

## Brown on Girardin, trans. Wilkinson (2017)

Girardin, Delphine de. *Balzac's Cane*. Translated by Marta L. Wilkinson, Peter Lang, 2017, pp. xvi + 136, ISBN 978-1-4331-4068-6

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Delphine de Girardin's novella playfully brings a literary myth to life by granting Honoré de Balzac's ornate cane the supernatural power of invisibility. The cane takes on a new role when the handsome Tancred Doriment, suffering from an excess of beauty, yearns for invisibility. Allowing him access to political secrets and literary salons, the cane eventually permits him to penetrate the private room of a young female poet whom he admires. In this way, Girardin anchors her tale of science fiction and romantic intrigue in the concrete literary and historical context of 1830s France. Marta Wilkinson skillfully translates the poems incorporated within the novella as well the voice of Girardin's sassy narrator who comments on the romantic and social escapades of Tancred and the cane. While Wilkinson translates Girardin's text superbly, her paratextual materials, notably the introduction and the timeline, could have better situated the novella within its 1836 context.

In an "Introduction," Wilkinson identifies intriguing themes from the novel, such as the importance of physical beauty and the growing lack of separation between public and private spheres. Wilkinson touches on issues of gender by pointing out that the three characters who use the cane to access private spaces and hear private conversations—knowingly or unknowingly—are male. She also notes that only the young female poet gives up her literary aspiration, whereas Balzac and Tancred succeed in their ambitions. In addition to linking the novella to questions of gender inequality, Wilkinson specifically directs her "Introduction" toward professors considering the inclusion of the text in their courses, citing additional concerns for privacy and self-representation.

However, Wilkinson's effort to establish the novella's connection with modern American readers in the introduction limits its effectiveness. Questions regarding Tancred's ability to be on *American Idol*, or *The Voice* may appeal to modern young readers, yet the link may not be clear to all. Nor are they entirely relevant since Tancred did not wish for celebrity, but rather, to fade into the crowd, as proven by his negotiation with the Balzac character over the use of his cane. Wilkinson's intertextual allusion to the characters from the twentieth-first-century *Twilight* series—in which a male protagonist similarly watches a young woman sleep—perhaps seeks to imitate Girardin's more or less subtle references to the literature of her time. However, not all readers will understand the reference and some may consider it a banalization of Girardin's novella since the romantic angle only appears in chapter nineteen out of twenty-four. The story is pertinent to today's world, but Wilkinson tries too hard to make the story *appear* relevant to modern student readers who use Twitter and Facebook while neglecting to provide other key contextual information.

For instance, missing from the "Introduction" is sustained discussion of the novella's historical relevance and context. From the novella's title, the reader anticipates the importance of Balzac himself, largely absent from the introduction. Modern readers might also be interested in nineteenth-century gossip and myths circulating about Balzac's sartorial choices, including his cane, especially when Girardin purposefully ends the novella with the sly suggestion that Balzac uses it to make profound psychological and social observations. Including famed writers, such as Lamartine and Chateaubriand, as well as disguising other characters' names with asterisks, Girardin has carefully prescribed a specific literary and social context for her readers, yet much of this remains unclear for readers unfamiliar with literary salons, Balzac's writing, and biography. Had Wilkinson included the dates of some of Balzac's novels and texts by Lamartine and Chateaubriand in the "Timeline" preceding the translation, it might have better situated the novella in its literary context.

Despite these quibbles, the modernizing elements do animate the novella. Wilkinson admires the "charm" and the "wit" (ix) of Girardin's text and renders them accessible to Anglophone readers. Direct and unwavering, the pithy narrator speaks her mind and the characters and scenes come to life in French as in English. In her "Translator's Note," Wilkinson explains the difficulty in translating words like "beau" and "belle." A similar justification of the choice of "timid" to translate Girardin's use of both "timide" and "docile" to describe the female author might also have been helpful: one carries a sense of yielding to societal norms and the other could be a psychological condition. Overall, Wilkinson succeeds in the difficult act of idiomatic rather than purely literal translation, especially in the case of the poems included near the end of the novella which she presents as a particularly exacting challenge in her work. By comparing the original French poems provided in the "Notes" section, the reader feels the power of the rhythms and rhymes in both.

Wilkinson has successfully accomplished her goal of making Girardin's *La Canne de M. de Balzac* "accessible to anyone who

enjoys such creative works” (xiv). Bringing renewed attention to Girardin’s little-known French novella in a text available to non-French speaking publics makes an admirable contribution to nineteenth-century studies.

**Volume:** 47.1–2

**Year:**

- 2018