

Monsieur Grandet's reputation in Saumur was founded on certain causes and effects which cannot be properly understood by those persons who have not, at least for a time, lived in the Provinces. Monsieur Grandet, still called "old man Grandet" by certain individuals (but the number of these old folks had diminished substantially), was in 1789 a master cooper [*barrelmaker*] living quite comfortably, and was able to read, write and count. As soon as the French Republic put up for sale, in the locality of **Saumur**¹, the lands of the church, the barrelmaker, then 40 years old, had just wed the daughter of a rich lumber merchant. Grandet, armed with his liquid assets and his dowry, armed with 2000 gold *louis*², went to the **department**³ sub-office, where, by means of 200 hundred double *louis* which his father-in-law had offered to the fiery **republican**⁴ who supervised the sale of national lands, he got for a morcel of bread, legally if not legitimately, the finest vineyards in the locality, an old **Abbey**⁵ and a few farms. The residents of Saumur not being of a revolutionary spirit, old man Grandet passed for a bold man, a **republican**, a patriot, a *thinker* who dabbled in the latest ideas, while in reality the barrelmaker actually only dabbled in grapes. He was named a member of the local administration, and his pacific influence was felt both politically and commercially. Politically, he protected the former nobles and prevented with all his power the sale of the **émigrés'** land; commercially, he supplied the **Republican armies**⁶ with one or two thousand barrels of white wine, and was compensated with the superb fields attached to a **women's order**⁷ that had been set aside for a last auction. Under **the Consulate**, the good fellow Grandet became mayor, administered wisely, and harvested grapes even better; under **the Empire**, he was *Monsieur* Grandet. Napoléon did not like the Republicans; he replaced monsieur Grandet—reputed to be someone who had worn the **revolutionary cap**—with a large landowner, a man whose name began with *de*, a future **baron of the Empire**⁸. Monsieur Grandet gave up his municipal honors without the least regret. He had had excellent roads built for the town's well-being which led to his land. His house and his property, **assessed** in a quite advantageous way, paid only modest taxes. Since then the rating of his different *clos*, of his vines, thanks to his constant attention, had become the "head" of the area, a technical term used to indicate that the vineyards produced the finest quality wine. He could have requested the cross of the **Legion of Honor**⁹. The award of this rating took place in 1806. Monsieur Grandet was then fifty-six years of age, and his wife was thirty-six. An only daughter, the fruit of their conjugal bed (*amours légitimes*), was ten years old. Monsieur Grandet, whom Providence had no doubt sought to console for his administrative disgrace, inherited in turn during that year from Madame de La Gaudinière, née de La Bertellière, mother of Madame Grandet; then from the old Monsieur La Bertellière, the father of the deceased; and then again from Madame Gentillet, the maternal grandmother: three inheritances whose value was known to no-one. The avarice of these three old persons was so intense that they had for many years been piling up their money simply to contemplate it in secret. Old monsieur La Bertellière was wont to call an investment a prodigal extravagance, finding greater interest in the sight of his gold than in the profits available from moneylending. The town of Saumur judged the value of these savings on the basis of the income from his visible wealth. Monsieur Grandet then obtained the new title of nobility which our mania for equality will never erase, he became *the most taxed* person of the precinct.¹⁰

(From Honoré de Balzac. *Eugénie Grandet*. Paris: Ed Flammarion, 2000. 61-63. Transl. by Stephen Walton.)

¹ Saumur: a mid-sized town in the Loire Valley; known for its white wines.

² *louis*: gold coin in use after 1740 worth 20 silver Francs. Under the Empire a *louis* was called a *napoléon*.

³ department: one of the 90-odd county-sized administrative districts into which France is divided after the Revolution

⁴ In France, a republican is a partisan of representative (elected) government, opposed to monarchy.

⁵ Abbey: house occupied by a monastic order, usually in the countryside.

⁶ The Republican armies were organized in 1792 to fight the revolutionary wars and defend the Revolution.

⁷ A women's order: an order of women religious (nuns).

⁸ Baron of the Empire: a baron was the fourth (of five) ranks from the top of the Napoleonic hierarchy.

⁹ The highest honor that can be awarded to a French citizen. Begun by Napoleon.

¹⁰ Official lists of the most-highly-taxed taxpayers of the locality were established by public officials: these then amounted to a new title of nobility. Bernard François Balzac, the author's father, had been included on such a list.