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Balzac et la Construction de l'identité Individuelle: Jeux d'Entente et de Concurrence entre l'État Civil et la Comédie Humaine (book review)

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SANTA, MARISA. *Balzac et la construction de l'identité individuelle. Jeux d'entente et de concurrence entre l'état civil et La comédie humaine*. L'Harmattan, 2020. ISBN 978-2-343-20294-5. Pp. 486.

La comédie humaine, in reconstructing the relationships between sex, power, status, possessions, offspring, etc., reveals what choices a society makes in describing human experience, and also shows how legal issues play out in texts produced by that society. Literature and law share common wisdom in emphasizing the complexity of human relations and share common interests in creating narratives that propose answers to broad questions of identity. As a lawyer who also holds a doctorate in French literature, Santa is uniquely qualified to explore the intersections of French law and Balzac's literary fresco. Using the quintessential quest-for-identity text *Le colonel Chabert* (1832) as a point of departure, her ambitious tome constitutes not only a deep dive into literature to discover the inner workings of law, but also a deep dive into law to discover the inner workings of the literature of human experience. Hence, law and literature are not two distinct poles, but rather two interrelated fields that cannot exist one without the other. Comprised of three sections bookended by an introduction and a conclusion, the work briefly traces the evolution of civil law and law studies in post-Revolutionary France (the centralized collection of personal data starting in 1792), the Civil Code dating from 1804, and the founding of law schools shortly before Balzac himself was a law student (1816–19), before moving on to a detailed analysis of the processes by which identity narratives are constructed. The first section, *Une vie*, explores expressions of legal personhood, including related topics like the body, the individual versus the state, notions of recognition, and definitions of familial and social roles. Santa shows how the legal notion of “person” in the Civil Code emerged from a confrontation between the idea of a physical person (or body) and the idea of a being endowed with rights, and she explores the complexities of this dual notion masterfully in texts like *Chabert*, *Le père Goriot* (1835), and *Eugénie Grandet* (1833). The second section, *Un héritage*, demonstrates how texts construct identity in relation to inheritance and the related topics of transmission of property, succession, genealogy, and blood ties. Here, Santa emphasizes a common thread in both the Civil Code and Balzac: The transmission of wealth requires legal power, and this is attributed first and foremost to the father, though this does not mean that women are powerless. The third section, *Des trajectoires*, explores how characters assume social roles and navigate networks of material relations according to sex, marital status, and legal competence. A picture emerges of identity as something that is constantly in flux, a perpetual negotiation of multiple and often conflicting narratives requiring huge investments of energy and skill. Those who thrive, like Rastignac, possess the necessary qualities of cunning, adaptation, and flexibility, while those who fail,

like Chabert, suffer from rigidity. Santa's massive and challenging undertaking is highly recommended to anyone interested in investigating the fascinating relationships between the Civil Code, the notion of identity, and Balzac's masterpiece.

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