

Elizabeth Helme's *Louisa; or the Cottage on the Moor*

There has been little modern day research into the work of Elizabeth Helme. There is also relatively little known about her life, despite the fact that Helme produced a large amount of both fictional and non-fictional work during her writing career. *Louisa; or the Cottage on the Moor* was her most successful text, going through numerous editions and translations.¹ Even though *Louisa* and several other of her novels proved successful, this by no means guaranteed her a place in the literary canon, and she remains an author who has almost slipped into complete obscurity. *Louisa* however, is a text which has much to offer, both as a form of entertaining, well-written fiction and as a prime example of the literary trends and styles of the eighteenth century. It is a text which both adheres to the conventions of its time, but also conveys its author's individual ideas and beliefs. This introduction will begin with a synopsis of *Louisa* and will then go on to look at the critical reception the novel received on its publication. After this I will contextualise the novel, looking more specifically at the genres Helme draws from and the literary styles and motifs she applies. I will then look at how this fits in with the work of her contemporaries and will consider whether Helme is a typical example of an eighteenth-century female writer. Finally I will explore in more detail some of the key themes Helme addresses in her novel, most notably that of the family, but also issues such as class, patriarchy and gender. I will also look at the nature of the literary market at the time, and will consider how this influenced both the style and content of Helme's writing.

Louisa has a fairly intricate plot in which the characters lives are all closely and complexly intertwined. It begins with Louisa Villars, the heroine and central protagonist of the story, arriving at a small country cottage owned by Mrs Maria

¹ Elizabeth Helme, *Louisa; or, The Cottage on the Moor* (London: G.Kearsley, 1787).

Rivers. Louisa arrives at the cottage after escaping an attempt on her virtue by her supposed guardian, Lord Danford. Mrs Rivers takes pity on Louisa and agrees to care for her. Mrs Rivers then attempts to distract Louisa from her unhappiness by telling her life story and explaining why she herself is also unhappy. Maria lost her mother and father when young and was cared for by a Mr and Mrs Rivers. When Maria grew older, Mr Rivers' nephew, Henry, arrived and Maria fell deeply in love with him. Maria later discovered a plot to lure her away from Henry and into the arms of her benefactor, Mr Rivers. Henry and Maria managed to escape and elope to Scotland where they were married. She became pregnant, but Henry was then ordered to go to India by his uncle and so was forced to leave Maria behind. Mr Rivers then told Maria that Henry had died during the journey. Distraught, Maria went into labour and delivered a daughter who she was told was stillborn. Deeply unhappy, she moved to the small country cottage in Kendal.

Louisa then begins her own tale of woe, describing how she too was orphaned and was brought up in a French convent. It was here that she met Lady Julia and her mother, the Countess of Melville, who soon became a surrogate family to the orphan. Louisa then met the brother of Julia, Lord Gray and fell in love. However, she felt she could not marry him, despite the family's blessing, as she was of a lower social rank. At seventeen she was forced to part with her surrogate family as she was called home to live with her guardian, Lord Danford. On her way there, she was almost kidnapped by another admirer, Danvers, whom she strongly disliked. She was saved however, by a gentleman she knew only as Belmont, but with whom she felt a strong emotional connection. Louisa then safely arrived at Danford's estate and after spending some time there soon began to suspect that he was a close blood relation. However, Danford then declared that he was not related to her and instead felt for her sexually. Danford

then attempted to rape Louisa and there was a struggle. After stabbing him with some scissors, she then escaped to the cottage. After the retelling of these two stories, events then move into the present. Louisa is reunited with the Melvilles and it is then that the true identity of the characters are revealed. Belmont is revealed to be Henry, the lost love of Maria. Mr Rivers and Lord Danford are shown to be the same person; he tried to attack both Maria and Louisa. The final revelation is that Louisa is the daughter of Henry and Maria; the death of Maria's child was another of Rivers' lies and therefore Lord Danford is also Louisa's great uncle. This is confirmed by Lord Danford/Mr Rivers, who commits suicide but confirms Louisa's heritage in his suicide note. With her newly found social status, Louisa feels able to marry Lord Gray, and the two exchange vows in a double ceremony with Lady Julia and her love Lord Castlebrook.

It was the improbability and heavy reliance upon coincidence that several of the critics picked up on when reviewing Helme's novel. There is relatively little evidence of contemporary criticism for *Louisa*. It was reviewed in several periodicals, including the *Monthly Review*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Critical Review* and *New Lady's Magazine*. All of the reviews are short, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for example, it is simply described as 'a pleasing little artless tale'.² However, when we consider that this particular periodical was usually quite critical and damning of novels then this review, although brief, could be considered quite a compliment. For example, on the same page as *Louisa's* review, it is written that 'there cannot be a greater tax on a reviewer than to read through the generality of modern novels, which multiply every year, for the great edification of the giddy and thoughtless of all

² *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 57: II (1787), p.909.

ranks'.³ The review which directly follows *Louisa* also exemplifies the attack novels came under, when the reviewer describes *The Generous Attachment* as 'tedious, unanimated and void of taste and sentiment'.⁴ When compared to reviews such as this one, Helme's text seems to fare quite well. The *Monthly Review* has a slightly more extensive feature, and comments on how the novel is an 'improbable tale' but 'not unpleasing'. The reviewer quotes a poem which states 'in all you say or do, / Ever keep probability in view' and argues that this is a 'rule' for which we 'ever must be sticklers'. Despite criticising its improbability however, the review is again relatively favourable, arguing that the narrative is 'intitled to praise' and is 'prettily written'.⁵

The final review appears both in the *New Lady's Magazine* and the *Critical Review*. This reviewer believes the novel to be 'much superior, both in its plan and conduct, to the numerous productions of this class' and argues that 'curiosity is skilfully excited, expectation kept momentarily alive, and, at last, the intricacies are unravelled very satisfactorily'. This review is the most positive that the novel receives, and even asserts that 'we believe [...] that the story may be true'.⁶ The novel proved popular with both critics and the general public. *Louisa* became Helme's most successful work. When advertising her later novels they were frequently described as being by the 'author of *Louisa; or the Cottage on the Moor*'. The popularity of the text became a selling strategy for Helme's publishers. Advertisements of the time describe how new editions of the novel had to be 'expedited' to 'supply the increasing demand for this favourite production' and then in another advertisement describes how 'two large impressions of this favourite

³ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 57: II (1787), p.909.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 76 (1787), p.449.

⁶ *The Critical Review*, Vol. 63 (1787), p.308.

production have been sold within this Month'.⁷ When Helme was writing, the novel was perceived as a 'lowly' form when compared to poetry. Female writers were also often much more susceptible to attack from literary critics, as female writing was looked on far less favourably than the work of their male counterparts. Despite these obstacles, *Louisa* proved to be a best-seller and fared well with critics, proving that her success was a considerable achievement. Despite the fact Helme has often been ignored in recent years, the few modern critics who have reviewed her work have also tended to look approvingly on her texts. Janet Todd for example writes that 'Elizabeth Helme was one of the better light-romance novelists of her time [...] she tells her tale well and smoothly, and her conventional plots, [...] hold the reader's interest'.⁸ One can only hope that with time, more modern-day researchers and reviewers will turn to Helme's work and explore in more depth its literary potential.

Like many of her female contemporaries, Helme's work was often didactic and it is clear that *Louisa* is also written from such a perspective. Helme herself sets out in her preface to the novel that 'a composition that enters the world with a view of improving [...] it, has a claim to our utmost indulgence'.⁹ Cheryl Turner describes how women of the eighteenth-century came to perceive it to be their 'responsibility to guide society on moral and social issues' and that it was 'prose fiction, which offered a new outlet' to fulfil this responsibility.¹⁰ Todd also notes how 'by the mid- to late 18th century, the middle classes were avid for advice'.¹¹ In *Louisa*, it is the title character, Louisa Villars, who best articulates Helme's moralistic perspective. Louisa

⁷ *The English Novel 1770-182: A bibliographical survey of prose fiction published in the British Isles*, ed. by James Raven, Peter Garside and Rainer Schowlering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.407.

⁸ Janet Todd, *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers, 1600-1800* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.160.

⁹ Helme, Vol. I: p.vi.

¹⁰ Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.164.

¹¹ Todd, p.14.

is a role model; she is a symbol of virtue and of chastity, an ideal which the other characters can only strive towards. Helme emphasises in her prologue the ‘heavenly attributes’ of ‘virtue and humanity’ and insists that if her ‘heroine merit one tear of sensibility’ then as an author she will be ‘amply satisfied’.¹² It is clearly Louisa’s virtuous beliefs and lifestyle that are of utmost importance to Helme, she must articulate these ideals effectively if her novel is to succeed in its aim of instilling moral integrity. Helme achieves her aim convincingly, painting the character of Louisa as a model of honesty and integrity. She introduces the character largely through the description of Mrs Rivers and Mary, who when looking at the fatigued Louisa note how ‘every fresh glance’ at the young girl ‘discovered a new grace, or additional virtue’.¹³ Without knowing anything of her personality, Mrs Rivers thinks of Louisa as ‘loveliness itself’.¹⁴ Despite her lack of wealth or heritage she is also a near-perfect example of decorum and manners. Her selflessness is frequently stressed in the novel, largely through her refusal to marry her true love, Lord Gray because she fears she will sully the family name. She continues to refuse even when the family actively encourage the match.

Louisa’s virtue and morals are constantly tested during the novel. For example, the primary symbol of her chasteness – her virginity – is threatened when Lord Danford tries to rape her. However, she does what any honourable young maiden is expected to do and staves off the attack whole-heartedly. She finds the strength to overcome these obstacles in virtue, asking at one point ‘what have the virtuous to fear?’¹⁵ It provides her with the courage and perseverance to carry on. The way in which she triumphs and achieves happiness at the end of the novel only

¹² Helme, Vol. I: p.ix.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.75.

strengthens her moral stance, and reinforces the underlying message in the novel that a virtuous life will be rewarded with happiness. Helme calls it ‘meeting their due reward’.¹⁶ Virtue is seen to be the one quality which can override all others. As Julia says of her brother, Lord Gray, ‘he is young, sensible, handsome; and what is still superior, he is virtuous’. Lord Gray also articulates the importance of virtue, when he proclaims in his duel with Danvers that ‘I fight for innocence and virtue – at any weapon, I am sure to conquer’.¹⁷ Similarly, just as Louisa’s virtue is rewarded, evil deeds in the novel do not go unpunished. Helme proclaims in her prologue that ‘[I] shall content myself with exposing vice’.¹⁸ The main example of this is in the novel’s villain, Mr Rivers/Lord Danford, who is forced to see the error of his ways, and feels so terrible about it that he takes his own life, something which could be considered the ultimate punishment.

Although Helme wrote within the frame of didacticism, this did not stop her from drawing from a variety of other genres. Todd points out that, ‘many professional women wrote across genres: Helen Maria Williams was a poet, translator, and novelist, Elizabeth Helme was all three and a children’s author as well’.¹⁹ *Louisa* draws from a number of genres including gothic, romance and sentimentalism. The gothic features most prominently at the start of the novel, through the image of the lone, wandering female lost on ‘barren land’ and on a ‘frosty night’. Louisa is described as having ‘wandered amidst these wilds till cold has almost deprived me of sensation’.²⁰ This image of the innocent female forced to endure darkness and the severity of the natural world alone is a common motif of gothic literature. The gothic is again evoked in a latter part of the novel, when we hear of the sinister letter Maria

¹⁶ Helme, Vol.I: p.x.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.vii.

¹⁹ Todd, p.13.

²⁰ Helme, Vol. I: pp. 1-2.

discovers which describes how she is to be lured away and again when the young, vulnerable Louisa is threatened by the lecherous Lord Danford. Although the gothic features far less prominently than it does in other works of Helme, *Louisa* still makes use of the gothic at key moments very successfully. The same can be said of the love plot in the novel. This plot is a fairly controlled and understated one. Neither Lord Gray nor Louisa show any signs of a reckless pursuit of their passion for one another. Instead their love is kept in check, primarily by Louisa who insists on playing very little role in his life until she finds out her true parentage. There are no speeches professing the couple's 'undying love' for one another. In fact, the occasions on which the couple do meet are often characterised by timidity and bashfulness. When they finally marry it is described in very brief detail, and again there are no romantic outpourings of love or affection. The love plot in this novel may be so understated because Helme felt it may detract from the legitimacy of her work as a piece of moral instruction. Novels concerned with love and courtship were often severely frowned upon by critics of the eighteenth century. It was perceived as frivolous and many feared it provided the wrong message for the 'impressionable youth' of the eighteenth century. Helme may well have feared a critical backlash if she had focused on the romance in the novel more heavily, and it was important that Helme's work be received well in order to provide her with the financial support she needed.

Sensibility and sentimentalism are concepts which tend to feature more heavily in *Louisa* than that of romance and the gothic. These concepts were, as Gary Kelly argues, primarily concerned with 'sympathy for the social bond' and an emphasis on 'inner moral and intellectual worth'.²¹ Todd highlights how the use of the 'sentimental female image' was widespread at the time Helme was writing. The main

²¹ Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1839* (London: Longman Ltd., 1989), p.12.

symbol of this image was the ‘chaste passive heroine’, but this passivity is not to be automatically aligned with weakness. Instead, Todd argues that it is a ‘powerful passivity’.²² Although Louisa is passive to a certain extent, she does display moments of both mental and physical strength. She fends off Lord Danford’s attack, struggles and resists vehemently when Danvers tries to kidnap her and displays spiritual courage in overcoming the supposed ‘death’ of her parents and the separation from her surrogate family.

Helme was acutely aware of what proved popular with readers and had a good awareness of the marketplace. For Helme, writing was not simply a leisure activity; she did not have the financial means or the social status to afford her this luxury. Instead writing provided her with an essential secondary income to provide for her family. When asking the Royal Literary Fund for assistance, Helme states how she has ‘written for the press’, not for her own satisfaction or gratification, but for the literary market.²³ She wrote according to what the market dictated because it was essential that her writing sell in order for her family to live in the manner they were accustomed to. Helme’s writing has been accused of being formulaic and elements of *Louisa* are undeniably very predictable. However, I think it is important to remember that her formulaic tendencies may be entirely deliberate, for as Turner suggests, didactic matter stood a better chance of attracting readers, and ‘the market for material expanded significantly during the eighteenth century’.²⁴ Helme, like her contemporaries, would have suffered pressure from the increasing commodification of literature. She may also have faced the common dilemma whereby on one hand, the author is perceived as an inspired individual, someone who should be creating a work of ‘genius’, on the other hand they were a tool of the industry and many felt they had

²² Todd, p.20.

²³ Royal Literary Fund, case number 97, 20 Oct. 1803, quoted in Turner (see above).

²⁴ Turner, p.162.

to write what sold. For example, during the 1790s, over half of the novels published were gothic fiction. This was not simply the case that half of the country's writers suddenly felt inspired to write gothic, it was because writers saw the potential selling power in this increasingly popular genre. E.J. Clery notes how the 'vogue for supernatural fictions' was in 'response to an overwhelming demand' for the genre. She also points out that the literary market was increasingly becoming a 'demand-led industry', one where profitability and marketability began to increasingly affect literary style and content.²⁵ Writers and booksellers struggled to balance this profitability with the need for both novelty and sameness. As Clery argues, 'how can a claim to inspired originality be sustained under the pressure of repetition?'²⁶ I believe it is clear that Helme did attempt to firmly place her own stamp on a heavily tried and tested formula.

Todd argues that the moralistic advice in eighteenth-century novels tended to be 'conservative, not subversive' and that 'the message was usually subordination and patience'.²⁷ Feminist critics have tended to argue that these types of didactic novels only reaffirm and reinforce the female as a subordinate subject. Todd goes on to argue that the cult of sensibility which stressed 'those qualities considered feminine by the sexual psychology of the time – intuitive sympathy, passivity, and emotionalism' both 'glorified and debased women'.²⁸ It is true to say that *Louisa*, on the whole, is a conservative novel. Her female characters tend to adhere to social expectations of femininity and the patriarchal structure. Helme also stresses the importance of family. It is equated with happiness and a sense of belonging and personal satisfaction. It is also Louisa's reward for her virtuous acts. However, as much as the conventional

²⁵ E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.138.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.139.

²⁷ Todd, p.15.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.19.

family is stressed by Helme, she also makes it clear that the reader should not necessarily place a blood relationship above that of an emotive bond. Emotive bonds serve an important function in *Louisa*. When Louisa lacks a biological family, the friendship of Julia, Lady Melville and Mrs Rivers provide the heroine with invaluable reassurance, love and support. The fact that Louisa's great uncle was the perpetrator of several of the crimes against her also shows that a blood relation is not one which can be automatically trusted. Julie Shaffer argues that in *Louisa*, it becomes 'necessary for the worthy to reinvent the family structure, to find it through emotional connection, rather than through the power or automatic connection provided by blood or legal family relationship' and that in this respect, the novel shows 'radicality'.²⁹ For example, Julia encourages Louisa to shake off her fears of inferiority, and to follow her emotions, saying 'let your hand follow your heart. Banish then, my sweet girl, the giant Pride'.³⁰ I would agree with Shaffer and argue that despite the novel's largely conservative stance, there are radical elements to Helme's work. Helme is looking outside of conventional perceptions of family and taking into consideration other types of relationships, something that many of her female contemporaries failed to do.

During the course of *Louisa* Helme continues to explore and re-explore the notion of family, in particular focusing on its link to social standing and identity. Ruth Perry notes how many female protagonists in fiction are victims of 'disinheritedness' whereby the lack of a family damages their sense of identity and position in society. Louisa could easily be placed into this category of 'disinherited female'. Perry notes

²⁹ Julie Shaffer, 'Forming Friends, Family, and Lovers: The Sexual Problematics of Sentimental Bonds in Non-Canonical Late 18th-Century Woman Penned Novels', *The University of Wisconsin*, (1994) <http://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/shaffer/INCEST.htm> [accessed April 2006]

³⁰ Helme, Vol.II, p.83.

how the female's 'disinheritance defines her – until the very end of the novel'.³¹ Again, Louisa follows such a pattern, whereby the young girl's lack of parentage continues to be an issue throughout the course of the novel. It is Louisa herself who often brings this issue to the forefront, declaring her feelings of inferiority and lowliness at several points in the text, especially when comparing herself to her companion Julia, who has a strong family network. Louisa proclaims that she is 'conscious of my inequality' and how the 'cruel stars' oblige her 'to refuse the amiable Lord Melville'.³² To explain her ideas Perry looks at the novels of Frances Burney and her heroines who struggle with 'the excruciating difficulties for a woman without a family name'.³³ The structure of some of Burney's novels are similar to that of Helme's *Louisa*. Burney's female protagonists often lament at their sense of illegitimacy and strive to solve the issues surrounding their parentage. The important thing to note with these novels of 'disinherited females' is that this sense of disinheritance is nearly always dispelled by the end of the novel. It is the revelation and reunion of Louisa with her birth parents that provides the sentimental climax to the novel. Perry notes that these 'tear-jerking sequences' are an important part of the disinherited daughter plot, it legitimises the female and provides her with the stability and social standing which she has lacked up until that point.³⁴ The way Helme makes use of an established literary convention of her period again shows her acute awareness of the literary market. She knew what was popular, what sold and what would be more likely to lead her to success.

In conclusion, although didacticism was a hugely important movement in the eighteenth century, one must bear in mind that the effects of this movement were so

³¹ Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.39.

³² Helme, Vol. II: p.78.

³³ Perry, p.39.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.405.

far reaching that almost every novel in the eighteenth century had some sort of didactic element. The use of didacticism in Helme's work is therefore far from unique. However, what the didacticism in Helme's work does do is as act as a vehicle for articulating a whole spectrum of other ideas and issues. The way in which Helme effectively engaged with contemporary topics was reflected in the critical reception of the novel. *Louisa* fared well with critics and even better with the buying public. The literary market was flooded with sentimental, 'light-romances' at this time and yet Helme's work still proved incredibly popular. What was it that made this text from a debut female novelist stand out and achieve such popularity despite the fiercely competitive, male-dominated literary market? I think readers of the time recognised that although conventional in style and genre, Helme very skilfully executed her work making it stand out within its genre. Its plot is intricate and carefully constructed, its characters well developed. She draws on a variety of genres and styles to excite and maintain her readers' interest. More importantly it is a text which still has much to offer the modern reader. Helme most notably deals with the way family is constructed and perceived, something which is perhaps increasingly relevant to our society in which the family is no longer characterised solely by blood relations. Helme was a writer who was acutely aware of the marketplace. During the period authors faced increasing pressure to produce texts which would sell effectively rather than simply writing what they wanted. Not only did Helme face pressure from the industry she was writing for, but she also suffered a personal pressure to generate income and secure her family's financial status. It is perhaps no wonder then that her novel is a somewhat predictable and formulaic one, one which relies heavily upon the popular motifs and techniques of the time. Despite its conventionality and formulaic nature however, Helme's work is one which most certainly warrants further research and

analysis by the modern critic. Helme is an authoress who should not remain in obscurity.

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