

Madame Angot

Micromégas

(*Le Courrier de Bourges*, 16 September 1864, p.3)

One of those popular stereotypes that sum up all the ridiculous aspects of an era. Revolutions have often been compared to the violent movements which sometimes occur underwater and which bring to the surface, from the muddy depths, unknown objects and detritus whose existence no one could have suspected. The same phenomenon occurs in the wake of our social upheavals. Madame Angot seems to have originated in the notorious period of John Law's financial operations, when so many aleatory fortunes emerged as if by magic from his bank in the rue Quincampoix; she subsequently grew up during the Revolution, and finally blossomed in all her lustre under the Empire. Madame Angot, as a distinct personality, certainly never existed; yet she reproduces, with striking characteristics, that ridiculous side of a society which we French know how to depict with such merciless accuracy. At each phase through which the course of events channels our habits and our national morals, there arises a new stereotype which public malignity seizes upon – a sort of scapegoat upon which our population, mocking, sneering, insubordinate, satirical par excellence, heaps all the barbs of an inexhaustible verve. After 1815, it was Chauvin who was the butt of this pressing need for laughter and jest; since 1830, when a new era opened up for the middle class, we have put on the stage Mayeux, the self-satisfied National Guardsman proud of himself and puffed up with pride at his newly acquired rights; and more recently M. Prudhomme, the stereotype of the ignorant, pretentious bourgeois, pedantic, maintaining a grotesque gravity, declaiming hollow but sonorous phrases.

Madame Angot lived at a time of shifting fortunes, when it was not uncommon to get up in the morning a servant or even worse and to go to bed a millionaire, and vice versa. She therefore provided slander and mockery with much more fertile material. Risen from a lowly status to sudden wealth, living in splendid town houses, strutting about at Longchamp, at the Opéra, at the Comédie-Française, everywhere, without having had the time to bring her tone and manners up to the standard of her external apparel, she invariably presented the most amusing contrasts. After having been in turn a vivandière, a female companion on a privateer, a barmaid at some Lion-d'Or, then a market woman in Paris, she made her fortune by selling salmon, and was suddenly transformed into a lady of the parish, a lady whom the priest incenses in her pew, and who chooses May Queens.

There were several of these Mesdames Angot at the same time, young and old, ugly and pretty, brunette and blonde; they all lacked modesty. One day, one of them appeared in an elegant chariot, at the regenerated Longchamp racecourse; on this throne that Parny would not have disdained to describe, she reigned half-naked amid the flowers, her brow girt with a diadem of pearls, letting her robe of azure spangled with gold float in the wind. Adorned, adored, sometimes titled, creating a noble stock or even a dynasty, Madame Angot called herself 'the woman of the new France'; she drew a veil over the name of her father, of her first husband, of her second: she adopted a tone, gave herself airs, instructed her domestics to speak to her with respect, to carry her train, but only made the antithesis between her person and her fortune all the more amusing. A woman of superb embonpoint and athletic proportions, with a moustachioed upper lip, she clumsily imitated the manners of the young ladies of fashion, but exaggerating all their delicate nuances and thereby lapsing into caricature. This hoarse-voiced virago drank ass's milk, because her weak constitution demanded it. If, from time to time, in order to make the forgery complete, she deemed it appropriate to feel faint or to have her vapours, she would request a glass of brandy to restore her to her normal state. So much for her tone and habits; as for her conversation, one

may easily imagine that it had not passed the severe scrutiny of the Académie.

Madame Angot liked to boast of her simplicity, her frankness; she was not affected, she was quick to befriend you; she would ask you about your business and whisper hers in your ear. You learned from her that her companion – another Madame Angot – was the daughter of a fisherman from Saint-Malo, and that she had earned a good deal of money by trading paper money [*assignats*] for ‘ready cash’. That lady, on the other hand, would tell you a fable about the other one that was even less charitable. However, Madame Angot, discovering that she was making people laugh at her expense, paid for private lessons, copied the airs and language of the ladies of the old-established great houses, and decided to exhume her husband, who she claimed had been killed in the Army of the Émigrés. One met nothing but widows of generals and colonels. These ladies of the new France had a box at the theatre, where they came to show off their diamonds. On these occasions, when her carriage was driven up, a liveried valet would ask: ‘Where does Madame wish to go?’ ‘To *L’Enfant du malheur*, it’s much more charming.’ Melodrama became their favourite passion: it was much more charming than the Horatii.

The reader may judge from the above, and in a country like ours, what an avalanche of mockery, sarcasm and jibes must inevitably have fallen on these unseemly parvenues! What a goldmine for the novel and the theatre to exploit! Soon Madame Angot had invaded all the playbills, and she reigned there by better right than in the salons, where her feet constantly slipped and got tangled in the Gobelin carpets. A farce [*parade*] performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in 1795 was the starting point of the numerous plays for which Madame Angot provided the subject; it was entitled *La Nouvelle Parvenue*, and was revived in 1797 under the title of *Madame Angot, ou La Poissarde parvenue*. An actor, Labenette-Corsse, made himself a great reputation in the role of Madame Angot, and the play earned the theatre five hundred thousand francs; it had been bought for five hundred francs from the author, Ève, known as Maillot, who subsequently wrote *Le Repentir de Madame Angot, ou Le Mariage de Nicolas*

(1799) and *Dernières Folies de Madame Angot* (1803). That same year, Aude put on at the Ambigu-Comique *Madame Angot au sérail de Constantinople*, a ‘drame-tragédie-facétie-pantomime’ in three acts, which ran for two hundred successive performances and definitively established the popularity of the name and character of Madame Angot. The same author then presented *Madame Angot au Malabar ou La Nouvelle Veuve*. All of Parisian high society, all the Mesdames Angot who did not wish to be such, flocked to these comic plays, flaunting themselves in the dignitaries’ boxes with fans known as the ‘Grammaire des rentiers’ upon which were conjugated in golden letters ‘Je fus, tu fus, il fut’, etc.¹ The provinces flocked to them in their turn, then audiences abroad; it was an unprecedented vogue.

Outside the theatre, we find Madame Angot in Vadé’s *Œuvres badines et poissardes* (Paris, 1798), in *Le Déjeuner de la Râpée* by L’Écluse, and in various other books of the same period, the best-known of which is the *Histoire populaire de Madame Angot, reine des Halles*. In this story, the beautiful fishwife has a daughter who resembles her in every respect, and whom she marries to a young man from Marseille named Fanfan. The newlyweds, having left for Fanfan’s native city in the company of Madame Angot, are seized by corsairs while out sailing and taken captive to Tunis, where they are sold as slaves to the pasha. The latter recognises Madame Angot, whom he has seen in Paris. In a moment of good humour, he allows her to believe that he is in love with her, and grants her the same honours as his favourites. But when the intoxicated Madame Angot believes she is reaching the pinnacle of greatness, she is suddenly ordered to strangle herself on the pretext of a feigned conspiracy. After relishing her terror, the pasha pardons her and restores her freedom, which her husband has just bought back with a large ransom. This is undoubtedly where Aude got the idea for the play mentioned earlier, *Madame Angot au sérail de*

¹ The conjugation of the verb ‘être’ (to be) in the past historic tense, used only by the educated classes and regarded as difficult by the rest of the population. (Translator’s note)

Constantinople. Today, hardly anyone speaks of Madame Angot any more, but that does not mean the stereotype has disappeared. It still lives on; it has simply lost its protruding asperities, roughly rubbed off by a sceptical and mocking generation: the bursts of old Gallic laughter have stunned it. The Mesdames Angot of our time no longer go to their pew in church to inhale the smoke of the incense, they no longer make a splash with their carriage and pair at Longchamp; that monopoly has passed into other hands. But they give their daughters dance and piano teachers, and sometimes they go collecting for good works and become charity ladies.



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