For Love or for Money

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The Corset of La vieille fille

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

—William Blake, “The Sick Rose,” 1794

As a piece of underwear, a corset would seem to have no plausible connection to actual writing; but as a semiotic device of mimesis, the corset worn by Rose Cormon in La vieille fille calls attention to the rhetoric of realism in this novel. Being semiotic, it functions as a reading device and therefore contributes to the description that an action illustrates. La vieille fille, an exceptional novel in many ways, poses a problem of interpretation that the device of the corset helps to solve: does the novel portray the failure of a fat old maid to marry, or is it the story of a girl’s marriage?

Set, by its title, against the familiar marriage comedy (found in the Modeste Mignons, the Béatrixes, the Contrats de mariage) a book called La vieille fille should illustrate the comedy of no marriage—or its tragedy. The arrival of the third pretender to Mlle Cormon’s hand, the well-named vicomte de Troisville, precipitates the actions of the first two, the chevalier de Valois and du Bousquier—but Troisville has no such pretension; he is only a “prétendu prétendu” [pretended pretender] (4: 903) (as always, Balzac cannot resist the profound witticism when it falls under his pen). When
Rose learns that Troisville has a wife and daughter, she faints, and the broadshouldered but impotent du Bousquier carries her to her bedroom. There, unfortunately, he sees what spills out of her corset when her maid cuts it away. Clearly the corset plays a controlling part in the shape of the action, even though it is mentioned only three times, since it forces Mlle Cormon’s hand in accepting du Bousquier’s marriage proposal the next day. More to the point, this high burlesque becomes the rhetorical image of Rose’s essence and of the novel’s purpose. Her corset, the corset of Balzac’s prose, should give a metonymic identity to the novel, as the typifying illustration of the old maid. Instead, Rose’s corset does not contain her too plentiful contours any more than Balzac’s title contains his writing.

For the first-time reader, a surprise of ample proportions squeezes out of the covers of the book. The novel spills over its title and its apparent theme, stretching the characteristic Balzacian definition of the célibataire found elsewhere (for instance in Pierrette, Le curé de Tours, and La Rabouilleuse), just as Rose’s body overflows both above and below the corset that cannot define her shape. Escaping the confines of its constricting type-narrative, the novel does not illustrate the sterile, unmarriageable vieille fille but something very different: the amorous desire of a jeune femme.1 The announced topic does not contain the story. As Patricia Kinder speculates, about the feuilleton publisher Émile Girardin, “S’était-il fié au titre, croyant trouver dans La vieille fille . . . une œuvre dans le genre d’Eugénie Grandet?” [Had he relied on the title, expecting to find in La vieille fille . . . a work in the manner of Eugénie Grandet?], while a critic from La Phalange, a rival review, complained: “Nous attendions un pendant au Père Goriot ou même d’Eugénie Grandet; le sujet semblait le promettre . . . mais nous avouerons que la manière dont il a esquissé cette étrange anomalie de nos sociétés a trompé notre attente” [We expected a companion piece to Le Père Goriot or even Eugénie Grandet; the subject seemed to promise that . . . but we admit that the way he has sketched this strange anomaly of our society has deceived our expectations] (Kinder 195, 197).

With the aplomb typical of Balzac’s vigorous statements of opinion, the narrator tackles the question of the type in an imaginary debate with looser women than Rose: “Ici quelques femmes légères essaieront peut-être de chicaner la vraisemblance de ce récit, elles diront qu’il n’existe pas en France de fille assez niaise pour ignorer l’art de pêcher un homme, que Mlle Cormon est une de ces exceptions monstrueuses que le bon sens interdit de présenter

1. In this focus on the woman’s desire, I am taking a different perspective from Fredric Jameson’s reading in The Political Unconscious, e.g., 156.
comme type” [At this point, some facile women will perhaps try to dispute the plausibility of this narrative; they will say that nowhere in France does there exist a girl who is so stupid as to not know the art of catching a man, that Mlle Cormon is one of those monstrous exceptions that common sense forbids us to present as a type] (4: 862). But these criticisms fail, Balzac says, because Rose is Catholic. Poor argument! If she is a monstrous exception, she is not out to land a husband; but if she is a type, then she wants a husband, for even if a fille is a vieille fille, then it follows by Balzacian necessity, no matter what the narrator may claim, that she desires a man. This is the conundrum signaled by the semiotic device of the corset.

I take Rose Cormon’s corset as an emblem of metonymy understood partly as the container signifying the contained. Philippe Perrot writes of this essential undergarment, “Prendre la taille, soutenir les seins, faire rebondir la croupe, cambrer une silhouette selon les canons érotico-esthétiques du moment, constituent une de ses principales destinations” [To take in the waist, support the breasts, round out the buttocks, give camber to the silhouette according to the erotico-esthetic canons of the moment was one of its principal functions] (268). With the help of Rose’s corset, paradoxically, La vieille fille profiles the hidden contour of sexual desire. To be sure, the word “désir” occurs freely in the text—but corseted, molded, reshaped to mean something else: desire for marriage, desire for children, desire for “le bonheur.” These are some of the metonyms, which are clearly displacements, by which the subject of sexual desire escapes. The corset traces the action of this displaced discourse. I acknowledge Éric Bordas’s warning that “Toute traduction de la métaphore est un appauvrissement, et l’érotique jouit des détours qu’elle impose aux discours conducteurs” [Any translation of a metaphor is an impoverishment, and eroticism profits from the detours it imposes on the conveying discourse] (“Ne touchez pas le H” 27–28). It is such detours that interest me, rather than the translation of the metaphor or metonymy.2

2. Bordas also comments that Balzac refuses indecent language: “Même certaines notations de La vieille fille (1837), pourtant fort orientées, comme celle dans laquelle il est dit qu’il ‘fallait le silence de la nuit’ à mademoiselle Cormon pour ‘épouser en pensée’ quelque sous-lieutenant, ce qui vaut à Pérotte de retrouver le lendemain ‘le lit de sa maîtresse cen dessus dessous’ (VF, IV, 860–61), relèvent du comique satirique et non de la gauloiserie paillarde: la représentation a une finalité de déconstruction critique, soupçonneuse, presque méchante” [Even certain remarks in La vieille fille (1837), although they are quite tendentious, like the one which says that Mlle Cormon “needed the silence of the night” to “marry in her mind” some second lieutenant, with the result that Pérotte finds “her mistress’s bed all atumble” the next morning, are satirical comedy and not bawdy gauloiserie: such representation has a critically deconstructive, suspicious, almost unkind purpose] (“Ne touchez pas le H” 28–29).
Rose Cormon is defined by two qualities incompatible with the contour-giving task of a corset: “la force et l’abondance, les deux caractères principaux de sa personne” [heaviness and abundance, the two principal qualities of her person] (4: 857). With the years, we are told, fat had so badly distributed itself about her body that

il en avait détruit les primitives proportions. En ce moment, aucun corset ne pouvait faire retrouver de hanches à la pauvre fille, qui semblait fondu d’une seule pièce. La jeune harmonie de son corsage n’existait plus, et son ampleur excessive faisait craindre qu’en se baissant elle ne fût emportée par ces masses supérieures; mais la nature l’avait douée d’un contrepoids naturel. (4: 857)

[it had destroyed its original proportions. At present, no corset was up to the task of finding hips for the poor woman, who seemed to be poured in one piece. The youthful harmony of her bodice no longer existed, and its excessive volume made one fear that if she were to bend down, she would be toppled by those superior masses; but nature had endowed her with a natural counterweight.]

This tendentious text actually tones down the scathing description Balzac had first written, where one finds the suggestive expression “agreeable proportions” later replaced by “original proportions”; where “its excessive abundance” became the more neutral “excessive volume”; and “these floating masses” gave way to “superior masses.” In addition, the adjective “énorme” occurred at the end of the original version to qualify the “natural counterweight” (see the Folio edition 247). Indeed, the narrator’s attitude toward his subject deserves to be the object of a separate study; suffice it to say that it teeters on the border between sympathy and irony.

Alas, Rose’s abundance naturally lends itself to jokes which the narrator indulges in at her expense: “‘Je crois rêver,’ dit Josette en voyant sa maîtresse volant par les escaliers comme un éléphant auquel Dieu aurait donné des ailes” [“I must be dreaming,” said Josette, seeing her mistress flying about the staircases like an elephant to whom God had somehow given wings] (4: 890). At least her “embonpoint de nourrice” [wet nurse’s bosom] (4: 857) approximates a bait, suitable for catching a husband: “Quand elle s’était ainsi mise sous les armes, il se glissait dans les ténèbres de son cœur un rayon d’espoir: une voix lui disait que la nature ne l’avait pas si abondamment pourvue en vain, et qu’il allait se présenter un homme entreprenant” [When she had dressed to the hilt, a ray of hope would slip into the darker regions of
her heart: a voice would tell her that nature had not worked in vain to provide for her so abundantly, and that an enterprising man was going to present himself] (4: 869). Balzac maneuvers the rhetoric of his realism to accomplish that notion in the most literal fashion, when her embonpoint snares du Bousquier: “Elle avait été vue pour la première fois par un homme, sa ceinture brisée, son lacet rompu, ses trésors violemment lancés hors de leur écrin” [She had been seen for the first time by a man, her belt broken, her laces torn, her treasures violently flung from their coffer] (4: 907). Perrot contends that the “conception bourgeoise de la tenue” [bourgeois conception of clothing] heightens self-control, “self-maintien,” and the “domination continue des affects” [continuous restraint of feelings] (243), so that the failure of Rose’s corset implies failure to control emotions. While the corset signals matrimonial availability, according to Perrot—“Une des missions de ce modelage anatomique consiste en effet, en obtenant une taille fine et un beau maintien, à ce qu’il devienne sur le marché matrimonial une valeur érotique, un atout social et un gage symbolique” [One of the missions of this anatomical modeling, by obtaining a narrow waist and an attractive appearance, did consist in its becoming an erotic value on the matrimonial market, a social trump card and symbolic guarantee] (275)—its failure to contain and contour suggests overstepping the boundary of the social.

And indeed, a veritable metaphoric series of liquid images stems from—or rather flows from—the central passage about Rose’s corset, the moment of crisis when du Bousquier, to revive her, “jeta brutalement des gouttes d’eau sur le visage de Mlle Cormon et sur le corsage qui s’étala comme une inondation de la Loire” [brutally sprinkled drops of water on Mlle Cormon’s face and on her bodice which spread about like an inundation of the Loire] (4: 904). With comical medical precision Balzac had earlier described the “drowning” of her nerve endings in her fat (4: 895–96). Since neither excess nor abundance characterize Rose’s intellect, “quand la pauvre fille voyait la conversation s’alanguir, elle suait dans son corset, tant elle souffrait en essayant d’émettre des idées pour ranimer les discussions éteintes” [when the poor girl saw the conversation languish, she suffered so much trying to put forth ideas to revive the extinct discussion that she sweated in her corset] (4: 870). Here the corset symbolizes the limits of her mental ability. At the thought of putting up the vicomte de Troisville for the night, “La vieille fille était inondée d’espérance” [The old maid was inundated with hopefulness] (4: 893). Even her mare Pénélope “en sueur” [sweating] (4: 893) and “en nage” [drenched] (4: 894) somehow suggests Rose’s spilling out of her bounds. And a series of allusions to her “boiling blood” gives metaphoric consistence to the inundations of her not very “sage” “corps.”
La vieille fille most narrowly skirts a woman’s desire, I think, by assigning sex insistently to the domain of Nature. Good periphrases for sex are “les veux de la nature” [yearnings of nature] (4: 860) and “les agitations de la Chair” [agitation of the Flesh] (4: 861). Rose promises ten écus to support the supposed maternity of Suzanne, the most she has ever given, and justifies her largesse with a sentence that stupefies her friend Mme Granson: “Mais, ma bonne, il est si naturel d’avoir des enfants!” [But my dear, it is so natural to have children!] (4: 885). This sentiment, characterized as immoral, stems from the heart; her desire overflows the strict contours of her own principled modesty. Combining this naive frankness with extreme innocence produces striking rhetorical effects—among them, apparently, what might be called a lightning rod function. Balzac thus pretends to cultivate delicate ground while warding off criticisms from the partisans of morality—virtue guardians among the press and among the aristocracy. In Le lys dans la vallée, both the framing device and Lady Dudley are lightning rods, while in Béatrix and in Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan, woman’s desire is so theatrical, so performed, as to approach parody and hence carry safely away the fury of the flash. In La vieille fille, the alliance of nature and ignorance functions in the adroit expressions of Rose’s exacerbated desire for Troisville: “La vieille fille n’avait jamais rencontré d’homme aussi séduisant que l’était l’olympien vicomte. Elle ne pouvait se dire à l’allemande: ‘Voilà mon idéal!’ mais elle se sentait prise de la tête aux pieds, et se disait: ‘Voilà mon affaire!’” [The old maid had never met so seductive a man as the Olympian viscount. She couldn’t say like the Germans do, “Here is my ideal!” but she felt herself possessed from head to toe, and she said to herself, “This is the one for me!”] (4: 898–99; emphasis added). The accent is on “possessed.” While the corset of Balzac’s prose purports to shape Mlle Cormon into a “vieille fille,” she would rather feel like a “fille,” a type notably represented in the novel by Suzanne.

Analyzing the many indirect languages for sex would produce a valuable study of this novel (see chapter 18 on the language of sex), but the metonym of happiness, with the repeated words “bonheur” and “heureux,” is symptomatic of the rhetorical process involved. (And here I take metonymy chiefly as displacement.)

Happiness means either Love or Money. “Un heureux mariage” (4: 829) means additional wealth for du Bousquier (as for many of the suitors in La Comédie humaine, all, in this, avatars of Balzac himself), while for Mlle Cormon “heureux” is a euphemism for “sexual.” When she turns forty-two,

Son désir acquit alors une intensité qui avoisina la monomanie, car elle comprit que toute chance de progéniture finirait par se perdre; et ce que, dans sa
céleste ignorance, elle désirait par-dessus tout, c’était des enfants. Il n’y avait pas une seule personne dans tout Alençon qui attribuât à cette vertueuse fille un seul désir des licences amoureuses. (4: 859)

[Her desire then acquired an intensity close to monomania, because she understood that any chance for offspring would soon be lost; and what she desired above all, in her celestial ignorance, was children. There was not a single person in all Alençon who would have attributed to this virtuous maid a single desire for the licentious pleasures of love.]

—but among Balzac’s readers there are such persons; at any rate, it is clear that Balzac’s text seeks them. For instance, if Rose wishes God would send her a husband so she can be “chrétiennement heureuse” [happy in the Christian way] (4: 860), doesn’t the adjective make it clear that any un-Christian happiness could only be immoral, “des licences amoureuses”? In typical fashion, Balzac treats the problem sociologically: the woman who would be virtuous must choose a “mari libertin” [libertine husband]. Rose little cares for the “vieille ruine” [old ruin] that is Valois, her other suitor, and she is anxious about his apparent indifference to marriage and the “prétendue pureté” [pretence of purity] of his morals. Her fears are rooted in an obscure private politics; how is it that no one has noticed, Balzac asks, that “ces nobles créatures, réduites par la rigidité de leurs principes à ne jamais enfreindre la fidélité conjugale, doivent naturellement désirer un mari de haute expérience pratique!” [these noble creatures, reduced to never breaking conjugal fidelity by the rigidity of their principles, must naturally desire a husband of considerable practical experience!] (4: 876). Sex and money, money and sex: the fact that the terms are reversed with Suzanne, who desires an “heureux mariage” in the sense of money, underscores the quid pro quo.

Indeed, the semiotic significance of bonheur and heureux slips along a slope from metonymy to metaphor. “Bonheur” stands for “child” from the start, as Suzanne fakes a pregnancy attempting to trick du Bousquier into marriage: “un bonheur que vous payerez cher un jour” [a good fortune you would one day pay dearly for] (4: 833). Suzanne’s patronne likes the chevalier de Valois and goes so far as to excuse him in advance in these terms: “Une de ses ouvrières aurait-elle été coupable d’un bonheur attribué au chevalier, elle eût dit, ‘Il est si aimable!’” [Had one of her working girls been guilty of a good fortune attributed to the chevalier, she would have said, He is so attractive!] (4: 821), where bonheur clearly means pregnancy. When after the fatal failure of her corset Rose asks du Bousquier to pretend that the marriage had been agreed upon for six months already, du Bousquier won-
ders: “Serait-elle comme Suzanne? . . . Quel bonheur!” [Could she be like Suzanne? . . . What good fortune!] (4: 908), where “like Suzanne” literally means pregnant, a boon for the impotent future husband. Of course society would call the unmarried mother’s *bonheur* a *malheur* (4: 918)—which underscores the opposition of the private sexual desire, uncontainable by the corset of the prose, to the social sanction of marriage. Later, we learn that, for the first two years of marriage, Rose is “satisfaite” [satisfied] (4: 925) and that “Le sang ne la tourmentait plus” [Her blood had ceased to torment her]. Are we to believe she has obtained the *bonheur* she sought? The editor Philippe Berthier notes: “Balzac pouvait difficilement faire plus nettement entendre que, même si son mariage n’a pas été ‘consommé,’ Mlle Cormon a été initiée au plaisir par son mari” [It would have been difficult for Balzac to make it more clearly understood that, even if her marriage has not been “consummated,” Mlle Cormon has been initiated into the pleasure of sex by her husband] (366). Here the reader may interrogate at once Rose’s *bonheur* and her ignorance, for she bewails her “désespoirs périodiques” [periodical despair] (4: 929)—the monthly proof that she is not pregnant. Frankly, a reader may well ask: just what was du Bousquier doing? Suzanne metaphorically changes the bride’s orange flowers into “fleurs de nénuphar” [lily-pad flowers] (4: 921), reputedly anti-aphrodisiac, and is the first to declare that “Mme du Bousquier ne serait jamais que Mlle Cormon” [Mme du Bousquier would never be anyone but Mlle Cormon] (4: 921)—i.e., never deflowered. Rose *married* best illustrates *la vieille fille*, and Balzac’s text continues to call her so well beyond her marriage (4: 930). It is not until the secret of du Bousquier’s failure to make Rose happy is revealed that we learn that “Cette pauvre Mme du Bousquier remplaca cette bonne demoiselle Cormon” [The poor Mme du Bousquier replaced the good Miss Cormon] (4: 932). As for Valois, intent on revenge, he asks: “Êtes-vous heureuse au moins?” [Are you happy at least?], but Rose’s modest and completely dishonest “Oui” is countered by Mlle Armande: “Pour que votre bonheur fût complet . . . il vous faudrait des enfants” [For your happiness to be complete . . . you would need to have children] (4: 931). It is ironic that Rose remains a *vieille fille* precisely because that *bonheur* eludes her as a married woman, and in fact the word comes to connote its exact opposite, childlessness: “D’ailleurs quel bonheur pour cette pauvre femme, car à son âge il était si dangereux d’avoir des enfants! . . . ma chère, vous ne savez pas ce que vous désirez” [Besides, what good fortune for the poor woman, because at her age it was so dangerous to have children! . . . “my dear, you don’t know what you want”] (4: 929).

Balzac makes no mystery of Rose’s “désir de se marier” [desire to get married] (4: 890), her “monomanie,” but encases her unavowable desire in the
corset of her innocence and ignorance. Her common designation as “la bonne Mlle Cormon” signifies “qu’elle était ignorante comme une carpe” [as ignorant as a carp] (4: 870). It is up to Mme Granson to dot the i’s of bonheur, while Rose’s innocence and ignorance appear to contain it, the better to suggest that sexual desire is its subtext:

—Chère cousine, vous épouseriez mon fils Athanase, il n’y aurait là rien que de très naturel; il est jeune et beau, plein d’avenir . . . seulement tout le monde penserait que vous avez pris un si jeune homme pour être très heureuse; les mauvaises langues diraient que vous faites vos provisions de bonheur pour n’en jamais manquer; il y aurait des femmes jalouses qui vous accuseraient de dépravation; mais, qu’est-ce que cela ferait? vous seriez bien aimée et véritablement . . . Eh bien, changez les termes . . . il en est de même de du Bousquier par rapport à Suzanne. Vous seriez calomniée, vous; mais, dans l’affaire de du Bousquier, tout est vrai. Comprenez-vous?

—Pas plus que si vous me parliez grec, dit Mlle Cormon qui ouvrait de grands yeux en tendant toutes les forces de son intelligence.

—Hé bien, cousine, puisqu’il faut mettre les points sur les i, Suzanne ne peut pas aimer du Bousquier. Et si le cœur n’est pour rien dans cette affaire . . .

—Mais, cousine, avec quoi aime-t-on donc, si l’on n’aime pas avec le cœur? (4: 885–86; emphasis added)

[“Dear cousin, if you married my son Athanase, it would be the most natural thing; he is young and handsome, his future is bright . . . only everyone would think you had taken such a young man so you could be very happy; wicked tongues would say that you are stocking up on happiness so as to never be lacking; there would be some jealous women who would accuse you of depravity; but what of it? You would be well and truly loved. . . . Well, change the terms . . . it’s the same for du Bousquier with respect to Suzanne. In your case, it would be slander; but in the du Bousquier affair, everything is true. Do you understand?”

“No more than if you were speaking Greek,” said Mlle Cormon opening her eyes wide and straining all the forces of her intellect.

“Well, cousin, since you need me to dot the i’s, Suzanne can’t love du Bousquier. And if the heart has no part in this business . . .”

“But cousin, what does one love with, if not the heart?”]

This illuminating conversation expresses the encrypted topic of the novel: the sexual desire of a virgin woman. It is Mme Granson who thinks Rose could
not possibly care about her _bonheur_ in marriage, but it is Rose who somehow manages to say that is _exactly_ what she wants. Were Rose Cormon as knowledgeable about relations between the sexes as Suzanne, this scene would lose its punch, naturally.

The corset of ignorance and innocence necessarily casts the body into the _vieille fille_ from which the fluid expressions of sex overflow. Condemned nearly unanimously at publication for its unheard-of vulgarity, the novel proved it had reached those readers it sought by its simultaneous strategies of containment and overflow.

Like _Pierrette_, _La vieille fille_ comes to an important anthropological conclusion, “une moralité bien plus élevée” [a much higher moral] than the lesson that sentimental objects should be bequeathed to friendly hands (4: 935–36). The moral concerns myths, like _Pierrette_, for which a chair in anthropology would be a good idea: “Les mythes modernes sont encore moins compris que les mythes anciens, quoique nous soyons dévorés par les mythes. Les mythes nous pressent de toutes parts, ils servent à tout, ils expliquent tout” [Modern myths are even less understood than ancient myths, even though we are being devoured by myths. Myths pressure us on all sides, they serve for every purpose, they explain everything] (4: 935). Balzac would arrive at an explanation for everything by turning his stories into myths, which function like a condensed history of humanity.³ In these final paragraphs of analysis, the semiotic strategy of the corset takes the form of a larger political expression, in which empires and revolution are at stake. Massol calls the story an allegory and sees the marriage as an alliance of liberalism, revolutionary ideas, and France against the forces of the former monarchy (96). Mlle Cormon’s personal story would have been saved by anthropology just as modern myths would save empires:

_[Si les mythes] sont . . . les flambeaux de l’histoire, ils sauveront les empires de toute révolution, pour peu que les professeurs d’histoire fassent pénétrer les explications qu’ils en donnent jusque dans les masses départementales! Si Mlle Cormon eût été lettrée, s’il eût existé dans le département de l’Orne un professeur d’anthropologie, enfin si elle avait lu l’Arioste, les effroyables malheurs de sa vie conjugale eussent-ils jamais eu lieu? (4: 935)_

³ Lise Queffélec in an excellent article has given a strong political meaning to the allusion to myth at the end of the novel.
[[If myths] are . . . the torch lights of history, they will save empires from all revolutions, if only history professors would instill the explanations they give of them into the masses of the department! If Mlle Cormon had been well educated, if there had been an anthropology professor in the department of the Orne, if, finally, she had read Ariosto, would the horrible misfortunes of her conjugal life ever have taken place?]

With such instruction, Rose would have known how to “read” the magnificent nose possessed by the chevalier de Valois, whereas du Bousquier would have been recognized as similar to Ariosto’s Orlando, whose horse is dead and who represents “le mythe des révolutions désordonnées, furieuses, impuissantes, qui détruisent tout sans rien produire” [the myth of disordered, furious, and impotent revolutions which destroy everything and produce nothing] (4: 936). The code is given; Mlle Cormon misses it. As Queffélec observes, “La forme mythique est inapte à assurer l’ordre dans l’histoire, tant que la faculté d’interprétation mythique manque au peuple. L’œuvre balzacienne sera donc à la fois mythe et science du mythe, univers de symboles et code de déchiffrement” [The mythic form is incapable of assuring order in history as long as the people lack the faculty of mythic interpretation. Balzac’s work is thus both myth and science of myths, universe of symbols and code of decipherment] (176). But Balzac addresses the myth to his reader, along with the semiotic code to decipher it, leaving Rose Cormon permanently in her error.