting from their pens. From the 1823 *Prix de poésie* awarded by the Académie française for the best poem addressing the question of the abolition of the slave trade, to histories of the Haitian Revolution, to broadsheet music and words of Créole *romances*, to pulp-fiction thrillers like *Le Mulâtre*, to theatrical adaptations and parodies of Claire de Duras's best-seller, *Ourika*, at all levels, writing about race generated income.⁵

Analysis of the patterns that emerge when one charts the genres and subjects with which France's canonical and non-canonical writers experimented complicates, on the one hand, our vision of the French theatre and, on the other, our vision of colonial and postcolonial texts. It places tension on the uncritical conclusions we have grown accustomed to drawing with respect to dramaturgy and texts about race. In fact, examination of each suggests that just as not all drama written and produced in France qualified as highbrow literature, not all texts raising the question of racial difference promoted the ideals of racial equality and social diversity. While in France the theatre represented simultaneously an area in which the country had built an international reputation for genius and excellence and an avenue for achieving quick financial success, the reality for most authors remained that of the hard life of a theatrical hack. The majority of writers earned a living, sometimes comfortable, sometimes hand-to-mouth, churning out scripts, often derivative, for the nineteenth-century entertainment industry in Paris. By the same token, while publications on colonial/postcolonial subjects abound, especially in print and ephemeral media (newspapers, ladies' periodicals, song sheets, poetry anthologies, short story collections), not all of these texts indicate activism against slavery and racial discrimination. While the efforts and sincerity in this early fight for universal human rights and human dignity demand recognition and while the relatively high percentage of female writers examining these subjects merits particular attention, the predilection for sentimental genres and heart-rending stories of persecution and sacrifice arguably had as much to do with the need to produce texts deemed marketable by publishers and newspapers in constant search of material that would entice the reading public to buy as it had to do with activism.⁶ Close analysis of these texts in search of evidence for political engagement or subversion often disappoints. While they usually condemn slavery, the prevailing argument in them remains disturbingly conservative. Virtually all of the texts paint racially-mixed cultures as volatile and as dangerous

French Caribbean (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 292). Refusing to speak of the moment after Haiti asserted its independence and became a republic as 'postcolonial' simply because it preceded the wave of decolonisation in the twentieth century appears reductionist. For both the island nation and metropolitan France, the 1820s are a moment that is 'postcolonial' and the texts in the corpus discussed here grapple specifically with this phenomenon.

⁵ As the examples of Charles de Rémusat and Claire de Duras demonstrate, not all playwrights and writers who addressed the question of racial inequality and discrimination were struggling to survive.

⁶ Lawrence C. Jennings provides a clear and comprehensive account of the efforts to abolish slavery in France in *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

sources of inequalities and humiliations that threaten public order and private happiness. Virtually all promote the geographic separation of races at the same time as they recycle the colonialist fantasy that Africans and slaves would be happier in servitude among people of their own skin colour than free and educated in a society that views them as inferior. Time had not dulled the interest of the topic, nor calmed the struggles for abolition and civil rights. When Balzac wrote *Le Nègre*, only two decades had passed since Haitian independence marked France's loss of Saint-Domingue, the proverbial crown jewel of its colonial empire. Only two decades had elapsed since Napoleon overturned the 1794 abolition of slavery and re-established the practice in France's remaining colonies. Half a decade had passed since the European nations made the slave trade and shipments (*la traite*) illegal. It had been but a scant few years since the French government had overturned contentious legislation preventing racially mixed marriages in France. Moreover, the writing of this melodrama coincided with a renewed push to energise the abolitionist movement. This was also the very moment at which France, in return for its recognition of Haiti as a nation, hounded Haiti for payment of the large and economically crippling financial reparations for the white colonists who lost their holdings. It was also at the very moment at which France began to shift its colonial interests to the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. At this time, race remained a hot and malleable topic for aspiring writers, just as the theatre stood as the venue that fired their ambition. Hence, it remains imperative to contextualise *Le Nègre*, to understand how it fits into Balzac's career, into his creative process, into the theatre industry in nineteenth-century France and into the corpus of texts dealing with questions of race.

***Le Nègre*: synopsis**

Le Nègre stages simultaneously the story of the ill-fated love of Georges, a free black man in Paris, for his white employer's white wife and the tale of this woman, Émilie. Besotted but temporarily abandoned by her jealous husband, who has left her alone in the city while he travels abroad on business, the innocent and hapless Émilie finds herself prey to the advances of her husband's steward at the same time as she tries to save her sister, Claire, from ruin after this latter is left pregnant by her lover, Manfred, the Marquis de Saint-Yves.

The first several scenes in Act I sketch out the scenario and trace the characters of Georges and Émilie. Neither will surprise audiences. Both prove stereotypical figures. Georges burns with passion. He simmers with barely repressed jealousy. His undeclared emotions push him repeatedly to the brink of suicide but the unquenchable belief that his love and devotion will win over Émilie pull him back, leading him to send away the other servants so he can open his heart to her. Unfortunately, interruptions plague Georges's efforts as Émilie receives letters and visits announcing the return of her husband, the return of Claire's now repentant seducer, and the flight of her sister who has lost all reason and abandoned her infant. When, at last, Georges manages to declare himself, Émilie rejects him. The steward announces his intention to leave his post with the Gerval family and as Monsieur de Gerval arrives, Georges warns Émilie that he knows the truth of her visits to the outlying village of

Sèvres, infamous for its popularity as a site for adulterous trysts. Misunderstandings accumulate as Émilie continues to hide the truth of her sister's fall from grace from her punctiliously rigid husband. Georges fans the fires of suspicion and jealousy in the mind of his employer, all the while prey to the same emotions he tries to stoke in another. The arrival of a secretive Manfred exacerbates the situation.

Act II opens in the village of Sèvres where the rivalry of two peasants, Flicotel and Marguerite, continues to sow confusion. The greedy old woman, Marguerite, rents her house out and had let it to Émilie to hide the pregnant Claire before, during, and after the birth of her son. Flicotel, a recent arrival to the village, keeps a tavern and sells cheap wine. A born troublemaker and busybody, Flicotel schemes constantly to sell more wine and get information about Marguerite's tenants. In Act II, alliances split along gender lines as Marguerite tries to help Émilie and Claire, on the one hand, and Georges and Gerval enlist Flicotel's assistance, on the other. Partial information leads Gerval to believe the worst about his wife and he assumes that she has been unfaithful and borne another man's child. Affairs come to a head as Gerval successfully bribes Marguerite to reveal the name of the woman to whom she rents her house. When he enters the house and spies Émilie holding a baby, his suspicions appear to be confirmed. In his jealous rage, Gerval begins to speak of murdering his adulterous wife. His steward, now even more jealous at the idea that Émilie has another lover, encourages him, initially in the hope that if Gerval cast off his wife, then an abandoned Émilie would look favourably upon the protection and adoration offered by Georges. The hunt for Claire continues and this act ends with Émilie rushing back to Paris with the hungry baby in tow.

The third and final act takes place back in the Gerval townhouse where Georges attempts to persuade Émilie that her only hope lies in following him. She rejects him despite his increasingly violent efforts to trap her. When she escapes his clutches, his own jealous spite pushes him to convince Gerval that Émilie must be killed. Georges offers to do the deed himself. Meanwhile, Émilie attempts to allay her husband's fears and buy time until the truth can be told without compromising Claire. In a final scene of judgment, Gerval wavers but the continued absence of Claire undermines his faith in his wife's innocence. He sends her to her room where Georges lies in wait with a dagger, ready to strike. Georges stabs Émilie. At the very moment when Georges and Gerval contemplate Émilie's bleeding form, Marguerite and Manfred rush in with the news that Claire has been found. Gerval realises the truth of his wife's innocence and Georges takes his own life. In the final lines of the play, Émilie pardons her husband.

Balzac in 1822: the genesis of *Le Nègre*

Le Nègre belongs to a period of intense activity in Balzac's literary career. In the early months of 1822, he sketched out a plan for ten dramatic works that he hoped would help bring his earnings for the year to three thousand francs. The list included titles

for comedies, melodramas, tragedies, *vaudevilles*, and even an opera.⁷ Curiously, however, *Le Nègre*, the only play that Balzac would complete in 1822, was absent from this schedule. Little is known about the precise circumstances of the play's composition, although it is likely that Balzac began work on the manuscript in the autumn of 1822. He submitted the finished piece to the selection committee of the Théâtre de la Gaîté, and subsequently learned of its rejection in a letter from the theatre's *Secrétaire général*, Hippolyte Lévesque. In this letter, dated 24 January 1823, Lévesque explained that *Le Nègre* was unsuitable and too poorly written to be staged. In this refusal of the manuscript, he cited the play's shortcomings as ranging from an overly pretentious style to a weak third act. While members praised Balzac for the vigour of some of his scenes, ultimately they remained alarmed by the staging of a black steward in Paris trying to win the love of his white employer's wife. The committee concluded that the stakes were too high and the risk too great for the theatre to even accept the melodrama.⁸

This letter marks an event that followed on the heels of a pivotal year in Balzac's life. While the structure, characters, and plot of *Le Nègre* obey the rigid conventions of theatrical melodramas of the period, the correspondences that exist between this standard tale of persecution and Balzac's own experiences in 1822, which had a profound impact on his emotional and intellectual development, are noteworthy. One can only speculate on what Balzac may have felt working in the confines of a genre that resonated in many ways with his own life and his other writings. In May, he met Laure de Berny, a married woman who, at forty-five, was twenty-two years his senior. Madame de Berny became a lover, confidante, and

⁷ Stéphane Vachon, *Les Travaux et les jours d'Honoré de Balzac: chronologie de la création balzacienne* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1992), p. 71.

⁸ Honoré de Balzac, *Œuvres diverses*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex et al., 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1990–), I, p. 1687. How should the modern reader understand this letter? The language aligns with that found in correspondence and *procès-verbaux* from censors rejecting dramatic works. The comments on the stylistic weaknesses are self-explanatory. The rejection based on the unacceptable risk for the theatre, however, remains less clear. Admittedly, *Le Nègre* dramatises a full range of shocking topics including adultery, unwed mothers, illegitimate children, cross-racial desire, betrayal, murder, and suicide, but these were not uncommon in melodrama. Boulevard audiences thrilled to see crises, excitement, and gore enacted, so in what way could *Le Nègre* place the theatre in jeopardy? In fact, we find this precise wording used on ballots cast on dramatic works that stage African or mulatto characters. See, for example the ballots of the *Comité de Lecture* for the *Opéra-Comique* (Archives nationales de France, AJ/13/1057) assessing the potential of two colonial librettos by Jacques-Louis Lacour from this period (*La famille créole*, s.d. and *Les Créoles*, 1823). Still, the concern expressed by Lévesque and the committee remains harder to read. On the one hand, it could signal an individual's desire to keep the French stage white. On the other hand, it sometimes signalled the very real concern over the financial viability of a play. The smaller boulevard theatres had tighter profit margins and an overview of the plays that represented non-white characters reveals that they tended to have very short runs.

maternal figure to Balzac. She stood as an unshakeable source of support as he struggled to establish himself as a writer. Thematically, *Le Nègre* appears to reflect much of his enduring attachment to the woman he called the ‘Dilecta’ (‘the beloved one’, in Latin). Like the relationship between Claire and Manfred in the play, Balzac’s affair threatened to cause a scandal, prompting Madame Balzac to dispatch her son to stay with his sister Laure in Bayeux, where he remained until August. The theme of a love affair frustrated by the moral strictures of society clearly mirrored the painful experiences Balzac lived in the months before he produced *Le Nègre*.⁹

Balzac’s love for Madame de Berny was by no means the only element that fed his imagination while he transformed *Othello* into a contemporary melodrama. On the contrary, *Le Nègre* afforded Balzac an opportunity to develop several key themes and character types with which he had already begun to experiment in his prose works. In *Sténie ou les erreurs philosophiques*, an unfinished epistolary novel written in 1820–21, he had previously recounted the story of Stéphanie (Sténie) de Formosand, who marries a wealthy older man despite being in love with her childhood friend Jacob (Job) Del-Ryès. In his first attempt at novel-writing, Balzac depicted Sténie’s anguish at being forced to choose social duty over love. ‘My mother is hardly concerned for my feelings,’ she complains. ‘She considers happiness only in terms of the size of one’s fortune.’¹⁰ In *Le Nègre*, the themes routinely mobilised in melodrama align themselves with those central in *Sténie* in two specific ways. First, the weight of social expectation threatens to prevent Claire, like Sténie, from being with the man she truly loves. Second, Émilie’s devotion to her sister recalls the selflessness of Sténie, who sets aside her own emotional well-being and enters into a loveless marriage rather than displease her mother.

While evoking the intertextual presence of *Sténie*, numerous elements in *Le Nègre* also resonate with the wider corpus of novels that Balzac published in the early 1820s. In *Georges*, for example, Balzac constructs a malevolent figure who fits in among the long line of Balzacian villains, the prototype for which had appeared in *Le Vicaire des Ardennes* in November 1822. In that novel, also written under the pseudonym Horace de Saint-Aubin, Balzac introduced readers to the character Argow, a pirate who terrorises the village of Aulnay as it awaits the arrival of its new priest. Condemned by the authorities as an outrage against morality and religion, *Le Vicaire des Ardennes* was forcibly removed from sale on 9 December 1822, proving that Balzac was certainly no stranger to controversy in the weeks before the Gâté refused *Le Nègre*.¹¹

Without doubt, the most significant of Balzac’s early works to demonstrate strong parallels with *Le Nègre* is *Wann-Chlore*. Begun during the author’s enforced stay

⁹ For a recent discussion of the affair between Balzac and Laure de Berny, see Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac à vingt ans: l’esclave de sa volonté* (Paris: Au diable vauvert, 2012), pp. 70–76.

¹⁰ Balzac, *Œuvres diverses*, I, p. 750: ‘Mais ma mère s’inquiète peu de mon cœur. Elle compte la fortune pour la somme totale de la félicité.’

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the censorship and *Le Vicaire des Ardennes*, see Anne-Marie Meininger, ‘La saisie du *Vicaire des Ardennes*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (1968), 149–61.

in Bayeux between May and August of 1822, *Wann-Chlore* tells the story of a Napoleonic officer, Horace Landon, who falls in love with a young Englishwoman nicknamed Chlora because of the whiteness of her complexion. As war spreads across Europe between 1808 and 1814, Landon must leave to fight in Spain. He entrusts Chlora to the care of his best friend, Annibal Salvati. Salvati soon begins to fall for Chlora himself, and resolves to break up the couple by telling Landon that Chlora has taken another lover in his absence. In an accumulation of *quiproquos* typical of melodrama, Chlora unwittingly co-operates with this lie by pretending to be involved in an affair with a certain Lord C..., who had fathered the child of her cousin Cécile. *Le Nègre* clearly recycles this interlocking plot. In the melodrama, Émilie's attempts to hide the truth of Claire's pregnancy echo Chlora's willingness to sacrifice her own social reputation in order to protect her cousin. At the same time, Georges's manipulation of Gerval recalls Salvati's letters to Landon, in which the Italian encourages his friend to return post-haste from the battlefield to punish Chlora. 'After uncovering a thousand pieces of evidence to prove that Wann-Chlore is in love with the young C...', he tells Landon, 'I've now discovered that she is pregnant! [...] Come back quickly, strike like lightning, take vengeance in your own hands.'¹² Upon his return, Landon bursts in to find Chlora cradling Cécile's child in her arms. In a fit of jealous rage, he fires a pistol shot that providentially misses his lover. The scenes in Act II of *Le Nègre* in which Gerval spies Émilie holding a baby and resolves to kill her replay the moment of high drama staged first in *Wann-Chlore*. The similarities in these two episodes suggest that *Wann-Chlore* nourished *Le Nègre* significantly, with Balzac appropriating material from his then unpublished novel and re-using it in a new, theatrical context to adapt *Othello*.¹³

If Balzac can be seen to rework his own fiction in *Le Nègre*, the play also reflects his early enthusiasm for Romantic literature. English and German Romanticism achieved popularity and notoriety in France during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Like many of his contemporaries, Balzac was fascinated by this new literary vogue. Even while training to be a lawyer, he attended Abel-François Villemain's lectures on European literature at the Sorbonne.¹⁴ These fuelled his

¹² Honoré de Balzac, *Wann-Chlore*, in *Premiers romans*, ed. by André Lorant, 2 vols (Paris: Laffont, 1999), II, p. 853. 'Après avoir acquis mille preuves de l'amour de Wann-Chlore pour le jeune C... j'ai découvert qu'elle était grosse! [...] viens, accours, tombe comme la foudre, prends toi-même la vengeance à la main.'

¹³ For a detailed overview of the plot of *Wann-Chlore*, see Balzac, *Premiers romans*, II, pp. 684–89 and for a discussion of the parallels between this novel and *Le Nègre*, see Pierre Barbéris, *Aux sources de Balzac: les romans de jeunesse* (Paris: Les Bibliophiles de l'Originale, 1965), pp. 284–85.

¹⁴ On Balzac's preference for the programme of public lectures offered by the Sorbonne between 1816 and 1818, see Laure Surville, *Balzac, sa vie et ses œuvres d'après sa correspondance* (Paris: Jacottet, Bourdilliat, 1858), p. 28, and Graham Robb, *Balzac* (London: Picador, 1994), pp. 47–48. While Villemain's courses on literature may well have introduced Balzac to Shakespeare's plays, a reading of his published lectures and the cursory treatment of *Othello* in them suggests that Balzac's understanding of the plot comes from another source. Villemain's influence on Balzac's aspiration is

appetite for works by key figures in the Romantic movement, particularly Goethe and Walter Scott. When preparing the manuscript of *Le Nègre* in late 1822, Balzac may have believed that there was quick money to be made capitalising on the fashionable appeal of Romanticism. As Cordova and Sol have shown in their recent edition of the text, *Le Nègre* offers numerous references to Lord Byron.¹⁵ The name ‘Horace Gordon’, scratched out on the first page and in many places throughout the rest of the manuscript, recalls Byron’s real surname, Gordon. Balzac’s manuscript also contains a suggestive inconsistency in the spellings used for the given name of the eponymous ‘Negro’. It appears sometimes with, and sometimes without, a final ‘s’. The first spelling follows the English and notably, Byron’s first name, George. Finally, Balzac’s character Manfred shares his name with the hero of Byron’s dramatic poem of 1817. Too numerous to be coincidental, these references function as a tribute to the English poet, and add unexpected layers of depth and meaning to a melodrama that appears conventional in so many other respects, although the extent to which the audience at the Gaîté would have recognised these remains a matter of speculation.

***Le Nègre* in the context of nineteenth-century French theatre**

While the resonances between Balzac’s personal life and literary activities in 1822 and *Le Nègre* stand out, situating the play within the theatrical context for which it was intended remains vital. Like Stendhal and, later in the century, Flaubert, Balzac’s early ambition was to write for the stage. As he began work on *Cromwell* in 1819, he was determined to make his name – and fortune – as a tragic dramatist. Even after the failure of this historical tragedy set during the English Civil War, and the subsequent rejection of *Le Nègre* in 1823, Balzac refused to abandon his dream of achieving critical and commercial success in what he considered to be the prestige medium, namely the theatre. In the period between 1820 and his death thirty years later, he conceived at least fifty dramatic projects and finished nine plays. Some of these are remembered more for the controversy they caused than for their artistic quality. In 1840, *Vautrin*, a drama featuring the criminal mastermind popularised by *La Comédie humaine*, was banned after just one performance for appearing to mock King Louis-Philippe. Other plays by Balzac proved successful only after his death. For example, *Mercadet ou le Faiseur*, a stinging portrayal of financial malpractice from 1848, remained unperformed during the author’s lifetime. Since his death, the enduring relevance of its themes and characters has continued to inspire new productions.

Le Nègre occupies an important and intriguing place in Balzac’s dramatic production and in his literary career as a whole. Following the bitter disappointment

unclear. In addition to teaching at the Sorbonne, Villemain headed the *Division Littéraire* of the *Troisième Bureau* at the Interior Ministry from 1816 to 1821. His office was charged with reading and evaluating manuscripts of all the plays submitted to the censors by theatres hoping to obtain the necessary authorisation to stage them.

¹⁵ Horace St Aubin (Honoré de Balzac), *Le Nègre*, ed. by Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol (Paris: L’Harmattan, Autrement mêmes, 2011), p. xv.

of *Cromwell*, the young writer decided to abandon the restrictive conventions of classical tragedy and to experiment more freely with language and genre. He began to look beyond purely historical subjects and sought creative inspiration from other theatrical models, in particular from Molière and Shakespeare. The project of creating a modern melodrama, with its amalgamation of high and low culture, must certainly have appealed to the future author of *La Comédie humaine* as he pursued his first theatrical success. Yet, at the same time, in choosing to write a three-act melodrama, Balzac would have found himself following a set of generic conventions even more highly codified than those of classical tragedy.

What was Balzac's relationship with the theatre at this time? As a young man trying to build his career, Balzac did not have sufficient money to attend the theatre on a regular basis. Tremewan proposes that reading theatre reviews in the press provided one point of contact.¹⁶ Linzy Erika Dickinson suggests alternatively that he gained his knowledge of the theatre mainly by reading theatrical works and claims that this in no way hampered his understanding of the medium. By 1825, as Dickinson reminds us, Balzac even felt suitably qualified to write the preface for an edition of the works of Molière produced by his own printing firm.¹⁷

If Balzac appears to have been an infrequent visitor to the theatre, his decision to submit *Le Nègre* to the Gaîté nevertheless brought him into contact with a highly developed industry.¹⁸ Much has been written about the thriving world of theatre in nineteenth-century France. In Paris, stage entertainment ranged from prestigious performances of new or canonical plays and operas at royally subsidised venues like the Théâtre-Français, the Odéon, the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique, or the Théâtre Royal Italien; to melodramas, vaudevilles, minor operas, operettas, shorter comedies, and parodies at private second-tier and boulevard playhouses like the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, the Vaudeville, the Variétés, the Gaîté, the Ambigu-Comique, the Gymnase dramatique); down to popular spectacles that ran the gamut from *pots-pourris*, pantomime, to the exploits of tightrope walkers, tumblers, dancers, posers, and equestrian or other animal performers. As an industry, the theatre employed a wide network of people including writers, composers, actors, singers, musicians, dancers, gymnasts, contortionists, seamstresses, laundresses, set designers, lighting and fireworks experts, painters, carpenters, *machinistes* to operate the sets, ticket

¹⁶ P.-J. Tremewan's description of Balzac's early contact with Shakespeare tends to muddy any clear understanding of how frequently Balzac may have attended live performances before the mid-1820s. Tremewan insists on the speculative nature of such claims, especially with respect to *Othello*, but underscores, nonetheless, the possibility that Balzac would have seen the Rossini opera. See P.-J. Tremewan, 'Balzac et Shakespeare', *L'Année balzacienne* (1967), 259–303 (pp. 261–66).

¹⁷ Linzy Erika Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's 'La Comédie humaine'* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 14.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the stakes, practices, and consequences involved in choosing to write for one theatre instead of another in Paris in the early nineteenth century, see Olivier Bara, 'Le champ théâtral sous la Restauration: essais dramatiques et stratégies de conquête du jeune Balzac', in *Balzac avant Balzac*, pp. 123–38.

sellers, *ouvreaux*, refreshment vendors, and even the *claque*.¹⁹ Journalists, printers, government censors, and selection committees also played an important role in keeping the theatres running. In the provinces, smaller cities, and the colonies, the theatre also provided entertainment and employment.²⁰ Like any industry, the theatre employed artists, artisans, and many who sought to escape the grinding poverty that loomed as a constant threat for a majority of the population. The young Marceline Desbordes, for example, found herself on stage as a child actress in the late 1790s when her mother left her husband, running off with her lover and Marceline, her youngest daughter, in tow. After her mother's death from yellow fever in Guadeloupe, Marceline returned to metropolitan France and the stage, quitting it only in 1806, when her first pregnancy became impossible to hide. Later, as the wife of an actor, Desbordes-Valmore struggled with pressing financial worries and wrote to supplement the family's income.

This hive of activity bespeaks the enthusiastic consumption of live entertainment at this time. Nonetheless, the theatre remained a sector haunted by tight profit margins and the ubiquitous spectre of bankruptcy. The government sought repeatedly to stabilise the volatility of the industry. From the Revolution onwards, the state instituted, by turns, measures to liberalise and then to regulate the sector, beginning with the famous *loi Chapelier*²¹ in 1791, that resulted in the doubling of the number of theatres (from fourteen to thirty-five) in Paris between 1789 and 1792. Under the Terror, efforts to democratise and popularise patriotic and instructive theatre led to the reinstatement of censorship and to the institution of weekly free

¹⁹ The *claque* was an institution peculiar to French theatres. It consisted of men paid to ensure the success or failure of a play. Descriptions of this can be found in F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *Theatre and the State in France (1760–1905)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Both offer an excellent in-depth account of the workings of French theatre during this time period. From its professions, to its institutions, to its idiosyncrasies, Hemmings unpacks the fascinating practices and people who defined and shaped the French stage during the nineteenth century. His research, like that of scholars including John McCormick, Julia Przybos, Angela Pao, Barbara Cooper, Gérard Gengembre, Odile Krakovitch, Olivier Bara, and Roxane Martin, deepens our understanding of how this complex industry functioned.

²⁰ For an overview of the theatre industry in the colonies, see Lauren Clay, *The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jean Fouchard, *Le Théâtre à Saint-Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l'État, 1955) and *Regards sur le temps passé* (Port-au-Prince: H. Deschamps, 1988).

²¹ Adopted on 13 January 1791, the *loi Chapelier* liberalised the theatre industry by allowing all citizens the right to open playhouses where all dramatic forms could be performed. This marked a shift away from the previous system in which theatres were granted *privileges* that provided them with monopolies over the production of certain types of plays. See Gérard Gengembre, *Le Théâtre français au 19^e siècle, 1789–1900* (Paris: A. Colin, 1999), p. 13.

performances paid for partly by government subsidies. The financial assistance provided the means for certain theatres to avoid closing due to lack of funds. Under Napoleon, censorship was reinforced. Furthermore, a series of imperial decrees beginning in 1803 reduced the number of theatres, at first from seventeen to twelve, and then in 1807 from thirty-four to eight. At the same time, restrictions were placed on the types of performances that could be produced at any given venue. In 1815, when the Bourbon monarchy returned to power, these restrictions were made law and remained in effect until the end of the July Monarchy in 1848. Under the Restoration, however, a number of small playhouses opened once more, one of the most notable being the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, previously closed in 1807.²² During this time, the theatres found themselves limited, in theory, by the 1807 permissions regarding the genres allowed for each location.

In the 1820s, the Gaîté could produce *dramas* and *mélodrames* but, according to the law, needed special authorisation from the government to stage other dramatic genres. Nonetheless, this theatre presented a full range of the popular genres; indeed, the 1822 *Almanach des Spectacles* highlighted its reputation for producing excellent vaudevilles.²³ In fact, in 1822, the Gaîté staged thirteen three-act melodramas, fourteen one-act vaudevilles, two one-act comedies, one two-act ballet, and one three-act *féerie*.²⁴ The following year, it expanded its repertoire, showing one four-act melodrama, thirty-one three-act melodramas, twenty-five one-act vaudevilles, four one-act comedies, and one two-act *pantomime*. The Gaîté employed approximately a hundred people in the various positions sketched above, and notably fifteen actors and eight actresses.²⁵ Located on the Boulevard du Temple, this playhouse could hold up to 1754 spectators²⁶ and offered shows daily. The theatre itself opened at five o'clock in the late afternoon and performances began an hour later. Ticket prices at the Gaîté ranged from sixty centimes to 3.60 francs.²⁷ For comparison's sake, the Théâtre-Français charged approximately twice the price and the other major boulevard theatres about fifteen to forty centimes more than the Gaîté.

Balzac hoped that the Gaîté would accept and produce his melodrama, *Le Nègre*. Perhaps his aspirations to write for this troupe were fuelled by the theatre's desire to extend its repertoire? Practically speaking, in an attempt to realise his ambitions, Balzac did what other playwrights with a script would have done. He submitted his manuscript to the selection committee. In 1823, this included Madame Bourguignon, the director of the Gaîté; Monsieur Frédéric, the *régisseur*; and

²² For a review of the changing fortunes of boulevard theatres from 1789 onwards, see Angela C. Pao, *The Orient of the Boulevards: Exoticism, Empire, and Nineteenth-Century French Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

²³ *Almanach des Spectacles pour 1822* (Paris: Barba, 1822), p. 203.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–09.

²⁵ *Almanach des Spectacles pour 1823* (Paris: Barba, 1823), pp. 206–14.

²⁶ Gengembre proposes this number. Nicole Wild cites a higher seating capacity of 1845 at this time in her *Dictionnaire des théâtres parisiens au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Aux Amateurs des livres, 1989), p. 167.

²⁷ Gengembre, *Le Théâtre français au 19^e siècle, 1789–1900*, pp. 38–39.

Messieurs Dépropriac and Pelissier. Hippolyte Lévesque served as secretary. Balzac would have wanted to sell his play and receive the going rate, namely a one-time sum of around 800 to 900 francs.²⁸ Had it been accepted and purchased, he would have received no portion of the profits from the play. This was standard for the boulevard theatres with the exception of the Théâtre du Vaudeville, which began paying playwrights twelve per cent of the evening's receipts in 1792. Clearly, for the budding author, dreams of making his fortune with *Le Nègre* would have been linked to establishing his credentials as a viable playwright and facilitating the sale of future plays, rather than to the amount he would have made on the sale of this particular script. Hence, Balzac's original ambition to have his *Cromwell* accepted by the Théâtre-Français stemmed from the prestige attached to this venue, as well as from the fact that this theatre did not simply offer playwrights a lump sum payment for a manuscript, but rather two *parts* of the evening's net take as long as they were above 550 *livres* in the winter and 350 *livres* in the summer.²⁹ In theory, playwrights could make a fortune but, in reality, this proved less often the case. Balzac's practical decision to write a melodrama in the hope of selling it to the Gaîté reflects his attempts to insert himself into the competitive entertainment industry.

***Le Nègre*: representations of exotic alterity during the French Restoration**

Key to Balzac's strategy in attempting to sell his melodrama to the Gaîté was his exploitation of one of the most prominent literary themes of the day: racial difference. *Le Nègre* fits squarely within a corpus of Restoration and Romantic representations of Africans and non-white figures of exotic alterity in literature and within dramatic explorations of contact between colonial and metropolitan spheres. The eponymous Negro of this play can be aligned with the major characters in a corpus from the same period that includes *Bug-Jargal* (1819) by Victor Hugo; *Sarah* (1821) by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore; *Ourika* (1823) by Claire de Duras; *Ourika, ou la Nègresse* (1824) by Ferdinand Villeneuve and Charles Dupeuty; *Ourika, ou l'Orpheline africaine* (1824) by Merle and Frédéric de Courcy; *Ourika, ou la Petite nègresse* (1824) by Mélesville and Pierre Frédéric Adolphe Carmouche; the 'Ourika' poems (1824) written respectively by Delphine Gay, Ulric Guttinguer, Gaspard de Pons, and Pierre Ange Vieillard; *Le Mulâtre* (1824) attributed to Balzac and Lepoitevin de l'Égreville; *Le Nègre et la Créole, ou Mémoires d'Eulalie D**** (1825) by Gabrielle de Paban; *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue* (1825) by Charles de Rémusat; *Pyracmond, ou les Créoles* (1826) by Jacques Louis Lacour; and *Tamango* (1829) by Prosper Mérimée.

This partial inventory of texts attests to the fact that the figure of the African was 'un personnage d'actualité' in Restoration literature.³⁰ In the footsteps of Léon-François Hoffmann, Sylvie Chalaye, and Roger Little, scholars such as Chris Bongie,

²⁸ Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 231–32.

³⁰ Léon-François Hoffmann, 'Balzac et les noirs', *L'Année balzacienne* (1966), 297–308 (p. 297).

Aimée Boutin, Barbara Cooper, Sarah Davies Cordova, Doris Kadish, Deborah Jenson, Françoise Massardier-Kennedy, Marshall Olds, and Antoinette Sol are among an ever-growing number of researchers working to raise awareness about the centrality of literary and dramatic works that engage with race during the 1820s in France. Their work complements the historical studies authored by Laurent Dubois, Carolyn Fick, Doris Garraway, Florence Gauthier, John Garrigus, David Geggus, Jennifer Heuer, Lawrence C. Jennings, Sue Peabody, Jeremy Popkin, and Dwaine Pruitt. In particular, Gauthier, Heuer, Peabody, and Pruitt provide an important complement to literary analysis insofar as they use archival evidence to sketch the contours of the African and colonial presence in France during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³¹ The now canonical texts of Hoffmann, Chalaye, and Little analyse literary and theatrical representations of race in France and provide a framework in which to understand the figure of Georges by situating this character from the 1820s within the larger evolution of black characters in French literature from the Renaissance forward. All three scholars trace the major shifts in representations of Africans and people of colour in the period between the French Revolution in 1789 and the end of the July Monarchy in 1848. They identify the evolution of positive portrayals across time. During the Restoration, these shift away from over-simplified images of the naïve and grateful *'bon nègre'* who responds to his benevolent patrons (owners, former owners, protectors) with childlike affection and self-sacrificing devotion,³² and give way to more nuanced portraits of

³¹ In *L'Aristocratie de l'épiderme: le combat de la Société des citoyens de couleur, 1789–1791* (Paris: CNRS, 2007), Gauthier documents the struggle for the recognition of civil rights for free blacks and people of colour in France and its colonies. In *'There are no slaves in France': The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Peabody charts the legal proceedings through which blacks and people of colour sued for freedom or recognition of their free status in metropolitan France. In 'The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France', *Law and History Review*, 27.3 (2009), 515–48, Heuer clarifies the changing legislation regarding interracial marriage in France in the first third of the nineteenth century. In "'The Opposition of the Law to the Law': Race, Slavery, and the Law in Nantes, 1715–1778", *French Historical Studies*, 30.2 (2007), 147–74, Pruitt makes valuable inroads describing the demographics for non-whites living in France during this time frame.

³² Obvious examples for plays would include Olympe de Gouges's *L'Esclavage des Noirs* (1789); Guillemain's *Le Nègre aubergiste* (1793); Gassier's *La Liberté des Nègres* (1794); Larivallière's *Les Africains, ou le Triomphe de l'humanité* (1795); Pigault-Lebrun's *Le Blanc et le Noir* (1795); and Béraud and Rosny's *Adonis, ou le Bon Nègre* (1798). We find similar figures staged in revolutionary fêtes and songs celebrating the 1794 abolition of slavery. The best known example of these songs remains André-François Coupigny's *Chant d'une esclave affranchie par le décret de la Convention nationale, sur le berceau de son fils* (Paris: Magasin de musique à l'usage des fêtes nationales, 1797). Jean-Claude Halpern and Caroline Crouin's work with archival documents retraces the theatrical commemoration of the 1794 abolition of slavery in France and demonstrates the conscious staging of scenarios of gratitude.

the African as a victim of prejudice who suffers in the context of racially heterogeneous society. Authors paint Africans as more or less violent and bloodthirsty in their texts in the 1820s.³³ At the end of the Restoration, these figures give way to that of the proudly defiant Romantic hero.³⁴

³³ To what extent do these texts reflect each writer's personal prejudices? It is difficult to say with certainty, but tempting to speculate. The differences in representations may align with the individual's position on slavery, equal rights for all races, and social diversity suggesting greater relative conservatism on the issue of diversity for Hugo, de Pons, and Balzac. Certainly, in his eponymous anti-hero, *Bug-Jargal*, Hugo creates a fittingly impressive black rival and foil for the white protagonist. In general, however, Hugo ascribes an unrelieved violence and brutishness to his non-white characters that would tend to reinforce, or even promote, negative racist stereotypes. Likewise, in de Pons's poem 'Ourika' and in the novel *Le Mulâtre*, the black characters are terrifying in their savage malevolence. Although these texts establish a causal relation between this behaviour and the acts of discrimination suffered by these non-white characters, the descriptions of their violence is calculated to frighten audiences and would have exacerbated and encouraged fears that the presence of blacks and mulattos posed a threat to the physical safety of whites. While Rémusat and Lacour also present violent non-white characters, their plays, like the novellas by Duras and Desbordes-Valmore, offer more positive portrayals of non-white characters and include strikingly negative portrayals of white characters. The resulting ambiguity in these texts does not allow for the construction of the same Manichean association between dark skin colour and dangerously violent aggression as seen in *Bug-Jargal*, *Le Nègre*, de Pons's 'Ourika', and *Le Mulâtre*. While qualifying an author as racist, especially without considering corroborating and exculpatory autobiographical evidence, seems counterproductive, comparative analysis of representations of Africans and non-white colonials does reveal the complexities involved in trying to understand, from a twenty-first-century perspective, the nineteenth century's efforts to grapple with the issues of racial diversity and social opportunities.

³⁴ The evolution in representations of the African should be considered in the light of the changes in melodrama that are contemporaneous. In fact, Jean-Marie Thomasseau situates a shift between 'classical' melodrama and 'romantic' melodrama in 1823, with the opening of Antier, Lacoste, and Chapponier's *L'Auberge des Adrets, ou la Pauvre Marie* at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique on 2 July. According to Thomasseau, before *L'Auberge des Adrets*, French melodramas remained structured by the central theme of persecution. From 1800 until 1823, the genre offered audiences simplistic representations of the struggle between the forces of good and evil by staging the unrelenting aggression of the villain toward a vulnerable heroine. The presence of children, the old, the sick, or the mentally infirm alongside the heroine often underscored her predicament, as well as her own self-sacrificing heroism in protecting these secondary characters. These works provided an intensely visual experience with dialogues that concentrated the spectators' attention on the action by describing the action taking place and scripting, quite literally, the appropriate emotional response. Highly codified, classical melodrama also reinforced social conventions and norms by underscoring the fundamental role of providence in

In *Le Nègre*, Balzac's protagonist fascinates because he occupies precisely the point we would expect in the trajectory as a black man whose reactions to the racial prejudice and to the repeated humiliations endured in metropolitan France lead him to renounce his loyalty to his white employer/friend and former master. Georges's initial threats of vengeance (Act I, scene 13) indicate that repeated instances of social exclusion, just as much as his love for the white woman, prompt his break with Gerval and his subsequent treachery. He explains:

Bent under the yoke of servitude in my own country, I was happy in my misfortune. It was Monsieur, who smuggled me here. It was he, who brought me to a country where the most insulting laughter has taught me that I am a being foreign to all humanity. This state is hideous. There is no doubt about it. I owe it to him, but that is nothing... Rebuffed as I was by society, I felt the spark of an emotion in me that turned my soul inside out. A woman appeared before me. Her gaze seemed to open the heavens to me. My homeland was no longer anywhere other than the places illuminated by her beauty. Finally, for the past two years I have carried this in my heart. Each of her smiles, even those that are not meant for me, maddens my soul.

Here, *Le Nègre* follows the predictable path found throughout the corpus cited. It underscores the pain and humiliation felt by the non-white character. Like the other works, Balzac's play imagines a sentimental position that would support, indeed justify, a policy of racial segregation. In fact, this passage mobilises a trope common to virtually all of the texts. It recycles the fantasy in which Africans and slaves voluntarily state that they would be happier in servitude in their own country – either in the Caribbean colonies or in Africa – among people of their same skin colour, rather than as social pariahs in a mixed society. All of these Restoration texts condemn interracial desire and warn against the dangers created by misguided efforts to

maintaining the social order. Romantic melodrama, by contrast, overturned the traditional ideological code and the morality of the genre by privileging the role of rebellious, marginal protagonists who call into question social conventions. The genre remained intensely codified, but excess and subversion became its dominant modes and fate, rather than providence, appeared as the motor driving the action. For a full analysis, see Thomasseau, *Le Mélodrame* (Paris: Presses Universitaires des France, Que sais-je?, 1984). Balzac's play, which predates *L'Auberge des Adrets* by several months, and his African hero display many of the characteristics that Thomasseau cites as defining romantic melodrama. At the same time, however, *Le Nègre* and its characters still obey the conventions of classical melodrama. Hence, this play teeters on the cusp of a shift in the melodramatic genre, just as its hero oscillates between the types of African hero. We would suggest that the increased importance of the role of destiny in dramatic representations of interracial love triangles observed before 1823 in both Cuvelier and Balzac's texts (1818 and 1822, respectively) can be linked to efforts to posit interdictions against interracial couples as ontological or even divine.

promote racial diversity and ‘raise’ non-whites to the status of whites. They reinforce the fears of white characters and readers/viewers by explicitly showing that the failure to maintain racially segregated societies leads to social injustices that, in turn, cause loyal slaves or former slaves to snap and to become violent.³⁵ The furious rebellion of a male character against oppression provides a link between the figure of Georges and that of the prototypical Romantic hero. Hence, *Le Nègre* proves characteristic of its time. The play exhibits the typical anxieties triggered by the question of racial diversity, as well as a response to these fears that would not have been uncommon during this era. It presents these to the audience using the pedestrian, though compelling, device of the interracial love triangle.³⁶

³⁵ The rejection of interracial desire in this corpus focuses primarily on the impossibility of a union between the black and white characters. While this may be linked to fear of miscegenation, most of these texts, with the notable exceptions of *Le Mulâtre* and versions of *Ourika*, do not specifically link interracial desire and hybridity. Certainly, the defamatory representations of mixed race characters, especially those found in Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal*, articulate hostile prejudices, but as a general rule, the question of interracial desire and the question of racial purity/miscegenation remain two separate issues. In *Le Nègre*, racial hybridity is never directly raised and Balzac deliberately does not make his male protagonist mulatto, as Ducis does in his own translation of *Othello*. Two important details underscore the need to separate rather than conflate these issues with respect to Balzac’s melodrama. First, he identifies Georges as African. Second, Georges has two exchanges with Émilie in which he imagines their future together. In neither of these fantasies does he suggest they would be parents. Readers interested in the general question of miscegenation and hybridity in French Restoration fiction will wish to consult Doris Garraway’s *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) as well as nineteenth-century French definitions of ‘créole’.

³⁶ Joseph Aude and J.-H. d’Egville’s 1818 vaudeville *Avis aux maris, ou Les Deux Colons* (Archives nationales de France, folder Porte-Saint-Martin (1818), F/18/623), published the following year as *Les Deux colons, trait anecdotique en 1 acte mêlé de couplets* (Paris: Les Marchands de nouveautés, 1819), offers a valuable counter-example that highlights the shift observed in the 1820s. In this musical farce, two women play a trick on their jealous husbands making each doubt whether his child is really one he sired. This hinges on one couple being black and one couple being white. In this vaudeville, there is no interracial love triangle. The male/female pairing in the two cases does not cross colour lines, but the women’s friendship does. More strikingly, the joke over whose baby belongs to whom plays with the notion that both women could be involved in a relationship with a man of different skin colour. Chalaye reminds us in *Du Noir au Nègre* that this gag proves popular enough to be recycled in other plays, notably Gosse’s melodrama, *Manon et le Chevalier des Grioux* produced in 1820 by the Gaîté. Increasingly, however, as the 1820s unfolded, humorous representations of interracial interactions gave way to intolerant and racist portrayals of jealousy that triggered aggressive and violent incidents of black reprisals targeting white victims.

At the heart of Balzac's melodrama lies the proverbial love triangle which was characteristic of melodramas, novels, and novellas of this time. In this case, however, cross-racial desire complicates the triad. *Le Nègre* proves particularly interesting because of its specific formulation of the relationships of the three central characters. In studying the other literary and dramatic works that grapple with the question of race during the French Restoration, much attention has been focused on the heterosexual and heteroracial relationship in these love triangles precisely because this source of dramatic tension serves to highlight the stereotypes that sought to prescribe and describe the social limits of prejudice and privilege in the nineteenth century. In *Ourika*, for example, the reader feels sympathy for the title character precisely because the love she bears for a man who should be her social equal according to her upbringing remains impossible because she is African and he is European. In the infamous scene in which Ourika becomes cognizant of the colour divide and her own racial identity, Madame de *** chides Madame de B., Ourika's foster mother, for not recognising what she, the interfering guest, presents as the inevitable isolation, once she reaches a marriageable age, of a black girl brought up as a white aristocrat. The apparent lucidity of Madame de *** in describing Ourika's unhappy situation emphasises the pretended validity of this social 'truth' and gives weight to the prescriptive message warning against mixing between the races. In *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue*, the rape of an African woman by a white French Creole underscores a similar message. While Léon de Valombre appears contemptible for his actions, the desire itself continues to be presented as a violation of moral, social, and natural laws. If this did not appear obvious enough, the frank behaviour of Léon's sister, Célestine, who expresses sexual desire for Hélène/Badia's husband Timur/Touko after witnessing the violent uprising on the Valombre plantation, hammers home the notion that interracial desire is tantamount to insanity. Again, the representation of this functions as a powerful prescriptive prohibition.³⁷ *Le Nègre* follows the same pattern by illustrating, first, how Georges's love for Émilie leads him to betray the Gerval couple's trust in him and, then second, how his jealousy and anger at not being able to possess her himself make him turn murderous.

While the dynamics of the interactions between Émilie and Georges remain important to the plotline, in *Le Nègre*, the homosocial and heteroracial relationship in the love triangle deserves equal consideration. Balzac's melodrama presents the audience with an example of a strong positive bond shared between the two rivals despite the difference in their skin colour. This stands in strong contrast to the relationships between rivals portrayed in the majority of the other texts.³⁸ Indeed, the

³⁷ It is noteworthy that in Rémusat's play, the heroic black male does not desire the white female. The dramatist deliberately underscores the negative consequences of owning slaves by demonstrating that this practice corrupts whites.

³⁸ *Ourika* provides a notable exception. Duras, like Balzac, imagines a latent competition for affection largely unnoticed by the white character (Anaïs in *Ourika* and Gerval in *Le Nègre*) but deeply felt and hidden by the African character (Ourika and Georges respectively). In the 1823 novella, however, the unspoken rivalry between two women does not erupt into physical violence as it does between acknowledged

relationship between Georges and Gerval suggests that shared trust, camaraderie, and affection have a levelling effect in relationships between men. In Act I, scene 17, Gerval refuses, for example to accept that Georges has quit his service. He wishes to send Georges to act as his agent in Hamburg. As Cordova and Sol note, this underscores both the confidence Gerval places in Georges and the level of education that Georges has.³⁹ The details in this fiction reflect part of a past social reality. In fact, non-whites were sometimes educated so that they could assume duties overseeing various parts of the plantation operation. Furthermore, since slavery was illegal in metropolitan France, providing an education for non-free, non-whites was one of the few 'legal' ways of having them enter the Hexagon. While it is true that Gerval's recognition of Georges's positive qualities and his celebration of and compensation for Georges's loyalty and services dramatically intensify the latter's betrayal and villainy, various permutations of this in nineteenth-century literary representations of Africans or non-whites signal the homosocial and heteroracial leg of the interracial love triangle as an identifiable trope. This trope mirrors the complex cultural reality of gender relations in the nineteenth-century colonial world. *Le Nègre* suggests the interdependence of white colonial males with non-white males in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. Balzac initially presents the bond between Georges and Gerval as positive. This distinguishes his text from virtually all the other texts from this period in which the black heroic figure and the white heroic figure begin as deadly rivals, but by the end, each recognises grudgingly the valour of the other. In *Le Nègre*, we see the opposite trajectory.

In drafting the story of an interracial love triangle for the stage, Balzac faced different challenges to those he would have faced had he been writing a novel or a poem. It became increasingly difficult to present non-white characters in the theatre. They evolved from figures of loyal, subservient, and grateful '*bons nègres*' of the late eighteenth century into defiant Romantic heroes. To a great extent, this remained tied to the strong resistance to demands that the civil rights of free non-whites be recognised from the 1780s onwards. To impose their views, pro-slavery colonial lobbies fomented fears and racial prejudices. The violence in the Caribbean leading to the independence of the Haitian republic also increased xenophobia. Thus, attitudes regarding racial diversity and equality became markedly more conservative during the Napoleonic era and during the Restoration. This rendered theatrical representations of interracial desire a source of anxiety for both the *ministre de l'Intérieur* and the playhouses. While selection committees for the theatres assessed whether these subjects would appeal to a paying public, censors evaluated whether proposed plays would pose a threat to public order. In general, whether a result of audience preference or political manoeuvrings, in the 1820s, plays representing interracial love triangles enjoyed comparatively less success than prose works or poetry on similar topics.

rivals in *Le Nègre*, *Bug-Jargal*, *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue*, and *Pyracmond, ou Les Créoles*.

³⁹ Balzac, *Le Nègre*, p. xxvii.

***Le Nègre*: recasting *Othello* as French melodrama**

While the play demonstrates all of the traits that place it so obviously in the vein of colonial and postcolonial texts, *Le Nègre* and its main character, Georges, stand out as exemplary in nineteenth-century representations of Africans or colonials precisely because Balzac's melodrama appears so Parisian. While most of the Restoration texts in the corpus discussed above, including Duras's *Ourika*,⁴⁰ emphasise the colonial context, the plot of *Le Nègre* does not. Instead, it focuses on the question of adultery in Paris and its outskirts.⁴¹ The play showcases the foibles of wealthy city-dwellers, their servants, and nearby villagers. The originality in this melodrama (a form that prized spectacular and technical innovations far more than true originality) lies in Balzac's pedestrian story of jealousy and misunderstanding that imagines and portrays Paris as a multi-racial society. The apparent novelty of this exploration of race relations in metropolitan France fades in the light of the fact that this play proposes an adaptation, if not a 'correction', of the *Othello* plot. Shakespeare's original itself warns of the dangers of a diverse society by scripting the consequences of interracial marriage and interracial rivalry as tragedy. When he reworks the plot, Balzac trivialises it, offering a Parisian tale. Unlike his contemporaries writing about interracial desire, he eschewed exotic scenarios in *Le Nègre*. Furthermore, textual analysis strongly suggests that Balzac resisted adopting a *fait divers* or a scenario with a historical subtext, just as he resisted using his play as a platform for subversive political or social commentary. While these characteristics distinguish his melodrama from the other Restoration texts discussed, introducing an unexpected view of Paris as a racially diverse space, these differences result, in all likelihood, from his own desire to stage a melodrama quickly and profitably. Expediency, as we shall see, appears to have guided his choice to adopt *Othello* as his subject and to domesticate it.

Balzac's numerous references to Shakespeare in *Le Nègre* have long supported Tremewan's conclusion that this melodrama is 'une imitation consciente d'*Othello*'.⁴²

⁴⁰ Although Duras set her novella in Paris, the three stage adaptations situate the action elsewhere. Ferdinand Villeneuve and Charles Dupeuty's *Ourika, ou la Nègresse* takes place in Marseilles; Merle and Frédéric de Courcy's *Ourika, ou l'Orpheline africaine* is set in Saint-Germain; and Mélesville and Pierre Frédéric Adolphe Carmouche's *Ourika, ou la Petite nègresse* is set outside of Bordeaux.

⁴¹ The figure of Georges allows readers to consider variations in representations of non-whites, as well as the domestication of what is often an exotic element. The extent to which *Le Nègre* remains outside of abolitionist literature of the time proves consistent with Balzac's future scripting of the colonies and Africa into his cartography of French experience. Despite the obvious anxieties it betrays, his play invites readers to reassess the historical *idée reçue* of France as homogeneous white space and to recognise that the *métropole* could only exist in a globalised heterogeneous space conceived of as including its colonies and the sites of its various commercial enterprises.

⁴² Tremewan, 'Balzac et Shakespeare', p. 296.

However, as Isabelle Michelot has shown more recently, Balzac's borrowings from his prestigious source are by no means direct or one-dimensional.⁴³ Instead, she argues, they take the form of modifications and reversals, with Georges recast as the manipulative Iago rather than the jealous Othello. As even a cursory reading of Balzac's play reveals, the structure and convoluted plotline of *Le Nègre* differ significantly from Shakespeare's *Othello*. At the same time, however, the links are clear. Closer consideration of historical and biographical data suggests that Balzac had neither the language skills nor the opportunity needed to work directly with Shakespeare's text. Furthermore, no evidence exists to indicate that the young aspiring writer attended the ill-fated opening of Shakespeare's *Othello* in English performed by Penley's troupe at the start of their tour at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin on 31 July 1822. This leaves the question of Balzac's sources for his reworking of Shakespeare's play. Although Tremewan offers some useful suggestions, Gilman's careful history of adaptations and translations of *Othello* in France from 1925, and our own inventory of theatrical almanacs, censors' records and the periodical press, help chart more specifically the possible points of contact. *Othello* was, of course, not unknown to Parisian audiences. Penley's troupe was not the only one performing *Othello* in Paris during the summer of 1822.⁴⁴ The Théâtre des Italiens staged performances of Rossini's *Otello* on 4, 18, and 20 July 1822.⁴⁵

Again, nothing indicates that Balzac saw these, but a comparison of *Le Nègre* with Ducis's 1792 translation of *Othello*, and Berio di Salsa's libretto for the 1821 Rossini opera suggests his familiarity with them, at least via theatre reviews.⁴⁶ They all share similarly simplified plotlines with respect to Shakespeare. We note that Ducis and Berio di Salsa made five significant changes. First, they concentrated the plot around the Desdemona character. Second, they made fate/destiny and not human passions the motor driving the plot to its inexorable conclusion. Third, Ducis changed Othello's skin colour and, in the published version, he gave a lengthy explanation of his reasons for making the hero a mulatto not a black man. Fourth, they changed the murder weapon, replacing the pillow with a dagger. Fifth, and most significantly, they proposed an alternative, happy ending. These changes were linked to public responses from the 1790s onwards to theatrical representations of violence committed by blacks or people of colour against whites, and must be seen in relation to fears and memories of the violence linked to the abolition of slavery and decolonisation in the Caribbean.

⁴³ Michelot, 'De l'essai à l'échec', p. 215.

⁴⁴ Balzac may equally have seen Jean-Guillaume-Antoine Cuvelier's popular pantomime, *Le More de Venise, ou Othello, pantomime entremêlée de dialogues, en 3 actes, imitée de la tragédie anglaise* (Paris: Fages, 1818), staged at the *Cirque Olympique* from 1818 onwards.

⁴⁵ 'Spectacles', *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (1 June–31 August 1822).

⁴⁶ For thorough details of the adaptations and versions of *Othello* in France, see Margaret Gilman, '*Othello*' in *French* (Paris: E. Champion, 1925). Her research helps provide the context for a close reading of the manuscript in search of its potential sources. Although it is unclear whether Tremewan was familiar with Gilman's earlier study, her work corroborates the conclusions at which he arrives.

Clearly, Balzac took a truncated version and moved even further away from the original as he translated the storyline into a stereotypical French melodrama. *Le Nègre* is set in Paris and the infamous outlying village of Sèvres. Balzac further lightened the skin colour of the female lead's husband, making Gerval a white banker. Othello virtually disappears as the absent white husband. The Iago character, Georges, becomes a free black. Like Ducis and Berio di Salsa, Balzac maintained the focus on the female lead. In fact, he considerably developed two storylines associated with female characters and even added a fourth female to the plot, although not on stage. Significantly, the mechanism that drives the plot to its final conclusion is neither passion nor destiny, but instead the betrayal of one female by another, a betrayal triggered, moreover, by vulnerability. Balzac chose not to offer a happy ending, or rather, he provided an ambiguous ending. Once again, however, the woman is stabbed not smothered. In *Le Nègre*, the black servant is the murderer, not the husband. Balzac prudently added a suicide to his ending that neatly sanctions the villain.

The young French author's proposed adaptation sets itself apart from the most notable versions – Ducis's translation, Cuvelier's pantomime, Berio di Salsa's libretto set to music by Rossini, Penley's English-language performance of Shakespeare's original, and Vigny's subsequent translation – by making the jealous husband white and the lovelorn subaltern black. In modifying the colour paradigm, Balzac shifted attention from race to gender. Georges becomes a powerful secondary character, whereas Émilie takes on the greatest importance. The major modifications that Balzac made can be summarised as a shift away from questioning racial prejudice, injustice, and hierarchies and one towards an exploration of female desire and vulnerability. Quite literally, this shift results from the strategic need to inject interest into the plot, because there is little to grab the audience's attention once the married couple is of the same race. Balzac was obliged to create drama. He did this by the addition of Claire, Émilie's sister, who had taken a lover before marriage, borne an illegitimate child, and gone insane. The actions of this unseen character create the required dramatic tension. Émilie works to save her own reputation and that of her sister, and, in doing so, she involves a third female, the old peasant woman, Marguerite, in the action. Significantly, in all of these cases, different forms of female desire are conjugated with female vulnerability, thereby exposing the problematic relationship between gender and power that is a central concern of Balzac's play, and of French melodrama more generally during this period.

Gender and power in *Le Nègre* and in French melodrama

While the very title of Balzac's melodrama suggests the centrality of the question of race, the text itself invites readers to focus instead on issues of gender. By making the heroine's husband white and the villainous interloper black, the playwright evacuates the question of mixed marriage and offers a flat oversimplified rejection of cross-racial desire. Intriguingly, feminine vulnerability appears to be a necessary consequence of erasing race in Balzac's version of the *Othello* plot. In his re-scripting, the elimination of a positive representation of cross-racial desire (Desdemona's love for

Othello and his for her) saps the plot of interest and energy. In *Le Nègre*, Émilie, the white female protagonist, is happily married to a white male protagonist, Gerval, the banker. The melodrama does portray Gerval's steward, Georges, as an aspiring rival. But, for the audience, the unrequited love of a black employee for his employer's white wife would not generate the same tension and interest as a heroic interracial couple persecuted by a jealous and devious subordinate. Balzac's subsequent choices to stimulate interest in the action, as well as to unify it, focus attention on the condition of women in nineteenth-century French society. By staging female vulnerability and persecution, *Le Nègre* offers a rich case study of how the genre of melodrama participates in the institutionalisation of patriarchal domination. An examination of the female characters and their roles in this play reveals the extent to which the narrative and poetic logic of this dramatic form depends upon the reiteration and normalisation of a social dynamic that undermines women's agency and punishes the female characters' attempts to improve the material conditions of their lives. In particular, the burlesque and Manichean stereotypes that structure and energise this melodrama – like so many others – introduce a predictable inevitability in the plot that serves to institutionalise social inequalities and reproduce the structures of patriarchal domination.⁴⁷ Balzac's deliberately heavy-handed use of generic conventions and clichés repeatedly draws the audience's attention to the plight of these women, whose attempts to ensure their own well-being continually place themselves and other women in danger.

While researchers in a variety of fields have studied the oppression of women in the nineteenth century and representations of this phenomenon, the descriptive and prescriptive staging of the imbalance of power between the sexes and the fate of the weaker sex in melodrama has garnered less attention, with some notable exceptions, including the work of Marie-Pierre Le Hir. *Le Nègre* proves a key text for examining this process and its consequences because this play deliberately pushes the melodramatic form to its limits through a parodic intensification of the genre's mechanisms and structures. In particular, the weaknesses that characterise females, servants, and peasants in melodrama govern their efforts to wrest some measure of control over their lives and function (or 'dysfunction') as the motor driving the plot to its predictable conclusion. The various manifestations of this powerlessness – naïveté, frivolity, innocence, fragility, misguided efforts to adhere to masculine codes of honour, loss of virtue, madness, inarticulateness, pride, vanity, ambition, self-

⁴⁷ See *The Physiology of Marriage*, ed. and trans. by Sharon Marcus (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). In the introduction to this translation of Balzac's *Physiologie du mariage*, Marcus highlights the ways in which a Balzacian text can institutionalise patriarchal domination. She signals the importance of this early work in understanding how Balzac laid a foundation for considering power dynamics and gender inequalities in society, even as a young writer. In fact, the very arguments that Marcus makes to highlight the importance of the *Physiologie* to Balzac studies apply even more strongly to *Le Nègre*, since it provides an earlier, and no less compelling road map of the poetic, aesthetic, and thematic preoccupations that characterise and unify Balzac's work. If in the *Physiologie* Balzac chose to parody and satirically exploit a 'scientific' genre, in *Le Nègre* he had already done the same for a theatrical genre.

sacrifice, vulgarity, greed, deceptiveness, cunning, brutishness – form the bases of the caricatural stereotypes that perversely function to legitimise the structures of patriarchal domination portrayed on stage by presenting it as justified by the inferiority of those who lack power. By embracing and exploiting the comic and emotional potential of generic stereotypes while staging the less exalted ranks of society for the very people it portrays, melodrama normalises oppression and inequality. In *Le Nègre*, the ridiculous, even grotesque accumulation of female characters struggling to take control of their destinies, as well as the deliberate underscoring of melodramatic devices, help create, for the modern reader, a critical distance that invites a reassessment of this institutionalisation and normalisation of patriarchal domination. Thus, the obvious injustice of Émilie's fate begs an analysis of the sequence of events that render it inevitable and a greater understanding of how these events were all the results of social structure that considered an imbalance of power between the genders and female dependence as 'normal'. Readers should keep in mind, however, that while *Le Nègre* exposes critically the phenomenon of female vulnerability and the institutionalisation of patriarchal domination, this melodrama is in no way subversive.

Structurally, Balzac's melodrama remains typical of the form. Three female characters appear on stage: Émilie; her maid, Rosine; and an old villager, Marguerite. Pulled from the range of stock characters designed to entertain audiences, each of these characters embodies one or more female stereotypes. By turns, Émilie plays the role of the bored, pretty, and slightly ridiculous wealthy wife; the worried and protective older sister; the faithful wife wrongly suspected of adultery; and the virtuous innocent female persecuted by a predatory male. Her maid, Rosine, alternates between the roles of faithful and efficient servant, naïve *soubrette*, and young woman happily in love. Finally, Marguerite, the older female villager, sometimes acts the cunning and greedy old woman, at other times the helpful and protective nurse figure, and, at still others, the burlesque country bumpkin. Using three female roles was a basic norm in melodramas staged at the Gaîté at this time and corresponded to the composition of the troupe.⁴⁸ However, Balzac introduces an additional female character into the plot in the form of Émilie's unfortunate sister, Claire. Although Claire never actually sets foot on the stage, this female figure proves an essential element in energising the plot. The absent Claire embodies female desire, weakness, and ruin as both an unwed mother and a fallen and forsaken woman, mad with grief.

Balzac's reliance on the conventions and clichés of melodrama (asides, misunderstandings, cases of mistaken identity, caricatural stereotypes) in his staging of the play's four female characters underscores their weakness – in body and in spirit. His representations suggest that this fragility, coupled with longing (womb envy, greed, sexual desire), serves as the very motor driving the plot to its predictable, catastrophic conclusion. His portrayals of female desire in this melodrama also tend to mask the practical imperative for women to ensure their own material survival. *Le Nègre* privileges the spectacle of feminine weakness in a display that seeks to elicit an

⁴⁸ For the exact composition of the troupe in 1822 and 1823, see the *Almanach des Spectacles* for these two years.

emotional response in the viewer. This diverts attention away from the portrayal Balzac offers of a social reality for women in this time period. The descriptive and prescriptive staging of female emotion in *Le Nègre* focuses on the vulnerability of women. At the same time, however, the play repeatedly flags as negative female attempts to ensure their own well-being. Virtually all the attempts by a female character to provide a secure and safe environment for herself and her family place that character and other women in danger. By presenting female agency in such an unfavourable light, this melodrama offers a striking illustration of the pretended legitimacy of patriarchal domination and control.

While heightened sensibility and female persecution both appear as standard tropes in melodrama, Balzac's play distinguishes itself by probing the phenomenon of female vulnerability and female desire at all levels of society. He offers four examples of women at risk: a wealthy married woman left alone by her travelling husband (Émilie); a young woman abandoned by her aristocratic lover and ruined by bearing a child out of wedlock as a consequence of this love affair (Claire); a lady's maid (Rosine); and an old peasant woman (Marguerite). The four women also illustrate various types of desire. Émilie, although married, embodies unsatisfied sexual and maternal desire. Claire, although unmarried, personifies fully realised sexual and maternal desire. Rosine exemplifies deferred sexual and maternal desire. And Marguerite rejects sexual desire and lusts instead after money and land. In *Le Nègre*, the conjunction of desire with vulnerability/security for each of the female characters proves key. Émilie is married, but, in her husband's absence, she finds herself vulnerable to Georges's advances. She must try to maintain her reputation at all costs in order to survive and to keep her husband's love. The fact that nothing guarantees the eventual return of Émilie's husband further increases her vulnerability. Claire, who serves in many respects as Émilie's degraded double, has lost her reputation, her means of subsistence, and her reason. Having given up everything to fulfil her desires, she finds herself wholly dependent on Émilie and Marguerite for her survival. Émilie's attempts to broker a marriage between Claire and Manfred are of material importance to both sisters. While this union would ensure Claire's survival and restore her reputation, it would also provide Émilie with a measure of support should her own husband never return. The servant, Rosine, makes her own living, but the possibility of marriage would offer her additional surety. By waiting to receive the blessing of her future father-in-law, Rosine follows the wisest course of all the female characters, but Georges manipulates her into leaving her mistress alone by telling her that her beloved and his father want her to meet them in order to make her betrothal official. Marguerite, the old peasant woman, seeks to maintain her reputation and the business that form the bases for her livelihood. Although married, she continually seeks to extend her property holdings. If Claire and Rosine place Émilie in danger by their actions, Marguerite seals Émilie's fate by selling her secret to Gerval. While the stereotype of the old peasant woman may be linked to greed, throughout Act II Marguerite had established herself as the voice of generous, kindly rustic reason and feminine solidarity. The fatal irony in *Le Nègre* remains the fact that Marguerite should betray Émilie by attempting to provide for her own future by buying more land, and that Émilie should be murdered because of her efforts to provide for her sister's future.

Ultimately, Marguerite and Émilie act totally in character. Their actions follow the script, stereotypes, and logic governing melodramas. The element that precipitates the betrayal functions most often as the protective supplement in the Derridean sense. Put in place to counteract the vulnerability of a character, it increases this vulnerability. While the persecuted heroine stands out as one of the key elements of melodrama, readings of other texts produced at the Gaîté in the 1820s demonstrate that the character of Marguerite in Balzac's plays is not unique. In fact, the peasant woman's actions in *Le Nègre* function like those of another Marguerite, namely the old woman in Boirie and Léopold's *Le Paysan grand seigneur, ou la Pauvre mère*, also staged by the Gaîté in April 1822.⁴⁹ In this melodrama, a poor old peasant woman wants to recognise her son who is being passed off as a marquis. The nobleman who seeks to have the son officially adopted and his henchman warn Marguerite that she must renounce her claims. This is further complicated by the fact that the aristocrat's accomplice has stolen the large sum of money meant to buy the old woman's silence. While this other Marguerite's resistance is couched in terms of the sanctity of family and the mother's bond with her children, her betrayal of her promise to keep silent should also be understood in terms of concerns for economic security by establishing her ties to her son. In *Le Paysan grand seigneur*, as in *Le Nègre*, old peasant women must calculate their actions based on what appears to offer the most secure future. This pattern of females making dangerous choices in a bid to provide for themselves also holds for younger female characters. Classic examples of this in various melodramas include young unwed mothers giving up a child, or poor young women marrying to save their fathers from poverty.

Le Nègre is no different from other melodramas in its portrayal of vulnerable women struggling unsuccessfully to secure their own futures. Nor is it different in its conservative reaffirmation of male institutions of patriarchal domination. In fact, Balzac's melodrama, even unstaged, stands out because it offers four complementary representations of female desire and vulnerability and their consequences. Without attempting to produce a subversive or feminist text, Balzac offers a shrewd portrayal of the double bind of female vulnerability in the early nineteenth century.

Translating *Le Nègre*: choices and challenges

Nearly two centuries after Balzac adapted *Othello* for French boulevard audiences, the time has come to translate *Le Nègre* into English. To establish our version, we consulted the manuscript of the text (MS Lovenjoul A155) in the *fonds Lovenjoul* held by the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France in Paris. Our reading of the manuscript was done against the backdrop of the Pléiade edition of Balzac's dramatic works established by Roland Chollet and René Guise, the edition of *Le Théâtre inédit de Honoré de Balzac* established by Douchan A. Milatchitch, and the recent new edition

⁴⁹ Archives nationales de France, *Le Paysan grand seigneur*, folder Gaîté (1820), F/18/601, and Léopold [Chandezon] and Eugène Cantiran de Boirie, *Le Paysan grand seigneur, ou la Pauvre mère mélodrame en 3 actes* (Paris: Quoy, 1820).

of *Le Nègre* established by Sarah Davies Cordova and Antoinette Sol for the series *Autrement mêmes*, published by L'Harmattan.

In the interests of establishing a precise and comprehensible vehicle that conveys Balzac's original into clear, readable English, we have normalised punctuation and spellings of characters' names, and harmonised the format. We have not signalled the shifts between 'tu' (the informal second person singular in French) and 'vous' (the formal second person singular in French) since there is no equivalent distinction in modern English. The slippage between the formal and the informal observed in exchanges between Georges and Émilie, as well as between Georges and Gerval, occurs commonly in melodramas from this period. In sections where Balzac abbreviated or omitted the name of the character speaking, we have reintroduced this into the text of the script. We have systematically indicated asides using a stage direction, even those that Balzac merely indicated as asides by placing them in parentheses. Furthermore, where the playwright's intent is obvious from the original, we have integrated changes and insertions directly into the text. Since the notes in Chollet's notes for the Pléiade edition offer an excellent study of these variants and the majority of these do not present large-scale changes, we have deliberately not reproduced them in our footnotes, in the interest of not taxing the English-language audience's initial experience of the melodrama. We have preferred instead to summarise them here, before our discussion of the challenges faced in producing a translation of this melodrama for our contemporary readers.

The revisions reveal, for the most part, the young Balzac's work learning the specificities of writing for the stage. They mark out places where he edited his manuscript to clarify the action, to concentrate the audience's attention on particular details or character traits, to heighten the effect of foreshadowing, or to increase dramatic effect. They also indicate the renaming of the character of the Marquis de Saint-Yves. In the unedited version, he was to be Horace Gordon, but was subsequently re-baptised Monsieur de Manfred. Balzac neglected to correct this with consistency throughout the manuscript. An overview of the working manuscripts for the theatre from the censor's records at the Archives nationales de France demonstrates that this type of oversight was quite common in the nineteenth century. There are, however, two sets of changes that deserve comment: first, the elevation of the title character to a position of greater authority, trust, and autonomy; and, second, the three illegible passages on the final page of the manuscript that have long been noted as rendering Balzac's true intent for the ending indecipherable.

A reading of the cast of characters listed on the manuscript reveals that Balzac originally conceived of Georges as simply a black servant ('domestique noir'). He later crossed out this description, transforming him into the steward ('intendant') for the Gerval household. Obviously, on one level, such a shift makes the action of the play appear more credible. As steward, Georges would have enjoyed the confidence and esteem of both of his employers that, on the one hand, made it difficult for Gerval to think his faithful friend and servant capable of betraying him by attempting to seduce and later destroy his wife and, on the other, for Émilie to convince her jealous husband of her innocence and fidelity. Likewise, Georges would have wielded sufficient power in the household to order the other servants away and isolate Émilie without raising suspicions. Undoubtedly, this reinvestment of power and trust in

Georges stemmed more from a need to establish coherence than an attempt to promote black empowerment. Balzac struggled throughout the play to reintroduce the energy lost when he modified the power differential from the one found in *Othello* by making the married couple white rather than biracial. Thus, Balzac needed to find a way to raise Georges to the level of rival while still making him subservient and allowing for his descent into murderous brute.⁵⁰ The shift from servant to steward represents Balzac's efforts to solve this problem. We cannot help but note, however, that the playwright insisted on flagging this character negatively. In Act I, scene 2, and the penultimate scene (Act III, scene 14), Balzac wrote him in as 'Le Nègre' (the Negro), emphasising with this unflattering pejorative both Georges's skin colour and the racist derision aimed at non-whites at the time.⁵¹

The other modifications produce a veritable conundrum. Even the most cursory reading of the manuscript underscores what all editors of the French versions note: the hastily written third act of Balzac's manuscript remains exceedingly difficult to read. The final page, in particular, poses an interpretive dilemma. Balzac's handwriting proves difficult to read in certain key passages. In the introduction to their 2011 edition of the play, Cordova and Sol emphasise the indeterminacy of the ending given the impossibility of deciphering the pronouns in what they describe as the most important stage direction of the text.⁵² In fact, the manuscript presents two

⁵⁰ Although in Act III, scene 15, Balzac decided to cut Gerval's final characterisation of Georges as a 'monstre' (monster), when he realises that Émilie was innocent and Georges a villain, he had in the previous scene already branded him a 'tigre d'Afrique' (African tiger).

⁵¹ While some critics have encouraged linking the term 'nègre' in Balzac's play with the concept of a ghostwriter that is communicated in French by use of the same term, it remains difficult to see how the figure of the unsung literary hack collaborating or writing under another's name would play a role in the melodrama in question. While evocative, it seems unlikely that Balzac wished his play to be read as an allegory for the theatre industry. Moreover, the use of the term 'nègre' to designate a ghostwriter appears more frequently in criticism and parodies of Dumas *père's* work, most notably in connection with Eugène de Mirecourt's infamously racist and slanderous pamphlet *Fabrique de romans, Alexandre Dumas et Cie* (Paris: Les Marchands de nouveautés, 1845), which accuses Dumas of being a vampire and slave driver sucking the blood, profits, and labour out of his 'nègres', that is to say, white French writers. In Balzac's melodrama, the use of the term in the title and the character list for the two scenes that bookend the main action of the play seems more likely part and parcel of the author's attempt to represent a vignette of a racially diverse Paris.

⁵² Cordova and Sol suggest that 'L'œuvre vacille entre le mélodrame où George [sic] tuera Émilie, et le romantisme tragique du suicide de George [sic], autrement dit entre le crime et le sacrifice' ('The work vacillates between a melodrama in which George kills Émilie and tragic Romanticism with Georges's suicide, that is to say, between crime and sacrifice') (Cordova and Sol, *Le Nègre*, p. xxxiii). They insist on the indeterminacy of the text stating, 'De plus, la graphie elle-même du manuscrit rend impossible toute détermination définitive de la fin qui reste ambiguë faute de pouvoir déchiffrer l'écriture de l'auteur. La didascalie la plus importante de la pièce

margin notes with extra material for the final scene. Both contain stage directions with pronouns that are difficult to reconcile with logic and the text, and both render simple readings impossible and necessitate interpretation. In addition, a barely legible word in *Émilie*'s penultimate line introduces further ambiguity.

The page in question, the last in the play (MS Lovenjoul A155, folio n°41 verso), corresponds to scene 15. This page contains an exchange of seven sets of lines given respectively by Georges, Gerval, Georges, Gerval, *Émilie*, Gerval, and *Émilie*. In the margins, we find two brief passages to insert into the text. As the markings on the manuscript indicate, Balzac clearly intended for the first, 'if love made my arm tremble before, in just a moment it will tremble no more and' ('si l'amour a fait trembler mon bras tout à l'heure il ne tremblera plus et') to appear in Georges's second set of lines, after the phrase 'Qu'est-ce qu'elle est belle, Maître' and before 'ton secret sera gardé!'. At this point in the text, Balzac noted a stage direction that reads either 'Il la tue' or 'Il se tue',⁵³ depending on how one interprets his handwriting and the central pronoun. The first reading imagines that Georges murders *Émilie* at this point and the second, that he commits suicide. The Milatchitch edition adopts the first reading, while both the *Pléiade* and the Cordova and Sol editions adopt the second.

After, at the end of the page, running vertically up from the bottom of the left corner is a more clearly scripted stage direction and line to be inserted, but there is no notation to indicate where this addition belongs in the text. The line of text reads 'Love that renders one criminal, might it not also have the power to absolve?' ('L'amour qui rend criminel, n'aurait-il pas le pouvoir d'absoudre?'). The stage direction that precedes it appears to read 'Killing her' ('En la tuant'), but arguably could be said also to read 'Killing himself' ('En se tuant'). This proposed addition creates a greater challenge to editors and translators since there is a need to reconcile meaning with the two pronouns and the placement of this second addition. The *Pléiade* and the Cordova and Sol editions opt once more for the thesis of a suicidal Georges, inserting this last addition at the end of Georges's second set of lines and interpreting the stage direction as repeating and reinforcing the earlier one to indicate his suicidal gesture, but what if one were to entertain the notion of the melodrama ending with a murder and a suicide? There exist no markings to indicate where the second addition belongs. It does appear difficult to integrate this logically into the final scene if we read it as Georges killing *Émilie*, for how could a person murder somebody after killing himself. Moreover, scene 15 begins with Manfred entering and expressing

reste impossible. Faut-il comprendre: il le tue; il se tue; ou il la tue?' ('Furthermore, the writing itself in the manuscript renders it impossible to determine definitively the ending, which remains ambiguous given the inability to decipher the author's handwriting. The most important stage direction in the play remains illegible. Are we to understand: he kills him; he kills himself; or he kills her?') (Cordova and Sol, *Le Nègre*, p. xxxiii).

⁵³ While theoretically possible to read the pronoun as '*le*', as well, we have discarded it as a possibility on the basis that there is nothing to indicate that Georges kills either Manfred or Gerval in this last scene, thus rendering this reading nonsensical.

surprise at finding Émilie murdered. Hence, a bolder interpretation offering a more grisly ending would place the last addition earlier, most likely in scene 14.

Finally, in the exchange of three lines between husband and wife that conclude the melodrama, Balzac's writing poses yet another puzzle. In this passage, Gerval asks Émilie to explain Georges's words and her response remains uncertain. The playwright's scrawl renders it difficult to read Émilie's line. Did Balzac intend his character to say 'Since he loves me' ('Puisqu'il m'aime') or 'Since he is dying' ('Puisqu'il meurt')? Cordova and Sol, and Milatchitch, all follow the same reading, taking it to be the first possibility. They imagine Émilie fending off her husband's query with an equally cryptic comment, for the antecedent of 'he' ('il') suddenly becomes ambiguous and could refer to either Georges or Gerval. The Pléiade follows the second reading. Our own reading of the manuscript leads us to suggest the greater validity of the second reading ('meurt'), which, furthermore, offers greater logical coherence with Georges's spectacular gesture of self-destruction. We remind readers in the footnotes of the alternative reading found in two of the three French editions.

Our translation takes the notion of indeterminacy of the ending seriously.⁵⁴ If it remains truly impossible to decide between one reading or another of the pronouns, then it is fitting to propose a translation for both possible endings for our readers rather than paying lip service to the impossibility of deciding based on lack of evidence for what Balzac intended and then promptly making a choice for readers. Therefore, we propose two alternative endings for *Le Nègre* on the basis of the manuscript and textual evidence at hand. We do not know which would be 'correct' or even preferable, and we encourage readers to consider both and to reflect on the possibilities and the dramatic effects they would offer the audience. Given that two of the French editions available imagine Georges as committing suicide, we offer a translation of that ending first. The second ending (see Appendix A) integrates the final margin note into scene 14 and presents Georges as attempting to murder Émilie in that scene, and then killing himself in the following and final scene. In this possible ending, it remains unclear whether Émilie dies or survives.

Although many challenges exist in translating Balzac's nineteenth-century melodrama for a twenty-first-century Anglophone audience, three stand out. The first interpretative challenge has just been discussed along with our description of how this translation responds. The other two stem directly from the use of language as a vehicle for stereotypes and *idées reçues*. *Le Nègre* recycles a wide range of theatrical and racial commonplaces, all of which appear dated today. The translator must consider the formulaic expressions that stage stock melodrama on the one hand and prejudice on the other, and determine whether intervention or transparency appear most appropriate in rendering the text accessible in English.

The contemporary reader may view the overly dramatic expressions of emotion so common to the genre of melodrama as distractingly artificial. Georges's confession of his suicidal intentions in the opening monologue appear as ridiculous

⁵⁴ In embracing this indeterminacy rather than trying to eradicate it, our translation aligns itself with Ducis's translation of Shakespeare which proposed two possible endings.

as Émilie's waffling between joyous anticipation of her husband's return and compassionate despair over her sister's situation at the beginning of her monologue in Act I, scene 5, or as Manfred's epistolary excesses when he announces his return and intention to marry Claire. Readers today should remember that melodrama and boulevard theatre played deliberately on conventions and on audience expectations to generate laughter, fears, and tears.

Finally, shifts in race relations and perceptions of appropriate language force translators working with texts representing racialised interactions from previous centuries to decide whether or not to revise the source text in order to avoid jarring modern sensibilities. While arguments can be made for minimising abhorrent expressions of prejudice, alternate arguments refusing revisions can be mobilised in order to convey the historical nature of representations that constructed and helped circulate prejudice. In this translation of *Le Nègre*, we have chosen deliberately to communicate without revisions the racial stereotypes and slurs found in the original French without condoning or expunging them. The proposed translation attempts to keep these points of anxiety and discomfort alive as a means of triggering discussion and analysis of the social and cultural reality of Restoration France, the nation's relationship with its colonial (and postcolonial in the case of Haiti) present, and the impact of this relationship on future institutions. In doing so, we recognise that engaging in the challenging task of reporting and witnessing verbal exchanges that appear anathematic today places demands on both the translator and reader. It requires that each remain attentive to the difficulties inherent in staging the exotic alterity of French society from a different age. The reader may feel shock faced with the term 'negro'.⁵⁵ The reader may feel disquiet or even anger observing that the play presents an over-simplified Manichean system portraying the African male as an aggressive savage who deliberately preys upon and violates an innocent European female. These visceral reactions force readers and translators alike to acknowledge that this melodrama does not condemn racial prejudice. While certain passages in *Le Nègre* underscore the tragic incompatibility of Georges's desire with his skin colour, while Georges does lament the lack of recognition of his pain and suffering as a human being in passages reminiscent of sections from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Balzac's text does not challenge or subvert the separation of races, nor the negative consequences associated in the 1820s with interracial desire. The translators encourage readers to consider how racial stereotypes and slurs serve to describe and prescribe a conservative and racially divided – if not racially pure – society. The shifting nature of what is considered acceptable in speech or behaviour places tension on works of literature, their reproduction (in new editions and translations),

⁵⁵ It should be noted that in the 1800s, in English, the term 'nègre' could be translated as 'Negro' or the even more highly offensive racial slur, 'nigger'. In the twenty-first century, neither term is a comfortable choice. We have, in fact, adopted the more neutral of the two terms, and throughout the introduction have continued to use Balzac's French title. One could imagine a more toxic translation that deliberately heightens the racism in the play. Such a play might not have shocked a Parisian audience in 1823, but it would certainly shock and offend a twenty-first-century public.

and their reception, but does not detract from the importance of reading critically works that represent fantasies of inequality and/or prejudice.

Conclusion

Over the years, sceptical literary critics have fallen into the trap of dismissing *Le Nègre* first, because it utilises a minor genre known for its formulaic tendencies; second, because it was an early work that was never staged; and third, because it poses uncomfortable questions about how nineteenth-century French authors represented race and women. In doing so, they have overlooked the fundamental importance of this text. In this highly conventional Romantic melodrama, Balzac offers an ambitious and concentrated vision of nineteenth-century French society in microcosm. In each of its three acts, the play stages the tensions, contradictions, and prejudices surrounding the role of non-whites, women, and the popular classes within French society. While Balzac mobilises stereotypes and caricatures that offer a deliberately distorted vision of reality, his characters and the situations in which they find themselves all push the modern reader to measure the distance between this fictional representation and the cultural realities of nineteenth-century Paris and France by exploring the history, sociology, anthropology, politics, geography, art, architecture, theatre, and literature of this period. To ignore this short, unstaged melodrama would be to dismiss unwittingly a work that raises a wide variety of timely and topical issues, from the evolution and promotion of racial prejudice to the value of theatre and literature. Given the increasing importance of interdisciplinarity as an investigative and epistemological mode in the twenty-first century, the growing acknowledgement of theatre's role as a primary vector of cultural production in nineteenth-century France, and the continuing necessity for comparatist perspectives that allow for a nuanced analysis of artistic production as the international negotiation of aesthetic, poetic, and ethical preoccupations, *Le Nègre* stands as a rich and as yet relatively untapped source of insight. This English-language translation hopes to facilitate its study by offering Anglophone scholars and students the possibility to read and study this previously inaccessible Balzacian text. The introduction, translation, notes, and bibliography proposed allow readers to exploit the full potential of this text across a wide variety of disciplines.

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Le Nègre
The Negro

CHARACTERS

MONSIEUR DE GERVAL, banker

ÉMILIE, his wife

MONSIEUR DE MANFRED, the Marquis de Saint-Yves¹

GEORGES, a steward²

ROSINE, lady's maid to Émilie

MARGUERITE, a peasant woman from the village of ***

FOOTMEN, etc. peasant men and women

FLICOTEL, a wine merchant in Sèvres

For the first act, the stage is set in Monsieur de Gerval's townhouse, which is furnished with a secretary.

In the second act, the stage is set overlooking Sèvres.

In the third act, the stage is set in Monsieur de Gerval's townhouse.

¹ In the manuscript, 'Horace Gordon' has been crossed out, as well as 'William', in favour of 'Monsieur de Manfred, Marquis de Saint-Yves'.

² In the manuscript, 'domestique noir' ('black servant') has been crossed out and replaced with 'intendant' ('steward'). Balzac's final choice underscores the trust and authority accorded to Georges by Monsieur de Gerval.

ACT I

SCENE 1

GEORGES, alone.

It is still dark in the apartment, but dawn has broken and morning light can be seen filtering through the shutters. Georges is leaning against the door to Émilie's bedchamber. He is watching the door.

GEORGES: She is resting and I am standing watch over her!... (*He puts his ear to the door.*) Her breath is as pure as that of a child and mine is burning like the sky over my homeland...¹

She has just this instant returned home from the ball... (*He looks at the clock.*) Just this instant!... Eight hours have already passed and my love-filled reverie has made it the fleeting dream of a single minute... Oh! What a night!... Stuck against the drawing room door, I watched her shine in the midst of one hundred rivals and when I saw her dancing, so lively and light in the arms of another, all of Hell itself gnawed at my heart!... How beautiful she was!... Roses against her breast, roses upon her brow, roses in her hair... It seems like it was just a moment ago that she was walking there, just right there... There it was that her rose crown fell. (*He bends low as if picking up the sash and giving it to her.*) "Thank you, Georges." Oh! Her smile and her heavenly accent whipped my rage to its limits... (*He removes a rose from his shirt.*) Oh! Cherished rose! Rose that fell from her hair, you will be a talisman for me.² Are you not the faithful portrait of her? Alas!... For the past two years, I have suffered. For the past two years, I have watched over her, like this, consumed by vain efforts to extinguish this fire that consumes me. My eyes speak. My eyes devour her. Fortunately, my mouth has always remained silent. Let us break this wretched silence. Ah! I have just seen her in such beauty! I will speak!... This morning, now, at this very instant! (*He runs to the door.*) No. May she live and be happy. My poison is here,

¹ This line mobilises several commonplaces to stake out Georges's African heritage and savagery. It relies on the popular comparison of African desire with the continent's climate. The intensity and unbounded nature of both contrast sharply with the calm, contained repose enjoyed by the European female. Balzac differentiates Émilie from Georges by deftly linking one with purity and childlike innocence and the other with heated longing and childish naïveté.

² Georges's description of Émilie foreshadows Balzac's future interest in charms and talismans as having both life-affirming and deathly properties. In *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), Raphaël de Valentin possesses a different kind of talisman, a wild ass's skin that has the power to grant wishes. However, with each wish, the skin shrinks, and Raphaël's life force ebbs away. While *Le Nègre* does not share the fantastical element of *La Peau de chagrin*, Georges's passion for Émilie can be viewed in similar terms. Gerval's intendant lives for his mistress, but suffers a living – and ultimately real – death when she resists his advances.

always ready, and when my suffering is at its height, poor Negro that I am, I will go to sleep forever. If I think about her heavenly smile, my death will not taste bitter and, at least, I will not have insulted virtue... And, why should I not speak?... Why suffer alone? Let me tell her the horror of my torments, so that she may know the depths of my misfortune and how my African blood boils in my veins.³ She will pity me. She will weep over my death... No! I know what her answer will be...⁴ Why trouble the happiness that she enjoys? She loves her husband... Die, Georges! Die!...

What! Would I die without having attempted anything? I will speak. Yes. Everything favours me. Monsieur de Gerval is absent. I will send the servants away and I will remain alone with her, alone!...⁵ How will I be able to contain myself? (*He listens.*) I hear some noise. She is awake. She is ringing for me. (*She rings the bell.*) Somebody will see me. What excuse shall I give? I will open everything up, myself.

SCENE 2

THE NEGRO,⁶ ROSINE

ROSINE: Oh! You are here, Monsieur Georges? For somebody who came in so late, you are up early!

GEORGES: It is 10 o'clock.

ROSINE: Was the ball beautiful?

GEORGES: Yes.

³ Once again, Balzac mobilises the racist trope of savage passion to distinguish Georges's love for Émilie as dangerous and foreign. He returns to this at the climax of the play.

⁴ In fact, Georges does not know what her answer will be. When Émilie rebuffs him, his surprise and jealous rage underscore his assumption that she harboured warmer feelings for him.

⁵ In the manuscript, the phrase 'Cette idée me tue' ('This idea kills me') has been crossed out.

⁶ Balzac uses this impersonal racial description sparingly in the script to designate Georges. It occurs here and then at the end of the play (Act III, scene 14). Given the title of the play, the rarity with which Balzac uses the term intrigues and encourages interpretative speculation. The two scenes in which the stage directions refer to Georges as '*Le Nègre*' (the Negro) appear to frame an unflattering portrait of this character. They underscore the devious and violent nature that he keeps carefully hidden until he attacks those whom he betrays.

ROSINE, *aside*: That boy is always sad. (*Aloud.*) Did Madame look very beautiful? Her rose crown,⁷ was it placed well?...

GEORGES: Oh! Yes! Yes!

ROSINE: Did Madame dance much?

GEORGES: Far too much.

ROSINE: Did she have many handsome partners?

GEORGES: Yes. (*Aside.*) How can I get rid of her?

ROSINE: Was the supper lovely?

GEORGES: I wouldn't know anything about that.

ROSINE: Did you not see anything?

GEORGES: Nothing... Well, only one thing.

ROSINE: What was that?

GEORGES: Your beau, Charles!

ROSINE: Oh! Oh!

GEORGES: Hurry up and get Madame dressed. Charles will be waiting for you this morning at eleven o'clock at the water tower. His father has learned of your love for one another and he has agreed to let you marry.

ROSINE: Oh, Monsieur Georges! How happy, I am!... (*She jumps up and down in delight.*)

GEORGES: Silence and hurry! Your mistress is waiting.

ROSINE, *aside*: Despite his gloominess, he has good heart! (*Aloud.*) Thank you, Monsieur Georges!... Thank you for your trouble. I will not forget this.

⁷ Balzac crossed out 'coiffure' ('hair') and replaced it with 'guirlande', here translated as 'crown'. This change allows him to focus the audience's attention on the crown of roses, simultaneously a nod to the eighteenth-century tradition of awarding rose crowns to honour innocence and purity in young village maidens and a nod to the biblical crown of thorns. Here, this fashion accessory functions as a burlesque metaphor for Émilie's contested reputation and Georges's role in engineering her downfall.

Honoré de Balzac

GEORGES: Your mistress is waiting.

SCENE 3

GEORGES, *alone.*

GEORGES: Run, poor child!... Run to the water tower! It pains me to deceive her. She is happy. She, she is loved! And, if she does not find Charles, her heart will nonetheless revel sweetly in the thought. How I wish I were looking forward to such a meeting, myself! I hear the others. Let me get rid of all of them. Before leaving, I want to see Émilie once more. (*He hides and only leaves after having seen her.*)

SCENE 4

ÉMILIE, ROSINE

ROSINE: You are always sad, Madame. And yet, yesterday, you must have enjoyed yourself.

ÉMILIE: Worldly pleasures hold such little importance, Rosine! And, if your heart is not in them, then they hold no importance at all.

ROSINE: But, Georges told me that you danced a great deal.

ÉMILIE: To distract myself, because, as you know, ever since Monsieur went away, I have been going out often. I have been trying to find the much-vaunted pleasures of Paris and nothing anywhere amuses me. How cross I am with Gerval for not returning!⁸ Every letter announces his arrival. When will I stop getting more letters!

ROSINE: They bring you pleasure, nonetheless.

ÉMILIE: Yes, but they are merely letters! And, if when I read them, my heart feels and recognises his affection for me, his tenderness, and the tone he uses that seems to bare his very soul, I would still prefer seeing him. A single glance from him is worth one hundred love letters. Oh! Rosine, truthfully, I believe that this separation has given my affections all the freshness of that first wave of emotions.

ROSINE: Do not say that too loud, Madame. The walls have ears and all husbands would leave their wives.

⁸ Gerval's prolonged absence evokes the themes of female abandonment and isolation that recur in Balzac's later works. In *Le Père Goriot* (1835), for example, Madame de Beauséant retires to Normandy following the collapse of her affair with the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto.

ÉMILIE: Rosine, is everything in order in Monsieur's rooms?

ROSINE: You ask me that every day.

ÉMILIE: That is because every morning I expect him!... Rosine, I fear that some misfortune has befallen him... For the past few days, I have felt so wretched that today I can only imagine black premonitions... Rosine, something terrible is going to happen to me. People have always predicted that I shall die a victim of my own tenderness.⁹

ROSINE: And, how old will you be when this happens?

ÉMILIE, *laughing*: Very well, my child! Help me push away these sinister thoughts. Come now! I imagine that Gerval will arrive today. My heart assures me of this. Yes, I will hear him call me 'Émilie', and his countenance will overwhelm me with joy! With joy!... No. Even if one is completely happy, this does not prevent the suffering and misery of others. But, let us drop that subject. Gerval is coming back. Everything here must be happy, full of laughter, and seem like a celebration.

ROSINE: Does Madame have anything to add to her outfit?

ÉMILIE: No, no. Her noble soul scorns these frivolous things. The love that one bears for one's husband is the most beautiful adornment a woman can wear! And, besides, simplicity, is it not its own form of coquetry?¹⁰

ROSINE: Does Madame have any order to give me?

ÉMILIE: Run and see if there are any letters.

ROSINE: I have already checked, Madame.

ÉMILIE: And?

ROSINE: There was only this.

⁹ This feeling of foreboding that Émilie describes mirrors Desdemona's fears in Shakespeare's play and Cuvelier's pantomime, as well as Hédelmone's in the Ducis adaptation.

¹⁰ Balzac cut Emilie's order 'Rosine, tu me rendras justment ma guirlande d'hier' ('Rosine, just give me my crown that I wore last night') from the manuscript. While this tightens the scene, it also removes some of the humour to be found in Émilie's constant contradiction of her own categorical statements that enlivens scenes 4 and 5.

Honoré de Balzac

ÉMILIE, *crying out*: It is not in his writing!¹¹ Oh! Rosine! He is coming! He is coming. I am going to see him... Run to his suite and put out new flowers. Make sure that everybody is ready. I will not dine without him. Say that I will wait until two o'clock.

ROSINE: But, in the meantime?

ÉMILIE: Georges will serve me my chocolate here in this drawing room. Here he is!

ROSINE: Does Madame have any other orders to give me?

ÉMILIE: None, my child. Bring me my rose crown. (*Rosine goes into the bedroom and comes back out.*) What happiness! But, I am out of my mind, in truth. My heart is racing. Oh! Now I am truly living!

ROSINE: Would Madame allow me to...

ÉMILIE: Fasten my crown of flowers better than you did yesterday, because it fell off.

ROSINE: If Madame would be so good as to... But, this circlet is too short! There is a rose missing.

ÉMILIE: And, what does that matter? When is he coming? Oh! If I knew what road he would be taking, I would go meet him.

ROSINE: Could Madame do without my services for several minutes?

ÉMILIE: Rosine, I can do without the entire world. The idea that he is coming back is enough to keep me happy for a long while. Go! Go, my child! I want everybody who is around me to feel my joy.

ROSINE, *leaving*: She is always the same! So good, excellent!¹²

SCENE 5

ÉMILIE, *alone*.

ÉMILIE: So, I am going to see him again! To call him by his sweet name. Alas, while my heart shivers with joy, my sister, my poor Claire is pining in solitary agony, alone, prey to despair, to shame. Oh, my sister, I am ashamed of being so happy for myself and I can only think of you!

¹¹ This sentence is added in a margin note and serves to reinforce the link between dialogue and staging.

¹² Balzac eliminated 'adorable' in favour of 'excellent'.

So young to have fallen victim to a seducer! Let me look at the last letter he sent, because I cannot give it to Claire unless it offers hope for her.

(She reads it.) 'Cherished angel, dry the tears that you are shedding at this moment. They insult my love. It is no more possible for Manfred¹³ to be a coward, than for you to be unfaithful. Learn, my dear, that the reason for my exile has vanished and that shortly I will return, like a loyal knight, bearing a heart over which you continue to reign as sovereign.'

Oh, Claire! How happy I am for you!...

'You will rise from your depths of misfortune, shining with greater brilliance than you did in your days of innocence, if that be possible, and he who by an involuntary lapse caused your unhappiness will make it his glorious mission to make you beautiful among all wives.¹⁴ Rejoice, then, and may this letter mark for you the dawn of happiness. As I write this, I add to it my whole soul because these letters will strike your eyes. Oh, my tender love, what I would give to be there to dry your tears, to cover you with kisses and to serve you as I did in those happy days when you laughed and danced at my side.'

No. In the depths of the heart of the one who penned these lines, a spark of honour and of virtue continues to shine. Manfred, come honour this unfortunate woman who hides herself from all other eyes! Her only wish is to bear, without shame, the title of mother, which I envy her so. Oh! I will save her reputation! For no one in the whole world knows about this important secret. It is the only one I keep from Gerval. The honour of a woman, and especially that of a cherished sister, is so precious that one cannot make too many sacrifices to keep it pure. The people in the house where she is know nothing themselves about the existence of her child!... What a number of cares!...¹⁵ *(Georges enters.)* Let us go put this letter with the other ones. I will bring it to my sister in a little while and I will go early since for her it will be the height of happiness!... How happy she will be when she reads all of her lover's letters with her husband. *(She folds away the letter.)* Everything smiles on me this morning and my sinister premonitions have disappeared. But, how shall I go to Sèvres,¹⁶ now? I have never hidden my actions from Gerval and what would happen if he were to learn that during his absence, I went out for five hours each day? He, who gets alarmed at the slightest nothing, at a worried smile, at a word... He, whose jealousy is as intense as his love... Oh! How a woman must carefully attend to the

¹³ Throughout the manuscript, Balzac tended to forget to correct the name for this character. In all editions of the manuscript and in this translation, 'Horace' has been amended to 'Manfred'.

¹⁴ Originally, the manuscript uses the more ambiguous term 'femmes' ('women' or 'wives') instead of 'épouses' ('wives').

¹⁵ In his manuscript, Balzac noted the beginning of scene 6 after this line. The end of this scene posited in editions and translated here is based on the margin notes.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Balzac imagined originally using Versailles as the setting for Act II. In the end, he chose to use Sèvres. This village on the outskirts of Paris was linked in the public imagination to frivolity and debauchery, as well as to manufacturing. It would hold none of the residual connections to court life associated with Versailles.

outward appearance of her conduct! It is decided, then. I will not go to see my sister anymore... Not to go see her would be like taking away the raft to which an unfortunate person clings when drowning. Come what may, I will go! Nobody will tell Gerval about it. And, besides, he loves me and if he gets angry, it is I who shall scold him.

SCENE 6

ÉMILIE, GEORGES, and two servants

ÉMILIE: Ah! Here is my chocolate. Over here, Georges!

GEORGES, *to the servants*: You can go now. I will stand in for you if anyone needs you.

SCENE 7

ÉMILIE, GEORGES

GEORGES, *in the background*: Finally, we are alone together... (*He comes closer.*) My courage is failing me...

ÉMILIE: What is the matter with you, Georges? You look sad.¹⁷ I do not like faces like this. When I am gay at heart, you should be happy. Monsieur de Gerval is coming home.

GEORGES: Coming home!...

ÉMILIE: What is wrong with you?...

GEORGES: I cannot breathe, Madame.

ÉMILIE, *getting up and letting her glove fall*: Are you in pain?...

GEORGES, *on his knees*: Oh! Yes! A great deal of pain!

ÉMILIE, *aside*: This man terrifies me... His face has changed.

GEORGES: Madame, I must speak with you.

ÉMILIE: Speak, Georges, but first get up!

¹⁷ Balzac opted to strike the adjective ‘fatigué’ (‘tired’) from Émilie’s description of Georges. The choice focuses attention on his mental state.

GEORGES: No, no! I will not leave your feet...

ÉMILIE: Georges! Are you guilty of having committed some error? You know how indulgent we are, and you can confess without fear.

GEORGES: Me, guilty!... No! No, I have still not spoken.

ÉMILIE: Come now! Explain yourself, immediately.

GEORGES: Explain myself!... She is the one who has ordered me to do it. (*He moves away.*) No, I would not know how to confess it to her. I will keep it locked in my heart, all this mourning, rage, despair, all these torments of Hell. I will suffer. I will die, but this fatal secret will never pass from my soul to my lips.

ÉMILIE: What is it? Has some misfortune befallen Gerval?

GEORGES: Rest assured, the misfortune is mine alone.

ÉMILIE: Georges, you frighten me...

SCENE 8

ÉMILIE, GEORGES, MARGUERITE

MARGUERITE, *in the hallway*: I tell you that I must to see her and that she knows who I am... Oh! Here she is!

ÉMILIE, *aside*: Marguerite! Here?... How imprudent!... What can have happened?... (*Aloud.*) Georges, leave us.

GEORGES: Oh! I can breath again!... I will be able to calm this agitation that is killing me and to regain my senses!

SCENE 9

ÉMILIE, MARGUERITE

ÉMILIE: Marguerite! What brings you here? I have forbidden you to come here.

MARGUERITE: That is true, Madame. But, you see, there is a great deal of news on our end. That little lady has slipped out the back.

ÉMILIE: What are you telling me?

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MARGUERITE: The truth, Madame, with all due respect to you.

ÉMILIE: But, Claire was calm enough when I left her!

MARGUERITE: I don't say no. But it is precisely after you left, that she began her ruckus. She was shouting, shouting loud enough to be heard all the way over at that bit of land that my man sold last year to Guillaume, the church warden.

ÉMILIE: And after, Marguerite? You are torturing me.

MARGUERITE: My apologies, Madame. When the young woman was not shouting any longer, I made as how to go into her bedchamber. Then, didn't she just come at me, laughing all the while, but, you know, Madame, it was one of those laughs that frightens you and her eyes, they was staring like this...

ÉMILIE: Oh, my heart has stopped.... Go on! Finish!

MARGUERITE: She told me that she had been waiting for me for a long time, but I just explained to you why I did not go up. Then, she took me, with all due respect to you, for a man, a Monsieur Manfred. She made me sit next to her and took my hand, and after speaking to me very friendly-like, she looked at me and gave a terrible scream, and went running off into the other room where I never go, just like we agreed.

ÉMILIE: Oh! My sister!.. Her suffering has altered her reason.

MARGUERITE: I would think that yes, and no. No, because I done stayed up watching over her all the night and she was calm enough. She talked readily enough, talked and talked to Monsieur Manfred, and to somebody else whom she called her little Ferdinand. But, being as how I did not understand anything at all, I did not know whether this was good or bad. I think that yes, because this morning, when I be leaving her alone, she run away and Pierre, the neighbour, he saw her leave through the little woods. Sure enough, she was dressed like a lady and to any questions, she answered that she was going to find him.

ÉMILIE: Oh! My poor Claire!... *(She weeps.)* Was she alone when she ran away?

MARGUERITE: All alone.

ÉMILIE: Did she have anything with her?

MARGUERITE: No.

ÉMILIE: Did she close the door to her rooms?

MARGUERITE: Yes, Madame.

ÉMILIE: Good God! Her baby will die!... And I am the only one who knows about his existence and who can save him. What to do?...

MARGUERITE: Nothing. Well, not nothing... I ran here, quick.

ÉMILIE: Marguerite, I am going to give you some money. You will send people out right away to find this young girl.

MARGUERITE: People? Will we be able to find any, what with today being the fête in Sèvres?

ÉMILIE: Marguerite, they must bring this unfortunate creature back, no matter what the cost. And I, I will leave for Sèvres before one o'clock. *(She rings the bell.)*

SCENE 10

ÉMILIE, GEORGES, MARGUERITE

ÉMILIE: Georges, have them ready the carriage. I am going out.

GEORGES: Madame, Pierre is out.

ÉMILIE: Let us go. I will do without the carriage. *(To Marguerite.)* You must be discreet about everything that you see or hear.

SCENE 11

MARGUERITE, GEORGES

GEORGES: It appears that you are going out with Madame?

MARGUERITE: Might be.

GEORGES: Do you live far from here?

MARGUERITE: One is always far from home, when one is not there.

GEORGES: You are very haughty for a dairymaid!

MARGUERITE: A dairymaid!... I will have you know that I am the wife of Nicolas Guernon, landowner and vineyard owner from Sèvres, near Paris!... A dairymaid!...

GEORGES: In Sèvres? Is that not the village where Madame goes every day?...

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MARGUERITE: To your servant's house... And, she is no more a dairymaid, than you are a white man. (*Aside.*) He wants to make me jabber, this one, doesn't he, now?

GEORGES: Instead of helping the poor in Sèvres, Madame would do better to...

MARGUERITE: Oh, my yes! Well, to help the poor... Some might tell you the secret, but me, thank God, I know how to keep my mouth shut, my friend!...

SCENE 12

MARGUERITE, GEORGES, ÉMILIE

ÉMILIE: Hold up, Marguerite! You will leave immediately. I will not be far behind you.

MARGUERITE: Thank you, Madame. Respects to you and yours.

SCENE 13

ÉMILIE, GEORGES

ÉMILIE, *tries to eat and gets up from her meal*: Oh! I can eat nothing more. My heart is swollen. Claire's misfortune overpowers me. Shall I wait for Gerval? No! No, this poor baby will die if she has locked him in... And, besides, I must be the first to weep with this poor sister because now our tears will hold no more bitterness. (*She spies Georges.*) Georges! What are you still doing there?

GEORGES: Madame, the arrival of that woman did not allow me to finish...

ÉMILIE, *aside*: Claire made me forget about this other worry...

GEORGES: I am leaving you, Madame.

ÉMILIE: So suddenly? And, for what reason?

GEORGES: It is necessary.

ÉMILIE: You dislike it here so much?

GEORGES: Dislike it here?... No! No!

ÉMILIE: Then, why would you leave?

GEORGES: Oh! Do not ask me any questions!

ÉMILIE: I would have thought, Georges, that we had shown you enough kindness through the trust that we have placed in you and the place you have here, for it to be possible to examine together this problem that you insist on keeping secret.

GEORGES: And I must, Madame.

ÉMILIE: So be it. Georges, you are free. I will be angered by your going and I had not thought that one day you would leave the man who saved your life, the man who is your benefactor....

GEORGES: My benefactor!... Monsieur de Gerval is the source of all of my suffering.

ÉMILIE: You forget yourself. What is the meaning of this?

GEORGES: Of what, Madame? Was I the one who asked to come to France?... Bent under the yoke of servitude in my own country, I was happy in my misfortune. It was Monsieur, who smuggled me here. It was he, who brought me to a country where the most insulting laughter has taught me that I am a being foreign to all humanity.¹⁸ This state is hideous. There is no doubt about it. I owe it to him, but that is nothing... Rebuffed as I was by society, I felt the spark of an emotion in me that turned my soul inside out. A woman appeared before me. Her gaze seemed to open the heavens to me. My homeland was no longer anywhere other than the places illuminated by her beauty. Finally, for the past two years I have carried this in my heart. Each of her smiles, even those that are not meant for me, maddens my soul. Well, Madame, she loves somebody else! Marriage fulfilled all of her wishes. She is adored. She pierces my heart each day and the madness in my words tells you sure enough that this woman, it is you!...

ÉMILIE: Me? Good God!

GEORGES: Yes! You!... But, it is not a crime!... Because it is I who saw you, first. It is I who pointed you out to my master, pointed you out as an object worthy of love. This fire that burns me, I ignited it in his heart and you owe me his love. But, my love, I believed I could extinguish it. I have fought to smother it for the past two years. I have suffered because of it and I will die from it!... Tell me now, whether he

¹⁸ While the exact circumstances of Georges's arrival in France are unclear, the fact that Gerval bought and smuggled him into the country is suggestive of the slave trade. Balzac's later novels suggest an interest in slave-trading. Charles Grandet rebuilds his fortune by engaging in this practice in *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), while Charles Mignon returns from his travels abroad with two black servants in *Modeste Mignon* (1844). In *Le Père Goriot* (1835), Vautrin dreams of becoming a plantation owner in America and presiding over a workforce of forty black slaves. For an extended discussion of Balzac's attitude towards slave-trading, see L.-F. Hoffmann, 'Balzac et les noirs', pp. 303–08.

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is my benefactor, or my enemy? And, could I keep this volcano contained within my heart, without letting it break out into the open and must I not leave you?...

ÉMILIE: Georges, you should have gone yesterday.

GEORGES: Oh! I understand what you see!... It is a Negro, who is speaking!... And, his love is a cruel insult. I read it in your eyes... Émilie, the immoderate heat that simmers in this heart over which you reign, the love that consumes me and ennoble the most unworthy of beings, do they not make you see me as a man? And, besides, a soul that springs from God, a soul in which your image dwells, could it ever be base? Your head could rest without shame upon my breast!

ÉMILIE: Georges, do not speak any further! And, leave!

GEORGES: Leave?... Madame, I have a right to your pity and I was hardly expecting your scorn!... Leave?... Ah! This word creates an entire world of thoughts in my soul. I am no longer equal to it. I tremble and I feel a rage in my soul that all of my love can hardly outweigh.

ÉMILIE: When will you be finished with this insulting speech?

GEORGES, *showing his breast in which he has tucked the fallen rose*: When this heart has ceased to beat.

ÉMILIE: What do I see, there? A rose from my crown!

GEORGES: Oh! Give it back to me!... It is my heart's blood! It is my soul! My breath! My life!... Give it back to me! I order you to...

ÉMILIE, *ringing the bell*: Help! Help!....

GEORGES: Quiet! Your screams are useless. I have taken care to send everybody away and we are alone.

ÉMILIE: Good God! What is to become of me?

GEORGES: Oh! You are safe with me. The most tender respect stands between the two of us. But, my infernal passion has burst forth from my heart and it must no longer, it can no longer, be contained within and the forfeit I condemn you to pay for your disdain is to hear me out.

ÉMILIE: Yes! Yes, this is torture.

GEORGES: Torture!... So, you prefer my hatred to my love?

ÉMILIE: Even more, I would prefer death!

GEORGES: Revenge, revenge!... Oh! Masterpiece of innocence! I am afraid to destroy you. Stay away from me! Go!... I am getting carried away... What did I say? I am seeing you perhaps for the last time. Stay, Émilie! Utter one single word of regret for my fate and I die content! This word will be for me the sole blossom of love that I will gather in my life. Émilie!... I would be satisfied by one glance!... You do not answer!...

ÉMILIE: I am trying not to hear you.

GEORGES, *weeping*: To die with her hating me!... Oh! Her indifference never drew tears from me... Go! I will make you share the pain that you leave as your testament to me. I have no love left, but rather, a terrible need to avenge myself. In the most sacred of sanctuaries, in the heavens, we will meet again!...

ÉMILIE: I hear Gerval! I am saved.

GEORGES: Silence!... I know about your trips to Sèvres.

ÉMILIE: Oh! So many misfortunes all at once!...

SCENE 14

GEORGES, GERVAL, ÉMILIE

GERVAL: Finally, I have found you, my dear Émilie.

ÉMILIE: Oh, my love! How impatient I have been waiting for you...

GERVAL: Indeed, I find you overcome with emotion!... Good day, Georges. Leave us.

GEORGES, *aside*: Unfortunate man! I have already troubled his happiness.

SCENE 15

GERVAL, ÉMILIE

GERVAL: Why is it, Émilie, that despite your charming habit, you did not come to meet me and that I found no one about? Was it on your orders that all the servants were sent out?

ÉMILIE: My love, I did not know they were gone.

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GERVAL: Émilie, something extraordinary just happened, here. Your face does not show that calm that it usually displays and the expression on your face is not that of joy.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, it is true, indeed, that my face will always be too weak an interpreter for my feelings for you.

GERVAL: Émilie! That tone, I recognise it as the voice of the woman who takes care to render my life beautiful. The source of your emotion still remains hidden from me, however.

ÉMILIE: Is it not merely the pleasure of seeing you again?...

GERVAL: This pleasure looks a great deal like worry.

ÉMILIE: Worry! Oh! I have much of that!

GERVAL: About what?

ÉMILIE: When I see, Gerval, that you do not believe me any longer!...

GERVAL: Not believe you?... Émilie! I beg your pardon! Do not attribute this reaction to anything other than my dark and extremely jealous nature, that you know so well. If it has been my misfortune, it also gives greater strength to my love.

ÉMILIE: Oh! How happy I am to see you again!

GERVAL: As for me, I thought I would never arrive! And, when I saw Paris, I trembled with pleasure!... It has been such a long absence.

ÉMILIE: In the end, dear love, seeing your face makes me forget all the rest! (*Looking at the clock.*) Good God! Noon!... Gerval, I must leave you for an hour. Just a moment and I will be back.

GERVAL: Oh! My dear Émilie! What business can be so pressing as to oblige you to leave me so soon?

ÉMILIE: Business, Gerval!... No!... It is a sacred duty.

GERVAL: Can you not tell me, at least, what it is?

ÉMILIE: Oh, I would like to be able to explain the whole to you.

GERVAL: But, where are you going then?...

ÉMILIE: Gerval, you love me, or at least you say you do... Well, no more questions! I must keep this secret, because it is not mine.

GERVAL: I believed that a woman did not have any secrets from her husband. Well! Go, Émilie! You are free to act as you wish. I will never demand any account of your actions, and from now on, I will notify you of the exact time of my arrival. Surprises are unpleasant for me.

ÉMILIE: My dear love! Do you mean to tear out my soul?

GERVAL: Émilie, go! One hundred times alone! Wherever you wish! I leave you to be the sole judge of your actions and I will never doubt your tenderness.

ÉMILIE: Farewell, Gerval!

SCENE 16

GERVAL, alone.

GERVAL: I believed she would stay!... But, why should I worry? Is her heart part of mine? And, her innocence, is it not as pure as mine? Oh, I blush at my thoughts!... Georges!

SCENE 17

GERVAL, GEORGES

GERVAL: Georges! Tell me, pray...

GEORGES: Monsieur, I am no longer in your service.

GERVAL: And who can have dismissed you?

GEORGES: Madame...

GERVAL: For what reason?

GEORGES: Madame knows what it is.

GERVAL, *aside*: Everything astonishes me and escapes me. (*Aloud.*) Can you not tell me what it is?

GEORGES: I would not know.

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GERVAL: Georges, are you still that faithful servant, the discreet, devoted one that I raised to the status of a friend?

GEORGES: Well, Monsieur?

GERVAL: Do not hide anything from me. What is the reason for your departure?

GEORGES: It is because I wish to remain this faithful and devoted servant who is your friend that, in the end, I must remain silent.

GERVAL, *aside*: He is killing me. (*Aloud.*) Do you at least know where Madame is going?

GEORGES: Monsieur, were I still your steward, I would hardly believe myself to be loyal if I told you.

GERVAL, *aside*: What a lesson!... (*Aloud.*) Then, you do know?

GEORGES: Yes, Monsieur.

GERVAL: Georges! Whatever the reason that Madame gave for dismissing you, I am keeping you in my service and I am going to employ you in the position of courier for my business in Hamburg... Now, I order you to answer me: where is Madame going?

GEORGES, *aside*: Let him suffer, too. (*Aloud.*) Madame is going to Sèvres, where, in your absence, she spends five hours of every day.

GERVAL, *aside*: Ah!... Well! Let us, at least, keep this private from this man!... (*Aloud.*) Good! Georges, Madame has been going there on my orders and I am happy to learn that they have been faithfully carried out.

GEORGES, *aside*: He wants to hide his anguish from me. I rejoice in this, from the very depths of my soul! Oh! Vengeance is sweet!... After all, if Madame is innocent, I will not have caused her any harm.

SCENE 18

GERVAL, GEORGES, MANFRED

MANFRED: Madame Gerval (sic), is she home?

GEORGES: No, Monsieur.

MANFRED: But, it is imperative that I speak with her immediately!

GEORGES: Madame has gone out.

MANFRED: Gone out!... Oh! Do not deceive me, for my visit could not help but procure her the greatest of pleasures, if by chance she were here. Give her my name. I am sure to be admitted in to see her.

GERVAL: Monsieur, who are you?

MANFRED: Monsieur, I will only reveal my name to Madame Gerval.

GERVAL: Does Monsieur know Madame Gerval well?

MANFRED: Very well.

GERVAL: Are you an acquaintance of long-standing?

MANFRED: Yes, if one measures time according to the strength of feelings.

GERVAL: Is Monsieur a relative of hers?

MANFRED: No, sir.

GERVAL: It is surprising, Monsieur, that I have the honour of seeing you for the first time, when I am the intimate friend of Madame Gerval.

MANFRED: Her intimate friend!... That is a title that I would challenge anyone in the world to hold other than me, but if you are really worthy of this title, then answer me this: has Émilie truly gone out?

GERVAL, *aside*: Émilie!... (*Aloud.*) Yes, Monsieur.

MANFRED: In that case, she must be in Sèvres...

GERVAL, *aside*: In Sèvres? He knows this!...

MANFRED: I will hurry there... If, by chance, she comes back and I have not been able to meet up with her, you can tell her that the poor man who had been exiled has not broken his promise. (*He exits.*)

SCENE 19

GERVAL, GEORGES

GERVAL: Georges!... Horses, pistols, and let us hurry to Sèvres!

ACT II

The scene is set in Sèvres. It shows the main square. To the right is the wine merchant Flicotel's house, to the left, Marguerite's house. There is a path that is supposed to lead to the corner of Flicotel's house.

Naturally, in the main square, there is everything that is necessary to show that there is a village fair going on (marionettes, boutiques, etc.). That is left to the set designer to choose and arrange.

SCENE 1

FLICOTEL, a peasant

FLICOTEL: Come kids, let's hear it for fun and Nanterre cakes, lots of Nanterre cakes because that makes everybody thirsty and this year's wine is the best and the cheapest. Next year the vines will freeze and the wine won't be worth anything. Drink up enough for two years and dance your fill because it's hot and you'll need to cool down and refresh yourselves afterwards.

PEASANT: Wine!... Give us some wine...

FLICOTEL, *aside to his serving boy*: Here we go!... (*Aloud.*) So, dance my friends! (*Aside to the serving boy.*) You need to sing something to get them all going. Forward march! A few belts with the vocal chords... If they take up the refrain, they will be thirsty and consequently, they will consume watery liquids. Now, that, my friends, isn't something I only say to the good-natured ones and the wily ones.¹⁹

SCENE 2

MARGUERITE, FLICOTEL

MARGUERITE, *aside*: Who the devil would have guessed that there was a child in that bedchamber!... Was he crying for long, the poor little mite? What a fortunate thing that he is still sleeping because I would not know what to do if he were to wake up!... You try finding a nurse on the same day as the fair, and besides, that would only fan the flames, wouldn't it? Madame Gerval has still not arrived!... Damn, if the little lady's leaving her babe behind doesn't just prove that she is crazy.

¹⁹ This scene offers a rare but important reminder of the fact that melodrama was a musical genre that often involved dance, as well as pantomime. The beginning of Act II contains within it subtle cues for staging. Modern readers should not forget that the entire spectacle in melodrama went far beyond mere simple dialogue and included gestures, music, song, as well as the set and costumes.

FLICOTEL, *aside*: What the devil is she mumbling about, old Mother Marguerite? For nobody to know what has been going on over at her house for such a long time, somebody must have paid her a pretty penny. Sharp as I am, I still have not been able to get into that bunker over there. (*He points to the house.*) It is true that since I do not want any of her wine, the old woman loves me about as much as marsh fever.

MARGUERITE, *still aside*: All these young ones about, they be making mistakes because they don't know enough to stop when they get to the edge of the cliff. With all that, men... oh, men!... In the end, as my mother always said, there are good stones in the worst of walls and if that little lady had not strayed so important-like, I wouldn't have rented out our house so expensive-like and I would have lost all the extra money that has fallen on our heads like hail in a storm. All these rich folk, they still want to keep things secret-like, I can see that.

FLICOTEL, *aside*: And if I tried again? (*Aloud.*) Good day to you, Mother Marguerite.

MARGUERITE: Good evening, Mister Flicotel.

FLICOTEL, *aside*: There is no spark. Oh, the old bullet, if I could... eh, she is as miserly as an Arab, let's lay out a few glasses of my muscat wine, the most recent one and see what happens... Forward march, attack and charge ahead, as my old captain used to say... Of course, he's at the back of the line these now!... (*Aloud.*) Mother Marguerite!

MARGUERITE: Get away with you troublemaker, you watered-down wine peddler, you!

FLICOTEL, *aside*: I'll get even with you for that. (*Aloud.*) Come now, Mother Marguerite! You aren't going to quarrel with me on a holiday of all days, now are you? Insults are forbidden on the day of the fête, except when they begin fights and then when people come to my place to make up. Do you like muscat wine?

MARGUERITE: I am not thirsty.

FLICOTEL: You need to have a little drink to feel thirsty! Besides, it is good for your health this liquor here. It makes bad humours melt away like regiments under cannon fire.

MARGUERITE, *aside*: I do not see why my health would suffer because of our quarrels... (*Aloud.*) Give it here... and leave me be.

FLICOTEL, *aside*: I thought as much. (*Aloud.*) Come on, Mother Marguerite, nobody walks well on one leg alone.

MARGUERITE: He is right... And, it's not my fault...

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FLICOTEL: How is that little lady who comes to your house...

MARGUERITE, *giving back the glass*: Here. You cheap old trooper, you tittle-tattler, you! Are you going to start up with your machinations and turn the whole village topsy-turvy?

FLICOTEL: That is fair enough. You see, Mother Marguerite, I am indeed the legitimate offspring of pleasure, and I like a ruckus because a ruckus and misunderstandings make for drinkers who make up. You find me the same as I was, when I was a raw recruit at the door of an ambassador for twenty days and I know how to be diplomatic. Come now, Mother Marguerite! All good things come in threes.

MARGUERITE: That is true. One has to pay homage to the truth.

FLICOTEL: Tell me then, mum! What is the name of that little lady?

MARGUERITE: Mister Flicotel, we are not cousins, you know!

FLICOTEL: Neither on the right flank, nor on the left flank.

MARGUERITE: Well, in that case, show me your heels.

FLICOTEL: We will be better than cousins! We will become friends. Well, a string wrapped four times round is only that much stronger...²⁰ So what is this about that little lady?

MARGUERITE: Off with you, Mister Flicotel! I have had enough and as for telling you about what goes under my roof, I would cut out my tongue rather than open my jaws. Can't you all see what a 'cheaplomat'²¹ he is, with his face like a Chinaman, a fine figure of a man, indeed, out to seduce good honest folk!

FLICOTEL: Seduce you? A good soldier feels no desire for broken old cannons. Get on with you, Mother Marguerite! I'll show you that this dog still knows a few tricks.

MARGUERITE: I am not afraid of you, my friend.

FLICOTEL: Seduce her!... (*Aside.*) Let's go back and look at things carefully. I am going to make my headquarters at the window and you can beat me with sticks like a drummer if I do not give her some some rope to hang herself with and then with what I know, I will tie her up very nicely, indeed!... Drink my wine and not say anything...

²⁰ Here, Flicotel serves a fourth glass of wine to the old woman.

²¹ Balzac offers the audience a delicious pun when he coins the word 'griplomate' to describe Flicotel's stinginess and his false diplomacy.

SCENE 3

MARGUERITE, *alone.*

MARGUERITE, *alone*: Ever since he stopped buying our wine, I have not trusted that man. To lure people into his shop, he chatters about everything he knows and doesn't know. He would make me a fine reputation if he came to learn that I have let my house... Here is someone!... Oh! It is Madame.

SCENE 4

ÉMILIE, MARGUERITE

MARGUERITE: Oh, Madame, here is another mix up for you that isn't the least...

ÉMILIE: What? What is it?

MARGUERITE: Since this morning when she left...

ÉMILIE: What news is there? Has she been found?

MARGUERITE: No, Madame. Not yet.

ÉMILIE: I am trembling in terror. If she were dead... Oh, Marguerite! Do not hide anything from me. (*She weeps.*) The poor unfortunate thing will not be able to survive.

MARGUERITE: Rest assured, Madame! My godson and my husband, they sent me my cousin back to tell me that they are following her tracks...

ÉMILIE: Oh! I can breathe again.

MARGUERITE: And that they were hoping to be able to bring her back tonight.

ÉMILIE: Tonight!... Oh, what will Gerval say if I am late in getting home!... Everything will be the death of me all at once (*Aloud.*) Then, what are you trying to tell me?

MARGUERITE: Well, Madame, I did be finding this poor baby.²²

ÉMILIE: What! You went into the room? There, where I had forbidden you to go, by the terms of our agreement?

MARGUERITE: Madame, I heard screams in there that forced me to go in.

²² MARGUERITE: Eh bien Madame, j' P'ons trouvé ce pauvre enfant.

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ÉMILIE: I could not prevent her from doing this! Oh, my sister!... Here! Take this as the price of your silence.

MARGUERITE: Ah, Madame, I will sew my mouth shut!... Madame, since his mother went away, he has eaten nothing... and I didn't dare go looking for a nurse. First of all, we cannot take one from hereabouts.

ÉMILIE: What about in the surrounding area?

MARGUERITE: I am all alone, Madame, and besides, it is the fair today, and by this time tomorrow, if Madame has not come back...

ÉMILIE: Silence. I had come to bring the baby back to Paris!... But, how would I be able to do that and still keep Gerval from learning about this whole adventure?... The mystery of my trip has displeased him enough... Oh! My sister! What torments I am suffering for you!... Marguerite, this secret must die and be buried in your heart.

MARGUERITE: Madame, except for me, nobody around here will know the slightest word about it.

ÉMILIE: The unfortunate creature!... If this letter had arrived one day earlier, this misfortune would not have happened!... Come Marguerite, while we are waiting for news of this young girl, I will take care of her son. When I cradle him, I almost believe myself to be his mother. If she is not back in one hour, I will be forced to leave with her baby, because in Paris, I will easily be able to find help without delay.

SCENE 5

FLICOTEL, *leaving*, GERVAL, GEORGES

FLICOTEL: I have been thinking that she must be married and that... Oh! Look! Here comes the cavalry.

GERVAL: It is she!...

GEORGES: Madame went in there.

GERVAL: Oh! I will know everything, I hope.

FLICOTEL, *to Georges*: Gentlemen... (*Aside.*) Oh! What an unfortunate and swampy mug on that one. (*Aloud.*) Gentlemen, will you be wanting me to be putting your horses in the stable?

GEORGES: Yes.

FLICOTEL: Will you be wanting to rest a bit in the company of some bottles of Burgundy, Bordeaux, maybe some wines from Paris and other local neighbouring locales?

GERVAL: The devil take you. Go away!

FLICOTEL: With the horses.

GEORGES: Would you be quiet!

FLICOTEL: I do have some lovely partridges, some veal, and....

GERVAL: Leave us!... Émilie!... Oh!... I am burning up. She is there!...

FLICOTEL: These would be bad shareholders for my business.

SCENE 6

GEORGES, GERVAL

GEORGES: For the love of God, Monsieur! Calm yourself. Have you not noticed that since we left, each of your gestures, each of your words has been touched with madness.

GERVAL: Do you believe that, Georges!... What can she be doing in this house... Good works? One does not hide those!...

GEORGES: Monsieur, steady on. The rank to which you have elevated me near you must serve to excuse my frankness. I suspect you of being jealous of Madame.

GERVAL: No, Georges, I love her and that is all. Me, jealous!...

GEORGES: God preserve you from that Monsieur, because jealousy is a terrible passion, a serpent that creates his venom from the sweetest flowers and corrodes the heart by causing it to suffer... Perpetually! One shrivels. One is consumed, and in the end, one dies. You are not listening.

GERVAL: Yes, indeed!... One dies, is that not it?... (*Aside.*) How carefully everything is closed up!...

GEORGES: But you are agitated.

GERVAL: Me? I am calm.

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GEORGES: All the better, Monsieur, because you will be able to clear up your suspicions more easily that way.

GERVAL: Suspicions!... And, about whom?

GEORGES: About Madame.

GERVAL: Unfortunate man, your proof!... You dare to accuse her. What do you know about this?... You know something...

GEORGES: Yes, Monsieur.

GERVAL: Speak, then.

GEORGES: I know that Madame is an angel of beauty, of innocence, the model for her sex. Modesty adorns her brow. Charity is always in her hand, sweetness on her lips, and virtue enthroned in her soul.²³

GERVAL: And, what motive could lead her here?

GEORGES: She is false, however, Monsieur. She deceives you. She has not written to you for a fortnight. She was reduced to silence by your arrival. She loves you, but weakly. She...

GERVAL: Torturer! What are you saying here?

GEORGES: Monsieur, I am repeating the words that came from your very lips while we were on our way here.

GERVAL: Oh Georges, Georges! The unfortunate man stretched on the rack only suffers in his body. He can have a calm and pure soul if he is innocent, but me, I feel indescribable agonies. Listen to me, Georges! This young man... Did you sometimes see him?

GEORGES: Never, Monsieur.

²³ While *Émilie's* idealised qualities correspond to those characterising virtually all female heroines in melodramas from the time, they also mirror the kindness and self-sacrifice shown by other female characters in Balzac's fiction, most notably the eponymous heroine in *Wann-Chlore* (1825) and Madame de Mortsauf in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1836). *Émilie's* protectiveness of Claire also reflects Balzac's own feelings towards his youngest sister Laurence, who in 1821 married an inveterate gambler and womaniser, Armand-Désiré de Montzaigle. Laurence's consequent slide into depression infuriated Balzac, and no doubt contributed to her premature death in 1825, at the age of twenty-three.

GERVAL: Never!... My soul is being ripped apart. If there had been no crime, would she have made a mystery about receiving him? And, this house... To come here every day...

GEORGES: Monsieur!... Your wife is innocent. I would repeat this, were my head under the axe. Yes. Among all the things on which the sun sheds its light, there is no virtue more pure!... I know this.

GERVAL: Oh, Georges, you breathe new life into me... I dare suspect her... Oh, I am a miserable thing, unworthy of happiness... Georges, let us go back to Paris...

GEORGES: That would be perhaps the best course of action.

GERVAL: Why this 'perhaps'?

GEORGES: Well, it is just that I do admit, Monsieur, all outward signs are against Madame, according to what you have said.

GERVAL: Well, Georges...

GEORGES: It is not for me to advise Monsieur.

GERVAL, *aside*: He is killing me... (*Aloud.*) What would you do?

GEORGES: I see no harm in shedding light on all this... (*Aside.*) I want this more than he does now.

GERVAL: Let us stay! What anguish!...

GEORGES, *aside*: You can suffer all you like. You will not languish in pain for two years!... And you deserve your pain... To dare believe her capable of such trickery! Émilie, I will avenge you.

GERVAL: What are you saying?

GEORGES: A woman is such a weak creature, so easy to...

GERVAL: To...

GEORGES: In the end, I am happy not to have a wife!

GERVAL: Oh, yes!...

GEORGES: I would suffer ten times more than you!... (*Aside.*) At every instant revenge pushes me to accuse her and love holds me back.

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GERVAL: Georges, it is decided. I will remain here.

GEORGES: As for me, Monsieur, I would never have suspicions regarding the one that I love. Her words would be orders and I would believe her based on a simple smile.

GERVAL: He is torturing me.

SCENE 7

GEORGES, GERVAL, FLICOTEL

GEORGES: Monsieur, here is the landlord who would give you some information.

GERVAL: Fi on you!... Georges, if one were to learn that I had questioned him, what a dishonour that would be.

FLICOTEL, *aside*: To drink or not to drink? They are asking themselves that question...

GEORGES: Monsieur, if it were me who questioned him, you would not be compromised in the least.

GERVAL: Well hurry up then... I am listening.

GEORGES, *to Flicotel*: My friend, do you know to whom this house belongs and...

FLICOTEL: Certainly. Are you desirous of knowing?

GEORGES: Yes, knowing what happens there and being as you are across the way...

FLICOTEL: What goes on there!... You have never been to Sèvres, then?

GEORGES: Never...

FLICOTEL: Well, then, my dear sir, that little house is one of those houses in the country that one lets... you see what I mean... in order to do what we in the regiment always called a six-pence dance, a little extra-legitimate party, a conjugal incoherence, a stag party. (*Aside.*) Take that, Madame Marguerite!

GERVAL: Are you telling the truth?

FLICOTEL: Oh, Monsieur, it is the rumour that runs round the country. I do not guarantee anything, but what I can answer for is that there is a mystery in that house

there. A mystery so mysterious that old Mother Marguerite, who never misses firing off in a conversation, has not so much as made a peep about what is going on in her house.²⁴ It seems that the young lady that comes from Paris pays her very handsomely, because old Mother Marguerite, who has never had a penny, has recently purchased a little plot of vines.

GERVAL: Does she come alone?

FLICOTEL: The vineyard...

GERVAL: The little lady from Paris, my friend! Answer me.

FLICOTEL: Oh!... Alone? Yes, yes, but one day, that is to say, one night, through the shutter, I saw two people quite clearly.

GERVAL: A young man!...

FLICOTEL: I do not say that it was a young man. I have never seen him, but that does not prove anything... Steady on, Monsieur, one does not come from Paris to Sèvres to look at porcelain here, when one be squeezing things so close in such a discreet house.

GERVAL: My blood has run cold!

GEORGES: She loves somebody else and I am scorned!...

GERVAL: For pity's sake, my friend, have you noticed movement in this house? Who keeps it?

FLICOTEL: It is an old witch who sold me her wine too dear, and I would not give a cannon of nails for her. She manages things so well that nobody in the country here can know what goes on in her house, but a month ago...

GERVAL: A month ago... (*Aside.*) She did not write to me around that time... (*Aloud.*) Well?

FLICOTEL: Dear sir, one month ago, in the middle of the night, one sent post haste to Paris. A man in a carriage came and the screams one screamed in that house, there... It was shrieks to make you believe that somebody was having her throat slit. I saw lots of light over there and they sent Marguerite and her husband away for that

²⁴ The domestic drama that lurks behind closed doors would become a key theme in Balzac's later works. In the preface to *Eugénie Grandet* in 1833, the novelist describes the provinces as rich in 'des mystères habilement dissimulés' ('carefully hidden mysteries') (Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, III, p. 1026).

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whole night there. Oh! It was infamous!... Go marry yourself off then, and forward march, as my captain always said...

GERVAL: Georges! Let us run over there! Let us run...

GEORGES: Monsieur! Stop, for pity's sake!

GERVAL: Georges! All of hell is there. I am burning. I am shivering. Oh, my heart is turning to marble for her!

GEORGES: Monsieur, you are not suffering as much as I am!... But, if what this man says is true, should we not make sure of it? His house is well-situated for us to observe everything. Let us stay!

FLICOTEL: It would seem that this is of interest to them...

GERVAL: My friend, I am renting your house for twenty-four hours. Here...

FLICOTEL, *aside*: Bravo!... They will eat, drink, and sleep.

GERVAL: Georges, you will contain me, my friend, because I feel a rage... I would be calmer if I knew the truth, no matter how terrible it might be for me. The shock of all my emotions is terrible...

FLICOTEL: Steady on, Monsieur. Here is that Marguerite who knows everything...

GERVAL, *to himself*: I am trembling... (*Aloud.*) Leave us!...

SCENE 8

GERVAL, GEORGES, MARGUERITE

GEORGES: God!... It is the same woman as this morning.

GERVAL: What are you saying?

GEORGES: She must not see me. She came to the townhouse this morning.

GERVAL: Oh! Every step I make is like walking to my death. Madame, is that house yours?

MARGUERITE, *aside*: What does he want from me? (*Aloud.*) Yes, sir.

GERVAL: Do you live there?

MARGUERITE: Yes, sir... But you are ill.

GERVAL: Yes... In order to regain my strength, I have been advised to take the air in Sèvres, and I would like to rent your house.

MARGUERITE: Well, in that case, Monsieur, go find another one.

GERVAL: Why?

MARGUERITE: Mine is let.

GERVAL: And to whom?

MARGUERITE: That is my secret.

GERVAL: My good woman, do not play with me... If you do not answer, I will... You...

MARGUERITE: Monsieur! And what right is it of yours to question me? I will have you know that when one is honest...

GERVAL: Honest!

MARGUERITE: Yes, Monsieur. When one is honest, one does not owe anything to anyone. Nobody can trouble you. Farewell, sir!

GERVAL: One moment. Answer me and I will pay one thousand francs for one single answer. Tell me the name of the person to whom you rent your house.

MARGUERITE: One thousand francs!... One gives me more than that to keep silent.

GERVAL: Well then, I will give you two thousand... three thousand!

MARGUERITE, *to herself*: Oh the devil... I could buy Claudin's vineyard.

GERVAL: Will you answer me? Is it not paying handsomely for death? Well? Speak!...

MARGUERITE, *to herself*: Claudin's vineyard!... What harm can it do? They are not from here.

GERVAL: Well?...

MARGUERITE: Give it here, sir! Give it here!... Monsieur, I have rented it to the wife of a banker, Madame Gerval. Do you know her?

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GERVAL: No. Georges, I am dying!...

GEORGES: Was she unfaithful? (*Georges carries off Gerval.*)

SCENE 9

MARGUERITE, alone.

MARGUERITE: What is the matter with him?... That is quite extraordinary. Three thousand francs!... Here they are. Those vines of Claudin's are well worth a single word. It is obvious that Madame Gerval could find no harm in me earning such a sum by saying her name. I will have Claudin's vineyard!... Oh! Oh! Look, here is another Parisian who looks to be in a hurry. If he has come for the fair, then he has arrived too late.

SCENE 10

MARGUERITE, MANFRED

MANFRED: My dear, good old woman, could you point out to me the house that has been inhabited for the past six months by a young woman that Madame Gerval must come to see quite often... Every day, in fact...

MARGUERITE: But, then everybody knows?...

MANFRED: What is that? Everybody?... What are you telling me? (*Aside.*) Would I have sullied her pure innocence, thus! (*Aloud.*) Madame Gerval is here, is she not?

MARGUERITE: Oh well! This one knows everything.

MANFRED: Look here, my good old woman! Answer me, because you seem to not be ignorant of that about which I am speaking. See here! And do not look at me so closely... (*Aside.*) I tremble lest I be recognised.

MARGUERITE: Monsieur, I can well see that you are part of this whole charade, but...

MANFRED: Come, good woman, come... And, if you know where Madame Gerval is, run and tell her that Manfred is waiting for her here, because I cannot see poor Claire again without her being prepared for my return. Run along now.

MARGUERITE: Manfred! Oh!... I will hurry, then!

MANFRED: What? It is here...

SCENE 11

MANFRED, *alone.*

MANFRED: Love, God of Life, if this cursed affair of honour has been the source of Claire's misfortune, ah!... You will help me fix everything and soon she will be able to show a pure brow in front of everybody. I am going to see her once more... Oh, I know her. I will be welcomed like a cherished love. The sweetest smile will welcome me as if I had never insulted her, because she loves me enough not to reproach me for what she has suffered. So much happiness pains me!... I have trouble bearing it... It is here, in this village, in this thatched cottage, that she has been lamenting her fate.

SCENE 12

MANFRED, GEORGES, GERVAL

MANFRED, *without seeing Gerval and Georges who slip in:* Oh, I will buy this house!... I want for those who live in it to be happy, always!...

GERVAL: It is he!... Oh, what did he just say? What do I see? Émilie!...

SCENE 13

MANFRED, ÉMILIE, GEORGES, GERVAL

GERVAL, *to Georges:* From here, we will be able to hear without being seen.

ÉMILIE: Oh, unfortunate man! What have you done? You come too late...

GERVAL: He comes too late...

MANFRED: You make me shudder. What has happened?

GERVAL: He has come... It is I who... Oh! What suffering!

ÉMILIE: Speak more quietly. You have come to bear witness to a spectacle all the more heart-rending for you because you alone are the innocent cause of it.

MANFRED, *lowering his voice:* Good God! Claire is dead!...

ÉMILIE, *lowering her voice:* No. But, death might be less cruel. My poor sister gave up hope of ever seeing you again. While she never blamed you, loving you was still to bear a burden of misfortune that was too heavy for her. Her soul was not equal to it.

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She has lost her reason. Claire is wandering about in the neighbouring villages. She is asking everybody about you. Since this morning, when the unfortunate soul disappeared, people have been looking for her. Having only received your letter today, I was not able to prevent the cruel death of her soul, this wretched state in which one outlives oneself.

MANFRED: I am listening to you, but I am at pains to understand you. Each word dashes the coldness of death on my being. Where is she?... Where is she? It is I, who am her executioner... Unhappy man! I want to die!

GERVAL: What passion in their exchange!... What a look of tenderness she has just given him!... I am betrayed...

ÉMILIE: Manfred, you are a father and your existence no longer belongs to you.

MANFRED: My child!... Oh, to see it!... It is a desire that feels close to hunger... Well, I will sacrifice this love to my love for Claire. I will run to search for her. All I want is to see my son in his mother's arms.

ÉMILIE: Very good, Manfred. I will be proud to be your sister.

MANFRED: Oh! You breathe life into me once more. I have needed the consolation of a virtuous heart like yours. At this moment, to hear from your mouth a word of approval is to find myself saved. Oh, tender protector of our love, you see that I am putting my life in danger to bring back to Claire my fortune, my hand, my position, but...

ÉMILIE: Go! Everything can still be put right.

MANFRED: Let me fly to find her trail. I want to see her, to kneel at her side, to call her by her cherished name. She will understand me. The loving tone will banish all the clouds that fog her soul and at the tiniest glimmer of hope, I will come back to bring you news.

ÉMILIE: Manfred, your mother is happy.

MANFRED: The most beautiful day of my life will be the one when I call you sister. This name covers a multitude of names. Farewell! I must run. I must fly!... (*He kisses her hand.*)

SCENE 14

ÉMILIE, GERVAL

GERVAL: What do I see!... Stay here, Georges.

ÉMILIE: Worthy young man...

GERVAL, *aside*: Her praise is the final blow.

ÉMILIE: At that age, one is pure and candid and one does the right thing with that first passion that disappears only too soon from the soul. (*Lowering her voice.*) So, my sister will be happy.

GERVAL, *aside*: Uncertain I suffered. Now, knowing my misfortune, I must bear it with courage, and since my love has just succumbed in the most hideous of agonies, my heart must maintain the calm of death.

ÉMILIE: Let us go back.

GERVAL, *aloud*: What! It is you, Émilie!

ÉMILIE: Oh...

GERVAL, *aside*: Let us go easy on her. (*Aloud.*) I did not believe that I would meet you here, and I give thanks to my idleness that guided me here to this fête. At least I will get to see you.

ÉMILIE: Oh, Gerval, how pale you are!

GERVAL: Just like you this morning! My agitation comes from the pleasure of finding you here.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, what brings you here?

GERVAL: More trusting than you, I have just told you.

ÉMILIE: I did not understand what I heard.

GERVAL: I believe it. That is the result of your love.

ÉMILIE: My love, the sound of your voice makes me cold with fear.

GERVAL: It is the same as always, however.

ÉMILIE: No, no. I do not recognise it.

GERVAL: That does not astonish me...

ÉMILIE: What do you mean to say?

GERVAL: That nothing would astonish me more today.

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ÉMILIE: Gerval, you horrify me. My love, for the love that I bear for you, for the love that gives me life and happiness, answer me. If chance has really brought you to Sèvres, did you, nevertheless, question somebody about me?

GERVAL: Madame, that question is an insult.

ÉMILIE: The purest tenderness perhaps dictates an insult. Furthermore, if I have wounded you, I would feel that much more pleasure in asking your pardon... a pardon that you could grant to your Émilie.

GERVAL: Madame, I had forgotten that you could never insult me any longer.

ÉMILIE: Oh! This sentence clarifies everything for me. I see on your brow what is happening in your soul. In the course of loving you, your soul has become mine and I can still read what is there. Gerval, my presence in this place displeases you, does it not?

GERVAL: No. Where virtue resides, all is virtuous.

ÉMILIE: Your smile says the opposite.

GERVAL: But, why interpret it thus? A pure heart remains above all reproach.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, happiness is a plant so delicate that the smallest nothing harms it, and when one allows one's life to depend on one smile or one glance, one resigns oneself to all the suffering that can come from a hesitant smile or an uncertain glance.²⁵ Tell me that you love me and my joy will return. Gerval, I see it. You suspect Émilie. You are hiding some injury from me. If I am the cause of this, may I die!

GERVAL: Madame, silence yourself. (*Aside.*) Her sweet voice is going to awaken the love in the depths of my heart.

ÉMILIE: What are you saying?... Gerval, this morning, I made a mystery of my trip to you, but I hope to be able to explain it to you very soon.

GERVAL: I free you from this obligation. Have you successfully fulfilled your sacred duty?

ÉMILIE: Yes.

²⁵ Balzac was fascinated by the ways in which outward movements, however small or involuntary, could reflect inner thoughts and feelings. He explored this interest with a mixture of seriousness and parodic humour in his '*Théorie de la démarche*' ('*Theory of Human Locomotion*') in 1833.

GERVAL, *aside*: I know. (*Aloud.*) Madame, you dismissed Georges.

ÉMILIE: Oh my love, would that be the motive for this coldness of yours that is killing me. Oh! How happy I am, because it will soon be cleared up and you will be angry to have caused me a moment's pain, if in any case my pain comes from you.

GERVAL: Georges no doubt committed some act of infidelity?

ÉMILIE: No.

GERVAL: There will have been some dispute with our servants.

ÉMILIE: No.

GERVAL: Madame, did he watch with too curious an eye your comings and goings?

ÉMILIE: What would that have mattered? I can have the whole world as witness to my actions.

GERVAL: What then is the cause of his disgrace?

ÉMILIE, *aside*: What a fate! Everything he asks me today is something about which I must remain silent.

GERVAL: Well, Madame, you seem agitated!

ÉMILIE: Gerval, these number among the things that a woman who sincerely loves her husband must keep silent.

GERVAL: I am satisfied, Madame. (*Aside.*) Yet another temptation for my conscience. (*Aloud.*) Since chance desired that we should meet, will you allow me the honour of taking you back to your hotel?

ÉMILIE: What a speech!... That is not possible.

GERVAL: And, for what reason?

ÉMILIE: I cannot yet tell you.

GERVAL: Upon my soul, this is a bit strong, I demand it.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, I believe in truth that you are testing me. Go on. You can burden me with insults. I will love you no less. Strong in my innocence, I am certain that I shall not lose a single of my rights to your heart. Oh! Take the trouble to love, be faithful and insulting suspicions will be the rewards you reap for sweetness and modesty. Come, my love! Think what you like about this. Put things in the worst

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light. I am not worried in the least. Go ahead. I will always be your *Émilie* and I will wait patiently for you to become my *Gerval* once more.

GERVAL: Admit, however, *Madame*, that today I am most unhappy in all of the questions that I raise and the pardons I beg, and that in the end your confidence, your sweetness, and your love have grown prodigiously during my absence.

ÉMILIE: Unfortunate creature that I am!... My premonitions did not deceive me. *Gerval*, I love you!... And, you seem to hate me!... Farewell!

SCENE 15

GERVAL, GEORGES

GERVAL: Oh! She knows the way to my soul very well!... No! I believe her to be innocent because she speaks with the accent of virtue... What a misfortune that crime does not wither beauty... What torment! *Georges*!

GEORGES: Well then, *Monsieur*, do you have enough proof?

GERVAL: No.

GEORGES: What more do you require? As for me, revenge now has excited me to such a point that I...

GERVAL: *Georges*, I like your faithfulness, but you make me shudder.

GEORGES: Oh *Monsieur*, I see. *Madame*, with one smile, with one word, has charmed you. But, a woman is never more caressing, never more sweet, she never seems more innocent than when a passion grows in the depths of her heart. To hide love under the appearance of coldness, to hide coldness under a semblance of love it is all so easy for them and they make a game of the most sacred oaths with an indifference that we cannot call a crime because for them this fickleness of sentiment is rooted in nature.

GERVAL: You rekindle my hatred.

GEORGES: Oh, *Monsieur*! The door to that infernal house is open. Nothing would be easier than to reassure oneself, in the blink of an eye, of what *Madame* is doing there. Well, if I loved her, if I adored her, I would not move any closer.

GERVAL: That is true. The door remains open... No. I will not go over there.

GEORGES: That is just as well, *Monsieur*, because after all, it is your misfortune that you might perhaps find there.

GERVAL: Georges, you who are indifferent, go over there!

GEORGES: Heaven preserve me from that. (*Aside.*) He will go. I will know everything!

GERVAL: It is folly to hesitate.

GEORGES: Or wisdom...

GERVAL: My heart fails me. Why will you not go?

GEORGES: Because if Madame has betrayed you, for her, I...

GERVAL: Do not finish! (*He runs over.*)

SCENE 16

GEORGES, alone.

GEORGES: There he goes, that unfortunate man, and it is I, who pushed him to the precipice. Émilie, if you loved another, what a weapon that would be for me!... What hope. Oh! That she be covered in infamy, that she beg for death. Then, she would belong to me. I would bring her to my country, I... What a racket!

SCENE 17

GERVAL, GEORGES

GERVAL, *in the wings*: Good God!... I am dying...

GEORGES: What did he see?... (*He carries him in.*)

GERVAL: A baby... A baby!...

GEORGES: Oh, what good fortune!...

GERVAL, *delirious*: Oh, rage! Oh, despair!... Oh, death!... A baby!... Georges, I slipped in without a sound, slowly, like an intruder. I arrived and without being seen, pressed against the door. There, I saw Émilie. It was she, all right. Yes. This is no dream. She is still there. Calm, she was savouring her crime. She was cradling a baby. Perhaps she had just fed it? There, that is this sacred duty!... The looks she has for me have never held as much love as the one she seemed to give as she smiled at this horrible creature... What death shall I inflict upon her?...

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GEORGES: Kill her! Hey, Monsieur! She is not the real guilty party.

GERVAL: It does not matter.

GEORGES: Monsieur, avenge yourself! Never has revenge been so legitimate. Abandon a creature who is unworthy of your love.

GERVAL: Oh, Georges! Show some respect for her, all the same!

GEORGES: What, Monsieur? You still love her and you would still delay satisfying your need for revenge?

GERVAL: No. No, I will not delay this torture one single minute longer!

GEORGES: And her accomplice?

GERVAL: Oh! By God, he will die by my hand alone!... I breathe nothing but carnage, but murder! Oh, what a shudder!...

SCENE 18

GERVAL, GEORGES, MANFRED

MANFRED: That unfortunate creature!... She is in the river, perhaps, and these miserable beings tell me this with an indifference!... There is only one ray of hope that remains for me. One of these peasants has not answered and is still combing the countryside. What cruel uncertainty!...

GEORGES: How do you feel?

GERVAL: Better. Somebody spoke and it is one of the enemy.

GEORGES: Indeed! Here is the young man.

GERVAL: Him!... May he die! It is necessary to do away with him.

MANFRED, *arriving at the edge of the stage*: If she be dead, then I shall follow her. Émilie will take care of my son.

GERVAL, *bearing only these last words*: Scoundrel!...

MANFRED: Help!...

GEORGES: Silence! Or you are dead!

MANFRED: Oh! I knew that I was still in danger.

GERVAL: Monsieur, it is love that had brought you here.

MANFRED: Free, I might perhaps answer. Captive and under the dagger of a murderer, no human power will pull from my mouth a word or a murmur. I am a man, and if need be, I will suffer and keep silent.

GERVAL: Well, then, if I free you, will you answer my questions?

MANFRED: If I judge them to be suitable.

GERVAL: Be free. I entrust myself to your conscience.

MANFRED: I thank you. What do you wish from me?

GERVAL: Monsieur, I repeat again, is it love that has brought you here?

MANFRED: Yes, monsieur.

GERVAL: And are you loved in return?

MANFRED: I believe so.

GERVAL: Do you not have living proof of this in that house?

MANFRED: That is the truth!

GERVAL: The name of she who is dear to you?

MANFRED: That will never issue from my mouth until it can be heard with honour.

GERVAL: That is enough, sir. It is necessary that this very night, either you or I, either I or you, be the sole possessor of this perfidious woman.

GEORGES: And if you fall?... Let me strangle him.

MANFRED: What a surprise? Claire's madness comes from this? Oh, that seems impossible to me!

GERVAL: Sir, are you a man of honour?

MANFRED: You would do better to ask questions that I can answer!

GERVAL: Until this evening...

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MANFRED: Where shall I find you?

GERVAL: Everywhere.

MANFRED: But to conclude this all?

GERVAL: At Madame Gerval's townhouse.

MANFRED: I will be there, Monsieur. *(To himself.)* Oh, France! Cherished country! Homeland of glory and pleasure! I will die on your soil or be banished again once more for the same reason and you, cherished unfortunate woman, whether you love me or whether you love me not, I will fly once more to your aid. I do not want to depart from this life without seeing you and giving you my name. *(To Gerval.)* Monsieur, I will be there, no matter what hour of the night. What weapon do you choose?

GERVAL: They do not matter when one must die.

MANFRED: The witnesses?

GERVAL: No need for them. Your grave or mine shall be dug. The victor will leave.

MANFRED: We shall meet again.

Émilie escapes unseen aided by Marguerite, who is carrying the cradle. Georges and Gerval clasp hands saying: 'Revenge!'

ACT III

Same set as in the first act.

SCENE 1

ROSINE, alone.

ROSINE: Make me wait half a day in front of the water tower!... I would never have thought that Charles would be capable of such a trick!... Well, I love him no less for it!... Perhaps even a little more!... Oh, how good women are!... Yes, very good. Madame, is she not busy rocking a baby and giving it milk? A baby that she will have rescued, no doubt! She spends her life doing good deeds... And that nurse who has still not arrived... Madame is waiting impatiently for her, because she does not want the baby to stay here any longer... I do not know what is going on, but the mortal sadness to which Madame seems prey makes me suspect that it is something out of the ordinary.

SCENE 2

ÉMILIE, ROSINE

ÉMILIE: Well, is the nurse coming?

ROSINE: She will be here in a quarter of an hour.

ÉMILIE: She had better be here. Monsieur has not yet returned?

ROSINE: No, Madame.

ÉMILIE: How impatient I am to see him and to tell him everything, because that interview in Sèvres impressed upon my soul a sense of melancholy that overpowers me. Oh, Rosine! I am very sad.

ROSINE: But, Madame, you must have seen Monsieur.

ÉMILIE: Yes, Rosine. I saw him. I heard him. You know what joy I promised myself when I would see him, when I would hear him... Well!...

ROSINE: Well?

ÉMILIE: My premonitions did not deceive me this morning and I am an unfortunate creature.

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ROSINE: Whatever has happened to you?

ÉMILIE: Silence, Rosine!... I do not even wish to say it to myself and I am doing everything I can to banish the suspicion from my heart. But no, his last words 'your love has grown prodigiously in my absence' are still ringing in my ear and the tone of irony seems to me to portend some ominous doom.

ROSINE: Begging you pardon, but what is wrong with you?

ÉMILIE: An evil genie of fate is chasing after me and has plotted today's events... Oh! How I wish that it were tomorrow!...

ROSINE: You make me shiver. What is wrong, then?

ÉMILIE: My child, there are secrets that must die in the hearts of two spouses... Die...

ROSINE: What sadness!...

ÉMILIE: Rosine, did you say that I wanted Monsieur to come to my rooms as soon as he should arrive?

ROSINE: Yes, Madame.

ÉMILIE: Well, then leave me alone, because everything preys on me. I have had enough of myself. Go back to stay near that poor infant. I am going to lock you in because I do not want anybody to see him.

SCENE 3

ÉMILIE, alone.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, especially, must not enter without my having explained everything to him. Now that Manfred has arrived, there shall be no more mystery... I would like, however, to be able to keep my sister's secret strictly between the three of us because Gerval does have such rigid principles. He is so violent that he would hold prejudices against my sister that a whole life of innocence would never be able to dispel... If he knows nothing, then why say anything to him about it? But, should he even have the slightest suspicion, I will reveal everything to him. This course of action seems to me to be the best one to pursue. I am calmer now. What a racket. It is he! I recognise his footsteps.

SCENE 4

GERVAL, ÉMILIE

ÉMILIE: Oh, here you are, my love! I have wanted you so!... I was just thinking about you...

GERVAL: You were thinking about me, your husband? But, that is very kind! Oh, you are a model for all women!

ÉMILIE, *aside*: Always this cruel sarcasm!...

GERVAL: You left word that you desired to see me. What do you want from me? Come now, speak!

ÉMILIE: But, Gerval! You fill me with an astonishment that grows with each word you utter. What do you mean by this tone? By these manners? You are not the same.

GERVAL: It is true... I am imitating you... I...

ÉMILIE: Do not finish... I can guess your thoughts. My dear love, come here. Sit, here, beside me.

GERVAL: I wish to remain standing.

ÉMILIE: So be it... Gerval, I will ask that you hear me out without interrupting me, because what I am going to say is of the highest importance and requires the greatest of secrecy.

GERVAL: In that case, Madame, as these things of the highest importance will necessitate on my part explanations that must be kept secret for me, and even for you, this is not a good location. This sitting room is too close to the antechamber. We might be heard. Let us go into your apartments.

ÉMILIE: No, Gerval!...

GERVAL: Why this refusal? (*He heads toward the door.*) But, there are noises coming from in there!...

ÉMILIE: I do not hear anything...

GERVAL: Then, you are prodigiously distracted. There is somebody in there.

ÉMILIE: It is Rosine.

GERVAL: I just saw her.

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ÉMILIE: She will have entered from the other side.

GERVAL: But, why is the key not there?

ÉMILIE: Good God! Why this inquisition? What does it matter to you? Come back here, and listen to me, I beg of you.

GERVAL: You do not usually remove the key in this manner.

ÉMILIE: It was my wish to do so today. I am mistress in my own home, I think...

GERVAL: Yes, but I, I am master everywhere, and I intend to enter into this bedchamber immediately.

ÉMILIE: My love, you terrify me.

GERVAL: Oh? I terrify you!... Unworthy spouse, you are trembling! (*Aside.*) Well, do I need to get angry? (*Aloud.*) Madame, I believed that I inspired feelings in you that were not those of terror.

ÉMILIE: I no longer know what is happening in my heart... Gerval! Listen to me!...

GERVAL: Do you have the key?

ÉMILIE: Yes, Gerval. Here it is.

GERVAL: Oh! You removed it, yourself! Give it to me! I want it.

ÉMILIE: You want it!... I will give it back to you, but I would see it as the greatest proof of your love...

GERVAL: Of my love...

ÉMILIE: Of your love... to have the permission to speak to you before you enter into my room.

GERVAL: What shall I find in there, then?

ÉMILIE: Oh! Nothing that could alarm you...

GERVAL: The key!

ÉMILIE: Let me say to you that...

GERVAL: I want it, this instant! (*He grabs the key.*)

ÉMILIE: The baby is not mine!... (*She falls in a faint.*)

SCENE 5

ÉMILIE, alone. She flutters her hand.

SCENE 6

ÉMILIE, GERVAL

GERVAL: In my house!... The same cradle as in Sèvres!... Shall I lose my temper?... Would I demand a love that she no longer has for me? Tonight, I will leave without seeing her again... She is there. What silence!... Good God! She still has half of her virtue and her crime has killed her. Oh! I love her still!... Émilie, farewell!... Émilie! She will die!... Émilie!

ÉMILIE: Gerval, you have just said my name in the same tone as you used to use and this accent has brought me back to life. Gerval, I am innocent.

GERVAL: Oh! Do not touch me!... Émilie, may you live happy, if the picture of the grief of an honest man does not trouble you sometimes. Farewell! You will never see me again and I forbid you to say a single word or to follow my footsteps.

ÉMILIE: He is killing me...

GERVAL, *coming back*: Émilie! I feel that I will always adore you.

ÉMILIE: So, then hear me out!

GERVAL: No, because you can convince me with a single glance! Go! My sole revenge will be the memory that I leave you of my love for you.

SCENE 7

ÉMILIE, alone.

ÉMILIE: I will die of this!... I feel it. The blow has fallen, here, and the prediction has come true. The coldness of death has seized me already and my eyes refuse all tears... What shall I do? He has not understood me. He does not want to understand, through what mystery?... I will write to him! Should he read one single word, it will suffice... Oh! I cannot stand... My knees betray my will... I can barely open... Oh! My eyes are blurring!... Rosine!

SCENE 8

GEORGES, ÉMILIE

GEORGES: You called, Madame?

ÉMILIE: You are still here, Georges? (*Aside.*) Oh! Everything becomes clear!

GEORGES: Yes, Madame! We see each other for perhaps the last time and...

ÉMILIE: And, you have come no doubt to beg my pardon for the insult that you believe you inflicted on me this morning. Go, Georges! The insult will be lost in the very distance that separates us.

GEORGES: A completely different motive brings me.

ÉMILIE, *aside*: Let us see what he shall reveal to me.

GEORGES: Madame, this morning I invoked Vengeance and she has heard my prayer. Heard it and has answered it, only too well.

ÉMILIE: Oh, Georges! Since it is you who has deceived Monsieur de Gerval, no doubt you are going to hurry to explain everything to him.

GEORGES: No, Madame.

ÉMILIE: What are you telling me?

GEORGES: Will you listen to me this evening?

ÉMILIE: Yes, Georges.

GEORGES: Well then, Madame, I have plunged you into the abyss, since my speeches have revealed that which your cunning knew how to hide until this moment. Now, I am in despair because my love has outlived my anger.

ÉMILIE: Georges...

GEORGES: On your honour, listen to me. Monsieur no longer wishes to see you anymore and Monsieur will perhaps no longer exist after this evening.

ÉMILIE: What did you say?

GEORGES: The truth.

ÉMILIE: Gerval might die?...

GEORGES: It is probable.

ÉMILIE: He, die?... Oh!...

GEORGES: If he perishes, I will avenge him by strangling his rival, so Madame you will remain alone in the world. France will fill you with horror, as it will me. Well, I do not ask whether you are virtuous. The past belongs to God alone. For my part, I will answer for the future, and all that matters to me is that you are the only woman whose smile is the one I love. So, follow me! We will go far away, very far away, to the desert, to the ends of the universe, to wherever you like, in the end. There, no one will notice us. How happy we will be! You will find in me the slave, yes, the most attentive slave, and the most devoted one! Never shall the eye of a mortal penetrate our sanctuary. I will live for nothing other than you. For you alone, I shall divine your thoughts, your needs, your desires, and I feel enough strength to be able to content myself with your divine image and with hope. Yes, to carry out your orders shall be my delight! One single glance from you shall be my greatest joy. Your pleasure will be greater to me than my own, and in the end, I will make all creation bow down before a single one of your wishes and you will be, for Georges, a kind of visible divinity. Well?

ÉMILIE: Gerval die!... But, for what reason?...

GEORGES: You have not been listening to me!

ÉMILIE: Not see him?... Oh! My reason has gone!...

GEORGES: Well, Madame?

ÉMILIE: What, traitor? You are still here? You dare come near me and soil the air that I can hardly breathe? Get out of here! You fill me with horror! Your presence equals death to me!... You serpent! Three of your venomous words will have sufficed to destroy my happiness... Oh! I swear it! If you are the cause of my misfortune, and you are, then I... will still pardon you... because this would be a sin... that would make me die.

GEORGES: Oh! Heavenly virtue! And, you are the guilty one!

ÉMILIE: I? Guilty!... Of what?... I?... To whom shall I speak?...

GEORGES: Always this scorn! You will not follow me, I see!... Well, you will follow your spouse, I promise you that! You will be reunited!... We all shall be! I swear it!... But, let us not swear an oath quite yet. Madame! Do you give me no hope?

ÉMILIE: Oh! Give me back Gerval!... May I speak to him? See him for an instant? For a minute? A second?... (*Hysterical.*) Oh! My sister! You are calling me! I hear your

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delirious laughter. Well, we shall all be together on the road asking everybody for both of them... (*To Georges.*) Where is he?... God! My thoughts are all confused!...

GEORGES: Oh, your reason has been disturbed. Let me give it back to you and procure for myself the greatest pleasure, revenge! I fill you with horror, do I not?

ÉMILIE: Oh, yes!...

GEORGES: Well, you are going to beg me and kiss my feet!

ÉMILIE: On my knees?

GEORGES: On your knees... If I allow it?... Oh, flower that the storm shall destroy, I want to contemplate for one moment your delicate and pure beauty. Listen to me! You need to see Monsieur de Gerval again, if for no other reason than to intoxicate him with a single glance and to create in his eyes the semblance of manufactured innocence. He will submit to this yoke... See him, or justify yourself! It is all the same and you desire this.

ÉMILIE: Do I desire this?... Oh! For one single minute of an interview with him, I would pay half of my life, and then I would dedicate the remainder of it to him.

GEORGES: Very well. There is no one but me in the world who can procure this happiness for you, because he has placed you under my guard, and during his brief absence, everybody obeys me here. He has gone to dispose of his fortune and will only return in order to leave with me. Beg! Now, beg this horrible monster!

ÉMILIE: Georges, of course, if it is necessary that I throw myself at your feet and if you permit it, then I will do this... Yes... I will have the courage to do it... Georges, do you see any pride in my words. If you return Gerval to me, I ...

GEORGES: Oh, joy! Look here! Her first tender glance!

ÉMILIE: I will owe you more than life, because his love is more dear to me than everything. Is it necessary to fall at your feet?... Do you order it?... You do not answer!... Well, here I am!...

GEORGES: What delight!... (*He draws a dagger.*) If she died without seeing her husband again, then my revenge would be complete!

ÉMILIE, *escaping*: Help! Gerval, come protect me... May somebody warn him!...

SCENE 9

GEORGES, *alone.*

GEORGES: The infernal creature only adopted that loving tone to free herself from me. Go ahead! You shall die! I swear it now.

SCENE 10

GERVAL, GEORGES

GERVAL: What did I just hear? Where is Émilie?

GEORGES: She is looking for you to prove her innocence, but she has acted criminally against you and against the whole world.

GERVAL: Let us leave, Georges. The sight of this house is killing me. Once, happiness resided here. Now, everything is deadly. I have given my orders so that my adversary can come find me. Let us leave.

GEORGES: What, Monsieur? You want to leave Madame...

GERVAL: Oh, Georges! I understand you and I thank you. Yes! It would not be very noble to abandon her and not leave her a part of my fortune. I wish to overwhelm her with kindness. Every kind gesture will be a dagger's blow.

GEORGES: It is not that, Monsieur.

GERVAL: What do you mean to say?

GEORGES: What, Monsieur? You are going to go bury yourself in some foreign country? You will remain there plunged in grief and Madame will be here, happy?

GERVAL: Well, she will be happy!

GEORGES: Monsieur, what will become of the fortune that you are going to leave her?... This baby...

GERVAL: He will enjoy it!... This baby will profit from it!... Oh! That is a thought straight from Hell!

GEORGES: Monsieur, life reserves all of its treasures for villains.

GERVAL: That is true.

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GEORGES: And, Madame will live happily ever after?

GERVAL: Georges! Let us go! I can no longer control myself.

GEORGES: There are circumstances under which one metes out justice, oneself!...

GERVAL: Let us go, I say.

GEORGES, *aside*: I must convince him. (*Aloud.*) Monsieur! When one is in love, is not writing letters to one's beloved one of the sweetest ways to pass the time?

GERVAL: There might be letters!...

GEORGES: Do you see? In this corner, here? Madame was holding one close, just this morning.

GERVAL, *reading*.

GEORGES: She will die!...

GERVAL: Oh! Unhappy man! Why did I not leave!... (*Reading.*) To Madame Gerval. He calls her 'Émilie'. What love!... Oh! I would have liked to have seen her answers!...

GEORGES: Well, Monsieur? Shall we leave?

GERVAL: No. Oh! What pain!... She must die...

GEORGES: Monsieur! Calm yourself and decide...

GERVAL: Georges, you will have my fortune. You will unite us in the same grave, and since you, yourself, you are so faithful, some memory of us will linger at least on this Earth.

GEORGES: Monsieur! I say it again, avenge yourself in cold blood!

GERVAL: Oh! I can feel that I still love her. This Fury that rises in me renders me savage, but not yet savage enough for me to plunge this dagger, myself, into the breast that I have covered with my own kisses.

GEORGES: It is, indeed, more sublime, more grand to let her live happily ever after with that being that she will call your son and with he whom she shall soon call her husband.

GERVAL: Oh! That one! He shall not live!... No!... Somebody laughed, I believe. It was a laugh from Hell. Would that have been me? Georges!

GEORGES: What do you want?

GERVAL: Georges, in your soul, do you have the energy that I lack? Do you have the heart?

GEORGES: Yes.

GERVAL: Enough to strike a woman?

GEORGES: Only one alone! Your wife!

GERVAL: Quiet! Find a dagger!...

GEORGES: Here is one.

GERVAL: Already?

GEORGES: I have been carrying it in order to avenge you in case you should fall this evening.

GERVAL: Oh! Let me embrace you!... Such devotion does not usually spring from an African heart.

GEORGES: We will die all three of us, because I wish neither life nor fortune without you.

GERVAL: Good Georges! I feel now such satisfaction!... Oh no, no. It is the calm before the storm!... Émilie, die?...

GEORGES: Monsieur, once one has spoken this word, the action itself must follow.

GERVAL: You are good. Let me see her one more time.

GEORGES: To delay revenge is to abandon one's claim to it.

GERVAL: Georges, listen to me. I want to question Émilie because I cannot condemn her without hearing her out. Tell her that I am waiting for her in her drawing room and while she is on her way, go into her bedchamber on the other side. If she is not guilty, you will see me enter. If she be the one who enters, then strike. I will have condemned her.

GEORGES: You will be obeyed, but I will not need this dagger, because all ruse and trickery reside in the heart of a woman and for every single thing, there is always an excuse. The more guilty she is, the more innocent she shall appear... (*Aside.*) He has heard my words.

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GERVAL: Run and find her.

SCENE 11

GERVAL, alone.

GERVAL: What have I ordered? Everything seems to be to be a dream, between the thought of a crime and its execution, the soul seems to fall prey to hallucinations!... Oh! The stone from the prison cell, the bronze of the chains, the axe of the executioner cannot trouble the soul of an honest man and my reason has been toppled by that expression in a woman's glance that can change!... Let me remain impassive!... Oh! I hear Émilie!...

SCENE 12

ÉMILIE, GERVAL

GERVAL: Good God! What memories she has just awakened!...

ÉMILIE: Gerval, I have carefully saved the outfit that I was wearing on the day when you noticed me for the first time. I have been told that you wanted to see me and that you want to abandon me. I come as I was. Nothing has changed in my soul.

GERVAL: Nothing!... Émilie!...

ÉMILIE: Gerval!

GERVAL, *aside*: Oh! What a smile of innocence!... (*Aloud.*) Émilie, when I loved you, I knew that nothing perfect existed on earth. All the same, to me, you were perfection itself because I loved you!... Why do you remain standing?

ÉMILIE: If your love has disappeared, then we are no longer equals and I owe you respect as a master, and as a judge, perhaps.

GERVAL: Speak to me formally, then.

ÉMILIE: Sir, I will obey you. (*She wipes away a tear.*)

GERVAL: The errors that arise from defects that are inseparable from our nature must be pardoned because each of us has need of indulgence and I sense that I will always love you, even with your defects. But, there are insults that one cannot tolerate.

ÉMILIE: Oh! Do not look at me like that. You make me quake.

GERVAL: Émilie! If through the dictates of nature itself, your love for me ceased to exist, I would pity you. There would be no crime in it.

ÉMILIE: Oh! I would find much to blame in it!

GERVAL: No, Émilie! There would be none, if you confessed your involuntary penchant to me. But, what a horrible crime, what an atrocious one it would be to betray a spouse and to hide from him that one has ceased to love him.

ÉMILIE: That is true, Gerval.

GERVAL: Émilie, did you not vow to love me always?

ÉMILIE: No. But rather, I vowed to please you always.

GERVAL: Well, then! Perfidious woman, did you not go to Sèvres every day during my absence?

ÉMILIE: You have been kept well informed.

GERVAL: Did you not remain there for five hours each time?

ÉMILIE: You have not been deceived.

GERVAL: Did you not rent a house?

ÉMILIE: That is the pure truth.

GERVAL: Is there not a newborn babe in that house?

ÉMILIE: No, because he is here.

GERVAL: Even better, Madame!

ÉMILIE: Gerval!

GERVAL: Be quiet! One month ago, did you not go for a long time without writing to me?

ÉMILIE: Nothing could be more true.

GERVAL: This baby is about a month old, is it not?

ÉMILIE: Yes.

GERVAL: What an easy confession, what candour!

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ÉMILIE: What could be more natural, Gerval? I rented this house for my sister.

GERVAL: And this baby is your sister's, no doubt?

ÉMILIE: Yes, Gerval. This is the secret that I wanted to share with you earlier, ever since the moment when Claire's young lover returned from exile.

GERVAL: This novel is most interesting. This confidence would have been more believable six months ago.

ÉMILIE: Gerval, do you think that I have been unfaithful to you?

GERVAL: I would not know how to imagine this, because until now you had never hidden any of your thoughts from me, except this adventure that you hid from me the whole time.

ÉMILIE: Gerval!

GERVAL: I wish that you had never been born. Here, Madame! And, these love letters that you received in my absence, what do you say about them? And this baby that I have seen you rock and feed? Why was it not your sister doing that? Why did you not tell me that Claire had left her family? This confidence, would it have harmed you?... Oh! You would have a great deal of trouble to take me to Sèvres and to show me your sister, there!

ÉMILIE: Oh! Kill me! Kill me! I do not want to live any longer without your love.

GERVAL: Let us go to Sèvres!

ÉMILIE: Claire is not there!... I know!... She is there. My wits have gone.

GERVAL: Find your sister for me.

ÉMILIE: I am dying!...

GERVAL: Oh! You must hear me out completely. This is your first trial. It is nothing yet. Shall you call your accomplice, from whom I already have a confession, a liar? Give me some proof in the end and I shall believe you!

ÉMILIE: Proof!... proof!... I have no other proof than my word. That is the most sublime proof, the only proof that comes from innocence and it should suffice if you love me.

GERVAL: I no longer feel anything for you.

ÉMILIE: He no longer loves me and I am innocent. Oh! I feel a savage energy that sustains me! Yes! I am your Émilie! I still love you!... I am faithful to you! Do you believe me?...

GERVAL: Oh, it is contrition that makes you speak thus!

ÉMILIE: I! Repent?... And for what? I have told you the truth.

GERVAL: Émilie, swear to me that no one other than me has told you that he adores you.

ÉMILIE: I will not swear that.

GERVAL: Somebody told you that this morning.

ÉMILIE: That is true.

GERVAL: Who?

ÉMILIE: I cannot name him.

GERVAL: And you are innocent?

ÉMILIE: Yes!...

GERVAL: This is too much, Émilie! Think about all of your errors.

ÉMILIE: The love I bear you is too great. There is that one.

GERVAL: Do not look at me like that and go into your suite. You will receive my orders there.

ÉMILIE: Well! I shall continue to hope, because my sister and Manfred might still arrive.

GERVAL: She is smiling even at death. Émilie!

ÉMILIE: What do you want from me?

GERVAL: Do not go in. You cannot be innocent! But confess your sin! I will pardon you and will dedicate my life to you.

ÉMILIE: I am innocent and pure, as the flower that has just opened.

GERVAL: Go, go, Madame! Return to your rooms!

SCENE 13

GERVAL, alone.

GERVAL: This minute is a year in my soul.

SCENE 14

THE NEGRO, ÉMILIE, GERVAL

GERVAL: I am dying!

ÉMILIE: Gerval!... Gerval, farewell!...

THE NEGRO: She will belong to no one! (*While killing her.*) Love that renders one criminal, might it not also have the power to absolve?²⁶

GERVAL: African tiger!... Have I told you that this is what you are?

ÉMILIE: I am innocent.

GERVAL: Yes, yes!... Help!

SCENE 15

MANFRED, GERVAL, MARGUERITE, GEORGES, ÉMILIE

MARGUERITE: Victory! She has been found! She has been found!...

²⁶ As noted in our introduction, our translation offers two alternate endings. Each attempts to reconcile dramatic logic with the difficulty of deciphering words and inserting lines written out in the margin. Specifically, the ambiguities stem from two insertions that run vertically up the lower left margin of the last page of the manuscript, as well as two illegible pronouns and an illegible word. The first reads either 'En la tuant' or perhaps 'En se tuant'. The second insertion clearly reads 'L'amour qui rend criminel n'aurait-il pas le pouvoir d'absoudre', but there is no indication where it belongs in the text. In attempting to resolve these puzzles, most editors have traditionally opted to read the pronoun as 'se' and considering it as an additional gloss to Georges's suicide. Such an interpretation allows for a potentially happy ending in which Georges dies, but Émilie might hope to recover. The bolder editing decision would be to read this line as one Georges gives while murdering Émilie ('En la tuant'). Logically, this would require inserting the second insertion into the script earlier. We suggest it fits most appropriately, here, in Scene 14. We propose this darker reading, in which both Émilie and Georges die, as our first ending.

GERVAL: Is that Marguerite?

MANFRED: What do I see? Madame Gerval, murdered!...

ÉMILIE: My sister!... My sister!...

MANFRED: As soon as she saw me, all her wounds were healed and at this very moment, she is resting next to her son. I just brought her to your apartments.

GERVAL: Good God!... Émilie was telling the truth! It is her sister whom you love!

MANFRED: I can now admit that, because in a short time, Claire will be my cherished wife.

GERVAL: Where can I flee!... I, myself, have dishonoured the purest of virtues. Oh, my brother, I depend on your discretion! That of this woman, I know how to buy it, but Georges...

GEORGES: Rest easy, I love you enough to... Just let me see her, one last time!...

GERVAL: Do not go near her!

GEORGES: How beautiful she is!... Master, if love made my arm tremble before, in just a moment it will tremble no more and your secret will be kept safe! (*He kills himself.*)

GERVAL: Émilie, what does he mean?

ÉMILIE: Since he is dying,²⁷ I must keep silent.

GERVAL: And my pardon?

ÉMILIE: Gerval, my wound will be dear to me.

²⁷ The Cordova and Sol edition and the Milatchtich edition opt for a different reading of this line, suggesting that Émilie justifies her silence with the phrase, 'Puisqu'il m'aime' ('Since he loves me').

ALTERNATE ENDING

SCENE 14

THE NEGRO, ÉMILIE, GERVAL

GERVAL: I am dying!

ÉMILIE: Gerval!... Gerval, farewell!...

THE NEGRO: She will belong to no one!

GERVAL: African tiger!... Have I told you that this is what you are?

ÉMILIE: I am innocent.

GERVAL: Yes, yes!... Help!

SCENE 15

MANFRED, GERVAL, MARGUERITE, GEORGES, ÉMILIE

MARGUERITE: Victory! She has been found! She has been found!...

GERVAL: Is that Marguerite?

MANFRED: What do I see? Madame Gerval, murdered!...

ÉMILIE: My sister!... My sister!...

MANFRED: As soon as she saw me, all her wounds were healed and at this very moment, she is resting next to her son. I just brought her to your apartments.

GERVAL: Good God!... Émilie was telling the truth! It is her sister whom you love!

MANFRED: I can now admit that, because in a short time, Claire will be my cherished wife.

GERVAL: Where can I flee!... I, myself, have dishonoured the purest of virtues. Oh, my brother, I depend on your discretion! That of this woman, I know how to buy it, but Georges...

GEORGES: Rest easy, I love you enough to... Just let me see her, one last time!...

GERVAL: Do not go near her!

GEORGES: How beautiful she is!... Master, if love made my arm tremble before, in just a moment it will tremble no more and your secret will be kept safe! (*He kills himself.*) (*While taking his own life.*) Love that renders one criminal, might it not also have the power to absolve?

GERVAL: Émilie, what does he mean?

ÉMILIE: Since he is dying,²⁸ I must keep silent.²⁹

GERVAL: And my pardon?

ÉMILIE: Gerval, my wound will be dear to me.

²⁸ The Cordova and Sol edition and the Milatchtich edition opt for a different reading of this line, suggesting that Émilie justifies her silence with the phrase 'Puisqu'il m'aime' ('Since he loves me').

²⁹ Georges's final words questioning whether a love that precipitates a criminal act might also contain within it the power of absolution act as a foil for Gerval's anguished demand for pardon.

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