

Plot Summary: Eliza Parsons *An Old Friend with a New Face*

The novel begins with the news that the Bruyeres have been ruined and are being forced to leave Paris. They decide to travel to Switzerland, stopping at Salines to call upon an old friend the Marquis St Juliers, who is indebted to Monsieur Bruyere. Bruyere relates his current situation; that he has lost everything at the hands of his Catholic cousin the Count de Themirez. The Marquis offers Bruyere the management of his estates in Lisbon and suggests he goes and views them; leaving his family.

The Marquis announces the arrival of a female relative, the Countess Dulay. The Marquis takes the Countess and Madame Bruyere, or Louisa, to a hermitage where they are entertained and they observe an eerie cavern. Three new guests are introduced and they are all revealed to be working for the Marquis in order to seduce Louisa. Two strangers arrive at the castle bringing news of Bruyere's death. The Marquis informs Louisa that the children are legally his responsibility. There is increasing pressure placed on her and eventually she consents to marriage.

Four guests are announced to dinner including Monsieur Corthouse and his daughter. Corthouse is penniless and trying to regain his fortune by bringing his daughter together with the Marquis, who is enamoured of her. The Countess is outraged at the Marquis' infatuation and confesses all to Louisa: that her husband is still alive, held by the Inquisition, and that her marriage to the Marquis is not legal. She tells her to leave with her children as the Marquis intends to have them committed to holy orders. Louisa leaves for the hermitage, when her disappearance is discovered the Marquis is simply

relieved.

At the hermitage the children talk of a frightening murmuring coming from the cavern. An old man, the Count de Vassy, an old friend of Bruyere's father, is living there. His only love was sent to a convent by his family because of her class, where she died before he found her. When he discovers his associations with Louisa he offers to write to his old friends for assistance. They set out for Lisbon where Louisa becomes ill. They go to the house of Donna Violante de Poissy, the wife of Vassy's old and faithful friend. Donna Elvira de Suza, a relation to the Grand Inquisitor, visits and is enlisted to help Louisa. Bruyere is still alive and he is released and taken to Elvira's house. She is so taken with the whole family that she invites them to live with her. Louisa delays telling Bruyere about her marriage to the Marquis and quickly sickens and dies.

The Marquis meanwhile has been ruined by his new wife, Marquise Corthouse. When his fortune is gone she leaves him for an admirer and he is left with nothing. The Marquis dies and through guilt leaves everything to Bruyere. The Countess repents and goes into a convent for the last years of her life. Mademoiselle Corthouse dies, reduced to poverty in Venice. Bruyere marries Violante's daughter Maria and the two Bruyere children are happily married.

### The Catholic Enemy?

Religion is the issue around which the novel gravitates but whether this issue is strictly anti-Catholicism, anti-atheism or simply pro-Protestantism is hard to determine. Parsons chooses to represent France as an explicitly Catholic country, even though at the time it was written it was officially an atheist country. The Bruyere family are declared ‘an enemy to the religion of the country’, in other words an enemy to Catholicism<sup>i</sup>. This deviation from the reality of the period complicates the reading of the novel. The French revolution was an anti-catholic movement resulting in the country becoming atheist. There was therefore a common enemy constructed as an enemy to both Catholics and Protestants. Many people, however, were uncomfortable with leaving behind traditional anti-Catholicism and this may be the reason for Parsons’ decision to portray France as Catholic. This element of religious conflict gives the novel a gothic edge and Parsons is often noted as a Gothic writer, but I would suggest this novel is not of a consistently Gothic nature.

The Marquis is the central villain of the novel and is exposed as deceitful, cunning and destructive. He can be seen as representing the French Catholic threat to England. The novel was written in a period of strong anti-French and anti-Catholic feeling. As Robert Miles notes the reaction in mid 1790’s against them ‘had reached a fever pitch.’<sup>ii</sup>

Tensions in 1797 between the previously Catholic France and Protestant England had been high for a long while. The wars between 1689 and 1748 had centred on Catholic claimants to the English throne, causing fear and xenophobia among the English. Linda

Colley looks at the specifically religious nature of these wars:

One of France's primary objectives...was an invasion of Britain in support of Stuart claimants to the throne, first the exiled James II, then his son, James Edward Stuart, and finally his grandson, Charles Edward Stuart, alias Bonnie Prince Charlie. Since these princes were Roman Catholics, all of these wars were bound to raise the issue of the security of the Protestant settlement within Great Britain itself, as well as the spectre of another civil war on its shores.<sup>iii</sup>

These wars were seen as a violent Catholic threat to the English Protestant throne. The French Revolution (1793-1802), which followed this, further enflamed religious tensions. An engrained hatred of the Catholics was now joined by a joint hatred of atheism, as a threat to all religions. It was in the middle of this hot bed of religious feeling that this novel was written in 1797.

The Bruyere family, from the beginning of the novel, is victim to the tyrannical force of Catholicism. The banishment and ruin of the Bruyeres is accredited to their 'unpardonable crime' of being a Protestant family.<sup>iv</sup> Their religious beliefs in this respect ally them to the English reader and evoke pathos through prejudices against the French. The Bruyeres, despite being themselves French, seem to be constantly contrasted with the French Catholics and set apart from them. They can be seen as a representation of Englishness under a foreign threat. The Catholic Count de Themirez deprives Bruyere of his fortune and can be seen as a commentary on the harms that England fears from the French. Bruyere is later taken captive by the Inquisition, at the Marquis' request, as the Countess informs Madame Bruyere: 'he wrote to one of the officers belonging to the

Inquisition, whose character he well knew, and described your unfortunate husband as a Protestant, a banished man, and now a spy at the court of Portugal.’<sup>v</sup> Religion is the means and power behind the injuries Monsieur Bruyere receives along with his family, from their unseen tormentor the Marquis. Bruyere is unaware the whole time he is held that the Marquis has put him there and Madame Bruyere is unaware of the extent of the harm she has to fear from him for some time. Victor Sage sees this element of the unseen tormentor as another anti-Catholic tool and discusses this with reference to Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*:

The image of Roman law involves the exclusion, and therefore the denial, of the English presumption that the accused be confronted in person by his accuser. The Roman Inquisition, like hell itself, is full of veiled accusers.<sup>vi</sup>

The Marquis even plans to harm the children: Henrietta is to be sent to a convent and Henry to a college of Jesuits. Religion is a tool of terror here and Catholicism is portrayed as an evil force trying to destroy the innocent and defenceless Protestants. The Count de Vassy is another example of suffering at the hands of Catholicism: he loses his love to a convent at the directions of his Catholic mother. She writes to him and says, ‘When you learn that Clara Beaufort, is now sister Agnes, in the convent St Mary Magdalene at Salines, I hope you will remember she is dead to you.’<sup>vii</sup> This is particularly interesting as she is an English Protestant and directly shows the dangers many English people feared.

The fear of Catholicism was so strong that laws were passed limiting the role Catholics could play in England in a bid to control them: ‘At its most formal, the division was

enshrined in the law. From the late seventeenth century until 1829, British Catholics were not allowed to vote and were excluded from all state offices and from both houses of parliament.<sup>viii</sup> Linda Colley sees Catholics as a convenient target for blame in this period: ‘In times of danger or insecurity, Catholics - like witches - became scapegoats, easy targets on which their neighbours could vent fear and anger.’<sup>ix</sup> The presence of Protestant fugitives from France in England only heightened fears: ‘France had attempted to expel its Protestant population in 1685, and many of these Huguenot refugees had settled in Britain, living reminders to their new countrymen of the enduring threat of Catholic persecution.’<sup>x</sup> This history of strong feeling towards both the Catholics and the French makes a French, Catholic enemy a popular and obvious choice for a villain in a novel. Victor Sage notices that this was a popular trend of the time, starting from the very beginning of Gothic fiction with Lewis’s *The Monk*. He says that Lewis used a Catholic villain in order to ‘exploit a popular prejudice.’<sup>xi</sup> In this light the novel can be seen as quite nationalistic and as making a political statement about prejudices of the time. Robert Miles sees this patriotism in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* which was written in the same year: ‘To dwell on the horrors of the Inquisition in 1797 could thus be read as a patriotic assault on Catholicism, and in comparison with the ‘Illumist’ Gothic novels, as a ladylike alternative to matters current and political.’<sup>xii</sup> This novel can be read as similarly patriotic, damning Catholicism and celebrating Protestant endurance of hardships. There is also the argument that the Marquis is simply devoid of any religious feeling and consequently could be seen as an example of the dangers of atheism as much as Catholicism.

### Protestants and Divine Protection

The idea of enduring hardships is particularly important to the presentation of Protestantism in the novel. The Bruyere family, though constantly persecuted and deprived of almost everything they have, are always confident that God will aid them. Bruyere explains they have nothing to fear for themselves or for their children as God ‘that gracious Power will protect them, will inspire us.’<sup>xiii</sup> Linda Colley saw Protestant Britons as encouraging this trust:

Protestant Britons believed they were in God’s special care. They knew that they were bound to be regularly tested by periods of extreme sin and suffering, and they took it for granted that struggle - especially struggle with those who were not Protestants - was their birthright.<sup>xiv</sup>

Colley lays this theory of necessary struggle at the feet of several texts available at the time including John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. This contained commentary on the Protestant burnings during Mary Tudor’s reign and was first published in 1563. Colley sees the influence of this work as twofold:

First, Foxe linked brutal religious persecution with Roman Catholicism and with foreign intervention. Mary Tudor - as he made clear - had been married to Philip II of Spain when most of the burnings and heresy hunts had taken place. But second, and still more tellingly, Foxe’s martyrs could stand for everyman. They included women as well as men, the poor and insignificant as well as the eminent and prosperous, and all ages from the venerably old to the most vulnerably young.<sup>xv</sup>

This twofold meaning encouraged not only hatred for foreign powers but also an

increased sense of national identity through their unity as Protestants. This can be seen in the novel too, the Bruyeres of reputable family are persecuted, as well as their young children and their loyal servant Philip. The Catholic persecution knows no bounds in the novel.

The faith of the Bruyeres is rewarded at the end of the novel. The Catholic tormenters all end in ruin with the Bruyere family, although altered, at peace once more. They represent the victorious English Protestants having triumphed through adversity. Victor Sage states that in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* ‘the setting and the character are fairly perfunctory. The novel’s relevance is to a contemporary readership.’<sup>xvi</sup> This can explain why the nationality of Parsons’ characters is not necessarily important to her, as the issues of her novel would have been recognised by her contemporary readership anyway.

### Status

Inconstant prosperity is seen in the novel with characters’ circumstances changing. This flux of economic prosperity is used to convey the differences between the characters in the novel. The French and Catholicism were often characterised by excess and consequently as being poverty stricken during this period and Colley sees the benefit of this portrayal for Briton:

Characterising the French and other predominantly Catholic states as poverty-ridden was also a way of claiming that only Protestants could enjoy a true and lasting prosperity, that those who lacked fervour and clear vision in serving the Lord were likely to be slothful, misguided and ineffective in the more mundane

aspects of life as well.<sup>xvii</sup>

This aspect of undeserved prosperity and consequently its temporary state is seen several times in the novel. The Marquis comes into money but uses it for personal gain and fritters it away on a lavish lifestyle. He is brought to ruin at the end of the novel through his excessive behaviour and we are told he is ‘deserted, destitute and wretched.’<sup>xviii</sup> His corruption and downfall is aligned with the city and vice and we are told that he, ‘Gave himself up to love, and the full enjoyment of pleasure, which he was now determined to seek at Paris.’<sup>xix</sup> His love of the city and pleasure is contrasted against the morally good characters of the novel who are shown to enjoy country life and domestic pleasures. Madame Bruyere says that Bruyere has ‘fondness for domestic happiness’. The Count de Sylves, who was made unhappy by his wife and her love of excess was:

Obliged to seek for other amusements than his domestic circle afforded him, he grew devoted to the pleasures of a country life; and though he had no heirs to enjoy his estates, he had relations he loved, and to improve his fortune for them, was the only enjoyment he derived from riches.<sup>xx</sup>

Money is shown consequently as of little importance to the heroes of the novel and they are therefore seen as worthy of possessing it. The villains are shown as unworthy and they all lose that they had by the end. This also evokes a town and country divide, with the city as being the centre of vice and the country as representing an older and purer way of living.

The idea of prosperity is also linked to the idea of titles indicating rank. These are shown in the novel to be worthless and not demonstrating the moral worth of a character, much

like the possession of money. Madame Bruyere remarks that titles are ‘frequently rendered contemptible.’<sup>xxi</sup> She and Bruyere are notably only Madame and Monsieur but are the novel’s heroes, with undisputable characters. The Marquis as their opposite is wealthy and titled but not deserving of any respect which usually accompanies these things. The Count de Vassy is a particular victim of class snobbery and is denied his love due to her status, as she was not considered worthy of his family. We are told by Vassy that his father:

had not taken up his resolution lightly, but would a thousand times sooner hear of my death, than that I should live to disgrace my family by a shameful marriage with an indigent, obscure English girl, whose consummate art, and pretty face, had made fools of both Poissy and me.<sup>xxii</sup>

This acts both as social and religious commentary with the Catholic characters concerned with wealth and titles in comparison to the Protestants who are more concerned with family and happiness, with daily life rather than living to excess.

### The Heroine

Madame Bruyere is presented as the ideal of femininity and is faultless throughout the novel. She is the epitome of woman as set out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who said ‘Woman... was born to obey.’<sup>xxiii</sup> Madame Bruyere obeys Bruyere and the Marquis, scrupulously and against her own desires. When she discovers her ruin at the beginning of the novel she endeavours to control her own feelings to try and help her husband and perform her duty to him, “I will no longer murmur,” returned she, “tell me what I am to do, what I must bear, and you shall see I will not shrink from the performance of my

duties.<sup>»»xxiv</sup> She is obedient and submissive but her role as a wife and mother are crucial in the novel. Rousseau claimed that this domestic role was essential to a national well being:

Yet her contribution to the well-being of the state was vital, as vital, indeed, as that of men, but essentially and necessarily different from it. The confines of the home were the boundaries of her kingdom. This was where she exercised a gentle and improving sway over her husband and forged the next generation, breast-feeding and brainwashing her children into Patriotic virtue. Women who neglected their families for the outside world, who put their infants out to nurse, or worst of all, practised birth control, endangered the polity and violated their own natures.<sup>xxv</sup>

Madame Bruyere's constant mothering of her children and her unfaltering obedience are the only constants in the novel where social positions and prosperity are constantly in flux. The following is a contemporary instruction from a father to his daughters on how he considers women: 'I have considered your sex; not as domestic drudges, or the slaves of our pleasures, but as our companions and equals; as designed to soften our hearts and polish our manners.'<sup>xxvi</sup> Madame Bruyere certainly fulfils these obligations, a loyal companion to her husband and a moral guide to her children. Her obedience leads eventually to her death, we are told that the 'unfortunate woman was sinking to the grave, a victim to the deceptive treachery of the vile Marquis, and her too delicate sense of honour.'<sup>xxvii</sup> Mary Robinson's contemporary letter shows resistance to this unquestioning obedience which Parsons seems to promote: 'woman is condemned to bear the drudgery of domestic life, to vegetate in obscurity, to love where she abhors, to

honour where she despises, and to obey, while she shudders at subordination.<sup>xxviii</sup> Her unquestioning loyalty prevents her from leaving the castle at the beginning of the novel while she could do so.

Madame Bruyere's moral goodness contrasts strongly with the Countess and Mademoiselle Courthouse and their reliance on their appearance and love of excess. This contrast between appearances and worth are highlighted in Mary Robinson's letter:

What a pity it is, that whilst your Beauty casts a lustre all around you, your Souls which are infinitely more bright and radiant [...] shou'd be suffer'd to over-run with Weeds, lie fallow and neglected, unadorned with any Grace!<sup>xxix</sup>

They are not concerned with establishing any good qualities, only in looking good and living an expensive lifestyle. The excess demonstrated by the Countess and Mademoiselle Courthouse can be used to demonstrate the French corruption. Colley remarks about the treatment of French women that:

even before 1789, it had been common for writers on proper female conduct, whatever their politics, to invoke the supposed behaviour of Frenchwomen as exemplifying what must at all costs be avoided in Britain. Frenchwomen, John Andrews observed in 1783 had whiter teeth than their sisters across the Channel, but this small merit was cancelled out by their heavy use of cosmetics.

Frenchwomen, Mary Wollstonecraft agreed, were too vain, too frivolous, too self-indulgent, too prone to sensuality to be the model for rational and modest womankind.<sup>xxx</sup>

The extravagant Countess, who very much embodies this vision of French femininity, is

bought to financial ruin through her expensive lifestyle and is forced to rely on male support to sustain herself. She is enlisted to help the Marquis but does eventually repent and we are told that ‘she is unhappy, poor, and she says, repentant.’<sup>xxxii</sup> Her behaviour is very similar to that of Mademoiselle Courthouse. We are told that ‘her showy person, forward manners, and handsome entertainments soon drew a crowd.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> Her reliance on her appearance and love of excess eventually cause hers, her father’s and the Marquis’ ruin:

She was not in the situation to make terms, and quickly accepted his unconditional offer; leaving her worthless parent to want and misery among strangers, and without the least remorse, gave him up to the punishment he had well deserved for the baseness of his conduct; though the infliction of it ought not to have proceeded from her.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The Countess in her repentance can be seen as representing a corrupted French female Catholic, as well as simply as representing the atheist. She has no religion in her life; her only concerns are amusement and money. Her decision to enter a convent can be seen as a decision to embrace religion and religion can be seen as saving her at the last moment before death and as enabling her to be absolved of her past behaviour.

### A Reading

Robert Miles states that ‘Gothic texts of the 1790s in a certain respect resemble those visual puzzles where, for instance, a picture looked at in one manner produces a vase, in another, two faces in profile.’<sup>xxxiv</sup> This novel can be seen in more than one way, it is the act of reading that makes up its content. The different religious meanings can all be

validated but this validation lies in the hands of the reader. Meanings are only contained within the text for those who want to see them. The theories of Wolfgang Iser on reading are useful for developing this point. He was a founder of reception theory and saw meaning as between physical text and reading. He saw the text as defining the rules of reading, with a code of communication. He described the breaking off of plot threads as forcing the reader to start making a reading:

The reader fills in the blank of the text, thereby bringing about a referential field; the blank arising in turn out of the referential field is filled in by way of the theme-and-background structure; and the vacancy arising from juxtaposed themes and backgrounds is occupied by the reader's standpoint, from which the various reciprocal transformations lead to the emergence of the aesthetic object.<sup>xxxv</sup>

This particular novel is broken off into three volumes, forcing the reader to consider their reading between each one. The narrative is also interspersed with the character's histories to disjoin the events. Also towards the end of the novel there is a shifting to and from different characters present situations. As well as bridging gaps specific to the plot the reader will also be encouraged to bridge gaps between the text and the social backdrop it is set against. Therefore the references to Catholic and Protestant divisions would immediately connect to the readers' subsequent knowledge of the French wars and the general anti-French feeling of the time. This gap filling allows the reader to choose an anti-Catholic or anti-atheist view point to the novel. It seems that more than anything Parsons is simply being pro-Protestant and that anything else be that Catholicism or atheism is an enemy.

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- <sup>i</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume I* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 21
- <sup>ii</sup> Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester University Press, 1995) pp. 62
- <sup>iii</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 3 - 4
- <sup>iv</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume I* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 3
- <sup>v</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume II* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 98
- <sup>vi</sup> Victor Sage, *Horror and Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) pp. 150
- <sup>vii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 20
- <sup>viii</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 19
- <sup>ix</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 23
- <sup>x</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 23
- <sup>xi</sup> Victor Sage, *Horror and Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) pp. xiv
- <sup>xii</sup> Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester University Press, 1995) pp. 70
- <sup>xiii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume I* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 4
- <sup>xiv</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 29
- <sup>xv</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 26 - 27
- <sup>xvi</sup> Victor Sage, *Horror and Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988) pp. 30
- <sup>xvii</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 35
- <sup>xviii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 210
- <sup>xix</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 152
- <sup>xx</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 67
- <sup>xxi</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume II* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 115
- <sup>xxii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 16
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 239
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume I* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 8
- <sup>xxv</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 239
- <sup>xxvi</sup> John Gregory, 'A Father's Legacy to his Daughters', in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. by Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 44 -53 (p.45)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 114
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Mary Robinson, 'A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination', in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. by Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 238 - 243 (p.239)
- <sup>xxix</sup> Mary Astell, 'A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their Truest and Greatest Interest', in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. by Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 197 - 206 (p.197)
- <sup>xxx</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 251
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 239
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 153
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Eliza Parsons, *An Old Friend with a New Face, Volume III* (London: Longman, 1797) pp. 254 -255
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester University Press, 1995) pp. 70
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction Between Text and Reader', in *The Book History Reader*, ed. by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 291 - 196 (p.295)

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