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Book Review: Balzac's Cane

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***Balzac's Cane* By Delphine de Girardin, Translated with introduction by Marta L. Wilkinson, Edited by Tamara Alvarez-Detrell and Michael G. Paulson as Vol. 250 of the *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures* series. 2017. Peter Lang: New York. 138 pages; cover illustration from original text, no photographs. Notes include original French text of three poems included in entirety in translated text; contains extensive bibliography (with combination of French and English sources) concerning Delphine de Girardin, Balzac, and Nineteenth Century Writing; \$89.95; hard cover.**

By Randi M. Rezendes¹

Our digital age has made many of us accustomed to immediate and easy access to information, but we still stumble upon the occasional reminder that such advances have not granted us omniscience and that there are some texts that still may be inaccessible to us for a variety of reasons. *La Canne de M. Balzac* (1836) by Delphine de Girardin was one of those texts until Marta L. Wilkinson of Wilmington College undertook the effort of translating Delphine de Girardin's French novella in the scholarly edition *Balzac's Cane* so that its ideas can be contemplated by more than just students of French or Comparative Literature.

La Canne de M. De Balzac follows the 19th century male protagonist Tancred Dorimont in his attempts to make a living for himself in the city of Paris. Although he comes with a letter of recommendation, Tancred's encounters are not productive because he is considered to be a "beautiful" man. While his name and letter get doors open for him, his countenance leads others to push him back through those same doors with either an excuse or direction to another venue/employer that would be a better fit. This continues until Tancred discovers that Monsieur Balzac (the author Honore De Balzac) has a cane that allows the bearer to become invisible. When he is presented with an opportunity to use the cane himself, Tancred embraces the chance to gain respite from the judging of his appearance and uses the invisibility granted by the object to further his financial and romantic interests. During this time, he encounters Clarisse Blandais, a young woman who is starting to present her writing in the salons of the city. Tancred is intrigued by her and uses the invisibility to meet and interact with Clarisse without being formally introduced to her as societal customs would require. Eventually, the unsettling story has a rather fairy tale ending, but the eventual outcome for Tancred and Clarisse is only one item of contemplation provided by this witty and idea-packed text.

Wilkinson presents her translation of this novella in *Balzac's Cane*, Vol. 250 of the *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures* series. It is an academic edition designed to give students and scholars a quick immersion into the world of Delphine de Girardin and her text. Opening with her introduction "The Seen, the Unseen, and the Power of Possession in Girardin's *Balzac's Cane*," Wilkinson continues with a translator's note where she briefly discusses the terms concerning beauty that were employed by de Girardin and their impact on the translation and interpretation of the story. Rounding up the introductory materials is a timeline for

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Delphine de Girardin that allows readers to get a quick overview of the author's publications (1824-posthumous).

Following the novella's text is a list of further translator notes that comment on particular word issues; these notes help the reader place references to literature contemporary to the writing of the novella. In addition, Wilkinson has incorporated the full French text of three substantial poems that are introduced in the text as recitations by the poets in the Paris salons. These poems provide language students the opportunity for recitation or translation comparison, but they also provide non-French speaking readers at least some exposure to the original poetic forms. The volume ends with an extensive selected bibliography that lists primary and secondary texts in French and English to support continued exploration of the era, author, and ideology.

Tancred's interactions allow readers to consider the society and perceptions of 19th century Paris, but de Girardin was not content to concentrate just on Tancred and the issues concerning his beauty and its reception/rejection by others. Clarisse is an author who is also struggling to find her place in society. She is able to showcase her work, but only when she is presented to society by male authors. Her creative endeavors are judged in connection with her gender with corresponding expectations and constrictions. While Tancred wishes to be invisible, Clarisse is fighting to gain visibility and acceptance of her ideas. Tancred is able to catch a glimpse of her true self beyond what is shown in public, but only when he uses the cane to render himself invisible. He transgresses the accepted customs and rules of society at the same time as he ignores her right to privacy – to interact with the young woman on his own terms.

Although the length of this work causes us to refer to it as a novella, the layers constructed by de Girardin give readers much to consider. The setting and literary allusions provide a rich contextual background for the story, but de Girardin also weaves irony and humor into the story in a way that makes readers have to stop and consider the perspective and approach of the tale. The inclusion of Clarisse as a poet adds a consideration of authorship and voice to the ideas concerning society, norms, and gender that are visible in this created world. This layer of the text can also be connected back to the de Girardin's own experiences trying to present her written work to the world, experiences that are mentioned both in her preface to the text as well as Wilkinson's introduction to this version. Delphine de Girardin was no stranger to the expectations of society. Many of her works were published under a male pseudonym (Vicomte de Launay). In the preface, she refers to herself as the "author" and mentions some of the criticism she received concerning the text – including issues with two chapters that others wanted her to remove (Wilkinson points out that they are included in the text under different names). The preface is concluded with the assertion that she has been "vouched for" by particular writings of male authors and authorities – writings which are a part of her own text. Thus, she is presented for consideration by her own work and on her own terms instead of through the channels deemed proper and acceptable by society.

The academic supports to this edition help establish it as a perfect addition to a language-focused or era-centric literature course, but Wilkinson's introduction highlights a further use and appeal of the novella that extends beyond these traditional settings. Her introduction explores de Girardin's use of wit and irony in the text to help students navigate the nuances of the story, and she provides educators with a list of questions suggested by the scholarship of Margaret Waller that help tackle matters that transcend the story. These questions focus on the nature of knowledge, who controls it, and how it is obtained (xii), questions that can push considerations of this text past purely historical and literary lectures into discussions that tackle ideas that can lead to contemporary concerns. Wilkinson sees the invisibility and voyeurism depicted in the text as a means of creating dialogue concerning our own digital age where "one need not be stalker or

voyeur to invade the most intimate spaces of another” (ix). Such ideas can be integrated in interdisciplinary classrooms to give us a new lens for viewing ideas of gender, visibility, voice, and even technology.

Unfortunately, there is one drawback to this edition – one that will impact its access to students – the price. The single story nature of this edition means that it would be one of a number of texts needed for a course, driving the book cost for one course quickly into the triple digits. Unless the price eventually comes down, the text is more likely to be reserved for an individual project or directed study rather than in a classroom where the ideas could be discussed in a collaborative atmosphere. Wilkinson believes that *Balzac’s Cane* “offers a segue into the literature via student experience” (x). The ideas presented in the text can help students approach and connect with concept that might at first seem unapproachable and abstract. This edition provides us with the tools that we need to help students engage with this rich text from another era to open dialogue that crosses disciplines, but the issue of access due to economic considerations may still keep its access restricted.

Wilkinson’s translation *Balzac’s Cane* has made Delphine de Girardin’s novella visible to many readers for the first time. Through this appearance, we are able to consider the concepts of beauty, visibility, gender, voyeurism, and even irony. Tancred uses the cane to hide his own distracting beauty so that he can be free to observe others, but the consideration of his adventures and his interactions with Clarisse give us a number of lenses through which we can view our world and contemplate our own visibility.