No tale is too slight, in *La Comédie humaine*, to bear a political burden, and *Pierrette*, as slight as its pitiful heroine, shoulders a disproportionately weighty charge. In this short novel of 1840, an innocent young girl dies, not just because of neglect and abuse by her hateful unmarried cousins, but also because of politics. Certainly Balzac intended to expose the harm caused by the *célibataires*, Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis Rogron, “célibataires sérieusement célibataires,” as Balzac called them in his preface to the first edition (4: 24), but through their story his narrative emphasizes the fateful connection between Pierrette Lorrain’s private story and the larger social theater. In the provincial town of Provins to which circumstances bring her, political passions rage, fueled by petty private ones. It is to these furious and devious party politics that Pierrette falls victim. Just before the end, the guilty partisans turn her story into a lie, first through a judicial *non-lieu*, dismissing the case, which is unjust, then by mendacious retellings. In the final paragraphs, Balzac turns her story into a myth.

*Pierrette* is one of the novels of *La Comédie humaine* in which the personal history of an individual is inflected toward myth, the enduring history of a type. Lise Queffélec’s strong analysis of the mythic dimension of *La vieille fille*, which dominates the summary ending of that novel, connects myth with anthropology, the Balzacian science that allows us to make sense of a story. (According to *La vieille fille*, the lack of instruction in anthropol-
ogy for all its people led France into the error of the July Monarchy.) In Pierrette, the key to this anthropology is the story of Beatrice Cenci, treated by Balzac as a mythic figure of innocence and purity sullied by political passions.

Pierrette’s genealogy, shown schematically in figure 8.1, makes her a victim from the start. By virtue of M. Auffray’s two marriages separated by fifty years, the family divides into two camps, which are diametrically opposed along several axes. On the side of the first Mme Auffray, mother of the ugly Mme Rogron and grandmother of the noxious célibataires, there is age, malice, avarice, hatred, health, longevity, and strength, while on the side of the second Mme Auffray, mother of the charming Mme Lorrain and grandmother of the adorable Pierrette, one finds youth, kindness, generosity, love, illness, mortality, and weakness. Even in the first description of Pierrette, as Véronique Bui has shown, she appears so ill and pale that she is compared to a funerary statue of marble (241). Rogron the father practiced usury and supplies his children with apprentices in what Bui has called a slave trade (242). His children, the retired mercers Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis, are narrow, cold, heartless, greedy, and stupid. At forty Sylvie looks like fifty. She especially is characterized by her implacable hatred, while Pierrette, “un de ces enfants de l’amour, que l’amour a doués de sa tendresse, de sa vivacité, de sa gaieté, de sa noblesse, de son dévouement” [one of those love children whom love has endowed with its tenderness, its vivacity, its gaiety, its nobility, and its devotion] (4: 77), “ne savait qu’aimer” [knew only how to love] (4: 79). She incarnates love and would, if she lived, make a marriage of love like her mother. On the Rogron side greedy business succeeds, whereas the Lorrain family goes bankrupt and lives at the mercy of others in an old-age hospice; all the Rogrons live long, while the second Mme Auffray dies at forty, her daughter Mme Lorrain dies the same year at about twenty-two, and Colonel Lorrain dies when Pierrette is only fourteen months old. Pierrette too will die young, as a teenager. In its systematic antithesis, this genetic structure, like most of Balzac’s genealogies, is overwhelmingly significant, figuring both character and destiny. As an indicator of character, one can hardly fail to notice the roguish, grasping ill-humor suggested by the sonority of the name Rogron. Pierre Citron in the Preface to the Garnier-Flammarion edition unfolds Rogron into “le ton rogue d’un ogre qui gronde” [the arrogant tone of a scowling ogre] (36). Jean-Louis Tritter for his part hears in it “la grognerie, la rogne et le grondement” [growling, crossness, and snarling] (Introduction, 4: 18). Finally, Jean-Hervé Donnard speaks of “Rogron, ce sinistre crétin, qui étale sa vanité” [Rogron, that sinister moron who displays his vanity] (293).
Figure 8.1 *Pierrette* genealogy
Orphaned at an early age, raised by her grandparents on her father’s side, Pierrette resembles the chaste and virginal Virginie in *Paul et Virginie*, a comparison Balzac twice brings to our attention. Nicole Mozet, however, calls *Pierrette* the anti-*Paul et Virginie*, “la revanche brutale du social sur la nature” [the brutal revenge of the social on nature] (*La ville de province* 212). But I believe Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s novel already represents the brutal revenge of the social on nature. *Paul et Virginie* contains this very thesis in its ending: Virginie dies because she has been sent away to France and has lost the natural innocence of her childhood. In Balzac’s novel, Pierrette’s native Brittany stands for her primitive, innocent life, full of natural affection, as the Ile de France (her island home) does for Virginie. Brittany is Pierrette’s lost paradise. Pierre Citron describes it as “une province reculée, peu atteinte par la civilisation, et où se conservent des traditions de naturel, de simplicité et de générosité” [a remote province, scarcely touched by civilization, where traditions of nature, simplicity, and generosity are preserved] (Preface 23). Everything that comes from this distant and utopian province is charming, gay, natural, beautiful—like the song Brigaut sings, Pierrette’s Breton bonnet, her manners, and even her silvery voice. The sixteen-year-old Jacques Brigaut, who follows her to Provins, is her Paul (one who eventually seeks but cannot find the romantic death of his model), while Provins figures the regulated society that imposes other rules upon Pierrette (such as the need to learn what a young woman should know). Her half first cousin Sylvie, like Virginie’s aunt in France, represents the social ethos, an influence contradicting nature in this case as in the earlier novel, and for very similar reasons—primarily celibacy, misplaced pride, and greed.

As long as Sylvie is compared to Virginie’s unmarried aunt in France and not to her mother Mme de la Tour or Paul’s mother Marguerite, both ideal Balzacian maternal figures, *Pierrette* is a *Paul et Virginie* for the 1840s. Just as Virginie dies because of the inflexible social and colonial forces still powerful at the end of the eighteenth century, overwhelming the gentle qualities of nature, Pierrette dies the victim of forces characteristic of the time when the novel takes place—near the end of the monarchy. These forces are money fueling political ambition, born of materialism and “l’empire accordé par les lois à l’argent” [the power granted by laws to money] (4: 94). As Citron notes: “L’important est le pouvoir, lequel s’obtient par l’argent, lequel à son tour ne s’obtient vite que par le mariage ou l’héritage” [The important thing is power, which is obtained by money, which in turn is obtained quickly only through marriage or inheritance] (Preface 45).

As the first of the three novels grouped in *Les célibataires*, *Pierrette* paints the moral portrait of a particular social segment and its effects in the con-
text where it occurs. The portrait of the célibataires is set amid a generalized lowering of social rank in Provins. There is no viable aristocracy except as a bourgeoisie with pretensions (“l’aristocratie bourgeoise et ministérielle de la ville haute” [the ministerial bourgeoisie aristocracy of the upper section of the city] [4: 72]), while the Rogrons’ post-mercantile rank is lower yet, symbolically set in the “ville basse” [lower section of the city]. Jean-Louis Tritter, in his introduction to Pierrette in the Pléiade edition, notes that the party in power scuttles itself, and that in a sense Provins represents “le symbole de la France royaliste en décomposition” [the symbol of a decomposing Royalist France] (4: 14). Having left behind the world of commerce and returned to Provins, Rogron brother and sister represent the nefarious class of the idle former merchant. Stupidly believing that they can now “be” bourgeois because they have amassed enough wealth to stop working, they incarnate the maxim “Tout marchand aspire à la bourgeoisie” [Every merchant aspires to join the bourgeois class] (4: 46), by which Balzac early suggests a source of the harm to be done to Pierrette. The Rogron house apes bourgeois style in comic exaggeration; it is the old maid’s mania, the “affection factice” [artificial attachment] that replaces natural affections for the célibataires (4: 78–79). With nothing to do, excluded from the bourgeois salons, Sylvie and Jérôme-Denis are easily snatched up by the loosely grouped liberals, cunning schemers with shady pasts. When the Rogrons acquire Pierrette, they happily return to their old cruel habits as despots of their apprentices, when they were mercers, and their boredom vanishes.

Shaped by this social climate, the political drama around Pierrette starts in 1824 when she is sent to live in Provins at the end of her eleventh year; she dies in March 1828, at Easter, and the novel closes with the political destinies of the town’s bourgeois forces after 1830. In its narrative design and chronology, the novel links Pierrette’s story tightly with the political one: events of Pierrette’s life are simultaneous with political events, and the narration alternates between political episodes and episodes concerning Pierrette. Not only do political explanations intervene in the narration of Pierrette’s story, but, moreover, Pierrette’s story serves political interests directly. Provins had never had a liberal party of any consequence until she came. Her arrival in Provins is the object of careful study by the scattered elements of the opposition, to which the new situation at the Rogrons’ house gives the consistency it lacked. To show this connection between the personal and the political, a paragraph describing the beginnings of intrigues immediately follows the short summary of the first of three phases in Pierrette’s life (4: 83). With Rogron as their moneybags, Vinet, Gouraud, and others form a liberal party which figures the forces of greed and hatred in the political arena as much as
the célibataires represent cruelty and malice in the genealogical sphere. (Jean-Louis Tritter ranks the novel among those where “Balzac attaque le plus violemment les libéraux” [Balzac attacks liberals the most violently] [“A propos des épreuves” 29].) Even as the party is just being constituted, as the political intrigues are just starting to ferment, Pierrette is already described as its victim. Because Mme Tiphaine’s salon scorns Sylvie while admitting the charming Pierrette, Sylvie becomes the implacable enemy of the established party headed by the Tiphaines. The wily lawyer Vinet exploits Sylvie’s hatred and founds a newspaper paid for by Jérôme-Denis Rogron. Balzac’s text repeatedly emphasizes how tightly the formation of the liberal party is linked to Pierrette: “Au moment où, pendant que sa femme donnait les cartes, l’avocat expliquait l’importance que Rogron, le colonel et lui, Vinet, acquerraient par la publication d’une feuille indépendante pour l’arrondissement de Provins, Pierrette fondait en larmes” [While his wife was dealing the cards, at the moment when the lawyer was explaining the importance that Rogron, the colonel, and he, Vinet, would acquire through the publication of an independent newspaper for the Provins arrondissement, Pierrette was bursting into tears] (4: 87). Vinet’s ambitions against the rich and powerful have a horrible influence on Pierrette’s destiny comparable to the malignant mercantilism of her cousins.

The political rivalry fatefully predestines Pierrette to harm, like the predetermined outcome of a myth: “Provins ne devait pas moins être funeste à Pierrette que les antécédents commerciaux de ses cousins” [Provins would not be less fatal to Pierrette than her cousins’ commercial background] (4: 50). She becomes the token shifted about on the game board by the several squabbling interests, the pieces thrown down as the stakes in the game. By the time the drama reaches its crisis, Pierrette’s destiny has become inextricably embroiled in politics, and Balzac insists on reminding us of it, underscoring the simultaneity of Pierrette’s illness and the most recent developments in the partisan war (4: 143); describing political events that have a great influence on the trial concerning Rogron’s guardianship of Pierrette (4: 152); pithily condemning Vinet’s lies: “Le procès se plaidait. Pendant que la victime des Rogron se mourait, Vinet la calomniait au tribunal” [The case was being heard. While the Rogrons’ victim was dying, Vinet was slandering her before the court] (4: 157). The maneuvers of the opposed camps both exploit and depend on Pierrette’s martyrdom. André Vanoncini calls this chillingly effective source of evil a dramatic, multidimensional machine (262). Lying, betrayal, and deceit are the hallmarks of the multidimensional political action as it takes the young girl into the teeth of the machine. The play could hardly be more somber, a tenebrous Scène de la vie politique
Balzac could have added (along with others) to that much under-populated rubric.

As the liberal party is planted in the fertile soil of Sylvie’s hatred, the political passion feeds and is fed by private ones centered on Pierrette. Balzac carefully makes the connection: “La prochaine arrivée de Pierrette hâta de faire éclore les pensées cupides inspirées par l’ignorance et par la sottise des deux célibataires” [Pierrette’s imminent arrival hastened the hatching of covetous thoughts inspired by the ignorance and stupidity of the two bachelors] (4: 69). By a law of his world, every célibataire wants a spouse, and that impulse toward marriage figures the passion driving all movement in this novel, where the comedy of marriage exactly aligns with the political comedy. Balzac engages in some of his most tortuous language to describe what must be taken as the desire of the vieille fille. Here is a sample:

Ces calculs profonds ne parlent pas aussi brutalement que l’histoire les exprime. Vouloir rendre les circonlocutions, les précautions oratoires, les longues conversations où l’esprit obscurcit à dessein la lumière qu’il y porte, où la parole mielleuse délaie le venin de certaines intentions, ce serait tenter un livre aussi long que le magnifique poème appelé Clarisse Harlowe. (4: 101)

[These deep calculations do not speak as brutally as the story expresses them. To want to express the circumlocutions, the oratorical precautions, the long conversations where the mind purposefully obscures the light it brings to it, where honeyed speech dilutes the venom of certain intentions, would be to attempt a book as long as the magnificent poem called Clarissa Harlowe.]

Intrigues link the private politics of an inheritance to be won, if not stolen from its deserving owner, to the public politics in which power depends on connections. Marriages are plotted like political alliances, for purposes of power and not for love, affection, or family (in truth, somewhat business as usual). In her maniacal urge to marry, Sylvie casts her eye on colonel Gouraud and absurdly finds a rival in Pierrette. Such a rivalry recalls one of the stock situations of the comic theater, here strangely distorted and deviously twisted by Sylvie’s atrocious hatred. Only Sylvie could imagine the misalliance of the fourteen-year-old Pierrette with the blustery colonel more than three times her age. As for Gouraud, eager for the old maid’s money, he thinks nothing of blaming Pierrette (while at the same time thinking of marrying her in case she should inherit): “Le colonel Gouraud, jaloux de plaire à Mlle Rogron, lui
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donnait raison en tout ce qui concernait Pierrette. Vinet appuyait également
les deux parents en tout ce qu’ils disaient contre Pierrette” [Colonel Gouraud,
eager to please Mlle Rogron, agreed with her in everything concerning Pier-
rette. Vinet also supported the two siblings in everything they said against
Pierrette] (4: 89). Exploiting these marital intrigues, both Vinet and Tiphaine,
on opposite sides of the political fence, play Pierrette for their strategic pur-
poses: “[Vinet] eut bientôt trouvé le moyen de perdre à la fois Pierrette et le
colonel, espérant être débarrassé de l’un par l’autre” [[Vinet] had soon found
the means of destroying both Pierrette and the colonel, hoping to be rid of
one through the other] (4: 104); “Ainsi le Président [Tiphaine] vit dans la
cause entre Pierrette et les Rogron un moyen d’abattre, de déconsidérer, de
déshonorer [l’Opposition]” [Thus the President saw in the case between Pier-
rette and the Rogrons a means of demolishing, of discrediting, of dishonoring
[the Opposition]] (4: 143). Pierrette is truly “cette enfant broyée entre des
intérêts implacables” [this child crushed between implacable interests] (4: 96).

In such a way does the bourgeoisie of the town acquire a guilty con-
science—and so it will retell Pierrette’s story to suit itself. As Balzac pithily
writes, “L’intérêt général exigeait l’abaissement de cette pauvre victime” [The
general welfare called for the abasement of this poor victim] (4: 96). Sylvie’s
mounting jealousy has boiled over the political pot. Sent away by the fur-i-
ous old maid, Pierrette walks into a door in the dark, strikes her head at the
temple and develops a subdural hematoma (Van den Doel 1291); at the same
time, suspected of receiving a love letter from Gouraud, she is attacked by
Sylvie, who bashes her hand to a bloody mess. The injuries compound her
chlorosis (greensickness), an enfeebling anemic illness of adolescent girls that
fascinated Balzac, and lead to the melodramatic arrival of her grandmother,
Mme Lorrain, the mother of Pierrette’s father. With her “colère divine”
[divine fury] and her visionary ability to “read” Pierrette’s entire story (4:
140), Mme Lorrain appears as a mythological figure, an intervention of a
force of good. The doctors too, including Bianchon and Desplein, are on the
side of truth—a constant in La Comédie humaine. Toward the end, while
the waning life in Pierrette’s fragile body depends on a final heroic medical
operation, trepanation or trephining, the demonstration of the harm caused
by the two célibataires is summarized in several restatements. These results
are announced in logical fashion with a phrase beginning “Ainsi, l’épouvan-
table martyr exercé brutalement sur Pierrette par deux imbéciles tyrans”
[Thus the dreadful martyr brutally exercised upon Pierrette by two imbecilic
tyrans] (4: 152). The true account Pierrette tells her grandmother, the first of
the several retellings, is nevertheless powerless in the face of those that follow,
narratives of mendacity and myth.
The revisions of Pierrette’s story arise in a number of legal proceedings that stem from the crisis—appropriately so, to the extent that they are trial testimony, but they also occur as rumors and innuendoes. Although for the most part the struggle goes in Pierrette’s favor, when she dies, the last legal action, a criminal trial against Jérôme-Denis Rogron, ends officially in a non-lieu, and no one is left to counter the lies that follow. From the start, Balzac had announced, as is his wont, a “drama” (by which he often meant a tragedy), and clearly this concerns Pierrette’s present life in Provins, just as the expression “son histoire” [her story] (4: 36) signifies her past. By the end, both the story and the drama have been taken over by the political forces of the town—and of the narrative. The retellings are all that will remain of the plot.

What makes the lies insidious is that they are not entirely fiction. It is a matter of verbiage masking the truth, and this structure of mendacity is anchored in the character of the two bachelors. From the start, Denis Rogron’s stupidity is “parleuse” [talkative] (4: 44). Thus is established in the story an exemplar of speech unhinged from a content; his verbiage is empty, not to say false. Even though Rogron has little role in the retelling, which is given to third parties, empty verbiage is an ingredient in the mendacity that reigns at the end, for which the reader has been well prepared. Similarly, Sylvie has, since adolescence, two masks: the face she makes up to show her clients in her fabric store, and the real face, which is natural to old maids (4: 45). In like manner, her hideous behavior toward Pierrette is now masked by the lies others tell. Balzac thus establishes a semiotic system giving consistency and presence to mendacity. As the novel approaches its end, the retellings of Pierrette’s story perpetuate this system. After the judge pronounces an order in Pierrette’s favor, Vinet inaugurates a mendacious version of her story: “Et tout ce bruit pour une petite fille qui entretiendait une intrigue avec un garçon menuisier!” [And all this fuss for a little girl who was having a romantic intrigue with a carpenter boy!] (4: 149). He goes around explaining to his political cohorts: “Sylvie, fille éminemment sage et religieuse [and that is her mask], avait découvert une intrigue entre la pupille de son frère et un petit ouvrier menuisier, un Breton nommé Brigaut. Ce drôle savait très bien que la petite fille allait avoir une fortune de sa grand-mère, il voulait la suborner” [Sylvie, an eminently decent and religious woman [and that is her mask], had uncovered an amorous intrigue between her brother’s pupil and a little carpentry worker, a Breton named Brigaut. The rascal knew perfectly well that the young girl was going to inherit a fortune from her grandmother; he wanted to suborn her] (4: 149).
This version lies at a considerable distance from the truth we have been told throughout the story. The Conseil de Famille, another legal proceeding with testimony, hears the same story: that there was an amorous intrigue between Pierrette and Brigaut (4: 150–51).

To one particular character belong the most important retellings, including the last one: the magistrate Desfondrilles. He is first described as a “juge-suppléant” [surrogate judge], “plus archéologue que magistrat” [more of an archeologist than a magistrate] (4: 64). Studying the past and seeking to restore it in the present, on the one hand, and making judgments and promulgating legal opinions, on the other, Desfondrilles serves as the perfect figure combining myth and mendacity: he is one who can make a lie into a vital, enduring, and signifying story. Desfondrilles is an “homme fin . . . qui avait fini par s’amuser de tous les intérêts en jeu dans Provins” [astute man . . . who had come to enjoy all the interests at play in Provins] (4: 123). He has no serious role until the last pages, when his double authority as judge and archeologist will bring to Pierrette’s life, beyond her death, a closure without appeal. At the moment he is introduced in the novel, he is acting like an archeologist, calling for a bas-relief to commemorate Provins’s glorious past as a capital (4: 65). (The mention of the bas-relief, as a symbolic representation of history, foreshadows the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, which follows upon Desfondrilles’s retelling of Pierrette’s story.) By the time Rogron is being tried, Desfondrilles has become the juge d’instruction (investigating magistrate) in Provins, and three pages before the end, when he reports to the court, “le Tribunal rendit un jugement de non-lieu parfaitement motivé” [the Court rendered a perfectly justified judgment of case dismissed] (4: 160).

By then, no one who has dabbled in Pierrette’s death admits the least remnant of guilt, and Desfondrilles caps the general amnesty of the bourgeoisie with this astonishing, brilliant retelling:

—Affaire de parti, répond le président Desfondrilles. On a voulu faire croire à des monstruosités [on the part of the Rogron bachelors]. Par bonté d’âme, ils ont pris chez eux cette Pierrette, petite fille assez gentille et sans fortune; au moment de se former, elle eut une intrigue avec un garçon menuisier, elle venait pieds nus à sa fenêtre y causer avec ce garçon qui se tenait là, voyez-vous? Les deux amants s’envoyaient des billets doux au moyen d’une ficelle. Vous comprenez que dans son état, aux mois d’octobre et de novembre, il n’en fallait pas davantage pour faire aller à mal une fille qui avait les pâles couleurs. Les Rogron se sont admirablement bien conduits, ils n’ont pas réclamé leur part de l’héritage de cette petite, ils ont tout abandonné à sa
grand-mère. La morale de cela, mes amis, est que le diable nous punit toujours d’un bienfait. (4: 162)

[“A partisan affair,” answers president Desfondrilles. “They wanted to make people believe there were monstrosities [on the part of the Rogron bachelors]. Out of the kindness of their souls, they took in this Pierrette, a rather nice little girl without a fortune; as she was becoming a young woman, she had an amorous intrigue with a carpenter boy, she would come to her window in her bare feet to chat with the boy who stood over there, you see? The two lovers sent each other love letters by means of a string. You understand that in her state, during the months of October and November, little else was needed for such a pale-colored girl to go bad. The Rogrons behaved themselves admirably; they did not claim their part in this little girl’s inheritance; they gave up everything to her grandmother. The moral of all this, my friends, is that the devil always punishes us for a good action.”]

None of the events is actually changed, but, like the other retellings, everything is slanted to protect the guilty. The “épouvantable vérité” [dreadful truth] is known only to Brigaut and the doctor Martener (4: 162), after Mme Lorrain has died. In the lines that follow this retelling, myth joins these lies to further obscure the truth.

For Balzac too retells Pierrette’s story in the penultimate paragraph, balancing mendacity with a powerful myth: he compares her to Beatrice Cenci, hoping to grant a mythic dimension to his less famous story and to compel the reader’s involvement in making his delicate narrative more significant than mere history, drama, or story: “Pour donner à ceci d’immenses proportions, il suffit de rappeler qu’en transportant la scène au Moyen Âge et à Rome sur ce vaste théâtre, une jeune fille sublime, Béatrix Cenci, fut conduite au supplice par des raisons et par des intrigues presque analogues à celles qui menèrent Pierrette au tombeau” [To give immense proportions to this, it suffices to remember that, transporting the scene to the Middle Ages and to the vast theater that was Rome, a sublime young girl, Beatrice Cenci, was led to her execution for reasons and intrigues almost analogous to those that led Pierrette to her grave] (4: 162). The sixteen-year-old Beatrice Cenci was condemned by the pope to be beheaded in 1599 for having her father killed, after he had long abused her. But the comparison is troubling. Little of Beatrice’s
story explains Pierrette’s. There are some elements in common: the suffering of the heroine, the injustices and the persecution by judicial forces of which she was victim, her calm stoicism and her resistance to pain, and a wound to the head (Count Cenci is said to have stomped on his daughter’s head). Yet, while the Cenci story involves evil, private passions, and politics, all of which do occur in Pierrette, it tells us nothing about the evil that Balzac specifically castigates while exposing it in horrifying detail: celibacy. More important, the key terms determining Beatrice’s guilt and innocence are absent from Pierrette’s life and death. Nothing resembling rape, incest, parricide, or execution by beheading occurs in Pierrette, and the moral ambiguities that make the Cenci story both fascinating and disturbing would seem to make Beatrice ill-suited to confer on Pierrette a quasi-divine aura. Furthermore, although Balzac claims that now “l’histoire et les vivants . . . condamnent le pape, et font de Béatrix une des plus touchantes victimes des passions infâmes et des factions” [history and the living . . . condemn the pope, and make Beatrice one of the most moving victims of infamous passions and factions] (4: 162–63), it is not certain that the living and the dead have so universally condemned Beatrice Cenci’s punishment by the forces of the pope. The two important nineteenth-century versions of the story by Stendhal and Percy Bysshe Shelley are less partisan.

Long before Balzac mentions it, the Cenci story had achieved a kind of mythic quality, partly because it existed from the start in several narrations, which were produced for particular purposes to persuade people, and partly because it involved archetypal family relationships. As Antonin Artaud wrote of his play Les Cenci, “le père est destructeur. Et c’est par là que ce sujet rejoint les Grands Mythes” [the father is destructive. And that is the reason this subject belongs with the Great Myths] (cited in di Maio 161). Derrida in his study of Artaud also mentions parricide as a mythic origin of theater: “Un meurtre est toujours à l’origine de la cruauté, de la nécessité nommée cruauté. Et d’abord un parricide. L’origine du théâtre, telle qu’on doit la restaurer, c’est une main portée contre le détenteur abusif du logos, contre le père, contre le Dieu d’une scène soumise au pouvoir de la parole et du texte” [A murder is always at the origin of cruelty, of the necessity named cruelty. And above all a parricide. The origin of theater, such as we should understand it, is a hand raised against the abusive detainer of the Logos, against the father, against the God of a stage subject to the power of speech and of the text] (350).

Clearly for Balzac too the central figure had the quality of myth. It is virtually certain that Balzac knew Stendhal’s narrative “Les Cenci,” published in La Revue des deux mondes in 1837. In addition to the circumstantial proof
of chronology and Balzac’s interest in Stendhal, both Stendhal and Balzac consider the 1500s part of the “Moyen Âge”; this usage is all the more aberrant in that Beatrice Cenci died in the last year of the sixteenth century; if Balzac too speaks of “Moyen Âge,” it is likely he borrowed this detail from Stendhal. Several readers have shown the influence of Stendhal on Pierrette, particularly in the description of the love between Pierrette and Brigaut. “Les Cenci” was published among the Chroniques italiennes, eight narratives Stendhal borrowed and retold from manuscripts obtained in Italy. In translating and adapting the account found in the manuscript, he both omitted some of the most gruesome and obscene particulars and added to the original, especially to contribute psychological motivations and to clarify points of detail; he also elaborated on the portraits of both father and daughter. Unlike Shelley’s play, Stendhal does not give us to understand that Francesco Cenci actually raped his daughter. In any case, those who tried to save Beatrice from capital punishment argued self-defense, and Stendhal added a considerable paragraph on this topic.

Alexandre Dumas also retold the Cenci story based on similar manuscripts, and unlike Stendhal did not stint on the description of the gruesome murder of Francesco Cenci and the official tortures of Beatrice and her family. Like Stendhal’s Chroniques italiennes, Dumas’s “Les Cenci” was published in 1839, the first of his Crimes célèbres, just when Balzac was writing Pierrette; it too was based on Roman manuscripts that Dumas probably saw when he traveled to Rome in 1835 (Del Litto 230–32). It is very likely that Balzac read Dumas’s account as well.

Shelley too was given a manuscript “copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome” early in his self-exile in Italy, in Livorno in 1818 (“Preface” to The Cenci 2). Stephen C. Behrendt observes about Shelley’s tragedy,

*The Cenci* is the record of a failed revolution, a rebellion that proceeds to its catastrophe from that most traditional, mythic spring: the conflict between generation and generation, between parent and child. . . . Beatrice’s dilemma parallels those both of women during Shelley’s era . . . and of the British populace generally. . . . Hence her situation and the choices she makes are invested with a significance far greater than the merely historical. (218)

The story assumes the nature and significance of myth, Behrendt believes, because it follows the Aristotelian precept of reducing the events to univer-

1. Quoted in a note to *La physiologie du mariage* (11: 1830, note 3), Geneviève Delattre observes that “Balzac inclut assez volontiers le XVIe siècle dans le Moyen Âge” [Balzac quite habitually includes the sixteenth century in the Middle Ages] (*Les opinions littéraires* 7).
sal form; the thing that has happened becomes the thing that might happen (224). Balzac claims something like this when he speaks of granting immense proportions to his fable. It would then become “une histoire, une fable symbolique, simple et frappante, résumant un nombre infini de situations plus ou moins analogues” [a story, a symbolic fable, simple and striking, summing up an infinite number of more or less analogous situations], according to the broad definition of myth proposed by Denis de Rougemont (cited in Brunel, “Mythanalyse” 41).

Myth redefines the drama of the present as a story of the past. When Balzac replaces the lies of the Provinois with the “touching” story of the “sublime” Beatrice Cenci, who was martyred for reasons and intrigues “presque analogues à celles qui menèrent Pierrette au tombeau” [almost analogous to those that led Pierrette to her grave] (4: 162), we are obliged to consider how Pierrette’s drama is transformed. It is strange that Balzac chose the Cenci story to orient the reader toward a wider interpretation of his not immense story (“Pour donner à ceci d’immenses proportions” [To give immense proportions to this]), where earlier allusions to Paul et Virginie and to Cinderella (4: 121) had already provided closer mythological models.

Like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Virginie, the universal Beatrice stands for a childlike innocence and purity, but she is tainted by guilt. Shelley writes in his preface: “Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound” (7). He claims she maintains her innocence in the face of the blight, poison, and corruption around her. Crimes and evil were merely the mask and mantle of circumstances. As Laurence S. Lockridge has written, “Shelley has used the strongest possible images of violation and contamination to make vivid the fact of evil having been forced upon her from without. . . . The Cenci portrays a world so evil that it can tragically infect the innocent” (98). For Stuart Curran, “As a work of the theater The Cenci stands today where Artaud left it [after adapting Shelley’s play], capable of that ‘unrelenting incandescence’ of psychological truth he envisioned, the mythic record of an innocence resolutely reduced to despair and redeemed by the human power to accept the absurd and thereby triumph over it” (280). Balzac’s view of Beatrice is similar to these. The Stendhalian coloration of the heroine may also have contributed to the entirely sympathetic notion Balzac had of her. Moreover, the fact that Beatrice was tortured by the pope’s judges may have been in Balzac’s mind as he evoked the mythic dimension; the Cenci story ends in a case of official torture, ordered by the pope. Judging from the use Balzac makes of the Cenci story, he must have believed that infamous passions and political factions made a victim of Bea-
trice; it was of secondary importance that she had her father killed. It is as if he neglects all but the rape and the trial phase of her story, in which she is, in small part, the game piece shifted on the playing field of interests barely related to her actions. In short, the mythic dimension of Beatrice Cenci’s drama, which many writers since Balzac have also observed, works its primary effect on Balzac. It is this rather than the historical image that must have captured Balzac. (Among his Pensées, sujets, et fragments was the plan to write a five-act drama on Beatrice’s fate.)

Of great significance in this mythological reading of the Cenci story is the painted portrait of the heroine (see figure 8.2). As Balzac wrote: “Aujourd’hui l’histoire et les vivants, sur la foi du portrait de Guido Reni, condamnent le pape, et font de Béatrix une des plus touchantes victimes des passions infâmes et des factions” [Today, history and the living, on the strength of the portrait by Guido Reni, condemn the pope and make Beatrice one of the most moving victims of infamous passions and factions] (4: 162–63; emphasis added). Louise Barnett, among others, informs us that the portrait thought to be by Guido Reni was considered the high point of a tourist’s visit to Rome by the early nineteenth century. Poorly executed copies were to be found in every shop. “Their purchasers were attracted not by art but by the titillating Cenci history which the portrait mediated” (170). Shelley had such a copy, and he comments on its fame by noting that his servant instantly recognized its subject (“Preface” 3). The cloth draped on Beatrice’s body and the turban from which her blond hair escapes suggest the dress she designed for her execution, according to Stendhal’s narrative. Trollope, Taine, and Dickens wrote about the portrait, Stendhal too. A contemporary account written in 1838 by one Valery glowed with admiration:


[The Cenci girl's pitiable head, dressed with elegance and affectation, the presumed work of Guido’s earliest period, was thought to have been painted from memory after having seen the heroine mount the scaffold. . . . The Cenci girl . . . was the true type of a young Italian girl, and the head attributed to Guido marvelously expressed this ardent, naive, and tender character.]
Nathaniel Hawthorne waxed rhapsodic about the portrait in his journal in 1858:

its spell is indefinable, and the painter has wrought it in a way more like magic than anything else I have known. . . . It is the very saddest picture that ever was painted, or conceived; there is an unfathomable depth and sorrow in the eyes; the sense of it comes to you by a sort of intuition. It is a sorrow that removes her out of the sphere of humanity; and yet she looks so innocent. . . . It is the most profoundly wrought picture in the world; no artist did it, nor could do it again. Guido may have held the brush, but he painted better than he knew. (cited in Barnett 168)

Shelley wrote with a similar fervor in his preface to *The Cenci*, describing the portrait as

a just representation of one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature. There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic. ("Preface” 6–7)

In Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, in Melville’s *Pierre*, and in two of Edith Wharton’s novels, the portrait serves to evoke the theme of incest. Unfortunately, since late in the nineteenth century, art historians have known that it is neither of Beatrice nor by Guido Reni—unknown painter, unknown subject.

It is possible that Balzac first came to know the story of the Cenci because of the painting. He limns Pierrette’s description in the manner of a painted portrait (4: 155) and describes her eyes in a language that echoes the enthusiastic descriptions of the painting: “avec des yeux d’une tendresse à réchauffer un cœur mort” [with eyes containing such tenderness as would warm up a lifeless heart] (4: 106). There is one other significant mention of Beatrice Cenci in *La Comédie humaine*, in *La femme de trente ans* (2: 1205): “le
Figure 8.2 Presumed portrait of B. Cenci
visage de Beatrice Cenci où le Guide sut peindre la plus touchante innocence au fond du plus épouvantable crime” [Beatrice Cenci’s face, where Guido was able to paint the most touching innocence behind the most appalling crime]. Appropriate for La femme de trente ans, this description acknowledges the horror of Beatrice Cenci’s crime, unlike the reference in Pierrette. Only by separating the notion of the “plus épouvantable crime” from Pierrette’s actions, and setting her undeniable innocence against a background of the “crimes” committed around her and against her, would the portrait fairly symbolize Pierrette. Barnett writes that “to the nineteenth century, Beatrice Cenci was the embodiment of victimization and crime on the level of the most ancient and absolute taboos” (170–71). In this novel, for Balzac, the painting expresses the suffering of young innocence, the embodiment of victimization without the crime and without the ancient taboos.

Yet the fact is that the mythic transfiguration brings Balzac’s story to a non-lieu (a dismissed case) also. Is it possible that this is the final effect he sought? André Vanoncini has recently written of “la dissolution de l’histoire sous le régime du non-lieu” [the dissolution of the story under the order of the case dismissal] (260). Beatrice Martina Guenther seems to accept Balzac’s belief that alluding to Beatrice Cenci transforms Pierrette’s story into “an immortal work.” As she writes, “The story of Pierrette’s life (and the injustice she has suffered) will never be allowed to stop, and [the uplifting example guarantees] the narrative’s continued existence” (121). However, “[b]y decentering his conclusion through the reference to Béatrix Cenci, the writer implicitly reenacts the persecution of Pierrette” (123). Ultimately, I believe, more is at stake than is apparent at first glance.

What, after all, happened? A young girl died. When the immense proportions of myth take over from that simple story, its destiny changes, just as its destinataire changes: the story is destined (both meanings) to reveal a deep narrative truth of Balzac’s creation. When Pierrette’s drama resolves, like a fadeout, into Beatrice Cenci’s portrait, the myth eclipses the tragic conflict that has been played out, just as the new, powerful destinies of the bourgeoisie of Provins camouflage their small-minded meanness. It is significant that, in the July Monarchy where the novel ends, the opposed camps have dissolved, and Provins and the Provinois have come to new prominence based on the success of their maneuvers. Washed of guilt, the city folk achieve their goals. Vinet becomes deputy and procureur-général, Rogron is receveur-général, Tiphaine premier président de la Cour Royale, Gouraud becomes a general and has the peerage and the Légion d’honneur, etc. The new regime has soothed the political passions that raged so violently and pulverized Pierrette in their machinery. Like Pierrette’s drama, the histori-
cal guilty conscience dissolves into a non-lieu. The failure of justice in the plot—not only in the court but in the moral domain of the novel—figures the dismissal of the narrative, which evaporates. Under such a whitewash, rare is the archeologist who might uncover Pierrette’s memory. If, like an ornamental lion in Sylvie’s gaudy living room, the commemorative icon were only a constitutional myth (4: 61), if the idea of a symbolic meaning were to be treated only as parody, then the immense proportions of myth would not transport Pierrette to the universal. Guided by his sentimental attraction for the painting, Balzac let Pierrette’s private drama disappear. Nothing will have happened here except politics—lies and myths.

But the politics we must read, as the story’s destinataire, are newly defined. Politics can touch individuals and families intimately, a concept that constitutes a major element of the determinism that lies as a deep-seated belief in La Comédie humaine. Moreover, the political message about lies and myths applies as well to the art of narrative writing: narrative resembles the political in that it deals in lies and myths. “Politics” so understood is the ultimate meaning here: about a narrative art more significant than mere history or small story, the narrative art of La Comédie humaine, placed in the immediate context of “aujourd’hui” [today] and of “l’histoire et les vivants” [history and the living] (4: 162). Whether Balzac knew it or not, by turning Pierrette’s story into myth and mendacity, he lent greater weight to this deeper purpose, which we can find in the ending if we are good readers of myths and lies. The artist is the one who saves the story in spite of all—it is because the artist acts that what may have dissolved, what may have “not taken place,” remains for the world to contemplate again and again, that the mythic portraits of young, lovely innocence and of old, hateful malignancy remain on the stage of the vast theater of Balzac’s world, transported from the Roman “Middle Ages.” In this light, the most significant phrase in the penultimate paragraph (the one about Beatrice Cenci), which comes between the comparison of Pierrette to Beatrice and the mention of the portrait and the condemnation of the pope, is this short sentence: “Béatrix Cenci n’eut pour tout défenseur qu’un artiste, un peintre” [Beatrice Cenci had an artist, a painter, as sole defender] (4: 162). Identifying with him, Balzac could claim: “Je serai celui-là.” [I would be that one.] “Celui-là”? A kind of god, without a doubt. Only now does the final one-sentence paragraph betray its meaning and purpose, which is to elevate the preserver of this small story to divine existence: “Convenons entre nous que la Légalité serait, pour les friponneries sociales, une belle chose si Dieu n’existait pas” [Let us agree that Legality would be, for the rogues of society, a beautiful thing if God did not exist] (4: 163).