INTRODUCTION

The Castle of Wolfenbach was published in 1793 and is an interesting example of what I would call an ideologically bifurcated female gothic, part liberal and cosmopolitan in its endorsement of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and part conservative in its sympathy for the rights of the patriarch (even the most egregiously violent, murderous, and abusive ones) and the native superiority of the British people. Its author, Eliza Parsons (1748-1811), is remembered today, if she is remembered at all, as the author of two of the books that Isabella Thorpe and Catherine Morland discuss as being "all horrid" in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. As Michael Sadleir pointed out in 1927, early critics of Austen assumed that the titles were fictitious until gradually all of them were discovered, some in only one surviving copy. This is indeed ironic, as in their day they were immensely popular and widely available, but printed on such poor quality paper that they literally disintegrated with overuse. All of the titles are now being reprinted by Valancourt Books with the intention that they should be rediscovered and taught along with Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, thereby setting the Austen title in its fullest gothic context. The text that I have edited here is prepared for use in the college and university classroom, and hence I have prepared this Introduction as well as notes on the text that analyze the major issues in the novel.

The Author

What we know about Parsons has been summarized by Devendra Varma in his introduction to her other Northanger novel, *The Mysterious Warning* (1796). Born in 1748 to a prosperous Plymouth wine merchant, Mr. Phelp, Eliza was an only daughter and adequately educated for her day. She married a turpentine distiller named Parsons and moved to Stonehouse. The advent of the American Revolution brought financial ruin to Mr. Parsons, then working as a government contractor for the British navy, when two of his ships were seized by the colonists. The family sold their home in Stonehouse and regrouped in the London suburbs, building warehouses and storage facilities for the turpentine trade. In 1782 a fire destroyed the whole property, also wiping out goods that were due to be shipped imminently to America. This time the devastation was complete, and the husband and father of eight suffered a paralytic stroke and died three years later.

During this three year period their eldest son died while in military service in Jamaica, and Eliza Parsons was left as the sole support of her family. Like Charlotte Smith before her, she picked up her pen, and like Smith, lived to witness the early deaths of a number of her other children: another son in service off St. Domingo, a daughter who died in 1803, and her only surviving son in 1804, while commanding a gun boat at sea. From 1790 until her death in 1811, Parsons published over 20 novels (comprising more than 60 volumes), some less than mediocre (Varma, xv) and some "respectable performances" (Summers, 117). She was certainly popular in her own day, although the critics of her time castigated her grammatical errors (particularly her tendency to use "neither. . . or") and the lack of organization in her novels. As Varma notes, "the principal narrative is often splintered into different stories, and although the various strings of tales and sub-plots are entertaining and the attention is seldom permitted to flag, the reader's mind can at times experience *ennui*" (xi). In addition, given the speed with which she churned out works, there had to be and there were a number of errors in her writing, and in this particular novel, the ending seems to me less interesting and much more unnecessarily drawn out than the earlier sections. Given the desperate personal and financial situation she was facing at home, it is difficult to condemn her works. As Varma notes, "few female writers have had a sadder biography. Haunted by misfortune, and broken by a struggling career," Parsons died at the age of 63.

During her lifetime, Parsons was a deeply religious Protestant with a simple, child-like faith in the benevolent ways of an all-seeing Providence. As Sadleir notes, "no novelist was ever more pugnaciously Protestant" (22). In Parsons's religious scheme, the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished in this life. She also held conservative views on marriage, stating, "I have rarely observed through life that any union, contracted to a parent's disapprobation, has been fortunate or happy" (qtd. Varma, ix). Although she clearly did not support arranged marriages motivated simply by the desire to acquire title or property (as witnessed by the catastrophic events in *The Castle of Wolfenbach*), she did support a father's right to make decisions for his children, and Matilda's defiance of her uncle is not an act that Parsons would have condoned (and indeed Matilda does pay a price for her rebellion). We would say now that Parsons was an advocate of companionate marriage, a union of two people who love and esteem each other, and have chosen to marry each other (rather than have their parents arrange the marriage to consolidate

property). The evolving nature of the increasingly popular companionate marriage, as well as the rights of women, is certainly at issue here. As Stone has noted,

> in France [and England] in the second half of the eighteenth century there was some intensive propaganda, both in writing and in art, in favour of the affective family type, free marriage choice, marital love, sexual fulfillment within marriage—the alliance of Cupid and Hymen—and close parent-child bonding....Despite this, however, there is strong evidence that the practice of marriage arranged by parents for material advantages was reinforced by the legal code of both the *Ancien Régime* and Napoleon's Code Civil. (390)

Whenever a culture is changing the nature of its basic unit of kinship (marriage and family), there is bound to be a tremendous amount of anxiety about the new arrangement, not to mention angst about displacing a system that had persisted for centuries. This anxiety results in what I initially called ideological bifurcation. On one hand, Parsons endorses the "old" ways, while on the other hand she is clearly sympathetic to reform and goes to great lengths in this novel to depict the abuses that can occur when fathers select completely unsuitable husbands for their completely dependent daughters.

We can make some other assumptions about Parsons's personal beliefs on the basis of her novel. In addition to her religious agenda and conservative ideologies about the sanctity of the patriarchal family, she was also blatantly nationalistic in her celebration of British superiority. For her, the British people had been blessed with a Constitution that was ratified by the 1688 Glorious Revolution, and this Constitution insured their rights and freedom under the legal and court systems. She further presents the bourgeois agenda in a number of statements throughout the novel that condemn gambling, over-dressed and gossiping aristocratic women, and lecherous and violently jealous aristocratic men. She goes so far to say in this novel that middle-class people are more attractive than aristocrats because they do not stay out late at night partying, drinking, and losing their looks. As Varma points out, she was strongest in depicting characters in the lower and middle classes of society rather than in describing aristocrats (xi), while her heroines are always young, innocent, and naturally elegant and her villains are "morose, savage, sneering, revengeful, jealous, and cruel. In their

psychological make-up passion lies dormant, but once roused into action, it blazes forth in uncontrolled fury" (x). In short, Parsons was engaged in writing to the gothic formula that had been established already: part sentimental virtue in distress, part novel of manners, part melodramatic confrontation between good and evil. Although Parsons was no "feminist" in the line of Mary Wollstonecraft, she does share a number of what I have labeled elsewhere gothically feminist traits: heroines who manipulate their way into inheritances, all the while proclaiming their incompetence or vulnerability.

The Novel and Its Contexts

The Castle of Wolfenbach has been analyzed by Sadleir and other critics as an imitation German gothic novel, complete with a supposed German heroine and at times a setting in Germany ("supposed" because she turns out to be Italian). Styling itself as a translation of a work originally written in German, the book is of course completely British, but it reveals the vogue for all things Germanic in the 1790s. As Tompkins points out, "Germany soon rivalled Italy as the land of romance; by 1792 a heroine's accomplishments include German, and a year later the Minerva Press had discovered Central Europe" (290). Varma claims that the novel is most likely inspired by the adventure of the Duchess de C. in the French novel *Theodore and Adelaide* by Madame de Genlis (xii), originally published in 1782, but translated into English in 1783. Genlis stated in her footnotes that the story of a jealous husband who imprisoned his wife for nine years in a subterranean cavern without light was true and that she, in fact, had met the lady in question (Tompkins 273). Virtually everyone who has talked about *The Castle of Wolfenbach* also claims that Radcliffe's novels *A Sicilian Romance* and *The Romance of the Forest* are also definite influences on *Wolfenbach*, and I would agree. One of the earliest discussions of the novel, Sadleir's, criticizes the novel for being "too occupied with 'terror' and with Gothistic *décor* to allow herself much realism. Here and there she betrays personal pre-occupations or prejudice" (13), and by that I think he is referring to her rabid pro-British statements. More tellingly, Sadleir criticizes Parsons for what he calls her "coldly violent scenes of almost sadistic cruelty" and her "habit of giving deliberately trivial interpretations for pseudo-ghostly phenomena" (13). He places her in the school of Matthew Lewis, the

school of horror rather than terror (contradicting his earlier statement, quoted above), and certainly there are a series of extremely bloody and shocking murders in this and her later novels that rival anything Lewis presented in *The Monk* (1796).

In approaching a female gothic text, the first order of business is to analyze the nature and characteristics of the heroine. Matilda Weimar is very much in the mold of other gothic heroines, particularly those of Radcliffe's early novels (cited above). She is beautiful, pursued by a lecherous uncle who intends to rape and then marry her, and she is of unknown or mysterious parentage. Her challenge in the novel is to discover the secret of her birth, find her parents, and inherit her rightful property. Much like Radcliffe's heroines, she must save a woman trapped in a "haunted" castle, she must find protectors and mentors, and she must negotiate to get a rival out of the way so that she can marry the man she loves, the Count De Bouville. Although she loves the Count, she cannot admit her feelings until her status as an aristocrat is ensured, and so her reserve and native modesty are continually tested, and because she is a heroine, she constantly behaves in an impeccable manner. Mellor has claimed that "women writers [of this period], denouncing sexual passion, urge their readers to embrace reason, virtue, and caution" (60), and such would be an exact description of the character of Parsons's heroine Matilda. She is the soul of reason in discovering the Countess of Wolfenbach, while virtue and caution mark her every move while she flees her uncle's embrace and finally marries the man of her choice.

The other characters in the novel are all stock types. The Count and Countess of Wolfenbach form one of the inset narratives here, the story of a disastrous arranged marriage that ends in murder and mayhem. The story is, of course, fantastic and quite implausible, but the "willing suspension of disbelief" necessary in reading fiction requires us to believe that such a situation (the 18 year imprisonment of a wife by her husband) could, in fact, take place. The other inset narratives are equally extreme. Mother Magdelene's story is one of unrelieved tragedy and betrayal, and again serves to warn women that men are interested in only thing: their money. We also have the central narrative, the story of Matilda, her uncle, her parents, and the Count De Bouville, but this story splinters into the stories of Matilda's protectors, the Marquis and Marchioness de Melfort, and De Bouville's female suitors, Mademoiselle De Fontelle and Mrs. Courtney. In short, these narratives spin in and out of contact with

one another and at one point we hear Victoria Wolfenbach's story told from three different points of view.

In addition to character and plot, Parsons's novel is interesting for its engagement with some of the major ideological issues of its time, the early 1790s. With the French Revolution raging and the guillotining of King Louis XVI in 1793, the situation in France was very much in the forefront of British consciousness. Many Britons were initially sympathetic to the overthrow of the King and his excessively extravagant wife, Queen Marie Antoinette. As the Revolution proceeded, however, its violence and horrors shocked the British and they turned against not only revolution, but even the notion of reform. Parsons is writing at precisely this moment. She is, in fact, caught between an attraction to France (as represented by the devoted hero De Bouville and the chivalrous mentor-father substitute the Marquis De Melfort) and a repulsion for its excesses (as represented by the odious liar and gossip monger Mlle De Fontelle). It is perhaps most accurate to see Parsons as part of a trend that Adriana Craciun has recently charted: cosmopolitanism.

As Craciun points out, many women writers in Britain subscribed to the principles of the French Revolution but filtered them through a celebration of the British constitution as it had been ratified following the 1688 Glorious Revolution. Craciun points out that these women writers "cultivated a radicalized cosmopolitanism through their engagement with French revolutionary politics" (1). The cosmopolitan ideal was ushered in as a result of the French Revolution, and it spoke to the need to promote a reform agenda in the face of counterrevolutionary, reactionary politics. To be a citizen of the world was to believe in the universalism of the Rights of Man, "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité"—Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. But achieving such an ideal, nay utopian, goal is inextricably bound up with the features of an aristocratic tradition: primogeniture, a rigid class system, and inherent gender inequalities in the legal and political systems. As Parsons makes clear, for a woman like Matilda to be free, she would need to acquire autonomy, sexual agency, and economic independence in her own right. These she eventually does acquire, but only through the confession of her uncle, who ultimately holds all power over her life.

Although critics have tended to see *The Castle of Wolfenbach* as a "sham" German gothic in the tradition of *Schauerromantiker* (German-horror-romanticism), most of the action takes place in Bath, scene of so much intrigue in *Northanger Abbey*. In addition to Bath, numerous scenes take place in Germany, Vienna, the French coun-

tryside, Paris, London, Nice, and Tunis. The characters are in fact constantly on the move, by horse, runaway carriage, or boat attacked by pirates. Despite the international nature of the varied settings, however, no one could doubt that the novel was written by an English woman of the middle class. A clear British nationalistic agenda suffuses the scenes set in England. The British are praised for their complexions, their court and legal systems, and their freedom from the notorious *lettre de cachet*. Gerald Newman notes that in addition to the pervasive cosmopolitanism that characterized Europe in the eighteenth century, the decades leading up to the French Revolution "also witnessed an awakening of national pride, a proliferation of national cultural institutions, and myriad attempts to excavate the foundations and define the type of the national self" (50). This "national self" for Parsons was characterized by honesty, sincerity, transparency, and virtuous self-possession. In contrast to the French, British citizens were praised for their rationality, their adherence and respect for the law, and their deeply religious practices.

Wollstonecraft was not above distinguishing British women from French women, noting that the latter were given to a lack of "personal reserve, and sacred respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life, which French women almost despise" (70). Further, she notes that "in France the very essence of sensuality has been extracted to regale the voluptuary, and a kind of sentimental lust has prevailed" (70). The very negative portrait that Parsons draws of French women shows that, although she embraces some of the ideals of cosmopolitanism, she eschews the "French influence" which could be found in depictions of sexual license, excessive gossiping and rumor mongering, overblown displays of sensibility, and social disorder. Although cosmopolitanism had a natural affinity with French culture, in the final analysis it was largely an aristocratic phenomenon (witness Mary Robinson's poem celebrating Queen Marie Antoinette, "Monody to the Memory of the Late Queen of France"). Francophilia contested mightily with Francophobia in the hearts and minds of the British, and as the Revolution went on and the violent excesses piled up, British sympathizers with the Revolution became more and more scarce (and quiet).

The Castle of Wolfenbach deserves to be more than a footnote to literary history, read and remembered only because its title is mocked in *Northanger Abbey*. It can tell us much about the middle-class project in Britain during the early 1790s and it can tell us much about how the gothic novel evolved. I would not claim that it is a great novel. Instead, I see it as a historical document that speaks to

us about the fears, beliefs, and prejudices of its era. As such it is an interesting text to study in relation to other gothic, sentimental, and melodramatic works of the 1790s. In a decade that saw the fall of a King and the rise of the Emperor Napoleon, this novel spoke about the attraction and allure of France and the French people to the British bourgeois imaginary. Unpacking that allure even today is an engaging exercise in literary archaeology.

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