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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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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This book undertakes a reexamination of second-wave feminism and its negative and singular characterization of female bodily experiences. Tomlinson sets out to analyze the diversity of contemporary women’s writing in French and whether a new generation of women writers takes an intersectional approach to the representation of the female body and the female fertility cycle. Through a close textual analysis of works of fiction from three different Francophone contexts, this unique array of texts enables Tomlinson to execute both a cross-cultural and intersectional study within a sociological framework. This text could risk centering contemporary writing from France as it is inspired by and perhaps more obviously deviates from the tradition of second-wave feminism, but Tomlinson is skilled at critiquing and contributing to the theoretical frameworks surrounding her topic through a thorough analysis of multiple authors and works from each Francophone context. She successfully puts aside the “universal woman” of second-wave feminism and extends her study beyond the Hexagon, traveling from France to Algeria and finally to Mauritius, as they represent divergent cultural, linguistic, political, social, and religious landscapes. After a description of second-wave feminism and its critics, the voyage starts with contemporary French authors including Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes, among others, and explores such topics as menstruation and the supernatural, childbirth within violent texts, and menopause and medical discourse. Next, Tomlinson travels to a different sociocultural context, that of the Maghreb and specifically Algeria, that often engages with patriarchal discourse and in turn oppresses women and associates the female body with shame and silence. However, for contemporary Algerian authors, such as Malika Mokeddem, Maïssa Bey, Leïla Marouane, and Nina Bouraoui, menstruation, childbirth, and menopause are not taboo subjects and may even be synonymous with rebellion against patriarchal oppression. Finally, Tomlinson makes the wise choice to expand her intersectional study to Mauritius, with a sociocultural context vastly different from that of Algeria. The authors Ananda Devi and Shenaz Patel situate the female body at the center of their works, which also represent the multi-ethnic, multi-religious,