Le Triomphe de la Beauté OR Liberte, Egalite, ????

by mamculuna

Summary

Anne Théroigne goes from opera singer to revolutionary to incarceration during the French Revolution, but the myth of her life overwhelms the reality, even to her.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Le Triomphe de la Beauté OR Liberte, Egalite, ????

History is fiction.

--Robespierre

I. 1790

Anne Théroigne, pah! She sleeps with whoever will take her in.

Where is she from?
Liège, Marcourt, the other side of nowhere.

The Marquis de Persan who keeps her, he’s older than her father. She’s been screwing his son, and also his son’s friends.

I heard she took on half the army.
And look at her—that pink dress! Cut down to her nipples.

Her family was nothing—Terwagne, not Théroigne. She changed her name like she changes her clothes. Really, she grew on a bush.

She thinks she’ll be a singer. How will she sing with her mouth full?

She became a companion to Madame Colbert. I’d like to watch her doing what companions do. That’s where she learned to sing, and also to read and write. And maybe to eat with a fork and wash herself.

She thinks she’ll perform for Fabre. Ha! She’ll perform in his bedroom.

Life as a singer was not working out for Anne Théroigne. When Madame Colbert had paid for lessons, the teacher had promised her that she had a voice like a lark, and that the city of Paris would beg her to sing.

The truth was, she could hardly get an audition.

The night before with that stupid accountant hadn’t helped her voice. Her throat hurt, thinking about it. But she had to eat.

And now Fabre, who’d taken all his pleasure in other nights, was waving her aside from the stage.

The pretty dark-eyed boy who’d come to talk? act? was sitting in seats far behind Fabre, though they were having some kind of conversation across the rows.

She doubted the boy had a sou; more like, he was trying to get some money from Fabre, just as she was doing. Still, he might lead to something.

His eyes were warm and laughing, and he touched her shoulders.

“Maybe if you ate more, your voice would improve,” he said.

“It’s done, really. I used to sing, but now…” She let her voice fade away but kept her eyes fixed on his. Big brown eyes, she though, eyes of a puppy. Wonder if he has teeth yet?
She wandered home with him, the stones bruising her feet through the thin slippers.

Home for Camille was not a hidden room or a sweet trysting place, it turned out. It was a place on the floor in an apartment where friends and acquaintances talked and drank and argued and ate. And it thrilled her more than any lover she’d had.

Long after Camille wandered away, she sat listening to talk of revolution.

Before long, she was known as something more than the girl Camille brought in. She had a white dress and she wore it constantly, at first to meetings of different clubs and then to the crowds that had begun to gather in the streets every night around the best speakers.

The king and his taxes, the queen and her gowns. Every night the men stood shouting about their iniquities, blaming anyone who supported them. They spun visions of a glorious republic, free of aristocrats and support for armies, great systems that made the farmer, the baker, the farrier the equal of the Dukes and Marquises that ruled them now.

Gradually the murmur grew. New notes were added, as people joined the crowds. The church—was it different from the palace? Weren’t the priests raking in money, no different from the lords?

Anne listened, hearing not only the fabulous plans but also the rise and fall of the voices, the hypnotic cadences that roused the crowds to cheers.

They sounded nothing like men whispering privately to girls, but she could feel the same surrender in herself, letting her mind be roused to passion in spite of herself.

But in smaller rooms, at the ends of club meetings, she heard other voices describing other injustices, ones she knew too well. Women’s voices reciting the litany of women’s woes: no right to the money they made or the children they bore, no right to own land or speak in court.

She took all of the speeches home with her, in her mind, and went over their arguments, even though she didn’t always know what they meant. She knew how they felt.

She talked with the women and with the men. She learned who the dark-eyed boy was, Camille Desmoulins, and met his friends.

The old days were falling away, the days when she’d been a poor orphan passed from house to house, the other days when a man might make her do things for his pleasure that weren’t for hers, just to know that she had a place to sleep. She looked in the mirror and imagined herself heroic, like Jeanne d’Arc, calling soldiers to follow her.

Just the thought was intoxicating.

When the tocsin rang out on July 14, she was running at the head of the crowd, shouting her slogans. Men were following her! And women too!

“To the Bastille! To the Bastille!”

She had a pistol stuck into her belt and a red and blue cockade pinned to her dress. Above her flushed cheeks, her eyes were glowing, and she was breathless.

Weeks later, she mounted a table in a park where a group of women had gathered. She knew how to be on stage, but this was so much more, so real, so true.

“We too must have our rights! No longer should we be trampled by the rich or by the church, and no longer prisoners of fathers and husbands!”

The women cheered, and Anne felt as if the whole world were standing at her feet, watching her with rapt adoration.

“My sisters!”

Unfortunately, Camille had been standing nearby, under a lamppost, and walked behind her as the crowd wandered apart.

“You’re making a name for yourself.”

She tossed her head. “We are all sisters.”

“Sisters. You mean those people who pull each other’s hair.”

“Camille, you have no ideals.”

“I sell ideals by the pound. Come buy some.”

He caught her hand, but she pulled away. Just a man, she thought, even if he is the Lanterne Attorney. And a man that’s going to sleep with every woman in Paris, but not me.

She turned away and walked home, still bathing in the warmth of the women’s cheers. In her mind, she was waving a flag and marching at the head of a great column of women dedicated to
II. 1793

Suleau wrote that she’s lying and betraying everyone. She ran away to escape the truth. She’s been stolen by the Emperor! He’ll make her his whore.
Théroigne de Méricourt! She’s in Kufstein now, talking and talking to the Emperor’s man. She’s fucked half the men in the Cordeliers Club, and now she’s starting with the priests.
I hear the Emperor is paying her to sleep with Marat and Danton and take their secrets back to him.
She’s back now, saying she was kidnapped and told them nothing, but we’ll see how that goes.
She’s written a catechism for whores—she ought to know!
No, she can’t read or write. All she can do is fuck.
She killed the queen and the king with her own sword.
She made the mob torture La Belle Bouquetière to death.
Théroigne drinks the blood of children...

Paris was darker than it was before I left, I’m sure of that. So few lamps are lit now in the streets, and so many houses have drawn curtains and closed shutters. The clouds hang low and gray all day, and there’s no moon at night.

Too many streets are black with blood.
The head of Launay rolling outside the Bastille. The soldiers at the Tuileries. And then the night they opened the doors and Suleau came out. My own blood was boiling then—he seemed like all the men who took me and lied and cast me aside, and I had a pistol. And then Suleau’s blood was everywhere.

Cold wind from the river. The lamps flicker.
I will walk faster, that will make me warm. Is that a body hanging from the lamppost?

No, just a paper blown into the trees. But men have hung there, I’m sure of it. Robespierre says he feels the lampposts reaching out for him.

It will be better when I reached the hall. I have my speech all written, and I know they’ll love me. They always love me.

Voices, loud voices. Soldiers marching towards me. I’ll run.

When they pass, I see three drunken bakers, still white with flour, except where the red wine splashed on them. Like blood.

Camille loved Suleau, the bastard. Camille hates me now. Those dark eyes, once so warm, like sweet dark coffee—now I see the fires of hell burning there when he looks at me.

I will speak of the rights of women, and everyone will agree, and applaud. They’ll cheer me, and we’ll drink and applaud again. Unless Marat comes in.

Marat hates me too—and yet his gang of sansculottes and trichoteuses, they want to shed blood until Paris is one huge abattoir, with everyone dead who dared to speak a word.

His time will come, and Camille’s, and Danton’s. Who’ll save them? Who’ll save me?

And that’s why I’m going with Brissot. Brissot, that dried up old eunuch, he’ll live forever. No one will hurt Brissot or Saint Just. We are not the bloody mob, we are wise and careful, like great-aunts at tea. We are safe. We will live.

Now that I’m in the hall, at the rostrum, I am a different woman. I can hear my voice and I sound strong! I’ve changed the white dress for a red one, but still I carry the two pistols at my waist, even here. I am the revolution, a woman who looks like blood and tocsins and fire burning Paris!

The long windows sparkle with reflected candles. The darkness is only outside.

There are cheers, yes, I hear them! They think I have so much to say! Damn Camille and all the Cordeliers who wouldn’t let me write for them. Damn their eyes.

“Women!” I say. “Women, it is our time! The republic will open our doors and windows! We’ll spend our own money! We’ll own our own houses!”

I can even here loud voices in the street, loud voices of women. They must be struggling to come inside to hear me. I will go to them.

As I’m striding through the hall in my fiery dress, my hair streaming behind me, I see white faces with mouths open in amazement. They don’t think the women of the streets should hear me, but my words are for everyone! For all the women! For all the men, too! I toss my head and march out into the night.
A rotten egg smashes in to my hair. Rough hands grab me. Down the stairs, down on to the street, ripping at my clothes. For a minute I think they are men, here to rape me like before, but no, I see the white scarves and long hair of women, wearing working clothes.

My sisters! I try to cry to them. Do they think I’m someone else, some lady? They are hitting me and pushing me down and pulling me back up to hit again. My pistols are gone, my red dress torn off, I’m lying in the filth of the gutter while they kick me.

My head. Lights flashing, roaring in my ears. Fists and wooden clubs and heavy shoes crashing against me.

And then a voice shouting No! and hands pulling me up.

I can’t stand, I am blood and pain and fire, but I see his face as he drags me away.

Marat. It’s Marat who saves me, from his own bloody mob of women.

III. 1794

Administrator of asylum: You are here to commit Citoyenne Théroigne to this institution for the care of the mad. Is it by her will, or has the law bound her here?

Joseph Terwagne: I am her brother and have the right to assign her to your care. She has neither father nor husband, and she is not able to care for herself.

Administrator: What is her madness?

Joseph Terwagne: She sees things that are not there, hears voices no one hears, wanders in the streets shouting nonsense. Left unattended, she will wander into the river or be taken by mobs. Her mind is gone.

Administrator: Stay with her here while I prepare the papers of committal.

Anne Théroigne: Joseph, why are you leaving me here? I haven’t hurt you, brother. I could not. Please don’t do this to me.

Joseph Terwagne: Anne, you will be safe here. They are killing everyone now, everyone. Danton and Desmoulins are already in prison. Manon Roland and Phillipe Égalitaire are dead. Marat is dead. France is a pit of vipers eating each other. I can’t keep you safe, but I can hide you here.

Anne Théroigne: Joseph, I beg you. This will be worse than death. Please take me away. Please, please, my brother. Don’t do this to me.

Joseph Terwagne: Do you know what they did to Olympe de Gouges? Do you want to meet the guillotine? Do you?

Slam of an iron door. Stone walls, no window.

Don’t cut my hair! Not my hair!

Gruel on the floor, on the bed. Marat is taking me away. And Lucile Desmoulins, Camille’s pretty little wife, she’s telling me to leave.

I could vomit again, but the angels will beat me.

Marat, take the angels instead. I see the king coming for me. He’ll lock me in his porcelain dungeon.

I’ll write to Saint Just, he’ll help me. I should not be here, I should be doing my work. The women of France need me.

I’ll dress myself carefully and speak to the angel. My white dress, yes, and I will write my speech.

There are lions and snakes instead of men here. No matter, they’ll support my cause.

Dear sires, I beg you, hear the cries of women.

So long. I’ve been here so long. The stones are turning into gold, and I should sell it for the revolution.

Here is my letter to Saint Just.

I won’t eat, I can’t eat, Camille has sent poison and it’s in all the food. Oh, God, don’t pour it down my throat.

Water, more water, I will wash the blood.

Oh God.

The darkness is full of blood. Suleau, Suleau, I beg your forgiveness, Suleau covered in blood.

I’ll speak to the Cordeliers…no, Danton has told them to send me away, he’s locked me out. Camille’s his friend.
In Kufstein, the Emperor gave me fine food and a soft bed. He didn’t cut my hair and scrub me with wires. He didn’t send his men to hold me down.

And yet I told him.

Now this demon pulls the words out of my mouth on a string and chokes me with his fingers. Now I am hung from a tree to melt in the sun.

But I won’t tell, not anything. So many long weeks, but I won’t tell.

I must make my speech. The rights of women must not be forgotten. Saint Juste, Brissot, even Marat, they will help. They are dead but they will help.

I forgot to sign it.

The days so long, the nights when devils come so dark.

Dark blood falling angels weeping fire

Bodies on the walls the Queen’s head falling blood blood blood

End Notes

Mantel’s Anne is, of course, mostly likely close to the reality, but there were many fictions: Lamartine, Carlyle, etc., etc.

Sources include Hilary Mantel’s review of Théroigne de Mérimécourt: A Melancholic Woman during the French Revolution by Élisabeth Roudinesco, translated by Martin Thom (review is at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v14/n10/hilary-mantel/rescued-by-marat) and A Woman of the Revolution: Théroigne de Mérimécourt by Frank Hamel (https://books.google.com/books?id=5sJVAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA340&dq=marat+and+theroigne+de+mericourt&source=bl&ots=Z_unkVC_c_&sig=C1_8o2gX8yJASEY2QFkFN9MLmiw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi2mYns78TJAhVGOCYKHTddAv0Q6AEIUjAM#v=onepage&q&f=false)

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