

Conroy on Heathcote and Watts, editors (2017)

Heathcote, Owen, and Andrew Watts, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac*. Cambridge UP, 2017, pp. 218, ISBN 978-1-107-69128-5

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Taking up most of Honoré de Balzac's oeuvre, including *La Comédie humaine*, *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac* is an excellent introduction to Balzac studies for beginning French scholars, and contains many well-written contributions that adeptly introduce key questions at a level that will be comprehensible to any college student. Like many volumes in the series, this book contains short, highly readable contributions to the field, which could easily be assigned in an undergraduate, even a freshman, course. It is a testament to the wisdom of the editors Owen Heathcote and Andrew Watts that this collection also contains timely insights for senior researchers.

The Cambridge Companion to Balzac synthesizes and adds to the voluminous critical work on *La Comédie humaine*, while also shedding light on the novelist's early works, minor works, and correspondence. As coeditor Andrew Watts notes in the introduction, this volume "certainly does not purport to offer the final word on Balzac. On the contrary, in presenting a reappraisal of his work, it reflects the vibrant scholarly interest that Balzac continues to generate in France and beyond" (9). The contributors succeed in showing Balzac to be "a polyphonic writer who sought to harness the myriad discourses—artistic, historical, social, political, scientific, religious and philosophical—that surrounded him during the first half of the nineteenth century" (8).

Chapters that stand out in their contribution to the field include Michael Tilby's chapter on Balzac's early works, in which he argues that Balzac's pseudonymous novels produced before *La Comédie humaine* contain material derivative of other fictions; also that these early works set up the peculiarities of *La Comédie humaine* in an "overall idiosyncrasy of language and form" and "a reflection of the novel and, more especially, on the teasing relationship between the fictional and the real" (38). Other chapters take similarly nuanced positions on the great questions of Balzac studies. To discuss only a few, David F. Bell returns to the classic question of whether Balzac is a fantastic or a realist writer in "Fantasy and Reality in *La Peau de chagrin*," revealing how the Mesmerist movement influenced even the most fantastic elements of that novel. According to Bell, the wild ass's skin is not "simply an inexplicably strange and fantastic entity" but also "an object of wonder" and "an invitation to be surprised and to question in the face of a seemingly inexplicable phenomenon" (65). In "Balzac, Money and the Pursuit of Power," Allan H. Pasco examines the role of money and finances in *La Comédie humaine* and the play *Le Faiseur*. Pasco finds that whether "human or material, capital was the impulsion for the most important movements of Balzac's society" (67) and "much of the action [in *La Comédie humaine*] originates from the need of a fortune, a fortune that plays a significant role in the vision of the July Monarchy that Balzac presents" (79). Dorothy Kelly broaches the theme of money and its corrupting influence on the family and marriage in "Balzac, Gender and Sexuality: *La Cousine Bette*" where she shows that when "money and individual satisfaction reign" in Balzac's works "sex disconnects from marriage and becomes a commodity" (124).

The most unexpected aspect of this volume is its thorough engagement with controversies in Balzac's reception and his current place in the francophone literary canon. Coeditor Andrew Watts argues against the notion that adaptations of Balzac—whether for television, radio, or film—are mediocre and perhaps even damaging to the reputation of the author: "adaptations have helped to sustain Balzac's artistic afterlife, and in so doing, reinforce his enduring appeal" (173). Most innovatively, the volume contains two "Epilogues" that explore Balzac's contribution as a living writer to the literary imagination: "Dual Balzac" by the novelist Chantal Chawaf and "Living Balzac" by the novelist, poet, and playwright Éric Jourdan. These epilogues supplement the highly readable tour through the most significant issues in Balzacian studies that we find in the twelve chapters; standing apart from the scholarly interventions, the epilogues make the case for and against Balzac's role as a living author today. In "Dual Balzac," Chawaf pleads Balzac's case, arguing that he is "an Überwriter. He endows writing with a supernatural vitality that enables the imaginary to overflow into the non-fictional" (189). Chawaf argues that despite the "dislocation of the fictional text" since the 1960s, the separation of reflexive literariness from history and storytelling, Balzac remains a living author and reading him offers a chance to escape the death of the novel (192). In "Living Balzac," Jourdan claims that the authors Balzac has influenced—such as Jules Romains, Georges Duhamel, and Roger Martin du Gard—are "sterile"; he reasons that lesser authors were influenced by Balzac's "panorama of a society with multifarious facets" such that Balzac gave "birth to a miserable line of novelists with a greater or lesser interest in society" (193). The "living Balzac" is, for Jourdan "not the official Balzac [...] but Balzac's hidden compartments" (197). These epilogues are, no doubt, polemical and will generate much debate. Richer for the inclusion of these more polemical pieces, this volume bluntly address the controversial status of Balzac within francophone literary culture, in which he is seen as the father of Realism, but

also as a patriarch who might have stifled contemporary innovation through his powerful influence. This volume is entirely worthy of becoming the definitive introduction to Balzac studies; any of the essays contained therein could be used in any literature classroom to give a sense of the broader questions in literary studies. It is also a much-needed reflection on Balzac's place in the canon of francophone literature.

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