TRACING PHANTOMS:  
RELIGIOUS SECRETS AND THE (UN)VEILING OF  
JEWISH IDENTITY IN BALZAC’S “SARRASINE”¹  

ESTHER RASHKIN  
The University of Utah

I am the Wandering Jew of the mind, always standing, always walking,  
without respite, without pleasures of the heart. . . .  

Balzac, Letter to Mme Hanska

There is probably no better known Balzac short story than “Sarrasine”  
(1830), a fact due largely to Roland Barthes’s groundbreaking  
Despite the variety of poststructuralist and postmodern approaches  
brought to bear on the text since Barthes, however, readers still generally  
agree with his main contention that the ellipses in the text are placeholders  
for the “void of castration” at the narrative’s center, and that Sarrasine’s  
ignorance of the Roman custom of using castrati to sing soprano roles in  
opera is “the basis for all the snares by which Sarrasine is surrounded.”²  
Thus posited as the zero degree of analysis or textual “truth” (Barthes 62)  
whose inevitable revelation the narrative functions to defer, castration itself  
has never really been analyzed in the story. It has been treated instead much  
like Freud treats “penis envy” in women: as an untranscendable symptom  
of an inexorable anatomical lack that necessarily grounds interpretation.  
The reading I propose asks whether castration is in fact the privileged  
signifier elided from “Sarrasine,” or whether the text’s ellipses, while  
appearing to elide castration, instead mark the silencing or exclusion from  
the text of something very different. The analysis will reveal that a secret  
concerning a character’s religious identity is concealed in the narrative:  
Sarrasine’s mother is Jewish. This secret is never explicitly stated in the  
text; rather it haunts Sarrasine in the form of a phantom.  

A phantom is the specific psychic configuration that occurs when a  
drama experienced as too shameful to be articulated is concealed or  
repressed by a parent in one generation and then transmitted  
transgenerationally, without ever being spoken, directly into the  
unconscious of a child. The language and behavior of the individual (or
fictive character) who unknowingly receives this silent communication or phantom may appear incongruous, haunted, hallucinatory, obsessive, or phobic because these phenomena have in fact originated with someone else. The phantom is thus a formation totally outside any developmental view of behavior. It hinges neither on Oedipal dynamics nor on the functioning of the phallus. As such, it represents a radical departure from all previous psychoanalytic theories, including Freudian and Lacanian, and it offers a heretofore unrecognized, nonphallocentric vantage point from which to analyze certain instances of individual as well as group and societal psychopathology.3

Identifying a phantom hinges on a process of linguistic reconstruction that construes certain seemingly incongruous elements of a (human or fictive) narrative as ciphered fragments of a drama that had to be silenced. Close reading in such instances is redefined as an anasemic process of retracing these encrypted fragments, which have been broken off from a trauma “lived” by someone and transmitted as unknowable to another, from the life-saga of the latter “back up toward” (in Greek ana) their unspeakable signifying sources (semia) or complementary fragments concealed by the former. This means reading, through a character’s language and behavior, a psychic “prehistory” that originates with someone else but that the character unwittingly enacts as her or his own.4 A major result of this non-phallocentric reading approach to “Sarrasine” will be to suggest how psychoanalysis can participate in the exploration and exposure, within certain literary works, of heretofore unseen narratives of religious identity and prejudice. Specifically, reconstructing from the discursive elements of the text the secret drama of Sarrasine’s mother’s Jewish identity and delineating this drama’s implications for Sarrasine’s life-narrative will open the way to identifying a religio-historical saga, encrypted within the text, that is concerned with the ideology of anti-Semitism. Unveiling this saga of prejudice will in turn reveal how the silenced or repressed ideology or “religious unconscious” inscribed within the tale can be read as a reflection of and a commentary on the larger socio-cultural and religious phenomenon with which its inscription coincides: French (Catholic) society’s response to the emancipation of the Jews in post-Revolutionary France.

* The story of Sarrasine begins when an anonymous narrator, speaking to us from a fancy dress ball in the Paris home of the Lanty family,