

Prajznerová, Kateřina

**Testing the psychological and social limits of female im/potency :  
transgressive elements in Elizabeth Inchbald's A simple story**

*Brno studies in English*. 2002, vol. 28, iss. 1, pp. [147]-160

ISBN 80-210-2968-4

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104060>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

KATEŘINA PRAJZNEROVÁ

## TESTING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL LIMITS OF FEMALE IM/POTENCY: TRANSGRESSIVE ELEMENTS IN ELIZABETH INCHBALD'S *A SIMPLE STORY*

In the preface to her study *Women, Power, and Subversion*, Judith Lowder Newton recalls her reaction when she first began finding subversive power in Jane Austen: 'This can't be! I must be going mad!' (xvii). Until recently, an analysis of the transgressive elements in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* would have appeared just as improbable. Most literary histories group Inchbald's fiction together with the works of other 'minor' women writers under the sub-genre of 'the didactic novel' (MacCarthy 419, Mews 22, Schofield 10). Viewed from a feminist perspective, Inchbald's ostensible focus on a woman's 'proper education' points toward a broader theme underlying her work, the role of gender inequality in the formation of female identity (338). In a pre-Freudian context, Inchbald examines the im/potency of female desire for autonomy, questioning how natural or constructed social definitions of femininity really are. Focusing on the development of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's relationship, this paper traces four interconnected areas of transgressive impulses in the novel. These include the novel's psychological depth, emotional intensity, gender conflict, and openness to multiple interpretations.

While *A Simple Story* may not be as sensationally radical as the works of the better known Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, there is often a difference between a novel's socially acceptable 'moral' and its 'tendency' working against that explicit moral (Spacks 4-5). As Tony Tanner puts it, the genre of the novel is 'a paradoxical object in society' and a specific text often 'subvert[s] what it seems to celebrate' (4). In *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind*, Mary Anne Schofield shows that in the late eighteenth century the women's novel often functioned as a 'masquerading romance' (190), a love story not only incorporating disguise but 'act[ing] as a disguise itself' (27). Inchbald's skilled subtlety enables her to advocate not only intellectual, but also sexual and social emancipation. By eroticizing Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's relationship, Inchbald undermines the ideal, purely virtuous daughter-father and student-tutor relationships portrayed in the majority of didactic writings of her time. Simultaneously, by exposing the failure of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's marriage,

Inchbald challenges the husband's automatic assumption of the authoritarian father/tutor role.

On a psychological level, *A Simple Story* offers an intricate study in personality contrasts. Discussing the novel in the context of other Jacobin works, Gary Kelly calls it 'a model of psychological self-examination' showing 'the influence of society and its institution on the development of individual character' (64). Catherine Craft-Fairchild argues that even though *A Simple Story* is not 'unambiguously feminist' (76), it nevertheless 'probes the psychological underpinnings' of patriarchal authority (77). Inchbald's deceptively 'moderate' fictional strategy that avoids both 'the hysterical and complicated plots of sensibility and the unnatural adventures of the Gothic tale' allows her more room for character development (Todd 434-35). Maria Edgeworth's impressions suggest the novel's impact on the contemporary readership: 'I never read any novel that affected me so strongly, or that so completely possessed me with the belief in the real existence of all persons it represents' (qtd. in Inchbald vii).

Miss Milner is a conflicted woman. At first glance, she exemplifies a typical, spoilt eighteen-year-old 'lady of fashion' (6), 'idle, indiscreet, and giddy, with half a dozen lovers in her suite' and searching for an exciting life (11). She is beautiful, with a 'quick sensibility,' a 'dangerous character of a wit,' and 'an inordinate desire for admiration' (15). Nevertheless, with all her flightiness and vanity, Miss Milner is generous to her father's debtor, Mrs Hillgrave, for whom she sells 'some of her most valuable ornaments' in order to 'satisfy [Mr Milner's] demand' (12). Miss Milner also shows beneficence toward Dorriforth's outcast nephew, Rushbrook. Repeatedly disregarding Dorriforth's resentment, she eventually establishes Rushbrook in his uncle's favor (150). In Julia Kavanagh's words, Miss Milner is 'a new woman, a true one, a very faulty one' with whom the reader can sympathize (qtd. in Spender 214). Craft-Fairchild's more recent observation confirms that Miss Milner remains 'interesting, vital, and elusive' for readers today (81).

Dorriforth is just as divided and unpredictable as Miss Milner. He is 'about thirty' (5), 'tall and elegant' (9), and even though he is not particularly handsome, people are attracted by his 'charm' (10). He is basically a 'good man' accustomed to practice 'every virtue which it was his vocation to preach' (5). Nevertheless, there are in Dorriforth's nature 'shadows of evil' (33). He is known for his 'obstinacy' that he and his friends prefer to call 'firmness of mind' but 'had not religion and some opposite virtues weighed heavy in the balance, it would frequently have degenerated into implacable stubbornness' (34). The signs of his growing tenderness toward Miss Milner alternate with outbursts requesting strict obedience to his will as well as with hints of selfish doubts bordering on emotional indifference. Dorriforth experiences painful dilemmas as his rigid views of virtue clash with the irresistible symptoms of erotic passion. At a time when both 'heroes and heroines were flattened by the conventions appropriated to women's novels,' neither Miss Milner nor Dorriforth fits easily under particular literary types or the prevailing gender stereotypes (Rogers 13).

Besides the complexity of their characters, the incompatibility of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's personalities contributes further to the tensions in their stormy relationship. On the one hand, Miss Milner is spontaneous and warm, with only a casual Protestant up-bringing at a fashionable boarding school that 'had left her mind without one ornament, except those which nature gave' (4-5). On the other hand, Dorriforth is a stern and inaccessible Roman Catholic priest, 'bred at St. Omer's in all the scholastic rigour of that college' (5). While creating the reader's romantic, wishful anticipation of resolution in marital satisfaction, Inchbald consistently drops clues that Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's future happiness as a couple is unlikely and that perhaps they should not marry after all. The sense that Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's irrepressible love is ill fated permeates the novel.

Closely connected to the novel's psychological depth is its atmosphere of emotional intensity. The human attraction to the taboo, specifically sacrilegious and incestuous passion, adds significantly to the strain in Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's relationship. According to Caroline Gonda, 'the respectable' eighteenth-century novels feature 'guardians desiring wards,' but not 'vice versa' (183). Terry Castle sees Inchbald's novel as 'a story of law and its violation. It is about the breaking of vows, the crossing of boundaries, the reversal of prohibitions' (294). As one of Miss Milner's friends remarks, rules 'were made to be broken' (21). Correspondingly, Miss Milner refuses to be confined within the proscribed boundaries of feminine propriety.

As if instinctively, Miss Milner desires exactly that which she knows is forbidden her. In Luce Irigaray's words, she wants 'always something more and something else besides that one [...] that you give [her], attribute to [her]' (*This Sex* 29). Miss Milner embodies sexual energy in the household of two priests and two 'unseductive innocent females,' the landlady, Mrs. Horton, and her niece, Miss Woodley (7). The vigilant cleric Sanford, Dorriforth's mentor, soon perceives Miss Milner's disruptive potential. He pronounces her 'incorrigible' and advises Dorriforth 'that a suitable match should be immediately sought out for her, and the care of so dangerous a person given into other hands' (38). Miss Milner's family situation draws destabilizing connections between sexuality and power that are still relevant in the discussions of gender issues today.

Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's story encompasses the explicit relations between a ward and her guardian, a student and her teacher, between two lovers, and between a wife and her husband. However, it is the implicit daughter-father dynamic that is central to the progression of their relationship. Dorriforth's power as the father figure is stressed by a conspicuous maternal absence in the novel. Richard Steele's description of father-daughter love captures the perplexity contained in the ideal purity and tenderness of the relationship as expressed in the dominant social views at the time:

Certain it is, that there is no kind of Affection so pure and angelick as that of a Father to a Daughter. He beholds her *both with, and without Regard to her Sex*. In Love to our Wives there is Desire, to our Sons there is Am-

bition; but in that to our Daughters, there *is something which there are no words to express*.

(*Spectator* 449, qtd. in Gonda 1, italics mine)

A similar ambiguity suffuses Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's relationship. By portraying Miss Milner's attraction to the father, Inchbald reaches to the bottom of the formation of female identity in patriarchal society.

Dorriforth's role as Miss Milner's surrogate father is suggested throughout the novel. At their first meeting, Miss Milner promises 'ever to obey him as her father' (13). Her promise continues to taint their relationship. When Dorriforth apologizes for striking Lord Frederick and participating in a duel, Miss Milner is aware that seeing her guardian kneeling at her feet is 'the same impropriety as if she had beheld a parent there' (62). Even during their courtship, Dorriforth monitors Miss Milner's behavior and moods, watching her 'as he would a child [...] [or] his darling bird' (134). Before Miss Milner dies, she appeals to Dorriforth's initial paternal responsibilities. Placing herself back into the position of his 'ward, to whom [he] never refused a request,' she asks him to protect Matilda, their daughter, 'for her grandfather's sake' (211). Perhaps the most telling example of the lasting fusion of filial regard and sexual desire in their relationship is Dorriforth's invocation of Miss Milner's name at the time when he is unexpectedly reunited with Matilda. Matilda is now about the same age as her mother was when Dorriforth first started falling in love with her and her 'person, shape, and complexion' are 'extremely like what her mother's once were' (220). As Matilda faints into her father's embrace, Dorriforth exclaims: 'Dear Miss Milner' (274). Clearly, forbidden desire fuels the continuous testing, both conscious and sub-conscious, that goes on between Miss Milner and Dorriforth.

*A Simple Story's* stylistic economy and linguistic reticence increase its emotional charge. While Dorriforth's position as a legal guardian and a priest imposes social restraints from without, the novel also explores the internal processes of self-restraint. Susan Allen Ford points out that power often 'resides in what is not named' and emphasizes that 'desire is never directly spoken' in the novel (65). In her complementary letter to Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth writes: 'By the force that is necessary to repress feeling, we judge of the intensity of the feeling and you always contrive to give us by intelligible but simple signs the measure of this force' (qtd. in Gonda 184). Miss Milner's behavior is full of such signs. To Dorriforth they are rather confusing, though. At one point he exclaims: 'Your words tell me one thing [...] while your looks declare another—which am I to trust?' (51). Burdened by his sense of responsibility, Dorriforth at first remains unaware that the chaotic exasperation he experiences is due to his own growing love for his ward.

The intensifying effect of Inchbald's characteristic reserve and her skill in capturing her characters' emotional states in concrete images are illustrated in her needlework scene. One evening Miss Milner and Miss Woodley are working together when Dorriforth joins them. After talking for a while about 'indifferent

subjects,' Dorriforth says: 'Perhaps I am wrong, Miss Milner, but I have observed you, are lately grown more thoughtful than usual' (109). His insightful observation throws Miss Milner into an embarrassed confusion. Her momentary loss of emotional control is expressed in the fact that 'she turned pale, and could no longer guide her needle' (110). Miss Milner's love for Dorriforth, 'often gratified by that degree of enjoyment, or rather forbearance, which would be torture in the pursuit of any other passion,' continues to interweave anxiety and delight long after Dorriforth is freed from his religious vows (81).

Like Miss Milner, Dorriforth experiences sensations of 'excruciating pleasures' that he strives to hide (103). In fact, his susceptibility to Miss Milner's charms is suggested at their very first meeting. Dorriforth had feared assuming his responsibility for Miss Milner and even wished that he 'had never known her father' (10). He had been unsure whether 'he had undertaken a task he was too weak to perform,' but the difficulty with his ward turns out to be of a different kind from what he foresees (6). When Miss Milner, 'with tears in her eyes,' impulsively kneels down in front of him, he has to cover his face with a handkerchief or 'she would have beheld the agitation of his heart—the remotest sensations of his soul' (13). In turn, Miss Milner's spontaneous gesture signals Dorriforth's influence over her. Since this moment, their mutual attraction grows steadily.

The increasing intensity of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's attachment is suggested when Lord Frederick, one of Miss Milner's admirers, expresses his suspicion regarding the true reason for Dorriforth's dislike of him. During one of Lord Frederick's visits, Miss Milner laughs appreciatively at a compliment made by Dorriforth. Reacting jealously, Lord Frederick makes this apt literary reference: 'From Abelard it came, / And Heloisa still must love the name' (22). While Dorriforth maintains an appearance of indifference, Miss Milner has to lean out of the window to 'conceal the embarrassment these lines had occasioned' (22). Dorriforth nevertheless perceives and acts upon Lord Frederick's challenge. Shortly after this incident, he moves Miss Milner away from London and into the seclusion of his country home.

However, this precaution proves ineffectual and eventually even Dorriforth gets caught without his mask, his violent gesture communicating clearly the state of his feelings. Lord Frederick follows Miss Milner to the country and the couple's flirting provokes Dorriforth to such a degree that the priest strikes the suitor 'a blow in the face' (61). Dorriforth immediately regrets his impulsive action. He is aware that he has 'departed from [his] character' and is 'no longer the philosopher, but the ruffian' (62). As Castle points out, this change of character, akin to a carnivalesque metamorphosis, is symptomatic of the subversive potency of Miss Milner's 'female energy' (295). Despite his religious convictions, Dorriforth accepts Lord Frederick's challenge to a duel but this first time he is only present and does not fight his opponent.

As has been suggested, underneath Miss Milner's defiant, witty manner, there hides a painful emotional turmoil. It soon becomes apparent that she flirts with her suitors largely to conceal her attraction to her guardian. She tries hard to

avoid detection, even swearing that she loves Lord Frederick in an attempt to prevent the impending duel. Eventually, Miss Milner gets cornered, though. Her nerves stretched to a breaking point by Dorriforth's insistence that she marry, she reveals her secret to Miss Woodley, the good-natured household servant who had become her dear companion. With 'a degree of madness in her looks,' Miss Milner admits to her that she loves Dorriforth 'with all the passion of a mistress, and with all the tenderness of a wife' (72). The phrasing of her feelings contains several layers of incompatibilities, connecting 'virtuous delicacy with illicit passion, the mistress with the wife, marital tenderness with the man who must never marry' (Gonda 183). Horrified, Miss Woodley immediately diagnoses Miss Milner's state as 'fatal attraction' and prescribes an exile at Bath (79).

While separated from Dorriforth, the desperate Miss Milner falls ill. Luckily, it is not long till she hears of her guardian's inheritance and his likely release from his religious vows. She is instantly filled with a sense of thrilling anticipation, experiencing 'a chill through all her veins,' a 'pleasure too exquisite, not to bear along with it the sensation of exquisite pain' (102). The last remaining obstacle is the saintly and cold Miss Fenton whom Dorriforth dutifully plans to marry because she had been engaged to his deceased cousin. This obstacle is soon overcome with Miss Woodley's help. When Dorriforth learns from her of Miss Milner's love, he quickly becomes Miss Milner's 'profest lover' and, in another carnivalesque turn, 'every thing and every person' in the household wears 'a new face' (304). However, while Miss Milner is proud of changing 'the grave, the sanctified, the anchorite Dorriforth' into an ardent 'slave of love,' whether such transformation really occurs remains uncertain (138). Even though he is 'transported at the tidings' of Miss Milner's revelation, Dorriforth realizes that 'perhaps, [he] had better never have heard them' (131). Secretly, he is unsure of Miss Milner's worthiness and suitability as his wife.

The emotional strain between Miss Milner and Dorriforth continues to grow after their official engagement. Finally, his inner uncertainties and his disapproval of Miss Milner's behavior lead Dorriforth to cancel the wedding preparations. Dorriforth's decision to separate, announced formally in a letter to Miss Milner, makes him inaccessible once again, creating a renewed sense of prohibition that invites a violation. Dorriforth asks Miss Milner not to disturb him with 'further trial' and they do not speak, yet they are painfully aware of each other's closeness in the household. As Dorriforth makes arrangements to go to Italy, Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's emotional states are suggested 'through well-crafted stage business,' through the way 'they look, what they do, what they do not say' (Macheski 96). When one evening Dorriforth's dinner guests inquire about the date of his departure, Miss Milner's knife and fork give 'a sudden spring in her hand,' though 'no other emotion witnessed what she felt' (178). Later, when Miss Milner comes across Dorriforth's packed suitcases, she runs to a secluded corner in the hall to cry. As she hears Dorriforth coming, she tries to suppress her tears, and looks at him 'earnestly, as if to imply, "What now, my Lord?"' Dorriforth responds with a bow 'which expressed these words

alone: "I beg your pardon." And he hastily withdraws. Thus 'each understood the other's language, without either uttering a word' (180-81).

Even Sandford is affected by the silent suffering of both Dorriforth and Miss Milner. For the first time, he feels sympathy with Miss Milner's situation and at dinner offers her a biscuit (185). He also invites her to breakfast with them on the morning of Dorriforth's departure, addressing her kindly as 'my dear' (186). At the last minute, as they hear Dorriforth's carriage coming and the tension is about to break, Sandford intervenes: 'Separate this moment [...] or resolve never to be separated but by death' (190). With everyone caught up in 'a trembling kind of ecstasy,' Dorriforth and Miss Milner are married on the spot (316). Once again, as when Dorriforth first became conscious of their love, a carnivalesque transformation takes place: 'Never was there a more rapid change from despair to happiness [...] than was that, which Miss Milner and [Dorriforth] experienced within one single hour' (193). However romantic this reversal may appear, it does not indicate happiness ever after. One significant detail ominously stands out. The ring that Dorriforth hurriedly places on the bride's finger turns out to be 'a mourning ring' (193). The ending of the first half of their story remains open, suggesting that the couple's struggles will go on.

As the above discussion of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's psychological depth and the sustained emotional intensity of their relationship shows, their story represents an intriguing tangle of complexities. These complexities provide a fertile ground for multiple battles along the gender line, the novel's main ideological focus. Inchbald was finishing *A Simple Story* at a time of 'strong revival of moral reform' and royally sanctioned persecution of radical thinkers by the Society for the Suppression of Vice (Stone 666). Contemporary conduct books compared the husband's moral rights to the commanding divine power in the bible (Todd 207). Legally, 'a woman was still regarded basically as a chattel, under the authority first of her father and then her husband' (Spencer 12). As Newton observes, 'subversion, indirectness, and disguise are nature tactics of the resisting weak, are social strategies for managing the most intense and the most compelling revelations' (9). To uncover the assertive impulses in women's fiction, it is necessary to look at techniques such as 'ambiguity' and 'equivocation' (Watson 113).

Dorriforth becomes Miss Milner's guardian at the request of her dying father, Mr Milner, who is Dorriforth's close friend. Mr Milner asks Dorriforth to 'protect' his daughter 'without controlling,' to 'instruct [her] without tyrannizing [...] and perhaps in time make [her] good by choice rather than constraint' (5). The expectation to 'make' Miss Milner a certain way 'by choice' foreshadows the difficulty of Dorriforth's task. His position is further complicated by Mr Milner's wish restraining Dorriforth from 'all authority to direct his ward in one religious opinion contrary to those her mother professed, and in which she herself had been educated' (5). It is not surprising that Dorriforth approaches his guardianship with some trepidation. The power struggles between Dorriforth and Miss Milner are at first submerged under the guise of respectful kindness on both sides. However, the reader soon learns that Dorriforth's politeness 'would

sometimes appear even like the result of a system he had marked out for himself, as the only means to keep his ward restrained within the same limitations' (23). Moreover, their 'dissimilarity of opinion [...] in almost every respect' increases rather than dissolves with time (23). It is apparent that conflicts lie ahead.

Miss Milner's consciousness is itself a battleground where internalized ideas of her social subordination clash with her attempts to assert her individuality. Her 'energy and obstinacy' seem boundless (Ty 100). In addition to her sexual potency, she repeatedly disrupts her guardian's authority by laughing. As Hélène Cixous points out, laughter has a potential to 'shatter the framework of institutions' and 'blow up the law,' representing a powerful weapon against oppression (258). When Dorriforth admonishes his ward that she should 'trust to persons who know better than [her]self,' Miss Milner responds by 'freely [...] indulg[ing] that risibility which she had been struggling to smother.' She laughs with 'a liberty so uncontrolled' that 'in a short time' she is left in the room 'with none but the tender-hearted Miss Woodley' (17). She laughs when Dorriforth presses her with an offer of a suitor she dislikes (24) and again when he forbids her to attend the masquerade (152).

Miss Milner also displays her anti-authoritarian streak in mocking Sandford's aggressive moralizing. For example, one evening Sandford discourses on two 'very different kinds of women' and, as is his habit, indirectly criticizes Miss Milner while pretending to ignore her (117). He observes to Mrs Horton that 'beauty [...] when endowed upon spirits that are evil, is a mark of their greater, their more extreme wickedness' (117). As he adds that 'Lucifer was the most beautiful of all the angels in paradise,' Miss Milner, unable to stand this talk any longer, silences him with the following retort: 'How do you know?' (117). Frequently, 'by a happy turn for ridicule, in want of other weapons,' she throws 'in the way of the holy Father as great trials for his patience, as any his order could have substituted in penance' (40-41). Sandford's attacks on her character humble Miss Milner but she does not give in easily. She experiences 'an inward nothingness [...] and had been cured of all her pride, had she not possessed a degree of spirit beyond the generality of her sex, and such as even Mr. Sandford with all his penetration did not expect' (40). Even though Miss Milner does not enjoy their frequent confrontations, she has 'generosity to forgive an affront' but 'not the humility to make a concession' (91). On one occasion, her verbal challenge leaves Sandford 'evidently alarmed' and looking about him 'with so strong an expression of surprise, that it partook in some degree of fear' (94). While never quite free of male domination, Miss Milner has a strong will and persists in her efforts for a measure of personal dignity.

Miss Milner also maintains a sense of autonomy by simply refusing to speak. As Craft-Fairchild points out, *A Simple Story* 'speaks through silences and gaps, from between the lines' (77). Such silences and gaps in the text are especially relevant in Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's gendered struggles. Miss Milner is able to consistently avoid the marital offers that Dorriforth arranges for her, resisting his entreaties that she confess to him who 'the true object of her affection

is' and thus keeping Dorriforth perplexed (100). Even at their wedding, Miss Milner gets around a direct promise of feminine surrender. When Dorriforth asks her after the ceremony if she will now show him 'that tender love' she so far has kept from him, she disguises her continuing defiance in an equivocal gesture: 'She raised him from his feet, and by the expression of her face, the tears with which she bathed his hands, gave him confidence' (192). Later in their relationship, she leaves him rather than confessing her adultery to him.

Miss Milner's ambition to teach her guardian/tutor 'to love' (115) reflects her reversal of the agent-recipient dynamic of the 'mentor-lover tradition' (Spencer 140). Once the barrier of Dorriforth's priesthood disappears, she sets out to 'stimulate passion, in place of propriety' (115) in him, 'whose heart was not formed (at least not educated) for love' (37). For a long time, Dorriforth sexual desires had been largely suppressed and unconscious, but a gradual release had been happening from the time of their first meeting, as outlined above. Prompted by the hint from Miss Woodley, Dorriforth finally recognizes who the unknown lover whose name Miss Milner had so obstinately concealed from him really is: 'Again he searched his own thoughts, nor ineffectually as before.—At the first glance the object was presented, and he beheld *himself*' (130). Dorriforth's transformation from chastity to sexuality suggests Miss Milner's educational success.

After they become engaged, Miss Milner continues to test Dorriforth's notions of prudence. She wants to find out if his love would outlast 'ill treatment' in order to prove to herself that he loves her as she wishes to be loved (138). She is 'sometimes haughty' and 'to opposition, always insolent' (139). As she says to Miss Woodley, 'as my guardian, I certainly did obey him; and I could obey him as a husband; but as a lover, I will not' (154). Her ambition is no less than to be 'beloved in spite of her faults' (138). In the meantime, Dorriforth begins to wonder whether he should in fact marry her. He may seem 'blinded by his passion' but he still wants to hold on to his patriarchal power (139). The situation gets worse when, shortly before their anticipated marriage, they come up to London and 'a lawsuit and some other intricate affairs that came with his title and estate' often keep Dorriforth from his house 'part of the day; sometimes the whole evening; and when at home would often closet him for hours with his lawyers' (140). Feeling neglected and bored, Miss Milner 'varied and diverted' the 'tedious hours' with 'many recreations her intended husband could not approve' (140). Dorriforth watches 'closely' as Miss Milner renews her 'fashionable levities,' spends money on 'toys that were out of fashion before they were paid for,' and flirts with Lord Frederick in Dorriforth's presence (139). Disturbed, Dorriforth confides in Sandford that if he finds 'her mind and heart [...] too frivolous,' the marriage 'shall yet be broken off' (142). Tortured by suspicions and fearful premonitions, Dorriforth envisions 'the horror of domestic wrangles—a family without subordination—a house without economy—in a word, a wife without discretion' (142). The thought occurs to him that maybe he should separate himself from Miss Milner '*forever*' (306).

The episode of the forbidden masquerade brings 'the various, though delicate,

struggles for power' between Miss Milner and Dorriforth to the foreground (151). A fictional masquerade, functioning like an actual masquerade, illuminates 'certain underlying and problematic impulses [...] present just under the ordinarily decorous surface' of the text (Castle 117). Castle stresses the suspension of 'sociohierarchical inequality' at the masquerades and its liberating effect for the female protagonists (292). When Miss Milner receives the invitation to 'a masked ball,' she makes up her mind to 'certainly go,' with or without Dorriforth (153). Predictably, Dorriforth refuses to accompany her. Moreover, he commands Miss Milner to stay at home that evening. Miss Milner, who is still Dorriforth's ward but now also his betrothed lover, determines to try the force of his love by doing 'something that any prudent man ought not to forgive' and insists that she will go (72). Angered at her persistence 'in so direct a contradiction to his will,' Dorriforth withdraws from further communication on the topic and his earlier thought concerning the end of their engagement echoes in his mind (155). Apparently, Miss Milner is well aware of what is at stake: 'If he will not submit to be my lover, I will not submit to be his wife—nor has he the affection I require in a husband' (154). She acts on her initial decision, hoping secretly that her 'power over him might [be] greater still' (138).

Like the previous key moments in the novel, this catalytic scene of conflict between female and male wills is enveloped in ambivalence. Miss Milner's triumphant mood soon changes into thoughtful remorse. Once she gets to the masquerade, the admiration of others does not satisfy her: 'there was one person still wanting to admire' (161). She feels fatigued by the 'crowd and bustle' and regrets 'having transgressed his injunctions for so trivial an entertainment' (310). When Dorriforth realizes that Miss Milner has really gone, he succumbs to a similar dejection and tries to at least find out what she looked like when she was leaving. In her discussion of the 'all-important matter of costume,' Castle points out that 'the idea that [...] costume could be a way of acting out repressed desires' and reveal the veiled person's true nature was well acknowledged in the eighteenth century (73). She quotes Addison's comment that masqueraders usually wore "'what they had a Mind to be'" and also Fielding's observation that to "'masque the face'" was to "'unmasque the mind'" (73). Miss Milner dresses as Diana, the goddess of Chastity. However, 'from the buskins, and the petticoat festooned far above the ankle, [the dress] had, on the first glance, the appearance of a female much less virtuous' (137). Miss Milner's costume embodies 'the intense cultural ambivalence' surrounding the masquerade which was regarded as 'both delightful and pernicious' (Castle 115). Her anxiousness that Dorriforth must not see her before her departure suggests that Miss Milner realizes the rebelliousness of her mask which is 'at once ambiguously sexual and sexually ambiguous' (Castle 311).

Significantly, when Dorriforth questions the servants, they cannot agree whether Miss Milner was wearing 'men's clothes' or 'a woman's dress' (141). One of them insists that Miss Milner 'had boots on' but the other replies that 'they were only half boots' (141). This indeterminacy of Miss Milner's dress is yet another manifestation of her dissatisfaction with her submissive role, uncov-

ering her desire for power, traditionally considered a masculine trait. To add to Dorriforth's anger, Miss Milner happens to be seen with Lord Frederick as the two of them are walking toward her carriage after the ball. Confused, frustrated, and provoked at not being able to neither classify nor control her, Dorriforth gathers up his threatened patriarchal authority and decides to punish Miss Milner by calling off their wedding.

According to Castle, 'the masquerade topos' is 'a master trope of destabilization' in eighteenth-century fiction (117). However, as in the case of actual masquerades, the relief from restraints usually lasts only 'for a brief moment' (Castle 88). Some anthropologists view masquerades as rituals that actually 'reaffirm the status quo by exorcising social tensions' (Castle 88). Miss Milner's victory over Dorriforth's restrictions appears only momentary. When she comes back from the masquerade, she finds 'patriarchal control firmly in place' there (Craft-Fairchild 77). The immediate consequences of the masquerade episode foreshadow Miss Milner's final banishment in the second part of the novel. The empowering potential of Miss Milner's assertive action does not fully surface till it is echoed in the staircase scene which represents Matilda's parallel transgression of Dorriforth's rules. The meeting on the staircase initiates Matilda's eventual reunion with her father.

All Miss Milner's efforts for more equality during their courtship are not enough to form a base of friendship-like communication nor do they lead to a true partnership once they get married. After four peaceful years, glossed over in one paragraph, Dorriforth finds himself under another unexpected social obligation and becomes entangled in 'intricate affairs' managed by lawyers (193). He is forced to leave his wife and daughter to 'save [...] a very large estate in the West Indies' (196). Dorriforth stays abroad for about three years, postponing his departure several times and sending poor if 'frequent apologies for not returning' (196). Eventually, he breaks off all contact with Miss Milner in order to conceal his illness and because of a 'too cautious fear of her uneasiness' (196).

During her husband's absence, Miss Milner gradually grows restless and tempted by the possibilities of her new personal freedom. At first 'only unhappy,' she later becomes resentful at her abandonment and finally feels 'provoked,' giving way 'to that irritable disposition she had so seldom governed' and starting to mix in 'the gayest circles of London' (196). Eventually, she ends up in an affair with her old time admirer, Lord Frederick, who was 'ever of all her lovers most prevalent in her heart' (198). Majority of critics interpret Miss Milner's voluntary exile after Dorriforth's return as her acknowledgment of her guilt and her final surrender to the patriarchal order (Craft-Fairchild 101, Ford 55, MacCarthy 435, Spacks 199). However, the fact that Miss Milner decides not to plead for her husband's forgiveness or wait for his punishment can also be read as yet another attempt at self-determination. Rather than making a 'penitent confession' (Lott 644), she escapes 'his house, never again to return to a habitation where he was the master' (197).

Nevertheless, Miss Milner pays a price for her final transgression and the patriarchal revenge is also transferred further down the female line to her daughter

Matilda. Miss Milner had left her daughter behind but Dorriforth declares 'the unshaken resolution never to acknowledge Lady Matilda as his child' and sends Matilda to her mother (202). Moreover, Dorriforth engages Lord Frederick in a duel, and this second time he is 'inexorable to all accommodation,' fighting mercilessly until his opponent is 'so maimed and defaced with scars, as never again to endanger the honor of a husband' (198). Miss Milner and her daughter live in seclusion on the Scottish border for the next ten years, until Miss Milner's death. While Miss Milner and Matilda are banished from society, Dorriforth secludes himself emotionally but retains his social status. His will is 'the law all around' the neighborhood of his estate (261).

As Elizabeth Bergen Brophy emphasizes, 'fiction reflects the values of its time, to be sure, but just as importantly, it creates them' (234). Limiting their study to the nineteenth century, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have charted a tradition among women writers of creating 'submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the accessible, "public" content of their works' (73). *A Simple Story* is a precursor of this literary trend. It reflects as well as resists oppressive gender ideologies, questioning patriarchal authority and acknowledging female desire for autonomy. At the end, reconciled with her father, Matilda is allowed to choose whether she will marry her cousin Rushbrook. Importantly, her final decision is left unanswered in the text. As Rushbrook prepares to propose to her, she warns him: 'His lordship has told me it shall be in my power; and desired me to give, or refuse it to you, at my own pleasure' (337). Matilda had pleaded with Dorriforth on Rushbrook's behalf, calling him her 'relation,' her 'companion,' and her 'friend' (335-36). She appears surprised and not very excited to hear Rushbrook's declaration of love. The potential future is left up to the reader to imagine: 'Whether the heart of Matilda [...] could sentence him to misery, the reader is left to surmise—and if he suppose that it did not, he has every reason to suppose their wedded life was a life of happiness' (337).

Throughout the novel, Inchbald subverts the reader's expectations of happy, satisfying endings by intersecting disturbing details and half-closures with worrisome undertones. Irigaray advises women to attempt to challenge the patriarchal order through confusion, to '[m]ake it impossible for a while to predict whence, whither, when, how, why [...] something goes by or goes on: will come, will spread, will reverse, will cease moving' (*Speculum* 142). Anticipating Irigaray's strategy, Inchbald's novel, with its undercurrent of ambiguity and open-endedness, creates a similar puzzlement. The development of Miss Milner's and Dorriforth's relationship, as it progresses cyclically from reunion to break up, exemplifies the instability. Matilda's story continues the cycle. When Dorriforth rescues her from abduction and is taking her back home 'in the middle of November,' everything around turns 'green' in Matilda's exhilarated view of things (331). The trees appear 'in their bloom' and the birds seem to sing 'the sweetest music' (331). Even at Matilda's happiest moment, this perception of spring at the beginning of winter suggests an underlying danger. If her or the reader's hopes start up too much, they will be exposed to frost when the illusion disappears and the cold sets in as is it bound to do according to the season. *A Simple*

*Story* is an artistically innovative and culturally transgressive work. Set in the domestic sphere and concerned with the ways of maintaining personal dignity in the face of limiting social pressures, it offers a rather realistic portrait of a woman's experience. Newton's initial disbelief at her nontraditional reading of Austen indicates the lasting influence of the same social pressures on our minds today.

## WORKS CITED

- Brophy, Elizabeth Bregen (1991). *Women's Lives and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Tampa: U of South Florida P).
- Castle, Terry (1986). *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford UP).
- Cixous, Hélène (1980). "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Kohen, in Marks, Elaine and Courtivron, Isabelle de, eds. (1980), 245-64.
- Craft-Fairchild, Catherine (1993). *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP).
- Ford, Susan Allen (1994). "'A name more dear': Daughters, Fathers, and Desire in *A Simple Story*, *The False Friend*, and *Mathilda*", in Wilson, Carol Shiner & Haefner, Joel, eds. (1994), 51-71.
- Gilbert, Sandra & Gubar, Susan (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP).
- Gonda, Caroline (1996). *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* (New York: Cambridge UP).
- Inchbald, Elizabeth (1967). *A Simple Story*. 1791 (London: Oxford UP).
- Irigaray, Luce (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP).
- (1985). *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP).
- Kelly, Gary (1976). *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon P).
- Lott, Anna (1994). "Sexual Politics in Elizabeth Inchbald", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 34:3 (1994): 635-48.
- MacCarthy, B. G. (1994 [1946-1947]). *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists, 1621-1818* (New York: New York UP).
- Macheski, Cecilia. "Penelope's Daughter: Images of Needlework in Eighteenth-Century Literature", in Schofield, Mary Anne & Macheski, Cecilia, eds. (1986), 85-100.
- Marks, Elaine and Courtivron, Isabelle de, eds. (1980). *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P).
- Mews, Hazel (1969). *Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: Athlone P).
- Newton, Judith Lowder (1981). *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens: U of Georgia P).
- Rogers, Katharine M. (1981). "Dreams and Nightmares: Male Characters in the Feminine Novel of the Eighteenth Century", in Todd, Janet, ed. (1981), 9-24.
- Schofield, Mary Anne & Macheski, Cecilia, eds. (1986). *Fetter'd or Free?: British Women Novelists, 1670-1815* (Athens: Ohio UP).
- Schofield, Mary Anne (1990). *Masking and Unmasking the Female Mind: Disguising Romances in Feminine Fiction, 1713-1799* (Newark: U of Delaware P).
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer (1990). *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* (Chicago: U of Chicago P).
- Spencer, Jane (1986). *Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil).
- Spender, Dale (1986). *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora).
- Stone, Lawrence (1977). *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper).

- Tanner, Tony (1979). *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins).
- Todd, Janet (1989). *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia UP).
- Todd, Janet, ed. (1981). *Men by Women* (New York: Holmes).
- Ty, Eleanor (1993). "Disruption and Containment: The Mother and Daughter in *A Simple Story*", in *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s*. (Toronto: U of Toronto P).
- Watson, Barbara Bellow (1975-76). "On Power and the Literary Text", *Signs* 1 (1975-76): 111-18.
- Wilson, Carol Shiner & Haefner, Joel, eds. (1994). *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P).