

Author Biography

Eliza Parsons was born in Plymouth, Devon in 1739 and was the only daughter of John and Robora Phelp.ⁱ Phelp was a local wine merchantⁱⁱ and Eliza received a comfortable upbringing in terms of economic prosperity.ⁱⁱⁱ Eliza married young to a Mr. Parsons, who was a turpentine merchant of Stonehouse, which was near Plymouth.^{iv} Parsons suffered losses to his business which were caused by the American War of Independence and the couple due to financial need moved to London (1778-9).^v Here, at a house near to Bowridge, Parsons began to build himself up again, building warehouses and workmen's dwellings, and for the following three years things were looking prosperous for the couple. In 1782 disaster struck and Parson's properties were destroyed by fire. Eliza's husband, defeated, left his business and went to work in the Lord Chamberlain's office at St. James's. Eliza also obtained a small role in the same department as her husband, largely through the favour of the marchioness of Salisbury.^{vi}

Tragedy struck again when Mr. Parsons died in 1790, leaving Eliza and their eight children without means of support.^{vii} Eliza was forced to turn to novel writing to support herself and her children having no husband now to provide for them. She published her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith, in two volumes*, in 1790, the same year as her husband's death. This book was dedicated to the Marchioness of Salisbury and subscribed to by some notable figures, including Horace Walpole.^{viii}

Eliza mainly produced gothic novels, showing her affinity with the tastes of her contemporaries, writing directly to fulfil popular demand.^{ix} She produced nineteen multi-

volume popular novels and they have been accredited with, ‘little enduring literary merit.’^x Her large production of books, due to economic necessity, led to her work being uneven in quality.^{xi} Two of her more notable works were *The Castle of Wolfenbach : a German story* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796). These books are referred to in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, where they are read by Isabella Thorpe as part of a collection of horror novels.^{xii} This illustrates their contemporary significance and close affiliation to the popular literature of the time. Both of these books were also reprinted in the Northanger set, 1968, edited by Devendra P. Varma, showing their significance to the development of the gothic genre. Eliza, aside from her main output of novels, also produced a play, *The Intrigues of a Morning, or, An Hour at Paris*. This was staged at Covent Garden on the 18th of April for the benefit of Mrs Mattocks and again at the same theatre for Mr Hull. She also produced a translation of six of La Fontaine’s *Tales* (1804) under the title of *Love and Gratitude*.^{xiii}

Eliza remained short of money despite what she earned from her writings and she struggled to support her family. She was granted some sums of money from the Royal Literary Fund which enabled her to support her family and continue writing.^{xiv} Between 1793 and 1803 she received 45 guineas from the Royal Literary Fund and also held a post at the Royal Wardrobe.^{xv} The fund’s aid in 1803 obtained her release from debtors prison. Eliza died on 5th February 1811 at Leytonstone in Essex, leaving behind four married daughters.^{xvi}

ⁱ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21455>

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ⁱⁱⁱ Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Yale University Press, 1990) pp. 834

^{iv} <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21455>

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^{vii} Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Yale University Press, 1990) pp. 834

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^x <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21455>

^{xi} Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Yale University Press, 1990) pp. 835

^{xii} <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21455>

^{xiii} <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21455>

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