

**A life marketed as fiction : An analysis of the work of Eliza Parsons.**

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A Life Marketed as Fiction: An Analysis of the Work of Eliza Parsons

Karen Morton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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A Life Marketed as Fiction: An Analysis of the Work of Eliza Parsons

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

Sheffield Hallam University, May 2005

This thesis constitutes a scholarly intervention into the life and work of Eliza Parsons (1739-1811), a little-known writer of the Romantic period, offering a biographical account, including evidence from original research, and an analysis of her literary works, also based on fresh findings. Furthermore, it corrects errors published by scholars who had provided the scant information previously known about her. A project of recovery, the thesis investigates the motives, methods, difficulties and successes of a once-popular writer in order to understand circumstances influencing her career, thus expanding the body of knowledge currently available to scholars researching the reading and writing culture of the era.

The writer of twenty works, Eliza Parsons is now only known for the inclusion of two novel titles, *The Castle of Wolfenhach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), in the list of 'Horrid Novels' mentioned in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). These class her as a Gothic writer, a category supported by my exploration of others of her works in that genre. However, my research has discovered works in other genres, including novels of contemporary manners and a play, the majority of which have not previously been studied.

I argue that Eliza Parsons is interested in generic experimentation, partly influenced by her reception, as evidence of which I include a comprehensive appendix of contemporary reviews, and partly by her need for financial security, which encourages her to follow changing tastes in reading. However, all her works display an interest in parenting and education, discussed throughout the thesis and providing my main contention that she repackages an eventful life as material for publication as fiction, driven by the necessity to support her family, rather than by a desire to write.

Generic diversity in her literature mirrors that of her private writings. Though the only extant documents are letters requesting financial aid, I argue that her prefaces and dedications can also be considered as personal writing. These sources reveal a capacity for foregrounding whatever aspect of her circumstances or personality best suits her current purposes. Thus, though she emphasises her poverty when seeking alms, her novel dedications draw on aristocratic connections from a wealthier past.

My thesis aims to reconstruct as fully as possible the life and oeuvre of a little-known writer, who, as one of those publishing with William Lane's Minerva Press, is of considerable importance to academic understanding of women's fiction of the period.

**A LIFE MARKETED AS FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE WORK OF  
ELIZA PARSONS**

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## C H R O N O L O G Y

1739 4th April, Elizabeth Philp, daughter of John Philp, wine-merchant, and his wife Roberta, baptised at Charles Church, Plymouth.

1760 24th March, marries James Parsons, a turpentine distiller and government contractor for naval stores at Charles Church, Plymouth.

1761 24th March, James, son of James and Elizabeth Parsons, baptised at Charles Church, Plymouth.

1762 30th April, Mary, daughter of James and Elizabeth Parsons, baptised at Charles Church, Plymouth.

1765 13th February, William, son of James and Elizabeth Parsons, baptised at Charles church, Plymouth.

? A son dies of yellow fever off St. Domingo. 1

? Mr Parsons' ships emptied or seized as prizes in American war. He has to dispose of his contracts on London market. 2

? Parsons family move to Bow Bridge.3

1782 Eldest son dies in Jamaica, shortly after promotion to Captain of the Royal Marines.

1782 Fire in still-house destroys Mr Parsons' business. Eliza said to have saved town of Bow by demolishing workmen's housing.

1785 8th September, Elizabeth Parsons appointed Sempstress in Ordinary to His Majesty's Wardrobe at St James's Palace.

1785 October? 5 James Parsons appointed Second Assistant Clerk in the Lord Chamberlain's Office.

1789 James Parsons dies of a stroke, leaving Eliza with eight children to support.

1789 11th August, James Parsons buried at St Mary at Lambeth Church.

1790 *The History of Miss Meredith* by 'Mrs. Parsons' published by T. Hookham. Dedication, signed 'Eliza Parsons', to The Marchioness of Salisbury. Address given as 15, East Place, Lambeth.

1791 *The Errors of Education* published by Wm. Lane's Minerva Press. Dedicated to The Countess of Hillsborough.



1792 2nd January, falls. Compound fracture of left leg keeps her bedridden for 5 months, unable to sew or write.

1792 18th April, *The Intrigues of a Morning*, a translation of a Moliere play, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, put on at Covent Garden. Published by Minerva, dedication to Mrs Crespigny.

1792 17th December, writes first letter to trustees of Royal Literary Fund, to request financial aid, from 5 Princes Place, Vauxhall Road, Lambeth.

1793 *Woman As She Should Be* published by Minerva, dedicated to The Duchess of Gloucester, dedication dated 26th February.

1793 *The Castle of Wolfenbach* published by Minerva.

1793 14th May, writes to William Windham, MP, requesting a subscription towards *Lucy*, a novel, from 55 Beaumont Street, Weymouth Street, Portland Place.

1793 *Ellen and Julia* published by Minerva, dedicated to Mrs Crespigny, dedication dated 12th November.

1794 *Lucy* published by Minerva.

1795 *The Voluntary Exile* published by Minerva.

1796 Moves from Leicester Square to Point Pleasant, Wandsworth Fields.

1796 7th July, writes to Royal Literary Fund requesting financial aid, from Point Pleasant, Wandsworth Fields. She had left Leicester Square due to inability to pay debts.

1796 *The Mysterious Warning* published by Minerva, dedicated to The Princess of Wales, dedication dated 22nd November. Address given as 22 Leicester Square.

1796 *Women As They Are* published by Minerva, dedicated to Mrs Anson, dedication dated 1st November (though the title page makes it clear that *The Mysterious Warning* is already in print).

1797 *The Girl of The Mountains* published by Minerva, dedicated to Princess Sophia Matilda of Gloucester.

1797 *An Old Friend With A New Face* published by T. N. Longman, dedicated to Lady Howard.

1798 *Anecdotes of Two Well-Known Families* published by T. N. Longman, dedicated to 'The First Female Pen in England'.

1799 *The Valley of St. Gothard* published by P.Norbury, Brentford, dedicated to Matthew Gregory Lewis. 6

1800 *The Miser and His Family* published by P.Norbury, Brentford.

1801 *The Peasant of Ardenne Forest* published by P.Norbury, Brentford.

1801? Placed under King's Bench Rules at 13 Temple Place, Surrey Road for non-payment of debts.<sup>n</sup>

1802 *The Mysterious Visit* published by P. Norbury, Brentford.

1803 30th May, letter to Royal Literary Fund requesting financial aid, from 13 Temple Place, Surrey Road, in fear of debtor's prison, unable to keep up repayments for King's Bench Rules.8

1803 Daughter, wife of a surgeon, dies.

1804 *Murray House* published by P. Norbury, Brentford.

1804 *Love and Gratitude* published by P.Norbury, Brentford.

1804 6th September, *The Times* reports that Eliza Parsons has been up before the magistrate at the Surrey Sessions, charged with obtaining goods under false pretences and tax evasion. Former charge dropped, Eliza Parsons amends tax schedule in court and is discharged.

1804 12<sup>th</sup> November, only surviving son, Naval Lieutenant recently promoted to command of gun-vessel *The Hecate*, dies in storm at sea off Whitstable Bay. Reported in Navy List for December.

1807 *The Convict; or Navy Lieutenant* published by P. Norbury, Brentford.

1808 Moves to Assembly House, Leytonstone, Essex.

1811 Dies on 5th February at Leytonstone. Death reported by *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

**1** Devendra Varma refers to this event in his introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, Northanger Set of Horrid Novels, (London: Folio Press, 1968) p. viii, though he mentions neither the date nor the son's name. However, I have found no other source for this.

**2** Devendra Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, p. vii.

**3** *ibid.*

**4** *ibid.*

**3** The Lord Chamberlain's records are illegible.

**6** *Author of The Monk*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973 (1796)

**7** Presumed date. Letter dated 30th May 1803 to Royal Literary Fund states she has been under King's Bench Rules for two years. Letter to Dr Dale, 30th May, Royal Literary Fund Archives.

**8** *ibid.*

## CHAPTER 1 Introduction

*Should I be so fortunate to obtain your interest...A*

This thesis is a scholarly investigation into the life and work of Eliza Parsons, an under-researched novelist and playwright of the Romantic era. It constitutes a retrieval of lost or previously unknown data, based on original research and new findings in respect of her life and literary work. The investigation has involved the consultation of numerous archives, libraries, journals and web-sites and has resulted in the uncovering of new facts about her life, work and reception. I have consulted many contemporary documents to trace information back to its original sources where previous scholars have relied on secondary, and frequently incorrect, sources. As such, this thesis constitutes a scholarly intervention into the analysis of women's writing in the eighteenth century, through the analysis of Eliza Parsons' work and life. I have focused intensively on Eliza Parsons so as to demonstrate the wealth of data retrievable on a writer seemingly lost to modern scholarship, from resources often ignored by critics. By examining incidental textual elements such as dedications, prefaces and requests for financial aid, I demonstrate that it is possible for critics to discover a great deal about writers of whom little is known. This is particularly significant in the field of the recovery of lost women writers of the Romantic period, currently a rich area of research; one which is of vital importance to our understanding of the reading and writing culture of the period, and one which has for too long remained unexplored. Scholars are now locating many previously obscure authors of the time and making their works available once more.<sup>4</sup> My work is thus intended to serve as both a resource for scholars working in this area of research and to others investigating less well-known women writers.

In appendices, I have made available for researchers some important information on the reception and readership of Eliza Parsons' works. In Appendix 1, I give the subscription list of her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790),<sup>5</sup> which contains many names recognisable to us, from royalty to writers, and gives an indication of the social milieu from which Eliza Parsons drew her acquaintances before she became impoverished. In Appendix 2, I have gathered together the diverse reviews of Eliza Parsons' writing which occur in the following journals from 1790 to 1809: *The Critical Review*, *The Monthly Review*, *The English Review*, *The General Magazine*, *The Analytical Review*, *The British Critic*, *The Monthly Magazine and British Register*, *The Monthly Mirror*, *The Monthly Magazine*, *Flowers of Literature* and *The Lady's Monthly Museum*. This appendix of forty-eight reviews will serve as a useful scholarly tool for future researchers.

I argue throughout this thesis that Eliza Parsons is a woman who negotiated carefully and strategically with the circumstances in which she found herself, drawing on every possible connection or device which would aid her in her bid to earn money to support her family through writing. In order to provide a sufficient focus for a thesis aiming to recover Eliza Parsons' life and work, I concentrate on her in relative isolation from others whose works are becoming better known,<sup>6</sup> except in certain circumstances when she appears to be contributing something new or challenging to the genre of Romantic-era women's novel-writing as a whole. In these cases, I compare her with other writers. Naturally, as a writer of Gothic novels, she is competing for publication with writers such as Ann Radcliffe, although in the preface to her first work, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), a novel of manners, she pays

compliments to Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, Clara Reeve and Anna Maria Bennett. These are the writers she wants to emulate, and she follows the lead of many in her dedications to noble and notable ladies.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, one of those to whom she dedicates her work, the wealthy socialite Mrs Crespigny, is chosen as dedicatee by others whose works and circumstances are similar to those of Eliza Parsons. For example, in 1804, Mary Tuck dedicates to Mrs Crespigny *Durston Castle: or The Ghost of Eleonora*, whose title is suggestive of Eliza Parsons' work of 1793, *The Castle of Wolfenbach*.<sup>8</sup> That she is not following Ann Radcliffe's *The Castle of Athlin and Dunbane* (1789), is clear from the superscription that she is employing her pen 'to preserve a growing family from immediate distress'.<sup>9</sup> Ann Radcliffe was a wealthy woman who had taken up a writing profession from choice. In 1805, Eliza Parsons' 1802 novel *The Mysterious Visit* is recalled by another, anonymous, writer dedicating to Mrs Crespigny a work entitled *The Mysterious Protector*.<sup>10</sup> To her, Sarah Wilkinson dedicates *The Fugitive Countess, or Convent of St Ursula* (1807),<sup>11</sup> whose eponymous heroine is reminiscent of the imprisoned Countess in Eliza Parsons' *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), a considerable section of the plot of which takes place in a convent. Thus it appears that, from setting out to follow in the footsteps of other writers, Eliza Parsons seems to be setting the pace in some areas. Perhaps other women, writing for money like her, are emboldened to write the kind of text deemed worthy of patronage in past years, in the hope that Mrs Crespigny might honour them too.

I want to explore briefly the theme of genre in the roles undertaken by the men and, in particular, women of the Romantic era. Although working people of both sexes may tend to have been categorised in terms of their occupation, in higher society the roles

of women might well be more distinct than those of men, who might merge their various identities of, for instance, gentleman farmer, drinking partner and man about town. The roles played by a woman seem to have been more entrenched; the private roles of mother, wife, educator and so on might have been intensified in public as the respectable mistress of a household, matron, good dressmaker or employer of a good dressmaker, exemplar of excellent manners and a reflection of good taste on a husband's part. There is an inflexibility to the roles, or we might use the term genres, of a woman's life which might find its outlet in some cases; an obvious example might be that of actress, but this role was a dangerous one to assume, as it puts all the other respectable and socially acceptable roles at risk. In ordinary life, perhaps one of the most flexible genres to which one could belong as a woman of the period, provided one had wealth enough to enjoy it, was that of a widow. An unmarried woman 'belonged' to her father and a married one to her husband, but a widow had the status conferred by marriage coupled with autonomy. It was she who was the head of the household, who ordered her life, who ventured out into the world to pay servants and hire workers, unless she had a son who could perform these tasks. Perhaps, then, a widow might have experience of a wider range of life genres than her married and unmarried sisters.

As far as choice of occupation is concerned, the woman who has one of the most varied, in terms of knowledge and experience of life genres, is the writing woman, who must know enough about the world to write about different scenes, and know about the life of different classes of people and be able to give voice to their experience. A writer situates her characters in a particular background, generally well-described enough to convince audiences that they recognise it - a marketplace, a



landed estate, a village cottage. As mentioned above, the prevailing culture required one to signal one's role in society. Rules of conduct and etiquette of the Romantic era are evident to us in novels such as Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778),<sup>10</sup> and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1802),<sup>11</sup> and the restrictions of behaviour coupled with the need to be seen to conform meant that boundaries were rigid. Women writers seem to have been in a particularly good position to blur those boundaries. They worked in private, thus, so far, were respectable. They required, however, a knowledge of many kinds of behaviour, classes of people and settings, to give their work the layers a novel demands. They then had to give dialogue to characters both good and evil and make troubling, and unrespectable, thoughts thinkable. It seems that it is this blurring of the boundaries which truly compromises the respectability of women writers. This blurring of the boundaries is recognised by Anne Mellor, who argues that the limitation of the public sphere to men in the period from 1780 to 1830 by Jurgen Habermas is historically incorrect, declaring that, during the Romantic era

women participated fully in the public sphere as Habermas defined it. They openly and frequently published their free and reasoned opinions on an enormous range of topics, from the French Revolution and the abolitionist campaigns against the slave trade through doctrinal religious issues and methods of education to the economic management both of the individual household and of the state. Their views were openly circulated not only through the economic institutions of print culture (newspapers and journals, books, circulating libraries) but also through the public forums of debating societies and the theater. Not only did women participate fully in the discursive public sphere, but their opinions had definable impact on their social movements, economic relationships, and state-regulated policies of the day.<sup>14</sup>

This declaration that the varied roles of women have often been misunderstood, including their incursion into the 'male-centred' public world accords with my findings on Eliza Parsons, who, despite her modesty and moral stance, and her

reluctance to make overt political statements, illustrates the capacity of the writing woman to challenge expectations. For an example of a woman with a wide experience of a variety of life genres, Eliza Parsons is a good choice. A widow herself, she began writing to support her large family. As I point out in Chapter 2, she had a particularly eventful life and her roles multiplied over time. She had lived in good society and was reduced to a lower social position. She had been a wife and mother, a worker in the home and in the palace. She had worked as a writer, a seamstress and possibly as right-hand person in her husband's distillery business. She had, according to Devendra Varma,<sup>13</sup> made the important decision, when the family turpentine distillery caught fire in her husband's absence, to demolish homes to save Bow from the conflagration. She saw (and narrowly escaped) the King's Bench prison and had appeared before the magistrate. She moved from Plymouth to Bow, to Vauxhall, to Lambeth, Leicester Square, Temple, various other addresses and finally to Leytonstone. She brought up her five daughters to become teachers and wives, marrying her girls to foreign and local merchants. She brought up her three sons to join the Navy and merchant navy, at least one attaining officer rank. She saw the destruction of her family business twice. She nursed her husband through a long illness. She lost a husband, three sons and one daughter. She suffered a serious injury to her leg in a fall and its consequences over long years. She befriended booksellers and such celebrated writers as Mary Robinson and Matthew Lewis. The subscription list, an impressive document of around five hundred names, of her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith*, makes clear her wide circle of acquaintances.<sup>16</sup> Her subscribers include Royalty, aristocracy, literary people, college dons, professional people, Plymouth nobility and family members. She gave advice on publishing to budding authors.<sup>17</sup> She had been well educated and later translated foreign texts.<sup>18</sup> She

on her occupation as a writer, she focuses here on her role as a mother, attempting to educate her children to become useful members of society - surely of interest to a legislator. She makes great play of her disability, which requires her to hire a carriage to bring the letter to the MP, but as the cost is so great, she has to send the letter, rather than appear in person. Thus, we see her strategically drawing on that material from her life which will be the most effective.

Her dedications form another genre of writing. She dedicates a number of works, mostly to high-born ladies and indicates, by dedicating with permission, her knowledge of the best society. The subscription list to *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) makes clear her wide acquaintances with celebrities. Her dedicatees range from the Princess of Wales to Lady Howard, and she declares herself their humble servant, displaying gratitude for their gracious acceptance of dedication. This is no straightforward statement. The genre of dedication requires a specialised skill in professing humility and an inability to write, whilst engaging in very skilful writing indeed to ensure that the right note of subservience is sounded despite the confidence one actually has in one's competence as a writer. A writer truly unsure of her talent would hardly embarrass herself and her chosen dedicatee by involving them in a request to patronise an enterprise likely to fail. To present herself as a professional writer already assumes others will take Eliza Parsons at her word. She is able to proclaim acquaintance with the highest in the land, and, in her earlier works, gives her address at the end of the dedication, making the relationship seem more intimate still. She dedicates a few works without permission, and there is a strong sense of her conviction that the dedication will be acceptable, and indeed, seen as a compliment, to the recipient.<sup>24</sup>

There is a sub-genre within her dedications, as not all were directed towards noble ladies. Two, her play *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792) and *Ellen and Julia*, a novel of 1793, were dedicated to Mrs Crespigny, author and patron of authors, to whom Eliza Parsons owed gratitude for encouraging her in her early writing career. Perhaps the most interesting dedication is that of *The Valley of St Gothard* (1799), offered without permission to the writer Matthew Gregory Lewis. Here, Eliza Parsons displays hidden depths. She is apparently so sure of his acceptance of this dedication that she does not ask Lewis' permission, but makes it clear they are acquainted. This is no aristocratic lady, nor respectable patron of the arts, but a notorious author of scandalous works. Evidently, Eliza Parsons is expert at compartmentalising the genres of her life, including her circle of friends. She ranges from friend of the aristocracy to member of the literary community.

Prefaces introduce some of Eliza Parsons' works. The preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* shows how adeptly she blends different roles. It appears with the subscription list, which is added, ostensibly, to thank her patrons for helping her to publish, but its function is more complex. It is an address book, a public acknowledgement of private acquaintance, and as such, serves to show her new readers her standing in society, her worthiness and respectability. The preface alongside it emphasises her poverty, yet the two do not clash. This is hazardous, because to show one has friends in high places might reduce one's attractiveness as a petitioner for public acceptance as a professional writer in need of sales, but Eliza Parsons skilfully unites her disparate aims. Her prefaces express her timidity as a new or unsure author and crave the public's indulgence, in some sense, encouraging her

readers to buy her novels in order to help support fatherless children, rather than to find out what happens in the plot and be entertained. She seems to exhort her public to do a good deed and feel better about having been of use, and thus offers them the sensation of being literary patrons. Once again, however, this is not as straightforward as it at first appears. Whilst presenting what seems a candid plea for her public's forbearance, she at the same time displays admirable writing skill in summoning up the manifestation of herself as a hapless widow with no other means of earning money than attempting an occupation in which she is not talented, but which is at least respectable, since it is conducted at home in private. Once again, this shows acumen, since novel-writing for women of the era is not particularly respectable. Perhaps her new public, won over by the impression of a widow anxious to please with what little talent she has, would be surprised to learn she gave advice on publishing to Mrs Lewis, adulterous mother of the notorious Matthew Gregory, neither of whom were known in society for their respectability. Once more, she submits only that facet of her character which will present her in the best light possible for the occasion.

After my consideration of her 'life-writing' genres in Chapters 3 to 5, I go on to discuss the various literary genres in which Eliza Parsons writes: in Chapter 6 I discuss her novels of contemporary manners, in Chapter 7, her Gothic novels and in Chapter 8, her novels of biographical nature, whilst later in this chapter, I consider genres which she attempted only once and then rejected.

\*\*\*I will conduct a brief examination of examples of regional and social dialect in the works of other writers in order to discover if Eliza Parsons' usage is in any way remarkable. Next I will discuss the regional and social dialects and occupational

jargon of Eliza Parsons' fictional characters, including the 'archaic and innovatory tendencies'<sup>9</sup> mentioned by Katie Wales. This will be followed by examples of the different forms of narration used by Eliza Parsons, from the omniscient third-person, through epistolary first-person, to a mixture involving inset stories told by secondary characters, and didactic intervention by the author. This will demonstrate how Eliza Parsons utilises her fiction-writing to include a wide range of voices likely to appeal to, and to reflect the experiences of a large and varied female readership.<sup>27</sup>

In order to discover whether Eliza Parsons' representation of realistic dialect is unusual or noteworthy, I will discuss a number of examples from other writers. Perhaps the depiction of dialect from an eighteenth century novel which most readily springs to mind is to be found in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749).<sup>28</sup> A prominent example of this is the speech of Squire Western. Used to give colour and power to the character, and comedy to the text, Western's utterances are rendered in a fashion which appears authentic due to his use of West Country dialect words and (blanked) expletives, which give the effect of a 'larger-than-life', nonconformist character:

'And to gu,' said the squire, 'to zet Allworthy against thee vor it. D-n un, if the parson had unt had his petticoats on, I should ha' lent un a flick; for I love thee dearly, my boy, and d-n me if there is anything in my power which I won't do for thee sha't take thy choice of all the horses in my stable tomorrow morning, except only the Chevalier and Miss Slouch'.<sup>29</sup>

The speech of other characters in this novel, too, is individual. Thwackum's interjection of Latin tags, Mrs Honour's ingratiating manner and reiteration of 'your la'ship' and 'to be sure' making her speech unmistakably that of a servant, Blifil's sycophantic air, all add to the lively effect of the novel, and make clear the power

relationships between its characters. Other authors, too, add realism to their characters' speech. Madame Duval in Burney's *Evelina* (1778)<sup>30</sup> peppers her utterances with French expressions, marking her out as untrustworthy because tainted by foreign manners, Mr Coverley begins every comment with 'Egad', giving him a 'silly ass' aspect and the Branghtons' ungrammatical remarks characterize them as unfashionable and lower class.

Maria Edgeworth was an exponent of the portrayal of regional and social dialect in her novels. In 1800's *Castle Rackrent* narrated in the first person by an Irish servant, she gives examples of Irish dialect and speech patterns.<sup>31</sup> In 1812, she published *The Absentee*,<sup>32</sup> and again reproduced speech, such as that of the servant, Petito, Lady Clonbrony's woman, with an authentic air.

'O, merciful! Miss Nugent, if you could stand still for one single particle of a second. So then I thought of stepping in to Miss Nugent; for the young ladies are talking so fast, says I to myself, at the door, they will never know how time goes, unless I give 'em a hint. But now my lady is below, there's no need, to be sure, to be nervous, so we may take the thing quietly, without being in a flustrum. Dear ladies, is not this now a very sudden motion of our young lord's for Ireland? Lud a mercy! Miss Nugent, I'm sure your motions is sudden enough; and your dress behind is all, I'm sure, I can't tell how'.<sup>33</sup>

However, not all eighteenth century novels were peopled by characters with markedly different patterns of speech from one another. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the origins of *Pamela* (1740)<sup>34</sup> as an aid to letter-writing required it merely to indicate correct modes of address, rather than to focus too much on incorrect ones. There is very little differentiation between the speech of Richardson's characters. The same is true of *The Monk* (1796), although the tone of the text and the speech of its characters are of a higher status than those of *Pamela*, with elegant phrasing and frequent excursions into

poetry. Even the Gypsy fortune-teller speaks in verse, and the nearest Lewis approaches to lower-class modes of speech is Jacintha, a landlady, and ‘prosing old woman’,<sup>36</sup> in Ambrosio’s opinion, whose expressions are a little less magnificent than those of other characters and whose origins are betrayed only by her volubility and repetitive speech, as the following extract indicates:

‘Let me die’ cried Jacintha, ‘but your Sanctity is in the right! This then is the fact stated briefly. A lodger of mine is lately dead, a very good sort of Woman that I must needs say for her as far as my knowledge of her went, though that was not a great way: She kept me too much at a distance; for indeed She was given to be upon the high ropes, and whenever I ventured to speak to her, She had a look with her, which always made me feel a little queerish, God forgive me for saying so. However, though she was more stately than needful, and affected to look down upon me [Though if it am well informed, I come of as good parents as She could do for her ears, for her Father was a Shoe-maker at Cordova, and Mine was a Hatter at Madrid, aye, and a very creditable Hatter too, let me tell you,] Yet for all her pride, She was a quiet well-behaved Body, and I never wish to have a better Lodger. This makes me wonder the more at her not sleeping quietly in her Grave: But there is no trusting to people in this world!...’<sup>37</sup>

Aside from a few idiomatic utterances, such as ‘She was given to be upon the high ropes’ and ‘as good parents as She could do for her ears’, this is standard, if repetitive, English. Indeed, this point is reinforced by the very English nature of Jacintha’s speech. For a Madrilenia, she sounds very like a commonplace Englishwoman.<sup>38</sup>

A Bakhtinian view might suggest that Lewis is presenting a more monologic style of novel in which his views and desires for the outcome of the plot make the characters subservient to his goals and there is, thus, no need to make the characters obviously different from one another. The author signals clearly, via the narration, the opinion the reader is expected to have of each character. In contrast, a highly dialogic novel



will allow the characters some degree of autonomy. To do this, authors present their characters' thoughts and words in a fashion which makes their differences clear, without always needing to resort to didactic intervention through the narrator, although in the case of Henry Fielding's novels, both approaches are followed. He gives a character such as Western an easily recognisable idiolect, in *Tom Jones* (1749), which aids readers to identify him as a powerful, eccentric West Country landowner, but this does not stop Fielding's own frequent interjections and opinions littering the text. Nonetheless, our opinions of Western and company are shaped mainly by the manner in which they express themselves, and interact with other characters. With all novels there is, of course, an implicit understanding that the reader will recognise these signs. Thus, the representation of seemingly authentic speech in prose fiction must depend to some extent on stereotype. This is inevitable in a form which relies on the written word to indicate a character's opinions, motives and nature, without the help of tone of voice or facial expression. If the author is to do without narrative interjection, a character's words must clearly signal as much as possible for the reader to assemble evidence about them. Thus, for example, a servant is made to sound like a servant by the use, perhaps, of dialect words, ungrammatical utterances, distancing devices indicative of respect, and so on.

Lynne Pearce (1994) discusses the extent to which this dialogism<sup>40</sup> might be present in novels in her study of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which each character exhibits not only his or her social and cultural status, but more importantly, displays power relations with interlocutors. Pearce reminds us of that the range of relations indicated through conversation to be found in the novel form can be wide, and *Wuthering Heights* exhibits an extreme variant of this.

Here is a text where virtually every dialogic exchange takes the form of a battle, where speakers are monolithically 'powerful' or 'powerless' in their relations with one another. While this gives rise, it must be said, to a rather unsubtle demonstration of how power relations are inscribed in a spoken dialogue, it does emphatically remind us that dialogue is not always friendly.<sup>41</sup>

The characters, says Pearce, do not actually talk *to* one another or pause to listen for a reply.

They prefer, instead, to rant and rave, to dismiss or ridicule their interlocutor's reply before it is even uttered. At the same time, each statement is made *in anticipation* of a hostile response. Witness, for example, the following extract from Chapter Two. In a brutal parody of the bourgeois tea-party (where polite conversation is 'tactfully' exchanged) Lockwood is offered his first glimpse of how the 'inmates' of the Heights communicate with one another:

'Perhaps I [Lockwood] can get a guide among your lads, and he might stay at the Grange till morning - could you spare me one?'

'No, I [Heathcliff] could not.'

'Oh, indeed! Well, then, I must trust to my own sagacity.'

'Umph!'

'Are you going to mak' the tea?' demanded he [Hareton] of the shabby coat, shifting his ferocious gaze from me to the young lady [Catherine II].

'Is he to have any?' she asked, appealing to Heathcliff.

'Get it ready, will you?' was the answer, uttered so savagely that I started. The tone in which the words were said, revealed a genuine bad nature. I no longer felt inclined to call Heathcliff a capital fellow, (p 54).

It will be seen that even with a stranger in their midst the three characters - Heathcliff, Hareton and Catherine - make no pretence of civility. Not a single word of goodwill is ever given or received between them, and all the utterances are issued in a spirit of defensive animosity.<sup>42</sup>

Although Emily Bronte does allow her narrator (in the form of Lockwood, here) to indicate the tone of voice - using words like 'growled', 'snarled', 'snapped' and so on

to show the animal quality of the speaker - the extract Pearce analyses above displays enough information via the characters' words alone to allow us to make judgements about the nature of the conversation and its participants. The polite town-dweller, Lockwood, adds distancing devices with his use of 'perhaps' to indicate suggestion rather than demand, and the polite conditional 'could' rather than 'can', when requesting help. The only direct reply to any of the remarks in the extract follows his enquiry as to whether Heathcliff can supply a guide. 'No, I could not' responds Heathcliff, a short and impolite answer which returns Lockwood's 'could' merely to mock him. Lockwood next understandably exhibits a little impatience with his 'Oh! indeed!' but settles back into polite mode with his resigned remark that he must trust to his own sagacity. Heathcliff's reply is a mere grunt. The interjection into this exchange, between Heathcliff and a stranger, of Hareton asking a question of a fourth person is still more indication of the lack of courtesy at the Heights. He does not ask Catherine civilly for a cup of tea, but merely demands to know if she is going to make it, with the implication that she had better hurry. Catherine does not reply to him, but asks Heathcliff if *he* not 'Mr Lockwood' or 'this gentleman' is to have any. Nor does she ask Lockwood himself if he would like tea. In reply, Heathcliff ignores her attempt, however abrupt, to include the guest in the taking of tea and merely demands, in a short and uncivil imperative, that she prepares the tea - 'Get it ready, will you?' Although Bronte tells us, through Lockwood, of the savage tone in which this remark is uttered, we do not need the explanation. All the signs of discourtesy have been recognised by the reader from the remarks of the characters themselves. We recognise the transgression of the rules of polite speech in a number of forms - speaking of someone in the room in the third person, rather than directly to him in the second person, replying shortly and giving a negative response to a request for help.

(indicating, obviously, that content as well as form is a vital aid to the reader in gathering evidence about a character), ignoring the question asked, and the questioner, and by asking another question of a third person.

The above short analysis demonstrates a writer's allowing great autonomy for her characters, without narrative interference, in which approach Emily Bronte is highly advanced and unusual among novelists of her, or indeed any, era. This is a very different situation from that of Samuel Richardson and Matthew Gregory Lewis,<sup>43</sup> and further developed than Frances Burney and Henry Fielding,<sup>44</sup> but it shows the possibilities for an author who wants to write a dialogic novel. Now I investigate how far Eliza Parsons enters into this arena, by her use of different idiolects for her characters.<sup>45</sup>

In her novels she proves to be capable of rendering a variety of types of speech which have the appearance of authenticity. In third-person narrated novels, this diversity is often foregrounded, as Eliza Parsons renders the speech of her characters precisely; thus variations in tone, and more importantly, varieties of dialect are displayed. Often, as with Frances Burney's *Mr Coverley*,<sup>46</sup> who begins each comment with 'egad', an author uses a 'catchphrase' to signal the type of personality a character possesses. Eliza Parsons, however, does not rely on this kind of shortcut to indicate her characters' manner of speech, but renders their conversation in a relatively realistic manner, using a variety of terminology to express their personality, regional or social origins or occupation. A good example of this appears in *Murray House* (1804), in which Eliza Parsons demonstrates the ease with which she is able to represent the speech of servants and lower class characters. This is exemplified by Susan, an

insolent maid who has decided to tell her mistress that she has seen her philandering master enter the room of a young woman visitor. Susan is motivated by malice as she herself has been seduced by her master, who has rejected her for the better-born young woman of whom Susan is now telling his wife.

‘Dear my lady, you need not be angry with me, I thought I did right to tell you, but since you take it up so, you may like to be slighted perhaps; but if you don’t mind it, other folks do, and those folks will let him know it too. - I say ‘tis a vile shame! that fine gay Miss is as bad as anybody, always getting in private and whispering, and such like. - I am sure he’s a perjured man, that he is, and if he goes on so with that new Miss, after forsaking Lady Belmour and somebody else, *all* shall out, that it shall.’

‘I’ll be burnt now if he shall ever know any more from me; and for that Miss thingamee, if I don’t do her business I’ll be hanged’.<sup>47</sup>

Usually, as mentioned above, the speech of servants is recognisable as such because the author uses for these characters’ speech stereotyped expressions of lower class speech, together with the respectful tone that might be expected of a servant to an employer. Here, the servant is insolent and despises her mistress, and Eliza Parsons conveys this in her speech as well as in narrative description. She is obviously of a lower class because she uses vulgar expressions, such as ‘I’ll be burnt’ and ‘I’ll be hanged’ which a higher class woman would be too genteel to use. Then she tells tales, after having been berated by her mistress. The subject is the latter’s husband, whom the servant is accusing of adultery. The revelation is not told in a spirit of shamed sympathy, however, but with gusto, and when reprimanded, the servant takes offence, with ‘since you take it up so, you may like to be slighted perhaps’ indicating no care for the woman’s feelings, or her own subservient position in the household.

As well as her ability to reproduce the speech of more lowly members of society, Eliza Parsons also has a good ear for higher-bom speakers, and she allows rakes to

condemn themselves by their speech. In *Women As They Are* (1796), an epistolary novel, the heroine, Mary Boyle writes to her friend and reports the direct speech of a rake, Lord Scamper, related to her by a gentleman friend, Mr Gardner, who had been accosted in London by Scamper, who was lamenting the results of a duel fought over a married woman.

‘What a devilish business this has turned out between poor Nichols and your friend Stanton. Zounds! if every man took it into his head to kill those who were fortunate with their wives, why there would be an end of all gallantry, or every delight in life’.<sup>48</sup>

Scamper continues, on the subject of mistresses;

‘...to tell you a secret, I have parted with *my* little filly.’  
‘Which of them?’ asked the other. [Mr. Gardner]  
‘Ha! ha! ha! a good joke! (exclaimed Scamper;) you thought I meant one of my mares; - I mean the rantipole, Lady Penrickard. We had a devilish quarrel at Dover, the very night poor Nichols was popped through the head: and the next day madam took herself off with an Italian nobleman, who had been in our parties, and embarked for France. Dieu merci! I had no wish to recall her; I began to be tired; she was cursedly expensive, more than a brood of mares; so I shook the dust off my feet there, and am just come to town quite a free man’.<sup>49</sup>

This kind of rendition of a realistic idiolect provides an opportunity for readers to smile at a recognisable type of man, and little explanation is needed to define such a character, who is condemned as a wastrel by his own words. He uses informal and colloquial terms such as ‘popped’ to mean shot, revealing a flippant attitude to others’ suffering. He refers to a mistress as a ‘filly’, reducing her to the same status as an animal and a possession, as is evident from the fact that Mr Gardner thought he meant one of the horses Scamper owns. The latter finds Gardner’s assumption amusing, and is evidently attracted to ‘jokes’. He exclaims ‘Dieu merci!’ at once showing off his

knowledge of French and his daring in using oaths. His vocabulary and attitude are consistent, and readers are furnished with an easily-distinguishable type.

Regional dialect is also rendered accurately, as in the following example, also from *Women As They Are* (1796), of Patty, a Scots servant, distressed at the thought that her employer and his daughter are leaving their home.

‘My dear sweet mistress, have you the heart to leave poor Patty behind? I will follow you all the world over, and that geude mon, my maister, ye are sic a pair as poor Pat will never see again. - Ah! wae is me! if you gang awa, I must lay me down and die’.<sup>50</sup>

These examples of Eliza Parsons’ capacity to reproduce in an accurate manner the speech of a variety of diverse characters indicate a desire to give a voice to the personalities she portrays in a profound way. That is not to say she evades stereotype; one might say that to recognise a character by means of their speech relies on stereotyping, but she at least avoids using the economy of the catchphrase as a shortcut into the character, and thus also avoids caricature. This adds to the effect of realism in her work.<sup>51</sup>

The final discussions of the varieties of heteroglossia based on Katie Wales’ definitions are on the subject of narration. A polyphonic effect can be given by the types of narration used by a novelist and Eliza Parsons is no exception, using a variety of narrative methods in her work.’ I will first consider third-person narration in her novels, then first-person narration, and follow this with a discussion of the embedded narratives focalized through secondary characters in some of her novels.

\*\*\*Eliza Parsons displays a willingness to allow her characters a voice, through the sub-plots which constitute the platform from which they all speak. I argue that, for her, this is a means, not only of securing a larger and more varied readership, because more ‘points of view’ seem to be addressed, but also that, to construct these sub-plots and character mindsets permits her to draw upon personal experience and understanding in the representation of women’s opinions, as I discuss below. The varied plot structure is an element which was strongly disliked by her reviewers, as it seemed to them to splinter the text into diverse narratives which they often felt would be better as separate novels. The reviewer of *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) for *The Critical Review* opined that the two stories ‘are not sufficiently interwoven with one another’,<sup>51</sup> and *The English Review*’s critic declared that *The Voluntary Exile* was ‘not calculated to excite much interest in the breast of the reader, as it in general conflicts of a number of unconnected stories’.<sup>54</sup> That Eliza Parsons read her reviews is clear from remarks she makes in prefaces, as I discuss in Chapter 4, but she chooses not to respond to these particular criticisms, as she appears content to continue to present these multi-plot novels. There might be several reasons for this, not the least of which might be that, whether the critics liked her plot structures or not, her books sold well. It seems likely, therefore, that she attributed part of her popularity to this device. More importantly, she may have felt it necessary to persevere with this approach to be sure of giving a multiplicity of ill-used women voices with which to describe their experiences. When she chooses third-person omniscient narration, as she does in fifteen of her nineteen novels, she nonetheless often contrives to include embedded first-person narratives within them. These are characterised by Lynne Pearce as ‘inserted genres’, to be discussed a little more fully later, although for now I



want to describe the structure Eliza Parsons uses. There are generally various sub-plots involving secondary characters, often someone met by the main character on a journey, perhaps a woman fleeing a tyrant husband or guardian. These characters, in picaresque fashion, want to tell their stories and are permitted to do so in, so to speak, their own words; the embedded story is focalized through them. Frequently, they will deliver these stories in the form of a manuscript which the main character reads later, and, since it is presented as an inset narrative with the intervention of neither the main character, nor the third-person narrator, the reader obtains the story intact and uninterrupted.

These embedded narratives are generally concerned with the experience of a suffering woman who has made mistakes, and from whom Eliza Parsons wishes her readers to learn. This variety of sub-plot can be considered as the 'cautionary tale', involving a woman living in isolation in reduced circumstances having once been duped by a better-born man into a disastrous marriage he would later deny leaving her with no name or support. The main character, on reaching a little village on the continent, will be told that a fellow-countrywoman of his or hers is living in poverty and will visit to offer aid. Coincidentally, the main character will be, or will know, the woman's long-lost daughter. The woman will generally be in poor health and will tell her story shortly before she dies. It will often take the form of a manuscript to be read by her confidant at a later date and passed on to the daughter she has only recently rediscovered. This subplot appears in a similar form in a number of Eliza Parsons' novels.<sup>55</sup> Although not sparing the woman's life, the author seems anxious nonetheless to allow her a voice, and not, it seems, merely by way of demonstrating the character's repentance. The woman will speak out about her mistreatment and the

consequences of male bad behaviour are clear to the reader. She will die, either because Eliza Parsons is reluctant to break the tradition of killing off a misbehaving character - and the woman has always married without parental consent, a Parsons taboo - or because it adds to the realism of the story to deny an unlikely happy ending to an unfortunate woman. Allowing this character to tell her own story means that the reader is more likely to suspend disbelief and enter into the text than would happen when an author delivers an opinion on a character from the perspective of omniscient creator. When faced with an occurrence recounted in the words of the character who experienced it, the reader empathises and imagines himself- or more usually herself- in the same situation. I will describe this effect as 'objective subjectivity'; that is to say that whilst the author is always in control, and decides what information we are to be permitted to learn from the conversation and revealed thoughts of her characters, nonetheless an impression of objectivity is produced because a range of opinions are manifested by these characters. The reader is given the opportunity to follow an argument through from two or more different perspectives through these 'inserted genres' and witness the consequences of particular modes of thought and behaviour. This is a more credible means of delivering a message than merely presenting the personalities of characters as given, and directing them like automata. Naturally, the result is the same: the author's morals and ethos are still expressed by this method if she wishes them to be, but the manner by which this is achieved is flattering to the reader, who feels able to deliver an opinion on each character aided by their personality as expressed through reported speech and thought.

The production of a text which is, in Pearce's words, 'contradictory and indeterminate',<sup>36</sup> is not, I think, Eliza Parsons' aim here and nor do I feel that in her

case this is the ultimate effect. Cleverly, she uses the technique of polyphonic writing to suggest objectivity and a range and balance of views, but, as I have mentioned, this is 'objective subjectivity'. Its ultimate goal will be to reiterate her moral stance, whilst still allowing a certain amount of autonomy to her characters, as, though she puts the villainous on fair trial, and despite their inevitable condemnation, they are first allowed to take the witness stand. To continue with the trope of a trial, ill-treated women are given the opportunity to produce evidence in their favour. Although it would not, for them, be well-bred to accuse their men-folk openly of mistreatment, nonetheless we see their patient suffering, and other witness are called in their defence who are willing to speak up for them, only one of whom is the narrator, among many others. This technique is not peculiar to Eliza Parsons,<sup>57</sup> but the fact that the sub-plot is often used means the author is employing it for a specific goal, to impose her moral view upon the reader, but heteroglossia is the device used, partly to give the impression of objectivity, and partly to articulate the various issues surrounding the moral. Eliza Parsons' role as champion of education is foregrounded here. Since the beginning of her career, she has pointed out the folly of entering into marriage for the wrong reasons, whether because one is a romantic young woman without proper education, or because one is forced by a parent whose aim is only to make an advantageous alliance. Her own experience of marriage, short and full of tragedy, was a happy one in terms of her choice of partner, whom she saw as a worthy man. She also emphasises in prefaces her role as a parent, and reassures other mothers that their daughters' morals are safe with her. Her moral tales, enriched with a wealth of detail about the consequences of bad behaviour from a variety of viewpoints, serve to underscore her desire to be regarded as respectable, though she no longer moves in the wealthy social environment she formerly did.

Although, as has been mentioned, *Wuthering Heights* is an unusual novel in its author's desire to allow, as Pearce says, 'her characters their full independence',<sup>8</sup> nonetheless, the rest of this extract details many elements which Eliza Parsons has in common with Emily Bronte. However, she never truly approaches a state of refraining from, in Pearce's terms, 'imposing her own moral and ideological control'<sup>9</sup> over the plot. Rather, like Fielding, she combines the two approaches, with a certain degree of autonomy for her characters *and* an ability to enter the discussion in the person of her narrator, although her presence is far more restrained than Fielding's, and she allows her characters much greater freedom to express themselves. In one area mentioned by Pearce in the above extract, her approach is similar to that of Emily Bronte; the area of 'inserted genres'. This is understandable when considered in the light of the final sentence of the extract which deals with the allusion to 'the traditions of romance literature'. Eliza Parsons was only one of many of her contemporaries who used this technique, and the Brontes' reading is known to have included many Romantic texts, making the use of this device by Emily unsurprising. What makes the inserted genres so interesting for me is less their origins as generically separate from one another than their ability to dialogise the text into which they are inserted. Their presence frees the text from the control of the author/narrator, brings in disparate first person testimonies, new third person narrators (who recount the life story of another character in 'retold dialogues'), and even releases the action from the historic present in which it is set to whatever time frame is referred to by the found manuscripts or first person testimonies.

As mentioned above on page 17,<sup>1</sup> I discuss each literary genre in which Eliza Parsons wrote in separate chapters, but there are genres she tried only once and then discarded,

which I want to consider here. In them, Eliza Parsons seems to be trying to display her professional competence. She sets out to show that she is better-educated than the run-of-the-mill hack. Though she is no longer wealthy, she attempts to retain her membership of a cultured society by her forays into a number of literary genres which seem to require a more educated approach than novel-writing does. As I argued on page 8, she constantly strives to derive prestige from her former connections. For example, there is evidence that she was acquainted with the litterati, since the subscription list for her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), reveals the names of Elizabeth Montagu, Amelia Beauclerc, Anna Larpent, Mrs Crespigny and Horace Walpole.<sup>60</sup> Montague Summers records that Matthew Lewis, writing to his mother on the vexed subject of her foray into novel-writing, refers to her asking Eliza Parsons for her help as she knows so many booksellers.<sup>61</sup> She visited Mary Robinson in her last illness. Thus she had a certain amount of influence in the profession, but presumably not enough to satisfy her ambitions. It might be that her status was not of a quality which would ensure sufficient earnings, or that, despite her frequent protestations that she wrote only to support her family, she was ambitious and regretted the loss of consequence in society she had formerly enjoyed. These works are discussed here since they all provide more interest as the basis for discussion of their dedications, reviews and prefaces, all of which are discussed in separate chapters, than in terms of their content.

The first of the genres attempted only once is Eliza Parsons' play, *The Intrigues of a Morning*,<sup>62</sup> which has two claims to be discussed here. Firstly, it is her only venture into the genre of drama. Secondly, it is also a translation.<sup>64</sup> *The Intrigues of a Morning* was published by William Lane in 1792, only two years into her career, at a time

when she was perhaps feeling sufficiently confident about her new profession to move into a new genre of writing. The play was written after a terrible fall, so she may not have seen it in performance. It was presented at Covent Garden as an after-piece<sup>65</sup> on 18th April 1792<sup>66</sup> for the benefit of Mrs Mattocks, an actress who had worked at Covent Garden for forty years.<sup>67</sup> The play was performed once more, for the benefit of Mr. Hull, a well-known actor, also of long standing in Covent Garden.<sup>68</sup>

Eliza Parsons must have hoped to attract a little prestige, and may even have felt she had achieved success, but it did not last. Hostile reviews compared her version unfavourably with others' and suggested she had added nothing original to the script. Critics thought it silly at best, as the critic of *The Monthly Review* illustrates:

We are sorry that we cannot allow any great share of praise to this dramatic essay, from a lady's pen. It consists of the relation of a variety of schemes, intended to prevent the marriage of a young lady to a silly country squire, whom she despises: such, however, is the absurdity of these schemes, that the plotting parties seem as great boobies as the squire himself.<sup>69</sup>

At worst, it was considered a poor copy of Moliere. The reviewer writing for *The Critical Review* regarded it as mere plagiarism, and he cites its provenance as having been originally the work of a French writer, and then translated by Sir John Vanbrugh, 'though it was privately insinuated that Mr. Walsh and Mr Congreve had materially assisted the author.'<sup>70</sup> This information, says the reviewer, is the account of Mr Ralph, who had published it in 1723 under the title *The Cornish Squire*. It had played to packed houses. Whether it was Eliza Parsons' own idea to revisit the play, or that of Lane or even Mrs Crespigny is unknown. Perhaps the thought of beginning a new novel, whilst in agony, was too much for the injured and bed-ridden Eliza Parsons,

and she saw a way to earn money quickly, through a swift reworking of a short play and its subsequent performance at Covent Garden with the chance of its being popular enough to be rerun. Unluckily, it was not performed again, and the reviewer in *The English Review* doubted it had ever been staged at all.

If this was ever honoured by a reception on the boards of Covent Garden (though we cannot remember it in the dramatic list), it could meet with no fate less harsh than attends on every piece *Imposed* on an English audience without plot, language, or sentiment; intrigues without art, Spanish names given to French gentlemen, and a dull imitation of that truly comic character the intriguing chambermaid, compose this farrago of nonsensical errors offered to the public taste; and he who finds amusement in perusing the 'Intrigues of a Morning' must have emptied every circulating library in town of its trash.<sup>71</sup>

Although *The Analytical Review*<sup>79</sup> was complimentary about the play, the searing language of *The English Review's* notice must have been disquieting in the extreme for the ambitions of the fledgling playwright. This damning review, along with the poor quality of the play, may have discouraged audiences from responding enthusiastically, and thus also prevented Eliza Parsons receiving more than a paltry sum in royalties. As a result of these circumstances, and of her accident, she contracted debts which forced her, on the 17th December 1792, to write to the Royal Literary Fund for the first time, requesting money. In that letter she details her career so far, mentioning *The History of Miss Meredith*, *The Errors of Education* and, seemingly with some satisfaction, *The Intrigues of a Morning*. Its status as mere plagiarism is now challenged, as she writes that she 'translated a play of Moliere's which was performed as an after-piece at Covent Garden.'<sup>HX</sup> She seems to have been proud of her role as playwright, but the damage had been done and she did not return to the genre of drama. Perhaps partly as a consequence of the failure of her new

venture, it is at this time that she begins to request help from the Royal Literary Fund. Of course, her fall had prevented her from working, so any plan she might have had to write another play would have been cancelled, since, presumably, she would not have had the goodwill from the theatre after bad reviews.

Another genre attempted on one single occasion was that of editor. Eliza Parsons published *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* with Longman in 1798. Here she is ostensibly acting as editor of a manuscript from an unknown, but well-born, 'friend'.<sup>75</sup> Reviewers did not believe her insistence that she had merely prepared the manuscript for the press and, in any case, were not enamoured of the novel. *The Critical Review's* entire notice for this work reads:

The outline of this story is said to have been sent to the editor by some unknown friend. Whether this statement is true or false, is of little consequence to the public. The story itself is interesting, but the interest becomes weaker after the first volume.

The sceptical tone here makes it clear that in addition to the reviewer's disbelief in Eliza Parsons' editorship, he also feels she has made too much of the circumstance, no doubt spotting her vain attempt to appear in the role of seasoned professional to be applied to by novice writers when seeking to be published. Perhaps she had envied Mrs Crespigny's role of mentor in her own career and wanted to be seen in the same light, but knowledgeable critics could hardly be expected not to divulge information for the sake of a writer's career. The writer of the review in *The Analytical Review* is obviously not convinced by the editorial. After noting that 'Mrs. Parsons assumes the character of editor only of this work',<sup>77</sup> the reviewer quotes an extract from the preface



in which Eliza Parsons explains her role,<sup>78</sup> and then indicates clearly that she has attempted to mislead, but has failed.

The novels of Mrs. P do not rise greatly above, neither do they sink beneath mediocrity, that are calculated to entertain a numerous class of readers, without debauching the taste, or corrupting the heart.<sup>70</sup>

There seems to be no doubt in the reviewer's mind that *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* is to be counted among the 'novels of Mrs. P' and no further mention is made of her assumption of an editor's role. For a brief resume of the plot, perhaps the opinion of James Bannister, reviewing the novel for *The Monthly Review*,<sup>80</sup> will suffice. Bannister makes an interesting comment about Eliza Parsons' 'low' characters, which he dislikes.<sup>01</sup>

Though this novel does not exhibit those highly-wrought scenes of distress of which writers of fictitious history are generally fond, it is sufficiently impassioned to affect the heart and engage the attention. The character of an artless and innocent girl, blest with a good understanding and educated in virtuous principles is well supported in the delineation of Ellinor, the heroine: and the mystery which hangs over her birth (*the old story*) fully answers the desired purpose of keeping the reader in suspense; but we think that the manner in which this mystery is dissipated is liable to some objections. - Lord and Lady P. are well delineated; and to those who are best pleased with the contemplation of *virtuous* characters, Lord and Lady B. may furnish rational entertainment, and perhaps excite laudable emulation. - It were to be wished, however, that the writer had not been so fond of introducing Bridget and her mother. Mrs. Parsons should have recollected that low characters are to be tolerated in novels only when they display considerable wit and drollery, or some striking peculiarity.

The laudable tendency of this work is to inspire a love of virtue, with a consequent detestation of vice.<sup>82</sup>

On reading this, Eliza Parsons must have been saddened and annoyed. Not only had the reviewers rendered her unlikely to attract writers seeking advice, and removed an avenue of potential employment, but in the above review, the critic's dislike of her

'low characters' must have irked her, since readers had been informed by the same journal three years earlier that she was 'better qualified to delineate characters in the middle and lower classes of society, than to describe the manners of high life'. Once again, a genre was attempted and discarded, this time along with its publisher, Longman, with whom Eliza Parsons had published two novels.

She took the remainder of her works to Norbury of Brentford. Among them is her penultimate title, 1804's *Love and Gratitude*, representing the third and final of her abandoned genres to be discussed here. This is a translation, ostensibly of six 'novels' of Augustus Lafontaine. In fact, they are likely to have been adaptations of six of his 'tales', since the entire work is of one volume alone. Here, towards the end of her career, she chooses to publish a reworking of another's text. The reason could be because she had run out of ideas, of enthusiasm, of money or of support, for the kind of novels she had produced in the past. Another reason, however, might be that it was yet another attempt to reiterate her well-educated background. 1804 was the year that she appeared before the magistrate's court in Surrey for non-payment of tax. Although she was acquitted, the story appeared in the report of the sessions in *The Times* and presumably damaged her reputation. Thus, to produce a translation of a German text at this juncture may have served the purpose of soothing her nerves and saving her face, although it did not stir the interest of journalists, since no reviews of it were published.

The text is composed of six separate tales and is a pedestrian retelling, clearly recognisable as a translation, since what might be described as mainly default terminology seems to have been utilised. Eliza Parsons appears to have made a direct

translation with any peculiarities of expression likely to have been present in the original, and the resulting phraseology seems awkward.

In the South of France federatism had entered the bloody combat - Avignon, Aix, Marseilles, had already their assassins.

Oh, virtue! oh, human felicity! words devoid of sense! how many million tears have been dropped similar to those that Ludwig and Wilhelmina shed!<sup>85</sup>

Overall, the work gives the impression of a half-hearted, final attempt, given that she was now aged 65, to interest the public with a new venture and earn money.<sup>86</sup> The three works discussed above belong to her endeavour to be considered as a lady of letters, a brave attempt which indicates her willingness to keep open all literary avenues, and experiment with new ideas at least once before discarding them.

Eliza Parsons' tendency to challenge boundaries is one to which I will return frequently throughout this thesis. As a well-educated, respectable and morally secure woman, a role she assumes and frequently reinforces, she is an unlikely candidate for a liminal writer, one who tests boundaries. I argue, however, that it is because she has constructed this persona so well that reviewers are deceived: indeed, they do not recognise the testing of boundaries which she often assays. The personae she invents, in fact, form the basis for this work, since she repackages facets of her personality and experience for use in her fiction writing. I argue throughout that she experiments in genre: in literature and in life. She 'tries on' new roles, depending on her current specific purpose; for example, to request money or to present herself as a playwright, but behind every new attempt lies the specific, unwavering goal of earning enough to feed, clothe, house and educate her large family.

This tendency to test boundaries is one which many women of the period display.<sup>88</sup> Jacqueline Howard<sup>89</sup> notes that, since the 1970s, critics<sup>90</sup> have linked the subversiveness of Gothic with the fact that many of its authors are women, although Howard feels that it is difficult to demonstrate that different forms of writing are 'marked' by gender. She discusses the Lacanian view that language is oppressive to women. A woman is seen in terms of man's Other, rather than in her own right, so the language, 'institutionalised and inherently phallogocentric',<sup>90</sup> means women's relation to language is a negative one.

Speaking from the place of the Other, women thus have the choices only of silence, of adapting the language and logic of men, or of producing something 'other' itself, such as discourses not controlled by the symbolic order, that is, discourses which do not conform to male rules of rationality or logic, clarity, conciseness and consistency. Such discourses could arise only from a pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic, mother-infant form of communication.<sup>91</sup>

Howard points out the view of some feminist critics<sup>92</sup> who believe that women's writing shows signs of their exclusion, as language always fails women, which leaves them 'split between their experiences and the difficulties of articulating them.'<sup>93</sup> This position is 'analogous to mutedness, silence, absence and madness,' so women's writing 'can be marked by some form of textual disruption or subversion'<sup>94</sup> I agree with Howard that there are problems with this view, since it suggests that women are disabled in terms of expression. However, although I recognise the subversion that is evident in women's writing at this time, including that of Eliza Parsons, I see it as a liberating and empowering feature of women's writing that they appropriate for themselves, as Anne Mellor argues.

In *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*, Anne Mellor sees this subversion as commonplace among women writers. She notes that some feminist critics<sup>95</sup> have read women's novels of this era as 'registering the ultimate triumph of a patriarchal domestic ideology',<sup>96</sup> since they base their findings on religious tracts and conduct books. These critics, says Mellor:

have eloquently argued that women novelists of the Romantic era were either forced to accommodate themselves to, indirectly subvert, or gain power wholly within a cultural construction of the proper lady as a modest, domesticated woman, one confined to the private sphere, one who did not speak assertively in public.<sup>97</sup>

Mellor believes that closer examination of the fiction produced by women between 1790 and 1830 suggests 'a rather different story' and, despite powerful arguments from a number of critics to the contrary:

women novelists in the Romantic era did not resign the construction of "feminine discourse" in the novel to men, obediently reproducing a hegemonic idea of bourgeois capitalism and relocating it in an idealised middle-class patriarchal family. In this period, women novelists more frequently employed their writing as a vehicle for ideological contestation and subversion, exploiting the novel's capacity for disruptive humour and sustained interrogation of existing social codes, for what Bakhtin called its "heteroglossia" and "dialogism".<sup>8</sup>

The 'interrogation of existing social codes' undertaken by Eliza Parsons is plainly to be seen, particularly in reference to matters of education or parental interference in the choosing of marriage partners; however, the 'disruption' mentioned by both Jacqueline Howard and Anne Mellor takes many forms in her works. Examples include rambling discourses with a multitude of plots, an increasing tendency to dispense with nobility, both as dedicatees and marriage partners for her heroines, female characters who refuse to stare out of the window of a locked room at a sublime

view and attempt to escape and the creation of a splendid and unexpected *femme fatale*." Perhaps the most interesting form of articulation is her partiality for describing the thoughts of female characters, rather than merely their words and actions. She shows their reasoning, their hopes and goals, and, like the 'working out' of an algebra problem, indicates their motivation, rationale and the means by which they decide what to do in difficult circumstances. These can take the form of imprisonment, a wayward husband, or, and perhaps most frequently, how to make the best of finances. Often, a woman will muse over the form of a legacy - so much in bonds, so much in interest and the rest in cash, for instance, and will ponder on how to make the best use of it.<sup>100</sup> Here, many of Eliza Parsons' women readers will recognise the dilemma, as well as the thought processes, of the character.

Finally in this chapter, an explanation should be given here as to the veracity of the sources used. The main source of the little research already undertaken on Eliza Parsons is Devendra Varma's work,<sup>101</sup> to which later scholars refer. However, it is difficult to discover some of the sources he used, as they are not always cited, and indeed, some of his findings are incorrect.<sup>102</sup> This has resulted in an unreliable body of knowledge of Eliza Parsons, most of which tends to emphasise her poverty, rather than detail her achievements. I have attempted to verify every detail of Eliza Parsons' life mentioned in this thesis. Where appropriate, I have used her own words, from letters or prefaces, for example, to piece together the chronology and major events in her life. I have researched Varma's facts wherever possible, and have discovered facts unknown to him, and corrected inaccurate information he had published. Unfortunately, after contacting his son Herman Vanna, I am still unable to discover many of his sources, since his papers remain, as yet, uncatalogued. On occasion he

found information in the Dictionary of National Biography,<sup>103</sup> or the Lord Chamberlain's Papers, but in some cases, for instance his mention of the fire of 1782 which destroyed the Parsons family business,<sup>104</sup> I have been unable to locate the source, despite searching the National Newspaper Archive and contemporary journals for a report of the fire. Where Varma is my sole source, I indicate this. Where I have been able to locate his source, or other reliable sources, I give the latter.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the validity of a study of an unknown author, and described the approach my thesis employs. I have explained the basis of this thesis by arguing that, since I maintain that Eliza Parsons is repackaging her life in her fiction, the logical method in which to organise my material is drawing on the notion of genre. I have explained that I am widening this term to include not only literary genres, but the life roles performed by Eliza Parsons which constitute the raw materials for her literary work. I have indicated my contention that her main concerns: fear of poverty and of loss of status, a profound belief in good education and anxiety to please her readership, are constantly reiterated in her novels throughout her career, as I demonstrate in the remainder of my thesis. I have consulted every extant document with a connection with Eliza Parsons, in order to reconstruct, as far as possible, the life of a little known writer, adding to the body of knowledge currently available on under-researched women writers of the Romantic era.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Dr Dale, trustee of the Royal Literary Fund, 7th July 1796, Royal Literary Fund Archives, World Microfilm Publications.

<sup>2</sup> I am defining the Romantic era to mean the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first three of the nineteenth. In the introduction to Aidan Day's *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1, he provides quotations from other scholars who have defined the era and the movement. From *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), he quotes Margaret Drabble, who states that Romanticism is: 'a literary movement, and profound shift in sensibility, which took place in Britain and throughout Europe roughly between 1770 and 1848'. Day also quotes from the sixth edition of M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1993), which states: 'the "Romantic Period" is usually taken to extend from the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 - or alternatively, from the publication of [Wordsworth and Coleridge's] *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 - through the first three decades of the nineteenth century.'

<sup>3</sup> Publications by scholars researching in this area include Emma Clery *Women's Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (Tavistock: Northcote House, Horndon, 2000), Adriana Craciun *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Studies in Romanticism Series, Cambridge University Press, 2003), Michael Gamer *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Diane Hoeveler *Gothic Feminism: The professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (Penn State Press, 1998), Jacqueline Labbé *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) and Judith Pascoe (ed) *The Collected Poems of Mary Robinson* (London: Broadview, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Adriana Craciun's edition of Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (London: Broadview Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Eliza Parsons *The History of Miss Meredith* (London: T. Hookham, 1790). On the first occasion I refer to Eliza Parsons' works, I will give the publishing details, after which I will give only the date of publication. It should be noted that I have read some of her works in first edition copies, and some in Belser's microfiche edition. The bibliography indicates which edition has been consulted. However, at points when my argument is concerned with her biography and, thus, the original publishers of her works, these are the ones to which I will refer in endnotes. Since the microfiche edition is a facsimile, page numbering is unaffected, whichever edition is cited.

<sup>6</sup> Such as Mary Robinson, Amelia Opie, Anne Plumptre and Eliza Fenwick, whose works have been recovered and republished in recent years. Broadview Press have published new editions such as Anne Plumptre's *Something New*, Deborah McLeod (ed) London, 1996, Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*, Isobel Grundy (ed) London, 1998, Amelia Opie's *The Father and Daughter and Dangers of Coquetry*, Shelley King and John B. Pierce (eds) London, 2003, and Mary Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter*, Sharon M. Setzer (ed) London, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of dedications.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Tuck *Durston Castle, or, The Ghost of Eleonora* (London: C. & W. Galabin, 1804). Eliza Parsons *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (London: Minerva 1793).

<sup>9</sup> Dedication to Mrs Crespigny in Mary Tuck's *Durston Castle*, p. vi.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, *The Mysterious Protector* (London: George Robinson, 1805).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Scudgell Wilkinson, *The Fugitive Countess, or The Convent of St Ursula* (London: J. F. Hughes, 1807). By 1807, the dedicatee is Lady Crespigny, her husband having become 1<sup>st</sup> Baronet.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Burney, *Evelina; or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into The World* (1778)(Oxford: World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1802), (London: Pandora Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Devendra Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, The Northanger Set of Horrid Novels, (London: Folio Press, 1968), p. vii.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Her play *The Intrigues of a Morning* (London: Minerva, 1792) was an adaptation of Molière's *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, and her novel *Love and Gratitude* (Brentford: Norbury, 1804) was a translation of short texts by Augustus La Fontaine.

<sup>19</sup> Mentioned by Eliza Parsons in her letter to Dr Dale, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Letters to Dr Dale, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> December 1792, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1793 and 7<sup>th</sup> July 1796, Royal Literary Archives, and letter to William Windham, MP, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1793, BL Add. MS. 37, 914, f. 81-2.

<sup>21</sup> See note 24 above, letters from Eliza Parsons, Royal Literary Fund Archives, 1792-1803, World Microfilm Publications.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to William Windham, MP, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1793, British Library.

<sup>23</sup> *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792) and *Ellen and Julia* (London: Minerva, 1793) both dedicated to Mrs Crespigny, *Women as They Are* (London: Minerva, 1796) dedicated to Mrs Anson, *The Girl of the Mountains* (London: Minerva, 1797), dedicated, possibly without permission, to Princess Sophia Maria of Gloucester, *An Old Friend with a New Face* (London: T.N. Longman, 1797), dedicated, possibly without permission, to Lady Howard and *The Valley of St Gothard* (Brentford: Norbury, 1799), dedicated to Matthew Gregory Lewis.

<sup>24</sup> I discuss dedications in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> As I discuss more fully in Chapter 3.

<sup>26</sup> Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, (London: Longman, (1989) (1994)), p. 218.



27 This need to appeal to a wide audience is necessarily a function of her need to sell books.

28 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) (London: Penguin, 1994).

29 *ibid.*, Book V, Chapter 2, p. 182.

30 Frances Burney, *Evelina* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1968) 1982).

31 Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent and The Absentee*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., (1910) 1952).

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.*, p. 159.

34 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) (London: W.W. Norton & Co., (1958) 1993).

35 Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk* (1796) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

36 *ibid.*, p. 323.

37 *ibid.*, p. 322.

38 Beatrice, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796), p. 52, would no doubt sound recognisably an English servant to the novel's original readers who employed domestic staff. When asked about the death of her mistress, the Italian Beatrice weeps, 'who would have thought that I should live to see this day! I hoped to have laid down my old bones in peace'. Once again, her speech is idiomatic insofar as its content is exclamatory and clichéd, but there is no sense of her background, as there is with many of Eliza Parsons' servant characters, such as Susan in *Murray House* (Brentford: Norbury, 1804) discussed on page 24 of this chapter, and the Scot, Patty, in *Women As They Are* (1796) discussed on page 26.

39 For example, *Tom Jones* (1749).

40 Sue Vice, in *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 45, defines dialogism as 'double-voicedness' and states that in the novel, 'dialogism refers to the presence of two distinct voices in one utterance'.

41 Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, p. 121.

42 *ibid.*, pp. 121-3.

43 In *Pamela* (1740) and *The Monk* (1796) respectively.

44 In *Evelina* (1778) and *Tom Jones* (1749) respectively.

45 Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, p. 230 defines idiolect as referring to 'the speech habits of an individual in a speech community, as distinct from those of a group of people (i.e. dialect). The usage of an individual may well be constrained by his or her place of origin, but idiolect covers those features which vary from register to register, medium to medium, in daily language use; as well as more permanent features that arise from personal idiosyncracies, such as lispings, monotone delivery, favourite exclamations, etc'.

46 In *Evelina* {1778}.

47 Eliza Parsons, *Murray House* {1804}, Vol. 2, p. 39.

48 Eliza Parsons, *Women As They Are* (1796) Vol. 4, p. 252.

49 *ibid.*, p. 253.

50 *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

51 I shall return to the subject of Eliza Parsons' use of dialect in Chapter 8, when I discuss her final novel, in which she uses a particular idiolect which appears to be based on that of a real person. In that chapter, I will compare this mode of speech with that of a character from an earlier novel, *The Miser and His Family* (Brentford: Norbury, 1800).

52 As I mentioned on page 10.

53 Review in *The Critical Review*, 1794, Vol. 10, p. 49.

54 Review in *The English Review*, 1795, Vol. 25, p. 233.

55 For example, the unhappy story of Miss Rivers, which appears as a sub-plot throughout the majority of the novel in *The Errors of Education* (London: Minerva, 1791). Examples of the 'written narratives' I mention on page 30 include that of the seduced and rejected Mary Danvers in *Ellen and Julia* (1793), which takes up the whole of Vol. 1, Chapter 7, and the similar, but more detailed, missive written by Ellen in *The Convict* (Brentford: Norbury, 1807) which lasts from chapters 5 to 11 inclusive.

56 Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, p. 45.

57 An example of an inset narrative within an inset narrative occurs in Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), Howard Anderson (ed) (Oxford: World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 188-189. Don Raymond is telling his story to Lorenzo, which lasts for two chapters. Part of the way through it, he gives a letter to Lorenzo to read. It is from Raymond's sister Agnes to Raymond, telling him she is pregnant. This letter is not read aloud by Raymond, but by Lorenzo to himself. Agnes is permitted to focalize her story, unarbitrated by another narrator. A simpler version of this kind of

narrative (i.e., a letter appearing amidst an omniscient third-person narration) is exemplified by the missive sent to Berenza by his rejected mistress, Megalena Strozzi, in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), Adriana Craciun (ed) (London: Broadview, 1997), p. 103.

58 *ibid.*

59 *ibid.*

60 See Chapter 2 and the subscription list of *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) in Appendix 1.

61 See Chapter 2.

62 The preface to *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* (London: Longman, 1798), is discussed in Chapter 4 and the dedication of this novel and of *Intrigues of a Morning* (1792) in Chapter 3. Reviews of the two works are discussed here. See also the appendix of Contemporary Reviews in Appendix 2.

63 Eliza Parsons, *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792).

64 Another translation will be discussed later, but of prose fiction rather than drama. The two-act farce is a translation of Moliere's *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, though it is unknown whether Eliza Parsons translated it herself or used a previous translation, possibly that of Vanbrugh, for her play.

65 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.

66 *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792), title page.

67 Sir Lesley Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), Vol. XV, p. 399.

68 *ibid.* The place of performance is not given.

69 Review of *The Intrigues of a Morning* in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 9, September-December 1792.

70 Review in *The Critical Review* Vol. 16, 1792, p. 120.

71 Review in *The English Review* Vol. 20, 1792, p. 469.

72 Review in *The Analytical Review* Vol. 13, 1792, pp. 525-527.

73 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th Dec 1792. Royal Literary Fund Archives.

74 Eliza Parsons, *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families*, (London: T. N. Longman, 1798).

75 See Chapter 4 on prefaces for a further discussion of this novel.

76 *The Critical Review*, ns Vol. 23, July 1798, p. 353.

77 *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 27, June 1798, pp. 644-645.

78 See Chapter 3 for my discussion of this preface.

79 *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 27, June 1798, pp. 644-645.

80 See Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling (eds) *The English Novel 1770-1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

81 Although later in this chapter I will discuss in a more positive manner her ability to render the authentic-sounding speech of different classes.

82 Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 27, September-December 1798, p. 332.

83 Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 17, 1795, p. 463.

84 *Love and Gratitude* Vol. 1, p. 58.

85 *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 11.

86 As discussed in Chapter 8, she did write one more novel, of a very different type, which merits a chapter largely given over to it.

87 Such, for example, as Charlotte Dacre's rewriting of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), in *Zofloya* (1806).

88 Howard *Reading Gothic Fiction*, p. 54.

89 Howard states: 'From such a post-Saussurean, Lacanian framework, Rosemary Jackson, for example, claims that Mary Shelley's writings "open an alternative 'tradition' of 'female Gothic'", as they "fantasize a violent attack upon the symbolic order". Other theorists, such as Xaviere Gauthier, Chantal Chawaf, Marguerite Duras, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, who see women only as silenced or speaking and writing as men do, call for the creation of an *écriture féminine* which will enable women in the future to transcend patriarchal language by "writing the body" - female sexuality - into existence', p. 54.

90 Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction*, p. 54.

91 *ibid.*

92 See note 104, above.

93 Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction*, p. 54.

94 *ibid.*

95 Such as Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong and Jane Spencer. Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England 1780-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) p. 104.

96 *ibid.*

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> See the discussion of Eliza Parsons' *The Mysterious Warning* (London: Minerva, 1796) in Chapter 7.

<sup>100</sup> For a text beset by complex financial considerations and their minute description, see *Murray House*, (1804). See also the discussion of this novel in Edward Copeland's *Women Writing About Money: Women's Fiction in England 1790-1820*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.

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<sup>101</sup> See Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (New York: Russell & Russell, (1957) 1966), and also Varma's introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968).

<sup>102</sup> See my correction of some of Varma's assertions in 'New Biographical Information on Eliza Parsons' in *Notes and Queries*, June 2003, New Series Vol 50, pp. 223-4.

<sup>103</sup> Sir Lesley Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XV, p. 399.

<sup>104</sup> In Varma's introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, p. vii. Eliza Parsons does mention this fire, in her letter of 30<sup>th</sup> May 1803 to Dr Dale of the Royal Literary Fund, but not the date of it, nor that she had instructed workmen's cottages to be pulled down to save the town of Bow, as Varma informs us.

## CHAPTER 2 Biography of Eliza Parsons

*Born and accustomed to affluence.*.4

Since this thesis is concerned with the transference of personal experience into fiction, it is necessary to begin with a revelation of the biographical details of Eliza Parsons' life. Wherever possible, these have been gleaned from original sources, some of them new discoveries. I aim to reconstruct as much of her life story as possible from the documents still extant, in order to demonstrate that Eliza Parsons' origins, her motives for writing, her difficulties and successes all played a part in the construction of her oeuvre.

Elizabeth, daughter of John and Roberta Philp, was baptised at Charles church, Plymouth, on 4th April 1739.<sup>2</sup> Her father, according to Devendra Varma,<sup>3</sup> was a wine-merchant in the city. In a letter she wrote to the trustees of the Royal Literary Fund<sup>4</sup> in December 1792, she asserts that she was born and accustomed to affluence and was, as is evident from her later literary and translation work, well-educated. At the age of 21, on 24th March 1760, Elizabeth married, at Charles church, Plymouth, a merchant named James Parsons of St. Andrew's parish, Plymouth, a turpentine distiller who was a government contractor for naval stores working from the shipyards at Stonehouse, to the south east of Plymouth. On the same date the following year their first child James was baptised.<sup>3</sup>

It seems likely that, as their numerous offspring grew, the Parsonses would have continued in affluence and Elizabeth would have been content to remain a well-to-do woman of the merchant class but for a catastrophe visited on the family by the advent of the American war.<sup>6</sup> Varma tells of the capture of two of James Parsons' ships by the colonists and the flight home of others minus their cargo. Uninsured, he was incapable of building up his

business again and was compelled to uproot the family and sell his stock cheaply on the London market. The Parsons family moved to Bow China house, near Bow Bridge, where James began to rebuild his enterprise, setting up a turpentine distillery, warehouse and workers' dwellings at Bow Bridge.<sup>7</sup> The family once again began to prosper until the outbreak of a fire during James' absence in town. Once more uninsured, James Parsons was this time unable to restore his fortunes and his health deteriorated from that day.<sup>8</sup>

With the support of the Marchioness of Salisbury, James and Elizabeth Parsons both obtained appointments in the office of the Marchioness's husband, the Lord Chamberlain. While James was given the post of Second Assistant Clerk in the Lord Chamberlain's office, Elizabeth was appointed Sempstress in Ordinary to His Majesty's Wardrobe on 8th September 1785, a post she would hold until her death twenty-six years later.<sup>9</sup> These posts were minor, almost courtesy positions, and the family would have noticed a distinct fall in their standard of living, but for aid from high-born friends like the Marchioness of Salisbury and perhaps others, such as the ones who supported her literary works later. In 1786 or 1787, James Parsons suffered a stroke which necessitated careful nursing from his wife. For three years he remained sick until a second stroke killed him.<sup>10</sup> At that time, the family was living in Lambeth<sup>11</sup> and James was buried in the churchyard of St Mary at Lambeth on 11th August 1789.<sup>12</sup>

Although she had presumably been sole breadwinner for some time during her husband's illness, Elizabeth now was without hope of financial security except by her own efforts. A fifty year-old widow with eight children to feed, clothe and educate,<sup>13</sup> her options were limited. Although she had her position as seamstress at St James', this was poorly and irregularly paid and, following the fashion of the time for prose fiction, she decided to try

her hand at writing, having been encouraged to do so by Mrs Crespigny, writer and patron of writers.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, she either met noble ladies in the course of her work as seamstress at the Palace, or had known them previously in happier circumstances. At all events, there were plenty of ladies to whom she could dedicate, usually with permission. Accordingly, under the name Mrs Parsons, but signing prefaces and dedications Eliza Parsons, she wrote a novel, *The History of Miss Meredith*, dedicated to the Marchioness of Salisbury, which was published by Thomas Hookham in 1790. This was a novel dealing with contemporary society and the wrongs of its ill-treated heroine, whose morality and patience eventually resulted in a happy ending with a loving second husband. The work was published by subscription and shows an impressive list of subscribers, both long and illustrious. The 500-strong list included the names of the Prince of Wales, the Dukes of York and Gloucester, and nobility of various degrees from dukes to baronets. It also included members of the social and cultural elite, such as Mrs Fitzherbert and Anna Larpent. Some subscribers belonged to her previous life in the West Country, such as the Earl and Countess of Plymouth, and the Earl and Countess of Mount Edgcumbe, a title native to Plymouth. Others were members of various Oxford and Cambridge colleges, such as Mr St John Smith of Caius or Mr John Robinson of St Mary Hall, or were themselves writers, as in the case of Horace Walpole, Elizabeth Bonhote and Amelia Beauclerc. She also had connections in Norfolk, as the addresses of some of her subscribers make clear, which could account for her later application to the MP for Norwich, the statesman William Windham.<sup>15</sup> Her preface to this work had stipulated that she would not seek public approval a second time if her first novel were ill-received. It was not, however, as the novel was popular enough to run to three editions in Dublin, published by J. Jones.

Eliza Parsons' literary career began in earnest with the publication of a second novel dedicated with permission to the Countess of Hillsborough in 1791, this time with the publisher of popular fiction, William Lane, of the Minerva Press, in whose employ she published ten of her works. She began with Minerva only a little later than Lane himself did. He had been trading in Leadenhall Street for at least fifteen years before using the name Minerva Press in 1790. From the beginning of her career with Lane in 1791, Eliza Parsons seems to have been almost the archetypal Minerva writer, in that she was popular and prolific. It would be a mistake to assume that as a typical Lane writer she must also necessarily be a hack, or practitioner of the vulgar or low in taste. The range of writers on Lane's books shows the variety of topics and approaches taken by authors from Hannah More to Mary Meeke. It is not known why she went to Lane from Hookham, although this move is perhaps significant. Possibly Lane approached her, as she had written a well-received novel and was thus the type of writer he would be pleased to publish. The profits from this book, *The Errors of Education*, another contemporary novel, allowed Eliza to obtain for her eldest daughter a position as teacher in a school in Dorset Street, just off Baker Street, and a place for her thirteen year-old eldest son in the ship *The Alligator* under Captain Affleck.<sup>16</sup> It seems that, at this point, Eliza Parsons, though bereaved and under pressure to provide the family with financial stability, was succeeding through her efforts in her endeavours.

Unfortunately, Eliza Parsons' troubles did not end with the illness and death of her husband. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1792, as I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, she fell and suffered a compound fracture of her left leg which kept her bed-ridden for almost five months and semi-invalid for some years later. In a letter<sup>17</sup> she described the agony of her injury and the splinters of bone which continually worked through to the surface of her leg. Confined to

her room with her leg on a pillow, she could neither write nor sew, and thus her ill-luck was compounded by debts which she was forced to contract, having no means of support. It seems that, before her fall, she had written another work, not to be published until later in the year; this time, her only play, *The Intrigues of a Morning*. It appeared on only one night and the publication of it was greeted with derision by critics,<sup>18</sup> one of whom denounced it as a plagiarism of Moliere's work, although in a letter,<sup>19</sup> Eliza Parsons openly mentioned its provenance. 'I wrote "Miss Meredith" in Two Volumes', she wrote, 'and after that "The Errors of Education" in Three Volumes and Translated a Play of Moliere's which was performed as an after-piece at Covent Garden.' Although this letter could have been written after the hostile review, Eliza Parsons' unembarrassed acknowledgement seems to suggest she was not guilty of plagiarism. Perhaps her lack of a favourable reception as a playwright had soured the experience for her. Whatever the reason, it was the only play she published.

As soon as she was able, sitting up in bed and in a state she described as 'extreme torture',<sup>20</sup> she began to write another novel of contemporary life, *Woman As She Should Be*, in 1793, but the loss of earnings forced on her by her injury had meant her debts became very serious and at the end of 1792, she was threatened with prison unless she paid £20 before Christmas.<sup>21</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> December, she took the only course of action she could think of to save the situation, and wrote to Dr Dale, trustee of the newly-formed Royal Literary Fund. In her letter, she explained her circumstances and said that, although the new novel was now in the press, she was worried that it would not be a financial success, as her physical condition precluded her from asking for subscriptions in person. The tone of this letter is humble in the extreme, and, whether calculated in order to evoke sympathy or genuine, the distress it suggested had the desired effect on the trustees, who forwarded the money Eliza Parsons needed, putting her mind at rest by the next post. She expressed her sincere thanks



on receipt of this letter and gave the name of her publisher and his wife, Mr and Mrs Lane of Leadenhall Street, who, she said, would speak for her, having long known her, and having bought her books. A note of interest in this letter<sup>99</sup> is her statement that she had hoped to be a benefactor of the Literary Fund, rather than a supplicant to it. This was the beginning of a sporadic correspondence of application and donation which lasted until 1803. Her requests for financial aid were always granted.

*Woman As She Should Be* was published in 1793, and Eliza Parsons proudly dedicated it with permission to the Duchess of Gloucester. The funds from this work allowed her to apprentice her second daughter to a ‘capital’ mantua maker and put the third daughter in school as an apprentice. She was also able to pay for a device to which she believed she owed her life after her fall. This was a ‘stick and cane’, devised by ‘Mr Hunter’, which possibly consisted of a crutch and splint, and may indeed have saved Eliza Parsons’ life if it persuaded bone back under the surface of the skin and prevented an open wound.<sup>2</sup>

She published another novel in the same year, this time a Gothic romance, the first of a number of Gothic works, *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, whose profits permitted her to send her second son, now aged thirteen, to sea under Admiral Macbride, put the younger children into school and decrease the sum of her debts to £17. However, at this time, ‘an unlooked for occurrence’ forced her to find £12 quickly or once more face the threat of prison.<sup>24</sup> This time, Eliza Parsons did not ask the Royal Literary Fund trustees for help, but wrote instead to William Windham, MP, whom she did not know personally, but who was regularly petitioned by people from all sectors of society for aid, whether monetary, or through his influence. She begged her correspondent’s pardon for not waiting on him in person, but, due to her injury, which had made her lame, with splinters of bone still surfacing, she could

only go out in a carriage, and this she could not afford. She wrote that a new novel was in the press, *Lucy*, 'which has already been advertised by my publisher Lane, of Leadenhall Street, and will certainly be published within these three weeks', though in fact it did not appear until the following year. When requesting financial help, Eliza Parsons usually mentioned the project she was working on or had lately finished, as if to prove that she intended to help herself by her own industry rather than merely relying on the benevolence of others. It is not known whether or not Windham responded positively, but it seems probable that he did, as Eliza Parsons avoided prison and continued her work.

She published another three novels, *Ellen and Julia*, dedicated to Mrs Crespigny, in 1793, *Lucy* and *The Voluntary Exile* in 1795 and in July 1796 had recourse to the aid of the Royal Literary Fund once more, to whom a friend, Mr Carpenter of Bond Street, had suggested she apply. She pointed out that in the space of five years, she had written twenty-five volumes, whilst physically weak and mentally agitated. She had tried to keep a decent appearance, 'knowing the illiberality of the world ridicules and condemns a poor author'.

She explained her position at St James' Palace, saying that her salary of £40 per annum was in any case too small to support a large family, but the situation was worsened by the fact that the Civil List was seven quarters in arrears. Thus, she was still waiting for the wages she had been due almost two years before. She had been forced to flee from her home in Leicester Square and settle in Wandsworth, which must have occasioned her pain due to the great loss of consequence she must have suffered as a result.<sup>27</sup> Though Eliza Parsons lived there towards the end of the square's period of high status, it was still a good address, and she had been mortified at the flight from her home. She was compelled to flee because of the demands for money and insults she had suffered from creditors. 'Low minded people,' she wrote, 'cannot be reasoned with and 'tis in vain to tell them I will pay when I am paid -

money is scarce and they will not wait'.<sup>90</sup> She had been pleased by the response of the public to her works, but she gained little of pecuniary value from the sales of them, as her need for ready money always required her to sell out her copyrights, so the publisher received most of the profits.<sup>29</sup> In the case of *An Old Friend with a New Face*, the sale of the copyright was £60, a reasonable sum, and one indicative of the regard in which Eliza Parsons stood, but also a clue to the revenue she brought in for her publisher.

In 1796, Eliza published three more novels with Lane, *The Mysterious Warning*, dedicated with permission to the Princess of Wales and *Women As They Are*, dedicated to Mrs Anson and in 1797 *The Girl of the Mountains*, dedicated to Princess Sophia Matilda of Gloucester. Oddly, the latter title was not reviewed, one of only two of Eliza Parsons' works to be disregarded by the critics. Whether this was a symptom or a result of a deterioration in her relationship with Lane is unknown, but it was the last she would publish with Minerva. She seems to have been on a friendly footing with both William Lane and his wife, since, as already mentioned, she wrote in a letter to the Royal Literary Fund on 18 December 1792 that they had both known her for a long time, and would speak for her. This suggests that she was a personal friend of Mrs Lane's as well as a writer employed by her husband, but there was a break, nonetheless, and she no longer published with Minerva after 1797. She moved to the well-regarded Longman, representing a rise in status for her, and published two novels with them, *An Old Friend with a New Face* dedicated to Lady Howard (1797) and *The Anecdotes of Two Well-Known Families*, dedicated, mysteriously, to 'The First Female Pen in England', (1798). The latter title purports to be the work of a friend and edited by her. The critics were unconvinced that this was the case, but, nonetheless, her circumstances were such that she could have been sought out as editor, being by now part of the literary set and acquainted with writers and booksellers. This is emphasised by the

dedication of the next book she wrote, now with Norbury of Brentford, with whom she remained for the rest of her career. This novel, *The Valley of St. Gothard* (1799), was dedicated to Matthew Gregory Lewis, perhaps unexpectedly for such a moral and upright author as Eliza Parsons. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, she knew his mother and had advised her, according to a letter from Lewis to his mother in 1804,<sup>19</sup> on how to go about publishing a novel (to Lewis's horror) since Eliza Parsons knew so many people in the publishing trade. The following year she visited Mary Robinson shortly before her death, so it seems she had found a niche in the literary world, although her acquaintances, - the banned and deviant Lewis, his adulterous mother, and the once scandalous Mrs Robinson, for example - were not always as respectable as she appeared to be herself.

Eliza Parsons' personal circumstances changed little over the next three years, it appears, since she continued to write and be well-received on the whole. Three more titles appeared, *The Miser and His Family* (1800), *The Peasant of Ardenne Forest* (1801) and *The Mysterious Visit* (1802). However, a change had been taking place in her works, with *The Valley of St. Gothard* as the last novel she would dedicate. What is more, while most of her dedicatees were Princesses and noble ladies, the last was the outrageous Lewis. She seems to have felt rejected by the aristocracy and the result is clearly seen in her novels, which move from early heroines who marry into the nobility to those of later novels who wed solid and wealthy middle class men. These changes seem to echo her own worsening difficulties, along with the move from Lane, whose speciality was in publishing the type of texts she wrote, to other publishers. In 1803, her circumstances deteriorated again, and she made one final application to the Royal Literary Fund. This letter was written from Temple Place, and the reason was soon obvious. At the age of 62, she wrote, she was, and had been for the past two years, a prisoner. Although she had managed to avoid being placed in

debtor's prison itself, she was living under its rules, close to the King's Bench prison in the Temple. She had done all she could over the years to avoid debt but despite all her efforts, she had lost her liberty. She told with disgust how, in her current situation, there were two sorts of person and place: 'one quiet, unfortunate & civil, the other profligate, low & imposing'.<sup>34</sup> So as to be able to write, she found a decent room in a respectable house, but when she offered what money she could to her creditor, it was refused, and thus she was arrested. All the money she had was spent on 'procuring the rules of the King's Bench Prison as a less dreadful and less expensive confinement than within the walls'.<sup>35</sup> She had tried to continue writing but had become ill, which she said had resulted in worse difficulties. Added to the loss of earnings, there was the manner in which she was now regarded, 'for here the unhappy are viewed with an eye of suspicion,' and poverty was regarded as the worst crime. If she failed to keep up regular payments, she would be 'turned out to make room for those who can pay and be thrown among a set of low profligate beings'<sup>17</sup> of whom she shuddered to think. She was currently writing a novel, *Murray House*, (to be published in 1804) which would already have been finished had it not been for her troubles. Once more, the Fund's trustees obliged. It was the last time they were called upon to do so, although her difficulties were not yet over.

On 6th September 1804, Eliza Parsons appeared as a prisoner before the magistrate at the Surrey Sessions, brought up as a claimant for benefit from the newly-passed Insolvent Act, but not permitted to claim because she had been accused of non-payment of tax and obtaining goods under false pretences. The tax error was due to her not having entered into her schedule the salary from the Lord Chamberlain's office. The court was sympathetic to her and the charge of obtaining goods under false pretences was dismissed. She was allowed to amend her tax schedule in court and was permitted to go.<sup>38</sup> This episode must

have horrified the respectable Mrs Parsons, but the magistrate seems to have been either sympathetic to her circumstances or impressed by her demeanour in court. It is not known for certain how she fared financially from then on, as it seems she no longer applied to any person or body for aid. However, she did not continue to write for much longer. After *Murray House* in 1804, she published in the same year another novel which received no reviews from the journals, *Love and Gratitude*, whose title page described it as a translation of six novels of Augustus La Fontaine. Whether or not the seam of invention had run out, she chose this derivative form of work for her penultimate publication, then vanished from the booksellers' lists for three years.

Eliza Parsons' final novel, one of her best, was entitled *The Convict, or Naval Lieutenant*, published by Norbury in 1807.<sup>39</sup> She moved to Leytonstone in Essex, where records at a local archive mention her. Her name appears in the Rate Book,<sup>40</sup> a list of the parish's most wealthy, along with the amount of rent they are paying, and, based on that, a calculation of the percentage they are deemed able to afford as a donation to the poor of the parish. Mrs Parsons' rental of an apartment in Assembly House cost £37 per half year, and the alms she was requested to supply was four pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence, calculated at the rate of two shillings and sixpence in the pound per six months. This record continues until her death at the age of seventy-one on 5th February 1811.<sup>41</sup> It is unknown how she was able to afford this donation, or such a high rent, when the last written account of her suggested she was in penury. However, supposition might fill in the gaps. Devendra Varma asserts that Eliza Parsons managed to find respectable spouses for her surviving children, all daughters. He states that one of them married an ironmonger, Henry Martin, one an officer in the Gibraltar regiment, one a Norwegian merchant and one a wealthy Dutchman of rank from Copenhagen.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps one of these sons-in-law was sufficiently compassionate and

affluent to look after Eliza and eliminate the necessity to write for money in her old age. She did not publish after her move to Leytonstone, which appears to have taken place in 1808, and had written only one novel after 1804, after a three-year gap. Perhaps *Love and Gratitude* had been her final work for financial gain, and *The Convict, or Naval Lieutenant* fulfilled a different role.<sup>43</sup>

Her works continued to be read, some being reprinted in the 1830s. The most notable mention of her novels is in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, when Isabella Thorpe tells Catherine Morland there are seven titles she must read, 'all horrid'. Of the seven, all given without authors' names, two were written by Eliza Parsons, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* and *The Mysterious Warning*. This gives an indication of her standing as a writer of popular fiction, as she is the only writer to provide more than one of the works recommended by Isabella. Jane Austen is obviously alert to the market for Gothic novels and the titles she mentions are all of the 'German' school, whether translations from the German or influenced by German writers. The two works of Eliza Parsons she chose seem to have been selected because of their subtitles, 'A German Tale' and 'A German Story', indicating Eliza Parsons' grasp of the demand for such novels.

Eliza Parsons wrote nineteen novels and one play, over sixty volumes of work<sup>44</sup> in a prolific and hard-working career lasting from 1790 to 1807, taking Eliza from the age of fifty to sixty-seven. This career was unexpected when she married, a wealthy bride, set to be a member of polite Plymouth society and the contented wife and mother of a large family. She was to face the loss of the family business twice, the death of her eldest son and the illness and death of her husband, all of which were only the beginning of her difficulties. Her application to her new situation, her determination to provide respectable

education, employment and marriage for her family succeeded despite the bereavement of four more of her children, serious injury, crippling debt and the threat of imprisonment. Although it must have seemed to her that she was never far from penury or tragedy, her life can now be seen to have been a triumph over adversity, the life of an adaptable, strong and successful woman.



- 1 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 2 Charles parish records, Plymouth Record Office. *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Sir Lesley Stephen and Sir Stanley Lee (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 399, mistakenly gives Eliza Parsons' maiden name as Phelp. Her date of birth was erroneously given by Montague Summers in his *Gothic Bibliography* (1964), as 1748, and subsequent scholars have repeated these mistakes. 'Devendra Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968) p. vii.
- 4 Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 3 Charles parish records, March 1760 and March 1761.
- 6 Letter to Dr Dale, 30th May, 1803. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 7 Devendra Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968), p. vii.
- 8 Letter from Eliza Parsons to William Windham, MP, 14th May, 1793. BL Add. MS. 37, 914, f.81-82, Manuscript archives, British Library.
- 9 Lord Chamberlain's Records, Public Record Office, which contradict the assertion of James Raven that 'Eliza Parsons' brief post in the Wardrobe was soon succeeded by more novel writing.' Introduction to Volume I of Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schowlerling (eds) *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). In fact, Eliza Parsons continued with both her careers side by side.
- 10 Letter to Dr Dale, 30th May, 1803. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 11 Dedication to The Marchioness of Salisbury in *The History of Miss Meredith*, (London: Hookham, 1790).
- 12 St Mary at Lambeth parish records, London Metropolitan Archives.
- 13 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December, 1792. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 14 Dedication to Mrs Crespigny in *Ellen and Julia*, (1793).
- 15 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May, 1793, Manuscript Archives, British Library. William Windham (1750-1810), was a statesman and MP for Norwich from 1784 to 1802. He was elected to parliament in 1784, and was a friend of Burke whom he helped to impeach Warren Hastings. From 1794 to 1801, he served as Secretary for War under William Pitt, and resigned when the king prevented Catholic emancipation. From 1806 to 1807, he served as Secretary of State for War and Colonies in the ministry of Lord Grenville, ([www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/04/10/05](http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/04/10/05))
- 16 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May, 1793. Manuscript Archives, British Library. This son is not her first born, James, who, according to Varma, had predeceased his father, dying just before the fire at Bow Bridges, in Jamaica shortly after his promotion to Captain of the Royal Marines.
- 17 Letter to Dr. Dale, 17th December, 1792. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 18 See, for example, *The Monthly Review* Vol. 9, September-December 1792, *The English Review* Vol. 20, 1792, and for an accusation of plagiarism, *The Critical Review* Vol. 16, 1792. Incidentally, my claim that Eliza Parsons was well enough educated to translate foreign works is adversely affected by the latter review, since the critic says the play was 'supposed' to have already been translated, with additions, by Sir John Vanburgh, though 'it was privately insinuated' that it had been with the assistance of 'Mr. Walsh and Mr. Congreve.' However, Eliza Parsons' subsequent work in translating novels of Augustus La Fontaine for her novel *Love and Gratitude* (1804) may be said to exonerate her.
- 19 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December, 1792. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Letter to Dr Dale, 18th December, 1792. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 23 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793. Manuscript Archives, British Library. 'Mr Hunter' was John Hunter, the surgery pioneer, who had lived at 28 Leicester Square since 1783, and had opened the first Anatomical Museum there in 1785. He was, a little later, a neighbour of Eliza Parsons, who lived at number 22 for a year or so. ([www.speel.demon.co.uk/other/leicester](http://www.speel.demon.co.uk/other/leicester) 04/10/05 and [www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester](http://www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester) 04/10/05).
- 24 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793. Manuscript Archives, British Library.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 Letter to Dr Dale, 7th July, 1796. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 27 Leicester Square, as well as being the home of John Hunter, had housed many celebrated people, from Sir Ashton Lever at the Earl of Leicester's house, and William Hogarth, to Sir Joshua Reynolds at number 47 and first Sir Isaac Newton, and later the Burney family, at number 35. Dr Burney and his family moved in to number 35 in the 1760s. It was in this house that Frances Burney wrote *Evelina*. ([www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester](http://www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester) 04/10/05). Sir Ashton Lever was the founder of the Royal Toxophilite Society, and president until his death in 1788. Mrs Crespigny became Lady Patroness in 1801. ([www.xs4all.nl-marcelo/archerv/library/books/badminton/docs/chapter14](http://www.xs4all.nl-marcelo/archerv/library/books/badminton/docs/chapter14) 04/10/05). After

Hogarth died in 1733, his widow continued to live in the square until her death in 1789. ([www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester](http://www.coventgarden.uk.com/leicester) 04/10/05).

28 Letter to Dr Dale, 7th July, 1796. Royal Literary Fund Archives.

29 This was not an uncommon occurrence for authors. For further discussion on the topic, see Cheryl Turner's chapter, 'Direct Sale of Copyright' in *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge), pp. 113-116.

30 James Raven's introduction to *The English Novel 1770-1829* Vol. 1, p. 52. Though this is a reasonable sum for surrender of copyright, Raven also points out that in the same year, 1797, Cadell Davis paid Ann Radcliffe £800 for hers. Notably, in 1804, according to Robin Myers and Michael Harris (eds.), in *Development of the English Book Trade 1700-1899*. (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1981), p. 117, Vemer and Hood paid Robert Bloomfield £4,000 for the copyright of *The Farmer's Boy*.

31 This could possibly be Frances Burney, who also worked in the palace. It is unlikely to refer to Ann Radcliffe, however, since, as I point out in Chapter 7, Eliza Parsons does not seem to have been impressed with her work.

32 According to Montague Summers in *A Gothic Quest*, (London: Fortune Press, 1968), pp. 265-266.

33 See introduction to *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* Judith Pascoe (ed.) (London: Broadview, 1999).

34 Letter to Dr Dale, 30th May, 1803. Royal Literary Fund Archives.

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.*

37 *ibid.*

38 Reported in *The Times* 6th September, 1804.

39 This title has been missed by most scholars. For example, in one of the most recent and reliable critical works which include Eliza Parsons, Edward Copeland's *Women Writing About Money*, p. 46, he calls *Murray House* her final novel, although she published *Love and Gratitude* (1804) and *The Convict* (1807) after it.

40 *Leyton Parish Poor Relief Rate Books* Michaelmas 1808 - Lady Day 1811, Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow.

41 For a notice of her death, see *The Gentleman's Magazine* 1811, Vol. 81, pt. 1.

42 Devendra Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning* (1968), pp. viii-ix.

43 See my discussion of this novel in Chapter 8.

44 Not, as mistakenly attributed to her by Dale Spender in *Mothers of the Novel*, (London: Pandora, 1986) p. 150, *sixty novels*.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**An Analysis of the Dedications of Eliza Parsons' Works**

*The following work is inscribed with the most profound respect...l*

In this chapter, I demonstrate the way that Eliza Parsons tried to draw on and assert connections with the aristocracy in order to claim greater status for herself and her works. This strategy, as I demonstrate here, changed over time, depending on her circumstances and the changing fortunes of her books. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, Eliza Parsons dedicated eleven of her twenty works, usually with permission, to persons of note from the worlds of the aristocracy and of literature. A few dedications were offered without permission, and one only was submitted to a man. Generally, her dedicatees were noble ladies, the most noble of whom was the Princess of Wales, Caroline of Brunswick, to whom she dedicated her 1796 novel *The Mysterious Warning*.

Dedication is a genre which requires specific skills such as a self-effacing manner and effusive expressions of gratitude, and the language of dedications is of a formulaic and well-established style. Nonetheless, it is still possible to recognise the particular idiosyncrasies of a writer within the form. Eliza Parsons, from the very first occasion on which she dedicated her work, showed a highly-developed capacity to reap as much benefit to herself as possible from the exercise. She generally reiterated her lack of skill in writing whilst skilfully ensuring that the exact impression she wanted to convey was delivered. It is clear, from the biographical data in her dedications, that she wrote them herself, and in many cases, she added her home address, as though to emphasise the personal relationship she had with her dedicatee.

She began her career in 1790 with *The History of Miss Meredith*, published by subscription with Thomas Hookham and dedicated to the Marchioness of Salisbury, who had been instrumental in obtaining employment for Mr and Mrs Parsons at St. James' Palace when disaster hit their turpentine distillery business. The fact of the dedication to 'The Most Noble, The Marchioness of Salisbury' appears on the title page, along with the important addendum, 'By Permission', and it is delivered in full on the following page. Eliza Parsons begins her dedication:

If my being under the innumerable obligations to your ladyship, could alone have authorized an Address of this kind, I might, without permission, have inscribed the following sheets to the MARCHIONESS OF SALISBURY; but your ladyship has condescendingly added to those obligations, by permitting me to shelter the first feeble efforts of my pen under your patronage;- an honour which demands my warmest gratitude.<sup>3</sup>

Thus shrewdly and astutely does Eliza Parsons initiate her career with these, her first published words. Although up to now, this appears to be a typical dedication, the novice writer is perfectly aware of how to use the dedication to achieve her aims. She follows on immediately from this by saying that she is unused to the language of dedication, and knows only how to speak from the heart, so fortunately she cannot be accused of flattery. So confidently does she assure us of her lack of confidence that we are almost confused into believing her. Although it is obvious to the reader that she is in fact entirely aware of the language of dedication by her use of flattering phrases and expressions of gratitude, we accept her seemingly self-effacing words almost without realising that they are, on the contrary, designed to force the writer's character firmly upon us. She begins each sentence with an avowal of humility but turns each statement into a declaration about herself. Consequently, she continues by saying that when virtue and accomplishment are added to high birth, the noble possessor of these attributes is an inspiration, and thus she is 'proud of avowing that, to your ladyship's benevolence and generosity, I am indebted for more than life - for

the preservation of eight dear fatherless children!’ In this phrase, extravagant in its delivery, Eliza Parsons highlights the section of her autobiography most useful to her at the moment. We might assume that to begin one’s career as a writer, one might emphasise skill in writing, but for this writer, the important aim is to succeed in finding a way to feed, clothe and educate her large family after the death of her husband. At once we are to receive the impression that she is to be pitied, and so might buy the book on this account, and that she is respectable: that is to say, she gives the impression that she would never have stooped to entering the public marketplace had it not been for misfortune. Although she presents herself as subservient to the Marchioness, we are also left in no doubt that the two are acquainted, and thus we are given to suppose that they had been acquainted on a more equal footing prior to the death of Mr Parsons.

With her next novel in 1791, she begins publishing her works through William Lane’s Minerva Press, with which she remains through most of her career. *The Errors of Education* was dedicated, once again, with permission, to the Countess of Hillsborough. In this dedication, the writer goes a little further towards leaving her readers with a strong impression of her character and skill. She protests that, as the Countess can receive no pleasure from the praise of a ‘private individual’, she will not endeavour to offer it;- ‘I therefore most readily give up all attempts to display virtues which are universally acknowledged, and cannot be delineated by so unskilful a hand as mine.’ Masquerading as a display of humility, this is in effect a method of dispensing with the polite necessities, so as to get on with the real business of the dedication: to advertise her wares. What is more, there is another purpose to be served by this act of dedication, and Eliza Parsons openly avows it.

'Tis to entreat your ladyship's favourable reception of this work that I presume to address you; conscious of its numberless imperfections, I seek, under the sanction of your name, to screen it from the lash of criticism.<sup>4</sup>

Here, rather than a straightforward presentation of the gift of dedicated work, we seem to have the selfish declared aim of hiding behind one's grand friends in order to escape censure from the reviewers. Once more, however, this may not be all it appears to be, since the humility of tone here is swiftly followed by an advertisement for the novel, and the one which preceded it.

Impelled by the same motives which first induced me to take up the pen, and encouraged by the favourable reception 'Miss Meredith' met with from the indulgence of the public, I have ventured a second time to throw myself on its mercy: and if 'The Errors of Education' should be so fortunate as to obtain your ladyship's approbation, it will enable me to look forward with hope, and trust, though not without trembling, to the same generosity and candour I have so recently experienced.'

In one sentence, we are reminded that there is a previous novel, and given its title, and we are told that it was successful, and that the writer expects the same result from her latest novel. This is a clever use of a platform to publicise one's enterprise, and shows an astute business mind at work. Eliza Parsons knows she has to make her mark wherever possible, and the open use of the dedication in which to do so is embraced with subtlety and skill. The constant refrain, as before mentioned, from the writer, is that she lacks skill in writing, but the mark of a woman fighting for survival is clearly visible. She will use whatever methods are available to fulfil her goal.

A notable point in the above quotation is the assertion that the writer, although looking forward hopefully, does not do so 'without trembling'. This may simply be the kind of modest remark a novice might be expected to make. However, when it is

considered alongside the striking use of the word 'candour', softened by its coupling with 'generosity', which Eliza Parsons says she has recently experienced from her novel's reception, perhaps the assertion is more complex. Here she cannot be speaking entirely of the public;- they may buy generously, but do not give candid opinions directly to the writer. This, then, is more likely to be a reference to the reaction of the critics, which Eliza Parsons mentions in the interests of honesty, but glosses over rather rapidly, so as to be able to concentrate more fully on the pleasing detail of public approbation. In fact, although the critics were generally approving, one of them, the writer of the review of *The History of Miss Meredith* in *The Critical Review*, had prefaced complimentary remarks with the qualification, 'If we could have felt an inclination to be severe, Mrs. Parsons has taken from criticism her sting',<sup>6</sup> and the new novelist must have been aware that much had been spared her because of her circumstances, rather than because of her perceived talent as a fiction writer.

The next work to be published, in 1792, was Eliza Parsons' only play, *The Intrigues of a Morning*, which is dedicated to Mrs Crespigny. Mrs Crespigny held archery fetes at Grove House in Camberwell, and became Lady Patroness of the Royal Toxophilite Society in 1801.<sup>R</sup> She was a fashionable woman, wife of Claude Champion de Crespigny, later to become 1st Baronet. She appears to have been a popular dedicatee, presumably because of her patronage of female writers.<sup>9</sup> However, in the case of Eliza Parsons, it would seem that the writer is at pains to display her personal connection with the socialite. Indeed, her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith*, had included among its subscribers Mrs Crespigny, who subscribed to six copies, as well as her husband and two more members of their family. Clearly, then, Eliza Parsons had, at one time, been an intimate of the Crespignys. The dedication

says simply, ‘Respectfully and gratefully inscribed to Mrs Crespigny, Grove-House, Camberwell, by her ever obliged and devoted servant, The Author.’ Although there is here a lack of the lengthy and fulsome praise of her two previous dedications, this is nonetheless interesting, principally because of its form. It is given a page to itself, and is presented in a similar manner to the title information; that is to say, it is centralised on the page, printed in block capitals and certain words are made conspicuous by the use of larger print:

**RESPECTFULLY AND GRATEFULLY  
INSCRIBED  
TO MRS. CRESPIGNY,  
GROVE-HOUSE,  
CAMBERWELL;  
BY HER EVER OBLIGED,  
AND DEVOTED SERVANT,**

**THE AUTHOR. 10**

Up to the end of the dedicatee’s address, the inscription is centralised, and the largest print is that used for Mrs Crespigny’s name. The superscription, ‘by her ever obliged/and devoted servant’, is given two lines which lead diagonally down the page to the bottom right hand corner, where the words ‘The Author’ are given the same size type as the name of her dedicatee, and are given more space around them than the rest of the text on the page. Though Mrs Crespigny’s name is centralised, one’s eyes are drawn, because of their lower right-hand position, on the final two words. Here Eliza Parsons has not deemed it necessary to add a paragraph of grateful thanks and humble abasement. She is presenting herself as an equal, as this time her chosen recipient is a writer too. In fact, so confident does she appear that she does not even choose to sign herself by her name, but prefers to hammer home her professional status by signing herself ‘The Author’. The use of Mrs Crespigny’s address is notable. It at once proves her ‘devoted servant’ knows her well enough to visit her at home, and also seems, oddly and even a little insultingly, to imply that there may be more than one Mrs



Crespigny. It cannot be coincidence that Eliza Parsons does not give her own address, as she had done in her first dedication, or her name, as she had in dedicating both her previous works. This suggests the intended impression to be that although there may be two Mrs Crespignys, there is only one Author. As the previous page had, under the play title, emblazoned the words, 'As performed at Covent Garden', one may deduce that Eliza Parsons feels she has arrived as a member of the literary set and thus can justly claim one of its celebrities as an intimate, particularly since Mrs Crespigny was a playwright herself and put on plays at her private theatre in Camberwell.<sup>11</sup> This deviation from what was to be Eliza Parsons' usual choice of recipient, the nobility, is perhaps indicative of the very real desire of the writer to be accepted as a professional, despite her carefully chosen defence of lack of skill, which she reiterates as often as possible throughout her career to deflect criticism.<sup>10</sup>

After the play, Eliza Parsons returns to novel-writing. *The Intrigues of a Morning* was disparaged by the critics when it appeared as an after-piece in Covent Garden in April of 1792. Added to the disaster of her recent injury, the failure of her new venture as a playwright must have been difficult to bear, and she returns to her accustomed position as novelist and petitioner of the aristocracy, rather than the literati. In 1793, *Woman As She Should Be* is published, and a chastened author dedicates it to the Duchess of Gloucester. Along with the customary gratitude and protestations of the unworthiness of praise from a 'humble individual', there is a new note. In her request for shelter from criticism, she adds that the novel was 'written under a painful confinement to my apartment, when torturing pain threw a cloud over the brightness of fancy, and precluded every attempt to wit or humour.' This reference to her fall as a catastrophe has the ring of truth, with its repetition of 'pain' and its memory of

excruciating injury coupled with enforced solitude. Although she is always apt to maximise her woes, they nevertheless exist, and this time we see her allow this biographical detail to be publicised. Thus, her identity now moves from a widowed mother to that of a disabled person, attempting bravely to fulfil professional obligations in the face of pain and incapacity.

Although the disaster is real, it is a questionable business tactic to request one's prospective readership, perusing the first few pages before purchase, to buy solely to keep one from penury, rather than in expectation of pleasurable reading. However, here the writer's strategy of inducing sympathy is mixed with a veritable deep anxiety about her survival and that of her children. She seems here to be genuinely frightened that success is to desert her after her failure at Covent Garden, and all pretensions to professional confidence are dispensed with in favour of pleas for another chance to earn her living as a writer.

Later in 1793, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* was published, without dedication. Perhaps its sudden appearance after *Woman As She Should Be* left the writer no time to solicit patronage, incapacitated as her fall had left her, or perhaps its fashionable, though not quite so respectable, Gothic overtones meant that she preferred to test it out on the public and critics before involving nobility in a request for approbation.

1793 was a productive year for Eliza Parsons, and her next work was published in November of that year. *Ellen and Julia* was dedicated to Mrs Crespigny, this time with a suitably submissive inscription. The main reason for such humility was because it was dedicated without permission. Eliza Parsons begins by hoping the

intrusion on Mrs Crespigny's goodness will not be too great, but she reminds her patron that she has been good enough to help with the writer's 'former trifling productions'. This at once sounds self-abasing and meek whilst making clear that there have been other works; that is, that she is a professional, in whose fluctuating success Mrs Crespigny is implicated. She continues:

You, Madam, first condescended to honour them with your approbation, and impelled by motives which evinced the superior goodness of your heart, you first encouraged me to commit them to the public; humanity threw a veil over the imperfections your judgment could not approve, and your influence, like the exhilarating sun, diffused candour and lenity into every breast whose favourable opinion could do me honour.

Once again, there is a submerged message encoded in this flow of ostensible gratitude. It was on Mrs Crespigny's advice, it seems, that Eliza Parsons was encouraged to publish works with which she herself would have preferred not to trouble the public. If some have not met with commercial success, then, it is not the writer's fault. What is more, Mrs Crespigny has not insisted that errors are removed, since her 'humanity threw a veil' over them. Critical censure, then, is Mrs Crespigny's responsibility, and she is even reminded that it is her influence which has encouraged not only public leniency, but the candour of the reviewers whose 'favourable opinion' Eliza Parsons needs. Clearly, then, reads the subtext, Mrs Crespigny owes her creature a favour, and can hardly cavil at the dedication she is offered. Eliza Parsons asks pardon for soliciting such respectable aid, to give her work 'consequence in the eyes of the world', and also for indulging 'the gratification of that vanity' which Mrs Crespigny has 'raised and cherished' in her protegee 'by distinguished favours'. This is a curious melange of modesty and pride, of gratitude and reproach, and indicates the writer's desperate bid to survive and prosper as a

writer, calling in favours and risking censure from her chosen dedicatee. A further note of interest in this dedication is connected with the revelation of Mrs Crespigny's role in encouraging Eliza Parsons to become an author in the first place. If that were indeed the case, it is notable that the novelist did not dedicate her first work to her, preferring instead to dedicate it to the far more distinguished Marchioness of Salisbury, who was the wife of the Lord Chamberlain. The information about Mrs Crespigny's encouragement of the novice author hidden in this dedication indicates Eliza Parsons' ability to make the most of her situation by choosing a name of higher status with which to couple her own at the beginning of her career, and give herself the highest profile possible.

The next two works, *Lucy* of 1794, and *The Voluntary Exile* of 1795, are not dedicated, perhaps because Eliza Parsons received an unfavourable reaction from her daring dedication of *Ellen and Julia* without permission, or because this novel sold well enough to allow her publisher to back her next venture with a more lucrative contract. It is not until 1796, with *Women As They Are*, that she dedicates her work, this time to Mrs Anson of Shuckborough Manor (Shugborough Hall). During the period which had elapsed between the last dedication and this, Eliza Parsons must have received some indication that she was still in good odour with the gentry, because once again the novel is dedicated without permission. It is perhaps acceptable to dedicate without permission to a notable figure of the literary world in town and quite another to do the same to a gentlewoman in a country manor. The writer forestalls any censure by, once again, reminding the lady, and in doing so, the reader, that they are well acquainted, and that she has in the past shown great kindness to her 'most obedient servant'.<sup>14</sup>

The writer has received 'favours and indulgence' from the Anson family, and takes 'equal pride and pleasure' in acknowledging these condescensions publicly. Once more, she declares that any praise from her cannot give any pleasure to her dedicatee, and this time denounces dedications which are 'generally the vehicle for fulsome adulation, and originate from selfish and interested views.' She, of course, is not guilty of this sordid crime, and insists that her only motive is to praise and thank Mrs Anson for mercies received. She sets herself apart from other authors of dedications, who she appears to accuse of selfishness and a want of true feeling for their patron, whom they have only chosen for his or her influence which they hope will be used to elevate them. Here Eliza Parsons is again concealing her own motive. She tells Mrs Anson (and the reader):

In the few dedications I have been permitted to make, I have been singularly fortunate: characters so justly distinguished and admired by the world could derive no additional lustre from the panegyrics of my pen, any more than their consequence could be diminished by their condescension in my favour, - virtues that establish themselves in the eye of discrimination, can neither be affected by the one nor the other.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, she makes certain that Mrs Anson is aware that great names have agreed to patronise the writer's work, in case she were to be tempted to complain of the boldness of dedicating without permission. This might be considered as the very 'selfish and interested views' of others railed against in the dedication, but for the suggestion, implicit in her clever weaving of words, that Eliza Parsons is reliable. She goes on:

'Tis this conviction, madam, that emboldens me to prefix *your* name to an address warm from the heart of gratitude, where any attempt to praise, or display, virtues and accomplishments known and acknowledged by a whole county, and a large circle of admiring friends, would be futile and unnecessary, and therefore spares me on a subject I am little capable of doing justice to.<sup>16</sup>

This could well be considered as the 'fulsome adulation' mentioned before, to which the writer declared she would not stoop, but so subtly does she append her acclaim that we do not discern the contradiction and, instead, perhaps notice the mention of the 'Targe circle of admiring friends' to which we might assume Eliza Parsons belongs. The aim of her dedications seems always to be a mixture of gaining sympathy and patronage from important personages along with a reminder of her former status in society as a well to do woman of respectable standing and her own 'Targe circle of friends'.

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, in 1796 Eliza Parsons reaches the epitome of her dedications when she dedicates *The Mysterious Warning* to the Princess of Wales.<sup>17</sup> The humility with which she tenders this dedication, scattering liberally such words as 'gratitude', 'respect' and 'admiration', and professing herself 'obliged', 'devoted' and 'humble', belie the pride with which she presents her work. She tells her Royal Highness, in a similar manner to that in which she had addressed the Marchioness of Salisbury, her first patron, that high birth in itself demands respect but does not denote merit in its possessor. However, she goes on, when there also exists 'the most brilliant accomplishments, a graciousness of manners, a condescending sweetness that implies a wish to be distinguished more by goodness than greatness', then homage is given from the heart and love is added to the respect

due to her Royal Highness. This may well be a compliment to the lady, but also implies that she is well enough known to the writer to be offered something so personal as love. Eliza Parsons adds that there can be no pleasure for the Princess in the praise of an 'obscure individual'.

Nonetheless, of course, she extends it, and immediately contradicts her status as a mere obscure individual by announcing the 'equal pride and gratitude' with which she acknowledges 'the lively sense I entertain of the distinguished honour conferred on me' in being permitted to dedicate the novel to the Princess, although she has not the 'presumption' to hope the lady will derive much pleasure from reading it. The terminology has altered from respect and humility to encompass 'pride', 'distinguished honour' and 'presumption'. Although the last is denied, the fact that it is mentioned at all indicates that Eliza Parsons is expecting her dedicatee to read the work, and in spite of her protestations, that she will enjoy it. This latter point is made clear in the next statement: '[t]he few pretensions I have to merit are merely negative ones: I have never written a line tending to corrupt the heart, sully the imagination, or mislead the judgment of my young Readers'. Now the words 'pretensions' and 'merit' are added to the terminology of the piece and the tenor has been modified into delivering a reiteration of the preface, printed on the preceding page to the dedication, in which the writer assures her readers' parents that their offspring will come to no moral harm from reading her works. The subtlety with which this is accomplished is remarkable and is the mark of an adept writer. It is notable that she does not, as so often, pretend to a lack of skill in writing, contenting herself with the application of the adjective 'obscure', although nonetheless presenting something of an oxymoron of her identity with the addition of 'individual'. She may temporarily be politely obscure

for the purposes of respect to Royalty, but she does not place herself merely among the ranks of indistinguishable authors. Not since her first dedication had Eliza Parsons signed off with her exact address, usually being content to write it from 'London', but here she adds 22 Leicester Square. This has an air of simple good manners but equally it informs her Royal Highness where to direct any notes of thanks she may wish to send, or even where to visit her devoted and humble servant. Once again, the writer attempts to cling on to the status she had enjoyed in the past, as can be seen from the impressive subscription list printed at the end of her first novel, which had contained the names of both the Prince and Princess of Wales as well as those of other noble personages.

There is more to this dedication, however, than a simple wish to attach one's name to that of an illustrious person. Princess Caroline of Brunswick, the Princess of Wales, was an unusual choice of patron for someone who emphasises her own respectability as much as Eliza Parsons does, since her marriage to Prince George was more or less over by the time this novel was published. The date given for the dedication was November. Thus, the separation of the Royal couple had already occurred by this time, and thus, to dedicate to the forsaken Princess was implicitly to offer moral support publicly. This is an occasion when Eliza Parsons acts in a way that we might not expect, given her frequent assurances of respectability. These contrary acts were sufficiently common to alert one to the danger of classifying the author as a mediocre writer who keeps to the rules and breaks no boundaries. She deceives her readers into thinking her to be modest and unassuming, but is capable of sporadic deviation so unexpected that we are deluded into believing each incidence to be an unprecedented anomaly.<sup>18</sup>



In 1797 Eliza Parsons' next novel was published. *The Girl of the Mountains* was dedicated thus:

The following work is inscribed with the most profound respect and the warmest admiration of virtues and accomplishments, too distinguished for the feeble pen of the author to delineate, to Her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia Matilda of Gloucester, by Her Highnesses (sic) most devoted, and most obedient humble servant, Eliza Parsons.<sup>19</sup>

Once again the writer professes herself unable to describe the multitude of qualities possessed by her dedicatee and thus does not attempt to do so. There is no clue here as to whether or not the Princess gave her permission for the dedication, and the inscription seems somewhat half-hearted in its fervour. The success of *The Mysterious Warning*, which had sold well and been well received critically, may have encouraged Eliza Parsons to assume an inevitable welcome for her offering to Sophia Matilda.

*An Old Friend with a New Face* was published in 1791, and was dedicated to Lady Howard in similar terms to the one above:

With the highest veneration, the most perfect respect, and the warmest gratitude, the following work is inscribed, to The Right Honorable Lady Howard; by Her Ladyship's much obliged, and most obedient humble servant, The Author.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from a few minor differences from the dedication to Princess Sophia Matilda, the formula here is the same. One might detect a slight lessening of the sycophantic tone, perhaps denoting Her Ladyship's lower status as a mere member of the aristocracy, rather than one of the royal family.

A curious, single line dedication accompanies the next work, also published by Longman. This is 1798's *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families*, 'dedicated to The First Female Pen in England'. It is intriguing to speculate who might be considered the foremost woman writer in 1798. Perhaps, in deference to her new publisher, of higher status than Minerva, it is possibly another Longman author. As I mention in an endnote in Chapter 2, it could be Frances Burney, since her name was one of those mentioned by Eliza Parsons in the preface to her first novel as a model for her writing, although perhaps it could refer to Mrs Crespigny, who had done so much to help the new writer with her encouragement and patronage.

*The Valley of St. Gothard*, published in 1799, was also the last novel Eliza Parsons dedicated, although she wrote six more novels. This dedication is of a very different kind from the others, as it is directed to Matthew Gregory Lewis, the notorious scandal-making author of *The Monk*, which had been published in 1796. The dedication is offered 'with the warmest admiration of splendid talents, and the highest respect for personal merit'.<sup>91</sup> Although praise is given, it is not delivered in the same fawning manner as that used in previous inscriptions and the tone seems to be one of friendship, rather than acquaintance or dependency. As I mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, Eliza Parsons knew the mother of Matthew Lewis and, in 1804, five years after her dedication to Lewis, offered his mother advice in getting her work published. Although Lewis did not approve of this venture on the part of his mother, he seems not to have borne any resentment towards Eliza Parsons and indeed appears to exonerate her from blame.<sup>24</sup> Although her career is perhaps past its height at this point, she is by now well enough known and established as an experienced writer, nine years into her career, to dispense with her obsequious manner and choice of

noble and respectable dedicatees, and present herself to her public and critics as a professional member of the literary milieu. An excellent means by which to achieve this goal is to dedicate to a famous writer, whose name everyone knows, and thus by proxy attain a little of the frisson of fashionable decadence attached to him.

As mentioned before, no more of her six remaining novels were dedicated. This cannot have been due to any curtailment of the trend of dedication. In the 1770s, 13% of novels still extant were dedicated. In 1796 alone, this figure rose to 23%, in 1797, it fell a little to 19% and in 1798, 17% of novels contained dedications.<sup>26</sup> From 1800 to 1808, the year after Eliza Parsons' final novel, the proportion of dedicated novels were as follows: 1800, 17%; 1801, 22%; 1802, 11%; 1803, 17%; 1804, 15%; 1805, 21%; 1806, 17%; 1807, 11% and 1808 17%.<sup>26</sup> As can be seen, despite fluctuations in the level of dedications, novels continued to be dedicated until after Eliza Parsons' career ceased. In the majority, these novels were still, in 1808, dedicated to nobility or royalty. Therefore we must study Eliza Parsons' personal circumstances to find an explanation for the sudden cessation in her dedications.

The reason may have been due to an increasing lack of familiarity with her dedicatees, since, by now, it had been some years since she had moved in society. She may have been abandoned by her well-born acquaintances or may herself have become disillusioned by their loss of interest in her once her circumstances became a little too reduced for strict respectability. This is speculation, but it is fair to assume that it was the change to Norbury which made the biggest impact. Eliza Parsons dedicates only one novel while with him, and this to the notorious Lewis. Perhaps the calibre of the writers published by Philip Norbury, based at Brentford, was not the

kind to be found in the library of an Adams mansion in a West End square.<sup>97</sup> At all events, dedication was an aspect of Eliza Parsons' writing which shows a facet of her character we cannot see in any other part of her life. In it, she emphasises her respectability, her knowledge of good, even noble families and her ability to distance herself in print from the sordid reality of life in penury and debt.

This chapter has claimed that the dedication of Eliza Parsons' works are an important source of information about her motives and social circle. This becomes particularly clear, I have argued, when she ceases to dedicate her work as her social status is reduced and she can no longer claim relationship with her former intimates. Though dedications are an under-used area of research, I have maintained that they provide valuable insight into the associations a writer can use to gain cultural capital. Their evidence is of marked significance in the instance of research into the life and work of a forgotten writer. Furthermore, they indicate the cultural milieu in which her literature is produced by alerting us to the personalities approached by writers as beneficial patrons.<sup>98</sup> Like her dedications, Eliza Parsons' prefaces also indicate her attempts to forge bonds with a specific area of readership, and they are the subject of my next chapter.

1 Dedication to Princess Sophia Maria of Gloucester in *The Girl of the Mountains*, (1797).

2 Though there is a dearth of information on the relative forms of dedication in the eighteenth century, it seems clear that it is an extension of the system of patronage operating since the previous century, although requiring not financial backing, but the cultural capital of the connection with a noble or well-known dedicatee. Many texts, which shed light on other fields of study in the reading and writing culture of the late eighteenth century, are silent on this subject. For example, James Raven's *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), does not comment on patronage. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (eds.) *Development of the English Book Trade, 1700-1899* (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1981), contains case studies on John Nichols and Thomas Hood, as well as articles on tolerance by the government of the press and on periodicals, but does not mention dedications or prefaces. The same editors' later text, *Author/Publisher Relations During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1983), discusses Swift, Scott and Gladstone, as well as journalism, but, once again, has no word to say on dedication. Isobel Rivers' (ed.) *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992) gives insights into the reader response to Classics, poetry, Bible criticism and science books, but does not explore the dedication of novels. That authors are dedicating novels is clear from the name of the dedicatee given in the list of works in Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schowering (eds.) *The English Novel 1770-1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), but the text of the dedications is not given. For the purposes of comparison, I include examples of the formulaic language referred to above, demonstrated by the dedications quoted in endnotes 17 and 23 below.

3 Dedication to The Marchioness of Salisbury in *The History of Miss Meredith*, (1790).

4 Dedication to the Countess of Hillsborough in *The Errors of Education*, (1791).

3 *ibid.*

6 Review of *The History of Miss Meredith* in *The Critical Review* Vol. 70, 1790, p. 219.

7 Mrs Crespigny was an author and patroness said to be 'handsome, witty and accomplished'. See George Agar Hansard *The Book of Archery*, (London: Longman 1840), Section III, 'Female Archery' at [www.xs4all.nl/~marcelo/archery/librarv/books/book\\_of\\_archery/chapter03](http://www.xs4all.nl/~marcelo/archery/librarv/books/book_of_archery/chapter03).

8 See C.J. Longman & Col. H. Walrond *Archery*, (London: Longman 1894), Chapter XIV, 'The Royal Toxophilite Society' at [www.xs4all.nl/~marcelo/archery/library/books/badminton/docs/chapter14](http://www.xs4all.nl/~marcelo/archery/library/books/badminton/docs/chapter14).

9 See Chapter 1 for details of the dedications of other writers.

10 Dedication to Mrs Crespigny of *The Intrigues of a Morning*, (1792).

11 See the Universite de Montreal website, British Women Playwrights Around 1800, [www.etang.umontreal.ca/bwp1800/essays/cox](http://www.etang.umontreal.ca/bwp1800/essays/cox), for a discussion of Mariana Starke, whose play, *The Widow of Malabar* (1791), was first performed at Mrs Crespigny's theatre, and was dedicated to her.

12 For example, her dedications in *Woman as She Should Be* (1793), *Ellen and Julia* (1793), *Women as They Are* (1796), and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), among others.

B Dedication to Mrs Crespigny of *Ellen and Julia*, (1793).

14 The Ansons counted among their number Admirals. Possibly the Parsons family had received favour, since two of Mr and Mrs Parsons' sons were in the Navy, and this may explain the connection.

B Dedication to Mrs Anson in *Women as They Are*, (1796).

16 *ibid.*

17 The current Princess of Wales was a popular dedicatee, with or without her permission. An example of the latter variety is E. M. Foster's *Emily of Lucerne* (1800) whose dedication read:

To Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales.

Madam, As the Desire I feel of publicly avowing the Respect and esteem I entertain for your Character is the only Motive which actuates me in dedicating this little work to your Highness, permit me to indulge the pleasing Hope that you will not disdain the Liberty I have taken.

I am

MADAM,

With unfeigned Respect,

Your Royal Highness's

Most obedient humble servant,

E.M.F.

Quoted in Kathryn Dawes 'Anonymity and the Pressures of Publication in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Cardiff Corvey* 4 (May 2000). Online: [www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04\\_no3](http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04_no3).

In comparison to Eliza Parsons' dedication of *The Mysterious Warning* to the Princess of Wales in 1796, this is a brief, modest inscription, undertaken with neither permission nor, it seems, a desire to promote the writer, unlike Eliza Parsons' dedication to the Princess.

8 The choice of the Princess as dedicatee for a Gothic novel might be easier to explain. As a German, she might be expected to support a novel subtitled 'A German Tale'.

9 Dedication to Princess Sophia Maria of Gloucester in *The Girl of the Mountains* (1797).

20 Dedication to Lady Howard in *An Old Friend with a New Face*, (1797).

21 Endnote 31, p. 61.

22 It is, however, as I have mentioned before, unlikely to be Ann Radcliffe, as Eliza Parsons appears not to be impressed with her style.

23 Dedication to Matthew Gregory Lewis of *The Valley of St Gothard* (1799). As I have discussed, this is the only novel Eliza Parsons dedicated to a man, all the others dedicated were addressed to royal, aristocratic or respectable ladies. Other writers, however, dedicated to respectable men, such as Mary Ann Hanway, whose *Falconhury Abbey: A Devonshire Story* (1809), quoted in Kathryn Dawes, 'Anonymity and the Pressures of Publication in the Early Nineteenth Century' at [www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04 no3](http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc04_no3), was dedicated to 'James Buller Esq. Member of Parliament for Exeter'. She stated, 'I now offer to the Public, with all an author's hopes, an author's fears. I am therefore most anxious to procure for it the support and patronage of a Gentleman'. This novel was published ten years after Eliza Parsons ceased to dedicate her works, and it seems that only a gentleman's name will procure for it the respect that a writer craves, the novel genre having long been considered rather contemptible, by reviewers, if not by readers. Similarly, Elizabeth Gooch dedicated her *Sherwood Forest* (1804), quoted in Dawes, above, to 'James Wardell, Esq. Wine merchant, Pall Mall, after admitting that she had 'never yet ventured upon the fashionable mode of dedication' indicating that to dedicate a work was a common practice among novelists. She also indicates that the dedication was permitted: 'With every sentiment of gratitude of which the feeling mind is susceptible, I subscribe myself, Dear Sir, Your truly devoted humble Servant'. These examples are similar in approach to Eliza Parsons' shorter dedications. It is in her fuller dedications that we discover much more about the relationship she had with her dedicatees, and further personal details of the writer herself.

24 Cited by Montague Summers in *A Gothic Quest, A History of the Gothic Novel*, (1968), pp. 265-266.

25 Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling (eds), *The English Novel 1770-1829*, Vol. 1, p. 52.

26 *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 107-290.

27 There is evidence for this, in Garside, Raven and Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* and page numbers from this work follow each entry below. Between 1800 and 1818, Philip Norbury printed and sold only sixteen novels, of which Eliza Parsons wrote six. The others can be accounted for as follows: Elizabeth Helme wrote three; in 1805, *The Pilgrim of the Cross or: The Chronicles of Christabelle de Mowbray, an Ancient Legend*, dedicated, like Eliza Parsons' 1797 work, *The Girl of the Mountains*, to the Princess Sophia Matilda of Gloucester, p.213, in 1812, *Magdalen or: The Penitent of Godstow*, p. 366, and, in 1814, the posthumously-published *Modern Times*, dedicated to the Rt. Hon. Countess Cowper, p. 399. Her previous titles appear on the title pages as *St Margaret's Cave or: The Nun's Story*, *Louisa or: The Cottage on the Moor*, *St Clair of the Isles*. Isabella Kelly wrote two, with the titles *A Modern Incident in Domestic Life*, dedicated to the Right Honourable Lady Anne Culling Smith in 1803, p. 172, and, in 1805, *The Secret*, p. 214. These are hardly sensational titles, but on the title pages of each are a list of her previous works; *Madeline*, *Abbey St Asaph*, *Avondale Priory*, *Eva*, *Ruthinglenne* and *The Baron's Daughter*, which are rather more populist. The other titles are by Miss Guion, *The Italian Romance*, whose title page in 1803 claims her as the author of *Immelinda, a German Story*, p. 135; T. J. Horsley Curties, *The Watch Tower or: The Sons of Ulthona, and Historical Romance*, also in 1803, dedicated to E. H. Elcock Brown Esq., North Walsham, Norfolk, p. 168; an anonymous title in 1806, *The Children of Error* by an Officer of the Dragoons, p. 224; in 1817 Emily Clark, *Tales at the Fireside or: a Father and Mother's Stories*, dedicated to Col. M'Mahon, p. 443; and in 1818, *Benignity or: The Ways of Happiness* selected from the works of Henry Brooke Esq. by a Lady, p. 454. These titles seem to suggest a Minerva-like quality to the works published by Norbury, since most of them appear to be of a kind likely to attract thrill-seekers.

28 Some patrons are approached for their personal acquaintance with the author, and may not be approached by any other writer. Mrs Anson may be one of these (see endnote 13, above). In other cases, a well-known patron is approached. Mrs Crespigny falls into this category, as discussed on pages 66-67, although it is clear, from Eliza Parsons' reference to her, in her dedication of *Ellen and Julia* (1793), as having given encouragement, that the two were acquainted. However, since Mrs Crespigny is known to have permitted dedications from other writers, her inclusion as a patron of Eliza Parsons is of use to researchers, since Eliza Parsons can now be added to the list of writers dedicating to her.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**An Analysis of the Prefaces to Eliza Parsons' Works**

*The following Work I submit to the Judgement of the Public.. ”*

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Eliza Parsons uses her prefaces, like her dedications, as shown in the last chapter, as a means of asserting her relationship to a particular type of reader. In the case of prefaces, she claims to address the reader who is also a parent, as I shall show. However, her prefaces also assert her claim to professional authorship, by means of skilful argument, as I discuss fully. Her prefaces are a forgotten body of writing, but they are an important resource for researchers aiming to discover the constraints of and consequent solutions obtained by an author writing for money. Like her dedications, the prefaces to Eliza Parsons' works take the form of a direct address and thus, to some extent, her aims and approach are similar. However, whereas her dedications were indirectly addressed to the general reader, the prefaces are explicitly designed for their perusal. What is more, there is a difference in approach as she wishes to impress upon her reader a different aspect of herself from that offered to her dedicatees. Unlike the eleven works she dedicates, there are only four which are prefaced, all of them works she has also dedicated.

Eliza Parsons' first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith*, (1790) establishes her in the critics' eyes as a respectable writer who can be trusted with the morals of the innocent young female reader. The *Critical Review's* notice commended her work as moral and pleasing, noting her straightened circumstances. 'We wish our circulating libraries were always so well supplied' comments the reviewer.<sup>2</sup> No doubt this is the critic's genuine impression, but perhaps, too, he was swayed by Eliza Parsons' own portrayal of herself in the Preface as a modest private woman who tried to write because there

was little other choice for her. She begins by submitting her work to the public with ‘trembling anxiety’, thereby establishing herself as modest and apprehensive, eager to do well for her readers but unsure of her capacity to please them. She goes on:

A first effort might, perhaps, be entitled to some indulgence, did not the presumption of writing after a BURNEY, a SMITH, a REEVE, a BENNET, and many other excellent female novelists, subject the Author of MISS MEREDITH to the imputations of vanity.<sup>3</sup>

It is notable that she begs indulgence for her presumption in writing after these important women writers, and insists that, although this presumption suggests vanity, that had not been her motive. Edward Copeland, in *Women Writing About Money* identifies the irony here, and is suspicious of her demeanour. He notices that she nonetheless considers herself ‘fit and equal company’<sup>4</sup> with the aforementioned authors, since she lists the ones with whom she wants to be compared. However, she leaves the reader in no doubt why she has taken this step.

...all motives of this kind [i.e.vanity] she utterly disdains - far different were her incitements! accustomed to affluence, and for many years blest with prosperity, a combination of unfortunate events and disappointments, occasioned a cruel reverse of fortune. Her husband, unable to sustain the severity of his fate, sunk under his misfortunes, and left her with a numerous family unprovided for. To assist in supporting these children, are the following Memoirs published; and such is the Author’s reliance on the benevolence of the public, that she presents her Novel at the tribunal from whence there is no appeal, trusting that her inducements for presuming to publish will shield MISS MEREDITH from every shaft of criticism/

The use of the third person in this preface is one under which Eliza Parsons shelters to provide a distancing effect, which identifies the author as yet another character, distinct from Eliza Parsons the private woman, who thus still retains a genteel aura left over from her affluent years of modest retirement.



This type of preface, begging for the indulgence of the reader, and pleading for the work to be read sympathetically in case it is judged imperfect, is not uncommon. James Raven, in *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (Clarendon, 1992), notes that many such works are prefaced like this, often claiming to be the first attempt of a young lady, while actually being neither of these things. Even, he says, The assured Mrs. Parsons' does likewise.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as this is her first novel, the well-educated and formerly affluent Mrs Parsons, unused until the death of her husband to having to make her living, cannot claim as yet to be assured. In her case, although it made sense to ask for leniency, it in no way precludes a genuine anxiety and fear of failure as her new career begins.

As a new writer, Eliza Parsons seems to be confused by her status and even rather embarrassed by it. Her construction of herself as a woman - a mother and seamstress - who wrote, rather than as a professional writer is complex. She gives a strong impression, in letters and dedications, that she finds writing distasteful. She seems not to consider herself a writer. She is humble, self-effacing, overwhelmed with gratitude for patronage and overcome with fear of boring the public. Naturally, she would rather not have had to write, since before her husband's death, she had been a wealthy woman, but on the other hand, there is a sense in which her aversion to her enforced career pays lip service to feminine self-deprecation but does not always ring true - her relish for her role as a storyteller is at times clearly present. What is more, this state of affairs is particularly difficult to untangle, due to her skill in constructing characters, be they in her fiction, or versions of herself.

The next work with a preface is *Ellen and Julia*, (1793) which has a short inscription as follows:

The following Work I submit to the Judgment of the Public with much greater diffidence and anxiety than when I first threw myself on its candour and indulgence; because the many late excellent productions of other female writers painfully convince me of my own inability and deficiencies, and at the same time lays me open to the imputation of presumption and undue vanity: But as the soil sometimes serves to give additional brilliance to the diamond, I may at least be pardoned for an attempt to follow, though I cannot overtake, those celebrated Ladies to whom the public are so much obliged for their amusement. To the shafts of criticism I bow with respect, neither deprecating their severity nor imploring their indulgence, since either would equally offend their impartiality and judgment.<sup>7</sup>

In part, this is a reiteration of the preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* with its mention of the audacity of trying to follow Burney, Smith, Bennett, Reeve and others. Now, however, there is a slightly different tone. In the earlier preface, the writers mentioned were ‘excellent female novelists’ and Eliza Parsons only ‘the Author of Miss Meredith\*’; now, these novelists are ‘other female writers’, among whom, despite her protestations of ‘inability and deficiencies’ she evidently counts herself. Here she is transformed from mother of a large family to professional writer in a preface aimed at her public. This means that she too is one of the ‘celebrated Ladies’ delivering ‘excellent productions’, since, although she asserts that she is merely following these writers, she only states that she cannot overtake them; she does claim that she cannot equal them, which, in spite of its assumed modesty, is the true message of this preface.

The allusion to severity of criticism is one which has been mentioned before in Chapter 3 on dedications. In her dedication of *The Errors of Education* in 1791, Eliza

Parsons mentioned the 'generosity and candour she had recently experienced, and in that chapter, I suggest that the generosity may have been that of the public but that the candour was unlikely to be, since the public do not express their opinion openly to the writer. When Eliza Parsons used the term 'candour', it meant a 'freedom from malice, favourable disposition, kindness', rather than today's meaning of frankness. Candour, I propose, was more likely to be that of the critics, who had responded guardedly to her first production by saying that if they had felt inclined to be critical, the author had taken the sting from criticism because of her respectable subscribers and her unfortunate circumstances, rather than due to her skill as a fiction writer. In the preface to *Ellen and Julia* then, when Eliza Parsons writes of the candour and indulgence of the public upon which she had thrown herself on publishing her first work, I am assuming that she is including in that term both readers and reviewers. This view is strengthened by the final statement she makes in the preface; that she bows with respect to 'the shafts of criticism' and without objecting to their severity or begging indulgence, 'since either would equally offend their impartiality and judgment'. This is a clear reference to journal reviewers, whose opinion was out of her control, and thus she has gracefully to accept the verdict at which they will arrive in any case. This preface then ends on a professional note. Although still claiming want of skill, seemingly an odd approach for someone desperate to convince readers of a good reason to choose her books, Eliza Parsons has at least altered her representation of her situation from a poor widow to a poor writer. What is more, encoded within the preface is the message that she is among the celebrated female writers 'to whom the public are so much obliged for their amusement'.

Reviewers seem content to take her at her own valuation. Indeed, she herself explicitly reiterates the opinion expressed by her first reviewers in the preface to one of her novels, in an excellent example of her skill in manipulating her readership into believing her self-representation. Under the title 'A Card', she prefaces her 1796 novel *The Mysterious Warning* with a text which at first appears to be an apology for her lack of talent and spirit.

The author of the following work feels herself under the necessity of apologising to her numerous Friends, for the too frequent demands she makes on their indulgence. Conscious of her deficiency in talents, inclination has no share in her feeble attempts to entertain the Public: she obtrudes neither from vanity or confidence.

This is debatable. 'The author of the following work' has a declaratory ring to it. Eliza Parsons declares that she must make apologies to numerous friends, thus informing her readers that she has numerous friends to whom to apologise, and it is they, rather than servant-maids, for example, who read her work. The frequent demands she says she has made on the indulgence of her friends indicates that she is a prolific writer. She says it was not inclination that led her to attempt to entertain the public, who, we must suppose from this, are entertained. The final phrase in the above quotation anticipates criticism and is an attempt to deflect it. She obtrudes, she claims, neither from vanity or confidence, although the second quality is almost definitely present, and possibly the first, since she feels the need to address her public, and, what is more, does so above the dedication in block letters, 'To Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales'. This is evidently not intended to suggest the novel is the work of some humble unknown writer who puts pen to paper with no expectation of success. On the page following this preface, she indulges in a lengthy personal dedication to the Princess, already discussed in Chapter 3, pages 73-75, in which she thanks her for

permission to dedicate the book. Though expressed with an air of humility, the acknowledgement must have been made with pride that this favour had been granted. Her former status as an important agent in society is thus emphasised by the preface and dedication, taken together, and her unassuming demeanour now acutely suspect.

The contradictions continue, and perhaps are indicative of the contradictions inherent in Eliza Parsons' financial and publishing situation, with which she is attempting to negotiate. Although the preface begins with an apology, again in the third person, later it is used as a platform to explain Eliza Parsons' motives, and to deliver excuses for poor reviews. She professes to be insignificant, and hopes this will shield her from criticism and ridicule. She claims no pretensions to wit, and admits that some of her works

have been thought to dwell too much on scenes of horror, and melancholy events; she cannot refute the charge. Perhaps her writings take their colouring from her mind; when the heart is not at ease, it is incapable of communicating cheerful ideas to the descriptive pen; therefore she wisely declines an attempt she is unequal to, of *diverting* her Readers.<sup>10</sup>

Eliza Parsons' writing now becomes highly charged and the reader is given an idea of her real motive in writing this preface:

Dulness is a defect of the head, and is pardonable. - Wit and spirited talents, are too often apt to run riot; their redundancy may sometimes draw vicious characters, and describe profligacy of manners in such seducing glowing colours, as to affect the imagination, to catch the attention of young people, into whose hands works of this kind frequently fall, and may have the dangerous tendency to lessen the horror they ought to feel at vice, and the detestation such characters should inspire.<sup>11</sup>

The preface is no longer concerned with representing Eliza Parsons, but is an attack on other writers, and, possibly, reviewers. The wit and spirit she has just apologised

for lacking is now targeted as the evil means of corrupting young girls' minds. By this means she sets herself apart from other novelists who are castigated by reviewers for their depraved and immoral writings, which might encourage young girls to ignore parental dicta and seek adventure. How relieved must her readers be to know, she seems to suggest, that they have purchased bought a novel with which their girls' morals will be safe.<sup>1</sup> However, her demeanour here is interesting. For a supposed private individual, she has strong ideas on what should constitute a novel, and addresses her public with precisely that confidence she has just disclaimed. Nonetheless, she has not forgotten the persona behind which she shelters, and which is foregrounded in the final paragraph of the preface.

The author of this work is a *Parent*; as such, she has been strictly observant that her writings should never offend against delicacy or common sense. - She has never dictated one page, or suggested one idea inimical to the precepts of virtue, or that suffuse the cheek of innocence with a blush.lj

She makes sure that her readership and reviewers are reminded of her supposed *raison d'être* in her decision to 'turn author'. She is a widowed mother and of a different caste from the hacks who peddle their salacious prose under the same banner - the novel - as her own. The preface, which began as an act of contrition, has now become a deposition explaining Eliza Parsons' *modus operandi*, a manifesto. The line between public and private domain is expertly steered, and the reader is duped into accepting whichever of her roles she wishes to accent. The fact that this preface is followed by a dedication (discussed in Chapter 3) to the Princess of Wales makes it clear that this time Eliza Parsons feels it of paramount importance that her readers conceive of her primarily as well-connected, rather than as a skilful writer. It is likely that the main reason for this is that the prefaced text is a Gothic novel. The genre at

the time, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, had become so popular that the marketplace was flooded with what the reviewers considered ill-written and scurrilously plotted examples, all of which seem to have been voraciously seized by young, and other, readers.<sup>14</sup> One way to interpret this is to suggest that for Eliza Parsons, trying her hand at the latest fashion in literature because it would sell, the main issue of importance was for her to distance herself from the worst excesses of the form so as to reassure her former acquaintances, on whose help she may have in the future to call, that she was still a decent, moral person. The support of the Princess of Wales, in the shape of permission to dedicate the novel, must have been the very best outcome. She could write a moral tale of little interest to the buying public, and remain respected, or she could join the swelling ranks of those who wrote Gothic fiction and take with her the patronage of one of the highest ladies in the land to ensure both fashionable interest and respectability. In this instance, she was able to essay the latter, and it may have been partly this circumstance which helped Eliza Parsons attain her highest popularity around 1796.

There is, however, an alternative construction to be put on the dedication to the Princess, coupled with the appeal to parents in the preface. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Princess of Wales had parted from her husband and had been forced to relinquish to him her daughter. Although perhaps no longer a symbol of respectability, she did attract public sympathy, and Eliza Parsons seems to be adding her name to the list of Caroline's supporters. In the preface, however, she is addressing the parents of young readers, and there seem to be three strands to her message. Firstly, she is vowing not to write a word which will corrupt young minds - a necessary precaution for a would-be respected writer to make when prefacing a Gothic novel which she hopes will sell

well without alienating former readers. Secondly, she seems to be reassuring these parents that, despite her championship of the rejected wife of the heir to the throne, she has at heart a concern for the morality of the young, her own children among them. Thirdly, the statement that she, too, is a parent appears to be a message to the Princess, hidden in the public preface, indicating that she sympathises with Caroline on the removal from her care of her daughter Charlotte.

The last preface to an Eliza Parsons text appeared in 1798 with the publication of *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families*. As discussed in Chapter 1, this work was presented as a novel merely edited by her, written by an unknown who had asked her to shape it into a publishable form. There are two prefaces; a short one entitled 'By the Compiler' and a longer one 'By the Editor'. The former reads as follows:

As it seems to be the rage of the present novel-writers to endeavour at making impossibilities seem probable, I have collected some mysterious transactions, in two well-known families, that may serve to convince them there is no need to resort to *fiction* for entertainment, and that what may seem *improbable* is yet *possible*.

This odd statement, supposedly from the pen of the anonymous author of the manuscript sent to Eliza Parsons, appears to dwell once more on the shortcomings of other writers, whose plots are dismissed as unlikely and unnecessary in the face of true stories which are as mysterious as fiction whilst remaining conceivable. Many critics writing in the journals of the time complained of the lack of probability of some plots and generally commended Eliza Parsons for her invention of more credible events. <sup>16</sup> Here the unknown writer seems to ally herself with these critics and the sentiment is one of so much pertinence to Eliza Parsons that the reviewers' presumption of her own authorship is unsurprising.<sup>17</sup>



The preface by the editor tells that the manuscript was sent from an ‘unknown friend’ through an ‘eminent bookseller in New Bond-street.’ She professes to be honoured that the anonymous sender trusted her with the task of enlarging the originally-titled ‘Family Anecdotes; or Sketches for a Novel’ into a longer work, and preparing it for publication. The esteem with which Eliza Parsons states she has been honoured is reiterated in many phrases in the preface. She was paid ‘the compliment’ of enlarging the text, alongside a ‘handsome’ anonymous letter; the Bond Street bookseller was ‘eminent’; she set to work ‘with much diffidence’; she awaits the response of the public with more apprehension than she feels when publishing her own work, and hopes to ‘justify the confidence I have been honoured with’. All these elements emphasise that to be selected from all other writers to edit a novel is a compliment indeed. As has been mentioned in Chapter 1, her reviewers did not believe the tale of an anonymous writer and assumed the novel to be the work of Eliza Parsons herself. If they were correct, not only do these two prefaces bolster the statement on the title page; ‘Prepared for the Press by Mrs. Parsons’ but once more allow her to stress precisely the portion of her personality to which she wants to give prominence: this time, of a celebrated professional author chosen for, and available for more, editing work. This is not simply wishful thinking on the author’s part. As Matthew Gregory Lewis mentions in a letter to his mother in 1804, discussed in Chapter 2, Eliza Parsons had given Mrs Lewis the advice she had sought on writing and publishing a romance, and he makes it clear that his mother had chosen her because of her knowledge of publishing.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this charade of pretending editorship of *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* was enacted to generate more business as advisor and editor to prospective writers, as an attempt to advance into another branch of her profession, one more lucrative than her current work, given her late and lowly

pay from her palace position, as discussed in Chapter 2, and the constant necessity of selling her copyright to her publisher. However, this strategy was unsuccessful and this was the last time Eliza Parsons published a novel as editor, and also the last time she wrote a preface for her work. Interestingly, however, her next work, *The Valley of St. Gothard*, published in 1799, was, as discussed in Chapter 3, dedicated to Matthew Gregory Lewis, applauding his talent and personal merit, thus perhaps this is an apology for helping his mother, since he was horrified at her attempts to publish.<sup>19</sup>

We cannot know for certain why Eliza Parsons ceased to preface her work after 1798, but perhaps it was connected to the disbelief expressed by the reviewers of *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* that she was not merely the editor, but the author of the work. She may have felt rather foolish that her preface had been dissected so minutely, and decided not to allow her words to be analysed so brutally again. Another reason might be that her earlier prefaces were constructed so as to depict a writer unsure of herself and begging the reader's indulgence. By 1798, she had been in the publishing business long enough to make such a claim sound hollow and instead prefaced *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* in a manner which portrayed her as a complete professional. Since this was not a successful strategy and critics sneered, perhaps she decided not to preface her novels and concentrated instead on their message, a proposition to be examined in the last three chapters of this thesis.

Interestingly, although we discover a little about her personal circumstances in the prefaces, she does not follow her model, Charlotte Smith, who uses her prefaces to detail her woes, and indeed, began prefacing her work later than Eliza Parsons. Mary Anne Schofield notes that:

it is her prefaces, the first appearing in the 1794 *Banished Man*, which provide Smith with the raw material she weaves into the fabric of her fictions. Thus it is that she writes about the inequities of lawyers, the falseness of the government, the hunger of her children.<sup>21</sup>

Instead, Eliza Parsons saves the majority of her personal details for the smaller and specific audience of her benefactors, in her requests for financial aid, the subject of my next chapter.

- 1 Preface to *Ellen and Julia* (1793).
- 2 Review of *The History of Miss Meredith* in *The Critical Review*, Vol. 70, 190, p. 219.
- J Preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790).
- 4 Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England 1790-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 41.
- 5 Preface to *Miss Meredith* (1790).
- 6 James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (London: Clarendon, 1992), p. 67.
- 7 Preface to *Ellen and Julia*, (1793).
- 8 Obsolete definition from Oxford English Dictionary.
- 9 Preface to *the Mysterious Warning*, (1968), p. xvii.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 What the young women themselves thought about this is another question entirely. How Eliza Parsons fulfils this promise whilst still delivering a stirring adventure is dealt with in Chapter 7 on her Gothic works.
- B Preface to *The Mysterious Warning* (1796).
- 14 For example, see the review of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) in *The Critical Review* Vol. 19, January 1765, p. 50, which stated '[t]he publication of any work, at this time, in England composed of such rotten materials, is a phenomenon we cannot account for'. *The Annual Review* Vol. 5, 1806, p. 542, was clearly offended by Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) and delivered their verdict thus: 'We are sorry to remark, that "The Monk" seems to have been made the model, as well as the style, of the story. There is a voluptuousness of language and allusion, pervading these volumes, which we should have hoped, that the delicacy of the pen would have refused to trace; and there is an exhibition of wantonness of harlotry, which we should have hoped, that the delicacy of a female mind, would have been shocked to imagine'. Even Ann Radcliffe, whose reviews were generally favourable, received a rebuke from *The European Magazine and London Review* Vol 31, January 1797, p. 35, for her characterisation of Schedoni in *The Italian* (1796). The reviewer commented: '[t]he wildness allowed to romance admits of much licence; but such a character as the monk, even in a romance, humanity revolts at the idea of.
- 15 Preface to *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families*, (1798.)
- 16 An example is William Enfield who complimented her on her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), thus: 'A natural and interesting tale is related in neat and unaffected language; and the moral which it inculcates, is the reverse of those romantic notions, which most novels have a tendency to inspire'. Reviews criticising other texts for lack of probability include *The Critical Review* Vol. 6, 1792, pp. 268-272 in their review of Mary Robinson's *Vincenza*, and their review in Vol. 10, April 1794, of Regina Maria Roche's *The Maid of the Hamlet*. *The British Critic*, in Vol. 42, 1813, pp. 412-414, consider Maria Edgeworth's *Tales of Fashionable Life* silly and trifling, and *The Monthly Mirror*, in Vol. 20, 1805, pp. 110-111, were scathing about Alethea Brereton Lewis' *The Nuns of the Desert; or The Woodland Witches*.
- 17 There were, of course, many other reasons for their disbelief in her as merely editor, which reasons are discussed in Chapter 1.
- 18 According to Montague Summers in *The Gothic Quest*, (1968), pp. 265-266.
- 19 Montague Summers asserts that Lewis begged his mother 'not to publish her romance, whatever its merits. He felt that it would be everywhere advertised as by "the author of *The Monk*," and "then would follow paragraph after paragraph with all our family affairs ripped up"'. Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, p. 266.
- 20 For example, see the reviews of the novel in *The Critical Review*, ns Vol. 23, July 1798, p. 353, and *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 27, June 1798, pp. 644-645, discussed in Chapter 1.
- 21 Mary Anne Schofield, "'The Witchery of Fiction": Charlotte Smith, Novelist' in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers* (ed.) Dale Spender, (London: Teachers' College Press, 1992), p. 180.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**An Examination of Eliza Parsons' Requests for Money**

*'I know not how far I may presume from my Unhappy Situation to claim any  
assistance..']*

A final body of writing outside literary genres to be considered is Eliza Parsons' applications for financial aid, in which she represents herself in a variety of victimised roles: as widow, mother, hapless creditor, invalid and prisoner. These requests were made between 1792 and 1803 to the trustees of the newly-founded Royal Literary Fund, and on one occasion in 1793 to the Member of Parliament for Norwich, William Windham.<sup>2</sup>

From these requests we can deduce a great deal of information about Eliza Parsons' circumstances and the strategies she adopted to deal with them. The emphasis on her professional standing visible in her prefaces and dedications is reduced in her requests for charity and in its place her status as a respectable woman with the anxiety of reduced means is foregrounded. If the data from these letters is carefully analysed, an appreciable amount of autobiography is revealed, and, indeed, has formed the basis of Chapter 2 of this thesis, on Eliza Parsons' biography. Nonetheless, there is still a substantial element of propaganda in these requests, delivered by a woman who is well used to influencing her readers to her advantage. Thus, there will be little mention made of kind friends in the nobility, who might be expected by proposed benefactors to be in a better position to lend financial aid than themselves. The only written evidence of aristocratic connections is in the subscription list of *The History of Miss Meredith* and dedications. The effect of reviewing one set of information from the latter sources and comparing it to data from the letters is of two different women.

demonstrating the way that Eliza Parsons skilfully negotiated these two very different contexts.

In the first letter Eliza Parsons writes to the Royal Literary fund, dated December 17<sup>th</sup> 1792, she details her financial position and its causes. She tells of the death three years previously of her husband which had left her with eight children to provide for. Having ‘no recourses but my needle and pen’, as she points out, she decided to follow fashion and write novels. She records that she wrote *The History of Miss Meredith* and *The Errors of Education* and translated a Moliere play before the fall which kept her bedridden for months and unable to work, resulting in her need to ask for financial help. These are the bare facts but the extra detail supplied by Eliza Parsons invests her story with all the Gothic tragedy of her fiction writing, and has the same aim, that of achieving the maximum effect on her readers. She describes the late James Parsons as ‘a Worthy and respectable Husband’ whose death had left her and the children in ‘deplorable circumstances’. Interestingly, this, although to be followed by a dramatic depiction of her sufferings, is hardly overstatement, and in fact indicates a reticence about her husband’s part in his own and her misfortune. Eliza Parsons loyally omits to mention his lack of acumen which had resulted in disaster for his family. She contents herself with a statement that she was ‘born and accustomed to affluence’ - a phrase which is first used in the preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* and is repeated by critics and finally the writer of her obituary in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, thus:

February 5

At Laytonstone, Mrs Parsons, widow, well known by her literary works. She was reduced from a state of affluence to the hard necessity of writing to provide for a numerous family. She published in 1790, “The History of Miss Meredith”, 2 vols 12mo, and wrote also “The Errors of Innocence”; “Ellen and Julia”; “Lucy”; “The Voluntary Exile”; and “The Girl of The

Mountains”; all novels, all of which are respectable performances: and “The Intrigues of a Morning”, a farced

Although her statement that she was born wealthy and became poorer is hardly a major declaration, it does prove her capable of influencing opinion regarding her character since, although seemingly a trivial phrase, it is repeated by these journalists in the same words. Her self-made publicity had succeeded in creating a pervasive estimation of her respectability, a vital tool in her campaign for readers. As I have pointed out in Chapter 3, her dedications to the Princess of Wales and to Mathew Gregory Lewis do not suggest a high level of respectability; neither do her quitting her home under cover of darkness, nor her house arrest and court appearance for debt, to be discussed below, give a sense of decent self-effacement, but her propaganda appears to have been effective.

The mention of her decision to write novels for money delivers an opportunity to advertise them. She states that although they may be deficient in ‘Wit and Spirit,’ they are ‘at least moral and tend to amend the heart.’ This is a vital consideration for a woman novelist attempting to interest benefactors in her favour. To point out her respectable position within the ambiguous morality of the world of novel-writing is a shrewd move, and may even win her readers among the trustees of the Fund. She tells how her sole aim was to keep herself in business and find employment for some of the children, but this was denied her because of her accident.

The date of the fall is given as January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1792. This seems to have been the worst of all the torments she had suffered, worse than the loss of wealth and of her husband,

and the date appears to be given as though it is one she will never forget, the source of all her later woes. She puts the case in a striking manner:

On the 2 of last January by a dreadful fall I had the misfortune to break my left leg, a compound Fracture of the worst kind which confined me near six months to my Bed without the possibility of getting a shilling expending the little I had saved which was Insufficient for my Support, and obliged unavoidably to Contract Debts which now threaten me with Impending Evil within a few days. Still confined to my Room my leg on a pillow, splinters of Bones continually working thro' which keep me in extreme Torture, I have nevertheless been obliged to struggle with pain and try to write.<sup>6</sup>

Eliza Parsons goes on to say that, since she cannot ask for subscriptions in person due to her injury, she fears that she will make very little money from her latest novel. What is more, she is afraid of imprisonment, 'Miserable Cripple that I am', if she cannot raise £20 by Christmas. This account is delivered in agonizing detail which is calculated to extract the most sympathy possible from her potential benefactor.

There is, of course, another reason for emphasising the catastrophic effect this accident has had on her work. She is careful to stress that, despite her pain and the awkward recovery posture she is forced to assume, she had tried to write. Her diligent adherence to the work ethic which she has carried on in her husband's stead is implied strongly. She ensures that her potential benefactors understand that she has applied to them not in the first instance but as a last resort in the face of impossible odds and a real risk of destitution. She has waited just under a year to make her petition for assistance, and indeed, in that time, she had written and published more works. However, as stated in Chapters 2 and 3, the failure of her play may well have dented any optimism she had in attaining financial and critical success as a writer. She is careful, nonetheless, to steer her narrative away from the topic of unwelcome reviews



and even when focussing on her needy circumstance, cannot resist mentioning that the play was performed at Covent Garden, whilst keeping silent on reviewers' reactions. Her status as a writer is vital to her continued role as bread-winner. She points out that another novel is in the press, an epistolary work, *Woman As She Should Be*, to be published in 1793. She thus retains her identity as a writer, (and incidentally, a writer of letters): an important detail, since the Royal Literary Fund was set up specifically to help writers and despite her emphasis on her widowed and physically impaired state, it was also vital to present her credentials as a fit recipient of aid without overemphasising her capacity to earn a living. Steering this course between her roles as professional author and disabled needy widow is achieved with dexterity and accomplishes her aim: in January of 1793, the Trustees authorise a donation of ten guineas, 'at the rate of one or two guineas a week' to be dispensed by Dr Thomas Dale M.D. to whom all her requests to the Fund are directed.

The style of writing used in these requests is noteworthy. As if to stress at one and the same time that she is a fiction writer and that she is in dire straits, Eliza Parsons uses a style which evokes an atmosphere of the Gothic novel, heavy with disaster and emphatic capitals. As mentioned above, she does not spare her reader vivid details of her injuries and follows on in the same dramatic fashion.

I have finished Another Novel now in the Press, but incapable of soliciting Subscriptions in Person, I fear my advantages will be very small and at this time I am in the most alarming Situation from the certainty of being dragged to a prison Miserable Cripple as I am if I do not raise near Twenty Pounds by Christmas besides little wants that will oppress me next March.<sup>7</sup>

She continues that after ‘several sleepless nights and wretched days’, she had decided to apply to the Fund, feeling that ‘such Hearts could not be Insensible to the Distress of the Widow and the Fatherless’. The tone of this entreaty is an interweaving of verity and invention, at one and the same time sincere and dramatic. It is clear that Eliza Parsons is suffering from great anxiety: she is incapacitated, in pain and faced with debtor’s prison. While this is undoubtedly a difficult situation, it is noticeable that she cannot help describing it in the same tone used by writers of Gothic novels<sup>&</sup> for the crises faced by their characters.<sup>9</sup> Here, she chooses loaded vocabulary such as ‘miserable cripple’, ‘hearts’ which cannot be insensible to ‘distress’ and refers to herself and her children as ‘widow and fatherless’. It is interesting to note here that her instincts as a novelist, and perhaps reader, seem to have influenced her heartfelt requests for aid, at the same time as her own circumstances are informing her work.

Before signing off with due humility, she adds ‘If I judge wrong and do not come under the description of merit in distress Deign Sir to pardon this liberty as painful to my own feelings as presumptuous to you- ’. This sentence, which ends with a long dash rather than a full stop, is the key to the role she undertakes when requesting financial help. The dash attached to the word ‘you’ gives the impression of some strong emotion which has overcome the writer and does not permit her to notice the incorrect punctuation. Presumably, the reader is intended to conceive that the emotion is connected to the painful feelings just alluded to. The term ‘merit in distress’ leaves the reader with the impression of an *aegis* under which Eliza Parsons shelters. It is a fitting maxim, since she appears to have it in mind whenever she writes for help. She is always careful to give every evidence of worthiness, of respectability and of shock at finding herself in sordid circumstances which are none of her making.

The day after sending this letter, she writes another to Dr Dale in thanks for the letter she has received.<sup>10</sup> He had evidently replied on the same day that she had written her request, and she expresses deep gratitude for his letter and the fact that he has responded so quickly. She says that she feels the ‘delicacy’ of his reply to have been ‘dictated by Humanity and Politeness’.<sup>11</sup> Once more she iterates her case, urging him to believe ‘nothing but a painful necessity’ could have spurred her to a course of action ‘so repugnant’ to her feelings. She continues, in the same sentence:

unhappy Cripple as I am was I the only sufferer I could bear my misfortunes without a single Complaint but I have claims upon me Sir that supercede all other considerations, and when I reflect that upon my life depends the preservation of my children from the worst of Evils and that, without some relief or unexpected assistance I must sink under the Evils which Oppress me, I am Compelled to address the feeling and Benevolent Hearts in our behalf- 12

Here she seems oblivious to the niceties of punctuation or syntax, overflowing with the desire to ensure her case is well made. It is notable, however, that she places capital letters in a meaningful fashion, rather than simply capitalising all nouns. She wants to emphasise her role as disabled petitioner, thus capitalises ‘cripple’. When pointing out that she could have coped without complaint had it not been for her children, she capitalises ‘complaint’, seeming to stress the word’s links with ‘cripple’ and thus medicalise it. ‘Evils’ is mentioned and capitalised twice, indicating her status as helpless victim of malevolent forces which ‘Oppress’ her. Perhaps most noteworthy of all is the inconsistent capitalisation of ‘feeling and Benevolent Hearts’, which betrays her hope: it is taken for granted that the Trustees’ hearts are ‘feeling’ but so much more vital that this results in their generosity.

Although she has so often disclaimed any pretensions to writerly aims, as I noted in my discussion in Chapter 4 of her prefaces to *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), and *Ellen and Julia* (1793), for example, an indication of Eliza Parsons' ambition and aspirations is given in one sentence.

Alas! I once flattered myself I might become a Subscriber rather than a Solicitress to your Humane Institution, but the unhappy Accident which has confined me near a Twelvemonth to my room has overturned all my hopes and expectations.<sup>13</sup>

Despite her declared self-flattery, it is easy to suppose that she had truly dreamed of such popular success in her career that she would be able to bestow alms on others not so fortunate, or even not so talented, as herself. As well as 'hopes', she had also had 'expectations': an assumption of the mastery of her trade and subsequent prosperity. Under cover of shamefacedly revealing her high aims, she takes the opportunity to remind her prospective benefactors that she is in need, not because her books are not commercially successful, but because of an accident which has left her close to destitution after a year of struggling without help.

Evidently, Dr. Dale's reply had implied that he would speak for her to the Trustees, as she seems relieved at his answer. He had presumably also asked for referees, as she says,

Mr & Mrs Lane of Leadenhall Street have long known me, have purchased my works and know the Efforts I have made to support a Large Family, I am sure they will have the kindness to do me justice and speak in my behalf if applied to.<sup>14</sup>

The wording of this sentence is significant. Giving her publisher's name as a referee seems a rational strategy, but I argue that she has a twofold aim in doing so. She not only provides the name of a well-known publisher who can speak for her respectability and her fitness as a writer to apply to a literary fund, but also alerts Mr Lane to the fact that he is not paying her fairly. What is more, she is publicising this by informing the fund's trustees of the fact. They will presumably contact, and consequently embarrass, Mr Lane to check her suitability for their charity. Thus subtly does she make her point to the publisher: she has to sell her copyright for her works to Lane before receiving her dues since her debts had resulted in the need for money, thus she could not wait for revenue from sales. When she says that she is sure the Lanes will be kind enough to vouch up for her, this phrasing is mere formality, but what is much more significant is the statement that to act as referees would only be to do her justice. This implies an injustice to be rectified.

Here Eliza Parsons exemplifies merit in distress. She refrains from blaming anyone or anything for her sufferings and represents herself merely as a casualty of circumstances. The trustees are left, if they wish, to apportion culpability where they will, perhaps to her late husband, Mr Lane or reviewers, and strategy is successful: the writer has located a source of financial aid which will help her through the worst of times for eleven years.

The Royal Literary Fund's archives hold several further postscripts to Eliza Parsons' initial request for help: on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1793, the anniversary of her fall, she cannot wait any longer for the money she has been allotted and begs Dr. Dale to forgive her importunity in reminding him that in answer to his letter, she had suggested Mr and

Mrs Lane as referees. She obviously fears that they have not been ‘kind enough to do [her] justice’ and speak for her. She is unsure whether or not she has to write ‘any particular form of Application to the Society against Friday next’, evidently the day appointed for the vote on whether to make the donation, and begs Dr Dale to inform her what she should do.<sup>17</sup>

A document<sup>16</sup> in which the committee’s deliberations on Eliza Parsons’ first request for help are recorded is a draft directed to Dr Dale from Mr Brooke, evidently Treasurer for the fund, for ten guineas voted by the committee for her. The sum is split into four payments as follows:

		L. S. D.
Jan 6 1793 - Paid	Mrs Eliza Parsons - Two guineas	2” 2” 0
10 —	Do - on her request by letter sent by her Son -	3” 3” 0
21 -	Do Do-	2” 2” 0
28 -	Do Do-	3” 3” 0

Here we see that, although the first payment was dispatched to Eliza Parsons as voted by the committee, the rest of the instalments had been issued in response to her own requests and delivered to her by means of her son rather than waiting for the post. Although she employs a suitably humble and gratified tone to make her requests, she nonetheless remains dedicated to her aim and intends to make sure of the reward to which she has committed her labours. The short notes by which she makes these anxious requests are also retained in the fund's archive. The first, dated Thursday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, informs Dr Dale that her son, who is in the Navy, needs a few items for his forthcoming embarkation, and thus she wonders if the committee will advance her two or three guineas now instead of the following week as arranged. An interesting

postscript reads 'I can confide in my son that waits on you'.<sup>17</sup> Although this presumably means they can trust him to bring the money back, it reads more like an admission that not all the children have been told of their mother's straits. Perhaps she is attempting to instil confidence in the younger members of the family that they are in no danger of extreme poverty and that she is equal to supporting them in their father's stead.<sup>18</sup> The second note, shorter still, is dated January 21<sup>st</sup> and says that she has taken the liberty of sending her son for two guineas if Dr Dale 'will have the goodness to spare them.'<sup>19</sup> Now she appears to take as her due the donation once it has been agreed and has sent her son with the note and in expectation of his returning with the money.

Eliza Parsons requests the remainder of the donation in a letter dated January 28<sup>th</sup> and this document expresses her gratitude for the gift. She first says that, once again, she has taken the liberty of sending her son for the three guineas remaining from the money allotted to her. She is unsure how to address the committee and begs Dr Dale to do so for her to thank them for their generosity. Once more, she writes in the style of a character in a novel, using gracious terms bordering on the extravagant.

I entertain the warmest sense for favours so little deserved, yet so kindly and opportunely bestowed and if the Blessings of the widow and fatherless have Effects, those blessings are truly theirs.<sup>21</sup>

She thanks Dr Dale for the tactful and sensitive way he has conveyed these favours to her, as 'few, very few, know how to bestow benefits without doubly wounding the person obliged, and the painful feelings of sensibility keenly suffer the weights of obligations.' The use of the term 'sensibility' reminds her reader that, despite her current straits, she is delicately bred and suffers as much from the shame of having

obligations as from living in reduced circumstances. Once more, she emphasises her condition of 'merit in distress'. It also allows her, for a moment, to shed the weight of widowhood and even motherhood to assume a similar role to that of a fictional heroine, dependent upon the ability of men to release her from her bonds, while she trembles, fainting, in helpless fear. She is of course extremely able and, unlike her fictional role model, has done everything she can to extricate herself from her troubles, with novels in the press ready for publication and others in the process of construction. The problem is incapable of her solution, however, as the accident has removed her capacity to control her destiny, and here it suits her design to portray herself as entirely hapless and overcome with gratitude for male chivalry. After all, this is the last time she will be able to influence their opinion of her, and she may need to ask for money in the future, thus she wants them to remember her as grateful and pitiable, despite her former efforts to ensure them of her struggles to cope alone.<sup>22</sup>

It was prudent of Eliza Parsons to leave her benefactors with a positive impression of her, as there were indeed to be more requests for help. The next application she makes, however, is not to the Royal Literary Fund, but to a Member of Parliament, William Windham, on May 14, the year unspecified, but presumably 1793 given the publication details she mentions in the letter. Eliza Parsons writes to ask Windham for a subscription towards her latest novel, *Lucy*, and attempts to enlist his assistance by revealing details of her sufferings which, once again, are tailored to appeal to her correspondent. As a legislator, Windham will presumably be interested in the efforts his petitioner has made to remain respectable, educate her children properly, and avoid as far as possible being a drain on the resources of the district by paying bills



and keeping in employment. Therefore, she slants her discourse to focus on such details.

She begins by expressing her horror at having to address herself to him. At once, we see that she is taking the tone of a social acquaintance who begs pardon for approaching via a mutual friend. She assures him her sufferings are 'properly authenticated' and she is sure that a gentleman of his humanity will not turn away from 'a widowed mother whose labours are the sole support of her numerous family'. These niceties over, she embarks on her tale which takes on the aspect of a fictional biography, so succinctly does she recount the salient data.

Born and accustomed to affluence, a cruel reverse of fortune chiefly originating from the American War and its subsequent effects, reduced my husband from the happiest prospects to extreme difficulties - with the remnants of a handsome property, he purchased a place, but his misfortunes fell heavy upon his spirits, threw him into a lingering decay which terminated in death about 4 years ago, leaving me with eight children entirely unprovided for - excess of misery I believe preserved my life, for the existence of my family depended upon me.<sup>24</sup>

Once more, unruly syntax and punctuation serve to emphasise her distraught condition and she continues in like vein for some time, separating phrases by dashes and spilling her woes in a flood onto the page.

She makes an important point about her circumstances; namely that a woman with her background does not have an extensive range of ways to earn a living. She explains the problem and its solution.

Few are the resources for a well-educated female, my needle & pen was all my dependence- conforming with the taste of the age rather than from inclination, I wrote a novel

This novel was, she continues, well received and thus she continued to produce others. As in her correspondence to The Royal Literary Fund trustees, she gives details of her novels, but here, for the first time, we are given an insight into the results of her labours. She tells how the proceeds of the *Errors of Education* allowed her to place her eldest daughter as a teacher in a school in Dorset Street, and provided her eldest son, then aged 13, for a career at sea in *The Alligator*, under a Captain Affleck. She had hoped, too, to support and educate the rest of the family by further publications but her fall had rendered her bedridden and left her in debt. She states that as soon as she could sit up, she began writing *Woman as She Should Be*, which, she proudly asserts, ‘experienced great approbation, & was dedicated by permission to her Royal Highness of Gloucester’. She tells how the revenue from this allowed her to place her second daughter with a ‘capital mantua-maker’ and put the second as an apprentice in a school. Thus does she proclaim herself a responsible mother and citizen, enabling her children to work and thus not be a burden on charity, establishing two daughters as educators of the next generation and putting another to respectable work. What is more, with the publication of *The Castle of Wolfenbach* she is able to set up her second son for the sea, at 13, with Admiral Macbride, so she is also displaying for Windham her duty to the nation by supplying it with naval recruits. She says she was also able to put the younger ones into school and reduce her debts to around £17.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, she also gives details here of a medical aid to which she had recourse when convalescent. The publication of *Woman as She Should Be* had also paid Mr. Hunter for his ‘great stick & cane’ to which she says she owes her life.

This seems to have been a splint and crutch devised by John Hunter, the pioneer of surgery.<sup>26</sup>

At this point in the letter, she explains her aim: ‘supplicating a few noble benevolent spirits for a subscription towards a work I have now in the press called ‘Lucy.’ She says Lane has already advertised it and it will ‘certainly’ be published within three weeks. The fact that it was not published until 1794 seems to suggest that the chosen ‘spirits’ were not as benevolent as she had hoped. She explains with what appears genuine rising panic that if she cannot find money soon, she will be faced with ‘a prison the horror of which will be the final destruction of myself & family’. She says that she has struggled for a long time to ‘preserve a decent appearance, knowing that in this world of prejudices the garb & supplication of poverty generally excite contempt or cold useless pity’, a statement which moves from calm good sense to suppressed rage. Clearly, Eliza Parsons has experienced these reactions and is now, as she says, moved by despair to request aid. She finishes her application with a dramatically-worded, if ungrammatical, apology and justification for having made the request by letter:

I would have waited on you in person, but cannot go out except in a carriage from splinters of bones which are continually working thro’ my leg makes me very lame and keeps me in constant pain-<sup>97</sup>

She cannot afford to travel in a carriage; thus had to make her request by letter. What is missing from this tale of woe is, understandably, any mention of her applications for aid from the Royal Literary Fund, which she had presumably regarded as counterproductive. She thus prudently focuses Windham’s attention firmly on her

poverty. It is not known whether or not he came to her aid, but the fact that the letter has been kept in his files might suggest that he was generous enough to respond.

After this petition to William Windham, she resumes her applications to the Royal Literary Fund with a letter written on July 7<sup>th</sup> 1796, and in this letter, more details of her life and circumstances are disclosed, recapping the salient points as it is three and a half years since her last request for aid from the fund, and adding extra information.<sup>90</sup> She retells the story of her <sup>#</sup>widowhood and responsibility for eight children, her fall and her writing career, during which, she says, she has published twenty five volumes, ‘under all the disadvantages of a disordered Body & Mind’. This time, however, she adds a further detail. For some years she has had a position in the palace: Sempstress in Ordinary to the Wardrobe, a place which should bring in £40 per year if it were paid regularly. This, however, seems not to be the case. Although that amount is insufficient to bring up such a large family,

The Civil List is now in the Seventh Quarter of arrears consequently all my support has been derived from my little abilities in Writing, with the additional hardship that I have been obliged by the nature of my employment to lay out a good deal of ready money to pay my just debts.<sup>2</sup>

Here Eliza Parsons divulges details of an awkward and embarrassing predicament. She and James had been found places at the Palace, he as a clerk, she as a seamstress, by the Marchioness of Salisbury, whose husband was the Lord Chamberlain. James had held the post until his death. Such a position was for them both an honour but one which had its drawbacks, since one could not simply leave such a position and indeed, Eliza Parsons, like her husband, held the post until she died. She had duties, which must have encroached on the time she had available for writing, but was not paid

promptly, and, from the extract above, it seems the King owed her wages for work undertaken a year and nine months previously. The information here gives us a clear picture of Eliza Parsons' difficulties. As a seamstress to the royal wardrobe, it would not be seemly for her to do work which might earn her money but would be beneath her position at the Palace. She is not of a class to take in washing or hire her needle-working skills out elsewhere. She is bound by her status which brings little monetary relief, and now, as she makes clear in the next part of the letter, her respectability is in danger, too. She tells how 'to avoid complications I cannot comply with, and Insults I do not deserve', she has had to leave the house at 22 Leicester Square in which she has lodged for a year and a half to Wandsworth, from where she now writes. This is evidently a shameful flight,

..but low minded people cannot be reasoned with & 'tis in vain to tell them I will pay, when I am paid - money is scarce & they will not wait. Unable to bear unmerited reproaches, and fearful of Impending Evil, I have been driven to the mortifying necessity of quitting my home and having a temporary residence here<sup>30</sup>

but, she continues, this kind of concealment is painful to a feeling mind and an oppressed spirit allows 'little scope to the power of fancy or fertility of imagination requisite in all works of fiction'. The dishonour she feels in her circumstances is evident here, and the point is well made that two of the roles with which she identifies herself are now at risk. Her most recent new role, that of a novelist, in which she was succeeding well, is threatened by her current difficulty in writing whilst suffering what appears to be depression. Worse, her most fundamental identity, that of a respectable, delicately-minded woman, is now endangered by financial debt and the methods she has begun to utilise to escape her creditors. The extent to which her status as a writer is undermined is made clear in the next section of the letter.

The Public have honored my writings with general approbation, infinitely more than I could hope for, but as necessity always obliges me to sell the copy rights, my advantages are trifling to what the Publisher gains.<sup>31</sup>

As I discuss in Chapter 2, many writers found themselves in a similar position of having to sell their copyrights to the publisher at a fixed fee,<sup>32</sup> but perhaps Eliza Parsons makes the statement diffidently, seeming unwilling to cause trouble or accuse William Lane and lose his good will, but with the purpose of informing the trustees of a literary fund, set up expressly to aid struggling writers, of one of the causes of their petitioners' penury.<sup>33</sup>

The final paragraph of the letter, its appeal essential for the success of the letter, is couched in terms similar to those found in the fiction written by Eliza Parsons. She states that Mr Carpenter of Bond Street, who has known her and her family for some years, has encouraged her to apply to the fund, which she describes here as 'the Generous & Benevolent Society who foster genius & assist Indigent Talents'. She continues that if she falls under this heading, they can write to her, but if not, she begs pardon for intruding on Dr Dale's time. The message receives tragic tones from the use of terminology recognisable in her fiction.

Should I be so fortunate to obtain your interest, and fall under the Considerations of those beneficent gentlemen, a line addressed to me at Point Pleasant Wandsworth Fields - Wandsworth Surrey will bring me joyfully to wait on you; if on the contrary I am still pursued by ill fortune, and am deemed too presuming on benevolence, Deign Sir to Pardon this liberty & let not my Intrusion operate to the disadvantage of others.<sup>34</sup>

It is noteworthy that Eliza Parsons writes with clarity when she mentions the outcome she desires: if she is to be considered for charity, she wants Dr Dale to write to her.

Then her tone alters and once more she utilises her skill in her role as a writer to gain help in her role as a mother. She becomes much more cryptic when discussing a potential failure to gain their help and lays the blame on an evil fate, actively in pursuit of her like a tyrant chasing one of the heroines of her fiction. Such terminology is calculated to stir the chivalrous hearts of her benefactors, and it is successful, since they vote for a sum of ten guineas to be donated to her. These trustees are proven protectors: they have helped her before, and perhaps this is why she declares that a line written to her will result in her instant appearance at their door, unlike the apology she sent to William Windham for not waiting upon him in person three years previously. Perhaps she has recovered her mobility since that time, or perhaps she is more concerned to exert herself in order to receive aid from the Literary Fund, since they have never let her down when she has asked for their assistance. At all events, Eliza Parsons always receives what she asked from the Royal Literary Fund, and she shows considerable skill in writing to request aid. In the rest of my thesis I would like to examine her literary works in order to investigate the manner in which this skill is transferred to the task of writing fiction, and to study the means by which Eliza Parsons markets her own experience, revealed in her dedications, prefaces and requests for money, in her literary works.

- 1 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 2 Letters to Dr Dale, 17th and 18th December 1792, 28th January 1793 and 7th July 1796, Royal Literary Fund Archives, and letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793.
- 3 See Appendix 1.
- 4 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 5 *The Gentleman's Magazine* Vol. 81, pt 1, 18! 1, p. 195.
- 6 Letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 She will publish such a novel, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) shortly after writing this letter, but it is noticeable that the tone of it is dissimilar to the works she has published so far, which are novels of contemporary wit and manners.
- 9 The aged Nina, in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806), Adriana Craciun (ed) (London: Broadview, 1997), p. 112, sounds similarly stricken when she sobs that 'death admits no remedy; it has deprived me of my only hope and comfort in this world - of my poor Hugo, my darling son'. When her daughter Matilda, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Michael Gamer (ed) (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), p. 80, tells Hippolita of her husband's plan to divorce her, Hippolita replies with a martyred fatalism: 'There is a destiny hangs over us; the hand of Providence is stretched out - Oh! could I but save thee from the wreck!... I will go and offer myself to this divorce - it boots not what becomes of me. I will withdraw into the neighbouring monastery, and waste the remainder of my life in prayers and tears for my child and - the prince!'
- 10 Letter to Dr Dale, 18th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 Letter to Dr Dale, 2nd January, 1793, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 16 Undated document, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 17 Letter to Dr Dale, 10th January 1793, Royal Literary Fund Archives.,
- 18 This short sentence throws light on the real anxiety of lone women who fear their lack of skill in any occupation which can earn them enough to provide for a family, or fear that they will be accepted in the workplace by men.
- 19 Note to Dr Dale, 21st January, 1793, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 20 Letter to Dr Dale, 28th January 1793, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 In doing so, she gives the impression of youth, of being herself one of the 'fatherless' mentioned in her letter. At this time she is almost fifty-four years of age but here no indication is given of matronly respectability.
- 23 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793. Windham was the recipient of many requests for aid from his constituents and these are archived at the British Library. No indication is given among these papers, however, as to whether or not he responded to them with offers of help, if at all.
- 24 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 See Chapter 2 for a further brief discussion of Hunter.
- 27 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793.
- 28 Letter to Dr Dale, 7th July 1796, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 *ibid.*
- 32 Turner, pp. 113-116.
- 3j Here, then, perhaps her list of roles is extended as she takes on the identity of informer against her antagonists; the King, her creditors and her publisher, for her own sake and that of other women writers in similar circumstances, particularly in the case of copyright sale.
- 4 Letter to Dr Dale, 7th July 1796, Royal Literary Fund Archives.



**CHAPTER 6**  
**An Analysis of Eliza Parsons' Novels of Contemporary Manners**

‘conforming with the taste of the age rather than from inclination..’<sup>1</sup>

Dorothy Blakey, in *The Minerva Press, 1790-1820*<sup>2</sup> considers that if Eliza Parsons is remembered only for the inclusion of two of her titles in *Northanger Abbey*, ‘she is hardly given her deserts’, opining that ‘Jane Austen chose two admirable specimens of terror fiction for Isabella Thorpe’s list; but Mrs. Parsons has more than romantic fervour to recommend her.’ She reminds her readers that contemporary reviewers had praised Eliza Parsons’ talents, and herself regards her as a ‘skilful narrator’ whose narrative incidents are plausible. She goes on:

She flavours the most fantastic sensationalism with frequent dashes of actuality, and her occasional novels of contemporary life show even more convincingly her observation and wit. There seems reason to suspect that Mrs. Parsons wrote ‘horrid’ books for profit, and expressed her real self in topical satire. For she was a widow, with children to feed.<sup>4</sup>

Blakey mentions some of the novels she considers as delineating ‘contemporary life’; *Woman as She Should Be* (1793), *Women as They Are* (1796), *Anecdotes of Two Well-known Families* (1798). To these can be added Eliza Parsons’ debut novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* of 1790\ As mentioned in Chapter 4 on prefaces, Eliza Parsons had begged the indulgence of her readers for presuming to write after Burney, Smith, Reeve and Bennett and this indicates that when she writes the type of fiction singled out by Blakey as novels of contemporary life, she considers herself to be following in a literary tradition. What is more, this genre allows her (particularly in her prestigiously-subscribed first novel) to display her knowledge of correct behaviour, speech and dress, an important status symbol in a disrupted life beset by

changes of fortune and loss of consequence in polite society. Throughout her career, she continues to return to the novel of contemporary life.

In this chapter, I intend to discuss some of those novels which conform to the specifications Blakey considers as belonging to the genre, but in addition to this I will include pertinent aspects of novels to be discussed in other chapters. That is to say that, where a novel, for example, a Gothic novel, discusses particular elements of contemporary importance, I will discuss them here, although their Gothic constituents will be discussed in the chapter devoted to that genre. There are, of course, many topics of contemporary significance to Eliza Parsons' first readers, but of them all, perhaps those of primary moment are the issues of education and parental control. These issues underpin every piece of writing Eliza Parsons publishes: thus, not only are they considered in detail towards the end of this chapter, but the motif is reiterated throughout this thesis.

Initially, however, I want to discuss chronologically some of those novels clearly intended to conform to the 'novel of manners' format initiated by Burney, and see Eliza Parsons staking her claim to a place in the literary tradition. Judy Simons, in her essay 'Fanny Burney: the Tactics of Subversion'<sup>6</sup>, describes Burney's technique.

Despite the apparently conservative tenor of her novels, they do address radical issues in their analysis of female power, and the mutinous subtext that can be detected is often at odds with their surface conventionality.<sup>7</sup>

Eliza Parsons had indicated in the preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* that Burney was one of her models, and the feature described above is easily recognisable in her work.<sup>8</sup> Simons says that, at first glance, Burney's work seems to 'amalgamate

features from other contemporary fictions in a way that appealed to public taste; certainly they show evidence of Burney's literary heritage'.<sup>9</sup> She points out that the epistolary form of Burney's *Evelina* (1778), and its theme of a young girl's experience is traceable back to Samuel Richardson. In Eliza Parsons' case, too, there are indications of her wish to be part of a literary heritage, as indicated by the above-mentioned preface. What is more, there is proof of her debt to Richardson in the plot of *The Mysterious Visit* (1802), to be discussed later in this chapter, when her young heroine recognises her guardian as possessing a similar character to that of *Pamela's* (1739) villain, Mr B.

Felicity Nussbaum, on the subject of women's journals states that: '[i]n writing to themselves, eighteenth-century women could create a private place in which to speak the unthought, unsaid and undervalued'.<sup>10</sup> Although Simons utilises this observation in respect of Frances Burney, it is characteristic of Eliza Parsons' work. Indeed, Nussbaum's comment could be expanded upon, since Eliza Parsons makes women's private thoughts thinkable in her public writings, and this can be seen as another variety of Nussbaum's women writing 'to themselves': that is, it is an example of women writing to each other. It is not too farfetched to suggest a tacit understanding between women writers and readers which reviewers do not detect, but in which boundaries are tested discreetly. It seems unlikely that Eliza Parsons has a clear literary or political agenda, given her insistence in prefaces and dedications that she has little literary skill, but this is belied by her forays into playwriting and mock editorship, and more poignantly, by her admission to the Royal Literary Fund that she had hoped to be a benefactor to its cause rather than a petitioner. Clearly, despite her protestations to the contrary, Eliza Parsons had ambitions to achieve literary fame.

This is of importance when considering the possibility of her active aim to air topics of interest to women readers, and in providing them with an outlet for fears and aspirations.

Although these novels are about the aristocracy, Eliza Parsons makes it clear that she despises gamblers and rakes. This is so natural that it may seem as though she is merely acting conventionally, but it allows her to criticise the upper orders for their lack of a work ethic. She seems to place emphasis on the inconstancy and rakishness of the aristocracy in order to be able to illustrate in what manner those of the middle, respectable ranks do not emulate them. Many contemporary critics of the Gothic peevishly noted with what regularity women characters fainted.<sup>11</sup> The women who faint in an Eliza Parsons novel are either under severe stress or, more usually, are noblewomen who have been overcome by fatigue, drink and smoke at a gambling den. Eliza Parsons' ordinary, sensible women do not faint. They trust in God and their own abilities to work their way through strife.<sup>12</sup> A fainting woman will usually reveal herself as passionate and high-spirited, and in the main, badly educated.<sup>13</sup> Education is a topic on which Eliza Parsons has strong views, as will be discussed later.

When requesting a subscription from William Windham MP on 14th May 1793 for her latest work, *Lucy*, Eliza Parsons explains her reasons for taking up writing, as 'conforming with the taste of the age'.<sup>14</sup> It was, then, from a recognition of the need to follow fashion, 'rather than from inclination', that she wrote her first work, *The History of Miss Meredith*, published in 1790. The novel tells the story of Harriet Meredith and her friend Emma Montague, whose attitudes and morals differ greatly, leading to a successful, happy marriage for Miss Meredith and disaster for Miss

Montague. Miss Meredith has been forced by her father to marry a man to whom she is not attracted. Miss Montague has fallen in love with a rake, with whom she eventually elopes, determined to reform him. She continues her letters to her friend Harriet, telling her she is stupid to allow her father to make her marry someone she does not love. Harriet replies that she must do her duty, since to disobey her father would kill him. A visit from the young Lord Bleville disturbs Harriet's peace of mind. They are mutually attracted, but she is determined to obey her father. Lord Bleville's mother and Harriet's aunt both notice that the two are in love and attempt to change Mr Meredith's mind over the proposed wedding, but he is adamant, since the father of Miss Meredith's betrothed is his neighbour and Mr. Meredith wishes for an alliance between the two families. Emma and her husband, now thoroughly dissipated, separate and she goes abroad, unwilling to be humbled by a return to her friends. She dies in a convent, aged 34, an example to all those tempted by the idea of marriage without parental consent. Harriet's new husband gradually becomes deeply involved with gambling, eventually dying of a fever brought on by worry over debts. Lord Bleville, after a suitable period of mourning, offers his hand to the widow and is accepted.

Eliza Parsons' heroines lack wit and spirit: that is to say, plenty of her female characters possess these qualities, and one receives the impression that Eliza Parsons enjoys putting words into their mouths, but she makes sure that they are pursued by retribution, unlike their sister characters who behave in a quiet and seemly fashion, and receive their due happy ending. Transgressive women, such as Emma, or Charlotte in *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), although punished by death, are allowed a moment of glory and often are given a vivacious personality. It is made clear that

wit is not ladylike, but nonetheless, Eliza Parsons lets the reader see the character's behaviour rather than merely describing the woman as witty. Emma in *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) is considered charming by the old gentlemen with whom she flirts. She is considered high spirited, a fault considered a key to her downfall, but perhaps the reader is intended to admire her for her outspokenness.

The moral elements of the plot of this novel are revisited many times by Eliza Parsons throughout her career, and the main points are of immense importance in understanding her ethical philosophy. Firstly, the heroine is obedient. Parents are sometimes wise and sometimes tyrannical in Eliza Parsons' novels. However, but the main female character always obeys parental wishes, and is generally well rewarded by fate for doing so, although a young woman will sometimes run away from an evil guardian, but, since that is to protect her chastity, it is evidently considered acceptable.

Secondly, the heroine is, as in this case, sometimes set against another young woman whose morals are not so rigid, and their future destiny usually reflects this difference, as the person with the flexible ethics will die young or be cast out from her social group. Eliza Parsons' intentions here are clear; she intends to instil in her young readership a strong sense of morality. The reason for this might be threefold. It may be, and probably is, the case that Eliza Parsons herself believes firmly that this type of behaviour should be adhered to, and, since she has been driven to writing novels, at least can ensure that she does not follow the norm of sensationalism. It may be that, in this first, impressively-subscribed novel, she wishes to assure her respectable or noble subscribers that she will not append their names to a work which is scurrilous. It may

be that she hopes to win approval from the parents of her young readers, so as to make sure that her next novel achieves good sales. Nonetheless, Eliza Parsons, although insistent on good behaviour from the younger generation, makes clear any fault on the part of a too-tyrannical or feckless parent. However, she does not usually allow a son, daughter or ward to rebel without disastrous consequences. In cases where the motive for tyranny is sexual, as in the case of the attempted seduction of a young woman by her guardian, in *The Mysterious Visit* (1802), to be discussed later in the chapter, or a niece by her supposed uncle, in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), discussed in Chapter 7, the heroine is permitted to escape. In the case of *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), we have permission to disagree with Mr Meredith's choice of husband for his daughter, because his motive was at fault. He wished for an alliance between neighbours with no thought for his daughter's happiness. The two female match-makers were aware of the young people's affection for one another; therefore the second marriage is a love match, and the daughter is, belatedly, rewarded for her obedience to her father's wishes.

However, this moral position is made more complex by Eliza Parsons' concept of fairness. That is to say, although she has ensured respectability for her heroine by seemingly risking her happiness in an ill-fated but parentally-sanctioned marriage, Eliza Parsons then redresses the balance in the heroine's favour. She allows her husband to die, at fault, so that the reader does not waste sympathy on him, and his widow will thus feel the minimum guilt at the thought of a second match. The marriage which her aunt and her second husband's mother wanted for them now takes place. This imbues the match with parental blessing, and also links the heroine with the man she and the reader wanted for her all along. Fatherly wishes have been

obeyed, to the ruin of a daughter's happiness. Whilst following strict rules of morality and filial behaviour, Eliza Parsons has, nonetheless, allowed female wishes to be granted, and her heroine to marry for love. At the beginning of her career, there is, then, an undercurrent of desire for justice for women.

While the motif of the dead husband making way for a second, happier marriage does not recur frequently in Eliza Parsons' writing, it is nonetheless indicative of a desire for her heroines' success which does resurface often. The manner in which a woman gains happiness is habitually convoluted, indicating that her creator wishes to preserve the decencies and does not wish to appear guilty of incitement to insurrection. The very real nature of this desire for women's happiness in spite of male dominance is nonetheless evident. Although the young female characters are sometimes piously obedient, they cannot be said, even in the most sanctimonious case, to be entirely passive in all things. Harriet Meredith, although compliant with her father's desire for her marriage to Mr Williams, nonetheless shows independence in other matters. Of particular note is her adoption of a young Gypsy girl, Fanny, whose chapbook-selling mother left her by the roadside when there was no food to give her. At Harriet's insistence, Fanny is taken in and given a useful education, later marrying a tradesman in Carmarthen. Through Harriet's direct intervention, then, another young girl's life is altered for the better, and she marries well and happily. What is more, in her acceptance of a Gypsy, seen at the time as untouchable, we see here the first inkling of Eliza Parsons' wish for bridge-building between the different strata of society, an element which will increase as her career progresses.



Another frequently-used element illustrated by the education of Fanny is the generally superior position of nurture over nature in many of Eliza Parsons' novels. On Harriet's return to Meredith Hall from London after her marriage, she notes that Fanny, who had attended school nearby, is improved. This capacity for human minds and characters to be improved is a well-used component in Eliza Parsons' work, although a few fluctuations are noticeable, such as the flighty Emma in *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), who seems to be wilful by nature, since she has a sister who is the model of a well brought-up gentlewoman.

Emma, however, is not simply a tool for Eliza Parsons to use in proving the superiority of Harriet over her friend. She is not a bad person. Her friends, when reflecting on her sad story, say she is an example of a virtuous character who has been too much addicted to vanity and the good life. Like the mother of Frances Burney's main character in *Evelina* (1778), though she is virtuous, she does not appear to be. She has a good heart and is extremely witty. She is given far better dialogue than her earnest friend, and so droll are her utterances that she cannot merely serve as an awful warning. Her friends love her and old and respectable gentlemen are attracted to her repartee and flippant but welcome flattery of them. There is little disapproval of her manner. Thus we might look for other reasons for this characters' inclusion in this story than as a mere opposite to the virtuous Harriet.

One possibility might be to illustrate Eliza Parsons' anxiety over parental folly and bad decisions. Emma has seen the worst side of filial obedience in finding a marriage partner. Her best friend has been made miserable, not only by being forced to marry a man to whom she is not attracted, but also by being forbidden to marry the man whom

she loves. It is this last element which is of so much importance to Emma. Unlike Harriet, she has no unwanted suitor to whom her mother will wish to marry her, but there is a man she loves whom her mother has forbidden her to see. Harriet's uncomplaining misery appears to her to provide an example of what will happen to her if she relinquishes her lover, Sir George. Although Eliza Parsons' explicit portrayal of Emma's subsequent sufferings as the wife of a rake makes her moral clear, and exonerates her mother's veto of the relationship, nonetheless, Emma's bright and appealing personality seems to be another victim of Mr Meredith's dominance. Had he allowed his daughter's marriage to the wholesome Lord Bleville, Emma might have sought a similar partner from among his friends.

The death of Sir George is discussed briefly by James Raven, when he notes that '[c]ompared to earlier years, the nasty ends within the 1790 novels were related more distinctly to the moral worth of the recipient'.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, a villain is generally made to suffer and die slowly. Raven continues, '[h]aving ruined Emma Montague in *The History of Miss Meredith* and leaving her to die of remorse in a European convent, Sir George Oldham's required death, as of a fall from a horse, is at least unusually swift'.<sup>17</sup> The point at issue seems to be to me that Sir George dies on his way to a duel, and his quick, unexpected end means that he dies unshriven. Eliza Parsons often allows her villains to repent and at least die well, although they have not lived well. This suggests that she does not consider Sir George worthy of forgiveness and has, with writerly omnipotence, delivered him to the eternal flames, relenting enough to allow him to die before he has compounded his sins by taking part in the duel, although fully intending to fight.

Eliza Parsons begins her career with a work dealing with modern morality and society, electing to commence with a novel which restricts itself to the society she knows. Although she later writes Gothic novels, she returns to this type of novel several times. She determines to begin her career with a work which shows her knowledge of the upper classes and her familiarity with genteel manners. This, presumably, is intended to elevate her status, or at least prevent it from being further eroded. That is to say, although she cannot expect her social standing in poverty and widowhood to be raised in private life, public awareness of her has been augmented by this publication and its culturally exclusive subject matter has been dealt with in a manner which should maintain, if not increase, her substance in society.<sup>18</sup>

In *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), good family connections are given prominence. At the time of her husband's death, Harriet is pregnant but miscarries due to the shock of her bereavement. Thus, when she weds Lord Bleville, there will be no step-child for him, no remnant of her first husband, Sir Arthur Williams, to continue into the next generation and, since his father predeceased Sir Arthur, the Williams family dies out with the loss of the unborn child. Harriet is free to begin again with Lord Bleville's line. In later novels, the emphasis on blood is lessened, as might be expected from a novelist whose conviction that nurture is of prime importance compels her to investigate the effects of education and the presence of greatness of heart in all sectors of society. As she begins her profession, however, she is careful to restrict herself to the conventional. Despite this, she does not exhibit any kind of snobbery. As has already been mentioned, she includes in the sub-plots to her first novel the story of a Gypsy girl who is educated and allowed a happy marriage to a tradesman. James Raven, in discussing the usefulness of the epistolary form for the

exposition of notions of good and evil, states that the heroines of some of the epistolary novels give satirical accounts of 'the evil and vulgar', but continues, '[nevertheless, this does not explain why so many of the unstable and vulgar coquettes of these novels were deliberately depicted as the daughters and sisters of trade'.<sup>19</sup> In Eliza Parsons' novels, this is not the case. As a daughter and widow of tradesmen, she was aware of the worth and respectability of the merchant class, whatever the character of a particular member of that class. What she seems to satirize is any innate vulgarity; she was in a position to know that merchants could afford a good education for their children, having been well educated herself.

Raven mentions her portrayal of the Jankins family, tradespeople, it is true, and remarkably vulgar. However, it seems not to be their class to which she objects, since she creates so many aristocratic characters who are as envious, over-bearing and impolite as she shows the Jankins mother and daughter to be. Here is a description of the mother's clothes:

To our mutual relief the Jankins's (sic) were soon announced; when in bounced the mother, stuck out in stiff brocade with a rose on it as big as a fruit-plate, and this in the middle of August; flaring pink bows, green satin shoes bespread with tarnished gold flowers; and her head-dress, O Heavens! 'tis impossible any description can do it justice. Figure to yourself an immense load of black hair, for the most part false, decorated with such a profusion of pink riband, laced lappets, and diamonds, that the weight was too much for the feeble, scraggy neck to sustain; consequently this pile of elegance fell from side to side, like the pendulum of a clock. An enormous hoop completed the lady's dress.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, this is a very funny account, even a little malicious, which adds to the pleasure for the young reader, who is made aware of her own very good taste by contrast. Raven discusses this portrayal in a chapter entitled 'Vulgarity and Social

Grammar'. He remarks that 'a full gallery of stereotypes [of vulgar people] was available' to the reader by the 1780s, in which rank, worth and character could be recognised by external appearance, and points out that contempt 'was directed not only at the foibles of fashion, but also at the deceit and worthlessness of the pretensions of low rank'.<sup>9</sup> Eliza Parsons shows no sign of contempt for low rank in itself, merely at pretension. Raven singles out the description of Mrs Jenkins as a 'devastating' example of the type depicted in these novels, but follows the passage with the statement that such creations 'formed a distinctive subgroup of the large number of trading characters in the novels of the period'.<sup>22</sup> I would argue that it is not their identity as 'trading characters' that Eliza Parsons mocks. She is quick to debunk any signs of pretension that she spots in characters of any class, but most of the culprits belong to the gentry and are trying to attract friends or spouses from the classes above. Raven concedes that Mr Jenkins, at least, has a vestige of decency about him, but from reasons of the author's patriotism, rather than from her belief in her character's intrinsic worth. Raven says:

As an ideal with its origins in the laws of God and Nature, the proper, paternal management of the family supplied a microcosm for patriarchal society as a whole. On the other hand, exposes of preposterous wives and children avoided further direct accusations against the man of trade himself, and hence the charge that the author might be indulging in disloyalty to the commerce upon which Britain was built. Thus, even Mr. Jenkins was 'plain and decent (like what he once was, a wealthy tradesman.)'<sup>23</sup>

The fact that Eliza Parsons recognises the hapless Jenkins, at the mercy of his pretentious wife, as a 'plain and decent' man has to do with her understanding of those belonging to the merchant class and their difficult place in society. Invited to social occasions at which they are introduced to the upper classes and aristocracy by

virtue of their wealth and residence in the same Squares and Places as the great, they are betrayed by accent or unsure manners and made to look foolish. Unsurprisingly, sometimes they try a little too hard and go too far when aping the gentry. Eliza Parsons, however, is forgiving when their motives are merely those of trying to merge with their social surroundings. It is when any character, no matter how well or lowly born, attempts to outdo, rather than merely match, their 'betters' that she will show them to be worthless. Mr Jenkins' only crimes are an inability to control his wife and a wish to indulge her in her foibles. Eliza Parsons, although anxious to write for a well-born readership, nonetheless does not desert or patronise her own class, even at the beginning of her career.<sup>24</sup>

Like the novelist that she so much admired, Samuel Richardson, Eliza Parsons begins her career with an epistolary novel.<sup>25</sup> James Raven, as mentioned above, considers the epistolary form a means of discussing good and evil.

[P]lainly, transgressors of correct behaviour were allotted ghoulis ends to enhance the instructional utility of the novel. In characterisation and plot design, existing assumptions and new developments were reciprocal forces. A foolish or vicious type could be shown merely by his or her attitude to a particular issue - that issue could be further illustrated (often for future reference) by the performance of the evil and the virtuous. In part, this was assured by the popularity of the letter form in novels. Epistolary works did not allow direct authorial comment except through obviously approved heroines or heroes, while the demands of the elegant style expected from genteel narrators precluded sarcastic or unduly slanderous descriptions of villains. Thus knavery had to appear all the more black, while the few lively, even playful heroines of the narrative novels, (such as Mrs. Parsons' Miss Meredith) provided the most satirical and chastening accounts of the evil and the vulgar.<sup>26</sup>

Miss Meredith, although a 'lively' heroine, is as honourable as Pamela professes to be, and as diligent a correspondent, but there are fundamental differences. While Richardson's protagonist writes constantly from a fixed position but rarely posts her

letters, thus preventing the reader from knowing any other character's point of view but Pamela's, Eliza Parsons' main character sends and receives mail while all correspondents move about the country and in some cases the continent. The reader therefore receives many viewpoints, and this element is intensified by some characters passing on to their friends copies of letters which others have sent to them. All characters and the reader are thus kept well-informed on the movements of all characters in or out of the country, central to the plot or on the periphery. Most letters refer to other letters; thus the characters are writing to people about people writing to them. This is an ingenious and lively means of divulging information to the reader. It is also an efficient way to bring in sub-plots, with which Eliza Parsons' works are always crammed. The overall effect is one of objectivity, without the claustrophobic quality for which *Pamela* (1740) is so well-known and criticised. When Harriet mentions a compliment she has received, the reader is willing to believe her, as the reader often reads a letter from the person who complimented her, or from another whom she has impressed. This gives the writing a credible and refreshing property which infuses the text with dynamism, a circumstance which presumably helped sales and convinced the fledgling novelist to continue her writing career.

*The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) has a sub-plot describing an elopement. This sub-plot involves Lord Bleville who had left England for Paris on the marriage of Harriet Meredith to Mr Williams. Walking in the Bois de Boulogne, he had observed an elderly man cutting firewood and, in Wordsworthian fashion, had offered help. The man, Monsieur de Rene, after initially refusing aid, allowed Lord Bleville to help him carry his burden home to a cottage where he and his family lived in poverty. De Rene told his story as follows: as a young man, de Rene, dependent upon an uncle, had

rescued a young woman with whom he was in love from a life in a convent, to which she had been condemned to increase the fortune which her older sisters expected. She and de Rene then eloped. Unfortunately, his uncle had married his housekeeper, who, discovering the young man's secret marriage, and wanting all her new husband's wealth for herself, had poisoned his mind against his nephew. De Rene and his wife had in consequence spent their life in poverty. Lord Bleville, knowing he must not hurt their pride by offering help too openly, buys an estate in secret, telling M. de Rene that he has owned it for a long time, but that he has come to France in search of someone to run the estate for him. He asks the poor family if they will take on the job and, overjoyed, they agree.

This elopement, although presented sympathetically here, is an important tragic motif in many of Eliza Parsons' subsequent works. In the same novel, Emma and Sir George Oldham run away to marry, but from evil motives on his side, and ill-judged and romantic notions on hers. The de Renes, however, are a different case: their elopement providing the young woman with an escape from incarceration. The reader is encouraged to pity de Rene for his poverty and ill-treatment by his uncle. Nonetheless, Eliza Parsons punishes him for daring to marry without sanction from his guardian. He has been poor for many years before she allows his wants to be relieved by Lord Bleville. In the light of harsher fates for later characters who elope, it seems that he is only allowed to escape his poverty because his original reason for secret marriage was laudable - to rescue a young woman from a cloistered life for which she had no vocation. Eliza Parsons will frequently include the story of an unfortunate woman living in retirement who feels the need to tell her story before she dies. She is usually a woman of good family who in her youth had been pursued by a



young man of the aristocracy who had encouraged her to elope with him to marry privately without her parents' consent. After a few months of marriage, he will desert her, sometimes passing the 'rights' of her on to a friend. He will let her know that his guardian has insisted he marry an heiress and will tell her that their wedding was not legal. Sometimes, there is a daughter, born to the woman soon after her husband's desertion. The woman will eventually tell her story to a man who knows the child, usually by now a young woman. She will indicate her need to repent her hasty marriage, and, having been assured her daughter is well and likely to make a far better marriage than her mother, she dies content.

*The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), is, as mentioned above, one of the novels in which Eliza Parsons portrays the contemporary social scene. It depicts many of the cultural events enjoyed, and sometimes endured, by her characters: the opera, the play, routs, and in this first novel, a masquerade. The heroine, Lady Williams, nee Harriet Meredith, is compelled by her husband to attend a masquerade at the Pantheon with friends of his whom she dislikes. Shy, quiet and unimpressed by the London society into which she is being initiated, Harriet attends the masquerade in the character and costume of a Quaker, addressing others using the archaic second person pronoun ('thou' and 'thee') in authentic Quaker style. She later writes to her friend Isabella that she was dressed in the style of Ann Lovely, in a plain brown satin gown and petticoat, a book, muslin apron and cap. Her friend, the older, capable Lady Lloyd, wears a man's white domino, trimmed with pink. Sir Arthur Williams, Harriet's husband, is wearing a pink domino and his friend, Lord Richmore, a blue one. Richmore is a dissolute character who wants to ruin his friend's marriage, so that he can seduce Harriet. He notes that she has a loyal supporter in Sir Edward Stanley,

who loves Harriet but is reconciled to her marriage to his friend Sir Arthur. Richmore calculates a rift between Sir Edward and Sir Arthur, by hinting that Sir Edward is planning the seduction of Harriet, Richmore's own intended goal. His plan is successful and the party goes to the Pantheon without Sir Edward, who, in disguise like everyone else, nonetheless attends, although forbidden to address Harriet, to keep a close watch over her and her unwanted follower. Sir Arthur has become friendly with two women of gallantry and low morals, Lady Bell Reville and Mrs Burnett. Lady Bell is dressed as Minerva and Mrs Burnett as a Spanish lady. When the reluctant Harriet is led into the room by Lady Bell, a group of young men dressed as Savoyards ask why Decency is here, conducted by Wisdom, in this place of folly. Harriet soon becomes annoyed by being accosted by so many unknown people, but is then addressed by a man dressed as a Turk who bows and says Virtue must conduct the Quaker's steps, but has not the power to guard against the wicked in the mask of Wisdom. She wonders who he is. In fact, he is Sir Edward Stanley, doing his best to warn her against her dissolute companion.

While waiting for Lady Lloyd, who is dressed in a white domino, Harriet's attention is drawn to a similar costume, although it is not trimmed with pink. Its wearer addresses her. It is a man who asks if she is still looking for the blue domino even though a friend forbidden to speak to her is here. The unknown person is Richmore, trying at once to suggest that he is Sir Edward, and to insinuate that she is pining for him, Richmore. Harriet tells him that, on the contrary, she is looking for her friend Lady Lloyd. He tells her he is Sir Edward and accuses her of looking for Richmore, whose place in her heart he once thought his own. She cannot believe that Sir Edward would speak to her in this way and replies that she disliked Richmore more than any

other man. He grabs her hand and immediately the Turk appears and tells her she is deserting her friends. She asks the Turk, who is of course Sir Edward, for protection from the man in the white domino. An argument breaks out and Harriet, disgusted with the man in the domino, asks him to desist, calling him Sir Edward. The Turk, shocked, says that she obviously does not know the man in the domino. At this point, Lady Lloyd appears and Harriet is embarrassed by being the centre of the attention of two men. The Turk, seeing her discomfort, tells her the man in the domino is not Sir Edward. The conversation is then led by Lady Lloyd who wants to know why Harriet departed alone. Harriet replies that Lady Bell left her. In fact, she had done so to ensure Harriet is lost so as to leave the field clear for her friend Mrs Burnett to dally with Harriet's husband. A letter sent by Sir Edward to a friend states that he has seen Lord Richmore exchange his blue costume with someone in a white one, and as a consequence of his behaviour towards Harriet, Sir Edward challenges Richmore to a duel.

This rendition of confusion, immorality and malice seems fitting for a masquerade, an event which is surrounded by mystery, uncertainty and a taint of disreputability. Terry Castle, in her *Masquerade and Civilization in Eighteenth Century English Culture and Fiction* (1986), grounds her treatise in terms of Bahktin's carnivalesque.<sup>29</sup> Eliza Parsons' account of the masquerade exemplifies a number of the elements to which Castle refers, such as its flavour of decadence, despite the attendance of many respectable people alongside the fashionable profligates, or its status as a place for changing and furthering relationships, whether for mere flirting or adultery or even for political intrigue, due to the security offered by disguise. The latter capacity is, of course, ideal for a novelist, who can utilize this occasion to move the plot forward.

Eliza Parsons certainly portrays masquerades according to Terry Castle's analysis of the eighteenth century perceptions, as fashionable, trivial events, full of flirting and bad behaviour, but there is an added dimension which rescues them from being merely insignificant.

Terry Castle notes that we now think of the masquerade as an uncomplicated sign of the 'licentiousness and social disengagement of the upper classes of the period. We inherit this attitude in large part from the eighteenth century itself. Satirists of the time, she argues, condemn it as 'foolish, irrational and corrupt'.<sup>30</sup> However, Castle notes that the character of the masquerade is not so simple to understand. Masquerades appear in the newspapers of the eighteenth century next to the political news. London newspapers print advertisements for masquerades and costume warehouses. 'The modern reader', she says, 'is jarred by the surrealistic prominence of these accounts, which are juxtaposed quite unselfconsciously to reports of troop movements, parliamentary sessions, and other more sombre public doings'.<sup>31</sup> Politics and masques seem to 'absorb similar kinds of public attention'. This is because they carry the same kind of atmosphere - parliament and the masquerade are both places of metamorphosis, where things can change rapidly, where intrigue is rife and everyone is playing a role. Public events and the masquerade share the same stage; one's private persona is hidden and mutability is necessary in order to progress. There is a need to contravene the normal rules of social and political behaviour to discover the truth behind the everyday polite and somewhat meaningless exchanges.

The essence of the carnivalesque resists categorization, and its influence on the masquerade is clear. A murky area, where people's identity, status and morality are in

a state of flux, the masquerade is a space where the truth can be told, although on the surface it may appear to be the very opposite. People take on a character not their own. They deceive with their personalities and clothes, and perhaps speak as though they were a different person. However, due to the carnivalesque effect, the masquerade can also be a place where one can be the person one truly is, behind the social exterior. Thus, a timid gentleman might put on the garb of a Turk because that is who he would like to be seen as and becomes braver in consequence, if only for the evening. Although Sir Edward is not timid, he is a quintessentially English gentleman, discreet and well-mannered. As a Turk, he can break out of a polite necessity to remain in the background, and protect Harriet in the dashing manner he has been denied by her marriage to someone else. As a Turk, he also openly carries a weapon equal or superior to any stiletto Richmore may be wearing under his domino.

Castle notes that Addison wrote in the *Spectator* that '[p]eople dress themselves in what they have a Mind to be, and not what they are fit for,' but points out that subtle but insistent logic governs these scenes of metamorphosis, a 'logic of symbolic reversal'. Therefore, although Lady Lloyd wears a domino, suggesting that she seeks no alternative personality, she nonetheless chooses the domino of a man, thus retaining her own, strong-willed personality. The unpleasant Mrs Bumett, generally condemned to behave within the confines of restraint, dresses as a Spanish lady, a symbol of unEnglish passion, and in this guise, elopes with Harriet's husband. Lady Bell Reville, a woman of gallantry, and the very opposite of wise, is Minerva, whose other aspect is as the goddess of War. This persona suits Lady Bell very well, as she is determined to cause trouble between Harriet and her husband, and as her name suggests, revels in battle.

Harriet seems to be at odds with the rules. She wears the costume of a Quaker, since she feels out of place at the Pantheon and her clothes reflect this. She appears to continue to be truthful. She is calm, decent, quiet and simple, like a Quaker. What is more, she does not entirely lose her sense of discernment in the confusion. Although she mistakenly refers to Richmore as Sir Edward, since he has given her to believe that is who he is, she is shocked at his manner and cannot believe that Sir Edward would address her in the impolite way that he has. Harriet seems to have expected Sir Edward to behave like himself, rather than imagine the man under the disguise is Sir Edward enjoying the freedom from constraint shown by every stranger who has addressed her.

Nonetheless, despite Harriet's avowed dislike of the masquerade, she still consents to attend, and to dress up. Even though her character is that of the relatively unexciting Quaker, it gives her the opportunity to play-act, using the Quaker form of speech, and to address others as their alter ego, for example, referring to Lady Bell as Minerva. Perhaps, then, she conforms, in a more complex manner than the other characters, to the rule of inversion, of Addison's 'symbolic reversal'.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, perhaps she, like Mrs. Burnett, who, dressed as a Spanish lady, behaves as though she were the passionate Latin woman she wishes to be, is able to fulfil a need to act and shake free of constraints for an evening. There is a simpler explanation. Harriet attends the masquerade, and attends it as a Quaker because that is what her predecessor Pamela did (1741). Richardson has Pamela attending a masquerade, heavily pregnant, and thus somewhat incongruously dressed. Harriet, too, is pregnant. Although Eliza Parsons has borrowed this element, however, other aspects of Richardson's scene

were already familiar to the public, so that both writers are borrowing from a wider tradition. <sup>or</sup> Castle discusses Frances Burney's description <sup>m 9 ^</sup> in *Cecilia* (1782) of the masquerade, in which the heroine's dislike of the 'freedoms' assumed by unknown people who attempt to draw her into conversation is also a feature. In Burney's novel, a town 'Voluble' is dressed as Minerva, like the fashionable Lady Bell in *Miss Meredith* (1790), but the Turk is a lascivious suitor, unlike Eliza Parsons' chivalrous Sir Edward, while the hero, Delvile is dressed like the dastardly Richmore in *Miss Meredith* in a white domino. Cecilia herself is not in costume, unlike her counterpart, Harriet. Here, Eliza Parsons seems to be borrowing, but modifying, components from previous works, experimenting with extremes of behaviour using tried and tested elements and stretching their possibilities.

The mystery of the dominoes adds to the air of disreputability on the one hand, and on the other, political intrigue. Dominoes allow the person in them to take on any persona, or none, letting the person addressed decide who they are without their having to admit it. There is a liminality about dominoes which Eliza Parsons uses well. Castle says of the domino, '[i]t was disguise in its classic form - the quintessential sign of erotic and political cabal, the mark of intrigue itself.<sup>36</sup> The respectable and straightforward Lady Lloyd seems to be above intrigue, but in her case, the domino seems to be an instrument of intrigue used by the author rather than by the character. The scheming Richmore does not wear a white domino to pretend to be Lady Lloyd but Sir Edward, whom no-one has realised is present dressed as a Turk. It is, however, because Lady Lloyd is wearing a white domino that Harriet first talks to the unknown Richmore, because it means she is looking his way, scanning the crowd for a glimpse of Lady Lloyd and thus searching for white dominoes. She would

normally be the kind of woman who would keep her eyes cast down in the presence of men unknown to her.

Castle notes that 'then, as now, dress spoke symbolically of the human being beneath its folds'. It behaves in the same way as language, so the effect of travesty can be disturbing. Like language, says Castle, dress 'can be made to serve other than referential functions'. She says we always read conventional, cultural rather than natural, meaning into clothing, so 'the system can be exploited'.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the strictness of dress code at the time created a need to experiment with the 'uniform' that one is allowed to wear, and perhaps the masquerade is also a symbol of the need to experiment with identity, class, social caste, nationality and even gender. Castle recognises the view of disguise as anti-social: 'witness the persistent association between the mask and criminality, travesty and treachery'. So masquerades 'subverted the myth of the legible body by sending false sartorial messages'.<sup>39</sup> However, due to the limited range of costumes available from the costumier's, there is still a restricted syntax of dress within which one can perpetrate these seeming transgressions. Thus the 'false sartorial message' can still be read by those in the know, and the masquerade is revealed, not as simply a subversive space where confusion reigns, but as a form of discourse legible to initiates, another esoteric aspect of eighteenth-century exclusive society. Eliza Parsons has determined to disclose to her readers her own inside knowledge of this wayward diversion to ensure her credibility whilst nonetheless censuring the behaviour.

The carnivalesque can have an odd effect on the format of the work of art in which it is represented. According to Terry Castle, eighteenth century novels containing



masquerade scenes sometimes show 'generic instability'.<sup>40</sup> She notes, too, that in *Pamela* (1740) the masquerade forms a bridge between two halves of the novel's sequel, and changes everything from then on. After the masquerade scene, says Castle, 'the text becomes a true hodgepodge of discourses - a mixture of embedded exempla, "table talk" (the symposia of the B. and Damford households), and miscellaneous non-narrative items, such as Pamela's lengthy commentary on Locke's *Education*'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), the masquerade precipitates a change, although not a generic one. The scene is pivotal to the plot, since it is here that Richmore's undercover attempt on Harriet's emotions brings about a duel between himself and Sir Edward. The duel, which is not fatal, causes Richmore to repent and to confess to Sir Arthur his plot to seduce Harriet. Mrs. Burnett, too, was part of the plan, having heard that it was easy to obtain jewels from Sir Arthur. Sir Arthur realises he has been duped by worthless people and begins to worry about his gambling debts, resulting in a fatal fever, only days after the masquerade. Harriet miscarries upon his death. The masquerade has altered the lives of many of the book's characters.

The description of the masquerade is detailed and leaves an impression of authenticity. I suspect Eliza Parsons had attended the Pantheon when younger,<sup>42</sup> and this formed the basis for her representation of the masquerade. She would have been unlikely to have been to the masquerade very recently, not only because of her poverty, but because of her age and widowed status too. What is more, Terry Castle points out that the masquerade died out around 1790, the year *The History of Miss Meredith* was published. Unsurprisingly for an elderly writer, the high society entertainment she describes is already passe.

Eliza Parsons' second work. *The Errors of Education* (1791), is another novel in which contemporary' mores and ills are discussed and accounted for. This time a straightforward third person narrative is employed, by which Eliza Parsons can interrupt, in the fashion of Henry Fielding, to sermonise and make her personal views explicit to the reader. The great problem with society, according to Eliza Parsons, is its misuse of education, in which pronouncement she is as near in philosophy to Mary Wollstonecraft as she will ever be.<sup>43</sup>

In this novel, she uses for her example a young gentleman, Sir William Beaumont, amiable but weak, whose education has accustomed him to instant gratification of desires and the supreme importance in life of the pursuit of pleasure. His mother realises too late that she had educated him badly, that is, privately, rather than having given him 'a public mode of education, by the latter of which, though her son's morals might have been more endangered, his judgement must have been strengthened'.<sup>44</sup> At 21, he wants to go to London and she indulges him, hoping that her friends will look after him in town and that he will learn about society, which he does in the most unfortunate fashion, having been recognised as a newcomer and ingenu by a gambler and rake, Colonel Minors. Minors relieves him of his money and estates in play and by trickery. The dual nature of London society is emphasised, with a depiction of home visiting, routs and opera trips set against descriptions of gaming, duelling and seduction.

Although Sir William is well advised by his mother's friends, his gaming companions interest him more. Minors hopes to ruin him, so he encourages him to seduce a young

woman. Miss Rivers, whose mother is encouraging her to attract a rich husband. Miss Rivers, although obedient to her mother's wishes to meet Sir William alone and make him propose, instead succumbs to his desire to seduce her. Afterwards, she is horrified at her wanton behaviour and goes into a decline, refusing to see Sir William, because he had insulted her by offering her money, having been advised by the wily Minors to do so. Lady Beaumont, Sir William's mother, looks after Miss Rivers, who asks to be allowed to go into the country and retire. Mrs Rivers, angry at having lost the opportunity of a rich son-in-law, rails at her daughter and pursues pleasure in her own way by taking a settlement offered by Lady Beaumont and going to Paris where she lives with a lover. Miss Rivers declares that she, too, is a victim of the errors of education. Her mother had taught her to use her looks to entrap a rich man, but the young woman had not been prepared for her feelings of self-disgust when she did so. She becomes weak and ill, and, although a remorseful Sir William follows her to Exeter and begs for her hand, she dies, after telling him she prays for his happiness, and begging him to safeguard unprotected women and guard their honour.

Miss Rivers' presence as a further example of faulty education is intended to shock the reader. One reviewer does not doubt the realism with which this sub-plot is constructed:

Mrs Rivers in particular we mention as a natural and well supported character - her conduct is indeed execrable, and yet we fear there are too many mothers who act in exactly the same manner, and from a foolish hope of aggrandizing their daughters by marriage, throw them in the way of temptation; and should the poor girls fall martyr to their sensibility, the unfeeling mothers will reprobate them for the very errors their own misconduct has occasioned.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the shock of Miss Rivers' death, Sir William's faulty education has failed him and he cannot help but seek pleasure, although he tries to behave well, rejecting the friendship of Minors when he realises his true character. Bored with a decent but unremarkable life, he takes a mistress who robs him of the rest of his inheritance in collusion with Minors. He decides to go abroad, but dies, his constitution weakened by his excesses, a victim of the errors of education.

A parallel character is represented, in order that the reader does not imagine that a faulty education and a reckless young adulthood must inevitably lead to ruin. Lord Stormer had been a gaming companion to Colonel Minors and had abetted his enticement of Sir William into play. He had, on losing a considerable portion of his inheritance to the colonel, suddenly realised his supposed friend was cheating him, and had decided to reform. To do so, he had had to sell everything he owned and go abroad. He had told his mistress he could no longer support her, and it was she with whom Sir William had then taken up. Because of the fact that Lord Stormer has a good heart, Eliza Parsons allows him redemption. He is the model which Sir William could, even at a late stage in his corruption, have copied, but his inability or unwillingness to learn from his mistakes condemns him. Nonetheless, she accords him less blame than pity, since it is after all, the fault of his education that he is weak. The view that these young men have been badly educated is not one which was universally shared. The notice in *The Critical Review* approved the morality of the novel, but quibbled about the source of Sir William's failings:

This story is very defective in probability; but we cannot blame what is so strictly and exemplarily moral. The title also is erroneous; for the errors of Sir William Beaumont were not those of education, as the fickle unsteady temper, which he is supposed to possess, would have been the source of

equal misfortunes, wherever his education had been conducted. The same fault may be noticed in the characters of some of the ladies.<sup>46</sup>

Here there appears to be a difference of opinion based on ideology. The reviewer has not considered the possibility that Lady Beaumont's lenience towards her son, his mode of education and his subsequent 'fickle unsteady temper' might be connected. What is more, the reviewer's comment that the same defect is observable in the construction of some of the female characters would also be challenged by Eliza Parsons, who makes it clear that Miss Rivers had been brought up in affluence and indolence and was well-versed in the types of superficialities which are acquired at fashionable boarding schools. Another young woman, Louisa Maybank, by contrast, had received instruction in dancing, French, drawing, geography and history, and her temperament is shown to be much more stable. One particular example of this occurs when her late father's mistress attempts to claim his inheritance. The young Louisa firmly states the terms by which the woman will receive an allowance, but shows delicacy and understanding towards her circumstances, left as she is with an illegitimate child. The mistress breaks down and says she was proof against reproach, but Louisa's kindness has won her over.<sup>47</sup> Louisa has also learnt to make careful enquiries about her suitors before making a commitment. The rather superficial Lord Summers wishes to marry her and receives her father's permission to do so, but Louisa worries that she knows nothing about his morals. She is obedient to her father's wishes but it is clear she dislikes Summers. On his deathbed, with the wedding already arranged, her father absolves her of her promise to marry Lord Summers. She tells her fiance that if he is interested in his happiness, she will still marry him: if, however, he is interested in hers, he will release her from her

obligation. He does so, leaving her free to marry Sir Charles Frankly, a mere baronet, but one of greater moral worth than the nobleman.

Louisa had previously been informed of Sir Charles' background and was deeply affected by it. His father, having lost his wife, had ruined a poor but respectable young woman, Mrs Marshall, who had been a seamstress. He had been fond of her, and she had lived in his house and looked after his family well. She had had children, but had lost all of them except a daughter and two boys, the eldest a five-year-old. When his father died, Sir Charles had been 21 and his younger brother Henry at university about to take orders. They had seen their father on his death bed and he had told them to learn from his mistakes. He had ruined Mrs Marshall and had made her no provision. Before he died, he asked them to look after her and her children. Mrs Marshall had expected to be dismissed, but Sir Charles had written to ask her to continue looking after the house, and encouraged her to buy elegant mourning for herself and the children. He had offered her any sitting room she wanted for her own use. Then he had given his brother Henry half their father's fortune. Henry, amazed, had only accepted £20,000. He was to take orders and have the living in Sir Charles' gift. Sir Charles had given Mrs Marshall's children £5,000 each. On deciding to go abroad for three years, he had asked her to look after the house meanwhile. She had been overwhelmed by his goodness.<sup>dO</sup> This story provides the model for Louisa's own act of beneficence towards her father's mistress, although she has the harder task, as the woman, unlike the docile Mrs Marshall, initially reacts with hostility. The charity of her exemplar Sir Charles, however, must have spurred her on, and she is rewarded by the success of her plan, the blessing of Mrs Marshall and the praise of Lady Beaumont. Clearly, Louisa and Sir Charles are well suited.

The choice of a marriage partner of lower rank over one of higher is not uncommon in Eliza Parsons' works. She distrusts those whose income is hereditary, considering them more likely to drink and gamble than someone who has to labour for his living, or at least who has a limited income. As her career progresses, her heroines settle for suitors of much lower ranks than they had at first, until in her last novel, *The Convict; or Navy Lieutenant* (1807), to be discussed in Chapter 8, her heroine is content to marry a lawyer, as Eliza Parsons has a strong sense of justice and champions the middle classes.

When Sir William gets into debt, his mother is concerned about what is owed to tradespeople. She discovers that there is an outstanding bill for £2,000 at the jeweller's and £4,000 at the silversmith's. Sir William has £7,000 in the bank and Lady Beaumont suggests he withdraws it. When the banker, Mr Thornhill, is told of Sir William's debts, he advises Sir William to pay the tradespeople at once.<sup>49</sup> Eliza Parsons has shown Mr Thornhill to be a good man; thus her readers are likely to believe his advice to be sound. Thus she speaks for the rank to which she belongs. There might be a number of reasons for this aspect of her work, but what seems probable is that as she gets into worse financial straits, is kept waiting by the palace for the little she is paid, and has to move further and further out of town to less fashionable areas, her previous friends and acquaintances in society become more distant, and she presumably becomes disillusioned with them. This is borne out by her suddenly ceasing to dedicate her works after breaking her habit of dedicating to noble ladies by offering the last one she dedicates to Matthew Gregory Lewis. This subject has been discussed at length in Chapter 3 but it deserves to be mentioned here as by

their nature, novels of wit and contemporary manners deal with high society and Eliza Parsons' insistence on debating the relative moral worth of various ranks in their pages is noteworthy. She also discusses money in minute detail - the passage just referred to continues by deciding precisely how much money Sir William is to be allowed, where it is to come from and what he should spend it on. Her poverty is an obvious reason for Eliza Parsons' preoccupation with money in all her works, and here it serves to illustrate the failings of the aristocracy when they misuse it.

Louisa, properly educated and equally level-headed in romantic matters and financial ones, had assessed Sir Charles' merits before she allowed herself to fall in love with him. She is an astute woman who, if she can do so without giving offence, will diligently strive for what she wants from life. She is unimpressed by noblemen, judging them by their behaviour rather than their rank. After all, she has had as a model her father, Lord Maybank, who had been a tyrant and womaniser. No-one had been allowed to visit his wife, who had died with one major achievement to her name: that she had educated her daughter well. Armed with a mixture of her mother's principles and her father's flaws, Louisa is well equipped to recognise a noble wastrel. One night, at the opera, the impertinent Lord Delmot is attracted to her and begins to make advances. She tells him that she wants to enjoy the opera she has come to hear. Later, he tells Lord Summers he will wait until she marries and is tired of her husband. Lord Summers asks Louisa if she has been alarmed by Delmot's attentions - he is after all a great favourite with the ladies. She replies that she is unworried:

for the same reason, I suppose, as my kitten and cats are favourites of mine, because they sometimes amuse me with their tricks, and men and animals may occasionally answer the same purpose.<sup>30</sup>



This forthright manner, ease of repartee and ability to reject a man of dubious integrity was surely honed by Louisa's formal education, which taught her subjects of weight - languages, humanities and social sciences - as well as social accomplishments like dancing and drawing. Lady Beaumont confesses to Louisa that she too has learnt. As a result of her son's failings, she has realised that children should be watched over and that juvenile folly must not be allowed to grow into a habit. She now understands that she had been too indulgent with Sir William and wishes she had not sent him to a public school. She also observes that, judging by the behaviour of some of the young women of her acquaintance, boarding schools for girls are harmful. The students are taught everything indiscriminately without the consultation of talents or inclination so they learn nothing well. Morals are neglected, and with a few trivial accomplishments they are launched into a world of frivolity.<sup>51</sup> Eliza Parsons so often adds comments in her narrative about the failure of education methods that it is clear she has strong views about those influences to which children should be exposed, and those from which they should be sheltered. She is not an advocate of public schooling, as is evident from her comments as narrator, and those of her characters, an example of which can be seen in *Woman as She Should Be* discussed below.

After the publication of *The Errors of Education*, Eliza Parsons writes her only play *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792), described in Chapter 1. 1793 is the most prolific of her career, with three novels. The first, *Woman as She Should Be*, is dedicated by permission to the Duchess of Gloucester. It is, again, a novel of contemporary wit and manners. Once more, it deals with the problems of education, and this time Eliza

Parsons discusses the drawbacks of seminaries. The main character describes the opinion of her elderly aunt who often expressed her disapproval of girlish friendships:

.. at an age (she used to say) when the understandings are not properly informed nor the rectitude of principles assured and established; intimacies between young girls often prove dangerous should there be any defects in the heart of either of them; for the same reason she objected to a boarding school education, where in large seminaries it was impossible to expect *all* should be equally good, and one girl of faulty principles or depraved heart might too possibly ruin the morals of fifty.<sup>52</sup>

No specific details are offered as to what ‘danger’ might come to girls at boarding school from one of their number. Thus Eliza Parsons makes her character’s meaning vague in order to leave us, delicately, to make up our own minds, but subtly hinting that the danger is, at least partly, sexual. Although perhaps she is suggesting that the girls may learn to be arrogant, acquisitive or impolite, for example, her warnings are remarkably similar to those of Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Rights of Woman* (1792) when, on the subject of boarding schools for girls she states:

In nurseries and boarding schools, I fear, girls are first spoiled, particularly in the latter. A number of girls sleep in the same room, and wash together. And though I should be sorry to contaminate an innocent creature’s mind by instilling false delicacy, or those prudish notions which early cautions respecting the other sex naturally engender, I should be very anxious to prevent their acquiring nasty or immodest habits; and as may girls have learned very nasty tricks from ignorant servants, the mixing them thus indiscriminately together, is very improper.<sup>53</sup>

This passage is focused on by Tom Fumiss in his analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*. He notes her vagueness, arguing that she wants to prohibit girls from seeing one another naked, and says her language ‘correspondingly drapes its subject in mystery’.<sup>54</sup> He points out that when faced with ‘delicate and indelicate subjects, her text becomes delicate and evasive’, and accuses Wollstonecraft of using the very ‘feminine’ approach her text seeks to condemn, as though ‘masculine’

language were inappropriate or ‘constitutionally incapable of broaching feminine sexuality’.<sup>55</sup> This is so much the case with the passage quoted from *Woman as She Should Be* that it is possible Eliza Parsons is in dialogue with Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Rights of Woman* was published in 1792.<sup>56</sup>

After venturing into the Gothic with *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, Eliza Parsons published a third novel in 1793, which was a return to the consideration of manners and education. *Ellen and Julia* is the story of two sisters who are dissimilar in character, one taking after their father, and the other like their mother. Although they have been brought up in a similar fashion and equal attention has been paid them, they appear at first to typify the debate of nature and nurture. Ellen is 18, tall and elegant with dark blue eyes and good features. She is vain and impetuous like her father, haughty and proud to the servants, as well as to her mother and sister. Once we are informed that she is her father’s favourite, it is clear that once again, education is the fundamental source of accomplishments or failings. Her mother had been fond of old romances as well as a few modern novels ‘equally romantic and improbable’<sup>57</sup> and although she was capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction, Eliza Parsons’ narration makes it plain that these texts are ‘dangerous study for young minds without a proper selection’. She allowed the girls to read them:

Fatal indulgence, as it proved to one of them, whose mind, naturally proud and romantic, too eagerly adopted the sentiments of the different heroines, and conceived the highest disgust at her own situation, which secluded her from such delightful adventures as the world afforded to young women, handsome like herself.<sup>59</sup>

This passage not only displays Ellen’s similarity to Charlotte Lennox’s *Arabella*,<sup>60</sup> but also pre-emptively Jane Austen’s gentle mockery of young women like Catherine

Moreland, who believe the tales they read in novels. The character of Ellen is in sharp contrast with that of her sister Julia, who does not care for ‘the absurdities of romance, or the pernicious follies delineated in modern novels’.<sup>61</sup> By such means, Eliza Parsons disengages her output from that of the writers of ‘modern novels’, evidently preferring to believe the opinion of reviewers who saw her as a moral force, such as the critic who had described her as ‘the advocate of virtue’ and had singled her out from her sister writers with the view, although rather damning with faint praise, that ‘[u]pon the whole, we consider this lady’s labours less deserving the severity of critical remark than the general run of publications from the press of Mr. Lane’.<sup>62</sup>

As before mentioned, the connected topics of education and parenting are of immense import for Eliza Parsons and seem to form a recurrent theme throughout writing career. She uses the novel as a didactic tool to moralise about poor education and behaviour. Even when her works are set in the past, her concerns for the nurturing of the young have a contemporary resonance and realism which would find concord with her readers.

Although Eliza Parsons tends to represent middle-class heroes, she makes one such person a miser, in a novel dealing with both manners and financial minutiae, *The Miser and His Family*, published in 1800. She gives us the background to the story of the miser, Anthony Stanley, and his brother Edward in some detail. Their father, Edward Stanley senior, could have been a churchman, but changed his mind when he inherited £600 per annum at the age of 20 on the death of his father, a lawyer in the service of the Earl of Standfort, from whom the Stanleys were descended. When, as a

consequence of his dissolute behaviour, his mother died also, he gained a further annual income of £150. Dissipation led to the necessity of mortgaging the property when he was 26. He was only diligent in work when he began to study law in order to plague mankind for the wrongs he felt he had suffered. An aunt left him an annuity of £50 on which he lived, and managed to save. He had become a miser.

This circumstance is noteworthy: Eliza Parsons gives the family noble connections, but this has less to do with a desire to salt her narrative with mention of the aristocracy than with a determination to make the Stanleys potentially respectable by giving them useful employment as opposed to a dependency on wealthy relatives. The miser's evil is determined not through class or formal education, but because of having inherited too much money at too young an age. Perhaps his father should have recognised the temptations and invested the money so that a reduced income was available to his son. There are many instances of noble sons behaving rakishly and spending their inheritance, so here Eliza Parsons does not differentiate between the classes. The middle-class background of this novel is marked. Both good and evil middle-class characters are drawn, and the principal focus is, as usual, money. Here, as in many instances in her novels, Eliza Parsons uses the lack of money as an evil to be endured and an obstacle to be surmounted, whilst the profligate spending of money is a demon which leaves physical and moral destruction in its wake.

Stanley gained power over, and married, a rich widow. She wanted to marry so that she could spend and enjoy some of her own fortune; a telling comment on the lack of opportunity for widows to make the most of their wealth without a husband. She had, however, married a miser. After three years there were two sons, and the miser is

worried about the cost of a large family. Eliza Parsons, intriguingly, puts into her character's mind that he will 'inform his wife of a singular arrangement he intended to make to prevent the dreaded evil'. Whether this was to be separate rooms or a form of contraception is unknown, but in any case, before he was able to inform her of his decision, she had died of an inflammation of the lungs brought on by a cold. The narrator dryly states that the widower was not distressed by the loss of an expensive item, but was grieved at the cost of the funeral. She had begged her husband to educate her sons well. Here is the true worth of a woman, undervalued for herself and resented for her expenditure of her own fortune. She had considered education vital, but her husband let the children run wild until they were 7 and 6, when he sent them to school in Yorkshire, to be boarded, clothed and educated for £15 per year. Clearly this is an inadequate education, but the young Stanleys responded to it in different ways. The eldest, Anthony (who would grow into the miser of the novel's title), had a character much like his father's. He demonstrated a talent for accounting, and thus would be of use to his father, who indulged him. The younger, Edward, despite his poor schooling, had surprised and pleased his teacher by learning well. His brother lied about his extravagance to their father, who thus decided to send him to sea. Like Eliza Parsons' own sons, whose histories are briefly discussed in Chapter 8, he was apprenticed at 13, and spent the next five years working on a West India ship.

Here there appears initially to be a conviction that one's nature is revealed no matter what education one receives. These two boys were brought up together, so it is inviting to imagine that Anthony is simply of a miserly nature. However, when Eliza Parsons juxtaposes these pairs of characters for our inspection,<sup>64</sup> although she allows a certain dissimilarity due to nature, generally the main source of more adverse

personality traits is a bad education, whether it be poor guidance or parental over-indulgence. In the case of the Stanley brothers, it would seem that although Anthony had a tendency towards miserliness, possibly because he has had a year longer than his younger sibling to learn its ways, his downfall came when his father became more attached to him (from motives of greed) than to Edward.

The main characters in the novel are now given our full attention. Their father dies when Anthony is 19, leaving him his full estate of £160,000, except for £10 to Edward. Now Anthony is in the same position as his father had been, having an abundance of wealth at too young an age, and with an already questionable attitude to money. He requests an unscrupulous lawyer to help him experience unknown amusements, taking an elegant house but furnishing only one room well. The rest have second-hand furniture. He goes to the door of the play-house, but does not enter. The fact that he is described as at war with himself suggests that Eliza Parsons sees his character as damaged by nurture, rather than merely flawed by nature. Although she does not exonerate Anthony, she seems mindful of his inability to triumph over his *idee fixe*. It is notable that she does not make his 'normal' character half anxious to donate to charity, merely to enjoy hedonistic pleasures, suggesting that she does not absolve him of his faults entirely. Anthony's early bad attitude has been well learned from his father, whose own failings were brought about by his father's misplaced benevolence, or perhaps pride in making sure his son has no need to ask for help from his noble relatives.

Anthony's future wife is introduced by means of the second plot in this novel, which concerns the characters surrounding Anthony's brother Edward. The captain of his

ship, Captain Tracy, is a bluff old sea-dog whose speech patterns are delivered with an authentic flavour.<sup>65</sup> Captain Tracy is a man of honour who has won his fortune by hard work at sea and who appreciates that of his subordinate, Edward, whom he treats as a son. Tracy has one main failing, however: he dotes upon his spoilt daughter, Mary Ann, to the extent that she becomes insufferable. He wants her to marry Edward, but neither of them wishes to, and Mary Ann marries Edward's brother Anthony instead.

The character of Mary Ann Tracy, later Stanley, is an intriguing one. It is she who becomes the tyrant, reversing the usual motif and thus feminising Anthony. She is vain and ambitious because of her father's indulgence. At school, her friends envied her because her father was generous. She aspired to be a 'parlour-boarder', meaning that she would live with the family of her teachers and receive extra perks, and she could embroider, speak a little French, play the harpsichord, sing and dance a little. At 16, she was highly accomplished. Eliza Parsons emerges from the narration here and tells us that Mary Ann would have excelled if her talents had been directed, but she was taught everything at once so knew just a little of many subjects. The key to the girl's faults here is in the nature of her 'accomplishments'. This attitude to female education, to teach them enough to be good companions to their future husbands, although nothing of any profundity or academic worth, is one with which Mary Wollstonecraft argues and it seems that she has a supporter in Eliza Parsons.<sup>66</sup> Mary Ann grows into a tall, genteel, showy woman, scornful and fond of repartee. The fact that she is strong and intelligent does not worry Eliza Parsons: what concerns her is that Mary Ann is spoilt and will use her strength and intellect for selfish ends.



Mary Ann, as befits a masculinised female tyrant, is the one set against Edward for comparison, rather than his brother. Her education, consisting as it does of ‘accomplishments’, is one which does not allow intellectual growth. Her talents are not only wasted but warped into deviousness, because there is no outlet for them. Mary Ann sharpens her wits on others not so intelligent, rather than sharing enlightened conversation with equals. Her goal is, thus, not a career as a businesswoman or scientist, but money and possessions. Eliza Parsons is asking the reader what an intelligent woman can hope. At best, she hopes for an intelligent man who will indulge her wit and discuss matters of importance with her, or one who will allow her to help him run his business. If she has not received a sound education she cannot follow Mary Wollstonecraft and others into print and engage in ethical and political debate. Bitterness and an unwillingness to suffer fools gladly might well result in her entry into criminality or at best avarice as her wits languish and potential festers. The social structure is not yet in place to allow Mary Ann autonomy. Thus, she acquires a husband, to give her status, who is weak, to allow her to ignore him and who is rich so that she can spend his fortune in freedom.

Eliza Parsons is the opposite of Mary Ann. She is well-educated, she has no husband and she is to some extent autonomous, within the bound of her finances. Educated rather than accomplished, she can use her talents to provide for herself and her family. Although she has few resources, she is surely relieved not to be in Mary Ann’s moral position. Although the latter has almost everything, Eliza Parsons utilises the element she lacks, a balanced education, in order to criticize women like her, for Mary Ann can hardly be of an unusual type. In fact, women like her might well form part of Eliza Parsons’ readership, attracted to novels for their sensation value. She

demonstrates her didactic purpose here by using Mary Ann as an example of where the desire for instant gratification can lead. Eliza Parsons is well aware that women are capable of high intelligence; her novels are full of such women, but she, like Mary Wollstonecraft, knows they are being wasted and corrupted. In Mary Wollstonecraft's opinion, women who ape the bad habits of men are worse than the men are.<sup>67</sup> Here we have an instance of such a woman. She decorates the house in an ostentatious manner, gives numerous parties to impress her visitors, and spends all of her husband's money in an audacious fashion. Although Mary Ann is not aristocratic, we realise that Eliza Parsons will ridicule anyone of any background whose main consideration is status. When Mary Ann contracts smallpox and recovers her health but not her looks, the reader feels she has been suitably punished by the writer for her arrogance and posturing, and probably for wasting money.

Two years after this novel, Eliza Parsons published *The Mysterious Visit*,<sup>68</sup> which, despite its title, was less to do with the supernatural than lack of parental responsibility. The visit in question is made by a stranger to a modest, unassuming 'surgeon, apothecary and accoucher' of York named Clifford who has 'too much integrity to flatter the foibles of the ladies'.<sup>69</sup> This is the kind of character Eliza Parsons' readers recognise as a good man. Working for both rich and poor patients, he is 'blessed by the poor, but unnoticed by the rich - for he was a nobody'.<sup>70</sup> By 1802, when this novel was published, Eliza Parsons has become a champion of the middle classes, emphasising their moral strength and work ethic, and showing the aristocracy to be littered with wastrels and womanisers. Clifford has been chosen by the stranger at his door after two months' travelling to find a worthy character who is unappreciated. The stranger offers £500 for two to three weeks of the doctor's

attendance. £100 of it is to be paid immediately, and the rest after he receives a card, cut in a zigzag, with the word 'Remember' on it. This is sufficiently mysterious to whet the reader's appetite, particularly when, on receipt of the card, Clifford is whisked away by a carriage. His spendthrift and sullen wife is left with £20, and the assurance that he will return in two weeks' time.

After a few weeks, Clifford returns to ask his wife to leave York as he has been offered a post paying £200 per year. He gives her £50, which she spends on clothes, as by now the reader knows she will. Clifford informs his wife that they are to live in Ireland, and she is to take on a three month old baby, named Georgina, as her own. Naturally, she is intensely displeased to hear she will live so far away from society, and worse, be responsible for the education of a child. After much travelling, and explaining of the details of the financial transaction Clifford has made, they arrive in the town of Killyreagh. Here they meet Lord Dunlaney who becomes a close friend. Unfortunately, he has another friend, Sir William Symonds, who is a dissipated and evil man. It is not long before Mrs Clifford leaves with her lover. Lord Dunlaney insists Mr Clifford come to live with him and his late wife's aunt, Miss Carrisfort, who is attracted to Clifford. However, Symonds has designs on her and she accepts his offer of marriage to spite Clifford, after he rejected her. She is also impressed by his rank. However, after machinations which result in Lord Dunlaney's move to France for his health, mysterious fires at his castle and Clifford's old home, now rented out, which destroyed papers relating to Lord Dunlaney's settlement of money on him, and finally Lord Dunlaney's death, Clifford disappears.

All these events are suffused with mysteries, but they are not quite of the usual Gothic variety. Amongst this busy plot, there are gossiping women who suspect that Georgina is the daughter of Lord Dunlaney and Miss Carrisfort, and that Clifford is party to the secret. There are evil servants who aid Symonds in his machinations to discredit Clifford, destroy his claim to Lord Dunlaney's legacy and abduct him. There are self-centred women who care nothing for those who protect them. Although it is true that these elements appear in Gothic novels, this text has no hauntings and no deranged monks:<sup>71</sup> nothing, in fact, which is otherworldly, only the ill nature versus the good nature of mankind. This is what I term 'worst-case realism', to be described more fully in Chapter 7. It is as melodramatic as the Gothic, but the extreme circumstances are realistically feasible.<sup>72</sup> Lord Dunlaney suffers two strokes, and dies of the second one, as James Parsons himself had. A conflagration breaks out destroying a man's livelihood, as indeed had happened to the Parsons family. Clifford's position changes from a man respected by a member of the nobility to the target of gossip and disdain following the departure of his spouse, a circumstance with which Eliza Parsons was well acquainted. Although extravagant in drama and emotion, these kinds of events are not only possible, but many of them had actually happened to Eliza Parsons. The less sensational aspects of the plot dealing with irregularities of behaviour such as absconding wives and ill-mannered scandal-mongering fit neatly into the parameters of the novel of manners.<sup>73</sup> When Eliza Parsons adds extra angst, earthbound as it is, it belongs in a different category from both the novel of manners and the Gothic text. Although an author such as Ann Radcliffe will add this level of calamity to her plots, it is always within the framework of the explained supernatural,<sup>74</sup> whereas Eliza Parsons chooses at times not to include

this factor, making evident to her readers that she believes that humankind itself can be fiendish, without recourse to pantomime ghouls.

This is confirmed when Sir William Symonds incarcerates his wife in a ruined castle he owns in Ulster. The trope of the ruined castle is naturally familiar as the setting for the Gothic,<sup>75</sup> but here the symbolism is stripped away, and the tyrant revealed as a dishonest person, not a feudal lord, as we would find, for example, in Clara Reeves' *Old English Baron*. Interestingly, all that Lady Symonds has brought with her are pen, ink and paper and a thread-case.<sup>77</sup> Here the reader is guided to pity Lady Symonds. If she repents of her former poor behaviour, she may be someone the reader can admire, as indicated by the fact that she has brought useful work items with her, intending to write and sew rather than admire the scenery. It is true that she had not expected to be abducted, having been told she was to visit a nephew. We recognise that there is a difference between her character and that of Mrs Clifford, who would have refused to go on any trip which did not include shopping or parties, and on being taken to a ruined castle, would have screamed and fainted. There are degrees of bad behaviour here, from the intractable to the intolerable, and all are to some extent blamed on poor upbringing. When the future Lady Symonds told Lord Dunlaney, out of jealousy, that she considered Mrs Clifford bold and ill-bred, he rebuked her by pointing out that Mrs Clifford has not had the benefit of education. The fact that Lady Symonds has may explain why she repents of her actions. Education has triumphed once more.

When Mr Clifford had disappeared, Sir William Symonds, as well as inheriting his wealth, had taken over his ward, Georgina. She had been told her 'father', Mr

Clifford, had died and believed herself indebted to Symonds. After one of the teachers at her school tells her of the misconduct of her 'mother', Mrs Clifford, Georgina is eager to leave, and when she does, Symonds falls in love with her. She is given good clothes and taken to the opera and theatre. She is beginning to be vain, but is innocent enough not to realise that onlookers are assuming she is Symonds' mistress as she is tall and looks 16. She tires of her dissipated life style after a few months, a circumstance which again emphasises that although one might make mistakes, one's upbringing will prevent any serious fault. She is sent to the country to recover from her experiences in town and, on a walk, meets a middle-aged gentleman who asks where she lives. She says she is honoured to live with Sir William Symonds, but the gentleman says no-one so young and seemingly innocent could be happy in such degrading circumstances. She is shocked and after questioning her further, the gentleman, who is a clergyman named Marsh, is impressed by her obvious innocence. He gives her a card, telling her to call on him in trouble, and takes her home, where she can see that Symonds knows him and wishes him gone. After Marsh leaves, Symonds gives way to temper for the first time, and Georgina begins to have doubts about him. The next day, Symonds takes her to London with no luggage and without saying goodbye to Mr Marsh and his wife. He says they have done with rustics. In a reversal of the usual form in novels, in which the outdoors is a place of danger for women, here it has brought help, in the shape of Mr Marsh, and London, usually a place of dubious morals, provides further aid to Georgina.

That night in London, while preparing for bed, Georgina notices a book behind the dressing-table mirror. It is the third volume of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), which the house-maid has been reading. Georgina reads for five hours until her candle

burns low. The villain Lovelace reminds her of Symonds. In the morning, she asks Martha the maid if the book is hers. Martha replies, 'I borrowed it, Miss, from the *circulating liberey*- there are seven of them great books, Miss'.<sup>70</sup> However, she explains, only two can be borrowed at a time. Georgina is worried that she will not have time in London to read them, but Martha tells her they can be bought, 'but perhaps master won't like it, for gentlemen, they say, don't like them there books'. Georgina, determined, and not knowing what books cost to buy, hands Martha three guineas. Having so much to spend, and having read Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), Martha buys them all for Georgina. Symonds says they are to leave the next day for Ireland, a fact discovered by Mr Marsh who sends a note to warn Georgina of the 'arch-deceiver' Symonds. She writes confessing her doubts about him and telling them she will write from Ireland where they are going to visit Lady Symonds. She packs everything but the first volume of *Pamela*, from which she immediately realises that she is in danger, having recognised Symonds in the character of Mr B.

The events described above give a fascinating insight into Eliza Parsons' motives. She allies herself with Richardson as a moralist, but, implicitly, also as a professional writer in dialogue with a great author. She allows herself to be considered on the same terms as Richardson. There is no better model for a writer of novels of manners, and thus her readers note her homage, perhaps approving her respectability. What is more, the reader receives a glimpse into the reading customs of the era: servants are borrowing books from the circulating library. Perhaps the reader is a servant, encouraged by this to read further works of Eliza Parsons. Most interestingly of all is the tacit understanding that reading novels is entirely sensible and moral, and can

even teach a young lady about the wicked people she must learn to distrust. From its frequently expressed role as a frivolous occupation, dangerous to the sensibilities,<sup>R1</sup> the novel form is held up as a shining light in the darkness of publishing.

This is in contrast to Charlotte Smith's use of Richardson in her fiction. Mary Anne Schofield, in "The Witchery of Fiction": Charlotte Smith, Novelist',<sup>82</sup> discusses her 1789 work, *Ethelinde, or The Recluse of the Lake*, in which a 'budding novelist', Miss Clarenthia Ludford, describes the plot of her latest work, finishing the catalogue with:

But I will not tell you a word more of it, because I will surprise you with the catastrophe, which is quite original; only one event is borrowed from the Arabian nights, and one description from Sir Charles Grandison. Rupert, indeed, says, that with a little application, my pen will become truly Richardsonian.<sup>83</sup>

Schofield points out that Smith is making Clarenthia and her novel techniques appear foolish, while in her stated imitation of Richardson, she is concerned with 'a psychological novel that probes the inner female psyche'.<sup>84</sup> I, however, argue that Richardson is being used ironically. Eliza Parsons mentions his work without irony, and indeed with reverence. Further evidence of the diverse manner in which the two writers handle the subject of reading fiction can be seen from Schofield's discussion, once more in *Ethelinde*, of the result of reading every book in the library. Smith's character, Ethelinde, reads all fiction, which includes romances, and thus, says Schofield, she sees the world 'through heroine-colored eyes'.<sup>85</sup> This is in stark contrast to Georgina, whose novel-reading induces her to face reality for the first time. Ethelinde is more akin to Charlotte Lennox's Arabella in *The Female Quixote* (1752), who expects life to mirror fiction in a much more romantic fashion than the disillusioned Georgina.



Symonds informs Georgina that his wife has died, although in fact, she is still imprisoned in his castle. The death means they will no longer be going to Ireland, but instead, to Paris. Shocked at her guardian's callous reaction to the supposed demise of his wife, Georgina is further alarmed to learn that they will be travelling with Mrs Hood, the widow of a colonel, who she considers rather showy and haughty. She sprinkles French phrases into her conversation, thus betraying herself as pretentious and perhaps rather 'fast'. Mrs Hood hates Georgina, as she sees that Symonds is falling in love with her, but thinks that once he has seduced her, his interest will wane; thus, she aids his machinations. In France, the cook, Babet, who speaks no English, has overheard Symonds and Mrs Hood planning Georgina's ruin, and finds an old man who has been to England who can warn her. Georgina, however, with the help of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, has been learning 'the respect due to female delicacy',<sup>86</sup> and with the help of Babet, she escapes.

To a writer so concerned with manners and good conduct, this escape is of major importance. Eliza Parsons' heroines are well-behaved and obedient to their elders, as befits a young, unmarried woman. For Georgina to defy Sir William Symonds, who stands *in loco parentis*, there must be urgent need, indeed. In fact, the risk of being dishonoured is the only circumstance in which a young woman could leave her guardian, as Georgina and *The Castle of Wolfenbach's* Matilda do (1796). Though Eliza Parsons has paid homage to Richardson by allowing his characters to teach Georgina to recognise a sexual predator, she goes further than he does. Unlike Pamela, whose oft-repeated 'virtue' is rather passive, Georgina leaves, despite being in a foreign country where she does not know the language and has no friends except

for Babet. Women organise the flight. Babet has asked a woman who keeps the inn to write the directions to the mountains, where Georgina will find a monastery. The following morning, Babet takes her on to the road, kisses her and leaves her. Once again, the outside world, usually so dangerous, is the only safe place to be for a young woman pursued by a man whose failings are purely town-bred. Eliza Parsons seems to be saying that, as evil can be found anywhere, so can good. Unlike Evelina in the pleasure-garden, waylaid by prostitutes, Georgina is safer alone. She meets good people when she leaves the company of sophisticates, meeting Mr Marsh on a country walk, and here, about to meet a man living a solitary life, who takes her in for two days and intercedes for her at the monastery.

Eliza Parsons, in making mention of those works which had influenced her, appears to wish to modify them, to take them further and add to the literary heritage. Although seemingly in awe of Richardson and, in her first preface, of Burney,<sup>87</sup> she cannot help but test her cultural credibility, attempting to amass, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, cultural capital, on which to build the economic variety.<sup>RR</sup> Her novels of manners are on the one hand, full of the details of masquerades, routs and plays, indicating that she knew how the rich spent their leisure. Her adaptation of the Moliere play<sup>89</sup> and the translations of Augustus la Fontaine<sup>90</sup> may well be intended to display her cultural worth. This appears to be part of a targeted assault on the rich. Ultimately, she is still writing for money. Presumably, she wanted her novels to be read by the right sort of reader, because the right sort of reader did not only borrow, but sometimes bought. To keep the upper classes happy was doubtless also to keep the wolf from the door. On the other hand, however, she also stretches the boundaries of the novel of manners, by

bringing in 'worst-case realism' and giving her delicately-raised young heroines a refreshing, and practical, desire to respond actively to danger.

It is Eliza Parsons' status as elderly widow and mother which appears to have been responsible for the two seemingly disparate qualities in her work: one, a moralising, somewhat conservative tone and the other, a tendency towards the sympathetic portrayal of strong, and even deviant characters and opinions. Since she was around 50 years of age when she began to write, the moral, rather old-fashioned approach is unremarkable. She has sole responsibility for the support, education and occupations of her children, and the decision - and anxiety - about their marriage arrangements is hers alone. Evidence of the importance to Eliza Parsons of her maternal position is frequently to be found among her plots, letters and dedications. For example, in the dedication of *The History of Miss Meredith* to the Marchioness of Salisbury, the author thanks her for her generosity, 'for the preservation of eight dear fatherless children' and says that she has been induced to publish in the hope of providing for her family.<sup>91</sup> Many of her novels feature widowed mothers of sometimes wayward children, about whom they suffer anxiety and hope to see married respectably. This facet of her life explains her insistence on the obedience of children to parental wishes, particularly when of marriageable age. It explains her persistence in demonstrating her moral stance, and her frequent adherence to the socially-acceptable norm.

The very same widowed status, however, is also responsible for the extremely dissimilar strand in Eliza Parsons' fiction, a strand so dissimilar as to be apparently irreconcilable with the old-fashioned morality just discussed. This constituent

concerns her strong, and occasionally deviant, female characters, her sponsorship of the middle and lower classes, her reiterated belief in goodness of heart, rather than richness of pocket, and other elements of a political quality in her work. These factors are usually seen in parallel with more conservative aspects in the novels and grow in frequency and intensity as her career progresses. As already mentioned above, her widowed state can account for both of these strands.

In British society at this time, the only truly autonomous woman was the widow. Freed from filial obedience to a parent and wifely obedience to a husband, she, if of great enough financial consequence, could act for herself, and, to a greater or lesser degree, must go out in the world, to see to business and domestic affairs. Her poverty made Eliza Parsons of rather less consequence than she had been, but her new professional status gave her the same position as a working man. It seems obvious, then, that in order to write, she had to interest herself in various aspects of society to be sure of accurate portrayals. Coffee houses, gambling dens, banks, are all described and named. ~ Shipping details are itemised. Merchant's houses, in which to place a young male character as clerk, are depicted in detail.<sup>97</sup> Newspaper articles appear, describing duels.<sup>98</sup> Male characters discuss French politics, or the low wages the king pays his sailors.<sup>99</sup> We cannot know if Eliza Parsons was interested in all of these things before she became a writer, but she makes good use of her knowledge in her works.

Perhaps in the expression of opinions, sometimes in her own person or as narrator, and sometimes by proxy for her characters, she becomes more accustomed to having opinions to express. The necessity of dealing with her publisher, as well as managing

her household and her debts, must have brought her into the world, and made her assertive if she had not been so before her career began. This interaction with the world, in real life and for her fiction, may well have led to a freedom, a desire for experimentation with power, a perception of a captive audience to win over. This tendency is expressed in a number of ways, some more subtle than others, whether it be the eventual victory of female aspiration after initial adherence to paternal law in Eliza Parsons' first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), or the portrayal of a thoroughly wicked woman later in her career, in *The Mysterious Warning* (1796). However, it is a tendency which finds a perfect outlet in her Gothic novels, the subject of the next chapter.

- 1 Letter to William Windham M.P. 14th May, 1793.
- 2 Dorothy Blakey, *The Minerva Press, 1790-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1939).
- J *ibid.*, pp 59-60.
- 4 *ibid.*, p 60.
- 5 *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) had not been part of Blakey's study of Minerva fiction, having been published by Hookham.
- 6 Judy Simons, 'Fanny Burney: the Tactics of Subversion' in Dale Spender (ed) *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, (1992).
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 129.
- 8 For example, see the discussion of *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) in Chapter 7.
- 9 Judy Simons, 'Fanny Burney: the Tactics of Subversion' in *Living by the Pen*, p. 129.
- 10 Felicity Nussbaum, 'Eighteenth-century Women's Autobiographical Commonplaces' in Shari Benstock (ed) *The Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 154.
- n See the review of *The Voluntary Exile* in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 14, 1795, p. 352 for the opinion of an exasperated journalist who is sickened by the faintings in this novel. However, others, for example the writers of reviews in *the Analytical Review* Vol 21, 1795, pp. 296-299, and *The Monthly Review* Vol. XVII, 1795, p. 463, consider the characterisation in this work quite natural.
- 12 For example, Matilda in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and Georgina in *The Mysterious Visit* (1802).
- 11 For example, Ellen in *Ellen and Julia* (1793).
- 14 Letter to William Windham, MP, 14th May 1793.
- 10 An outcome reused by Eliza Parsons many times.
- 16 James Raven, *Judging New Wealth* p. 78.
- 17 *ibid.* I am unsure why the point is made that Sir George's death is 'at least' swift, indicating a measure of relief on Raven's part that the author has been merciful, or, perhaps, that she does not seem to have followed the norm on this occasion.
- 181 return briefly to this subject at the end of this chapter.
- 19 Raven, p. 79.
- 20 Eliza Parsons, *The History of Miss Meredith*, Vol. 1, pp. 75-76.
- 21 Raven, p. 142.
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 144.
- 24 By the end of her career, she is more open.
- 25 Eliza Parsons' homage to Richardson is discussed later in this chapter.
- 26 Raven, p. 79.
- 27 For example, *The Errors of Education* (1791) and *The Convict: or Navy Lieutenant* (1807).
- 28 This sub-plot is particularly well-depicted in Eliza Parsons' final novel, *The Convict: or Navy Lieutenant* (1807).
- 29 Graham Roberts, in his glossary for Pam Morris (ed) *The Bakhtin Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 250, gives a short version of Bakhtin's definition of the carnivalesque: 'Carnivalized literature takes from medieval carnival the inversion of power structures, the parodic debunking of all that a particular society takes seriously (including and in particular all that which it fears)'. Roberts points out that Bakhtin considered the novel as a genre to be the site of the carnivalesque. 'The novel, by the 'carnivalesque' way it revitalizes stability, inverts the hierarchies (however temporarily), and leaves unresolved the dialogue between author and hero, is an 'open' genre, extending into the absolute future of meaning.' My use of the term, however, refers to the specific depiction of inverted roles and power structures as seen in this discussion of the masquerade scene in *The Errors of Education*.
- J Terry Castle *Masquerade and Civilization in Eighteenth Century English Culture and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 2.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 Addison cited in Castle, p. 5.
- 34 *ibid.*
- j5 The elements reused include a wayward husband and an unwilling heroine accosted by strangers in disguises, volubly declaring her hatred of the masquerade and its transgressions of behaviour.
- 36 Castle, p. 59.
- ^ *ibid.*, p. 55.
- 38 *ibid.*

- 39 *ibid.*, p. 57.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 127.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 Although not as a young woman, as it opened in 1771, when she was in her thirties.
- 43 Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Rights of Woman* was published in 1792, the year after *The Errors of Education*.
- 44 Eliza Parsons, *The Errors of Education*, (London: Minerva, 1791), Vol I, Ch I, p6.
- 45 Unnamed reviewer, review published with Eliza Parsons' play *The Intrigues of a Morning*, Minerva, London 1792.
- 46 *The Critical Review* ns, Vol. 3, 1791, p. 234.
- 47 Eliza Parsons, *The Errors of Education*, Vol. III, Ch. 30, pp. 161-185.
- 48 *ibid.*, Vol. II, Ch. 26, pp. 195-202.
- 49 *ibid.*, Ch. 20, pp. 102-108.
- 50 *ibid.*, Vol. III, Ch. 27, p. 26.
- 51 *ibid.*, Ch. 33, pp. 230-242.
- 52 Eliza Parsons, *Woman as She Should Be*, (London: Minerva, 1793), p. 53.
- 53 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Rights of Woman*, quoted by Tom Furniss, 'Nasty Tricks and Tropes: Sexuality and Language in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*' in *Studies in Romanticism*, Summer 1993, Vol 32 (2), pp. 177-209.
- 54 *ibid.*, p. 199.
- 55 *ibid.*
- 56 An alternative is that both works take their cue from Rousseau's ideas of education in *Emile*, but this does not explain the title *Woman as She Should Be*, with its Godwinian echoes.
- 57 Eliza Parsons, *Ellen and Julia*, (London: Minerva, 1793), p. 44.
- 58 *ibid.*
- 59 *ibid.*
- 60 Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, (1752) (Oxford: World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 61 Eliza Parsons, *Ellen and Julia*, p. 45.
- 62 Review of *Woman as She Should Be* in *The Critical Review*, Vol 9, p. 120, 1793.
- 63 Eliza Parsons, *The Miser and His Family*, (1800), pp. 9-15.
- 64 Cf, for example, *Ellen and Julia* in the novel of the same name (1793) (details above) or Harriet and Emma in *The History of Miss Meredith*, (1790).
- 65 See Chapter 8 for a discussion of Tracy's mode of speech.
- 66 See Mary Wollstonecraft, 'A Revolution in Female Manners', in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Duncan Wu (ed), *Romanticism, An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 136.
- 67 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 'A Revolution in Female Manners', pp. 92-93, quoted in Duncan Wu *Romanticism, An Anthology*, p. 136. Wollstonecraft states that women: 'obtaining power by unjust means in practising or fostering vice, evidently lose the rank which reason would assign them, and they become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. They lose all simplicity, all dignity of mind, in acquiring power, and act as men are observed to act when they have been exalted by the same means.'
- 68 Eliza Parsons, *The Mysterious Visit* (Brentford: Norbury, 1802).
- 69 *ibid.*, p. 1.
- 70 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 71 As, for example, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796) or Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796)
- 72 For a discussion on the history and components of the Gothic, see Emma Clery's *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Robert Miles' *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (London: Routledge 1993).
- 73 For discussion on the novel of manners, see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), and Cheryl Turner, *Living By The Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, (1992) (1994).
- 74 For a discussion on Ann Radcliffe's techniques, see Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1995).
- 75 See Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle- Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

- 76 Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
- 77 Like Eliza Parsons, on the loss of her spouse, her only recourse is her 'needle and pen', referred to by the writer in her letter to Dr Dale, 17th December 1792, Royal Literary Fund Archives, discussed in Chapter 2.
- 78 For example, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), and Frances Burney's *Evelina*, (1778).
- 79 Eliza Parsons, *The Mysterious Warning*, Vol. 2, p. 168.
- 80 *ibid.*
- 81 See Charlotte Lennox's, *The Female Quixote* (1752) (Oxford: World's Classics, 1998), or Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993, for gentle satire of romances and novels. See also Michael Gamer's introduction to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, (1764) (London: Penguin Classics 2001), pp. xiii-xviii, for a discussion of its reception.
- 82 Mary Anne Schofield "The Witchery of Fiction": Charlotte Smith, Novelist', in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, Dale Spender (ed) (1992), pp. 177-187.
- 83 *ibid.*, p. 181
- 84 *ibid.*
- 85 *ibid.*, p. 178.
- 86 Eliza Parsons, *The Mysterious Warning*, (1796) Vol. 2, p. 246.
- 87 Preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790).
- 88 Cultural capital is defined by the editor, John B. Thompson, of Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991) p. 14, as 'knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications'.
- 89 Eliza Parsons, *The Intrigues of a Morning* (1792).
- 90 Eliza Parsons, *Love and Gratitude* (Brentford: Norbury, 1804).
- 91 Dedication of *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790).
- 92 Examples of this kind of detail appear in *The Errors of Education* (1791), which is predominantly set in contemporary London. Characters live in, or visit, named places, such as Stanhope Street, Mayfair; St James's Street; Clardges Street; the Mall; Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. Brookes's appears to be a known house in which to gamble, and The Thatched House, in which to dine.
- 9j In *The Miser and His Family* (1800), discussed on pages 156-157, above.
- 94 As in *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) discussed on page 129, above.
- 95 See the discussion of *The Convict; or Navy Lieutenant* (1807) in Chapter 8.



**CHAPTER 7**  
**An Analysis of Eliza Parsons' Gothic Novels**

*7/7 these Melancholy Circumstances I have to write works offancy...]*

In this chapter, I shall discuss the Gothic novels of Eliza Parsons, a major part of her output. First of all, however, I want to discuss briefly some aspects of the term 'Female Gothic' coined by Ellen Moers.<sup>2</sup> Since this term was introduced in 1976, it has been challenged many times as too simplistic or as a mere 'umbrella' term for the writing that women do in the Gothic mode. I shall refer in this chapter to a number of critics who engage with this concept, but I want first to suggest a way to read the Female Gothic which takes into account that it is concerned with a complex representation, which is almost always transgressive. That is, Male Gothic, which began the mode, is perhaps the version which is formulaic, and Female Gothic is in tension with this model, and thus is more difficult, if not impossible, to classify and contain, since it will always subvert the prototype, and different writers will find many means by which to subvert it. If this is the case, then Moers' statement that Female Gothic is defined as work done by women in the Gothic mode stands perfectly well as it is.

In an essay called 'Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies', Lauren Fitzgerald takes Ellen Moers to task, as she 'draws on an argument for ownership (of women's work) based in the body'. However, this could be seen as just, if we consider the topics about which women are writing: for example, money. It is because they are female that they are bound by oppressive property laws. I do not see this as an over-simplification, since women are responding to the outrages committed against them because they have female bodies. Their physical similarity

does not, however, indicate that their writing is identical, and it is in this diversification that the problem of classification arises. This topic is addressed by Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, who state that by the 1990s:

partly as a result of poststructuralism's destabilising of the categories of gender, the term was increasingly being qualified and there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the Female Gothic constitutes a separate literary genre. Today, over 25 years later, the terms being offered - 'women's gothic', 'feminine Gothic', 'lesbian Gothic', even 'Gothic feminism' - appear to suggest that Moers' definition is too much an umbrella term, and, possibly, too essentialising.<sup>4</sup>

Another view might suggest that the reason Female Gothic now has so many terms to describe its various forms is because recent work has shown it to be more complex than we knew. Not all women write in the same way or for the same purposes as Ann Radcliffe, but that does not mean that what they write is not Female Gothic. Perhaps, as an admittedly reductionist umbrella, it will suffice to remind us of the complexity and diverseness of the writing of women in the Gothic mode. This does not indicate that we should not try to tease apart the strands; indeed, we need to, in order to understand women's experience better, but perhaps this is not yet fully possible. There are very many more writers to discover, not only unknown, but previously discarded as second-rate, whose work needs to be studied anew, from the point of view of a female reader whose life, simply because it was lived before feminism was formulated and classified, was not merely one lived in the shadow of men with no recourse to pride in achievement or experience of sisterhood.

Possibly, we should regard the inception of the term Female Gothic as a historically informed reaction to the second phase of American feminist literary criticism, as Lauren Fitzgerald suggests, which

focused on uncovering the lost tradition of women's literature, rather than revealing cultural traditions of misogyny as Kate Millet, for example, had done in her 'first phase' classic, *Sexual Politics* (1970).<sup>5</sup>

To uncover a lost tradition is now seen as the main goal in recovering unknown women's writing, and this is the aim of my thesis. However, I consider that the term Female Gothic is not yet redundant, more especially as I can see no classification with which to replace it. This appears to me to be more of a statement about the complexity and diversity of women's writing and its varied utilization of a set of formulaic tropes than it is about the narrowness of the term employed to describe the process.

Gothic writing is an area in which Eliza Parsons challenges a number of boundaries, among them the model of Gothic devised by Ann Radcliffe. As well as writing fully-fledged Gothic novels, she wrote many which were mainly realist but Gothic-influenced: that is to say, these novels represent certain elements recognisable as well-used by exponents of the genre, such as tyrant Lords and lost mothers,<sup>6</sup> but without extreme aspects, such as the supernatural, or the 'German' subtitle she appends to her two best known Gothic works, to be discussed<sup>7</sup> below. However, although it is possible to read all of these novels through their use of Gothic tropes, I want to see these works, including the most extreme, as fundamentally realist. I have called this genre 'worst-case realism', a term which both describes the content of the novels and displays some of the main concerns of their author. When the novels contain recognisably Gothic elements, they will be discussed in those terms, but the features of realism within them will also be examined, as they link all of the novels mentioned in this chapter.

The term 'worst-case realism' refers to a literary subgenre which deals with the kind of tragic events which, although severe, were sufficiently real for Eliza Parsons to have encountered them, or were circumstances not too different from them, in her own life. The loss of a husband, children, livelihood and high standard of living are all present in these novels, and they were all part of Eliza Parsons' own experience. There are many instances of devastating fires in her works, a reminder of the fire which was a major tragedy in her life. To be locked in a tower by one's evil spouse is not anything Mr Parsons had inflicted on his wife, but when it is represented in a novel, such as *Murray House* (1804),<sup>9</sup> to be discussed below, the abandoned wife behaves rather more realistically than a Gothic heroine might. She is not beset by ghosts or other supernatural terrors. Neither does she exclaim on the wonders of the sublime scenery, as might have been the case in an Ann Radcliffe novel:<sup>9</sup> rather, she is confined there while her husband tours Europe with his mistress, and she fears penury rather than mad monks. The circumstances, then, although extreme, are realistic. These novels, like the rest of Eliza Parsons' works, contain detailed discussions of finances. This fact has been noted by Edward Copeland,<sup>10</sup> who remarks that the works of many women who had to write for money are strewn with references to how their characters' lives were financed, down to the most minute detail. One of Eliza Parsons' works, *The Voluntary Exile* (1795), Copeland terms 'Business Gothic', stating that '[i]ts catastrophes are remorseless, violent, and always commercial'.<sup>11</sup> 'Business Gothic' is a useful expression which I would extend to cover others of her works, such as *Murray House* (1804) and *The Miser and his Family* (1800), due to their concern with financial transaction. However, the term can refer not only to the writer's preoccupation with and fear of poverty, but also to her eye for a money-making genre of writing. In the case of worst-case realism, I feel it is rather the former

interpretation with which Eliza Parsons is concerned. All of her genres show a desire for financial success, of course, but in this particular type of writing, she writes out her fears and something of her experience. Her use of Gothic is not simply a cynical reappropriation of the form, but a means of consciousness-raising and witness-bearing toward the difficulties faced by women. By means of worst-case realism, she utilizes the Gothic form to explore fears and aspirations which women may not otherwise express. She is not alone in reshaping this male-invented mode to protest about patriarchal domination, but her version is one which is easily recognised by and appeals to women. For her, it is not escapism, but a means of exposing real anxiety and in some sense, a way to ameliorate that anxiety, through her determination to make thoughts thinkable, to display in her texts strong female friendships and to alert her female readers to the damage women can do to one another.

This understanding of women's concerns means that the reaction of the reader is of immense importance to her. Reviews of Eliza Parsons' works sometimes point out her realism, sometimes exactly the opposite,<sup>12</sup> but reviewers are generally men: evidently, this kind of writing has meaning mainly for the women who read it. Readers are given permission to face real possibilities about marriage: forced marriages, absconding husbands, husbands who are gamblers, kidnappers, womanisers, bigamists - even murderers. The manner in which these events are portrayed does not indulge in the extremities of Gothic. However, although there is no supernatural element, no ghostly apparition, no fainting overwrought female, there are features which appear in Gothic texts. There is a tyrant lord. There is often a taboo, a flight, an absent mother and so on, but these features are firmly considered as possibilities in the 'real' world of the novel of formal realism, rather than the Gothic romance. The woman under this

pressure will generally face it with fortitude. She will rarely faint. She will make positive attempts to free herself, instead of waiting to be rescued. Indeed as Edward Copeland points out, a character in one novel suffering just such a trial makes a comment which indicates Eliza Parsons' desire to distance herself from too unrealistic an approach:

She takes the opportunity in her last novel, *Murray House* (1804) to rebuke Radcliffe, her greater rival, for what she perceives as Radcliffe's inadequate account of the miseries of women's economic isolation: "I find nothing in this castle, in these sublime and picturesque views," cries Parsons' suffering heroine, whose adulterous and spendthrift husband has sent her to live in a crumbling Scottish castle, "to compensate for the loss of society, the deprivation of liberty. - Prospects, however grand and beautiful, cease to interest when the novelty is over" (II, 263).<sup>14</sup>

Eliza Parsons' antipathy to Ann Radcliffe is evident in more than one text, a circumstance to which I shall refer later in this chapter. Here, however, it is clear that she wants the distress of women at the hands of their husbands to be placed firmly in the realm of the possible.

Before turning to these novels of worst-case realism, I want first to discuss the works which can truly be considered as belonging to the Gothic genre. Eliza Parsons was known in her own time for her Gothic novels. This is evident from a number of sources, the most noteworthy being Jane Austen. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, in *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe is encouraging Catherine Morland to read the works of Ann Radcliffe and a number of other 'horrid novels', a list of seven of which she provides for Catherine's edification. They are works by Francis Lathom, Eliza Parsons, Regina Maria Roche, Eleanor Sleath, Peter Teuthold and P. Will. No authors' names are given, only novel titles, and Varmal? points out that for one

hundred and fifty years it had been thought that Austen had invented them. Varma notes that in writing an introduction to *The Tales of Mystery* (1891), Professor Saintsbury had expressed his doubt that the titles were those of real novels.

I have not read a single one of the list which was 'all horrid' - *Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *Orphan of the Rhine*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. I should indeed like some better authority than Miss Isabella Thorpe's to assure me of their existence.<sup>16</sup>

Varma states that Montague Summers had believed in their existence and a lively correspondence had begun in *Notes and Queries* between devotees of the genre, when a Mr M. H. Dodds identified *Clermont* in 1912. This find provided the momentum to locate the other six, critics such as Montague Summers and Michael Sadleir taking a keen interest in their provenance. Eventually all the novels were discovered and were of interest only to students of Romantic fiction until The Folio Press published them in 1968 as *The Northanger Set of Horrid Novels* chiefly, one assumes, as a curiosity or item of interest for Austen readers. Though no-one now remarks it, at the time it would seem that Eliza Parsons had been well-known for her writing in this genre, since she is the only author who is represented by two novels in Isabella's list. Both her main Gothic works (mentioned by Austen) are subtitled as 'German' in style.<sup>17</sup> This is presumably one of the reasons Austen chose these titles, as to be 'German' emphasises their 'horrid' qualities. Why Eliza Parsons does subtitle the works in this way could have several explanations. Perhaps it is a shrewd means of ensuring her readers know that they are really Gothic, or an indication of her own preferred reading, since she does tend to include Schiller-like bandits<sup>18</sup> and German or Austrian locations. A further reason for the subtitle 'A German Tale' of the later of the two novels, *The Mysterious Warning* of 1796, might be that it was dedicated to the

German Princess of Wales, Caroline of Brunswick, as mentioned in Chapter 3 on Dedications.

Devendra Varma, in *The Gothic Flame*,<sup>19</sup> discusses the *Northanger* 'horrid novels'. He asserts that Austen chose the seven titles deliberately, and quotes Montague Summers' assessment that they show only three or four Gothic fiction traits. *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) are categorised as aping German fashions. The first, he says, corresponds to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and the second recalls Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and, says Varma, 'has all the sadism of the terror novel'. In 1968 the Folio Press published the *Northanger Set of Horrid Novels* and Devendra Varma provided introductions to Eliza Parsons' *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796). In doing so, he broadened the range of topics discussed but in most cases, his introduction repeated remarks made by critics contemporary with her. He notes, as did they, that she is a widowed mother of eight, of a very moral disposition and advertises her works as of benefit to young girls, a sentiment with which the reviewers seem to have agreed. He mentions the fact that a reviewer took her to task for certain grammatical errors in her works. Where modern critics make only brief mention of Eliza Parsons, they tend to repeat these remarks,<sup>20</sup> with the result that a misleading impression of Eliza Parsons has become standard.<sup>91</sup>

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) was not the only contemporary source to indicate Eliza Parsons' popularity as a Gothic writer, although others are not so well-known to modern readers. Her obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* " indicates her profession and fame, as discussed in Chapter 5. A less respectable circumstance



occasioning a mention in *The Times* of September 6th 1804<sup>23</sup> also reveals her noteworthy contribution to Gothic fiction. An item on the Surrey Sessions for the day mentions her appearance before the magistrate on the charge of non-payment of taxes and obtaining goods under false pretences, of which the second was dismissed and the first remedied by amendment of her schedule. Her fame as a writer of Gothic novels is evident from the description given in the article:

**MRS. ELIZABETH PARSONS**

This lady is well known in the literary world for numerous works of imagination, in a style of composition founded on the romance of the Provençal poets of the 12th century, familiarly known by the name of *novel writing*. She is a widow with eight children, who have been supported by her talents. She holds the office of sempstress to the Royal establishment, and the ground of the opposition to her deliverance was, first, that she had obtained goods under false pretences; and next, that she had not introduced into her schedule the sum due from the Lord Chamberlain's office, for the place she enjoyed.<sup>24</sup>

The writer of this piece seems to be appalled at having to sully *The Times*' pages with mention of such a lowly profession, particularly since her non-payment of taxes was related to her post in the Lord Chamberlain's office, her salary for which she had omitted to mention in her tax schedule. This is hardly surprising, since, as she had informed The Royal Literary Fund's trustees, the Civil List was seven quarters in arrears. *The Times*, however, seems to be shocked that a recipient of the King's bounty should indulge in '*novel writing*' - affecting to know nothing of such a thing - and no doubt her financial defalcations were only to be expected.

Eliza Parsons doubtless indulged in the writing of Gothic novels for the same reason as most other writers of the genre: it was popular and it sold well: however, she utilises Gothic in a number of interesting ways. She is using the Gothic as set up by

Walpole, Reeve and Lee and helps to shape it, since she pre-empts Lewis in the creation of an evil woman.<sup>96</sup> Although at the beginning of the 1790s she is in the vanguard of the flood of writing in this mode, she is nonetheless calling on *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Recess* and *The Old English Baron* as blueprints for the mode when she makes her first foray into it with *The Castle of Wolfenbach* in 1793. Thus, although Gothic is utilised by its writers for many different purposes, there are nonetheless ground rules already written which are disturbed and shifted by Eliza Parsons' approach. She at once maintains her respectability by using the mode to express views on religion and education, and as a sounding-board for the expression of the fears and aspirations of women. She gives her female characters strong voices and differentiates them to the extent that we recognise them as 'realistic'. She uses worst-case realism to point out the genuine anxiety behind motifs such as imprisonment, and presents women as captive not in a dungeon, by a monk, but in penury, by an upper-class, morally dubious husband.

Many critics, both contemporary and modern, have seen her writing as an imitation of Ann Radcliffe's. James R. Foster mentions the preface to her first novel in which she names Frances Bumey, Agnes Maria Bennett, Clara Reeve and Charlotte Smith as her models and sees her similarity to Smith in other novels, such as *The Errors of Education*, *Lucy* and *The Voluntary Exile*.<sup>97</sup> He then asserts, however, that with *The Mysterious Warning*, she began to take so many of her sisters of the pen to copy Ann Radcliffe, and she wrote several other similar to this one'.<sup>98</sup> Dale Spender cites Robin Riley Fast, who considered that Eliza Parsons borrowed from Ann Radcliffe, but Spender does at least concede that she

...introduced elements of her own into her fiction, particularly as they related to women. She argued that if women were weak then there was all the more reason to educate them, and she was consistently concerned with women's vulnerability which was a product of their economic dependence.<sup>29</sup>

Montague Summers links the two writers here, when describing a walk to the Avon Gorge he used to take:

Here, surrounded by extensive and finely laid-out grounds, stood the picturesque and romantically Gothic building generally known as Cook's Folly. When I write 'Gothic' I do not mean as regards architecture, but as regards atmosphere, for Cook's Folly was entirely in the tradition of Mrs Radcliffe and Eliza Parsons. Here might a Montoni or a Don Felix de Salverda dwell.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting that Summers chooses Eliza Parsons here to link with Ann Radcliffe in the matter of devotion to follies. Remarkably, too, he mentions, in the same sentence as the notorious Montoni, the rather lesser-known Don Felix. One cannot help wondering if his readers were puzzled, not everyone having the same acquaintance with obscure characters in forgotten novels. What Summers does not say is that for Eliza Parsons a folly would fulfil the same role in a novel as a castle, a tower or a dungeon. It would function purely as a fortress in which to imprison a woman, rather than having been selected partly for its appearance as a place of wild and sublime beauty, Ann Radcliffe's most likely representation of such a building. Eliza Parsons' Gothic motifs are generally anchored firmly in the real world.

In noting the changing features of the novel form. Summers divides the Gothic into terror-Gothic and sentimental-Gothic. In his first category, Eliza Parsons' works do not appear, not even the two 'German' titles, featured in *Northanger Abbey*, but he places in the second, *Lucy* (1794) and *The Girl of the Mountains* (1797). He reminds

his readers that Gothic novels are generally romantic, whereas sentimental novels have a quality of realism - an unremarkable comment, but what is important here is the reaction Summers imagines will be produced from the reader of the sentimental novel.<sup>32</sup>

The novel, which was at first romantic or at least picaresque, soon partook of a certain realism. Then gradually fiction grew more realistic and less romantic, until romance again asserted its sway in the efflorescence of the Gothic Novel, where it was the supreme quality, and in the Sentimental Novel where it was blended with such an undercurrent of contemporary life as should make the fair reader delightedly exclaim, "Why, all this might easily happen to me!"

It is this quality to which the readers of Eliza Parsons' worst-case realism are exposed - although perhaps their exclamations were less delighted than ruefully despondent. Summers, too, recognises this quality in some of her works. He goes on to say that the reader could not expect Montoni to abduct her to the furthest isles of Tremiti, like Ariadne in *The Bandit Chief*,<sup>34</sup> or be locked in a cloister of a convent:

None the less it was clearly within the bounds of possibility that our heroine might so fascinate the heart of some bad bold baronet, that as she was returning from the Hotwells assembly or the Lower Rooms at Bath, he would whisk her away in his four-horsed chaise to the heavy Gothic magnificence of Arundel Hall amid the loveliest Cornish moors, where a grim-visaged steward would fit the role of gaoler well enough and a mysterious silent housekeeper prove as veritable a dragon-duenna as any Abbess of the Abruzzi. Did not the elder O'Farrel abduct his innocent victim Mrs. Parsons' Lucy from Lady Campley, Mrs. Murray and Henrietta, even in Whitehall itself, and hurry her via Harwich and Ostend as far as Verona before she was rescued? Did he not even continue to kidnap her from Verona to Vicenza, so strange and extravagant were his schemes? Life - on the printed page - was full of thrills!<sup>35</sup>

It seems that it is the reality and ordinary quality of the settings which have convinced Summers that these novels operated 'within the bounds of possibility', rather than the plot events, which still seem to him rather extreme, as is evident by discussion of

kidnap and his recognition of such essential Gothic personalities as the ‘bad bold baronet’, ‘grim-visaged steward’, ‘mysterious silent housekeeper’ and ‘dragon-duenna’. Summers classifies some novels as ‘terror-Gothic’ and others as ‘sentimental-Gothic’. As mentioned above, not even the titles mentioned in *Northanger Abbey* are classed as terror-Gothic, but in the sentimental-Gothic category, he places *Lucy* (1794) and *The Girl of the Mountains* (1797). *Lucy* is also singled out for its use of ‘the madhouse episode’, although I would add *The Miser and His Family*, (1800).<sup>36</sup>

The madhouse episode occurs in many other novels [he has just mentioned *Theodore Cyphon; or, The Benevolent Jew*] of which it will be sufficient to mention Mrs. Parsons’ *Lucy* 1794, Henry Cockton’s *Valentine Vox* 1840, Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* 1860, G.W.M. Reynolds’ *Joseph Wilmot* 1865; and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *The Rose and the Key* 1871.<sup>37</sup>

It is not surprising that Summers should link these earlier novelists with those of the later nineteenth century, as he notes that writers such as Eliza Parsons, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith and Isabella Kelly are ‘still being widely-read and enjoyed until the middle years of the Victorian era’.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the elements of kidnap, madhouses and other kinds of confinement still have resonance for the Victorian reader.

Once again, in the quotation above, Summers has linked Eliza Parsons with Ann Radcliffe. However, although Eliza Parsons’ works are full of explained supernatural and ruined castles, thus adhering so far to the female Gothic formula established by Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, and Charlotte Smith, and popularised by Ann Radcliffe, they are essentially family dramas, about sons wronged by fathers and wives wronged by husbands. Her novels are not about evil monks, sublime landscape and poetry-composing trapped heroines and thus she is critiquing Ann Radcliffe. Her heroines

spend their imprisonment working out means of escape. Her clergy are for the most part helpful, nuns offer a place of refuge for women and the landscape is dismissed as largely irrelevant, or a terrain to be conquered in the quest to escape. Eliza Parsons' previously mentioned antipathy to Ann Radcliffe is evident in remarks like the following one from *The Valley of St. Gothard* of 1799, in which the narrator says she will not dwell on descriptive scenery, since

Coxe's Letters have already furnished the descriptive novelists with whole pages of beautiful scenery, the repetition of which are now as tedious as a thrice-told tale.<sup>39</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the assumption that this is a hint as to the source of Ann Radcliffe's sublime descriptions, and Eliza Parsons seems to suggest that she rises above such a practice. Edward Copeland is convinced of the disparity between the two writers and their aims:

Ann Radcliffe speaks to a readership with a different experience altogether, as does Jane Austen.<sup>40</sup> It is not surprising then that in *Northanger Abbey* when Ann Radcliffe is praised by Henry Tilney, Austen's readers find two of Eliza Parsons' works on Isabella Thorpe's list of "horrid novels".<sup>41</sup>

In 1793, Eliza Parsons published the first of these 'horrid novels', *The Castle of Wolfenbach*. In this novel, there is a twist on the usual female Gothic form. The evil Count Wolfenbach has forced his wife to swear to live concealed in a disused wing of his castle, because she had not wished to marry him, having loved someone else. However, she had been compelled to marry the Count by her father. Her husband subdues her with the threat that harm will come to their son if she is disobedient, and leaves to pursue his depraved and profligate course. One night, a young woman,

Matilda, who has fled her evil uncle, comes to shelter at the castle and is told by the servant, who is party to the secret, that one wing is haunted, and indeed, clanking chains can be heard. Matilda has faith in God and not in ghosts and thus sets out to investigate. In the disused wing she finds the Countess holding the chains, and is invited to hear her story. Although the Countess has agreed to live locked away for the sake of her son, she is empowered by her authority over a literary device. She is permitted to explain her own explained supernatural. Whilst she is complicit in the Count's insistence on her physical obscurity, her voice is nonetheless heard through the chains. Indeed, one might even say that she shakes her chains in defiance, symbolic, perhaps of her own strong will and choice in being incarcerated to save her son. When another woman is courageous enough to uncover the superstition, the Countess reveals her story and permits the conspiracy to release her to begin.

This text has a fairy tale quality. Matilda is in the position of a questor who must by a test of skill or courage prove her worth and receive a reward. In Matilda's case her reward is freedom from a tyrant, happy marriage and a new set of friends. The Countess, in the role of bewitched captive, is avenged because of her integrity. She has remained faithful to her vow of concealment until rescue comes, not in the shape of a hero, but a young woman, supported by the Countess's own sister. The women work together to save each other, with the occasional help of men, it is true, but the organisation and impetus is their own. No character in this novel is waiting for a *preux chevalier* to rescue them. Victoria, Countess of Wolfenbach, has agreed to the terms set by her evil husband; that she must stay hidden and help perpetuate the rumours of a ghost in the castle, for the sake of her son's life. She is not expecting salvation from this peril, but keeps occupied and uses her time to educate herself. In

the haunted wing, before Matilda meets the Countess, she sees books and drawing materials on the table. This indicates that although she is imprisoned, the Countess behaves like an educated, cultured person. She behaves, in fact, much as Eliza Parsons did when faced with disaster on finding herself alone. She does not spend time gazing out at the scenery as Radcliffe's imprisoned women would. Matilda later finds verses which had been cut into the window by the Countess with a diamond. Although this is very much in the tradition of Radcliffe's heroines who seem to pass most of their waking hours in the composition of deathless verse, the subject matter is of a different type.

I am dumb, as solemn sorrow ought to be;  
Could my griefs speak, my tale I'd tell to thee.

A wife, a mother - sweet endearing ties!  
Tom from my arms, and heedless of my cries;  
Here I am doomed to waste my wretched life,  
No more a mother - a discarded wife.

Would you be happy, fly this hated room,  
For here the lost Victoria met her doom  
O sweet oblivion calm my tortur'd mind  
To grief, to sorrow, to despair consigned

Let gentle sleep my heavy eye-lids close,  
Or friendly death, the cure for all our woes,  
By one kind stroke, give lasting sure repose.<sup>42</sup>

It is noteworthy that the poem concentrates on the emotions experienced by a mother when forced to part from her child, rather than the celebration of the scenery a Radcliffe heroine might have composed in similar circumstances. This appears to be one of a very few instances of poetry composed by Eliza Parsons, except perhaps for some of the verses used as epigraphs on the title pages of her works. Although it is clear that she is not a poet - and it is noticeable that poetry was the one genre she did



not publish, despite, or perhaps because of, her admiration of Charlotte Smith - the poem is effective. It is not intended to describe a sublime vista outside the window, but the emotions of a distressed woman behind the window, and it is fitting that the external barrier and interface between confinement and liberty, the glass itself, is used as a writing-block for the expression of her grief. Fitting, too, is the employment as the stylus of the diamond, doubtless given to her by her husband as a symbol of his legal possession of her. Eliza Parsons' interest in the emotions and thoughts of her female characters is displayed here in the verses describing the Countess's misery. Victoria speaks of her own experience, and addresses the reader of her verses directly, warning any woman who finds herself in the room that she too is in danger. She refers to herself as wife and mother, then as 'no more a mother' and 'a discarded wife', understandably concentrating on her relation to others, since it is in the context of her role as wife and mother that her calamity lies. However, she also refers to herself as 'the lost Victoria', a telling phrase, since it is her self, in relation to no-one else, that is forsaken, not only when betrayed by Count Wolfenbach, but when she married him. I see here traces of a rather plaintive comment on the subsumption of a woman into the entity of her husband, and the existence of rolling hills, mountains or any other scenic countryside outside the window is of little account to the wronged Victoria.

By contrast, in Ann Radcliffe's 1790 publication, *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia recites an ode, the composition of Hippolitus, confined in the Abbey of St Augustin:

a large magnificent mass of Gothic architecture, whose gloomy battlements, and majestic towers arose in proud sublimity from amid the darkness of the surrounding shades.<sup>4</sup>

After Radcliffe has introduced the ode with the terms 'Gothic' and 'sublimity' in the same sentence, the reader is to some degree prepared for the metaphor-laden apostrophe on superstition which follows:

## SUPERSTITION

### An Ode

High mid Alvema's awful steeps,  
Eternal shades, and silence dwell.  
Save, when the gale resounding sweeps,  
Sad strains are faintly heard to swell.

Enthron'd amid the wild impending rocks,  
Involved in clouds and brooding future woe,  
The demon Superstition Nature shocks,  
And waves her sceptre o'er the world below.

Around her throne, amid the mingling glooms,  
Wild-hideous forms are slowly seen to glide,  
She bide them fly to shade earth's brightest blooms,  
And spread the blast of desolation wide.

See! in the darkened air their fiery course!  
The sweeping ruin settles o'er the land,  
Terror leads on their steps with madd'ning force,  
And Death and Vengeance close the ghastly band!

Mark the purple streams that flow!  
Mark the deep impassioned woe!  
Frantic Fury's dying groan!  
Virtue's sigh, and sorrow's moan!

Wide - wide the phantoms swell the loaded air  
With shrieks of anguish - madness and despair!

Cease your ruin! spectres dire!  
Cease your wild terrific sway!  
Turn your steps - and check your ire,  
Yield to peace the mourning day!<sup>44</sup>

The extravagance of the terminology, with its 'shrieks of anguish', moans and demons, not to mention eleven exclamation marks, is in sharp contrast to the calmer,

reasoned, personal outpouring of grief from the Countess of Wolfenbach. Radcliffe here is more interested in staking a claim to poethood than in making her main character appear more rounded, and the slightly hysterical tone of the poem does nothing to recommend the logic of Julia's mind to us. The subject matter, too, opposes the drift of Eliza Parsons' novel. It is Matilda's lack of superstition which allows her to be in a position to read the Countess's verses, and demons and spectres have no place in the text, since Victoria's place of confinement is reduced from a 'haunted' wing to an isolated apartment, where an abused wife can be kept in solitary confinement away from society.

Interestingly, the Countess is safer in her 'haunted' wing than anywhere else in the house. The Count abducts her by way of the kitchen door, which is found forced open. The realism of women's position is emphasised - there is danger for them outside the garden. This is not the only occasion on which Eliza Parsons uses this circumstance. Their enclosed world is hazardous for women on its perimeter, and the garden gate is a perilous boundary to cross, as Pamela and Clarissa knew to their cost.<sup>43</sup> However, the writer herself crosses boundaries with this representation of mutual female support. Matilda, telling her story, is aided by Victoria, who quickly devises a plan for Matilda's escape. The Countess shows her integrity by not attempting to flee, but merely to save Matilda. She tells the young woman to go for help to her married sister, the Marchioness of Melfort, in England. The Marchioness bullies her husband into action to help her sister, the Countess and Matilda. By this means, both are delivered from their dire circumstances. Matilda discovers her origins and marries well. The Countess is reunited with her son and makes a second, happy, marriage.

Here, Eliza Parsons challenges the notion of who is a fit person to control the action of the novel. The character of the Countess's sister is a strong one. She is given financial and moral support by a complaisant husband who also bestows status and respectability upon her. She is thereby free to act in a practically autonomous fashion whilst adhering to the code of etiquette by off-handedly requesting permission he is sure to grant in order for her to perform her adventurous acts of heroic rescue. In this way, the role of the diffident young woman is maintained by Matilda, who, although strong-minded enough to control her own destiny, is nonetheless helpless when it comes to means of attaining freedom for herself and the Countess. We might expect a strong handsome young man to step into the breach, but in fact, the women order the plot events between themselves, paying lip-service to convention by the presence of a wealthy and good-tempered man who indulges his wife's ideas. It is she who organised the rescue of her sister in a different country, under guard and in danger. She marshals her forces and sets them to the task, with eventual success for the two women she set out to aid. Although Victoria (the Countess) has organised the saving of the unmarried Matilda, she nonetheless asks for advice from the young woman. Although Matilda says she is not competent to give advice, and points her to Lord Delby (whom the Countess will eventually marry) and the widowed Mrs Courtney, Victoria considers her fit to give advice in Matilda's capacity as another wronged woman.<sup>46</sup>

The bad male characters in this novel are very bad - Matilda's uncle Mr Weimar is an Italian named Bemiti and seems to have chosen the most German name possible to become a fit villain for a Gothic novel. He and Count Wolfenbach have committed, respectively, one and four murders - but both repent fully and leave their current

female victims wealthy. The good male characters, when left to their own devices, are rather ineffectual - the chevalier fails in his attempt to save Victoria and the Marquis of Melfort is in the main motivated by his wife's ideas, although, as mentioned above, he does settle money on Matilda and consider her as dear as a daughter to him. It is the women, however, who dominate the events in this novel. The bad women, Mme le Brune and Mile de Fontelle, and to a lesser extent, Mrs Courtney, inflict psychological damage, rather than physical, which by its nature is harder to erase. On a carriage ride, having kissed her hand to acquaintances in a passing carriage, the Marchioness sees them all laugh amongst themselves, because they think that she and her husband have been fooled by Matilda. This is because the spiteful Mile le Brune has been spreading the malicious rumour that Matilda has been having a relationship with a handsome servant, in reality the elderly and devoted Albert. The enemy here is scandal, not a supernatural foe, although just as difficult to combat.

The scandal-mongers are women, and Eliza Parsons has little compassion for them. Unlike the villainous male characters, who eventually see the error of their ways, none of the female characters repents - the narrator informs us that Mrs Courtney relents through her easy-going good nature, not true goodness of heart, as she 'was polite and friendly where she had no temptation to be otherwise.'<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of the novel, the Marchioness invites a party of people, including the Neapolitan and Imperial Ambassadors, to meet Matilda's newly found mother. Mme le Brun and Mile de Fontelle are also present, and the Marchioness makes them pay their respects to the woman they have wronged, introducing her as 'Lady Matilda Bemiti, one of the first families in Naples, as his Excellency can bear witness',<sup>48</sup> and proceeds to tell Matilda that Mile Fontelle is the 'envious traducer of your character; the despicable young

woman, who, incapable of practising virtue, from the depravity of her own mind...hates...good and exalted characters...'49 before instructing the Frenchwoman to leave. Matilda had not expected this public rebuke and feels sympathy for Mile de Fontelle, but reflects that there is no point depending on 'the multitude', since these people surrounding her had a few months ago 'encouraged the persons they now reprobate.' 0 Indeed, many of the people enjoying the party that evening call on Mile de Fontelle next day to assure her that they think Matilda vain and impertinent. 'Such' comments the authorial voice, 'is the progress of envy, such is the hatred of virtue, in bad minds, and such you meet with in all public circles.'51 This, then, is part of human nature and will never change. The evil committed by the male characters is indeed severe, but it generally takes the form of open violence, dramatic outbursts of pantomime villain proportions, whilst the female characters' malign actions are more insidious and the consequences long-lasting. This is an example of realism in Eliza Parsons' Gothic novels, and a declaration about the power available to women which must not be misused. Katherine Anne Ackley studies Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1811), and sees Lady Pelham's complicity in Hargrave's planned seduction of Laura as 'interesting'. This finds its precedent in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and there are a number of similar examples in Eliza Parsons' works before Brunton's text was published in 1811, the year of Eliza Parsons' death.

The bonds between women abound in this text, confirming Eliza Parsons' desire to concentrate on realistic solutions to problems, no matter how Gothic these might be in nature. If one is without a husband, whether due to spinsterhood, desertion or widowhood, then women friends are likely to be a source of comfort. When Eliza Parsons' husband lost his business, it was the Marchioness of Salisbury who found

them both positions at St James' Palace. When she was unsure how to make ends meet upon her husband's death, it was Mrs Crespigny who encouraged her to write. As I mention in Chapters 1 to 4, Eliza Parsons herself had given publishing advice to Matthew Gregory Lewis' mother. Although women often betray each other in her texts, good friendships between them are always steadfast. It is as if worst-case realism can be mitigated by best-case realism: that is, just as the worst examples of male behaviour seen here, although extreme, are nonetheless possible, the best examples of female behaviour are also extreme but possible. It is not that women are wanting in kindness; more that their circumstances do not allow them the autonomy to act in aid of a female friend in difficulties. It is not always wealth which provides the means of succour. Rich women can be cold or kind. Once more, it seems that we are being shown possibilities, thoughts made thinkable, upon which women could act in an ideal world.

One of the more important kinds of bonds between women is well explored in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793). The role Eliza Parsons never entirely shrugs off, no matter in what genre she is writing, is that of mother. Although Matilda has the obligatory Gothic absent mother, with whom she is eventually reunited, she is amply provided with mother-figures. Agatha is a rather negative example, as whilst in charge of Matilda's care, she condoned Weimar's evil and actively encouraged him to commit incest, but she seems to have brought up Matilda reasonably ably. Victoria acts more as an older sister, but provides the means of Matilda's deliverance by suggesting she go to Victoria's sister Charlotte as companion. Charlotte acts as mother-substitute, providing a home for Matilda and acting as matchmaker in her relationship with Count de Bouville. When Matilda enters a convent to escape

marriage with Weimar, she meets another mother figure, this time actually called Mother St. Magdalene, a nun of only ten or so years older, in whom she confides and from whom she accepts advice, later writing to thank her for providing her with precepts by which she has tried to live since meeting her.

Matilda actively seeks out Mother St. Magdalene for companionship and presumably advice, this time of a more religious kind, one assumes, since the reader is told that only the receipt of letters from Victoria and Charlotte disturbs Matilda's religious observances. The reader is already aware of Matilda's rationality, since she has refused to be convinced by the tales of a ghost in the castle, but she is also of a religious disposition, so here Eliza Parsons has chosen to display a very positive picture of Roman Catholicism, in contrast to the Gothic novel's usual negativity.<sup>4</sup> What is more, the name of the nun in whom Matilda confides is Magdalene, a reminder perhaps of the renunciation of physical ties, made willingly, as was the case with the original Mary Magdalen. Since the Gothic often represents nuns as victims of cruelty and enforced incarceration, as for example in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Monk* (1796), this is a notably sympathetic depiction for a Protestant writer. Eliza Parsons herself sometimes depicts a darker side to conventual life, when describing cruel, avaricious Abbesses or narrating the life story of a woman forced against her will to take the veil. In this novel, too, she does highlight problems connected with a convent upbringing, which reiterates points about poor schooling which she makes earlier in her career with novels such as *the Errors of Education*, as discussed in Chapter 6.

In order to make pointed comments about education, Eliza Parsons sets part of the action of *The Castle of Wolfenbach* in France, where she can display her knowledge



and opinions of French failings. It is clear that she has no inherent dislike of the French as a nation, but their educational methods come in for strict censure. Although Matilda herself has been brought up as German and is sensible and rational, like the Countess and the Marchioness, the latter's husband is French and rather relaxed about leading his household. He tends to leave most decisions to his wife. Even the congenial Count de Bouville, who will eventually marry Matilda is given qualified approval by the narrator who informs us rather sternly that:

though he had a more than common share of solidity and stability,- yet he was still a Frenchman - still possessed a natural gaiety of heart and ...sometimes fell into the hyperbolic compliment so natural to his countrymen when addressing the ladies.<sup>5</sup>

It is the behaviour of the French women, however, which is particularly reprehensible. The French Countess de Bouville and her children are amiable, but Mile de Fontelle and her aunt Mme de Roch are extremely unpleasant, and we are informed as to the reason: Mile de Fontelle was brought up in a convent and then by her coquettish aunt. Mme de Nancy, too, had been subject to the restrictions of a convent, then 'sacrificed very early in life to an elderly man, every way unworthy of her, except by his immense fortune<sup>06</sup>. She suffers for five or six years until he dies leaving her a fortune and her independence. Her sister, seeing her treatment, vows never to marry. Eliza Parsons is quick to make the point that it is unsurprising that French women are so flirtatious, when their monastic early lives do not fit them for the real world. They marry, often to unsuitably old men who will soon die and leave them longing for some excitement in life. This indicates an understanding of the realities of life facing young women, and rather than employ the setting of the convent as an excuse to introduce frivolous subject matter, such as a bleeding nun, as Lewis does in *The Monk*

(1796), Eliza Parsons makes the most of the opportunity to face facts about the drawbacks of such a restrictive atmosphere. By contrast with Mile Fontelle, Adelaide de Bouville had been educated at home 'contrary to the general fashion in France'<sup>37</sup> and had 'avoided the stiff monastic air of a convent'<sup>50</sup> but also circumvented 'the follies and vices which too generally prevail in those seminaries of education'.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from its failure as an educational establishment, then, the convent receives a good deal of approval in this novel. This is underlined by the fact that Mother Magdalene seems to share some elements of Eliza Parsons' own and her children's history. Magdalene, whose pre-conventual name was Hermine, was the daughter of a merchant in Dunkirk, as James Parsons was a merchant in Plymouth. The family had been happy until Hermine's father was lost at sea on a voyage to England where a capital house had failed. In the same way, James Parsons' business failed in the American war, and his eldest son died at sea. Hermine's mother had received a letter to say this failure would mean bankruptcy. James Parsons had been uninsured and had to sell out his stock cheaply on the London markets. Although he began again in business, like Hermine's father, he was unlucky, having been ruined again by its destruction in a fire after which he died of a stroke.<sup>60</sup> Hermine was 15 and there were eight younger children, as there were in Eliza Parsons' family. Hermine's mother recovered but her nerves were ruined and she was hard to understand in speech, perhaps again recalling the situation after James Parsons' two strokes. Hermine and her mother received support, until her mother's death, from two women, Mme de Raikfort and Mme de Creponier, who helped in the education of the younger children and after discovering Hermine's aim to be a nun, aided her in achieving her goal. Their names are similar to Mrs and Miss Raikes and Mrs Crespigny, whose names

appear on the subscription list of *The History of Miss Meredith* and so can be said to have helped educate Eliza Parsons' children.<sup>61</sup> She also dedicates two novels to Mrs Crespigny, who may, like Mme de Creponier, have asked what career her protegee wanted to follow, and definitely offered advice and help on novel-writing. The similarities are so striking between Eliza Parsons' own biography and the sufferings of her characters that it is in vain to suggest these works are unrealistic, as *The Critical Review* had, saying that '[t]he terrible prevails, and the characters of the heroes in crime, are *too* darkly tinted.'<sup>10</sup> In fact, many readers must have recognised events and emotions in common, particularly with regard to the evils caused by men, and the support offered by women.

This phenomenon is not peculiar to Eliza Parsons' fiction. Katherine Anne Ackley points out that women writers of this era catalogued the experiences of women, from 'psychological, legal, and social victimisation' to 'the constant danger of physical assault' by men. She notes that Eliza Haywood, in her 1751 novel, *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, Frances Burney in her *Evelina* of 1778 and Mary Hamilton, in *Helen* (1778) speak of the victimisation of women.<sup>64</sup> Ackley states that although these texts are not explicitly feminist, there are many female characters of early novels who are seduced or abused by men. She notes that today's readers are able to put a construction on these circumstances based on our own perspectives:

Knowing what we do about sexual politics and power-structure relationships between men and women, for example, these texts are useful for illuminating the variety of ways in which the earliest female fiction writers perceived women's oppression. Their aim may not have been to "expose" the violent nature of women's lives, taking for granted that limitations and potential dangers were standard fare of everyday life, but their novels, nonetheless, adumbrate a stark reality.<sup>65</sup>

Not only does this indicate that Eliza Parsons is following in a tradition here, but it also helps to confirm my impression that contemporary male reviewers do not notice the same elements as I do, as a woman reading over two hundred years later.

Gothic here is treated as a disease caught from men and suffered by women. By 1793, the genre was widespread enough for the formula to be well tried. Eliza Parsons reorders the process of male cause, female suffering, male restitution into male cause, female suffering, female restitution and thus redresses the balance found wanting in a number of Gothic works of the time, including those of Ann Radcliffe. By bestowing upon the decorous young heroine some hearty married female support, she adheres to correct forms whilst allowing female characters a certain amount of freedom to control their own destiny. This, then, is a female-dominated plot in terms of recovery from male-authored evil. Boundaries are tested in many ways, such as the already-mentioned use of the explained supernatural, with Countess Wolfenbach's complicity in the trick and her revelation of it to Matilda. Other developments include the acceptance of transgressive behaviour by a woman, usually punished by death or disgrace in a Gothic text.<sup>66</sup> Matilda runs away from her guardian, Mr Weimar, because to remain would jeopardise her virginity. There is a suggestion of threatened incest, as her uncle is preparing, with Agatha's help, to seduce Matilda. She is worried, as she later tells her new friends, 'by freedoms I thought improper from our near connexion'.<sup>7</sup> Later, she overhears the plan between Weimar and Agatha and, although he lies in telling her he is not her uncle, she is uneasy when he asks her to marry him and escapes before he can put his plan into action. Eliza Parsons not only allows this dereliction of niecely duty, but rewards Matilda's intelligence and virtue with a thoroughly suitable marriage and pennits her to discover her family history and

breeding, none of which would have been possible if it were not for her bravery and quick thinking. It is this quick thinking which leads me to suspect that Eliza Parsons' heroines are more in tune with those of Mary Wollstonecraft than Ann Radcliffe's creations. Ranita Chatterjee in 'Sapphic Subjectivity and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*' sees the main female characters of Sibella and Caroline 'less as Gothic heroines and more as Wollstonecraftian feminists'.<sup>70</sup> Matilda and the Countess of Wolfenbach could both be described in this way to some extent, particularly in their evident intelligence and reasoned thinking. Diane Long Hoeveler, in 'The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism', states that; 'Wollstonecraft's Mary is a woman who possesses 'thinking powers'.<sup>69</sup> Hoeveler notes that Wollstonecraft considered that '[t]he only way women could improve themselves was to become as much like men as possible, and chief among the accomplishments she advocated for women was the need for them to repress their emotions and valorize their minds.' Once again, Eliza Parsons seems to follow Wollstonecraft to some degree here, as Matilda's logic is evident. However, a woman's method of thinking is clearly highly prized, and, although a sound education will equip a woman to equal a man in intelligence, Eliza Parsons recognises and celebrates the capacity of her women characters for empathy and a measured quantity of sentiment.<sup>70</sup>

The reasoned intelligence of the novel's leading female characters is naturally shared by their creator, and it results in a distinct methodology with regard to the more excessive features of the mode. Thus, despite this being a Gothic novel with its share of the usual motifs, Eliza Parsons is inclined to approach them in a manner suggestive of subversion or parody. For example, the haunted castle is mentioned immediately the novel opens. By page 6, Matilda has decided to explore the haunted wing,

undaunted by the possibility of the existence of ghosts, since her reason tells her they do not exist. Terror, then, seems in this novel not to be situated in the supernatural. Where terror is present is in the wife-abuse of which Matilda will shortly be informed, when she locates the source of the clanking chains, the mistreated wife of Count Wolfenbach. The reader learns of her suffering and of her vow to remain 'dead' for the sake of her son by page 8, and by page 9, Matilda has found her way into the haunted wing. This approach seems to run counter to novels which are *about* the supernatural, since in that case the writer would permit the tension to build slowly so as to increase the excitement and mystery. By contrast, Eliza Parsons' rapid exposure of the 'ghost' reveals that she wants to deal with this quickly and resolve it as it is the premise, rather than the point of the novel, though this point is entirely missed by the writer of the review for *The British Critic*:

This novel is opened with all the romantic spirit of the Castle of Otranto, and the reader is led to expect *a tale of other times*, fraught with enchantments, and spells impending from every page. As the plot thickens, they *vanish into air - into thin air*, and the whole turn out to be a company of well-educated and well-bred people of fashion, some of them fraught with sentiments rather too refined and exalted for any rank, and others, deformed by depravity, that for the honour of human nature we hope has no parallel in life.

Clearly, it is in this way that Eliza Parsons' works are frequently perceived as mere poor imitations of Ann Radcliffe's, but the haste with which the spectral element is dispensed with indicates that there are matters more pressing. It is a means to an end: it galvanizes the plot, but it is also a method of emphasising the need for her young readers to focus on religion rather than superstition. That this is one of the aims of the novel is made plain by Eliza Parsons' eruption into the narrative: '[s]weet are the consolations which religion affords!'<sup>79</sup> At the end of the novel, when Matilda marries, she writes to Mother St. Magdalene to thank her for teaching her the precepts she has

lived by, learning never to despair and that God never forsakes the virtuous. She adds that she feels it her 'duty, by active virtues, to extend, to the utmost of my ability, those blessings to others less fortunate than myself.'

A further subversion of Gothic motifs can be found in a conversation between the French Ambassador and the Marquis of Melfort, when the latter has been explaining the difficulties of Matilda with the villainous Weimar, and then states that he will probably have to trouble the Ambassador again soon on another matter, referring to the matter of Count and Countess Wolfenbach. The Ambassador states that the Marquis is quite a knight-errant, saving distressed damsels. This seems to be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fairy-tale element of Gothic: the mediaeval Romance is evoked, but the Marquis rescues Matilda and Victoria in a modern manner. The first of the two cases he deals with is about a woman refusing to marry a man, and the second an example of what happens if a woman does not refuse. Laws are brought forward to protect her, not swords or helpful magic spirits. High level - in fact, ambassadorial level - negotiations are conducted. The reader is reminded of the injustice of parental force in choosing marriage partners. The Countess's father forced her to marry Wolfenbach. Although Matilda has no father, the Marquis is a benevolent father figure who says he could not love his daughter more than Matilda and, campaigning for her, makes a legal challenge against Mr Weimar.

Although she is operating within the Gothic form, Eliza Parsons signals that she intends to use it to question the attitudes of thrill-seeking readers to the supernatural, readers who have become accustomed to the formulaic novels of Minerva writers. Matilda's forthright attitude to supposed phantoms means she is the only person who

discovers the truth about Countess Wolfenbach for herself. The way is now clear to discuss the main point of the novel, and as always, Eliza Parsons' point is largely concerned with the ill-treatment of women, a real enough problem, dressed though it is in the clothing of a 'German Story'.

Alison Milbank, in her introduction to the 1993 edition of *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), argues that Ann Radcliffe's novel differs from earlier Gothic works concentrating on the 'phallogocentric power of tyrannous noblemen',<sup>74</sup> in that it concentrates instead on his victims. Julia defies her father and the Church, asserting her freedom to choose her marriage partner, or not to marry at all and live alone. She concedes that:

[t]he alteration in focus is not without its awkwardnesses, which are evident in the abrupt shifts in perspective once the action of the tale falls outside the castle walls, and attention is shifted from one group of pursuers to another, and from one characteristic Sicilian landscape to a further contrast, with little sense of progression between one frame and another. Yet only a year later the immensely more sophisticated *Romance of the Forest* can play effectively with the change from La Motte's to the heroine's viewpoint, and by *The Italian*, Radcliffe can again focus upon the machinations and mixed motives of the villain, the monk Schedoni, without upsetting the moral balance of the novel.<sup>75</sup>

I would argue that Eliza Parsons' works have always concentrated on the victims of tyrants, since *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), the same year as *A Sicilian Romance*. Julia, the heroine of the latter, is a woman who can make her own decisions, but Eliza Parsons' heroines have always been practical and active in their own defence, although not always in obvious ways, as is evident in the manner in which Matilda and the Countess of Wolfenbach show their strength. Matilda has the courage to leave home when her safety is threatened, and to investigate a 'haunted' apartment. Her willingness to enter a convent, rather than to live openly, free from Mr



Weimar, seems at first to be a capitulation, but in fact, she is withdrawing from the world on her own terms and the confinement is temporary. Society has proved incapable of keeping her safe from Weimar; thus she removes herself from society. The Countess, too, has been let down by the law which cannot help her, since her husband is her lord and master. She too seems to be complicit in her own misery, having agreed to stay imprisoned, but the promise was made in order to protect her son, and it does not prevent her educating herself. Nor does it stop her helping a woman who, in turn, helps to organise the Countess's escape.

Ellen Moers, in *Literary Women*, claims that Female Gothic is focused on fear.<sup>76</sup> She goes on to argue that it is concerned with the strange and supernatural. That Eliza Parsons' Gothic works are concerned with fear is indisputable, but they are not escapist texts which dabble in the supernatural. Moers quotes Scott's words, that, like drugs, too much of Ann Radcliffe is dangerous, but a little is beneficial. Here, Radcliffe's escapism is clearly implied, but Eliza Parsons deals instead with fact-facing, and rather than superstition, rational Christianity. In fact, so little like escapist texts are any of her works that critics sometimes suggest that they might be given to young readers for their improvement, but not for their enjoyment. The critic in *The General Magazine* in 1790 considered *The History of Miss Meredith* perfectly pure:

... we recommend this novel to the attention of the parent and guardian, who need not entertain a fear in introducing Miss Meredith to the notice of those whose morals are the subject of their care and attention.<sup>77</sup>

A reviewer of *Ellen and Julia* declared:

It is well adapted to inculcate on young minds several lessons of prudence and virtue.<sup>78</sup>

*Lucy* was damned with faint praise:

The novel, if not deeply affecting, may afford a few hours' agreeable amusement, without leaving any injurious impression upon the mind of the reader.<sup>79</sup>

*The Voluntary Exile* was applauded for its morality:

Publications of this nature being, through the medium of the circulating libraries, often extensively disseminated, we feel a peculiar pleasure when enabled to recommend them to our young female readers, more especially as containing nothing inimical to good morals or good taste.<sup>80</sup>

A critic of *Women as They Are* certainly did not see the novel as escapist:

Although there are many instructive lessons presented in this novel, we fear there is less amusement than our young readers will expect.<sup>81</sup>

In Donna Heiland's *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*, she points out that Gothic narratives 'feel like escapist fantasy, but can tell us a great deal about what William Godwin called "things as they are"' and states that '[t]hey fill us with relief at our exemption from the dangers they represent, but force us to look at those dangers all the same.' In this text, Heiland discusses the place of Female Gothic in the sublime and there grounds for considering Godwin's phrase as an expression of the noumenal, the 'thing in itself, the essence of something. If this is the case, then Eliza Parsons was in touch with this sublime aesthetic when she wrote *Women as They Are*, whose title reflects Godwin's subtitle to *Caleb Williams*\*. Though this is not a Gothic text, it provides the evidence here for an understanding of the essence of woman's

experience, a deeply-felt recognition of what it means to be a woman at a sublime level. Read in these terms, Gothic as written by women provides an insight on a philosophical level into women's lives and minds, and in Eliza Parsons' case, it is not used as fantasy. She delivers her inside knowledge of female experience in order that her readers can recognise and relate to it.

Although Eliza Parsons' novels rarely arise in modern criticism, the two mentioned in *Northanger Abbey* are exceptions. In a discussion of the *Northanger* 'horrid novels', Bette B. Roberts questions the supposed intention of the writers of these novels to encourage moral behaviour, when in fact, they 'develop narrative strategies that appeal to the readers' emotions and thereby deliberately overstep their own prohibitions'. Culprits in this matter, according to Roberts, include Eliza Parsons, whose heroine in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* is delivered from her wicked uncle because of providential protection, not due to her own good sense. There is, for Roberts, no 'self-realisation, change, or growth in the female protagonist'<sup>86</sup> in this and other female-authored 'horrid' novels. Roberts singles out Eliza Parsons from the rest for the perceived 'gap between lofty pretence and actual structure'<sup>87</sup> in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* when the author seems to be extolling the virtues of the middle class, but arranges the plot to fit in with the heroine's expected marriage into the nobility. A Count is ready to marry the heroine, Matilda, despite her unknown background. Matilda is shown to be a Countess, and thus, for Roberts 'the action belies the pretence of democratic sentiment and middle-class superiority'.<sup>88</sup> However, although Roberts is correct when she notes that Eliza Parsons has, in this novel, delivered the ending which would be expected by her readers, this does not mean she has not contested the hierarchical structure of society and accepted practice in the choosing of

marriage partners. It cannot be said that Eliza Parsons has been guilty of pretence, since it is not that Matilda turns out to be a Countess, but that the Count was ready to marry her no matter what her background. Eliza Parsons' conformity is not so much to the idea of the aristocracy's supremacy or the propriety of noble blood remaining pure, but rather to the expectations of her reading public, who want certain outcomes. What is more, as a Gothic novel, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* relies to some extent on a standard formula for its sales. The singular fact that Eliza Parsons has introduced the idea of a nobleman's unconditional love for an unknown, who is a person of integrity who considers herself of no account, is noteworthy. Although Eliza Parsons evidently did not feel she could present her readers with too revolutionary an outcome, she has nonetheless delivered to them a new possibility by choosing as her hero a man who is willing to defy his noble family and marry as he wishes.<sup>90</sup>

It is important to note that when Roberts complains that Eliza Parsons has capitulated to conformity by creating a heroine who is a secret Countess, she does not take into account that this is not a *Tom Jones*-like denouement.<sup>90</sup> In the first few pages, we are given the hint that she will be well-born, when we are informed that Matilda's uncle had told her their family had been Counts.<sup>91</sup> For some readers, this early indication might explain Matilda's reasoned approach to the supernatural - as a noblewoman, she does not behave like the superstitious lower classes, but this cannot be the explanation, since Joseph is logically-minded too, even though a servant. What links them is education. This is the difference between Joseph and his wife Bertha, to whom he will not trust a secret. He has integrity as his oath prevents him telling Victoria's story even when she has been abducted. Once again, Eliza Parsons makes her point about the necessity of good education as a basis for excellent character.

The second Eliza Parsons work included in the *Northanger* 'horrid' list is *The Mysterious Warning* of 1796. To some extent, this can be seen as straightforward female Gothic, in that it involves the explained supernatural. However, as Eliza Parsons' novels often do, it tests boundaries. The circumstances are that on the death of Count Reynaud, who has disowned his younger son Ferdinand because of an unwise marriage, a ghostly voice is heard through the wall, delivering 'pardon and peace'<sup>07</sup> to Ferdinand in the next room, and a stern warning to his elder brother, Rhodophil. In fact, it had been Rhodophil, wanting Ferdinand's share of the inheritance, who had informed his brother that Renaud had cast him off, although this was untrue. The old man had died believing his younger son did not care to visit him on his death bed, whereas he was in fact in the adjoining room, having been told by Rhodophil that their father would not receive him. The ghostly voice acts upon the two brothers in ways which eventually redress the balance: Rhodophil is haunted by his crime and Ferdinand is comforted. The voices turn out to have been provided by Ernest, steward to Renaud, who had been aware of Rhodophil's villainy and had been unwilling to allow him to prevail. Rhodophil eventually confesses his crime before dying, leaving all to Ferdinand. This is an intriguing use of the explained supernatural, since it suggests that it is easier for a reader of the 1790s to believe in the voice of a nobleman from beyond the grave than the word of a flesh and blood servant. Ernest himself is more willing to assume the personality of his dead master than to attempt to abuse his position and inform Ferdinand in a straightforward way of his brother's treachery. The point is well made by Eliza Parsons that not only would Ernest be unlikely to be believed, but since Rhodophil is now his master, it would be seen as a dereliction of duty. Ernest's loyalty is to Ferdinand, so he cares little about this factor.

What is important, however, is that in speaking against his new master, he will lose his job. This would happen whether or not Ferdinand believed him, since Ferdinand's support is useless in his current penniless state, disinherited by Rhodophil's machinations. Ernest's only hope is to reinstate Ferdinand as his father's part-heir, and thereby earn enough gratitude to keep secure the post of steward. Here the explained supernatural has a clear financial aim, as well as providing a means of displaying the moral core of the novel. This suggests a degree of cynicism on the part of Eliza Parsons, as indicated by her recognition of seeming other-worldliness as straightforward economics.

The main action of the novel is directed by the servant. Not only does he provide the ghostly voice, but he holds the key to the relationships between the characters. Renaud had been right about Ferdinand's marriage. It had indeed been rash. His wife Claudina had been having an affair with Rhodophil. Ernest knows of this liaison, but does not tell his beloved Ferdinand to spare him. He holds the power, able to choose when to keep Ferdinand in ignorance, and when to disturb his composure with a spectral voice. Claudina had told Ernest that she was going to a convent and he swears not to tell his master where, even when it becomes very important for Ferdinand's peace of mind to know. Claudina's departure to the convent is closely followed by Ferdinand leaving the castle too. At this point, Ernest says confidently, 'I am certain the Count (Rhodophil) will not discharge me now.' His desire to keep his position seems to be at least as important as other sub-plots in this novel, and the power he wields is considerable. Perhaps, as the dedication of the novel to the rejected Princess Caroline of Brunswick indicates, she wanted to speak up for the under-dog. Although partly motivated by a need for employment, however, Ernest gives

Ferdinand invaluable support. He gives advice and information, deflects Ferdinand from an unwise course, and plans much of his life for him. He even brings his own nephew to teach Ferdinand's son Charles. He and Ferdinand keep in touch by letter, so that Ernest is constantly apprised of Ferdinand's actions and plans. To some degree, the servant class is also empowered in *Castle of Wolfenbach*, since Joseph is the only one who knows Victoria's location and the secret of the clanking chains. Matilda's servant, Albert, has the responsibility of leading her to safety.

Another boundary tested involves the transgressive woman. *The Mysterious Warning* is often assumed to be a Radcliffe imitation, but its plot concerns a woman unlike any of Radcliffe's creations. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Coral Ann Howells<sup>9</sup> sees in the novel a reworking of *Hamlet*, but I do not, although *King Lear* or the deathbed scene in *Henry IV 2* might be evoked.<sup>95</sup> The hero, Ferdinand, had lost contact with his half-sister Charlotte. He joins the army to fight the Turks but is captured. One Turk, Heli, makes friends with Ferdinand and decides to travel home to Vienna with him, having always wanted to live there. Heli's mistress, Fatima, turns out to be Ferdinand's half-sister Charlotte. When Heli's enemies visit his house on the outskirts of Vienna, she, bored with country life, leaves with them. She then devises a daring robbery with a manservant, in which they wear each other's clothing. She finally dies, stabbing herself after mortally wounding her accomplice in a failed attempt to gain Ferdinand's inheritance for herself. This is one of the surprises presented by Eliza Parsons. Moralising, anxious to warn her readers against making hasty marriages without parental consent, she nonetheless sometimes includes something as entirely unexpected as Fatima, the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman, who renounces her name and religion to live outside marriage in Turkey with a

Muslim. She elopes with his enemies, and steals his treasure, during which theft she disguises herself as a man. She then uses a knife, generally seen as a man's weapon, to kill and commit suicide, after a failed attempt to win recognition as her father's daughter and claim her share of his property, all this thirteen years before Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806). Catherine Craft-Fairchild, in her 1998 article, 'Cross-Dressing and the Novel',<sup>96</sup> notes that punishment of cross-dressing in novels begins early, citing an instance in Eliza Haywood's work of 1720, *Love in Excess*. She says that by the end of the century, novels self-consciously link female transvestism with moral corruption. This is seemingly borne out by the corrupt morality of the unchaste, thieving, murderous Charlotte, whose cross-dressing seems the least of her sins. Like Charlotte Dacre, Eliza Parsons feels the need to create this free-thinker, although she punishes her with death. However, for her female readers, she has made the thought of transgression thinkable - and, what is more, rather dashing. Charlotte provides another source of concern for Ferdinand, too. Her mother had been seduced by Count Renaud, and her nurse, Dupree, was Claudina's aunt. Fatima is, therefore, Ferdinand's half-sister, and Claudina, judging by Fatima's story, is *her* half-sister: the daughter of Fatima's mother and a German officer after her affair with Renaud was over. Ferdinand is concerned about possible incest, of a rather technical kind, in so far as he married the half-sister of his half-sister, the daughter of a man who had a relationship with his father's mistress. For Eliza Parsons, this means that Ferdinand's marriage to Claudina is doomed. She cannot allow it to continue. However, due to Ferdinand's ignorance of this circumstance, and his anxiety about its propriety once he is informed, he will be furnished with the appropriate happy ending in due course.



In *Gothic and Gender*, Donna Heiland reviews the treatment of the sublime in the works of male and female Gothic authors. Burke stated that the sublime oppresses the beholder whilst beauty empowers him. However, Heiland quotes Frances Ferguson, who notes that there is a dangerous quality to beauty which, in Burke's work at least, is capable of a different reading. To see beauty is to become weakened by it, wherein lies its danger. Heiland says that '[t]o argue for sublimity as the necessary answer to a tyrannical beauty is thus to argue for the necessity of a male rebellion against female power.' Therefore, even though the sublime destroys beauty, Gothic episodes are always followed by a return to normality, which Heiland calls the 'realm of beauty', and thus, 'one wonders whether sublimity does not at times also reinstate or produce beauty'.<sup>97</sup> In these terms, it appears to be possible to regard Charlotte in the light of the sublime. Donna Heiland reads Matthew Lewis' *Matilda*<sup>98</sup> in this way. Heiland states that 'her identity questions the distinction that most people make between the natural and the supernatural, human and inhuman, even female and male'.<sup>99</sup> Although Charlotte is entirely human, she does transcend the boundary between male and female. What is more, she may have done so before *Matilda*, since the dedication of the novel is dated November 1775, and Lewis's text was not published until March 1796.<sup>100</sup> *Matilda*, as Rosario, is under a cowl so cannot really be seen in her male role, whereas Charlotte's assumption of a male personality takes place openly, out of doors. However, I do not believe Charlotte can be regarded in terms of the Burkean sublime, or the sublime as utilised by Ann Radcliffe. *Matilda* could be described as inhabiting the realm of the sublime insofar as Ambrosio's experience of her is to be awestruck and in danger, threatened by an unknowable 'Other', and indeed, we can also see Charlotte in this light. Nevertheless, to read the character in this way is to regard her from the point of view of the male subject. In Charlotte's case, a female

reader will not respond to the character in this manner, since she will understand, even if she cannot condone, her motives and frustrations.

Heiland continues with her sublime reading of Matilda, stating that when Matilda is revealed as not even human, but a devil in disguise, 'one realizes the danger of women's power. Matilda is such a frightening creature that she cannot be female, cannot even be male, but must be relegated to the world of demons'.<sup>101</sup> For me, Eliza Parsons' creation of Charlotte is powerful precisely because she is human, and is permitted her space to be a wicked woman, rather than a demon. Matilda's denouement as a supernatural creature weakens her as a female. Only by being a demon, Lewis seems to be saying, can we explain such wickedness from a mere woman. By allowing Charlotte time to run wild and create havoc, Eliza Parsons empowers women. In *Art of Darkness*, Anne Williams expresses a view which concurs with my own, when she suggests that it is the inherent 'otherness' of women which constitutes their frightening quality for men:

In *The Monk* we observed how Rosario/Matilda's disconcerting ability to change her identity is associated with Ambrosio's downfall. Lewis's plot expresses the horrifying instability of the female 'other' seen in the male gaze.<sup>102</sup>

Heiland next does consider a human female character; that of Victoria in *Zofloya*,<sup>103</sup> and states that 'Victoria's alliance with Zofloya propels her into a socially destructive mode that far exceeds any challenge to the status quo that she could have made on her own'. Charlotte, by contrast, has as her mentor, not the Devil, but another woman, her evil nurse. It seems that her capacity, and thus, by inference, that of womankind, for social destruction, is sufficiently developed without recourse to supemature. Heiland notes that, since Zofloya, when he assumes human form, is a Moor, Dacre displays

'boldness in pairing this black man with the white woman', but Eliza Parsons is doing this earlier, in linking Charlotte with the Turk, Heli. However, unlike Victoria and Zofloya, it is Charlotte who betrays Heli, and takes on the role of a male infidel, by stabbing herself and the nurse. Here, it would seem that Eliza Parsons is rewriting the rules of the Female Gothic, and to some extent those of the fictional adherence to social norms, since, despite her punishment of aberrant behaviour by the female, she displays it without recourse to supernatural explanation.

The power displayed by Charlotte and Ernest reduces that of Ferdinand. He is feminised in a number of ways, for example, as the victim of both men, such as his brother Rhodophil, and women, such as his wife Claudina, and his half-sister Charlotte. His ill-judged marriage fails, due to his wife's affair with his brother, and his situation is made worse by Charlotte's demands for a share in his father's fortune. Rhodophil and Ferdinand are half-brothers, so each child is equally connected to Renaud, but it is Ferdinand's sensitivity which causes him to pity Charlotte and recollect that Renaud had been fond of her as a child, so she had reason to claim. It is not her fault that she was born out of wedlock and it encourages him to treat her leniently, although she abuses his trust. He is also disempowered by Ernest, as a nobleman whose servant knows more than he does about evil and how to combat it and also about money. Ferdinand is also treated like a heroine by going to a monastery as heroines go to convents for rest, help and advice. Here, he is advised by Friar Joseph not to stay in solitude at the ruined castle he had just visited, since no one should retreat from the world because of one bad experience. Ferdinand says that does not sound like the advice of someone who has renounced the world and Friar Joseph tells him that many of the brothers are in the monastery because they have

been sacrificed by others due to avarice and envy, and only a few are there by choice. This sounds like Mother Magdalene in *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, with whom Matilda shares lifestories. Here, Ferdinand tells Friar Joseph his tale. The feminisation of Ferdinand is thorough. He asks for advice from Ernest, he cries, is worried and emotional, faints and believes in ghosts. He is also emasculated by cuckoldry, since his brother is the father of Ferdinand's supposed second child. Ferdinand cares for others in a feminine fashion: he is not in charge of affairs, but empathises with other characters' emotions. At the end of Vol. 2, he asks his new friend Mr. d'Allenberg to excuse him, as he is due at Count M—'s house and says his friend cannot bear disappointment. This is feminine sensibility. He goes to the count's castle and is melancholy; understandable in many ways as his wife has left him, but the count is in a much worse position. He has just been released from years of imprisonment in a dungeon and his wife, too, has left him to enter a convent. The count is merely described as not happy, but Ferdinand is melancholy, conventionally a female complaint. This use of Ferdinand as the heroine of the novel is striking, all the more since there are no female contenders for the position. There are evil women characters, and good ones too, but the latter are unified by their victimhood and there are so many of them that there is nothing much to choose between them. In fact, the choice of Ferdinand as heroine can only be made because he is the most victimised of all, and because the majority of the plot is concerned with his doings. All turns out well for Ferdinand because he is aided by friends, not because of his own actions.

By contrast, the women characters in the novel are generally active in their own destinies. Charlotte chooses her path to live a deviant life and Claudina and Count M—'s wife Eugenia both choose to leave their husbands and retire to convents. The

other female characters are just as self-determining. Louisa Hautweizer, Theresa d'Allenberg and the Countess Wolfran have all thought themselves the sole beloved of Count Wolfran. Louisa and Theresa were at school together but lost touch until they meet with their fathers by chance at an inn where Ferdinand is also staying. Louisa's father dies and she talks wildly about being buried with him. Theresa takes her to the priest's house but calls for her father and Ferdinand as Louisa is delirious, calling on a Count Wolfran, Theresa tells them, 'in such terms as imply a degree of intimacy very incompatible with his professions to another'.<sup>104</sup> This in fact is Theresa herself, to whom Count Wolfran has been paying court. Once she learns the story from Louisa, however, she realises his evil nature. Louisa had been courted by the Count who said he wanted to marry her but was not sure his father would agree. Her own father had been court-martialled on a trumped-up charge and she was living alone with a priest after the death of a chaperone. For this reason, although the priest was unhappy about the Count, he agreed to marry him to Louisa, who would live under a false name until his father's permission could be sought. On the death of the priest, five weeks later, there were no witnesses to the marriage. The Count's father refused to sanction the marriage between his son and the daughter of his enemy. He was the officer who had had Mr Hautweizer court-martialled. The marriage certificate vanished from the cabinet in which Louisa had placed it. Wolfran left and wrote to say he would give her 400 crowns and an allowance, if she agreed to say nothing about their marriage, as his father wanted him to marry a rich young woman. If Louisa spoke about the affair, her reputation would be ruined. He returned and she told him of her disgust. On the pretence of taking her to visit relatives, he took her to a convent, from which she was released eighteen months later by a friend of her father's. On her return home, she was visited by a lady. She was the rich woman the

count had married and she now had a child. She had heard of the way her husband had behaved to other women and had left him to live in a convent, feeling that she has no right to her title. Wolfran dies in a fight, but before he expires, he confesses that he was indeed married to Louisa and she will inherit his wealth. Since Wolfran is now dead, the Countess leaves the convent and marries a young baron. Louisa refuses the inheritance from Wolfran and insists it is claimed by the Countess whose child, she points out, is Wolfran's heir. After some demurrer, the Countess is persuaded to accept the money. Ferdinand's wife Claudina and Count M—'s wife Eugenia both die in their convent, leaving the Count free to marry Louisa and Ferdinand to marry Theresa.

Although these three women are all victims of the same man, their decisions to help one another are similar to those taken by the female characters of *The Castle of Wolfenbach*. Louisa and the Countess make their decisions about Wolfran's fortune without any aid from others. Theresa had directed all the action to help Louisa. Countess Wolfran had removed herself and her child from her husband on hearing of his bigamy. Thus, although they had suffered from a male character's ill behaviour, they are empowered by the sisterly feeling it engenders and their decision to work to make each other's lives better. They are also given second chances. Eliza Parsons allows a number of second marriages in this novel, as in others already mentioned.<sup>105</sup> The previously-married Count M— marries the wronged and previously married Louisa Hautweizer. The bigamously-married Countess Wolfran marries the bachelor Baron Reiberg, and the previously-married Ferdinand marries the spinster Theresa d'Allenberg. That this is permitted is possibly because these people were innocent of any wrongdoing. Eugenia, too, was a victim, but her situation is complicated by the

fact that she had married a man she hated but, before the marriage was consummated, was delivered to safety by Count M—, the man she loved but whom her father would not allow her to marry. Although the pair eloped, they were captured and imprisoned by Eugenia's rejected spouse, Baron S—. She blames herself for breaking her vows, although they were made under duress. So strict are her morals, that even a reviewer of the novel thinks her too hard on herself, considering that

Eugenia's early errors were of the most pardonable kind; and her only *real vice*, the sacrificing her own happiness and activity, and wounding the peace of her husband, by a foolish, romantic monastic notion of heroism.<sup>106</sup>

To some extent, Eliza Parsons seems to agree with this judgement. Although Eugenia's crime is pardoned by her priest as understandable, and blame is clearly laid at the feet of her father for forcing the marriage, nonetheless she is not permitted a second chance, instead dying in the convent. This appears at first to run counter to the notion that Eliza Parsons is empowering the women in *The Mysterious Warning*. However, it would seem that she has sacrificed Eugenia for the sake of realism, the opinion of the reviewer quoted above notwithstanding. Although the realism is disguised by the symbolism of incarceration in, first, a dungeon and then a convent, it is true that a bigamous woman would be shunned by her friends, and despite the guilt of her father in forcing an iniquitous marriage upon her, she has disobeyed him: a serious matter for Eliza Parsons. She is strict in her insistence upon daughterly obedience, but does not exonerate bad parenting, consistently making the point that both parent and child should behave honourably and fairly. Eugenia, then appears to be the embodiment of a kind of mysterious warning, a sacrificial victim of a tyrant father, whose own 'mind-forg'd manacles' result in her bondage and death. That Eliza

Parsons has employed the Gothic form to pronounce upon the rights and wrongs of marriage is clear from the narrative voice in the final pages, which informs us that Ferdinand's second marriage is happy, because it was formed on the principles of reason and virtue. From Eugenia's melancholy story, says the narrator, we can deduce:

two observations of equal importance to society; when a parent exercises an undue authority over his child, and compels her to give a reluctant hand without a heart; by giving his sanction in the outset to deception and perjury; he has little to expect but that the consequences will be fatal to her honour and happiness.<sup>17</sup>

In the conduct of Baron S—, one can see the effects of

indulging that gloomy misanthropy, which feeds a proud spirit and a callosity of heart, insensible to every feeling but its own gratification, which, when opposed, may lead to the most determined cruelty and revenge.<sup>108</sup>

'The compulsory marriage' of Count Renaud is blamed for all the difficulties faced by the majority of the main characters, along with 'the very rash and imprudent' first marriage of Ferdinand; both holding out 'lessons of equal importance to the consideration of parents and children.' Ferdinand, however, 'having been severely punished for the impetuosity and folly' of his first marriage, is now assured happiness with Theresa. The final exclamation is evangelically fervent.<sup>109</sup>

From the characters of Rhodophil and Fatima, we may trace the progression of vice, and its fatal termination!

*Vice to be hated,  
Needs but to be seen.* 110



Allied to the topic of parental responsibility in choosing marriage partners for their offspring is the frequently repeated theme of education, the importance of which is again emphasised by the use of the Gothic form as a popular mode ensuring a numerous readership to be improved by Eliza Parsons' conscientious instruction. The three children of Count Renaud take their moral standards from their mothers, rather than their father. Rhodophil is the son of the first Countess who, like him, was unpleasant. The amiable Ferdinand is the son of the second Countess, who was fragile, well-mannered, sensible and respectable, and wild child Charlotte is the daughter of Renaud's mistress, and suffers the consequences of an irregular life. Ferdinand's son Charles is assured of good schooling as Ernest brings his nephew to be the boy's tutor. The reader feels that he is in responsible hands, since the behaviour of the nobility has hardly proved a good example of education, whereas Ernest has succeeded in arranging the amelioration of Ferdinand's fortunes, directs him away from the consequences of a bad marriage and sees him settled into a good one.

What constitutes a good marriage is debateable. Anne Williams, in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, recognises the inherent problems of marriage for women at this time, and as a plot device:

The theme of marriage,...so prominent in the Female Gothic conclusion, cannot within a strictly realist context be read as a "happy ending". We all know of some evils which marriage entailed for woman two hundred years ago: the loss of her civil identity and of her property, present and future.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst I accept this, I also see a tendency in Eliza Parsons' novels which progresses from marrying her heroines to younger versions of the traditional tyrant to marriage with the kind of husband with whom a woman might hope for better things. When a

nobleman is rejected for a mere baronet, as early in her career as 1791 (in *The Errors of Education*, her second work), and later bridegrooms include a lawyer (as in *The Convict* of 1807), it becomes clear that Eliza Parsons is ensuring that debauched living on the part of the husband will not be an option. Money will be in shorter supply than would be the case for a man living on a large inheritance. Town life is more likely for the couple than a venerable country seat; thus, the lack of secret stairways, winding corridors and deserted chapels will tend to render their life (and, importantly, that of their daughter) less dramatic, and consequently, less Gothic.

Bette B. Roberts discusses the topic of marriage in *The Mysterious Warning*, her interest in Eliza Parsons stemming from her status as a popular Gothic novelist, and also her ‘adaptations of Walpolean gothicism’ as well as the ‘assumptions, values and interests she shares with her women readers’<sup>119</sup>. She begins with a reference to Varma’s introduction to *the Mysterious Warning*,<sup>117</sup> in which he argues that Austen’s choice for *Northanger Abbey* was not random but deliberate: the titles were chosen for the quality of the tales. Roberts goes on to quote John J. Richetti, who explains<sup>114</sup> that popular fiction aimed to ‘flatter and exploit rather than challenge or redefine the assumptions of its implied audience’ and says popular novels act as ‘entertainment machines and fantasy inducers’.<sup>112</sup> Roberts believes that realist novels sometimes confront social values and problems directly, whereas the romantic novel reaches a contemporary audience because of its blend of ‘fantastical adventure and moral probability’.<sup>117</sup> She quotes Ian Watt’s statement that popular fiction ‘confuses the difference between reality and dream more insidiously than any previous fiction.’<sup>118</sup> Roberts argues that this insidiousness pertains to the

unresolved tension at the core of romantic fiction: the frames of moral virtue containing the plots of pursuit, seduction, murder and revenge; the avowals of emotional restraint and rational order justifying the gratification of egotistic sensationalism. 119

Nonetheless, it could be argued that this factor is as realist as, or more realist than realist literature, because although realist novels confront problems explicitly, romantic novels depict the frustration of being unable to change the situation politically. They display the alternatives available to their women readers: first, to escape into fantasy and second, to change an individual life for the better. This would be hard to prove if they merely dealt with unrelated fantasy, but usually the social problems arise in the same way as they do in realist novels. 120 The reader is aware that the heroine suffers from poverty, for example, or a tyrant guardian. She has no control over her life. The fact that she is represented as telling her story is due to her having done what she can and run away. Also, her witness-bearing is a way of making a small political statement, since it brings the story into the public domain. These novels often show active women characters, trying to change their lives for the better, privately, rather than by Act of Parliament or by political pamphleteering. Generally, the people to whom the female protagonist turns are other women, which suggests that the novelist is portraying a realistic state of affairs for women in difficulties. Women have a private network, an organisation, a means of helping one another out, although without changing the world or depending on men, except for those men who can be trusted and have liberal minds.

Thus, the fantasy element merges not only with the moral element noted by Bette B. Roberts, but also with a practical element too. Although everyone's life will not be altered by a novel, those women reading will know the author understands their

plight. For the wealthy readers, the fantasy element might be important to a restricted, if comfortable, life. For readers of more limited financial means, the idea of escape must have been appealing, although no material change in their lives was put forward in the books. Roberts discusses the experience of the female reader, and its reflection in Gothic novels. She quotes J. M. S Tompkins, who says, 'No fantasies have a wide popular appeal unless they are fairly closely linked with popular aspiration and even, though less closely, with fact.'<sup>191</sup> Roberts goes on to say that women find in Gothic an opportunity to express 'unspoken fantasies based upon their actual subordinate roles in a patriarchal society'.<sup>199</sup> For a great majority of readers, this is undoubtedly likely. However, she continues,

At the same time, the confinement of literate upper and middle-class women to the domestic sphere disables them from writing the realistic novel, which assumes some experience in worldly affairs.<sup>123</sup>

There are several problems with this statement. Firstly, the assumption that domestic fiction is the genre 'appropriate to women's knowledge and talent at this time'<sup>124</sup> and the assertion that the Gothic romance 'provides not only the respectable reinforcement of social values in the frame of probability, but also the subversion of these values through marvelous adventure'<sup>192</sup> both seem to devalue women's work. That is not to say that this subversion is not necessary - it clearly is - but perhaps women are controlling their environment more than they are often given them credit for, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Being seen to be respectable is not always the major concern of a woman writer, and this is not only the case for such radicals as Mary Wollstonecraft. Charlotte Dacre cannot be said to be merely paying lip service to respectability when she kills off her wicked heroine in *Zofloya* (1806). She is punishing a killer by death, as most men and women of her society would surely

advocate, but the rest of her novel seems unconcerned with respectability. There is an atmosphere of unspoken fantasy to which she is pandering with her representation of a fascinating but demonic Moor, and it is difficult to see how far she can be said to have reinforced respectable social values ‘in the frame of probability’ with her magic-laden tale of murder, mysticism and adultery.

What is more, Roberts’ assumption that upper- and middle-class women are ill-equipped to write realistic novels which assume ‘some experience in worldly affairs’ must be challenged. For women confined to domesticity, there is surely ample information in journals and newspapers on current affairs and politics to allow their characters to converse on the topic of the day. There are, in any case, women who are not so confined. These include women of the merchant class who aid their husbands in their work, or lone women who work in the public sphere themselves. Such women, like Eliza Parsons and Charlotte Smith, are well-fitted to discuss worldly affairs, particularly those concerned with finance, and they may well be the women who write as a means of earning money. Besides, there are women who are writers of realistic novels, such as Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney.<sup>126</sup> I would add to those names Eliza Parsons, whose realist novels, such as *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) and *Women As They Are* (1796), Bette B. Roberts does not discuss, although William Enfield’s notice of *The History of Miss Meredith* in *The Monthly Review* in 1790 makes clear Eliza Parsons’ realistic framework- and its compatibility with a male critic’s view:

A natural and interesting tale is related in neat and unaffected language; and the moral which it inculcates, is the reverse of those romantic notions, which most novels have a tendency to inspire; it is this; That violent attachment in the outset is not requisite to make the

married state a happy one: well founded esteem, softness of manners, and a reciprocal wish to please, lay the foundations of a more tender and permanent regard, than the passion generally called love.<sup>197</sup>

Eliza Parsons is seen here to concern herself with the crucial importance of making a good marriage, a motif used often in her works, whether realist or Gothic. The fact that women can choose realist and Gothic writing alters the perception of female Gothic writers as women who have no other choice of genre in which to make their mark. What is more, if they do concentrate on Gothic, that does not mean they choose a mere populist genre which manipulates female fantasy. Women's public role is greatly reduced from that of men, and themes within the novels consistently show a frustration with their powerlessness to change this state of affairs by law, for example, but their role is often to provide an important political weapon, which empowers women, and also gives them a platform to air their views to men. No matter how many female readers these women writers seem to be targeting, there are also significant numbers of men reading their novels. Perhaps their eyes are opened as to the passion a woman feels, not only in the expected area of emotion and relationships, but also, for example, in her desire to be financially independent, a subject discussed by many Gothic romances. Perhaps they are surprised by the lengths to which a woman will go if she feels she is being mistreated, flight being the main action taken. Maybe they are impressed by her logic, her strategy for deliverance (not all heroines being impassive fatalists) and her willingness to travel long distances alone, or with a single servant. This seems to me to be a positive aspect of Gothic romance which is sometimes forgotten - its fantasy element appears to be less a sop to respectability because of its safe unlikeliness, than a cover for deviant and sometimes radical thinking. We cannot know what conversations took place between a man and a woman after both had read a Gothic novel, and Austen's fictional account<sup>128</sup> provides

little help, but reviews give some idea of male concerns regarding female-authored fiction.<sup>129</sup>

Reviews of Eliza Parsons' work often concentrated on regretting the multiplicity of plots whilst complimenting her on her moral stance, but if we look for reaction to specific actions performed by or points of view expressed by the male and female characters, there is generally little contention with Eliza Parsons' reading of current society and its defects.

As already mentioned, the reviewer of *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) in *The Critical Review* of 1796 goes so far as to absolve a female character from the stain of a sin of which accuses herself, judging that Eugenia's faults were pardonable. He opines that her real vice was in sacrificing her own happiness and that of her husband by her 'romantic' notions of heroism in entering a convent. In this statement, the critic is distancing himself from a legal state of affairs which requires a woman to keep her vows, no matter in what situation they were made. Thus, Eliza Parsons has made an impact. Her character's deviant behaviour attracts no criticism, and in fact, her over-compensation for her aberration is deemed to be too harsh. Although powerless to speak publicly about women's subservience to men, Eliza Parsons has aired the issue with success. The critic continues;

[The character of count Rhodophil is, we hope, too coldly and deliberately atrocious to be natural.<sup>130</sup>

Although mention is made of the extreme nature of Rhodophil's evil personality, the critic does not deny its possibility; he merely hopes it is unlikely, giving the

impression that perhaps he feels such a man might exist. These instances have led me to believe that Bette B. Roberts<sup>111</sup> underestimates both the important role of women's Gothic writing to inform both male and female readers, and women writers' ability to portray realistic events.

Roberts points out, justly, that whereas Ann Radcliffe 'uses the union of Emily St. Aubert and Valancourt to develop a larger theme of rational sensibility',<sup>132</sup> Eliza Parsons takes a different route:

Eliza Parsons overtly upholds the socially-sanctioned marriage as an end in itself and uses the clandestine marriage, with its particularly negative economic ramifications, as a dominant source of gothic terror. Yet contained in this moral ideal are fantasised adventures which relate indirectly to deeper wishes and fears of women, concerning a real social problem.<sup>13</sup>

What is of interest here is the reason why Eliza Parsons upholds marriage with parental consent as an end in itself. She knows a woman has not much chance to survive without the financial backing, and, with luck, the good family name, of a man. The realist part ends here. Where the fantasy begins is with the idea of marriage for love. Although women are considered successful if they marry into a good and solvent family, there is more to be desired, as all women know. The possibilities of marrying for desire are limited in the real world, but can be played out safely in the Gothic novel. Thus, morals are adhered to by the 'correct' marriage, but there are several forms which marriage can take in an Eliza Parsons novel.

Firstly, there will be the 'socially-sanctioned' marriage, mentioned by Bette B. Roberts,<sup>134</sup> uncontentious and happy. This is generally the kind of marriage that



occurs at the end of the novel. Next, there is a marriage sanctioned by parents but unwanted by the bride or groom. This will take place, but, depending on the reaction by one or other of the partners, will have two different outcomes. The first, in which one partner, generally the woman, dislikes her spouse, will result in her elopement with the man of her choice, but she will suffer for her disobedience, because she broke her vows. The second possibility with an enforced marriage is that the suffering partner will endure the situation, but fate will allow release later. Thirdly, there is an elopement, usually by a naive woman with a wicked man of higher rank, who will abandon her later. Generally, she will die after telling her story as a cautionary tale to all those thinking of disobeying their parents. Finally, there is the happy second marriage. This is usually linked with the situation mentioned above, where a victim of enforced marriage suffers until destiny lends a hand. The unwanted partner, usually an unpleasant man, but sometimes an adulterous woman, will die and allow the suffering spouse to marry again. This type of marriage is represented as the happiest of all. The hero or heroine has married for love, after obediently marrying the person designated by his or her father, and putting up with a bad marriage out of duty. The second marriage, however, will be a love match, undertaken not by inexperienced teenagers, but worldly wise people who have chosen their own mate.

Although Bette B. Roberts takes into account economics when discussing the necessity for women to make a good marriage, she seems to take little account of it when she considers Eliza Parsons' morality. She regards her moralising excessive without investigating the purpose of it:

Eliza Parsons' didactic approach to the theme of marriage supports her intention or claim in the preface [of *The Mysterious Warning*] that:

'The author of this work is a *Parent*; as such, she has been strictly observant that her writings should never offend against delicacy or common sense.- She has never dictated one page, or suggested one idea inimical to the precepts of virtue, or that should suffuse the cheek of innocence with a blush. - Here rests her merit' (p xvii). The protestations of morality, which are inserted to the point of excess in the novel, are evidently viewed as a strong defense of her portraits of misfortune and suffering, which are the direct result of youthful imprudence or parental tyranny regarding marriage. These overt didactic assertions thinly mask the more interesting and compelling appeals through fantasy.<sup>115</sup>

Here, Roberts seems to underestimate both Eliza Parsons' need to appear respectable, and to make money. Whilst, as has been discussed, Eliza Parsons will often flout the 'rules' of a genre in order to make a personal point, the fact remains that her books have to sell. The way she deals with this is cleverly to note her first review's insistence on her unarguable morality. The book sold. From then on, she concentrates on this moral stance, presumably aware that a certain proportion of her readership is buying her novels for precisely this dependability, and this leaves her free for a little modest experimentation in challenging social and cultural values.

As previously mentioned, Coral Ann Howells<sup>100</sup> believes that *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) is a reworking of *Hamlet* into a 'moral fable about the destructive effects of the passions on man's happiness and hopes of salvation'.<sup>137</sup> This novel has, as Howells points out, like *Hamlet*, the 'themes of revenge, incest and fraternal treachery',<sup>100</sup> but she says that Eliza Parsons has re-allocated moral and emotional qualities so that the hero's brother, and not the hero, seeks revenge, and gloom is now a quality of the villains rather than of the hero. Unlike *Hamlet*, says Howells, the hero Ferdinand is a 'man of decisive action',<sup>110</sup> who ends the novel married to the girl he loves. A ghostly voice gives warnings, but is revealed, in a prime example of explained supernatural, to have been the work of the family retainer, likened by

Howells to the ghost of Hamlet's father because he too knew the family secrets. Howells says Eliza Parsons' belief in Providence is reminiscent of Hamlet's fatalistic approach, but only, she believes, because the novelist felt that '[p]rovidence was synonymous with poetic justice'.<sup>140</sup> She ends by expressing the view that, compared with *Hamlet*, the novel 'is inferior in every respect except its sensationalism'.<sup>141</sup> Howells seems to be basing her comparison of the novel and play on the fact that Eliza Parsons prefaces her text with a quotation from *Hamlet*, slightly misquoted: 'Thus conscience can make cowards of us all' and ends with another: 'Foul deeds will rise/ Though all the earth o'erwhelms them, to men's eyes.' That, as pointed out by Howells herself, Hamlet is gloomy and dies while Ferdinand is decisive and marries again for love, that Ferdinand's enemy is his brother and not his uncle, that revenge is sought by his brother and not by him, and that the ghost is not that of his father, or even real, seems to me to weaken Howells' case. What is more, Ferdinand had been banned from the castle, whilst his father was alive, due to his marriage without parental consent. By contrast, Hamlet had been on the best of terms with his father. In Eliza Parsons' novel, the incest is that of the hero's brother with the hero's wife. There is a further suggestion of incest in Ferdinand's first wife's half-sister being his own half-sister, although with no shared parent. There are so many dissimilarities in the two texts that Howells' argument for *The Mysterious Warning* as Shakespeare *moralise* falls. The significance of this type of reading is that it seeks to locate similarities and then compares to the disadvantage of the supposed revisionary text. This is unhelpful sometimes, because not only may the critic be mistaken in a belief of the author's intention, but also the intrinsic meaning of the text, as well as the motive and skill of the writer, whether highly developed or no, are devalued.

As before mentioned, other works not so strictly Gothic in form and content can be discussed here as their use of worst-case realism is similar to the approach employed by Eliza Parsons in her Gothic works. A novel which fits into this category is *The Girl of the Mountains*, published in 1797. There are many elements which link this novel to worst-case realism, but it has a number of Gothic elements too. The mountains of the title (the Pyrenees), suggest that it will deal with Romantic subject matter and indeed this is evident from the first page, when Mr Dupont is introduced as the ‘melancholy inmate of a lowly cottage’.<sup>142</sup> We find out gradually that he is living in exile with his daughter under an assumed name, for some misdemeanour of which the reader is not instantly informed. He is particularly gloomy as today is the anniversary of his dead wife’s birth. Walking toward nightfall, he becomes lost and in the dusk sees a light. He wonders if it is an ‘ignus fatuus’.<sup>143</sup> Here Eliza Parsons is suffusing the text with references to Romantic overreaction. Mr Dupont fears that the building from which he now sees the light coming might be full of bandits, but he hears the sound of praying. A storm is building so he knocks and discovers a man dressed in a monk’s habit who invites him in. He asks Dupont if he lives near ‘these frightful hills’ and tells him he dresses as a monk to deter bandits and came to the mountains to escape his friends’ ingratitude after spending his fortune on them. Dupont replies that it seems he is not alone in suffering. This introduction is full of melodramatic detail, from the mountainous gloom, through the threat of storm and bandits to the two wanderers sick of the world. So intense is it that one becomes suspicious of Eliza Parsons’ motives and perhaps considers the approach to be tongue-in-cheek. This impression is intensified when the hermit, de Gie, begins to tell his story in the style of a history book by recounting events following the death of Lewis 11th. The king left his daughter Ann, Lady of Beaujeu to govern the realm, rather than the heir

presumptive, Lewis, Duke of Orleans, a close friend of de Gie. Adventures of a heraldic flavour follow, with sieges, battles and imprisonments in towers. In reality, the friend of de Gie is Louis XII, who reigned between 1498 and 1515. We are told that he married Jane, a woman he would have loved had she not been deformed, who is selfless and devoted, even though she only married Lewis to please her father.<sup>144</sup>

Here then is a Gothic ingredient of the first order. Not only do the events of this novel take place in the mediaeval era, but the setting, in part, is France, and furthermore, the French court. Eliza Parsons is treading a precarious path, nine years after the storming of the Bastille and only four years since the beginning of Le Terreur. The details about the corruption of the French court are a sub-plot in the tale which is mainly concerned with the exploits of Dupont's daughter Adelaide. Dupont is waylaid by robbers, one of whom sends the others away and sees Dupont home. Waiting for him is the 17 year old Adelaide, in turmoil at her father's absence. The robber, Deplessis, has a gentlemanly air, polite and obliging. He asks to return, but before he does so the other robbers, who have been watching their errant companion's movements, attack the cottage, stab Dupont and abduct Adelaide. She awakes in a system of caves, guarded by the robbers Jacques and Lesare, to be told that her father is dead. Jacques tries to kiss her but she wins time by saying she is too upset by her father's death but will learn to cope with the situation. They show her to her bedroom, off which is an underground cave where she finds Deplessis, who Jacques and Lesare believe they have killed for his treachery. She looks after him in secret and he gives her a knife with which to defend herself against the others. They tell her she is to be their wife, and Jacques chases her. She pulls the knife and stabs at random, killing him. There are a number of remarkable circumstances here. First of all, a woman is living alone with

three men, one of whose wounds she tends, having made humanity supersede the rigid forms of delicacy' 143 Then, armed with a knife, she kills a man, notwithstanding the grounds of self-defence, and is allowed to live and continue as heroine of the novel. Generally, less extreme behaviour than this is punished by death for the character and only the most anodyne of personalities is permitted to prevail. Charlotte Dacre's Victoria<sup>146</sup> also has a confrontation with banditti, but she yields to Zofloya, unlike the virtuous Adelaide, who makes a vigorous effort to preserve her chastity, revealing herself to be an able fighter at the same time as providing emergency nursing care. As can be seen in Charlotte Lennox's Romantic burlesque *The Female Quixote* (1752), a woman interested in 'adventures' is morally suspect. Here, Eliza Parsons seems to be anxious to allow her heroine a more adventurous life, not through the woman's choice, unlike Lennox's Arabella, but due to the circumstances in which she finds herself because of her father's past.<sup>147</sup> Adelaide has been brought up in a convent and since she was three, the only man she has seen has been her father, but for all that, she becomes a killer in circumstances somewhat irregular for a gentlewoman.

Adelaide finds herself at the house of yet another hermit who tells her that the Countess at the castle nearby needs a companion. He has been surprised to learn that after a long residence there the Countess is anxious to leave for a tour of Italy and Spain. Adelaide does not want to go but feels that she cannot refuse. They set off for Spain, and on the border pass, the Countess describes the scenery as sublime, remarking that it is wonderful to look at but it would be horrible to live in. Adelaide disagrees, saying that anyone with a 'mind detached from the world'<sup>148</sup> can contemplate God's works and enjoy them. The Countess calls her a young

philosopher. It is interesting that the idea of the sublime is not to Adelaide's taste. She is not in awe but is humbly grateful for beauty. Generally, in the fiction of the period, one must either be aware of the sublime or arrogant enough (like Victor Frankenstein)<sup>149</sup> to face it on equal terms. Adelaide merely sees it as God's gift and gives thanks for it. In this respect, she clearly differs greatly from the heroines of Ann Radcliffe,<sup>150</sup> and one suspects that Eliza Parsons wants to make sure the reader notices. When faced with the problem of escape from the cave, Adelaide had seen the mountain as an obstacle to be surmounted to reach safety. She did not waste time either marvelling at the scenery or lamenting her inability to overcome the obstacle.

In Pampeluna the ladies are invited to stay at the castle of the governor, Don Diego de Salverda, a man of gallantry with a haughty wife and son and a kind and beautiful daughter, Isabella, with whom Adelaide strikes up a lifelong friendship. Both Don Diego and his son Don Felix are attracted to Adelaide and the Countess is jealous. Adelaide, although grateful to her, dislikes being presented to strangers as under the Countess's protection and feels the older woman ought to have tried to lessen Adelaide's sense of obligation. However, Adelaide decides that she knows so little of the world that perhaps these feelings are unjust. In these circumstances, we learn of Adelaide's worries, a typical aspect of Eliza Parsons' writing. Here we are invited to recognise her state of mind and sympathise with her difficulties. The realism of these thoughts and concerns has an accuracy which invites the empathy of the reader.

Isabella understands her difficulties and offers her enough money to pay for six months' stay at a convent if it should be necessary. When they leave, Don Felix follows them. The Countess ridicules the dress and manners of Don Diego's wife and

calls Isabella vain. Adelaide retorts that everyone has the right to think for themselves. At the next town, the governor, Don Lopez, is extravagantly gallant and he tells the Countess he wants to marry Adelaide. The Countess is shocked that a Spanish gentleman wants to marry a 'little adventurer, who does not know her name'.<sup>151</sup> Here is the sensibility, much more of the eighteenth than of the fifteenth century, requiring one to be seen to be respectable, as good behaviour is not sufficient proof that one's rank and family are of unimpeachable quality. The Countess tells Adelaide that all she has to do to gain a fortune is to be 'candid'. Adelaide is angry and refuses. The Countess rudely asks if this is because she is unable to abide by the conditions. Stung, Adelaide replies, 'madam, when I decline the offer, I am not obliged to make any concessions disagreeable to myself, ' adding that she is nobly bom. The Countess replies that no girl would turn this down and assumes she has a lover. In response, Adelaide says she will go to a convent. The gallant Don Lopez suggests she lives with his sister the Marchioness de Gusman, as he has realised the ladies are not her friends. The Marchioness has been melancholy since the loss of her only child but he is sure she will love Adelaide.

This complicated plot involves many elements of importance to women. For example, once again, as in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), female enmity and malice are at least as damaging as male evil and as difficult for respectable young women to overcome. The depression of a woman subsequent to the death of a child is also a realistic addition to which many women readers can relate. Worst-case realism here displaces the Gothic supernatural as a basis for anxiety, but at the same time, there is empathy from the writer who understands these fears and represents the mental state



and processes of women undergoing these dilemmas, to show them actively thinking, working out what to do, rather than merely being passively acted upon.

On a walk into a grotto with the Countess and Donna Padilla, Adelaide is abducted by three masked men. She screams and faints. For the sake of the servant, the Countess says that after the first shock, Adelaide did not complain, so perhaps she knew the men. Don Felix thinks Don Lopez is behind the kidnapping, and the servant thinks Don Felix has organised it. Worried, Felix asks the ladies what happened and the Countess tells him Adelaide has eloped: her scream was one of pleasure. Adelaide's first abduction came about because the robbers spying on Deplessis saw him with Adelaide in the garden of her cottage. Once again, the outdoors is dangerous and she is once again abducted. The fact that there are several possible suspects suggests that she is marketable material, and a young woman alone is available to the first bidder, or in this case, kidnapper. In fact, the truth is worse still. The ladies are of course the instigators of the abduction and their aim is not only to rid themselves of the competition for the men, but also to destroy her reputation. The very fact of her kidnap is enough to sully her character. The important detail is that the event is known. Last time, it happened in private; no-one but Adelaide and her kidnappers knew of it. Now society is informed and the damage is as great as if Adelaide had deliberately organised an elopement.

A feature which seems to be important here is the evil in women's minds. Readers of the Gothic are used to evil males<sup>j</sup> but the adaptation of Gothic elements which Eliza Parsons is undertaking continues here with the recognition of the disturbing qualities present in the female psyche. These may be expressed as explicit malice on the part of

women, or the negativity of a melancholy mental state. Just as the apparition of a fiend is replaced in the works of Eliza Parsons by the spectre of poverty, the Gothic trope of dark confinement is represented by depression as a consequence of bereavement. Instead of familiar demons hastening to do the bidding of a Satanic enemy, the spiteful machinations of jealous women render them complicit in the downfall of other women engineered by a wicked man. Ultimately however, despite the ill-will of both sexes, Adelaide makes the expected happy marriage to the good Don Lopez.

The realist features of *The Miser and His Family*, published in 1800, are discussed fully in Chapter 6, but there are Gothic qualities in the novel too, for example, the figure of the miser who lives in seclusion with a number of obsessions. However, there is once more a subversion of the form. When the miser marries, his overbearing wife keeps him locked in his sparsely-furnished room dressed in the threadbare clothes he will not replace, while she spends his money lavishly on entertainments and decoration in the downstairs apartments he will never visit. This pair provides at once the extreme quality of this novel and a reversal of the usual Gothic plot involving the incarcerated female. The realism consists in the attention to detail in describing the decoration of the house and deploring the modern folly of pretentious living. Once she has control of his money, the miser's wife reveals herself to be a spendthrift with an appetite for opulence but no taste. Both extremes of financial futility are given satirical treatment here, and although the portrait of both characters is harsh, they are recognisable as representative of some of society's failings. No attempt is made to distance the narrative from the present day, with a meshing of realism and Gothic features. Recognisable places are named and as has been seen

already, the figure of reason is present in the person of a lawyer, whose excellence of character is minutely described. Once again, it is a professional, not an aristocrat, who is acclaimed as the backbone of a stable society and is applauded for his worth, diligence and honesty.

As mentioned above, *Murray House*, Eliza Parsons' antepenultimate novel, published in 1804, involves the incarceration of a woman by her husband, for the purposes of facilitating his travels round Europe with his mistress. This stripping away of the stage setting of ruined castle and feudalism is raw worst-case realism. *Murray House*, like Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), is all about lawsuits. It is an epistolary novel, dealing with the correspondence between Anna Sidney and her friend Mrs Grenville. The estates of Anna Sidney's father have been judged to belong to Anna's cousin, Mr Ramsey. Mr Sidney's failing is chess which he plays with evil Sir John Kilmomey, whose wife Anna meets only once. She is lovely but failing, due, according to rumour, to his worrying her into an early grave. He is large, ungainly and arrogant, openly flirting with Anna in front of his wife. The two women are soon friends and Anna immediately hates Sir John. She does not see Lady Kilmomey again, as she, like Mr Parsons, dies of a stroke. Through their chess games Sir John has become Mr Sidney's 'friend' and even offers him large sums of money to pay back rents Mr Sidney had received from the estates now belonging to Mr Ramsey. He thus gains an ascendancy over Mr Sidney and the latter allows him to pay court to Anna. She makes clear her objection to him but finally has to submit, although she begs her father to save her from insupportable misery and says death would be better. He accuses her of reading romances, and says Sir John has saved them from poverty. Clearly, Sir John has only offered financial aid in return for Anna's hand in marriage.

Her father begs her forgiveness, but pleads with her to 'save a parent'.<sup>154</sup> Here Anna is put in an impossible position. She has a younger sister Emma and is now responsible for both Emma and their father.

Anna marries the detested Sir John Kilmomey and, eight days after the wedding, writes to Mrs Grenville that she is trying to assume an air of content,

and to gain the esteem of a husband, when those raptures of happiness, which I can ill support, shall be calmed, as all violent emotions are sure to be, into a reasonable and respectful affection.<sup>155</sup>

She is trying to do her duty, and feels that there must be merit in it, since her duty is to someone she abhors, while it is easy to be dutiful to those we love. Many women must have shuddered at reading this, in sympathy and perhaps even understanding of suffering the animal passions of a loathed spouse. This is at the base of the trope of the feudal Gothic tyrant - the threat that a young woman will be sacrificed to assuage his lust. Sir John is a thorough-going tyrant. He attempts to make Anna leave the bedside of her dying father, and when he thunders at her to obey him, she faints. Coming round, she is told her father has died. She finds that she cannot cry until her servant gives her a dose of hartshorn which stimulates her senses. Here a mechanical means is used to induce sensibility, rather than its being the natural state of a delicate mind prone to hysteria. Eliza Parsons indicates that Anna is a rational woman, who has understandably fainted from stress, but who afterwards enters a natural state of shock at the death of her parent. The melodrama which could have attended this scene is missing, and the distressing events are narrated in reasoned tones. However, this reading of the novel is disputed by the review in *The Literary Journal*. The review in its entirety reads:

This novel compared with many others of the same sort, may be considered as a *tolerable* publication. But it is liable in a high degree to that objection, which applies to the generality of novels, which is, that it abounds with extravagance, and an absurd cant about sentiment and sensibility, which, however fit they may be for heroines of romance, are but scurvy companions in the beaten track of life. Such nonsense has always a tendency to enervate the mind, and render it unfit for ordinary duties. The faculties of the soul are perverted, the imagination becomes inflamed and distempered, and every object is seen through a false medium. Such is generally the effect of injudicious novel-reading, even when the general scope, as in the present instance, is intended to promote the ends of morality and religion.<sup>156</sup>

In fact, Eliza Parsons is at some pains to make that very point. She makes it clear in the dialogue of Sir John, particularly about novels. He hates the affectation of romantic girls for ‘that parcel of stupid, cursed absurd novels’ written to encourage their disobedience to husbands and parents. He insists that Anna complies with his wishes. He has used this word, he tells Anna, because, although to him it is synonymous with ‘orders’, the word orders ‘may sound *harsh* in your romantic vocabulary’.<sup>157</sup> The fact that Sir John cannot tell that Anna is not being romantic suggests that others may fall into the same error, as *The Literary Journal’s* reviewer seems to have done. Eliza Parsons makes it clear that after the death of Anna’s father, she felt fortified and calmly told Sir John she was ready to go home. Her unhappiness, and her sense of duty that she should be with her father, were normal given that he was dying. The realistic treatment of the Gothic is, by this stage in her career, very much the norm for Eliza Parsons. Even the setting, although the plot moves to a Scottish castle, is in the main very urban, yet this novel appears to be the essence of Gothic, and Edward Copeland’s term, ‘Business Gothic’<sup>158</sup> is very apt. There is no supernatural element here, only men’s evil and the spectre of destitution, both financial and marital.

The matter-of-fact attitude to her woes displayed by Anna is a good example of the ways in which Eliza Parsons sometimes uses her characters to indicate practicality in unusual ways, as I pointed out on pages 185-187 above, in relation to the Countess of Wolfenbach. Anna, like Victoria in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), has been imprisoned by her husband. Like her too, she refuses to leave her 'prison' when she has the chance. Anna declares that, rather than escaping, she will return to her husband's house if she can, although this is not out of submission, but because as a wife she has a right to be there. Status and property matter, and Anna knows she is entitled to both.<sup>159</sup> She achieves her aim when the dissolute Sir John dies, leaving Anna free to marry Mr Ramsey, who has turned out to be an amiable man of 24, and has renounced the estates in favour of Anna and Emma. The marriage thus neatly reconciles the two sides of the family and, of course, unites the property.

Eliza Parsons seems from these indications to be deconstructing<sup>160</sup> the Gothic, in order that, at one and the same time, she might make money by writing in the genre, whilst subverting it to make moral points to a wide readership, as well as choosing an ideal mode in which to test boundaries. Her subversion of the genre can be undertaken to reconfigure the Gothic as a moral text, as, for example, she does in *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), by permitting the liberation of two mistreated women thanks to the religious faith of Matilda and the fidelity of Victoria to the promise she made to the Count. Nonetheless, this subversion can also be seen operating in a more challenging manner, in the creation of women like the knife-wielding Adelaide in *The Girl of the Mountain*, who stabs to prevent rape, and the amoral Charlotte of *The Mysterious Warning*, whose exploits in the novel appear to be designed principally to

excite the imagination of female readers without the consequences faced by the character. This capacity to test diverse boundaries in diverse ways is further exemplified by the novels in which Eliza Parsons employs biographical elements, which are the subject of my final chapter.

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- <sup>1</sup> Letter to Dr Dale, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1803, Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- <sup>2</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, (London: The Women's Press, 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> Lauren Fitzgerald, 'Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies' in *Gothic Studies* (eds.) Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, Vol. 6.1. May, 2004, p. 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, 'The Female Gothic: Then and Now', introduction to *Gothic Studies* Vol. 6.1. May, 2004, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies', pp. 8-9.
- <sup>6</sup> As in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796).
- <sup>7</sup> See also Chapter 6, for a discussion of realist works with certain Gothic elements.
- <sup>8</sup> Eliza Parsons, *Murray House*, (1804).
- <sup>9</sup> For example, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) and *A Sicilian Romance* (1790).
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Fiction in England 1790-1820* (1995).
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.
- <sup>12</sup> See Appendix 2 for contemporary reviews.
- <sup>13</sup> In fact, *The Convict: or, Navy Lieutenant* is Eliza Parsons' last novel, published in 1807.
- <sup>14</sup> Copeland, *Women Writing About Money*, p. 43.
- <sup>15</sup> Devendra P. Varma, introduction to *The Castle of Wolfenbach, The Northanger Set of Horrid Novels* (London: Folio Press, 1968), pp. xv-xvi.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) is sub-titled 'A German Story' and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), 'A German Tale'.
- <sup>18</sup> Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, *Die Räuber [The Robbers]*, (1781).
- <sup>19</sup> Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (New York: Russell & Russell, (1957) 1966).
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, p. vii of Devendra Varma's introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968).
- <sup>21</sup> This thesis aims to set right many of these misleading impressions.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine* Vol. 81, pt. 1, 1811, p. 195, notice of the death of Eliza Parsons.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Times* Sept 6, 1804, p. 3, column C, Eliza Parsons' appearance at Insolvent Debtor's Court.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> In *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), to be discussed fully later in this chapter.
- <sup>26</sup> Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Sophia Lee, *The Recess* (1785) and Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron* (1778).
- <sup>27</sup> James R. Foster, *History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 250-251.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (London: Pandora, 1986), p. 243.
- <sup>30</sup> Montague Summers, (intro. Brocard Sewell) *The Galanty Show*, (London: Cecil Woolf, 1980) p. 20.
- <sup>31</sup> Don Felix is a scheming Spanish nobleman in *The Girl of the Mountains*, 1797, to be discussed later in this chapter.
- <sup>32</sup> For discussions of the sentimental novel, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1993) 1994) and Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 37-38, she states of the sentimental novel that, 'developing along the patterns established by Richardson, [it] provided women with a genre apparently tailor-made for their experience, confined as it was to domestic concerns and affairs of the heart'. However, Poovey notes that there are inherent problems with the genre since, 'although women found in the sentimental novel a subject and even a genre, these works called attention primarily to women's weaknesses and helped to drive further underground the aggressive, perhaps sexual, energies that men feared in women'. It is perhaps these energies which surface in women's Gothic and are exhibited by some of Eliza Parsons' strong female characters, whom I discuss later in this chapter.
- <sup>33</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show* p. 28.
- <sup>34</sup> Anonymous, *The Bandit Chief* (London: Minerva, 1818).
- <sup>35</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, p. 29.
- <sup>36</sup> This work will be discussed later in this chapter.
- <sup>37</sup> Summers, *The Galanty Show*, p. 81.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.
- <sup>39</sup> Eliza Parsons, *The Valley of St. Gothard*, p. 92.



40 Interestingly, one of the characters in the 1793 novel *The Castle of Wolfenbach* is named Monsieur De Clermont, son of the Marquis De Clermont. Regina Maria Roche published *Clermont*, another of the Northanger 'horrid novels' in 1798.

41 Copeland, p. 43.

42 Eliza Parsons, *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, pp. 22-28.

43 Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), (Oxford: World Classics, Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 116.

44 *ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

45 Samuel Richardson *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). See Chapter 6 for a discussion of the relative safety of the countryside in comparison with London in *The Mysterious Visit* (1802).

46 Both have been given a settlement by the generous Marquis of Melfort, Victoria's brother-in-law, so there is sisterly feeling between them.

47 *The Castle of Wolfenbach* p. 116.

48 *ibid.*, p. 178.

49 *ibid.*

50 *ibid.*

51 *ibid.*

52 Katherine Anne Ackley, 'Violence Against Women in the Novels of Early British Women Writers' in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, Dale Spender (ed), (1992) Note 1, p. 223.

53 In Chapter 6, I discuss *The Mysterious Visit* (1802), in which a servant helps her mistress to escape.

54 See, for example, Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796).

55 *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, pp. 118-119.

56 *ibid.* p. 39.

57 *ibid.*

58 *ibid.*

59 *ibid.* Once again, as discussed in Chapter 6, this remark seems to be influenced by the views of Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

60 A fire does appear in the novel, but not as part of Magdalene's story. The servant Bertha is killed in a fire started by Count Wolfenbach (pp. 32-34) in an attempt to remove witnesses to his misdeeds. Interestingly, this incident seems to foreshadow events in *Jane Eyre* (1847). That the Rev. Bronte's bookcase might have held *The Castle of Wolfenbach* is an attractive thought.

61 That she may indeed be referring to these women is suggested by the fact that Mme de Raikfort is an invention, as the name cannot exist in French.

62 Review in *The Critical Review* Vol 10, 1794, p. 49.

63 Ackley, p. 212.

64 Other novelists mentioned include Maria Edgeworth and Mary Brunton, but the texts cited are written after Eliza Parsons'.

65 Ackley, p. 212.

66 For example, the perdition of the demon Matilda in Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), the death of Victoria in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806) and of Charlotte in Eliza Parsons' *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), and the ruined beauty of the vain Mary Ann in Eliza Parsons' *The Miser and his Family* (1800).

67 *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, p. 61.

68 Ranita Chatterjee 'Sapphic Subjectivity and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy* (1795)' in *Gothic Studies* (eds.) Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, Vol. 6.1. May, 2004, p. 52.

69 Diane Long Hoeveler, 'The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism' in *ibid.*, p. 32.

70 There are other indications that Eliza Parsons may be in dialogue with, or have been influenced by, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary* (1788). In *ibid.*, Hoeveler states that the character Mary's mother, Eliza, is 'possessed of nothing but "negative good nature"'. The character of like Mrs Courtney in *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) is similarly described, and the plot of *Mary* has some similarities with Eliza Parsons' 1804 novel, *Murray House*.

71 Review in *The British Critic* Vol. 3, 1794, pp. 199-200.

72 *Castle of Wolfenbach*, p. 22.

73 *ibid.*, p. 178.

74 Alison Milbank, introduction to *A Sicilian Romance*, (Oxford: World Classics, Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xi.

75 *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

- 76 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 90.
- 77 Review in *The General Magazine*, 1790, Vol. 4, p. 318.
- 78 Review in *The Monthly Review*, 1794, Vol. 14, p. 465.
- 79 Review in *The Analytical Review*, 1794, Vol. 20, pp. 49-52.
- 80 Review in *The Critical Review*, 1795, ns Vol. 14, p. 352.
- 81 Review in *The Critical Review*, 1797, ns Vol. 21, p. 472.
- 82 Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 2.
- 83 Eliza Parsons *Women as They Are* (1796), William Godwin *Caleb Williams: or, Things as They Are* (1794).
- 84 Betty B. Roberts, 'The Horrid Novels: *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Northanger Abbey*' in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition / Transgression* Kenneth W. Graham (ed) (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp. 89-110.
- 85 *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
- 86 *ibid.*, p. 94.
- 87 *ibid.*, p. 95.
- 88 *ibid.*, p. 96.
- 89 It is true, as suggested by Roberts' comments on p. 98 about women's position in this era, that at this point in her career Eliza Parsons does not wish to be too controversial. Nevertheless, in later novels, this element seems to develop into an apparent advocacy of the middle class, as I discuss in Chapter 8.
- 90 Henry Fielding *Tom Jones* (1749).
- 91 *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, p. 11.
- 92 Eliza Parsons, *The Mysterious Warning*, p. 10.
- 93 See Chapter 3.
- 94 Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction*, (London: University of London Athlone Press, 1978), pp. 19-20.
- 95 William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605) and *Henry IV 2* (1600), Act IV, Scene V.
- 96 Catherine Craft-Fairchild, 'Cross-Dressing and the Novel: Women Warriors and Domestic Femininity', in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, January 1998, Vol. 10, No. 2) pp. 171-202.
- 97 Heiland, p. 35.
- 98 In *The Monk*, (1796).
- 99 Heiland, p. 37.
- 100 There is, however, a possibility that *The Monk* had been published in 1795, since, according to Howard Anderson in his note on the text, two copies with 1795 title pages were discovered in the 1950s. Howard Anderson, introduction to *The Monk*, (Oxford: World's Classics, 1980), p. xxiii.
- 101 Heiland, p. 39.
- 102 Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 149.
- 103 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya: or The Moor* 1806.
- 104 *The Mysterious Warning*, p. 174.
- 105 In *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) and *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793), for example.
- 106 Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 16, 1796, p. 474.
- 107 *The Mysterious Warning*, p. 380.
- 108 *ibid.*
- 109 *ibid.*, p. 381.
- 110 *ibid.*
- 111 Williams, p. 138.
- 112 Bette B. Roberts, 'Marital Fears and Polygamous Fantasies in Eliza Parsons' *Mysterious Warning*' in *The Journal of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green State University, Ohio, Summer 1978, Vol. 12:1), p. 42.
- 113 Devendra P. Varma, introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968).
- 114 John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson: Narrative Patterns, 1700-1739*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 263, cited in Bette B. Roberts, 'Marital Fears' p. 42.
- 115 *ibid.*
- 116 *ibid.*
- 117 Roberts, p. 42.
- 118 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, (1957) 1959), p. 205, cited in Roberts, 'Marital Fears', p. 42.
- 119 Roberts, p. 42.
- 120 For example, Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) or Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1802).

- 121 J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England: 1770-1800* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 86, cited in Roberts, 'Marital Fears', p.43.
- 122 Roberts, 'Marital Fears', p. 43.
- 123 *ibid.*
- 124 *ibid.*
- 125 *ibid.*
- 126 See note 120, above.
- 127 *The Monthly Review* Vol. 3, Sept-Dec 1790, p. 90. Reviewed by William Enfield, according to Peter Garside, James Raven, Rainer Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* (2000).
- 128 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818).
- 129 For example, see Fred Botting's discussion of the adverse critical reception of Ann Radcliffe's works by some reviewers in *Gothic*, (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 66-67.
- 130 Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 16, 1796, p. 474.
- 131 In 'Marital Fears'.
- 132 Roberts, 'Marital Fears', p. 43.
- 133 *ibid.*
- 134 *ibid.*
- 135 *ibid.*, p. 44.
- 136 Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1978).
- 137 *ibid.*, p. 19.
- 138 *ibid.*
- 139 *ibid.*, p. 20.
- 140 *ibid.*
- 141 *ibid.*
- 142 Eliza Parsons, *The Girl of the Mountains* (1797), Vol. I, p. 1.
- 143 This is significant since a 'foolish light', rather than a will o' the wisp, is the sense in which we are to read this.
- 144 This is the real-life Jeanne of France, and all the details of Louis' marriage, subsequent divorce and remarriage are described with historic accuracy, as are the battles in Italy and the deal with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian over the partition of Naples and Milan.
- 145 *The Girl of the Mountains*, p. 154.
- 146 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya*, 1806.
- 147 The landscape itself invites irregularity. The mountains are not civilised, their only inhabitants being bandits and hermits, escaping lurid pasts.
- 148 *The Girl of the Mountains*, Vol. I, p. 245.
- 149 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, (1818).
- 150 For example, Ellena, in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1796) Robert Miles (ed) (London: Penguin Classics, 2000) p. 75, finds her spirits 'revived and elevated' by scenery and says '[i]f I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these, than amidst the tamer landscapes of nature! Here, the objects seem to impart somewhat of their own force, their own sublimity to the soul. It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works!' Like Frankenstein, she appears to consider herself on a level with God here, and is well aware of the quality of sublimity of such landscape. Adelaide does not recognise the sublime; she sees only the beauty of nature and is able to appreciate it and be thankful.
- 151 *The Girl of the Mountains*, Vol II, p. 11.
- 152 *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 275.
- 153 Such as Manfred in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Montoni in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Ambrosio in Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), or The Moor in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, (1806).
- 154 Eliza Parsons, *Murray House*, (Brentford: Norbury, 1804) Vol. I, p. 74.
- 153 *ibid.*, p. 81.
- 156 Review in *The Literary Journal* June 1804, Vol. 3, pp. 609-610.
- 157 *Murray House*, pp. 179-198.
- 158 Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Fiction in England 1790-1820* (1995), p. 45.
- 159 *Murray House*, Vol. 3, p. 25.
- 160 Deconstruction is defined by Katie Wales in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (1994) as aiming to 'undermine [a text's] presuppositions, de-stabilize it, de-centre it', p. 108.

CHAPTER 8  
An Analysis of Eliza Parsons' Biographical Novels

*The Author of this Work is a Parent'*

In this chapter, I will discuss the novels of Eliza Parsons which contain biographical components. A woman writer in this period is likely to look to her own experience or social circle for ideas, since to sit and watch the world, speculating on strangers from a seat in a coffee shop is out of the question. Eliza Parsons is no exception here, and whilst it would be incorrect to consider her works autobiographical, they nonetheless contain elements she had encountered in her own life and I shall suggest that one at least, her last, *The Convict: or Navy Lieutenant* (1807), goes further and commemorates a lost son. The biographical elements used are sometimes almost formulaic: for example, in the majority of her works, there will be a house fire.<sup>2</sup> The fire which destroyed her family's livelihood and her husband's health naturally disturbed Eliza Parsons greatly, but its inclusion in the catalogue of disasters visited upon her unfortunate characters indicates how deeply she had been affected. However, it must be noted that, although a fire is treated as a terrible occurrence, it is not a catastrophe, since her characters generally recover from the blow, as she did herself.

Mary Anne Schofield, in 'The Witchery of Fiction',<sup>i</sup> notes that Charlotte Smith, too, adds elements from her own experience to her fiction. She points out that Charlotte Smith, like all women of her era, was a superb needlewoman, and remarks that:

a major topos in Smith's novels involves metaphoric matrices of mending and sewing. Smith pieces together a fictional life from scraps, facts, and

pieces of her real life, thus creating an entire corpus that can be read as romanticised biography.<sup>4</sup>

Schofield sees this interweaving of personal and fictional lives as important in Smith's creation of feminist statements, which I see as comparable with Eliza Parsons' own pronouncements, subtle though they are. However, Schofield notes that Smith always uses a "writing", literary character,<sup>5</sup> one who is in the process of composition, whereas Eliza Parsons' texts do not contain such a character; nor, incidentally, one who sews, her other occupation.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is an indication of the difference in their aims. Although both had taken to writing for financial reasons, Smith had begun her foray into print in 1784 with *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays*, a somewhat writerly first publication, whereas Eliza Parsons made it clear in her first preface that she was a complete beginner. Smith, however, according to Schofield, 'does take her craft very seriously', and *Desmond*, her 1792 novel, 'is, perhaps, her most extensive investigation of the creative process.'<sup>7</sup> Although Eliza Parsons does not include a discussion of the composition of a novel in her works, she has presumably taken her meshing of personal and fictional elements from Smith's example, as she makes it clear that Smith is one of her models. Although Smith had begun publishing in 1784, and had written her first novel in 1788, two years before Eliza Parsons' entry into print, it was not long before their works could be read side by side, as Eliza Parsons developed her own techniques and methods. Interestingly, too, Charlotte Smith wrote twenty-six volumes, whereas Eliza Parsons published over sixty. In her concern to portray a viewpoint of relevance to women, however, she imitates Smith, who, in Schofield's words, 'maintains her avid concern for presenting an accurate picture of the female condition'.<sup>8</sup> This presentation includes the introduction of elements from personal experience.

Recognisable biographical constituents of the novels include a number in *The Miser and His Family* (1800). There are many middle-class occupations here, of which Eliza Parsons would have some knowledge, either personally or through her sons. Sea captains, clerks, churchmen, lawyers and plantation owners are all represented in this novel, but more specific parallels with her own life are present too. In this novel there is a merchant, suitably named Mercer, who loses his money, his buildings and stores.<sup>9</sup> His cargo does well but his money is lost in a bank and, like Mr Parsons, he has to go to London. Like James Parsons too is the character of Mr Brownlow's brother, who we are told has two strokes, the second fatal. <sup>10</sup>Mrs Dobbins, who is poor, moves to an 'obscure lodging' in Tottenham Court Road <sup>11</sup> as Eliza Parsons had moved from Leicester Square to Wandsworth in 1795 due to her inability to pay her debts. <sup>12</sup>There are details of life in Jamaica, and mention is made of Kingston, Spanish Town and Port Royal Harbour, of which Eliza Parsons would have been informed by her sea-going sons. Like them, Edward Stanley is apprenticed at the age of 13 and spends five years working on a West India ship. <sup>13</sup>

Although Eliza Parsons and her reviewers had made much of her reduced social situation, her readers would presumably be unaware of the details of her life. They would, however, recognise the authentic quality of her characterisation. This is especially effective in the presentation of her foolish fashionable characters and the effectiveness of this approach is not lost on the reviewers who recognise that Eliza Parsons knows whereof she speaks and has depicted society justly. The reviewers of *The Monthly Magazine* and *The Critical Review* seem to be of this opinion:

MRS. PARSONS' 'Miser and his Family' is a severe, and we are afraid, a just satire on the fashionable world, or rather perhaps it may be characterised as the simple exposure of its vices, but such an exposure as has for its object to deter young persons from approaching near that vortex of dissipation in which so many perish. 14

How far the sons and daughters of fashion will be *pleased* with Mrs. Parson's (sic) description of *them* we will leave our readers to guess, from the small part of it which we shall subjoin: it is enough for us to remark, in the terms of the old adage, that we fear 'it is too true to make a jest  
o f. 15

It is to some degree unsurprising that the portion of Eliza Parsons' novels which are firmly located in formal realism should display recognisable parallels with her own life events and those of her intimates. Nor is it remarkable that they also include the diverse voices of many individuals and types. However, as this chapter aims to demonstrate, there are indications that some of these events and voices approach more nearly to biography than others. As I discussed fully in Chapter 1, in order to establish the varying degrees of verisimilitude employed by Eliza Parsons, it is pertinent to discuss the concept of heteroglossia, by which means a firmer indication may be grasped of her desire and ability to mirror life.

The main focus of this chapter is Eliza Parsons' final work, 1807's *The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant*. In order to discuss my contention that the attributes of the main character, Henry Thompson, are in some ways drawn from the life of a favourite son of Eliza Parsons, it will also contain a comparison between the speech of this character and one from *The Miser and his Family* of 1800, as I explained in Chapter 1. In this earlier work, Captain Tracy is a merchant seaman who has succeeded financially but who perhaps had humble beginnings. Eliza Parsons gives him the

speech of a 'bluff sea-dog' who has a colourful way with marine metaphor. In the two extracts below, Captain Tracy explains his decision to retire from the sea.

'Good Lord! I am now, as one may say, without rudder or pilot, and may run aground with no one to help me.' 16

'I am a poor tempest-beaten fellow that can't hold long; and must look up aloft now for comfort, in the hope of a quiet birth [sic] there, with my dear wife. - The rope of *her affectations* was *never broken*, and she has fast anchoring in my heart as long as I shall dwell in this deceitful, vile, cold hearted world.' 17

Captain Tracy's idiolect could be an echo of a real person's speech, given that Eliza Parsons grew up in Plymouth, married a ship-owning contractor for government stores working out of Plymouth naval dockyards, and was the mother of three seamen. She is in an ideal position to use real remembered speech or a realistic-sounding equivalent.

The somewhat vulgar, though good-natured, tone of this mode of speech can be contrasted with that of another seaman, this time a naval man, Lieutenant Henry Thompson, in Eliza Parsons' final novel *The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant* (1807). Although Henry also uses seaman's slang, his background, as the third son of a country curate, is a little more genteel, and Eliza Parsons demonstrates her ability to differentiate between the speech of two sea-faring characters. Here, in the two following extracts, Henry is pleased to meet an old colleague, formerly the ship's doctor, and behaves with the politeness to be found in the behaviour of those of much higher rank, though it is expressed in a rather breezy fashion.



‘What cheer my lad? - Honest Sam, I rejoice to see thee, - why I was cruising with all speed to shake hands with an old acquaintance before I join ship.’<sup>18</sup>

‘You never knew me a shark in your life, Sam. - I shall dine with you, to be sure, your’s [sic] was a cursed ugly painful sort of an employment on board, and must have cost you some heart aches when you had to lop off the limbs of poor honest hearted fellows, and turn them adrift lame for life. - But that’s not here or there now. - Where are you bound to, - can I go with you? for it signifies nothing to go back, if you have a cruise in view.’<sup>19</sup>

This terminology, while recognisably seaman-like, is distinctly diverse from that of the altogether more breezy Captain Tracy. It argues that Eliza Parsons was well able to differentiate between degrees and levels of idelect, and, indeed, that she had a fine ear for subtlety of speech. This point is of vital importance if an assumption is to be made about the likely source for Henry’s character. A clue to its provenance can be found in the response to Henry’s speech from a critic of the novel. *The Lady’s Monthly Museum*, although applauding her creation of Henry Thompson’s character, presented in ‘glowing colours’, takes Eliza Parsons to task for his mode of speech, as its reviewer feels that a naval officer would have had a better education than Henry’s appears to have been.

This is an amusing and interesting novel. The character of an English seaman is presented with glowing colours, and the whole story is embellished with much pleasing variety. We must, nevertheless, in justice, give out opinion that the outline is too roughly sketched; the language is altogether too coarse for that of a naval officer, who, however rough in manners, has generally the advantage of a decent education. The novel is pleasing on the whole, and one of the best of this indefatigable writer’s productions.<sup>20</sup>

Generally, no doubt, since officers were taken in the main from the higher ranks of society, one might expect a genteel manner of speech from them. However, the critic

takes no account of the reason the character was promoted to the rank of lieutenant, which had been in recognition of an act of bravery. Before that, Henry had been constantly passed over for promotion in favour of those of higher class. Thus is it explained how a lower class person, sounding rather coarser than those of similar elevated rank, could become a naval officer. What is more, the reviewer evidently did not know that Eliza Parsons' three sons were all mariners, two in the Navy and one in the Marines, all incidentally dying in service before their mother's death. Eliza Parsons thus presumably knew better than most how a naval officer spoke, though the reviewer's remarks make it clear that this was unusual.

The reason for Henry's promotion in the navy having been as reward for an act of bravery, after all his better-born colleagues of lower rank had been promoted above him, suggests a possible real-life counterpart to these events. In November 1803, Eliza Parsons had lost a son, a naval lieutenant who had just received his first command, and was drowned in a gale off Reculver with his surgeon, master and four of the crew of his gun-vessel, *The Hecate*.<sup>91</sup> Since the review in *the Lady's Monthly Museum* makes it clear that a naval lieutenant who sounds like Henry Thompson is rather exceptional, it seems conceivable that the character's speech and even method of promotion was based upon a person well-known to Eliza Parsons, who could be the son lost from *The Hecate*. The middle class but fatherless Lieutenant Parsons may well have won his promotion for a similar act of bravery.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps this was a favourite son, whom Eliza Parsons felt the need to commemorate in print by the use of his speech-patterns and brave acts for her character of Henry Thompson. Her other two sons dead already, she may have wished to pay tribute to

her latest loss (another child, a daughter, was to die in 1804) by this picture of a middle-class, worthy sailor who makes good in his profession by diligence and faithfulness to duty. Although the reviewer of the novel could hardly be expected to know the family details of Eliza Parsons, it is noticeable that no account is taken in the review of this possibility of promotion for bravery, which allowed men of the middling ranks to succeed. These men may indeed have had spoken in dialect or in accents other than Received Pronunciation.

Two men by the name of Parsons appear in the Navy List, one William, the name of Eliza's second son, and one Thomas. It is no longer possible to determine which of them was the commander of the *Hecate* in 1803, but the fictional Henry's surname is Thompson, and his best friend is William. Henry is also the name of one of her sons-in-law. Perhaps an amalgam of the names and personalities of those she loved or was obliged to was used in the composition of this novel, written not for profit, but in retirement.

Eliza Parsons' penultimate work had been published in 1804 and she had until then produced at least one work per year so presumably she had decided not to write more. As discussed in Chapter 2 on her biography, she died in 1811 in Leytonstone, Essex. The move appears to coincide with the period just after the publication of *The Convict* (1807) and she was possibly already receiving financial support since she had not published for three years before that. She seems to have come out of retirement to write *The Convict*, so presumably it is one she has a strong desire to write.<sup>24</sup> Her role since 1804 seems to have changed: she has entered another stage of her life. She may have suspected that *The Convict* was to be her last novel, since she was sixty-eight

years old in 1807 and could not expect to live much longer. As there was presumably no need to write for money, there must be another reason for publishing, which appears to be homage to a dead son. She is not looking for high sales or acceptance from respectable acquaintances. Here she is acting as a mother, but in a different way from her previous role as breadwinner and educator. All through her career, she had been trying to make ends meet for her children - to feed, clothe and educate them, but all this, by 1807, is over and the surviving girls are married, so a different motherly role is now assumed. She wants to put on record the personality and some of the fictionalised deeds of a lost and loved son. She has no hope of a continuation of her husband's name now, since none of the sons survived, so she must immortalise him in a different way.

The tone of this novel is altogether more candid than Eliza Parsons' early work. She seems no longer to care about her genteel, cautious image, and makes political points more openly than before, making the novel something of a departure on that basis alone. At the end of her career she is giving her characters political statements to make. For example, Henry's friend William Lascelles is anxious because, though a husband and father, at thirty years of age he is still only a Second Lieutenant in the marines, with only four shillings and sixpence per day to feed four people. Henry naively declares that he does not think the king means anyone under the rank of captain to marry as he does not pay them enough to do so. The conversation continues. Henry is surprised that Lascelles has not been promoted, as he had heard that in the marine service, it was easy to be promoted so long as one did one's duty. He adds that, in his own service, the Navy, many lords' sons were put on Admiral's ships, so they were the ones who were always promoted. Lascelles agrees that merit

alone will not advance a man, and mentions the vices of noblemen, but Henry stops him. Once again, he displays his simple faith in the system by pointing out that it is the king himself who makes noblemen, so they must be good people. He suggests that perhaps His Majesty believes that poor men will not want to marry. Lascelles argues that the king could not obtain men to crew his ships if poor men did not marry. In this way, Eliza Parsons makes the argument clear, and, as a rarely- and poorly-paid servant of the king, has clearly been longing to bruit abroad her misgivings for some time. Characteristically, however, she only does so on behalf of her sons, whose careers in the Navy and marines must have thrown up this debate in her home.

The novel's moral seems to be that goodness of heart is more important than rank (particularly as Henry had saved the ship when his commanding officer was too afraid to take action). Henry, while on his way to his ship, had passed Newgate prison and heard an affecting sermon. A well-dressed woman, Ellen, the convict of the title, appears and asks where her child is. Someone puts a two-year old girl into her arms, and Ellen says that this is the last time she will kiss the child, asking who will look after her. Henry, mindful of the sermon, replies that he will. Ellen thanks him and hands him a manuscript containing the story of her life. Henry devotes himself and his pay to her upbringing. He tells Lascelles later that the child, Frances, is a gift from God. Lascelles replies that he esteems Henry's 'blunt spontaneous goodness' 26 more and more. This bluntness, described by *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* in their review of the novel in February 1809 as roughness of manners, is here openly admitted by Eliza Parsons, once again suggesting that it is an attribute of a real person, since it would have been easier and perhaps more believable for her critics if she had made Henry well-born. Frances eventually marries the son of Lascelles, who is a lawyer.

His family are worried because of her background, but he is adamant. Here Eliza Parsons finishes what she started when she ceased dedicating her works to the nobility, and marries a young woman of dubious background to a better-born young man, who nonetheless has a middle class profession and works hard for his living. The writer has broken away from the society of her early married life and says openly what she thinks about it. The only nobleman here is the husband of Ellen, who had taken part in a plot to allow his friend to seduce her. In fact, so candid has Eliza Parsons become that her final novel contains a species of date-rape as Ellen is left alone with her husband's friend, wakes up in his arms and realises she has been given an opiate. This was a plot by her husband to be free of his wife and destroy her reputation. As a result, she stabs him (although not fatally), hence her presence in Newgate. These circumstances give the reader the sense that Eliza Parsons has been longing to be more frank about what Ellen had termed 'the perfidy of man'. Henry, unusually for a hero, does not marry. Although his creator does give him a happier ending than her son had had, she perhaps feels uncomfortable with giving him a wife, family and long life, since this was not her son's destiny.

The epigram in *The Convict*, repeated in all four volumes, is from John Brown's *Barbarossa*, and lends credence to the suggestion that Eliza Parsons has strong feelings about her son's fate:

The ways of Heaven, though dark,  
Are just, and oft some guardian pow'r  
Attends unseen, to save the innocent.

..... And Oh! in whatever garb misfortune approaches my  
door, may humanity be in waiting, ready to lift the latch, and give her  
comfort!⌘

There are similarities between this text and *The Convict*. Like Barbarossa, the evil husband of Ellen repents before his death and tries to make recompense to his victims, and there is a supposed murder in each which did not take place: Ellen is tried for the murder of her husband, yet he has survived, and *Barbarossa's* Achmet is assumed to be the murderer of Selim, though he is in fact Selim in disguise. However, since the novel has no actual pirates among its characters, these extracts from the play appear to constitute a political statement on the part of Eliza Parsons, who is angry at the loss of her son, or sons, and wants to blame the 'pirates' in charge of lives and careers.

In this chapter, I have discussed the biographical elements in her works which most exemplify Eliza Parsons' attempt to market her life as fiction, the topic of my thesis. This is the culmination of my study of her life and literary texts and, although I have, throughout my thesis, discussed the enmeshing of her personal details with her works, it is in this chapter that I have shown the most evident features of biography repackaged as prose fiction. In doing so, I have maintained that this is a necessary area of research for a proper understanding of the reading and writing culture of the Romantic era. It is of particular import when applied to a forgotten writer, and one, moreover, who is driven to write by a pressing need for money, rather than a desire to give rein to her imagination. Such a woman will have recourse to fewer sources of inspiration than her poetic counterpart, and thus her own life serves her well as matter for transfer to the pages of fiction. It should be reiterated that Eliza Parsons' life was particularly eventful, and those events which have been recorded in extant documents are of a distressing nature. They provide adequate, if not abundant, material for novels, particularly those of a Gothic kind, since a happy life makes dull reading. Indeed, her life was so full of unpleasant events that perhaps they would be unlikely

to be regarded as likely; hence my use of the term 'worst-case realism', a classification into which Eliza Parsons' own biography seems to fit.



- 1 Preface to Eliza Parsons, *The Mysterious Warning*, (1968), p. xvii.
- 2 For example, in *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, (1968), p. 34, *The Girl of the Mountains*, (1797), Vol. 4, p. 171, and *The Peasant of Ardenne Forest*, (Brentford: Norbury, 1801), Vol. 1, p. 71.
- 3 Mary Anne Schofield, “The Witchery of Fiction”: Charlotte Smith, Novelist’, in *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, Dale Spender (ed) (1992).
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 There is one exception to this. In *The Errors of Education* (1791), there is a minor character, the mistress of a dead man, mentioned only as recipient of income from his will, who is a seamstress.
- 7 Schofield, p. 181.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 9 Eliza Parsons, *The Miser and His Family*, Vol. 4 p. 8. In *Errors of Education*, p. 117, there is a similar story of a minor character, the daughter of a merchant in the city, of good fortune but with a large family, who had suffered some losses in the American war.
- 10 *ibid.* Vol. 4, p. 55.
- 11 *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 143.
- 12 Letter to Dr Dale, 7th July, 1796. Royal Literary Fund Archives.
- 13 *The Miser and His Family*, Vol. 1, p. 15.
- 14 *The Monthly Magazine* Vol. 11, July 1801, p. 606.
- 15 *The Critical Review* Vol. 32, 1801, pp. 105-106.
- 16 Eliza Parsons, *The Miser and His Family*, Vol. 3, p. 2.
- 17 *The Miser and His Family*, p. 4.
- 18 Eliza Parsons, *The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant* (1807), Vol. 1, p. 4.
- 19 *The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant*, Vol. 1, pp. 4-6.
- 20 Review in *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* February 1809, p. 98.
- 21 See *The Navy List* for Dec 1803 and *The Gentleman’s Magazine* Vol. 73, 1803, for a report of the incident.
- 22 Eliza Parsons’ sons were put into the navy at the age of thirteen, so had to work their way up and may have started out with the language of the main crew.
- 23 Records for Eliza and James Parsons’ first three children have been found in the parish records of Charles Church, Plymouth (see Chapter 2), but after the family’s move to Bow, London, records are untraceable for later children as papers were destroyed, with the church, by bombing in WWII.
- 24 It is published with her usual publisher, Norbury, so her lack of work cannot have been because she had left him and could not find a publisher for three years.
- 25 *The Convict*, Vol. 2, Chapter 12.
- 26 *The Convict*, Vol. 2, p. 85.
- 27 *The Convict*, Vol. 2, p. 3.
- 28 Epigram on title pages of Vols. 1-4 of *The Convict*, from John Brown, *Barbarossa, a Tragedy*, (1755), Act III.

## C O N C L U S I O N

In this thesis, I have studied the life and work of a little known woman writer of the Romantic era, one of many who wrote for money. In doing so, I became interested in the means of support available to an educated woman left without financial provision. Eliza Parsons' circumstances were different from those of writers such as the celebrated, wealthy and childless Ann Radcliffe and the equally well-known, poor but talented writer Charlotte Smith. Eliza Parsons, before her husband's death, had made no previous foray into print, had been a busy wife, mother and businesswoman, had been forced by widowhood and the lack of insurance into earning her living by writing, and, most important of all from my point of view, was little known to scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Here, then, was an ideal focus for a study of the adaptability, ability to learn and sheer doggedness of a woman in need of financial security.

I had expected Eliza Parsons and her career to be somewhat run of the mill, based on the facts that her works have not been in print for many years and that few modern critics mention her except to repeat the material in the Dictionary of National Biography, or Devendra Varma's sometimes incorrect data.<sup>1</sup> What is more, contemporary reviews of her works often maintain that there is nothing remarkable in her writing. Thus I was surprised and pleased to discover that in many cases, she does test boundaries and make unique contributions to literature. Of course, I realise that every writer, unless writing in an absolutely formulaic manner, must also make unique contributions, although they may not be as politically radical as Mary Wollstonecraft's, as shocking as Charlotte Dacre's or as successful as Ann Radcliffe's work. Each minor or forgotten woman writing at the time, then, should not be lightly

brushed aside. Each will bring something new to writing, no matter how insignificant a detail it might be. Thus, my study of a sole individual fits into this aim. For this reason, I have not been concerned with a contrast between writers, since I did not wish to make mine primarily a comparative study.

Since Eliza Parsons attempted many genres of writing, and left correspondence concerning her requests for money in which she detailed particulars of her life, I found that to consider her life and work through the trope of genre was the most effective means by which to conduct my study. My justification for this strategy was discussed in depth in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I presented my original research into her biography, which contains facts previously unknown, and corrects errors which had been published by other scholars. As the dedications and prefaces to her works, like her requests for financial aid, also contain personal details, I discussed these too, in Chapters 3 and 4. I analysed their content and style in order to investigate the skills utilised by Eliza Parsons to emphasise the particular role or life genre she wishes to foreground for a specific purpose.

In Chapter 3, I discussed dedications, in order to locate evidence for her social connections and previous lifestyle, such as the mention she makes of a personal association with celebrity in her dedication of *Woman as She Should Be* (1793) to Mrs Crespigny. I noted her changing attitude to nobly born acquaintances as her career progresses and she becomes more and more isolated from her previous social connections and position. In Chapter 4, I analysed her prefaces and indicated her assumption of different roles, such as the complex skill she uses to present herself as a novice writer; for example, in the preface to *Ellen and Julia* (1793) where she submits

her work to the judgement of the public with anxiety. I also discovered the duplicitous nature of her assertion that she is a novice; for example in the preface to *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790) where she compares herself unfavourably with established writers but nonetheless connects her own writing to theirs. Sometimes her aim is to stress that she is a parent, for example in the preface to *The Mysterious Warning*, in order to calm the fears of those who consider that novel-reading is detrimental to the morals of their daughters. In Chapter 5 more details of Eliza Parsons' personal circumstances were revealed, as I discussed the wealth of information contained in her requests for financial help. This expanded my knowledge of her biography and also demonstrates her appropriation of whatever role will be the most advantageous for the purposes of gaining her benefactors' sympathy.

For the remainder of my thesis, I concentrated on the literary works, which have received little attention, and have never been examined as an entire oeuvre. The fact that many reviewers, as mentioned above, saw Eliza Parsons' work as average and unremarkable seemed not to mesh with the popularity of her novels at the time of publication, some of which ran to second and third editions. I realised that I was reading her work in a manner different from the reviewers, since the elements I noticed were usually not mentioned by the reviewers, such as the characters' detailed thoughts and decision-making, the inclusion of wayward characters like Charlotte in *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), or the fact that Eliza Parsons begins to marry her heroines to male characters of less noble backgrounds as her career progresses. This suggested that contemporary female readers understood the subtext, and recognised her empathy with their difficulties. Having briefly considered rejected genres in

Chapter 1, I then discussed her other literary works separately, beginning with Chapter 6's study of her novels of contemporary manners.

Here she is writing in a recognisable mode and clearly attempting to conform to the established exemplar of literature instituted by Burney and Smith. She courts public approval and tests the waters of critical tastes, but also stamps the text with her own pattern. She is seen, from her first novel onward, to be deeply interested in all things economic. This element can also be seen in the work of other novelists such as Charlotte Smith, but Eliza Parsons calculates to the last penny the amount, and the form, of any money to which the heroine is entitled in terms which display her understanding and, by extrapolation, her personal knowledge of financial insecurity. It is in these works that she also develops her style of permitting the reader to follow each step in a woman character's decision-making, allowing us to be privy to her thoughts. She utilises her life genres - here, her experience and fear of poverty - to inform her works and thus demonstrates to her readership her understanding of their worries and concerns. Realism, in these novels, consists in a determination not to provide fictional escape, but a discussion of and witness to difficult circumstances.

In Chapter 7, the longest chapter of the thesis, I discussed Eliza Parsons' Gothic works. This is an important chapter, since it was as a Gothic writer that Jane Austen refers to her in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), through her most Gothic creations, *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796). It was also significant, since it is this genre which she subverts most thoroughly. I agree with Edward Copeland<sup>7</sup> when he argues that she differs from, and indeed appears to dislike, Ann Radcliffe. This is evident in her Gothic works, works which some critics

see as mere imitations of Radcliffe.<sup>4</sup> I discussed some of these elements in detail and revealed the manner in which Eliza Parsons brings knowledge from her own experience and makes use of it in the career she had not intended to follow. In doing so, I believe that I have contributed a useful augmentation of the body of knowledge currently extant in the study of women writers in the Romantic era. I noted her subversion of the form in various ways, such as in her creation of the evil character of Charlotte in *The Mysterious Warning* (1796), whose actions and spirit link her more closely with a male tyrant than a wronged female, although Eliza Parsons makes it clear that Charlotte is indeed wronged. Her identity as the child of a broken relationship, along with all the disruption that entails, is evident. Other subversion I discussed includes her creation of Victoria, Countess of Wolfenbach, a character whom she utilises to lay bare the device of the explained supernatural.

In my final chapter, I highlighted some of the biographical detail in some of Eliza Parsons' novels, concentrating mainly on her last work, *The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant* (1807), which I read as a reference and memorial to a lost son. Although it is unwise to speculate excessively about the extent to which a writer's biography is deliberately integrated into a fictional text, I believe I have made the case adequately for this addition in Eliza Parsons' final novel, citing her previous retirement and move further out of town to Leytonstone; her loss of three sea-going sons, in particular her last surviving son, a naval lieutenant; the reaction to her roughly spoken creation by a reviewer who thought it unusual, and finally the candid style suggesting that she was no longer concerned to court public approval and had a different motive.

In Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel*,<sup>5</sup> she states that her aim was to study one hundred good women writers before Austen. I wanted to study one of them, but I also wanted to challenge the term 'good' which Spender used. If a 'good' novelist was one who followed the plot-driven exemplars of Richardson, Fielding and Defoe (whose recognition as originators of the novel by Ian Watt<sup>6</sup> Spender was disputing), then Eliza Parsons fails the test. Instead, she repays investigation into how the work of a woman writer appeals to her female readership, rendering Spender's value judgement redundant.

I have consulted many critical works which are to be found in most academic libraries as seminal texts, and which, on the topic of Eliza Parsons, contain incorrect or misleading information. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, many scholars follow Varma rather than returning to original sources as I have done, and, as a result, believe that she died at the age of 62, rather than at almost 72. Her inclusion into lists of female writers is uncommon, and if she appears, it is as a poverty-stricken, struggling writer.<sup>7</sup> My research has revealed that, as an educated and wealthy woman, she had few choices on the death of her uninsured husband but to write and sew. The latter occupation, undertaken for the King, brought no prospect of a fair return, and so, at the age of 50, and 'conforming', as she said, to 'the taste of the age',<sup>8</sup> she concentrated on a new career as a writer. To conduct such a career and to support and educate eight children is no mean feat. That she achieved such an old age by her own hard work is again remarkable. Although it is true that she had help from the Royal Literary Fund, and possibly from William Windham, this was a small amount compared with the earnings she was denied after selling her copyright to William Lane as a consequence of her disastrous fall and subsequent descent into debt. At the

end of my study, I cannot see her, disabled, elderly and poor as she was, as merely an example of a destitute ex-Minerva hack subsisting on handouts. This is a successful, strong and resourceful woman, one of many such, whose determination to take full part in the culture of their society emboldened them to place their work in the public arena. The questioning of our perceptions of such women by critics like Ann Mellor<sup>9</sup> is to be celebrated. Although Eliza Parsons is a minor character in literary history, without the radical stance of Mary Wollstonecraft or the reforming zeal of Hannah More, an analysis of her life and work adds nonetheless to our knowledge of the reading and writing culture of her era. My study has revealed a widow for twenty-two years, beset by illness and the loss of four of her eight children, who nonetheless managed to support her family, put them into decent positions as teachers, mantua-makers or seamen, and seeing the survivors respectably married, before dying at the age of 71, with an oeuvre of nineteen novels of several genres and a play to her name. Her works exist only as frail volumes in major archives, but she deserves better, as an excellent example of a woman who would attempt much for her family and made a considerable success of writing for a varied readership when other avenues failed her.

The implications of this thesis for further work in this research area are firstly, that researchers trying to discover biographical details of women authors of this era may find that investigating prefaces, dedications and correspondence helps them to piece together the details of the author's life. Secondly, this thesis has also investigated the close and complex relationship between a writer's biography and her literary output. Eliza Parsons, like many writers, 'mined' the resources of her experience in very strategic ways which would most appeal to readers. This type of study has implications for the analysis of the vexed issue of the relationship between the



authors' life and their works. In this thesis, I have attempted to uncover the complex interplay of biography and literary work. A third implication of this thesis for future work in literary studies is an awareness of the extent to which literary style is the product of the constraints of context on the writer. Eliza Parsons' circumstances (at least in part) changed markedly over time and so did her literary style. This needs to be borne in mind when analysing literary texts as a whole. A final implication of this thesis is the necessity for the continued engagement in the scholarly examination of seemingly 'minor' literary women and their lives, and the need to uncover details of their biographies. Whilst overviews of women writers in the Romantic period, such as Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft, are important, it is, however, still necessary to produce detailed analyses of individual women writers. Thus, Eliza Parsons, although categorised by Austen as a writer of 'horrid' novels, and stigmatised by many contemporary reviewers, through this close analysis has shown herself to be a writer of great stylistic variability, able to adapt her writing to her particular circumstances and strategically position herself in relation to her readership.

1 Particularly in his introductions to *The Castle of Wolfenbach* (1793) and *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) (1968).

2 For example the review of *The Errors of Education* in *The English Review* Vol. 19, 1792, p. 148, the review of *Woman as She Should Be* in *The Critical Review* Vol. 9, 1793, p. 120, or the review of *Lucy* in *The English Review*, Vol. 24, 1794, pp. 62-63.

3 Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Fiction in England 1790-1820* (1995), p. 180 and p. 188.

4 Including Devendra Varma in his introduction to *The Mysterious Warning*, p. xii and Dale Spender, who, in *Mothers of the Novel*, p. 234, quotes Robin Riley Fast's view. A slight deviation from this opinion is that of James R. Foster in *The History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England*, pp. 250-251, who considers her early work to be an imitation of Charlotte Smith's. However, he says that with *The Mysterious Warning*, she begins to follow Radcliffe.

5 Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (1986).

6 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1972).

7 For example, see Cheryl Turner's *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, (1992) 1994) in which, after discussing the misfortunes of Charlotte Smith, she says: 'Eliza Parsons fared little better. The daughter of a wine merchant, she made an unfortunate marriage to a man engaged unsuccessfully in the turpentine trade and, again, both were reduced to poverty.' To term the marriage unfortunate sounds as though it were regrettable, whereas Eliza Parsons, in her letter of 17th December 1792 to Dr Dale of the Royal Literary Fund, referred to James Parsons as 'a Worthy and respectable Husband'.

8 Letter to William Windham, M.P., 14th May 1793.

9 Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2002).

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## APPENDIX II

### CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS OF THE WORKS OF ELIZA PARSONS

*The History of Miss Meredith* 1790

Review in *Critical Review* Vol. 70, 1790, p. 219.

*The history of Miss Meredith, a Novel. By Mrs. Parsons.* Hookham.

If we could have felt an inclination to be severe, Mrs. Parsons has taken from criticism her sting; and when we find a work which is strictly moral and generally pleasing, from an author in similar circumstances, we must commend. We wish our circulating libraries were always so well supplied.

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol 3, Sept-Dee 1790, p. 90.

(Reviewed by William Enfield, acc. To Peter Garside, James Raven, Rainer Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* OUP, 2000)

*The history of Miss Meredith;* Dedicated by Permission to the most noble the Marchioness of Salisbury. By Mrs. Parsons. Hookham

A widow, reduced from a state of affluence to the hard necessity of *writing*, to provide for a numerous family, may justly hope to be screened by humanity from the shafts of criticism. In the present case, however, this shelter is unnecessary; for beside the respectable patronage under which Mrs. Parsons's subscription places her work, it appears grounded by modesty and simplicity. A natural and interesting tale is related in neat and unaffected language; and the moral which it inculcates, is the reverse of those romantic notions, which most novels have a tendency to inspire; it is this; That violent attachment in the outset is not requisite to make the married state a happy one: well founded esteem, softness of manners, and a reciprocal wish to please, lay the foundations of a more tender and permanent regard, than the passion generally called love: "that passion paints the object of adoration in colours far beyond nature; and when the person who was thought an angel, is found to be nothing more than a mere mortal, the disappointment but too frequently produces indifference or disgust."

Review in *The English Review* Vol. 15, 1790, p. 467.

ART. 18. *The History of Miss Meredith; a Novel. Dedicated, by Permission, to the Most Noble the Marchioness of Salisbury.* By Mrs. Parsons. 8vo. 2 vols. 5s. Printed for the author, and sold by Hookham. London, 1790.

This volume, besides its own merit, which is by no means inconsiderable, has to plead in its behalf the peculiar distresses of its author, a widow with nine children, reduced from affluence to absolute penury. We are much pleased to see so respectable a list of subscribers, and hope the sale will continue in proportion to the merits of the work, and the wants of the writer.

Review in *The General Magazine* Vol. 4, 1790, p. 318.

*The History of Miss Meredith.* By Mrs. Parsons. 2 vols. 12mo. 6s. sewed. Hookham.

For elegance of style - richness of invention- delineation of character - and purity of sentiment - we recommend this novel to the attention of the parent and guardian, who need not entertain a fear in introducing Miss Meredith to the notice of those whose morals are the subject of their care and attention.

### ***The Errors of Education* 1791**

Review in *The Intrigues of a Morning* Minerva Press, bound with other plays.

*Errors of Education.*

*Opinion of the reviewers.*

This performance has great merit; it abounds with good sense and liberal sentiments; the scenes are natural, pathetic, and interesting.

There are in the course of the work, many pleasing and striking characters introduced, which are well supported, and keep the attention awake. Mrs. Rivers in particular we mention as a natural and well supported character - her conduct is indeed execrable, and yet we fear there are too many mothers who act exactly in the same manner, and from a foolish hope of aggrandizing their daughters by marriage, throw them in the way of temptation; and should the poor girls fall martyr to their sensibility, the unfeeling mother will reprobate them for the very errors their own misconduct has occasioned; But Mrs. Parsons makes a remark on this subject so just, that we cannot resist a desire to quote it, wishing it may be impressed on the mind of every parent, who with little or no fortune, educates and dresses her daughters in a stile of elegance, and eagerly exhibits them at every place of fashionable amusement - "Whenever," says Colonel Minors to sir William Beaumont, "Whenever you see a girl brought up in a stile of dress and fashion, which she has no fortune to support; whenever I see an imprudent mother exhibiting her daughter at every public place, and encouraging young fellows to buz about her without any proper restriction; depend upon it, the girl is a coquet or jilt, or any thing a young man of fortune may chuse to make of her, and the mother little better than a procuress, who is on the watch to make the best bargain she can for her daughter."

The language is correct and elegant, and the whole story conducted in such a stile, as blends with amusement, and while it engages the attention, cannot fail to amend the heart.

Review in *The Critical Review* ns, Vol. 3, 1791, p. 234.

*Errors of education.* By Mrs. Parsons. Lane 1791

This story is very defective in probability; but we cannot blame what is so strictly and exemplarily moral. The title also is erroneous; for the errors of Sir William Beaumont were not those of education, as the fickle unsteady temper, which he is supposed to possess, would have been the source of equal misfortunes, wherever his education had been conducted. The

same fault may be noticed in the characters of some of the ladies. The little story introduced in the first volume is interesting and pleasing; but it *was Fanny*, not Louisa.

Review in *The English Review* Vol. 19, 1792, p. 148.

ART.22. *The Errors of Education; a Novel. By Mrs. Parsons*, pp.740. 12mo. 3 vols. 9s. Lane London 1791.

*The Errors of Education* may rank with those novels which, in the *literary thermometer*, possess no more than moderate heat. The incidents are not new nor interesting - the language is prolix, tedious, ungrammatical and unpolished.

Review in *The Town and Country Magazine* Vol. 23, 1791, pp. 507-508. Missing from British Library.

*The Intrigues of a Morning* 1792

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 9 Sept-Dee 1792.

*The intrigues of a morning. In two acts. As performed at Covent Garden. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Errors of education and the Memoirs of Miss Meredith* Lane 1792

We are sorry that we cannot allow any great share of praise to this dramatic essay, from a lady's pen. It consists of the relation of a variety of schemes, intended to prevent the marriage of a young lady to a silly country squire, whom she despises: such, however, is the absurdity of these schemes, that the plotting parties seem as great boobies as the squire himself.

Review in *The English Review* Vol. 20, 1792, p. 469.

ART.37. *The Intrigues of a Morning. In Two Acts. As performed at Covent-Garden. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Errors of Education, &c.* pp.31. 1s. sewed. Lane. London. 1792.

If this was ever honoured by a reception on the boards of Covent Garden (though we cannot remember it in the dramatic list), it could meet with no fate less harsh than attends on every piece *Imposed* on an English audience without plot, language, or sentiment; intrigues without art, Spanish names given to French gentlemen, and a dull imitation of that truly comic character the intriguing chambermaid, compose this farrago of nonsensical errors offered to the public taste; and he who finds amusement in perusing the 'Intrigues of a Morning' must have emptied every circulating library in town of its trash.

Review in *The Critical Review* Vol. 16, 1792, p. 120.

*The Intrigues of a Morning. In Two Acts. As performed at Covent Garden. 8vo. 1s.* Lane. 1792.

We are sorry to be obliged to strip off borrowed plumes. This was originally the production of a French dramatist, and it was supposed to have been translated, with some additions, by sir John Vanburgh. It was played as his production to crowded houses, and at advanced prices, though it was privately insinuated that Mr. Walsh and Mr. Congreve had materially assisted the author.

This at least is the account of Mr. Ralph, who published it under the title of the 'Cornish Squire' in 1734. We have seen the principal incident also in some other play on our stage, the title of which we do not recollect. The alterations in the present farce are inconsiderable, and some of them are disadvantageous; but the similarity, almost the identity, is too striking to admit of even a palliation of the crime.

Review in *The Analytical Review* Vol. 13, 1792, pp. 525-527.

ART. XVIII. *The Intrigues of a Morning. In two Acts. As performed at Covent-Garden.* By Mrs. Parsons, author of the *Errors of Education* and *Miss Meredith*. 8vo. 31p. Price Is. Lane. 1792.

This dramatic piece, like many others, represents a series of stratagems and intrigues to elude the commands of a covetous father, and to gratify the wishes of a favoured lover. The lovers, Erastus and Julia, employ their servants, Carlos and Nerina, to counteract the intentions of Closefist, Julia's father. Erastus, pretending to have been an old friend of the Lubberly family, accosts squire Lubberly, the swain destined by Julia's father to be her husband, and invites him to his house. Soon after his arrival, two physicians are employed to attend him, under the notion of his being insane. He is left alone under their management, and after a violent struggle disengages himself from them. While Closefist is calculating the profits of the expected marriage, Nerina, disguised and veiled, comes to the house in the character of a discarded mistress of Lubberly's, and furnishes Julia with a plea for refusing him. By means of the physicians, Closefist is persuaded to think Lubberly mad' while Carlos persuades Lubberly, that his intended bride is 'no better than she should be'. Other contrivances are introduced to break off the proposed match, and the fair Julia is delivered by her father into the hands of her lover - in full expectation that the death of his elder brother will make him as rich as Lubberly.

This piece is written in natural and easy language; with what degree of humour, may be judged from the following scene. P13.

'SCENE IV. A Parlour.

(to 'Ah! dogs! They little know' etc.

[Exit

*Women As She Should Be* 1793

Review in *The Critical Review* Vol. 9, 1793, p. 120.

*Woman as she should be: or, Memoirs of Mrs. Menville. A Novel. In 4 Vols. By Mrs. Parsons.* 12mo. 12s. Lane. 1793.

Mrs. Parsons has at least the merit, in this instance, of being the advocate of virtue, and a writer of no inferior talents. The characters she has drawn have nothing new or even striking in them, yet they are natural and consistent, and the events are generally interesting without

being extravagant. Upon the whole, we consider this lady's labours less deserving the severity of critical remark than the general run of publications from the press of Mr. Lane.

*The Castle of Wolfenbach* 1793

Review in *The Critical Review* Vol. 10, 1794, p. 49.

*The Castle of Wolfenbach: a German Story. By Mrs. Parsons.* Harlow 1793

This novel on the title page a *German story*: whether the author meant to say she had drawn it in part from any German author, or whether it is so entitled, simply because the scene is partly laid in that country, we are ignorant; the hint of it seems to have been borrowed from the adventures of the dutchess de C. in the Theodore and Adelaide of Madame de Genlis. The countess of Wolfenbach is a lady whom her husband, a man of the most ferocious character, has confined in a solitary castle, through a groundless jealousy of a young gentleman, who was beloved by her before her forced marriage with the count. She is believed to be dead by all the world, excepting a brother and sister resident in France, who are restrained from interfering by the countess herself, who in order to preserve the life of her child (threatened by its savage father) has been induced to bind herself by a solemn oath, not to attempt to appear again in the living world, and never to reveal the crimes which accompanied her detention. With these, the reader becomes acquainted in the process of the story; they are full horrible enough. Her husband at length dies in agonies of remorse; she is restored to her friends and to her son, an accomplished young gentleman of sixteen, who had been separated from her when an infant of a few weeks old. Another story runs as it were parallel to her's. It is of a young lady, brought up by an uncle at a distance from all her relations, and ignorant of them. When she is about fifteen, his affection for her turns to a criminal passion, and he attempts to seduce her. She runs away from him, and finds her way to the lady of the castle. After many incidents, Mr. Weimar, for that is the name by which he is known, reclaims her, tells her she is not his niece, but a foundling, explains away his former attempts, and presses her to marry him. She, after a well-described contest between her gratitude and her inclination, refuses, from motives of honour, a young gentleman who has gained her affections; conscious that such an alliance would degrade him in the opinion of the world. She therefore retires to a convent; the uncle forces her thence by a *lettre de cachet*, and after many vicissitudes he also discloses the measure of his crimes; restores her to her mother, from whom he had likewise taken her when an infant (the recognition here is affecting) and burying himself in a convent, leaves her a suitable match in rank and fortune for her rejected but tenderly beloved lover.

We do not pretend to give this novel as one of the first order, or even of the second; it has, however, sufficient interest to be read with pleasure. The terrible prevails, and the characters of the heroes in crime, are *too* darkly tinted. The two stories, besides, are not sufficiently interwoven with one another; we think they might, at least, have been *knotted* together by the marriage of the discovered son and daughter. There is no fine writing in these volumes; and now and then we meet with vulgarisms, such as *every one* went *their* own way; but in point of moral tendency they are unexceptionable. The following extract is an account given by the sister of the countess of Wolfenbach of their interview, after she had been acquainted by letter with the unhappy marriage.

' "You must suppose my dear Miss Weimar, (said the marchioness), that this letter made us all extremely unhappy; I wrote however, and, fearful that the count might have measures enough to insist upon seeing her letters, I took little notice of her complaints, but congratulated her on the recovery of her health, desired she would pay attention to it, for the sake of her husband and friends; in short, it was an equivocal kind of letter, and I thought could give no offence.....

...When all our business was finished, the count one morning took occasion to observe his presence was much wanted in the country; he had lately purchased an estate in Switzerland and should go there soon, consequently had many affairs which required his inspection. We took the hint, and finding I must part with my sister, I was very ready to leave Vienna." '

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. 3, 1794, pp. 199-200.

ART. 21. *Castle of Wolfenbach, a German Story, in Two Volumes. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Errors of Education, Miss Meredith, Woman as she should be, and Intrigues of Morning.* 12mo. 6s. Lane. 1793.

This novel is opened with all the romantic spirit of the Castle of Otranto, and the reader is led to expect *a tale of other times*, fraught with enchantments, and spells impending from every page. As the plot thickens, they *vanish into air - into thin air*, and the whole turn out to be a company of well-educated and well-bred people of fashion, some of them fraught with sentiments rather too refined and exalted for any rank, and others, deformed by depravity, that for the honour of human nature we hope has no parallel in life. Taken as a whole, the Castle of Wolfenbach is more interesting than the general run of modern novels, the characters are highly coloured, and the story introduced in a manner that excites curiosity, and in the language of the drama, abounds with interesting, though improbable situations.

*Ellen and Julia* 1793

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 14, 1794, p. 465.

(Reviewed by William Enfield, acc. To Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* OUP, 2000.)

Art. 44. *Ellen and Julia.* By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Errors of Education, &c. &c. 2 Vols. 12mo. 6s. sewed. Lane. 1793.

When the immoral tendency of some novels, and the romantic turn of many others, are recollected, it may appear in some sort meritorious that a work of this kind is entitled to the bare praise of affording a temporary amusement, without leaving any injurious impression on the reader's imagination:- but of the present novel it would be injustice not to say that it possesses something more than this negative merit. It is well adapted to inculcate on young minds several lessons of prudence and virtue. The leading characters are two daughters of a widowed mother, one of whom is led by vanity and romantic ambition into indiscretions, which bring her on the edge of ruin, and overwhelm her excellent parent with insuperable distress; while the other presents an example of filial affection, and of a conduct regulated by the most delicate sense of propriety, in circumstances of considerable embarrassment. The story also suggests important cautions to young married women against indulging a desire of admiration, and warns the unmarried of the hazard attending an intimacy with women who are distinguished by gaiety and freedom of manners. We mention these particulars, because we are of the opinion that this novel must depend for its success chiefly on its moral merit. In the first volume, the story is diversified with many striking incidents, but, through a great part of the second, the writer's invention appears to flag. The language, though natural, is never wrought into elegance, and is sometimes negligent and even ungrammatical.

*Lucy* 1794

Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 11, 1794, p. 234.

*Lucy: a Novel. By Mrs. Parsons.* Lane 1794

The heroine of this Novel is a Foundling, richly endowed with the gifts of nature, and of the most virtuous and amiable disposition. The first seventeen years of her life are spent in the obscurity of an old ruinous castle, in a remote part of Ireland: where she is protected *by* its *two* only inhabitants, a Mr. and Mrs. Butler, husband and wife, who, after living many years in the possession of a large estate, are driven by a series of calamities to seek for refuge in the most sequestered retirement. By the death of those respectable persons, the unfortunate Lucy is left in the most deplorable situation; destitute of all human society, and without any other subsistence than the milk of a cow, with which she had been nourished from infancy. To avoid persecution from a young libertine, by whom she had been accidentally discovered, she makes her way to a village, at the distance of some miles, and implores the protection of a Father Mark: of whose *great* humanity she had been informed by Mrs. Butler, and afterwards by a hermit, whom she had discovered in a subterraneous part of the castle. On the recommendation of this worthy clergyman, she is taken into the family of a Lady Campley, by whom she is treated with a degree of partiality and affection suitable to her extraordinary merit. A series of surprising adventures succeeds this period of her history, until, at last, her parentage becomes known, and she is happily married to the nephew of an Italian count, who was deeply enamoured of her charms.

The incidents in this novel are, in general, of a romantic nature: but conducted with great plausibility. The characters are well supported; the sentiments highly favourable to virtue; and it abounds with situations extremely interesting to the tenderest feelings of the heart.

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. XB, 1794.

Reviewed by William Enfield, acc. To Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* OUP, 2000.)

Without possessing, in any high degree, those excellencies which distinguish the class of novels, this tale will command attention by the mere power of incident and business. The scenery and characters in the beginning of the story, are romantic and interesting. An unfortunate pair, retiring from the world in despondency to a desolate castle; an outcast infant, brought up by them in a state of entire separation from the world, and, after their death, left for years in total solitude, till chance provides her a protector and guide in a neighbouring hermit; are circumstances that afford an opportunity for description and sentiment, of which the author has made very successful use. The rest of the story, in which the heroine is introduced into the world, and passes through a variety of trials, though less original, is amusing. Love, as usual, plays for a while at cross purposes, but at last satisfactorily rewards his faithful devotees. We remark, however, in the character of Lucy, more fondness for dress and show than might have been expected from her peculiar mode of education. We think it a mischievous perversion of moral ideas to say of a young man, who, after having tried in vain to seduce an innocent girl, attempts to debauch her by carrying her by stratagem to a house of ill fame, that he had not a bad heart. We cannot admit that the introduction, into the same tale, of three distinct stories of violent assaults on virgin innocence is any proof of fertility of invention: nor can we think it either morally instructive,



or consonant to nature, to make the most abandoned character of the piece, whose life has been a continued course of deliberate and horrid villainy, become on a sudden a sincere penitent and a good man. A total change of character is a longer and more difficult process than is commonly apprehended.

Review in *The Analytical Review* Vol. 20, 1794, pp. 49-52.

ART. XVII. *Lucy: a Novel, in Three Volumes*. By Mrs. Parsons. 3 Vols. 12mo. Price 9s. sewed. Lane. 1794.

If the merit of a novel be measured by its power of exciting surprise, the tale now before us may be entitled to a certain share of commendation. With respect to some of those qualities, which are expected in this class of writings, it can indeed boast no superior excellence. Its characters are only such as have been exhibited under a thousand different names in former novels; its moral sentiments are trite, and sparingly interspersed; in scenical description no extraordinary powers of fancy are displayed; and the language, though well enough adapted to the purpose of the narrative, possesses no high degree of elegance, and is, in a few instances, deficient even in grammatical propriety. -For example, 'both *him* and *the lady* were dragged out:' 'they had just *fell*: Oh! that I could *lay* in the same grave with him.' the story, however, has a sufficient variety of wonderful incident to fix the reader's attention. The first volume, especially, is abundantly romantic. Lucy, the heroine, an exposed orphan, is brought up in a deserted castle, at a distance from all human intercourse, except that of Mr. and Mrs. Butler, her supposed father and mother. At sixteen years of age, deprived by death of both her protectors, she is left in perfect solitude, without any other support than the milk of her cow and the produce of her garden. The description of the incident which provided her with a new protector will be a favourable specimen. VOL. I . P. 70 - 'Lucy kindled a fire [Lucy wandering in the wrong direction down a dark passage] but I may yet have the power to save you.'

In the sequel Lucy is discovered by a neighbouring youth, who, being enamoured of her charms, entices her from her cell, and lays a plan for her ruin. - the history of her escape from this snare, and from other plots against her innocence, and of a subsequent virtuous attachment, which, as usual, after many difficulties and embarrassments, terminates in a happy marriage, form the main business of the tale. Other subordinate adventures are introduced, but all in connection with the leading story. The novel, if not deeply affecting, may afford a few hours agreeable amusement, without leaving any injurious impression upon the mind of the reader.

Review in *The English Review*, Vol. 24, 1794, pp. 62-63.

ART. XV. *Lucy; a Novel. In Three Volumes*. By Mrs. Parsons. pp850. 12mo. Lane. London, 1794.

Mr. and Mrs. Butler had been driven from their own castle by the attempt to restore JAMES the SECOND, in whose cause they had lost two sons. An only daughter, amidst the general horror, was torn from their arms by a French officer, and carried to France. In despair they left their own country, and travelled till they came to an old castle in the north of Ireland, surrounded by bogs. One night they heard the trampling of a horse, and within a moment the cry of a child. Guided by the voice, they saw a small object on the beach, which proved to be

a female child, about two years of age. They took it into the house, gave it the name of Lucy, and from that day considered it as their own. Lucy was about sixteen when she lost both her protectors. She discovered an old man living in a cave, under the same castle, who had known Mr. Butler before he came there; but never saw him while he lived in it. He wishes to find protection for Lucy; and for that purpose leaves her to seek for a Mrs. O'Farrel. He returns just in time to save her from the violence of Mrs. O'Farrel's son, who had found her at the grave of her dear friends, who were buried in the garden. The old man sets out again, falls into a bog, and is lost. By the persecution of young O'Farrel, Lucy is obliged to quit the castle. She finds in the village Father Mark, whom she had heard Mrs. Butler speak of as a good man. He recommends her to Lady Campley, who treats her as her own daughter. At this Lady's she meets with Mr. O'Farrel, the father of the young man who had driven her from her home, old O'Farrel runs away with her, and carries her to Germany. They are obliged to stop on the road to take up a wounded gentleman (Count Maffie), and carry him to his uncle's, where O'Farrel meets with his son. Lucy is rescued from O'Farrel, but falls again into his hands, and is carried to a cottage where she makes her escape, and seeks refuge in a convent. The young Count Maffie learns where she is, and endeavours to persuade her to return with him to his uncle's; but she declined this, and returned to her friend Lady Campley, the young Count being of the party. She arrives but just in time to see Miss Campley, who dies soon after. This young lady leaves Lucy ten thousand pounds. Lucy becomes acquainted with the Marchioness of Gramont, who proves to be the lost daughter of Mrs. Butler. Lucy is at length discovered to be the niece of Mr. O'Farrel, and heiress to a large fortune. The novel concludes with the marriage of Lucy and the Count Maffie.

This novel is sufficiently interesting throughout the first volume, as it exhibits a young and artless female labouring under every danger and disadvantage in perfect solitude. Afterwards it dwindles into a mere farrago of wonderful and improbable adventures; madhouses, broken limbs, and a convenient succession of deaths. Yet, upon the whole, there is nothing in it that can offend the eye of the reader, and it may serve to amuse an idle hour.

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. 9, 1797, p. 674.

ART. 19. *Lucy, a Novel, in Three Volumes. By Mrs. Parsons.* 9s. Lane. 1795 (NB journal prints wrong publishing date)

Accident has delayed our account of these volumes; and now that we do speak of them, it cannot be in terms of the highest commendation. The heroine is led through various dangers and difficulties, and has a variety of miraculous escapes. At one time, in danger of being betrayed into the hands of a procuress; at another, violently hurried away from her friends. The catastrophe, however, as usual, is happy; the style is easy and agreeable; the moral unexceptionable. On the whole, we should esteem ourselves fortunate, if, in our perusal of works of this description, we should generally meet with as few errors to provoke censure, and as frequent occasion of praise, although this be limited and partial.

*The Voluntary Exile* 1795

Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 14, 1795, p. 352.

*The voluntary exile. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Lucy etc. etc.* Lane 1795

Publications of this nature being, through the medium of the circulating libraries, often extensively disseminated, we feel a peculiar pleasure when enabled to recommend them to our young female readers, more especially as containing nothing inimical to good morals or good taste. - The Voluntary Exile is written in an unaffected sensible style: the incidents, in the first volume particularly, are probable, interesting, and affecting, and interspersed with a variety of excellent and judicious observations. - In the subsequent volumes the scene changes to America, where Mr. Biddulph, the exile, engages as a volunteer in the British army, during the contest between the mother country and the colonies. The calamities of war, especially of civil dissention, are well depicted, and give rise to several little pathetic narrations, also to many humane and liberal reflections. A just tribute of respect is paid to the peaceful tenets and benevolent exertions of the quakers during that distressful period, exemplified in a variety of instances.

We conceive it ill judged, in a work of this nature, to anticipate curiosity by detailing the events, nor do our limits allow us to select a quotation of sufficient length to give a just specimen of the work, the merit of which consists rather in its general good sense and tendency, rather than in any particularly brilliant or striking passages. It abounds too much in episode, by which the interest of the principal story is weakened, - which story, with the episodes, turns too invariably on the subject of love. This is not the age of chivalry. - In the present times of political fermentation and public danger, our young women perhaps would do better to silence their hearts by strengthening their understandings, than foster their sensibility by indulging in enervating descriptions of tender sentiments. Neither is the present work entirely exempt from another error common to novelists:- horror is crowded upon horror till our sympathy becomes exhausted, and we read of faintings, death, and madness, with perfect apathy. Our feelings are more interested when the heart is softened rather than shocked; descriptions of misery may be aggravated and multiplied till they excite disgust: nor is it the fact in real life, that persons possessing the most exquisite sensibility invariably sink under every accident repugnant to their wishes. - The heart can suffer severely and long without breaking. - A writer of any genius might surely paint, in colours sufficiently vivid, the touching expression of genuine sorrow, without having recourse to the hackneyed expedients of swooning, dying, etc. This work is not quite free from grammatical inaccuracies.

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. XVII, 1795, p. 463.

The Voluntary Exile. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of *Lucy*, etc. Lane 1795.

This novel, though by no means to be ranked in the first class of fictitious tales, has too much merit to be wholly overlooked, or to be consigned to oblivion by indiscriminate censure. The narrative, it is true, if examined by the rules of criticism, appears very faulty. Far from gratifying the reader with the perception of unity of design, it confounds his recollection by a multiplicity of distinct and unconnected stories. The first volume contains in itself a complete and interesting tale, in which the hero is conducted through childhood and youth, falls in love, marries happily, meets with sundry misfortunes, and loses his wife; and this tale has so little connection with what follows in the remaining volumes, in which the disconsolate widower becomes a voluntary exile in America, that they might, without inconvenience, have been published as a separate novel. Notwithstanding this and other defects in the structure of the piece, the tales themselves are natural exhibitions of such occurrences as may easily be conceived to pass in real life, and are very well adapted to impress on the mind of the reader maxims of prudence and morality. Mrs. Parsons describes human vice and folly, as well as

human virtues and accomplishments, without exaggeration. Her men and women are such as are commonly found in the world; and she makes them speak such a language, and express such sentiments, as are familiar with every one who converses with mankind. She appears, however, better qualified to delineate characters in the middle and lower classes of society, than to describe the manners of high life; and the style of her writing is more adapted to suit the ordinary run of novel readers, who mind little besides the tale, than to gratify the tastes of those whose refinement will not permit them to relish a good story, unless it be embellished with the graces of fine writing.

Review in *The English Review* Vol. 25, 1795, p. 233.

ART. XXV. *The Voluntary Exile. In Five Volumes. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Lucy, &c. &c.* pp. 1252. 12mo. London: printed for W. Lane, at the Minerva Press, Leadenhall Street. 1795.

The *Voluntary Exile* is not calculated to excite much interest in the breast of the reader, as it in general conflicts of a number of unconnected stories. In short, this novel does not rank above the many productions with which the press daily teems.

Review in *The Analytical Review* Vol. 21, 1795, pp. 296-299.

ART. XIV. *The Voluntary Exile. In 5 vols., By Mrs. Parsons. Author of Lucy, &c. &c.* 1252 pa. Price 15s. sewed. Lane. 1795.

Mrs. Parsons has so long entertained the public with her novels, that her talents for this species of writing are well known. In furnishing the materials of her tales, she chooses rather to have recourse to such incidents and characters as occur in real life, than to employ her fancy in inventing models of perfection, and wonderful adventures, of which the world, as it passes, affords no archetype. The design of inculcating good moral lessons is always kept in sight; and though the characters are not elevated to a romantic height of excellence, they are always placed in such situations and so delineated, as to impress upon the minds of the reader some moral instruction. With respect to literary merit, Mrs. P's novels are not entitled to distinguished praise: they display no richness of imagery, or studied elegance of style; they are not, even, wholly free from grammatical inaccuracy; yet the language has an easy fluency and unaffected simplicity, well suited to tales of this kind. In short, without possessing those superior powers of writing, by which the reader's imagination and feelings are bom along with irresistible energy, Mrs. P., by adhering to nature, and copying living manners, produces novels, which will be thought in a considerable degree interesting by the generality of readers; and though it seems beyond her powers to 'elevate and surprise', she is very well qualified to amuse and instruct.

These general remarks are particularly applicable to the novel before us. Though, on many accounts, entitled to commendation, it is not an highly finished piece. The story is faulty from it's want of unity. The adventures of the hero, Hemy Biddulph, are, indeed, continued throughout, but they are too losely connected to interest, in any high degree, the reader's curiosity. The first volume conducts Henry through childhood and youth to the land of matrimony, and after giving him a few months happiness, deprives him of his wife. In the second volume, grief and disappointment drive him, *a voluntary exile*, to America, during the late war, the horrors of which are pathetically described. Here he forms a second attachment; the rise, progress, embarrassments, and completion of which form the leading thread of the

story through the remaining four volumes. Several other stories, however, are interwoven, which are unconnected with the main business; and which, except the pathetic tale of Leonora, might have been spared. Among the pleasing characters of the piece, are those of the hero, strongly marked with the features of fidelity and generosity; his mistress, Harriot Franklyn, whose principal traits are fond attachment united with a delicate sense of propriety; Henry's kind and active friend, Barrow, and his faithful and disinterested servant, Andrew. Of the characters which exhibit foibles, or vices, the principal are, Harriot's aunt, who, herself denied the comforts of matrimony, is loth to consent, that her niece should be happier than herself; Henry's mother, whose conduct affords a striking example to show the power of vanity and dissipation, to harden the heart into a state of unnatural apathy, his brother, whose vices involve him in disgrace and poverty, and at last plunge him into total ruin and despair; and Lord and Lady Burley, a fashionable pair, who agree to connive at each other's gallantries, and who delight in destroying those virtues, which they have no desire to imitate, and in undermining that domestic happiness, which they are too depraved even to envy. The story is enlivened with occasional traits of humour. An amiable family of quakers is introduced, whose manners are agreeably represented: as a specimen, we shall copy part of the account of Henry's and Harriot's visit, towards the close of their adventures, to this hospitable family. VOL V, P.222, 'As they advanced nearer,        would mutually endeavour to deserve it.'

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. 6, 1795, p. 190.

ART. 33. *The Voluntary Exile. In five Vols. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Lucy, &c. &c.* 12mo. 15s. Lane. 1795.

Many defects may be pardoned in a novel-writer, who endeavours to amuse our fancy, with some benefit, rather than any injury to our morals. By such a rule the author must be judged; and then we may with truth recommend her production, as affording a considerable degree of entertainment, and still more of prudential and moral instruction. *Five* volumes, however, are rather too heavy a tax upon the purses of readers, and the patience of reviewers, especially when this bulk is attained by the introduction of so *many* narratives foreign to the main story. Add to this, that it is neither wise nor humane, to perpetuate ill-will betwixt England and America, which seems to be one tendency of the work. The style is not generally faulty; but there are many oversights like the following, which admit of no excuse; 'new *scenes* was planned,' vol.i. p.35; 'their *visits* was interrupted,' p. 159; 'as there *has* been so many *details*,' vol.ii.p.89; 'the *difficulties* thrown in your way *has* clouded your mind.' vol iii. P.228. &c. &c.

*The Mysterious Warning* 1796

Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 16, 1796, p. 474.

*The Mysterious Warning: a German tale. By Mrs. Parsons. Author of Voluntary Exile etc.* Lane 1796

The modesty with which Mrs. Parsons presents this novel to the public, and deprecates the severity of criticism, - the inventive powers, - cultivation of mind, - and rectitude of invention, which it bespeaks, - demand and deserve our applause. We must observe, however,

that both the principal actions, the story of the Count and Eugenia, equally with that of the hero of the tale, are liable to some objections:- The episode of the former possesses interest and originality: but Eugenia's early errors were of the most pardonable kind; and her only *real vice*, the sacrificing her own happiness and activity, and wounding the peace of her husband, by a foolish, romantic monastic notion of heroism.

The style of this novel is not splendid, yet it is not defective; the character of count Rhodophil is, we hope, too coldly and deliberately atrocious to be natural; the mysterious warnings, arraigned at the bar of a strict morality, are not perfectly justifiable: and the mystery is but ill disguised. We have before had occasion to observe, that the novels of Mrs. Parsons would be more interesting, if her plans had more unity: when the principal narrative is frequently broken in upon by different stories, however entertaining in themselves, attention flags, the mind experiences a kind of disappointment, loses the connection, proceeds languidly, and is not easily reanimated.

One little grammatical inaccuracy often recurs, *neither, or*:- *neither* should invariably be followed by *nor*. ||We could not have selected a proper specimen of this work, without abruptly breaking the connection, or infringing upon our limits.

Review in *The Monthly Magazine and British Register* Vol. 3, 1797, p. 47.

Mrs. Parsons' 'Mysterious Warning' is a melancholy and affecting tale, judiciously conducted.

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. 8, Nov 1796, p. 548.

*The Mysterious Warning, a German Tale, in Four Volumes, By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Voluntary Exile, &c.* 12mo. 12s. Lane. 1796.

The object of these volumes seem (sic) to be to prove the injustice, as well as impolicy, of compulsory marriages. To effect this, an agreeable, but most melancholy, tale, is employed, of which it is but justice to say, that it is conducted with much skill and ingenuity.

*Women as They Are* 1796

Review in *Critical Review* ns Vol. 21, 1797, p. 472.

*Women as they are. A Novel. By Mrs. Parsons. Author of Mysterious Warnings etc.* Lane 1796

Although there are many instructive lessons presented in this novel, we fear there is less amusement than our young readers will expect. As a composition, the story is often deficient in interest, the events, however various, being of the common kind, and ending in a manner which cannot fail to be anticipated. The fault of which we complained in noticing *Mysterious Warnings*\* occurs here likewise, the author introducing a number of persons and events, which have no connection with the principal story, and unnecessarily interrupt the reader's attention. We must also take the liberty to add, that Mrs. Parsons ought to have thrown some ingredients into the composition of her heroine, more capable of accounting for her fall from virtue than mere *vanity*. Upon the whole, however, *Women as they are* is one of those novels which seem to detach pleasure from its alliance with vice, and may be safely recommended to

those young persons whose taste has not been vitiated by an absurd attachment to what is unnatural or mysterious. \*See *Crit. Rev.* Vol XVI p. 474.

Review in *The Monthly Mirror* Vol. 5, 1798, p. 31.

*Women as they are: a Novel, in four Volumes. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of Mysterious Warnings, &c. 12s. 12mo. Lane. 1796.*

The principal fault of this novel is its length: the attention of the reader is fatigued before he can get to the end of the second volume. The incidents are much confused, and the characters huddled together in an awkward manner: but it has yet a superiority over the generality of similar productions; and though the greater part of the materials are old, there is novelty in the outline, and occasionally very strong interest in the situations. The tendency is much to be commended.

*An Old Friend with a New Face* 1797

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. XI, May 1798, p. 562.

*An Old Friend with a New Face. By Mrs. Parsons. Three Volumes. 12mo. 10s.6d. Longman. 1797.*

Mrs. Parsons has justly obtained some degree of reputation as a writer of novels, and the present is entitled to considerable praise. We must, nevertheless, observe as the critic did to *Sir Fretful Plagiary*, there is *a falling off* in the last volume. We shall neither be surprised nor angry, if the fair writer should give us the same answer, which *Sir Fretful* made to the said critic.

Review in *The Scientific Magazine* Vol 11, 1798, p. 49. Not located.

*Anecdotes of Two Well-Known Families* 1798

Review in *The Monthly Review* Vol. 27, Sep-Dee 1798, p. 332.

(Reviewed by James Bannister, acc. To Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Showerling, *The English Novel 1770-1829* OUP, 2000.)

*Anecdotes of Two Well-Known Families Written by a Descendant. Prepared for the press by Mrs. Parsons. Longman. 1798*

Though this novel does not exhibit those highly-wrought scenes of distress of which writers of fictitious history are generally fond, it is sufficiently impassioned to affect the heart and engage the attention. The character of an artless and innocent girl, blest with a good understanding and educated in virtuous principles is well supported in the delineation of Ellinor, the heroine: and the mystery which hangs over her birth (*the old story*) fully answers the desired purpose of keeping the reader in suspense; but we think that the manner in which this mystery is dissipated is liable to some objections. - Lord and Lady P. are well delineated;

and to those who are best pleased with the contemplation of *virtuous* characters, Lord and Lady B. may furnish rational entertainment, and perhaps excite laudable emulation. - It were to be wished, however, that the writer had not been so fond of introducing Bridget and her mother. Mrs. Parsons should have recollected that low characters are to be tolerated in novels only when they display considerable wit and drollery, or some striking peculiarity. The laudable tendency of this work is to inspire a love of virtue, with a consequent detestation of vice.

Review in *The Critical Review* ns Vol. 23, July 1798, p. 353.

*Anecdotes of two well-known Families. Written by a descendant; and dedicated to the first female Pen in England. Prepared for the Press by Mrs. Parsons, Author of an old Friend with a new Face etc.* Longman 1798.

The outline of this story is said to have been sent to the editor by some unknown friend. Whether this statement is true or false, is of little consequence to the public. The story itself is interesting; but the interest becomes weaker after the first volume.

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. XII Aug 1798, p. 184.  
(In McNutt, this review is cited as in Vol 23, Jul 1798, p353)

*Anecdotes of Two well-known Families, prepared for the Press by Mrs. Parsons. Three Vols.* 8vo. 10.6d. Longman 1798

However desirous the parties really concerned in these volumes may be, to lay the anecdotes of their ancestors before the world, we much doubt whether the public will be amused or instructed in the perusal of them: the incidents are by no means well connected; the language by no means elegant; and although Mrs. Parsons 'may hold it a duty to her friends and the public, to lay the bantling at the feet of its own parent', yet the fair novelist must be well aware, that she is undoubtedly answerable for the dress with which she has ornamented it for public inspection.

Review in *The Analytical Review* Vol. 27, Jun 1798, pp. 644-645.

*Anecdotes of two well-known Families. Written by a descendant; and dedicated to the First Female Pen in England. Prepared for the Press by Mrs. Parsons. Author of An Old Friend with a New Face' &c.* 3 vols. 12mo. 858 pag. Price 10s.6d. sewed. Longman. 1798

MRS. PARSONS assumes the character of editor only of this work, which, she informs the reader, was sent to her, P.vii, 'with a very handsome anonymous letter, from an unknown friend, through the hands of an eminent bookseller in New Bond-street. It was entitled 'Family Anecdotes; or Sketches for a Novel.' I was informed 'that it was a plain matter-of-fact story,' the writer of which did me the honour to place it in my hands, with the compliment of enlarging upon and preparing it for the press, adding, 'that the writer would never be known, the events being collected merely to divert the hours in a tedious fit of sickness; and that if the work met my approbation, I was at liberty to claim it as my own offspring.'

The materials are perhaps spun out to rather too great a length; it requires more than ordinary powers to prevent the reader's attention from languishing through three volumes, containing



858 pages. The novels of Mrs. P do not rise greatly above, neither do they sink beneath mediocrity; that are calculated to entertain a numerous class of readers, without debauching the taste or corrupting the heart. They, who have been in the habit of perusing the productions of this lady with pleasure, will interest themselves in the fate of the fair Elinor, the heroine of the present performance, deprived for a time, by the vices and ambition of a father, of the privileges annexed to her birth, and, at length triumphing over the prejudices and accidents attending her deserted and exposed situation. The story, out of which several episodes naturally arise, is related as a fact, and connecting circumstances are not wanting to give it an air of probability. DD

Mention in *The Monthly Magazine* Vol. 6, 1798, p. 517.

MR. LLOYD'S *Edmund Oliver*' has considerable merit; it is levelled at the Godwinean philosophy; with a simplicity of story, and no uncommon condense of events, it is rendered interesting from the sentiments which pervade it: and what is of infinitely more difficulty than *plot-making*, the delineation of character. *Derwent Priory*' will amuse a leisure hour, and the same may be said of MR. (sic) PARSONS' *Anecdotes of two well-known Families*

Review in *The Monthly Mirror* Vol. 6, 1799, p. 96.

*Anecdotes of two well-known Families; written by a Descendant, and dedicated to the first Female Pen in England. Prepared for the Press by Mrs. Parsons. 12mo. 10s.6d. 3 Vols. Longman. 1798.*

Mrs. Parsons is merely the *editor* of this novel, which was consigned to her care by some person unknown. We do not think it is undeserving of publication, but if a little more time had been occupied in compressing the materials, and heightening the effect- for Mrs. Parsons is very competent to such undertakings- we should have reached, with less difficulty, the conclusion of the third volume. The interest is *spun out* until it is nearly lost.

*The Valley of St. Gothard* 1799

Review in *The Critical Review* ns, Vol. 26, July 1799, p. 358.

*The valley of St. Gothard, a Novel. By Mrs. Parsons 1799*

The novels of Mrs. Parsons are well known. This is neither better nor worse than her former productions: it will probably have many readers and many admirers.

Review in *The Monthly Mirror* Vol. 8, 1799, p. 96.

*The Valley of St. Gothard, a Novel. By Mrs. Parsons. 3 Vols. 12mo. 12s. Wallis. 1799.*

Former productions from the pen of Mrs. Parsons, have acquired for this fair author considerable literary reputation as a novel writer, which certainly will not be diminished by a perusal of 'The Valley of St. Gothard.'

Review in *The New London Review* Vol. 1, 1799, p. 615. Not located.

*The Miser and His Family* 1800

Review in *The Monthly Magazine* Vol. 11, July 1801, p. 606.

MRS. PARSONS' 'Miser and his Family' is a severe, and we are afraid, a just satire on the fashionable world, or rather perhaps it may be characterised as the simple exposure of its vices, but such an exposure as has for its object to deter young persons from approaching near that vortex of dissipation in which so many perish.

Review in *The Critical Review* Vol. 32, 1801, pp. 105-106.

ART. 39. *The Miser and his Family. A Novel By Mrs. Parsons, Author of The Valley of St. Gothard, Mysterious Wanderings (sic) &c. 4 Vols. 12mo. 16s. Boards.* Wallis. 1800.

An expectation will undoubtedly be formed (and the reader will not be disappointed in it) that these volumes, by the author of *The Valley of St. Gothard*, are not of the same flimsy fabrication as the generality of modern novels. All the characters are forcibly and distinctly drawn; and though the avarice of the two Stanleys, the atrocious villainy of Sharpley and his daughter, the folly and vice of Mrs. Dobbins, the blunt honesty of her father, the proud honour of Edward, the magnanimity of Emily, and the disinterestedness of Seymour, have been delineated many times elsewhere; yet the particular instances are so well chosen, and the assemblage so properly blended, that we meet them here again with real pleasure. How far the sons and daughters of fashion will be *pleased* with Mrs. Parson's (sic) description of *them* we will leave our readers to guess, from the small part of it which we shall subjoin: it is enough for us to remark, in the terms of the old adage, that we fear 'it is too true to make a jest of. After describing Mrs. Dobbins's loss of beauty by the small-pox, the author makes her send cards to her *friends*, to invite them to one of those routes where the company pay for the cards, &c. the following is a specimen of *right honourable* and *honourable* conversation:

'A very few were assembled [people playing cards talking about her loss of beauty]... and copy their examples. Vol. iv. p. 139.

*The Peasant of Ardenne Forest* 1801

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. XXI, Jan 1803, p. 83.

*The Peasant of Ardenne Forest. A Novel. In Four Volumes. By Mrs. Parsons.* 20s. Hurst &c. 1801.

We have heard from people addicted to the reading of such books as these, that the very life of a Novel is *incident*, various and endless incident. This, then, is a very lively Novel; for incidents, not a little wonderful, are crowded into almost every page. Whether they be quite natural and probable, we will not stay to enquire. One incident, occurring in vol. ii. p. 281,

cannot indeed be called unnatural, from the pen of a female. But doubtless, the fair author knows more exactly than we do, what sort of adventures best agree with the taste of the generality of her readers. The characters are sufficiently discriminated; which is a considerable merit in novel-writing. Some of them are coloured beyond nature; as that of Eleanora, and of young Douglas; the former is monstrously wicked, and the other is marvellously weak, in his unextinguishable attachment to her. The two principal characters are well supported, till we come to the winding-up of the tale, and few readers, we think, will be satisfied with the final arrangement of their fortunes.

*The Mysterious Visit* 1802

Review in *Flowers of Literature* Vol. 2, 1803, p. 457.

*Mysterious Visit! (The) a Novel, founded on facts; in four volumes.* By Mrs. Parsons. Hurst. 1803.

A publication very interesting by the easy and natural display of its characters, and the concern it inspires for the heroine. Its moral is perfectly pure.

*Murray House* 1804

Review in *The Literary Journal* Vol. 3, June 1804, pp. 609-610.

*Murray House*; 'a Plain unvarnished Tale'. By Mrs. Parsons, 3 vols. 12mo. 15s.

This novel compared with many others of the same sort, may be considered as a *tolerable* publication. But it is liable in a high degree to that objection, which applies to the generality of novels, which is, that it abounds with extravagance, and an absurd cant about sentiment and sensibility, which, however fit they may be for heroines of romance, are but scurvy companions in the beaten track of life. Such nonsense has always a tendency to enervate the mind, and render it unfit for ordinary duties. The faculties of the soul are perverted, the imagination becomes inflamed and distempered, and every object is seen through a false medium. Such is generally the effect of injudicious novel-reading, even when the general scope, as in the present instance, is intended to promote the ends of morality and religion.

Review in *Flowers of Literature* Vol. 4, 1805, p. 429.

*Murray House. A plain unvarnished Tale.* By Mrs. Parsons. 3 vols. 12mo. pp895. 12s. Norbury, Brentford. 1805.

The respectable author of this novel is well known to our readers. She has gained additional credit by its production; and we fear, it is a portrait which must come home to the feelings of many persons in the fashionable world, who bear a heavy heart under a profusion of riches and honours. It is extremely well written.

*The Convict; or Navy Lieutenant* 1807

Review in *The British Critic* Vol. XXX, Jan 1807, p. 84.

*The Convict, or Navy Lieutenant, a Novel By Mrs. Parsons, Author of the miser and his Family, Murray House, the Mysterious Visit &c.* 12mo. 4 vols. 1l. Hatchard 1807

This Novel is a combination of Novels, each of which, but that we presume the author's inventive fancy disdained it, might have been easily expanded into two or more volumes. The incidents are not quite within the pale of probability; but the narrative is kept up with much spirit and consistency; and much knowledge of human manners is demonstrated. The catastrophe is very ingeniously brought about, and worked up with much real pathos.

Review in *The Lady's Monthly Museum* Feb 1809, p. 98.

*The Convict; or Navy Lieutenant. By Mrs. Parsons. Lane and Co.*

This is an amusing and interesting novel. The character of an English seaman is presented with glowing colours, and the whole story is embellished with much pleasing variety. We must, nevertheless, in justice, give our opinion that the outline is too roughly sketched; the language is altogether too coarse for that of a naval officer, who, however rough in manners, has generally the advantage of a decent education. The novel is pleasing on the whole, and one of the best of this indefatigable writer's productions.

Review in *Flowers of Literature* Vol. 5, 1806, p. 500, (though journal, as novel, published in 1807).

*Convict (The); or, Navy Lieutenant. A Novel. By Mrs. Parsons, Author of 'The Miser and his Family' &c.* 4 vols. 12mo. 18s. p. 1145. Norbury. 1807.

Mrs. Parsons, has, as usual, been very fortunate in her choice of a subject that must excite sympathy in every feeling breast. The interest is kept up throughout; and the style is so simple, pleasant, and correct, that we consider this to be the best among the very great number which this amiable author has produced.

had a play performed at Covent Garden.<sup>19</sup> These diverse aspects of her life and writing represent different roles or genres in her life. I argue that she foregrounds these different aspects of herself depending on the role she is currently assuming: widow, mother or experienced writer, and depending on her aim: to petition for financial aid, to attract the sympathy of her readership, to forge professional relationships or, most importantly of all, to make money.

These roles, which can be considered as life genres, determine the type of writing which is appropriate. For example, her factual writing includes such items as prefaces and dedications in books, as well as requests for financial aid to benefactors. Although these are part of factual writing, they still belong to the life genres assumed by Eliza Parsons, since they each emphasise the particular aspect of her personality which she considers most appropriate to achieve her current goal of book sales, prestige or alms. Thus, these writings blur the distinction between the public and private sphere in which Eliza Parsons is living and working, and the line between factual and fictional writing, since they present her exclusively in the light in which she wishes to be seen by her reader.

One of these life-writing genres consists of the letters Eliza Parsons wrote to request financial help.<sup>20</sup> In her letters to the Royal Literary Fund,<sup>21</sup> she presents herself as a poverty-stricken writer. She mentions nothing of her success or of her acquaintance with literary figures, since this would dilute the sympathy she hopes to generate, along with the size of the donation she hopes to receive. She represents this persona as poverty-stricken, whilst remaining as respectable as possible. She also petitions the Norwich MP William Windham in 1793.<sup>22</sup> Once again, she asks for financial aid, but this time her letter contains a different kind of information. Rather than concentrating