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Sexuality and Power in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Arts in English

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by  
Michelle Martini  
December 2004

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Karen Cajka, PhD  
Styron Harris, PhD

Keywords: Inchbald, Sexuality

## ABSTRACT

### Sexuality and Power in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*

by

Michelle Martini

*A Simple Story* is controversial because of Inchbald's seemingly conflicting statements about women's "proper" education and because the most powerful character in the novel openly defies social norms. Miss Milner, the heroine of the first half of *A Simple Story*, overtly displays her sexuality and uses it to gain control of men. Her guardian Dorriforth, a Catholic priest, attempts to repress her sexual power. Miss Milner dies in exile, but Inchbald rewards her by saving her from a marriage in which her husband subdues her sexuality. Contrarily, Miss Milner's daughter Matilda represses her sexuality and conforms to eighteenth-century standards of how a woman should behave. Rather than rewarding her with a traditional marriage, Inchbald relegates her to a marriage without passion. Inchbald writes two parallel cautionary tales in order to emphasize that a woman must balance the two extremes and embrace sexuality while embracing intellect.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I often think about what it must have been like to be a woman in the eighteenth century; only then can I truly appreciate the position in which I find myself today. As a woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century about to receive a masters degree, I am thankful that the revolutionary women before me risked their reputations in order to confront the repressive restrictions society placed upon them. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge Elizabeth Inchbald's contribution to the liberation of women. Inchbald was a pioneer in her personal life because she ignored propriety and looked for approval from no one but herself. She was a pioneer in her professional life because she insisted on financial independence and gained it through writing. If not for women like Elizabeth Inchbald persisting for women's rights, I would not be writing a thesis.

I would also like to thank Dr. Judy Slagle, the chair of my thesis committee and the chair of the English Department here at ETSU. Although I've always possessed a passion for literature, taking Dr. Slagle's "Restoration and Eighteenth Century" course showed me the reason for my passion. Literature breaks boundaries, and in no other time period is that more obvious than in the eighteenth century. It was a "bawdy" time, and Dr. Slagle taught me that there is no shame in appreciating that type of literature. I am now a proud "Brit Lit" person, and I have Dr. Slagle to thank for initially piquing my interest. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Slagle for all of her help with my thesis. Without her calm, reassuring attitude and extensive knowledge of the subject, I would not have been able to complete this project.

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
ACKNOWLEDEMENTS .....	3
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	6
2. THE COQUETTE MEETS THE PRIEST: MISS MILNER AND DORRIFORTH STRUGGLE FOR POWER .....	13
3. THE PRIEST MEETS HIS DAUGHTER: MATILDA RELINQUISHES CONTROL TO DORRIFORTH .....	35
4. CONCLUSION .....	55
WORKS CITED.....	60
WORKS CONSULTED .....	62
VITA .....	63

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

James Boaden, Elizabeth Inchbald's first biographer and author of *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald*, writes of *A Simple Story* that "we are now arrived at the production which bears the highest testimony to the genius of Mrs. Inchbald. There are still living men of strong minds, who speak sincerely when they affirm her 'Simple Story' to be yet unequalled" (qtd. in Jenkins 275). Boaden wrote about *A Simple Story* in 1833, and although the novel only recently entered the list of oft-studied eighteenth-century works, *A Simple Story* still has yet to be equaled. In her first novel, Inchbald takes risks with characters' actions and the novel's themes that make up for the flaws critics find in the novel's structure.

Jane Spencer writes in the Introduction to *A Simple Story* that the novel has a feminist interest, not because it shares the contemporary advocacy of a rational education for women, but because it reveals what was repressed in order to make that case. Miss Milner embodies the female sexuality that women writers of Inchbald's time were busy denying in the interests of their own respectability, and women's claims for better treatment. (xiv)

*A Simple Story* is a remarkable novel because Elizabeth Inchbald creates a character who defies the norms of the eighteenth century. Spencer is correct that the novel "reveals what was repressed" and that "Miss Milner embodies . . . female sexuality." Inchbald wrote *A Simple Story* when the ideas of women's rights were first beginning to be explored. "Advocates for women supported serious education leading to rational thinking and distrusted accomplishments" (Spencer xiii), but authors were cautious when writing about female sexuality, even as it related to education. In the eighteenth century, sexuality was restricted to the private sphere and only acceptable within the confines of marriage. Spencer argues that the constraints on novelists when writing about sexual

desire were even more strict: “Only Inchbald’s extreme delicacy of handling could have made her theme [of female desire] acceptable to her readership” and “though this strategy [ambiguously displaying sexuality] was enjoined on her by social constraints it does not weaken her work” (xv). Not only does Inchbald defy norms by creating a character who overtly displays her sexuality, but she also creates a character who uses that sexuality to defy norms in her own fictional world.

Miss Milner, sent to live with her guardian Dorriforth after her father’s death, is an overtly sexual young woman. She uses her sexuality to exert power over men. Near the beginning of the novel the narrator describes some aspects of Miss Milner’s personality: “she had besides a quick sensibility, which too frequently discovered itself in the immediate resentment of injury or neglect” (15). This description, however, contradicts Miss Milner’s actions in the novel; she consciously uses her power over men in a way that injures their pride. She pits suitors against each other to satisfy her vanity. Vanity motivates Miss Milner; she thrives on the control she gains when she uses her sexuality to dominate men. Her dominance and awareness of the power of her sexuality make her a radical character.

In addition to Miss Milner’s revolutionary characteristics, the main male character sets *A Simple Story* apart from its contemporary counterparts. William McKee writes in “Elizabeth Inchbald: Novelist” that “Mrs. Inchbald was the first novelist to introduce into modern fiction a priest as a hero” (103). Although the idea of a Catholic priest as hero seems revolutionary, Dorriforth’s actions more closely resemble the stereotypical, patriarchal male. Dorriforth attempts to repress his own sexuality and that of his ward and only submits to his own desire for her after he is released from his vows and is manipulated by Miss Milner. When Miss Milner, who eventually becomes his wife, betrays him, he resorts again to his dominating nature and once again represses his passion.

Critics have argued since the novel's publication in 1791 that *A Simple Story* is an autobiographical account of Elizabeth Inchbald's life. Because this is a popular argument, it is necessary to include some biographical information when discussing *A Simple Story* at length. When Elizabeth Simpson Inchbald was eighteen, the age of the heroine in the novel, according to recent biographer Annibel Jenkins in *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald*, she "packed up her things, left her mother a note, walked some two miles to the turnpike, and took the stagecoach to London" (1). S. R. Littlewood, one of Inchbald's early biographers, describes her in *Elizabeth Inchbald and Her Circle* as "a pioneer of womanhood with perceptions far in advance of her time" (1). He points out "how mad a thing" it was for a "poor but pretty farmer's daughter" to act on her ambition (9). Inchbald went to London to be an actress and displayed Littlewood's assessment of her "pioneering" personality when she overcame a speech impediment to become successful on the stage. Much like Miss Milner, Inchbald was an independent woman. She knew what she wanted and pursued it with bravery and determination.

In 1772 she married Joseph Inchbald whom she'd met while still in London (Littlewood 11). In their first years of marriage, "her husband, assuming the male role and being of a rather independent nature himself, frequently went his own way" (Jenkins 12). Similarly, after Miss Milner marries Dorriforth, she spends ample time alone because of her husband's business trip to the West Indies. However, unlike Miss Milner, Inchbald remained loyal to her husband in his frequent absences. Jenkins writes that, according to Inchbald's pocket books, she resented her husband's absences (18), but "theirs was a good marriage" (22).

The Inchbalds met actor John Philip Kemble, who was in training for the priesthood, in 1777 (McKee 13). Kemble left religious training for the stage, and Elizabeth Inchbald began writing *A Simple Story* in the same year at Kemble's suggestion (Littlewood 29). Littlewood and McKee, among others, contend that "Kemble himself

obviously figures as the hero” (Littlewood 29). Inchbald is described as beautiful, and Jenkins points out:

[Inchbald’s] contemporaries saw Miss Milner as a coquette, and since they saw Inchbald as a coquette as well, the equation of Kemble, the former Catholic in training for the priesthood, and Inchbald as a flirt who falls in love with him at first sight, was as intriguing as the story she invented. (Jenkins 276)

Even after Joseph Inchbald died and Elizabeth began the process of finishing her novel, Jenkins argues that no romantic relationship existed between Inchbald and Kemble: “If the readers in the spring of 1791 wanted to discuss a possible ‘romance’ between Kemble and Inchbald, they did so with no evidence except speculation” (277). Viewed this way, the novel is not autobiographical but a cleverly-woven story commenting on social events and restrictions Inchbald observed first-hand.

However, the possibility of a novel based on true romance could have contributed to the novel’s immense popularity upon publication. Although Inchbald had published several plays before she published her first novel, *A Simple Story*, it “instantly caught the taste of the reading public” (Littlewood 83). Maria Edgeworth wrote to Inchbald in 1810 that

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 the people it represents . . . I am of the opinion that it is by leaving more than most other writers to the imagination, that you succeed so eminently in affecting it. (qtd. in Jenkins 279)

Because Inchbald began her career as an actress before becoming a playwright and eventually a novelist, she had developed her ability to choreograph effectively the characters’ actions without creating an overly-sentimental novel. Nora Nachumi writes in “‘Those Simple Signs’: The Performance of Emotion in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple*

*Story*” that “Inchbald’s interest in the physical expression of the passions and the sympathetic responses to their expression suggests that her skill as a writer was profoundly shaped by her experience in the professional theatre” (337). Miss Milner displays an awareness of her physical actions and uses them to gain an advantage over those around her. Inchbald is able to bring the body and its movements to the foreground because of her experience in the theatre, as Nachumi suggests.

The central issue of Inchbald’s novel, as I have mentioned, is the repression of sexuality in the eighteenth century (Spencer xv). The second half of the novel begins with an account of seventeen years that have passed after Miss Milner and Dorriforth’s, now Lady and Lord Elmwood’s, marriage. When Lord Elmwood attends to his business in the West Indies a few years after they marry, Lady Elmwood engages in an affair with a former suitor. When their story picks up in the beginning of the second half of the novel, Lady Elmwood is on her deathbed. Eleanor Ty argues in *Unsex’d Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* that in the novel “we see how one writer identifies with the potentiality of female force but then kills off and represses this power in her text because of its dangers” (100). Miss Milner/Lady Elmwood has used her sexuality to dominate Dorriforth/Lord Elmwood and her other suitors, and because she is aware of her sexuality and uses it to her advantage, she is “dangerous.” Ty argues that Inchbald purposefully kills off the heroine because of the danger to the eighteenth-century reader, but I would argue that Inchbald kills Lady Elmwood because death is preferable to a marriage in which her sexuality is repressed. Anna Lott writes in “Inchbald’s Sexual Politics” that “such an ending suggests that even if a marriage . . . appears . . . to promise future well-being, a woman who remains in her home will be forced inevitably to accept the constraints that . . . Miss Milner reject[s]” (644). Inchbald’s construction of the novel makes the contradictions of appropriate societal behavior more obvious; the death of the most powerful character makes the reader question the validity of the behavioral norms for women. Jo Alyson Parker argues in

“Complicating *A Simple Story*: Inchbald’s Two Versions of Female Power” that the “disjunction between the two parts” and the “violation of our aesthetic sensibilities is a sign that the text is doing its work” (Parker 265). The novel’s split and inclusion of two very different characters forces the reader to confront the societal norms imposed upon women in the eighteenth century, and because neither character’s ending is ideal, the reader must come to terms with the impossibility of an easy solution to a woman’s situation. In encouraging reflection and causing uneasy discontent with the outcome, the novel “is doing its work.”

The second half of the novel resumes with Matilda, Lady and Lord Elmwood’s daughter, as the heroine. Matilda conforms to societal standards of how a woman should act. She receives a “proper” education and does not acknowledge her own sexuality, and she certainly does not openly display her sexuality. Her father has disowned her, but he agrees to let her live with him as long as she “avoids my [Elmwood’s] sight, or the giving me any remembrance of her” (213). Matilda acquiesces to her father’s demands and, when they meet accidentally, also obeys his orders that she leave immediately. When a rejected suitor kidnaps Matilda, her father rescues her and invites her back into his home. Matilda no longer threatens Lord Elmwood because he realizes that, unlike her mother, she is not dangerous. By repressing her sexuality, she becomes appealing to her father. However, her imminent marriage to Rushbrook, Lord Elmwood’s nephew, promises no happiness because it involves no passion. Inchbald seems to reward Matilda with marriage and acceptance, but her fate is less than pleasing. Given her docile nature and the conformity with which she endures her situation, Matilda lacks all of the passion her mother possessed. She more closely resembles the submissive woman with whom the reader associates acceptable females of the eighteenth century, but the ending promises more of the same passionless Matilda in a passionless marriage. Therefore, Matilda’s fate is even less desirable than her mother’s.

Spencer argues that “the double narrative is a necessary form for . . . restoring both feminine propriety and narrative closure,” and that “the troubling questions raised by Miss Milner are laid to rest by Lady Matilda, a submissive and properly feminine father’s daughter” (xx). Although the second half of the novel seems to contain the solution, nothing could be farther from the truth; the true “troubling questions” emerge after reading Matilda’s tale. If Miss Milner dies as reward for her sexuality, and Lady Matilda marries undesirably without passion as reward for her lack of sexuality, what is the solution? Using sexuality to gain power is dangerous to men and women, but denying sexuality to conform to societal standards of the obedient woman is equally, and possibly more, dangerous.

CHAPTER 2  
THE COQUETTE MEETS THE PRIEST: MISS MILNER AND DORRIFORTH  
STRUGGLE FOR POWER

Miss Milner is a beautiful, eighteen-year-old woman who defies the typical eighteenth-century heroine. She is aware of her beauty and sexuality. Even more significant than her awareness are her manipulations using her sexuality. To this unusual character, sexual desire equals control and power. Spencer argues that “the significant difference between Miss Milner’s education and her daughter’s is that Miss Milner’s failed to subdue the sexual desire and the will to power which make her such a disruptive figure” (xv). As Spencer suggests, Miss Milner chooses to express her sexuality, even though the men around her attempt to force her to repress it. Instead, she is motivated by a need to dominate through desire. If men are sexually attracted to her, she feels powerful. Her actions publicly display this “will to power,” and each time a suitor acknowledges her sexuality, even through subtle actions indicating attraction, she becomes a “disruptive figure.” Miss Milner disrupts societal norms by refusing to subdue her sexuality, by using her sexuality to openly manipulate suitors, and by becoming the most powerful character in her circle.

Miss Milner is disruptive the moment she enters her guardian’s household. Dorriforth “knew the life Miss Milner had been accustomed to lead; he dreaded the repulses his admonitions might possibly meet from her; and feared he had undertaken a task he was too weak to execute – the protection of a young woman of fashion” (6). Dorriforth is a Catholic priest living with an unmarried thirty-year-old and her widowed aunt and has never experienced a “woman of fashion,” much less been responsible for such a woman’s protection. Inchbald emphasizes Dorriforth’s unrest at the responsibility Mr. Milner, in his dying request, places upon the young priest. Although Miss Woodley and Mrs. Horton look forward to the addition to their household, Dorriforth’s thoughts

“were less agreeably engaged” because “cares, doubts, fears, possessed his mind” (8). Miss Milner causes internal unrest in her guardian, even before he meets her face to face. Dorriforth already assumes he will have to discipline Miss Milner and dreads her reactions to his inevitable “admonitions.” He does not suspect that his attempts to repress her sexuality will not meet with negative reactions, but his admonitions will fuel Miss Milner’s passion.

When Lady Evans visits the house Miss Milner is soon to join, Dorriforth anxiously attempts to glean information about his future ward. Lady Evans tells him all she knows is “that she’s a young, idle, indiscreet, giddy girl, with half a dozen lovers in her suite; some coxcombs, some men of gallantry, some single, and some married” (9). Dorriforth responds “with a manly sorrow” that he wishes he “had never known her father” (10). While “manly” should imply a distinctly powerful emotion rife with male sexuality, “sorrow” implies the much weaker emotion that Dorriforth experiences. His reaction to the initial description of Miss Milner is telling; he attempts to retain his masculinity, but the regret he feels seems like a child-like response that undermines his male dominance. The power of Miss Milner’s sexual attraction is becoming obvious to Dorriforth even before he meets her, and it alarms him that he will soon have responsibility of controlling this beauty. Candace Ward writes in “Inordinate Desire: Schooling the Senses in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*” that “a disruptive presence, Miss Milner shakes Dorriforth’s household from its quiet by bringing the body – male and female – to the center of the domestic circle” (4). When Dorriforth responds to Lady Evans’s remarks “with a manly sorrow,” he seriously doubts his ability to understand, and therefore rein in, the sexual being he will have power over. Her sexuality, inherent in her young body, disrupts the “center of the domestic circle.”

Following the scene with Lady Evans, however, Mrs. Hillgrave enters and tells of Miss Milner’s generosity as a benefactress. Mrs. Hillgrave dismisses questions about Miss Milner’s beauty and responds that she hadn’t noticed, because to her Miss Milner

“appeared beautiful as an angel” (12). This inspires Dorriforth “with some confidence in the principles and character of his ward” and distracts him from contemplating her womanly beauty and sexuality (12). When Dorriforth is forced, through the conversation with Lady Evans, to dwell on his ward’s appearance and sexuality, he becomes unsettled and loses sight of her character. When Mrs. Hillgrave draws attention away from Miss Milner’s sexuality and beauty, Dorriforth contemplates her “principles and character.” Dorriforth does not believe that sexuality and strong principles can coexist. It becomes obvious that to Dorriforth, a pious, respectable woman must be void of awareness of her beauty and sexuality.

Dorriforth’s reaction to first meeting Miss Milner shows a return to his prior worries because of the immediate attraction he feels for her: “He had his handkerchief to his face at the time, or she would have beheld the agitation of his heart – the remotest sensations of his soul” (13). This incident illustrates Inchbald’s ability to make an insignificant gesture, such as placing a handkerchief to one’s face, extremely significant. This action is seemingly feminine, and the “agitation” in Dorriforth’s heart is not a “manly” reaction to seeing an attractive young woman. Dorriforth feels a powerful sexual attraction to Miss Milner that causes the “sensations” in his soul with which he is unfamiliar, but he attempts to hide it with a handkerchief. He begins to repress his own sexual desire. Inchbald does not follow this initial reaction with details of Dorriforth’s introspection or explanation of the gesture. Instead, she narrates the women’s reaction to Miss Milner. The absence of a dissection of Dorriforth’s blatant visceral reaction to meeting Miss Milner is as important as Inchbald’s explanation would have been. Left to ponder such a strong reaction, the reader finds it more meaningful in precipitating events to come.

Inchbald’s initial description of Miss Milner is brief, but telling. The narrator observes that “she was beautiful, she had been too frequently told the high value of that beauty, and thought those moments passed in wasteful idleness during which she was not

gaining some new conquest” (15). Jo Alyson Parker writes in “Complicating *A Simple Story*: Inchbald’s Two Versions of Female Power” that “Miss Milner relies on beauty, rather than intellect, as a means of gaining power” (259). Her responses to conversation, though not witty in the “proper” sense, are energetic, with a “quick turn of the eye, and an arch smile of the countenance” (15). While the other characters have heretofore been concerned with her appearance, only a short phrase is devoted to describing her beauty when the opportunity arrives. However, the power of suggestion in her habits of conversation displays a beauty and sexuality far beyond that short phrase. Ward suggests that Miss Milner’s “vivacity, suggestive of female sexuality, manifests itself in her gestures and expressive features” (4). Miss Milner is aware of her sexuality, and her gestures signify bodily responses to the opposite sex. She channels her sexuality in effective ways that are deemed appropriate, innocent behaviors, but elicit much less innocent responses from men. Miss Milner’s knowledge of the desire she elicits undermines the seeming innocence of her actions. The “quick turn of the eye” and “arch smile” the narrator describes imply a sexual awareness beyond Miss Milner’s eighteen years.

Dorriforth immediately represses his sexual desire for Miss Milner, just as she immediately begins to use her sexuality to her advantage. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues in *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* that “Miss Milner knows her own beauty and, more astonishingly, her own sexuality” (197). In relating the events of breakfast following her arrival, the narrator emphasizes Dorriforth’s “wise” contribution to the conversation. Dorriforth tells Miss Milner that she has “a greater resemblance” to her father than he “imagined” she “had from report” (15). In expressing his surprise at finding her so like her father, he is attempting to disassociate himself from her beauty. He relates her to a man, his friend, in order to place on her more masculine and platonic traits. Miss Milner responds that he does not fit the picture she’s imagined of him either. “I expected to find you an elderly man, and a plain man,”

she tells him (16). Ward argues that “the pleasure Miss Milner reveals upon her discovery signals the erotic tension that will characterize the rest of her relationship with Dorriforth” (4). The ironic opposite reactions they have to a similar situation, being pleasantly surprised that their imaginings were inaccurate, are indicative of the characteristics of both Miss Milner and Dorriforth. Dorriforth again stifles his sexual attraction to Miss Milner and chooses subtle language to misguide himself and his ward, while Miss Milner blatantly plays on her sexuality and flatters the man in whom her welfare lies. Therefore, Spacks’ assessment is correct; Miss Milner is aware of her own sexuality. Her awareness, along with Dorriforth’s denial of his attraction for his ward, signals the “erotic tension” to which Ward refers. Already Miss Milner dominates Dorriforth because while she is aware of herself, he has a reaction to her with which he is unfamiliar.

Eleanor Ty argues in *Unsex’d Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* that “vanity and disinterested generosity . . . are but some of the inconsistencies which make Miss Milner so attractive and dangerous to the stability of the rather austere Catholic household in which she is placed” (89). Ty’s assertion of a prominent vanity in Miss Milner is evident in the narrator’s description of how Miss Milner reacts to the uneasiness Dorriforth and Lord Frederick, one of Miss Milner’s suitors, feel in each others’ presence: “Miss Milner observed, but observed with indifference, the sensations of both – there was but one passion which at present held a place in her heart, and that was vanity” (19). The narrator’s observation goes on to show that she enjoys pleasing “for her own individual happiness, and not for the happiness of others,” which refutes Ty’s opinion of Miss Milner. When in situations involving males, specifically male suitors, Miss Milner does not possess conflicting “vanity” and “disinterested generosity.” Vanity is more important when she observes with “indifference” the obvious discomfort of Lord Frederick and Dorriforth. She does nothing to make the men more comfortable, and she continues to entertain Lord Frederick in Dorriforth’s presence. Her vanity makes

it necessary to receive favorable attention from Lord Frederick even though she is not concerned with his happiness. The fact that the narrator points out that “Miss Milner observed . . . the sensations of both” is significant because Miss Milner is keenly aware of the men’s unhappiness, yet because of her vanity she does nothing to alter their feelings. Miss Milner feels the need to be admired sexually in the public realm, and her vanity and need for power dominate the sensitivity the narrator implies she should feel for the men’s discomfort.

However, the scene with young Harry Rushbrook confirms Ty’s argument. “Miss Milner, whose heart was a receptacle for the unfortunate” (34), takes Rushbrook, the son of Dorriforth’s sister who married without his consent, to meet his uncle. Her motivations are unselfish, and she displays a “disinterested generosity” in this action. Because young Rushbrook is not one she considers a suitor, her vanity and sexuality are subdued. Miss Milner does not stand to gain power from Rushbrook’s admiration, so she can employ the unselfish generosity to which Ty refers. This “disinterested generosity” leads to her rescue of Rushbrook, which indeed upsets the “stability” of the house, at least temporarily. Ironically for a priest, Dorriforth reacts to Rushbrook’s appearance without generosity. The narrator observes that “he gave no greater marks of his resentment than calling for his hat, and walking instantly out of the house” (36). Ty is correct that Miss Milner does possess “inconsistencies” in her personality – “vanity” and “disinterested generosity.” But her vanity is more destructive to the tranquility of the household because it leads her to sexually dominate Dorriforth. The scene with Harry Rushbrook upsets Dorriforth and in turn upsets the tranquility of the each person in the household, but only temporarily. However, the vanity makes her more dangerous to Dorriforth, and consequently she is dangerous to the entire household’s “austere” structure.

Mr. Sandford, Dorriforth’s confidante and advisor, acknowledges Miss Milner’s dangerous sexual attractiveness: “Sandford knew the hearts of women, as well as those

of men” and “he saw Miss Milner’s heart at the first view of her person” (39). Like Dorriforth’s initial realization of his attraction to Miss Milner, Sandford realizes on his first meeting with her that she possesses powerful sexuality and is aware of her own power. As a result, Sandford is “eager to draw upon him her detestation, in the hope he could also make her abominate herself” (39). His way of stifling Miss Milner’s sexuality is to draw her contempt by ignoring her: “While, with every other person she was the principle, the first cause upon which a whole company depended for conversation, music, cards, or dancing, with Mr. Sandford she found she was of no importance” (40). As a result, Miss Milner is “cured of all her pride” (40), at least where Sandford is concerned. Miss Milner “frequently felt concerned that he did not speak to her” (41). Sandford is the first man over whom she does not have power. Her sexuality does not draw him to her, but instead it draws his contempt. However, Sandford does not succeed in making Miss Milner “abominate herself.” When Sandford openly refuses to speak to Miss Milner, “but though she had generosity to forgive an affront, she had not the humility to make a concession; and she foresaw that nothing less than some very humble atonement on her part, would prevail upon the haughty priest to be reconciled” (47). She is unwilling to offer this “humble atonement,” and as a result, Sandford’s contempt for her increases.

Sandford suggests to Dorriforth “that a proper match should be immediately sought out for her, and the care of so dangerous a person given into other hands” (42). Sandford uses strong language to describe Miss Milner’s sexuality: “so dangerous a person.” Ward suggests that “Sandford’s wish to see Miss Milner humbled represents the desire to contain, if not eradicate, her sexual energy” and that “both men believe . . . that the dangerous energy of Miss Milner’s nonconformity can be contained through marriage” (5). The reason both men believe this “dangerous energy . . . can be contained through marriage” is that Miss Milner’s sexual power would be confined to the private realm. Through marriage, Miss Milner would be in her husband’s power, and her own power would be subdued by eighteenth-century standards of how a wife should act in

public. Miss Milner does not conform by repressing her own sexuality in public, so both men believe marriage would relegate her sexuality to a private sphere. Miss Milner, though, has a need to feel powerful, and she exercises this power by openly displaying her sexuality and affecting men. Therefore, I disagree with Ward's assertion that "while marriage-as-resolution implies a recognition of Miss Milner's sexuality, neither Sandford nor Dorriforth perceive her as an active sexual agent" (5). Sandford and Dorriforth, though ignorant of first-hand experience in social behaviors regarding women and courting, are both intelligent men. To imply that they are ignorant of Miss Milner's sexual potency makes them seem downright idiotic. As I have already argued, Dorriforth and Sandford are aware of Miss Milner's sexual presence and would, therefore, perceive her as "an active sexual agent." She affects Dorriforth; therefore, it is logical that she would affect other men. Ward argues further that "rather, they see her as dangerous because she knows she attracts male desire, as evidenced by her many suitors, and does nothing to discourage it" (5). Miss Milner encourages male desire, enjoys the effect of her encouragement, and, therefore, embodies the concept of "an active sexual agent." Because Sandford recognizes Miss Milner's powerful sexuality and knows she is aware of her own power, he also sees her as a threat to his relationship with Dorriforth. If Miss Milner controls Dorriforth, Sandford no longer can. Sandford cannot compete with the power of female sexual attraction. His remedy to his own powerlessness is to make her sexuality powerless within the confines of marriage.

Ironically, Lord Frederick initially points out the danger Miss Milner brings to the household as a sexually powerful woman. When Miss Milner, at the request of her guardian, tells Lord Frederick he cannot visit her again, he replies in anger, "By heaven I believe Mr. Dorriforth loves you himself, and it is jealousy makes him treat me thus!" (20). When Miss Woodley attempts to shame him, he replies that Miss Milner's beauty is all-powerful: "for what but a savage could behold beauty like her's, and not own its power?" (20). This passage illustrates Miss Milner's effect on both Lord Frederick and

Dorriforth. More telling is Miss Milner's response. She admonishes Lord Frederick by telling him that "habit" keeps Dorriforth from falling in love with her, although she stops short of denying her knowledge of her own sexual power. She knows the only thing suppressing Dorriforth's desire for her are his vows.

Dorriforth is pleased when Sir Edward Ashton, another suitor, expresses "his passion" for Miss Milner (23). Dorriforth is "in anxious desire that the affection, or acquaintance, between Lord Frederick Lawnly and Miss Milner might be finally broken" (23), and he attempts to elevate Miss Milner's feelings for Sir Edward, whom he deems a more suitable prospective husband. Sir Edward does not openly confront Dorriforth as Lord Frederick does, and Sir Edward is "immensely rich" (23). Therefore, he "was the man Dorriforth would have chosen before any other for the husband of his ward" (23). When Miss Milner openly dismisses Dorriforth's suggestion that Sir Edward would make a "deserving" husband, Dorriforth asks her, "Unless your heart is already given away, Miss Milner, what can make you speak with such a degree of certainty?" (25). The narrator follows the question with an observation of Dorriforth's behavior as he asked the question:

He thought on Lord Frederick while he said this, and he fixed his eyes upon her as if he wished to penetrate her sentiments, and yet trembled for what he might find there. – She blushed, and her looks would have confirmed her guilty, had not a free and unembarrassed tone of voice, more than her words, preserved her from that sentence. (25)

Dorriforth "trembles" at what he might discover in Miss Milner's "sentiments," revealing his affection for her. He recognizes, though he subdues, his attraction to her. He is afraid that if she acknowledges or confirms a mutual attraction to her guardian, he will be forced to deal with his desire. Likewise, he does not wish to see his ward possessing devotion to another man. While he is unwilling to confront his own desire, he does not want Miss Milner to admit desire for another. Her blush would have revealed her

budding desire for him, but she is able to conceal it with a “free and unembarrassed tone of voice.” Both Dorriforth and Miss Milner are “preserved” from “that sentence” of revealing their desire for one another. However, because Miss Milner is making the decision of a preferable suitor, she continues to hold the power over her own sexuality.

Sir Edward is not discouraged when Dorriforth tells him of Miss Milner’s lack of interest: he “still hoped for a kinder reception, and was so frequently in the house of Mrs. Horton, that Lord Frederick’s jealousy was excited” (26). Lord Frederick “now unequivocally offered marriage,” but “Miss Milner declared both to him [Dorriforth] and to her friend [Miss Woodley], Love had, at present, gained no one influence over her mind” (27). Both Dorriforth and Lord Frederick are pleased that Miss Milner does not accept Sir Edward. Dorriforth is inwardly pleased, as his reaction following his question about her certainty illustrates, and Lord Frederick is outwardly pleased as his incessant pleas for matrimony illustrate. Even through her rejection of the suitors, Miss Milner retains power over all three men. She makes sure they know she is not in love, and her declaration of this lack of love keeps them in suspense. She continues to attend “balls, plays” and host “incessant company” (27), therefore continuing her public display of sexuality. By displaying her sexuality but not restricting it to one man’s attention, Miss Milner retains power. She enjoys the exercise of this power, for if she did not, she would confess her true feelings for her suitors and discontinue their suspense.

When the entourage visits the country, Miss Milner continues the games with her suitors. While at the house in the country, “Sir Edward was announced as an unexpected visitor” (48). Miss Milner “turned pale when his name was uttered” (48). When Sir Edward asks about the neighbors, Miss Milner, “with the highest appearance of satisfaction, named Lord Frederick Lawnly” (48). All of the characters react: “The colour spread over Sir Edward’s face – Dorriforth looked confounded – and Mr. Sandford as if he could have struck her” (48). Miss Milner manipulates the men with her seeming insensitivity. Sir Edward is embarrassed and disappointed, as his “colour” shows.

Dorriforth appears “confounded,” which could mean he is annoyed or irritated with Miss Milner’s behavior. But, Dorriforth could also be confused. Miss Milner attempts to draw a reaction by naming a suitor for whom she has claimed to have no affection. Dorriforth seems annoyed, but he also seems perpetually confused by his growing attraction to Miss Milner. Sandford’s physical reaction directly contradicts the other two men’s more emotional responses. Through this stark opposition, Miss Milner’s power over Dorriforth and Sir Edward becomes more evident. Rather than acting in a purely physical way, as Sandford does, the two men seem less masculine, further highlighting Miss Milner’s ability to exert power through unsettling the men’s balance. However, Sandford represents oppression by physically yearning to stifle Miss Milner’s defiance.

Katharine M. Rogers argues in “Elizabeth Inchbald: Not Such a Simple Story” that “taught to value herself primarily as a sexual being, Miss Milner can conceive of no way to gratify her ego except by exerting power over men” (83). Miss Milner tells her guardian that “Lord Frederick has neither my word, my promise, or any share in my affections” (57), yet when she reflects on his imminent dismissal, she “was thoughtful, and once sighed most heavily” (59). Losing Lord Frederick’s admiration brings about her melancholy. No longer can she use her sexuality as an advantage to bolster her pride, at least with Lord Frederick. When she meets him in the street, “Miss Milner’s countenance was brightened in an instant” (59). She claims no romantic interest in him, yet she visibly affirms the pleasant feeling she gets from his presence. What then, other than “gratifying her ego,” would explain this contradiction? Lord Frederick’s admiration makes Miss Milner feel powerful, and she desires the power existing in her sexuality.

Miss Milner “manipulates her admirers for her own purposes” (Spacks 197). Her purpose, at least at first, is to manipulate Lord Frederick to bolster her own ego. Her motivation changes, though, after she realizes her love for Dorriforth. She tries to find a way to stop the duel in which Dorriforth and Lord Frederick are about to engage. When Dorriforth physically challenges Lord Frederick, the two are propelled into a barbaric

situation to defend their respective honors. The thought of losing either man throws Miss Milner into despair. She again uses the sexual power she holds over Lord Frederick, this time to manipulate Dorriforth. She tells her guardian, “Yes, to my shame I love him,” forcing Dorriforth to disengage his anger and protect his ward’s love interest. Miss Milner pleads for the life of her pretended lover, when in reality she pleads for the life of the guardian she loves (Parker 258). The irony is that she holds power over Dorriforth because she holds power over Lord Frederick.

Miss Milner eventually admits to Miss Woodley, “I love him [Dorriforth] with all the passion of a mistress, and with all the tenderness of a wife” (72). This moment represents a prominent shift in the novel’s direction. The narrator of *A Simple Story* tells us that “Miss Milner, to do justice to her heart, did not wish to beguile Dorriforth into the snares of love” (81), a comment that comes before Miss Milner’s private interview with Dorriforth in which he again asks her about her feelings for Lord Frederick. This interview takes place after the duel, and after she initially tells Dorriforth that she loves Lord Frederick. Dorriforth, unaware that Miss Milner has intentionally misled him, asks for the interview in order to confirm the potential of her and Lord Frederick’s relationship. Although the narrator falsely points out that Miss Milner “did not wish to beguile Dorriforth into the snares of love,” that is exactly what she proceeds to do. She doesn’t take care with her appearance up to this point, but knowing she’ll be alone with Dorriforth, she “flew to a looking-glass, to adjust her dress in a manner that she thought most enchanting” (82). The implied ending to that sentence is: “to Dorriforth.” Miss Milner, aware of her beauty, attempts to use it to her advantage. She takes care to emphasize her sexuality, knowing it affects Dorriforth.

In the subsequent scene, Miss Milner appears submissive to Dorriforth’s inquiry. The narrator observes that “she never was perhaps half so bewitching as in those timid, respectful, and embarrassed moments she passed alone with him” (82). Ward argues that

Miss Milner appears timid and respectful in order to conform to what she thinks  
Dorriforth will find attractive:

[The] sacrifice she makes to attract Dorriforth: she abdicates agency as a  
desiring subject to assume a passivity more likely to provoke Dorriforth's  
desire and become an object "worthy" of his love. In *A Simple Story*, the  
subjectivity promised by Miss Milner's active sensibility – the freedom to  
experience and express passion – cannot withstand the pressure to  
conform to socially-defined demands for passivity. (Ward 8-9)

I agree that Miss Milner wishes to be an object "worthy" of Dorriforth's love; however, I  
find Ward's assessment of Miss Milner's attempt to attain that love not entirely accurate.  
Miss Milner does "assume a passivity," but she is still using her sexuality as a tool to  
attract his adoration. Spacks argues that "the first half of *A Simple Story* narrates a series  
of power struggles, most of them explicitly conceived as such" (197). This scene is an  
example of one of the power struggles that Spacks suggests. In pretending to abdicate  
power, Miss Milner still retains power. Dorriforth admires her, not because of her  
submissiveness, but in spite of it. By taking on this out-of-character passivity, Miss  
Milner makes her passion and sexuality more powerful because it directly contrasts the  
submissiveness. Dorriforth realizes, in seeing Miss Milner act as the docile Miss Fenton  
would, that Miss Milner is even more attractive to him. In addition, Dorriforth feels more  
powerful because of Miss Milner's seeming passivity. Up to this point, Miss Milner has  
had power over him by eliciting emotions with which he is unfamiliar. Seeing Miss  
Milner in a more socially acceptable, passive role brings his world back into a more  
logical order. Dorriforth is attracted to both aspects of her personality, which become  
more obvious in this scene. In fact, his declaration of this attraction satisfies Miss  
Milner's passion.

Dorriforth suggests to Miss Milner that Miss Fenton will marry out of duty but  
that "her fortune is inferior" and "her personal attraction less" (84). Before Dorriforth

finishes his explanation, Miss Milner visibly reacts to his statement. Her reaction is overtly sexual:

Here the strong glow of joy, and of gratitude, for an opinion so negligently, and yet so sincerely expressed, flew to Miss Milner's face, neck, and even to her hands and fingers; the blood mounted to every part of her skin that was visible, for not a fibre but felt the secret transport, that Dorriforth thought her more beautiful than the beautiful Miss Fenton. (84)

Dorriforth, unaware of the change in her appearance, goes on to praise Miss Fenton's lack of passion. Inchbald "exploits the cultural ambivalence over women's blushes – are they, because they suggest a lack of self-confidence, a sign of innocence and modesty, or rather, because they indicate sexual consciousness, a sign of guilt?" (Spencer xvi). In this case, Miss Milner is flushing, not blushing, because she is aware of her sexual power but does not feel guilty about her attraction to Dorriforth. Dorriforth's approval increases her self-confidence and decreases her modesty. In his continuing explanation about Miss Fenton's obedience, Dorriforth does not admonish Miss Milner because he inwardly feels her sexual power. He is overcome by it, rather than preferring the passionless Miss Fenton.

Sandford seems to sense Miss Milner's dominance when he enters the room just as she finally denies loving Lord Frederick. Sandford is aware not only of Miss Milner's sexual desire, but of Dorriforth's physical desire for his ward. He tells Dorriforth "if I can only save you . . . from the miseries which that lady is preparing for you, I am rewarded" (87). The words he speaks hang "upon her ears like the notes of a raven," and "frightful superstitions struck to her heart" (87). When Sandford speaks words of "all the fatal effects of sacrilegious love" (87), Miss Milner's behavior radically changes. Gone is the flushing associated with the lack of guilt concerning her love for Dorriforth and the pleasure at his approval. Forced by Sandford's harsh words to confront her love for a Catholic priest, Miss Milner "could scarcely prevent falling down" (87). Sandford's

words oppress her passion with guilt and therefore oppress her sexuality. But Sandford's admonitions do not oppress her power over Dorriforth. He interrupts Sandford and asks for an apology, which Sandford refuses to give. Dorriforth tells him to "say no more" and "as if to defend her from his [Sandford's] malice," he aids her to the door (88). Once again, Miss Milner's power is obvious, even in her physically weakened state.

Following the confrontation with Sandford, which reveals the first signs of Miss Milner's guilt over the inappropriateness of her love for Dorriforth, she quits her guardian's house to stay in the country. Dorriforth's cousin dies shortly after Miss Milner's departure. Because Dorriforth is next in line to inherit the family's property, he is released from his vows and becomes Lord Elmwood. Miss Milner returns to her guardian's house in London and her temporary guilt over being in love with a priest is alleviated. While she is free to pursue Lord Elmwood, her "pride, for the first time, began to take the alarm" (104). When he was restrained by vows of chastity, her guardian could not openly respond to his attraction for her, and "his indifference to her charms was rather an honourable, than a reproachful trait in his character" (104). But now that Lord Elmwood will surely marry to produce an heir, "she was offended that choice was not immediately fixed upon her" as it was with her other suitors (104). Miss Milner "left no means unattempted to make the conquest" (104). Despite the change in the situation, Miss Milner remains attracted to Lord Elmwood, and she soon returns to using her sexuality to attract him.

When Miss Woodley and Miss Milner discuss their trip to the opera, Miss Milner teases Elmwood and asks, "Would you have gone, my lord?" (107). After a brief repartee Miss Milner again becomes a sexual being, citing the power of the opera's "soft, harmonious sounds of love," soliciting this response from Dorriforth: "What ravishing pleasures are you preparing for me!" returned he, 'I know not whether my weak senses will be able to support them'" (107). Miss Milner "had her eyes upon him as he spoke this, and discovered in his, which were fixed upon her, a sensibility unexpected – a kind

of fascination which enticed her to look on, while her eye-lids fell involuntarily before its mighty force; and a thousand blushes crowded over her face” (107-08). There is nothing of guilt in Miss Milner’s blushes, and this passage recalls the previous “flushing” as it too displays the overt sexual attraction Elmwood and Miss Milner share. Elmwood no longer represses his desire but plays along neatly with Miss Milner’s overtures. Now that he openly shares the sexual attraction, Miss Milner is in an entirely new situation. Although Lord Elmwood is not the first man she’s affected with her sexuality, he is the first man who has affected her with his return of the attraction. There is a shift in power as a result of the “mighty force.” Now Lord Elmwood has control of the situation.

Miss Woodley reveals Miss Milner’s secret love for Lord Elmwood, and Lord Elmwood acknowledges his affection for his ward. Once the household becomes aware of their mutual affection, Miss Milner “takes that acknowledgement as an opportunity for the exercise of power” (Spacks 197). As Spacks suggests, Miss Milner begins to attempt to regain her power after Dorriforth acknowledges his love, even before she is completely recovered from her heartbreak-induced illness. She asks herself “Why did I not keep him longer in suspense? he could not have loved me more, I believe; but my power over him might have been greater still” (138). She wonders “whether [his affection] would exist under ill treatment?” (138). Miss Milner begins to act as she did while Lord Elmwood’s ward but “beyond her usual bounds” (139). She spends money on clothes she never wears and charities she cares little about. “She was charmed to see his love struggling” and “triumphed in shewing to Miss Woodley, and, more especially to Sandford, how much she dared upon the strength of his affections” (139-40). Miss Milner counts on the power she has over Lord Elmwood to prevail no matter what frivolous actions she takes. She feels confident that Lord Elmwood will withstand any test because he is sexually attracted to her and wants to have husbandly control over her sexuality.

Lord Elmwood issues a decree that he will watch Miss Milner “closely,” and if he finds her “too frivolous for that substantial happiness I look for with an object so

beloved,” he will break the engagement (141-42). This incites Miss Milner to work harder to test her power over Lord Elmwood rather than encourage her to quit her games and accept his love. “I’ll put him to the proof” she tells Miss Woodley (148). She continues acting as she had before Lord Elmwood’s pronouncement. The narrator points out that tense weeks follow “without either expressing (except inadvertently) their strong affection for each other” (150). Here the narrator implies that the shared passionate glances and Miss Milner’s blushing and eye-dropping continue to enhance the couple’s tension. Thus Miss Milner regains her power.

Miss Milner’s defiance of Lord Elmwood in the masquerade scene is rife with sexual tension. He tells her she can’t attend the party, but she tells him she “should certainly go” (151). Lord Elmwood doesn’t respond, so Miss Milner jests that she will attend in a Nun’s habit: “I may have the chance of making a conquest of even you, my lord – nay, I question not, if under that inviting attire, even the pious Mr. Sandford would not ogle me” (152). She suggests that by masquerading as a pure, penitent creature Lord Elmwood and Sandford claim to hold in high esteem, she will be irresistible to their repressed sexual desire. Lord Elmwood refuses to attend the masquerade, though, and leaves the room (153). Miss Milner is “highly offended at this insult” (153), not because Lord Elmwood refuses to accompany her, but because he openly resists her manipulation.

Making good on her threat to attend the masquerade in a habit, Miss Milner takes care “that her dress should exactly fit, and display her fine person to the best advantage” (154). The habit gives Miss Milner “the appearance of a female much less virtuous” than the “goddess of Chastity” she intends to portray (155). The contradiction is striking between the character Miss Milner dresses as and the responses she will inevitably receive. She dresses as an innocent, yet possesses both sexuality and desire. So, in altering the habit, she is a walking example of the sentiments of her lover. She insists that he “must not see me” (155) because she knows the effect the costume will have on Lord Elmwood; he would be forced to confront the feelings he has for Miss Milner, the

conflict going on within himself of attempting to subdue desire. If her costume forces him to confront his desire, he may also take further action to subdue her sexuality and his own desire, which would be detrimental to Miss Milner's plans.

Following the masquerade and his breaking of their engagement, Lord Elmwood is once again in Miss Milner's power when he witnesses another visit from Lord Frederick. Miss Milner's carriage has almost overturned, and Lord Frederick comes to her rescue and accompanies her home. Lord Elmwood reacts to Lord Frederick's unexpected presence:

Lord Elmwood was hurt beyond measure; but he had a second concern, and that was, he had not the power to conceal how much he was affected. – He trembled – when he attempted to speak, he stammered – he perceived his face burning with the blood that had flushed to it from confusion, and thus one confusion gave birth to another, till his state was pitiable. (171)

Miss Milner observes his reaction and takes pleasure in it: “for the impression this incident had made, was deep, and not easily erased,” and when she and Miss Woodley are alone she exclaims “in rapture, ‘He is mine – he loves me – and his is mine for ever’” (171). She is confident that, once again, her manipulation and display of the sexual attraction Lord Frederick feels for her have succeeded in affecting Lord Elmwood. She has, once again, used her sexual power over Lord Frederick to gain sexual power over Lord Elmwood. She does not seem affected by Lord Elmwood's “pitiable” state, and Miss Milner's vanity once again stifles her sensitivity toward Lord Elmwood's feelings. Of supreme importance are her manipulations to dominate Lord Elmwood.

Her manipulations, however, do not seem to work at first; Lord Elmwood continues his preparations to leave. At the final supper they are to share, Miss Milner “listened, she talked, and even smiled with the rest of the company, nor did their vivacity seem to arise from a much less compulsive source than her own” (183). Ward argues that in the earlier, similar scene in which Miss Milner appears resigned during Dorriforth's

questioning about Lord Frederick, “Miss Milner reaps the rewards of her submission: Dorriforth’s tender response” (8). As I argue previously, the effect of the submission is accurate, but the reason is debatable. Miss Milner appears submissive in the scene where they are discussing Lord Frederick, not because she feels submissive, but because she knows feigning submissiveness will positively affect Dorriforth. Dorriforth sees Miss Milner’s dejection, and his passion for her increases. In the scene before Lord Elmwood is to depart, her appearance is the same, but she genuinely feels dejection, which appears to Lord Elmwood as submissiveness. His passion for her increases as before, but he does not act on the passion but continues preparations for his journey. Therefore, Miss Milner’s manipulations, such as the feigned submissiveness in the previous scene, have more of an effect on Lord Elmwood than her genuine emotions.

Miss Milner’s dejection continues the next morning before Lord Elmwood’s departure. This apparently submissive attitude endears Lord Elmwood to her. In the final scene of Volume II, Sandford resigns to stop fighting Miss Milner’s power over Lord Elmwood. He marries them, declaring that he will “put out of” their “power to part” (191).

Volume III of the novel begins with an account of the seventeen years that have elapsed after Lord Elmwood and Miss Milner, now Lady Elmwood, marry. Lord Elmwood is forced to attend business in the West Indies. He puts off his return because of complications and illness but neglects to communicate his situation to his wife (196). Lady Elmwood becomes impatient: “Lady Elmwood’s heart was never formed for such a state – there, where all the passions tumultuous strove by turns, one among them soon found the means to occupy all vacancies – that one was love” (196). She then has an affair with Lord Frederick, now the Duke of Avon. Upon her husband’s return, she flees his house, leaving her daughter behind, and retreats to “the borders of Scotland” (199). Lord Elmwood maims the Duke of Avon in a duel and warns his acquaintances that he is “not to be reminded of her by one individual object” (197). He banishes his and Lady

Elmwood's daughter, Matilda, and the story resumes with Matilda keeping watch over her dying mother.

Lady Elmwood's final act of manipulation has failed. She attempts to fill the void she feels in her husband's absence by exercising sexual power over another man. Lady Elmwood's betrayal is "defiant," and she gains power by "giving to another man that which, according to her society's values, is no longer hers – her self, her body" (Ward 12). Through marriage to Lord Elmwood, Lady Elmwood has sacrificed her sexuality and become the submissive wife dictated by eighteenth-century societal standards. However, while her husband is present, she knows in the private realm she still has power over him because of his sexual attraction to her. When her husband leaves and takes the power she possesses with him, she must find it again in the public realm. She has already been assured of the Duke's devotion to her and resorts to playing a game with which she is familiar. However, Lord Elmwood is not present to respond to her use of power over the Duke. Whereas in the past the obvious sexual attraction the Duke feels for her incites Lord Elmwood's passion, Lady Elmwood finds herself in a situation with no possibility of that desired outcome. In her husband's absence, Lady Elmwood still feels the need to be sexually attractive, but does not anticipate the destructive results that will occur in trying to achieve the power she is accustomed to having. In her affair with the Duke, she is momentarily transported to the satisfaction she felt before her marriage but begins to realize her mistake when Lord Elmwood returns: "Or if the delirium gave her a moment's recompense, what were her sufferings and remorse, when she was awakened from the fleeting joy by the unexpected arrival of her husband?" (197).

Lady Elmwood does not die in defeat, though. She banishes herself but is saved from marriage to a man who represses her sexuality because of societal restrictions. As a love interest, Lord Elmwood feels the power of sexual attraction and gives in to his desire. As a husband, though, he expects his wife's sexuality to be contained within the privacy of their marriage. He expects Lady Elmwood to act as a stereotypical eighteenth-

century woman. Marriage gives him the power to dictate how his wife is to behave, and without the guilt of a friend's dying wish penetrating his conscience, he expects her to behave submissively in public, void of sexuality. Although he still loves her, he has usurped her authority through marriage, forcing restriction on her sexuality that he did not have the power to restrict as openly while her guardian. Once again, Lady Elmwood must regain the power that has been taken away by engaging in the affair with Lord Frederick. Although the first half of the novel ends with a felicitous, generous Lord Elmwood, his underlying nature is apparent in the beginning of Volume III. Regardless of what precipitates his actions, Lord Elmwood's banishment of his daughter indicates that he fulfills the repressive-husband role. Unequivocal dismissal of his child because of his displeasure with the mother indicates the "shades of evil" in his character to which the narrator refers early in the novel (33). Miss Milner's story becomes an illustration of one extreme possibility available to eighteenth-century women – a coquettish cunning reliant on sexual power rather than intellect. This possibility is not favorable to Inchbald, and neither is the forced sexual repression eighteenth-century standards would impose upon Miss Milner as a wife. Thus, the only two options available for Inchbald are death or forced sexual repression. Therefore, Lady Elmwood does not die as punishment for her actions; rather, Inchbald suggests that death is preferable to living with forced sexual repression.

William McKee writes in "Elizabeth Inchbald: Novelist" that the "glimpses of noble sentiment and genuine charity" are not enough to convince the reader "of the nobility of the heroine" (87). He argues further that "the reader . . . sheds not a tear when she [Lady Elmwood] is finally eliminated from the second half of the tale" because she is "foolish, vain, and extremely susceptible to flattery" (87). I completely disagree with this argument; Lady Elmwood is "foolish, vain, and extremely susceptible to flattery," which makes her endearing to the present-day reader. Her independence and acknowledgement of sexuality are admirable because these attitudes defy eighteenth-century norms of

appropriate female behavior. Present-day readers are able to see Lady Elmwood separate from the socially defined standards of the eighteenth-century “bad” woman, and instead see her as a revolutionary character. She is unashamed of her sexuality and uses it to her advantage. She is not innocent and does not pretend to be overly pious. Rather than hypocritically denying her sexuality and succumbing to societal pressures to remain demure and submissive, Lady Elmwood is rebellious and high spirited. As Rogers argues, Inchbald creates a character who engages “in conflict with the hero and is responsible for what happens to her; she is not a passive victim and does not set off the maudlin, over-inflated rhetoric that infested sentimental fiction of the period” (qtd. in Spender 82).

CHAPTER 3  
THE PRIEST MEETS HIS DAUGHTER: MATILDA RELINQUISHES CONTROL  
TO DORRIFORTH

Many critics have written about the seeming disjointed structures of *A Simple Story*. According to James Boaden, Inchbald's first biographer and often-quoted authority on her life, Inchbald originally wrote two separate novels and then combined them into the two-part novel that she published (Spencer xi). If viewed in this way, the leap in time and circumstance between Volumes II and III makes sense. But according to some critics, the two novels joined as one "violate our notions of textual closure" (Parker 256). Parker argues that the characters change so much that the novel defies logic and forces Inchbald into "authorial excuse-making" (256). While Parker's assessment of the unsettling jump in time and character traits is valid, the text is still logical. Inchbald may have left out a "central unifying action," as Parker suggests similar two-part novels possess (256), but there is textual evidence that supports the changes that seem so unsettling to this critic and others.

Generally, modern-day critics dismiss the second half of the novel as less inspiring and more conformist than the first half. Rather than viewing Volumes III and IV as a remedy to the problems established in the first half of the novel, the second half further serves the purpose of illustrating the dangers of women denying their own sexuality. Matilda's circumstances, in many cases a direct result of suppressed sexuality, serve as a striking contrast to her mother's. In this way, Inchbald adequately uses parallel structure to enhance the novel's overall affect. Terry Castle argues in *Masquerade and Civilization* that the second part's "underlying narrative structure . . . is almost identical to that of the first half" (323). Analyzing the events of this "almost identical" structure and comparing the second half to the first reveals that the difference between Matilda and

her mother lies in their handling of sexuality. Placed in parallel situations, Miss Milner is defiant and cunning while Matilda is submissive and pitiable.

From the beginning of Volume III, Matilda appears weaker than her mother. Peter Mortensen writes in "Rousseau's English Daughters: Female Desire and Male Guardianship in British Romantic Fiction" that "the impassive Matilda apparently has no feelings," and "where her mother's passions were strong and excitable," Matilda's "ruling characteristics" are weaker (366). The first example of Matilda's weakness is in the death scene with her mother. Although the narrator alludes to Miss Milner's sorrow over her father's death at the beginning of the novel, the reader does not see her as a devastated mourner. Miss Milner has a "meek sadness" and "pensive demeanor" after her father's death (13), but within a day she is "less strongly impressed with the loss of her father" (14). Matilda, though, "holds her [mother] to her bosom; and hangs upon her neck, as if she wished to cling there, and the grave not to part them" (200). Although Mr. Milner put his daughter, Miss Milner, in the care of Dorriforth to ensure guidance, Matilda seems to need more substantial support than her mother needed. Rather than behavioral guidance, Matilda needs a guardian to bestow emotional support on her. After her mother's death, Matilda is left without a guardian, and her father has "formed the unshaken resolution, never to acknowledge Lady Matilda as his child" (202). Matilda is "now destitute of the protection of her other parent, and it became his [Lord Elmwood's] duty, at least to provide her a guardian, if he did not choose to take that tender title upon himself" (202). Lord Elmwood does not choose to be her guardian, and he does not choose another guardian for his daughter. He makes it clear that whoever speaks Matilda's or Lady Elmwood's names in his presence will be banished. Thus Matilda is a victim of her mother's sin and her father's hatred. The narrator, in the beginning of Volume III, emphasizes Matilda's hopeless plight and how she only relies on Sandford and Miss Woodley. In the second half of the novel, the power of pity replaces the power of sexuality.

Lady Elmwood's dying letter to Lord Elmwood appeals to a sympathy he no longer possesses, but the letter is successful in its intention to make their daughter seem helpless. While his ward and wife, Lady Elmwood could make Lord Elmwood bend to her wishes by using her sexuality to stimulate him physically (Ward 12). Now, though, she must "appeal to his imagination – the vehicle of sympathetic identification – to thrust herself 'bodily' before his mind's eye" (Ward 12). Even after she is dead, Lady Elmwood has control over Lord Elmwood's emotions. She tells him in the letter to imagine "the grave where I am lying" (211). She is no longer the beautiful, vivacious girl he found so attractive, but her image still incites his emotions. After he reads the letter, "the tears flowed fast down his face; but he seemed both ashamed and angry when they did" (212). He is ashamed that the wife he has disowned still has a profound effect on him; he is ashamed that her power over him is acute; he is angry that he cannot control his desire for Lady Elmwood. No matter how hard he tries, through a hardened countenance and strict rules for his servants and acquaintances, he cannot deny the power of Lady Elmwood, even when her physical existence is extinguished by death. Contrary to Parker's views on the novel's split, Dianne Osland is able to see coherence as she explains in "Heart-picking in *A Simple Story*." Osland concedes that the changes may come from combining two separate novels, "but they are consistent with the way character is conceived throughout the first two volumes" (95). She is particularly writing about Lord Elmwood, and because he is affected so strongly by Miss Milner's physical presence and sexuality, Osland's assessment of consistency holds true.

Contrarily, Matilda's physical self does not intrude upon Lord Elmwood. He realizes his previous weakness for blatant female sexuality and forcibly relegates Matilda to a secluded portion of the house. He denies Matilda's physical presence (Ward 13). Ward writes that "Matilda becomes (im)material: like a ghost, she haunts her father's estate" (13). He suppresses her sexuality by banishing Matilda from his presence. What he fails to realize is that Matilda suppresses her own sexuality by choice. More than that

– she does not merely suppress her own sexuality – she does not acknowledge it at all. Matilda seems, unlike her mother, more likely to fit the “male version of female perfection” (Parker 262). As I have discussed, Miss Fenton, another character that fits the view of the ideal woman, is glorified by Sandford and Dorriforth in the first half of the novel. Miss Fenton has “features in a continual placid form” and “to have seen her distorted with rage, convulsed with mirth, or in deep dejection had been to her advantage” (37). In other words, Miss Fenton possesses no passion and certainly does not openly embrace sexuality. In this way, Matilda is more like Miss Fenton than Miss Milner. Because of her mother’s fate, Matilda learns “the necessity of disembodiment herself and practicing a virtue based on a spiritualized, rather than physical, sensibility” (Ward 15).

Matilda denies her sexuality because she has learned from her mother’s mistakes and because sexuality will gain her nothing with the men in her life. Sandford, the most prominent man in Matilda’s world, is completely changed from the first two volumes of the novel. He adores Matilda, just as he adores her mother at the end of her life. Once Lady Elmwood’s sexuality is extinguished by ill health, Sandford no longer sees the woman as a threat. Likewise, because Matilda is a passive character, void of vanity and feminine charms, Sandford sees her as an object of pity. Sandford’s seeming flip-flop in personality, then, does not “defy credibility” (264), as Parker suggests, but solidifies the characteristics Inchbald illustrates in the first half of the novel. Parker describes Sandford’s “instructing and championing Matilda” (265) but argues that the shift in his character defies “what we have come to expect in regards to character consistency” (264). I would argue Sandford’s seeming inconsistency in character serves to further emphasize the threat he felt when Miss Milner was so obviously comfortable with her sexuality. When he is presented with a weak character, Lady Matilda, he accepts her and supports her. He treats her as he refused to treat Miss Milner in her youth and pleads with Lord Elmwood on Matilda’s behalf. Void of sexuality, Matilda is appealing to Sandford. She

needs his guidance, and he is willing to aid in her education: “and as a scholar she excelled most of her sex, from the great pains Sandford had taken with that part of her education, and the great abilities he possessed for the task” (221).

When the doting Sandford and Miss Woodley accompany Matilda to her new home, the narrator describes the young girl’s awe at being surrounded by her father’s belongings. Her reaction to seeing her father’s portrait reveals her demeanor: “to this picture she would sigh and weep; though when it was first pointed out to her, she shrunk back with fear, and it was some time before she dared venture to cast her eyes completely upon it” (220). She fears Lord Elmwood and feels inferior to him, as her reaction to the portrait shows. Whereas her mother rarely sighs or weeps, Matilda is prone to these weaker actions, which makes her more like her father. Just as Dorriforth placed “his handkerchief to his face” in a very feminine gesture upon first meeting Miss Milner, Matilda reacts in a very feminine way upon first viewing her father’s portrait. Their personalities are unlike; however, Matilda and her mother are both beautiful women. The narrator points out that “Matilda’s person, shape, and complexion were so extremely like what her mother’s once were,” but that “her mind and manners were all Lord Elmwood’s; softened by the delicacy of her sex, the extreme tenderness of her heart, and the melancholy of her situation” (220). While Miss Matilda is described as “delicate,” at the same age Miss Milner has been described as having a “quick sensibility” (15). Instead of possessing a quick wit and undeniable charms, Matilda possesses a pitiful countenance brought on by her “melancholy” situation. In addition, “her mind and manners were all Lord Elmwood’s,” meaning she is able to successfully repress her sexuality as Lord Elmwood does in the first half of the novel.

While much emphasis is placed on Miss Milner’s beauty, hardly any is placed on Matilda’s. This lack of emphasis is important because the reader knows that Matilda is indeed attractive, but she does not take advantage of her sexuality or beauty as her mother did. While at Elmwood House, Matilda “neither received nor paid one visit,” supposedly

because of Lord Elmwood's stipulations regarding her presence (221). Matilda does not miss having visitors as she is not interested in the society of those outside her intimate circle. Castle suggests that Matilda, unlike her mother, "does not go anywhere in order to transgress" (325). Miss Milner finds ways to push the limits of what is considered proper by hosting male visitors with whom she openly flirts or by taking part in masquerades or shopping sprees. Unlike her mother, Matilda finds "transgression" inside Elmwood House and has no need to host outside visitors or venture away from the property (Castle 325). Matilda's "transgression" is against her father within the house; she creates turmoil with her presence, not like her mother by causing Lord Elmwood to struggle with sexual desire, but by forcing him to remember the struggle and his succumbing to his ward. However, unlike her mother, Matilda does not "transgress" against eighteenth-century standards for how a woman should behave. Matilda is happy in the private realm. Unlike her mother, she does not derive power from publicly displaying her independence and sexuality.

Because Matilda does not leave Elmwood House, the most telling example of her unacknowledged sexuality takes place in her encounters with Rushbrook. When Rushbrook realizes a volume of plays is missing from the room, he instructs his servant to find it (236). The servant returns with the book which he claims to have found in Miss Woodley's possession. When Rushbrook, through his servant, attempts to return the book to Miss Woodley, she refuses it. Rushbrook then goes to Miss Woodley's apartment to attempt to return the book in person. While Rushbrook tries to speak to the reluctant Miss Woodley, Matilda appears: "Perceiving a gentleman, she stopped short at the door" (237). Twice the narrator describes how Matilda looks at Rushbrook with an "air of dignity" (238). Rushbrook explodes into a plea for Matilda's acceptance, but she offers no promises of kindness. When she tells Rushbrook that "this is the last time, sir, we shall ever meet," she "burst into a flood of tears" (239). In this scene, two handsome people meet for the first time. Unlike the first encounter between Dorriforth and Miss

Milner, there is no sexual tension here. Matilda envies and despises Rushbrook, but rather than treating him as her mother treated Sandford, for whom Miss Milner felt similar sentiments, she reacts with the weak action of crying. Miss Milner resolved to win Sandford over with charm, but Matilda's actions show that she is more likely to try to win Rushbrook over with pity. Despite the difference in Matilda's behavior as compared to her mother's, Rushbrook is affected by this meeting. He feels affection for the "beauty of her person" and "grandeur of her mein" (240), and wants to "lead him [Elmwood] to the jewel he cast away," even if it leads to the young heir's banishment (241). Rushbrook's attraction for Matilda is already apparent, and underlying the young man's hope for reconciling Matilda and her father is the hope that if Lord Elmwood accepts his daughter, Rushbrook's attraction for her will also be acceptable.

Even without the charms her mother possessed, Lady Matilda is the object of another man's affection. Viscount Margrave, a "young man, of a handsome person," professes "himself her lover" (246). Viscount Margrave is wealthy, sociable, and popular with women. Matilda meets him before her mother dies when he accompanies her and Miss Woodley home during a thunderstorm: "Grateful for the service his lordship had rendered them, Miss Woodley and her charge permitted him to enquire occasionally of their healths, and would sometimes see him" (247). Although Margrave has no plans to marry, his strong feelings for and attraction to Matilda cause him to "look forward to that [marriage], as his only resource" for consummating his desire (247).

Matilda is unaware of Lord Margrave's attraction: "she was not only insensible, but totally inattentive to all that was said to her on the subject" (247). When Miss Milner is in a similar situation where a suitor desires her but she does not reciprocate the feelings, she cunningly uses the situation to her advantage as I discussed in the previous chapter. Unwilling to accept her sexuality, Matilda does not play games with Viscount Margrave as Miss Milner did with Lord Frederick. Matilda's impromptu meeting with Rushbrook makes her aware of his affection, and Viscount Margrave has made his

affection known to her. Matilda's mother, in a similar situation involving two men interested in gaining her affections, uses her sexuality to her advantage. Aware of her sexual attraction, Miss Milner employs flirtation to heighten the attraction Dorriforth and Lord Frederick feel for her. Matilda, on the other hand, unaware or unwilling to admit her sexuality, denies both Rushbrook and Margrave and does not attempt to heighten their desire.

When Margrave learns how Lord Elmwood has treated Matilda, "such an information gave him the hope of obtaining her, upon the illegal terms of a mistress" (248). He visits Elmwood House while Lord Elmwood is away, but on seeing Matilda with "so much modesty and dignity," decides again that he will have to marry her in order to have a sexual relationship with her (248). Matilda does not possess the raw sexual presence her mother does, but instead is often described as "modest" and "dignified," as was the case in first meeting Rushbrook. Even without the blushing and quick turns of the eye her mother practiced, Matilda is equally attractive to men such as Margrave. He is despondent when Sandford tells him he should never visit again. Matilda inadvertently holds the same sexual power over men as her mother, although she does not use it to her advantage.

Ironically, Matilda's denial of her sexuality also wins her the love of Rushbrook. The narrator describes Rushbrook's feelings while he stays in town: "he doubted, but he did not long doubt, that which he felt was love" (250). He reasons that he would not feel so strongly if Matilda were not Lady Elmwood's and Lord Elmwood's daughter, and he would not feel love rising from "gratitude and pity only" (250). Rushbrook realizes that "the violence of his passion" when he saw Matilda proves the "genuine love" he feels (250). Rushbrook, unconstrained as his uncle was by the bind of priesthood, is able to admit the feelings he has for Matilda. Her submissiveness appeals to his masculinity, not only because she represents the ideal eighteenth-century woman but because of her pitiable position. Although he denies his feelings arise from pity alone, the thought of

rescuing her from her current situation appeals to Rushbrook's ego. Even though Matilda tries to be "dignified" and "modest" in order to deny her sexuality, albeit unknowingly, she still appears sexual to men. Rushbrook realizes the attraction he feels for her and realizes he would not feel so strongly if not for the attraction. Even through her actions to subdue her sexuality, Matilda is unable to hide it completely from men.

In the midst of Rushbrook's fancies of love, Lord Elmwood finds the young man a potential wife. Rushbrook appears less than enthusiastic when Lord Elmwood broaches the subject of marriage: "There was, however, in his reply, and his embarrassment, something which his lordship discerned from a free concurrence" (252). Lord Elmwood asks Rushbrook if he is engaged, to which the heir replies that he is not. Rushbrook's answer to Lord Elmwood's question of whether he has "disposed" of "his heart" is less equivocal, and Lord Elmwood becomes angry. Rushbrook is afraid to tell Lord Elmwood of the feelings he has for Matilda, but the young man wants to make sure Lord Elmwood knows he is "disinclined to the prospect of marriage" (253). Lord Elmwood gives Rushbrook "a week to call his thoughts together" and decide either to marry Lord Elmwood's choice or "see some other more subservient to his will, appointed his heir" (254).

This scene is not unlike the scene in which Miss Milner denies her love for Lord Frederick. As I describe in the previous chapter, Dorriforth asks Miss Milner's true feelings for Lord Frederick, whom she had claimed to love in order to discourage a duel. Miss Milner, much like Rushbrook, cannot reveal the true object of her affection because of the impropriety of being in love with her guardian, a priest. Rushbrook and Miss Milner are in an ironically similar situation at different points in the novel. Miss Milner, afraid to reveal her love for Dorriforth, must evasively deny her desire for Lord Frederick. Rushbrook, afraid to reveal his love for Matilda, must evasively deny his desire to marry. Both Miss Milner and Rushbrook deceive Lord Elmwood, but both desire his approval. They both realize they must wait for a more opportune time to reveal

their true emotions; Miss Milner waits until Dorriforth is released from his vows, and Rushbrook waits until Matilda returns to her father's favor.

The difference in these scenes does not lie in the ambiguous denials of Miss Milner and Rushbrook, but the main difference lies in Dorriforth/Lord Elmwood's behavior. In the first scene, Dorriforth is patient, though exasperated, with Miss Milner. Miss Milner responds physically to Dorriforth's observation that she is more attractive than Miss Fenton, who in his estimation is more prone to acknowledge the necessity of marriage. As I conclude in the previous chapter, Miss Milner's reaction is sexually appealing to Dorriforth, although he is unaware of the reason for his change in emotion. Their repartee is much less tense than the conversation Rushbrook and Lord Elmwood share. Instead of light frustration, Lord Elmwood "fixed his eyes upon him [Rushbrook] with a sullen contempt" (252). When Rushbrook uses vague language to deter Lord Elmwood, the man asks his heir, "Do you dare to reply to me equivocally, when I have asked you a positive answer?" (253). Lord Elmwood gives Rushbrook the week to contemplate his feelings only after Rushbrook is affected by "the angry demeanor of his uncle" (253).

The reason for Lord Elmwood's change in behavior regarding two similar situations becomes more obvious when the scenes are juxtaposed. In the first scene, Dorriforth is disarmed by Miss Milner's sexual power. Her seemingly innocent, yet carefully practiced, behavior of blushes and trembling diffuses Dorriforth's anger. Rushbrook possesses none of her sexuality, and certainly has no such power over Lord Elmwood. Therefore, Rushbrook has no way to undermine Lord Elmwood's anger except by exciting his pity. In this way, pity once again replaces sexuality in the second half of the novel. However, using pity to manipulate Lord Elmwood is less successful than Miss Milner's sexuality was in the first half of the novel.

Rushbrook becomes ill during the week he is to contemplate his marital prospects. His illness causes him to become the pitiable subject, even though he still feels pity for

Matilda. While thinking of his love, “her pitiable situation presented itself to his compassion, and her beautiful person to his love” (254). Pity for her situation first draws Rushbrook to Matilda, and pity for her situation is what he reflects on first. When Rushbrook recovers, Lord Elmwood feels “much pity for his present weak state” and refrains from asking Rushbrook to conclude their earlier discussion (256). Once again, pity rules a character’s decision. When Matilda hears about Rushbrook’s illness, she “expressed compassion” and begins to feel that perhaps she should have treated him more kindly (256). Pity once again takes a prominent place, as suggested in these circumstances, in the second half of the novel.

Still, Matilda does not allow her compassion to supersede her contempt for Rushbrook, that is, until she sees a physical reason for her pity. When Matilda meets Rushbrook in the garden, she inquires about his health, and he responds that he is well. Miss Woodley and Sandford wonder aloud about her behavior, and she replies that “while he looks so pale . . . and so dejected, I can never forbear speaking to him when we meet, whatever he may think of it” (266). Matilda, once again, does not practice the same flirtations as her mother, and she is unaware of the power she has over Rushbrook. She speaks to him, not to enhance his attraction to her, but to practice what she deems a pitiable civility. Lord Elmwood then returns to Elmwood House, which makes another meeting between Matilda and Rushbrook unlikely.

When Lord Elmwood falls and breaks his leg, he becomes ill. Matilda “wept, moaned, and watched during the crisis of his illness,” and she expresses joy when he recovers (269). When Miss Woodley tells Matilda about visits to Lord Elmwood’s sickbed, the young girl claims she is happy: “But poor Matilda’s sudden transports of joy, which she termed happiness, were not made for long continuance; and if she ever found cause for gladness, she far oftener had motives for grief” (269). Although Miss Woodley and Sandford have not grown weary of “poor Matilda,” the reader begins to prefer Lady Elmwood’s use of sexuality over Matilda’s prostrate nature. Miss Milner’s

vibrant personality engages the reader because her actions cause the other characters to be unsettled; her constant struggles for power are more interesting because they create conflict. Whereas Matilda seems to abhor conflict, Miss Milner thrives on it, which makes her a more exciting character. Each scene of Miss Woodley's and Sandford's recitation of events involving their own interactions with Lord Elmwood further heighten Matilda's pitiful state and passive character.

Ironically, although Lord Elmwood pities Rushbrook during his recuperation, he does not pity the employee whom he dismisses. The employee is reviewing plans for the estate with Lord Elmwood and accidentally mentions the former wishes of Lady Elmwood. Lord Elmwood immediately "commanded me [the employee] to quit his house and service that instant" (271). Sandford claims there is nothing he can do to help the old man, and once again Matilda is "drowned in tears" (271). The lingering effects of Lady Elmwood's sexual power are still evident in Lord Elmwood's treatment of the employee. When the man mentions her name, it instantly reminds Lord Elmwood of his late wife and his feelings for her. Once again, he becomes angry because Lady Elmwood represents his defeat because of her power over him. Unlike Sandford, pity does not dictate Lord Elmwood's actions, and instead sexuality, or its lingering effects, guide his actions.

The most interesting scene in the second half of the novel takes place on the stairs of Elmwood House. Still reeling from the elderly employee's dismissal, Matilda reads books from her father's library in order to distract her "disconsolate mind" (272). One afternoon while her father is away on a hunt, Matilda abandons her books and rushes out to join Miss Woodley for a walk. As she hurries down the stairs, she accidentally runs into Lord Elmwood: "She gave a scream of terror – put out her trembling hands to catch the balustrades on the stairs for support – missed them – and fell motionless into her father's arms" (273-74). He intends to leave her, but she opens her eyes and "uttered, 'Save me'" (274). Lord Elmwood begins to cry and exclaims, "Miss Milner – Dear Miss

Milner” (274). When a servant happens upon the scene, Lord Elmwood’s “face was agitated with shame, with pity, with anger, with paternal tenderness” (274). Before the servant arrives, Lord Elmwood again becomes the effeminate male overcome by emotion. In private when he and Matilda are alone, he acknowledges Lady Elmwood’s lingering power over him, but when the servant appears his demeanor changes. His public self once again becomes hardened against any desire for womanly affection. He had a similar reaction to reading Lady Elmwood’s dying request in her letter; he feels shame and anger that she has such an effect on him. At the same time, in the scene with Matilda, he feels pity and paternal tenderness that contradict the shame and anger. Once again, the lingering effects of Lady Elmwood’s sexual power supersede the other emotions; his anger and shame guide his actions more than pity and paternal tenderness. This scene contains an obvious irony – Lord Elmwood equates Matilda’s sexuality with that of her mother, which brings about his dramatic reaction. However, if he had accepted his daughter instead of banishing her, he would be aware of how different she is from her mother. Although the scene does not seem to indicate Lord Elmwood’s sexual attraction to his daughter, it highlights this irony. Sexuality in any form is still dangerous to Lord Elmwood, even when he comes face to face with his daughter, who has continuously repressed her sexuality. After Lord Elmwood’s volatile reaction, the servant helps Lord Elmwood force Matilda’s hand, which is tightly gripping his coat, free from its grasp. Lord Elmwood quits the scene.

This scene brings all of Matilda’s pitiful actions to a climax. When she sees Lord Elmwood, she acts as if she has seen a ghost and screams with “terror.” While one can understand that she is afraid of her father, who has acted like a tyrant towards her, Matilda uses a typical eighteenth-century convention to remedy her predicament: she faints. Instead of trembling with excitement or sexual anticipation, as her mother does, she trembles with fear and falls fainting into her father’s arms. As if this action were not weak enough, she mumbles to her father to “save” her. Save her from what? Save her

from falling down the stairs or from his inevitable wrath? I suggest Matilda wants Lord Elmwood to save her from her present pathetic situation. She realizes her life at Elmwood House, as pitiful as it is, will end now that she has broken Lord Elmwood's command. She wishes him to save her, not only from banishment, but from the misery she's lived in since her mother died.

Lord Elmwood is unable to save Matilda. When she speaks, he hears Lady Elmwood's voice. The narrator has told the reader that Matilda looks like Lady Elmwood, and the reader can assume from the narrator's comment, "her voice unmanned him," that Matilda must sound like her mother as well. "Save me" are the words Lord Elmwood longed to hear from his wife. He was attracted to Lady Elmwood's sexuality, but he wished her to submit to him as a wife – to need him. Lady Elmwood, however, submitted to no one and never asked forgiveness for her betrayal. Even in her letter, as I've previously mentioned, she does not ask for forgiveness or for Lord Elmwood's pity for herself, but for her daughter. In her letter, she asks Lord Elmwood to imagine her in the grave "and ask yourself – whether I am an object of resentment?" (212). Yet for all this dramatic flair, Lady Elmwood never asks Lord Elmwood to save her from death without his forgiveness. She never asks him to save her from her banishment. Matilda says what Lord Elmwood never heard from his wife, and hearing those words in the voice like his wife's brings about his emotional response.

The morning after Lord Elmwood's meeting with Matilda on the stairs, Miss Woodley receives a letter from Giffard, Lord Elmwood's House Steward. The letter instructs Matilda to leave the house (277). Before her departure, Matilda thinks of ways to stay in Elmwood House, including apologizing to her father (280). Still, with Sandford's encouragement, she leaves. Although Matilda is not the threat her mother was, that is, a woman possessing knowledge of her sexuality, she is still a threat to Lord Elmwood. Her presence reminds him of his wife's sexuality. When he does not see Matilda, he is unaware of her sexual, physical presence. Their meeting on the stairs

makes him aware of the danger of his daughter's power, even though she is unaware of it herself. Although Matilda does not threaten Lord Elmwood's masculinity as her mother did through the shame of adultery, he is afraid that, like her mother, she will use her sexuality to manipulate him. He does not realize Matilda wishes to submit to his will; he cannot conceive of the possibility that his wife's daughter will not threaten his ego. Seeing Matilda reminds Lord Elmwood of his wife, and the encounter reminds him of what happened the last time he succumbed to a sexual being. Unable to face the possibility of another outcome like that of Lady Elmwood's betrayal, he banishes his daughter from his house.

Lord Elmwood has a similar emotional reaction to his nephew. When the two men finally resume the conversation regarding Rushbrook's marriage, the young man admits to Lord Elmwood that he is in love with Matilda. Lord Elmwood insists that Rushbrook "leave my house instantly, and seek some other home" (291). Lord Elmwood is furious when Rushbrook openly betrays him and speaks Matilda's name. While it seems hard to reconcile such a dramatic reaction to a seemingly innocent action, it fits with Lord Elmwood's change in personality. From the beginning of Volume III, Lord Elmwood is a hardened man: "nor did he himself deny, that resentment mingled with his prudence; for prudence he called it not to remind himself of happiness he could never taste again" (202). His resentment of Lady Elmwood alone does not cause Lord Elmwood's shift in personality; according to the narrator, he does not want to be reminded "of happiness he could never taste again." His wife flaunted her sexuality and made his desire acute, but he was betrayed by the apparent weakness for this sexuality. He does not want to be reminded of either the weakness or the happiness and, therefore, dismisses anyone who disobeys his command. In Lord Elmwood's changed character, weakness and happiness are inevitably linked since the one lead to the other in his experience with Lady Elmwood.

While Sandford and Lord Elmwood discuss Rushbrook's fate, Lord Margrave plots to kidnap Matilda. Margrave and his friends "set off for the habitation of poor Matilda, and arrived there about the twilight of the evening" (320). They take Matilda while the rest of the house attempts to escape the pretended fire Margrave's friends have announced. Matilda again becomes a victim of circumstance; she has done nothing intentionally to encourage Margrave's attraction but ends up in another pitiable situation. An acquaintance of Lord Elmwood's happens upon the entourage en route and immediately goes to Elmwood House to tell the lord of his daughter's fate. When Lord Elmwood hears of Matilda's predicament, he asks Rushbrook, "Where are my pistols, Harry?" (324). Elmwood sets off to rescue his daughter "while poor Matilda little thought of a deliverer nigh, much less, that her deliverer should prove her father" (325). By this point, "poor Matilda" is overwhelmingly resigned to her fate. Throughout the second half of the novel, she has accepted her circumstances without contradiction, and her passive nature makes her a more appealing victim to Margrave.

Matilda's weakness is further illustrated in the kidnap scene. In denying her sexuality, she has unwittingly denied power in general and made herself vulnerable to Margrave's vile intentions. "Poor Matilda" is weak and, unlike her mother, causes a suitor to feel he can take advantage of her weakness. Miss Milner used her sexuality to manipulate Lord Frederick, but he never attempted to take advantage of her without her consent. Although he was as frustrated as Margrave, he continued to hold out hope because of Miss Milner's games. In contrast, Margrave sees no reason to hold hope for a future with Matilda unless he forces the future. Despite the denial of her sexuality, she is attractive to him; because of the denial of her sexuality, she appears weak and controllable. Matilda's pitiful nature, then, leads to her victimization. Ironically, the woman who seems to invite desire, Miss Milner, does not have her purity threatened until she chooses, but the woman who is properly submissive and attempts to thwart sexual desire, Matilda, has her purity threatened by an unwelcome suitor.

This victimization, though, also gains her father's approval. The kidnapping confirms Matilda's weakness and makes her appealing to her father. Matilda is "reduced to that of the suffering, languishing heroine" and "allows her elders and betters to choose for her" (Mortensen 367). Lord Elmwood no longer sees Matilda as powerful, and he no longer feels threatened by her presence. Ironically, when Margrave takes physical possession of her sexuality, Lord Elmwood realizes Matilda's sexuality is not a threat to his own future. This realization allows Lord Elmwood to separate his wife and daughter in his mind and makes her rescue possible. When Lord Elmwood arrives at Margrave's, Matilda responds by "falling on his knees" and bathing "his feet with her tears" (329). Matilda's actions demonstrate visible proof to Lord Elmwood that his daughter, unlike his wife, is submissive. Together they leave Margrave's, and when Lord Elmwood demands the party stop for rest, "she could only turn to him with a look of love and duty" (329). Matilda treats Lord Elmwood as her mother did not. Rather than testing his love, Matilda submits and becomes the "dutiful" daughter. She attempts to talk to him, but "her tears wholly overcame her," and he "commanded her to desist from exhausting her spirits; and after a few powerful struggles, she obeyed" (331). Matilda's obedience has been unquestioned from the beginning of the volume; she has remained a recluse at her father's demand. She obeys him as her mother never did, and he finally accepts her because her obedience means that she is not a threat.

However, the kidnap scene is necessary because Lord Elmwood sees proof of Matilda's obedience; her implicit obedience while a forced recluse in her father's house had no impact on him. In order for his ego to be fully satisfied and for him to forget his wife's past transgressions, Matilda's obedience and submissiveness must be explicit and obvious. Once again, the irony is that Matilda has remained the same throughout; if Lord Elmwood had accepted his daughter instead of banishing her, he would have been aware long before of her more acceptable behavior.

The novel concludes with Lord Elmwood once again discussing marriage with Rushbrook. The young man admits his affection for Matilda, and Lord Elmwood pretends to again banish him. Matilda, “in a pathetic voice,” however, pleads for her father’s mercy (335). Lord Elmwood sends Matilda into the room with Rushbrook so that she may “grant him what he has requested” (336). When Rushbrook and Matilda meet, he reveals his love for her: “I boldly told him [Lord Elmwood] of my presumptuous love, and he has yielded to you alone, the power over my happiness or misery” (337). The narrator aptly points out that “whether the heart of Matilda, such as it has been described, *could* sentence him to misery, the reader is left to surmise” (337). Unlike her mother, Matilda does not use her sexuality to wield power over men. Also contrary to her mother’s actions, Matilda does not gain pleasure from manipulating her suitors in order to gratify her vanity and ego. Therefore, Matilda does not relish causing men discomfort, and the narrator implies that she, unlike Lady Elmwood, could not find pleasure in Rushbrook’s “misery.” In realizing Matilda does not “sentence him to misery,” the narrator claims that the reader “has every reason to suppose their wedded life was a life of happiness” (337).

The reader has “every reason to suppose” that their wedded life is happy but void of passion. The narrator conspicuously leaves out Matilda’s acceptance of Rushbrook’s proposal. I’d suggest that is because Matilda agrees to marry Rushbrook more out of a sense of duty than of passionate love. Nowhere in the second half of the novel is Matilda described as a sexually passionate woman; therefore, it is hard to imagine her sexuality suddenly bursting forth at Rushbrook’s declaration of love. If she marries out of duty, she becomes like Miss Fenton, whom Miss Milner despised. Miss Fenton is described as passionless, which makes her unappealing to Miss Milner and, as I argue in the previous chapter, to Lord Elmwood. However, Lord Elmwood has been betrayed by a passionate woman, and now he prefers the submissive Matilda. Lord Elmwood eventually approves of Matilda “because she, unlike her mother, is non-threatening and submissive to the

paternal order” (Ty 86). Rushbrook finds Matilda appealing for her beauty and her pitiful situation. Now that her pitiful situation is rectified because of her father’s preference, the reader is left to wonder if Rushbrook’s affection will continue. Will a marriage to a woman who denies her sexuality make Rushbrook happy? As Rushbrook’s initial reaction to Matilda illustrates, he responds to passion without analyzing the consequences of what his love might bring about. From their first encounter, Rushbrook seems more passionate than Matilda. Therefore, their union results in a passionate man’s marriage to a passionless woman. I suggest that Rushbrook and Matilda may be content in their marriage, but that a marriage without passion is by no means acceptable to either Rushbrook, the author, or the present-day reader. Lady Elmwood dies instead of living in a marriage in which she is forced to be submissive. Contrarily, Matilda is not rewarded for denying her sexuality. Instead, Inchbald relegates Matilda to a marriage with a man she has never professed to love.

The next-to-last paragraph, then, takes on a new meaning:

[The reader] has beheld the pernicious effects of an improper education in the destiny which attended the unthinking Miss Milner – On the opposite side, then, what may not be hoped from that school of prudence – though of adversity – in which Matilda was bred? (337-38)

I would argue that the answer to Inchbald’s question is “happiness resulting from passionate desire.” The narrator implies that Matilda and Rushbrook will have an “opposite” union than Lady and Lord Elmwood, but the reader has no reason to assume this felicitous marriage will develop. Undoubtedly, Matilda will continue to remain submissive and obedient to her husband, just as she was to her father. In this paragraph the narrator juxtaposes the two extremes Inchbald illustrates and rejects. While Miss Milner’s “destiny” is death, Matilda’s “adversity” continues in life. Both women are rewarded, but neither woman’s fate is ideal. Succumbing to eighteenth-century societal standards of appropriate behavior for a wife will not make Matilda’s future more

promising than her mother's. Instead she becomes a slave to her husband like other women who shed their identity, sexuality, and independence to become a wife, which will satisfy neither Rushbrook nor Matilda.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Critics debate the ending of *A Simple Story* almost as often as they debate a possible romance between Elizabeth Inchbald and Joseph Kemble. In the last paragraph of the novel, the narrator ominously describes the seeming reason for Miss Milner's downfall: "And Mr. Milner, Matilda's grandfather, had better have given his fortune to a distant branch of his family – as Matilda's father once meant to do – so he had bestowed upon his daughter A Proper Education" (338). J. M. S. Tompkins writes that "this moral" is common with women authors "at the end of the eighteenth century," but "it seems hardly to be integral to the development of the work" (345). Indeed, the issue of Miss Milner's education as compared to that of her daughter only appears a few times in the novel, so it would seem Tompkins' argument that it is not "integral" is accurate.

However, Tompkins writes that the fact that education is not of supreme importance in the novel does not mean that it should "therefore be dismissed as insincere" (345). What Inchbald intends, Tompkins argues, is to comment on the "indulgent, trifling upbringing of the society beauty, compared with her daughter's austere youth, in the comprehended presence of guilt and sorrow" (345). Miss Milner, as the narrator points out at the beginning of the novel, has a "little heart employed in all the endless pursuits of personal accomplishments," which "left her mind without one ornament, except those which nature gave" (5). Miss Milner, then, represents one extreme of eighteenth-century women – women Mary Wollstonecraft describes as "propagators of fools" (13). Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published the year after *A Simple Story*, that "the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended with the constitution of civil society to render them insignificant objects of desire" (13). Although Inchbald wouldn't have read the Vindication, the idea of a woman forced to rely on beauty rather than intellect would have been a popular debate. By

Wollstonecraft's standards, Miss Milner would have been less than ideal. Wollstonecraft writes that "body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves – the only way women can rise in the world – by marriage" (12). Wollstonecraft asserts that these "libertine notions" are partially the reason for women's oppression during the eighteenth century. Miss Milner seems to fit this idea; she becomes an "object of desire" in order to marry Dorriforth. However, Inchbald takes this notion of the beautiful fool much further than other contemporary authors.

In the Vindication, Wollstonecraft only discusses sexuality as it applies to marriage. Ashley Tauchert argues in the Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that for present-day feminists,

the right to a sexual life freed from the inevitabilities of motherhood and permanent partnership is a hard-won psychological and material gain. For Wollstonecraft writing in 1792, it was an inconceivable object. Sex was a dangerous business in 1792. . . (xvii)

Knowing this, Inchbald's treatment of female sexuality in *A Simple Story* becomes much more significant. Miss Milner embodies the idea of the coquette, but she does not manipulate men with the innocence and asexualized demeanor women of her era would have employed. What makes Miss Milner more radical is that she displays her sexuality openly, and she is aware of her own power. Instead of playing along in seeming submissiveness, relying solely on her flutters of the eye and blushes, she engages Lord Elmwood in power struggles through defiance. She does not flatter him, but expects him to flatter her as in the scene when they discuss his preference for her over Miss Fenton. Miss Milner takes the "constitution of civil society" Wollstonecraft writes of to an entirely different level; instead of playing down her sexuality, she emphasizes it and uses it to manipulate and gain power.

To present-day readers, Miss Milner is a much more attractive character because of her defiance. Her sexual power games are amusing and interesting, and her ability to

take advantage of her situation makes her seem daring and independent. In the eighteenth century, though, Miss Milner's dominance gained through manipulation would have seemed extreme and threatening. Inchbald is left with two options – either to kill Miss Milner or narrate the events of her marriage, which likely would have been a story of sexual repression of a lively character. Given the two extremes, Inchbald chooses Miss Milner's death, which is preferable to repression.

Ironically, Wollstonecraft argues that oppression drives women, like Miss Milner, to employ cunning means of gaining authority: "From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed" (221). Viewed in this way, Dorriforth becomes a victim of his own sexual repression and attempt to repress Miss Milner. His insistence that she must behave more suitably, as is proper for an eighteenth-century lady, forces her to find other means to assert herself. As a sexually aware woman, she resorts to using "follies," as Wollstonecraft refers to them, to manipulate her guardian. Instead of driving Miss Milner to conformity, Dorriforth's "tyranny" encourages her to become more extreme in her defiance. Therefore, sexual repression is not the solution to encouraging less frivolous manipulations in women.

Matilda seems to offer another solution, besides forced sexual repression by males, to the enduring question of how to remedy the eighteenth-century woman's plight. Matilda has not "been corrupted by the fashionable education of the day" but is educated in "that school of prudence" (Inchbald 338), which Wollstonecraft seems to prefer. Rather than emphasizing her beauty, Matilda focuses on sophisticated learning found in the books Sandford and her father deem challenging. It would seem, then, that Matilda's education and manners are preferable to her mother's cunning. But Spencer writes that this did not satisfy Wollstonecraft: "There was not enough contrast between mother and daughter . . . [Miss Milner] was presented in too favourable a light, allowed too many virtues; and her daughter was no advertisement for the better education she received" (xiv). Spencer quotes Wollstonecraft's assessment of Matilda: "Educated in adversity

she [Matilda] should have learned (to prove that a cultivated mind is a real advantage) how to bear, nay, rise above her misfortunes, instead of suffering her health to be undermined by the trials of her patience” (qtd. in Spencer xiv). Matilda, then, is not a suitable character to illustrate the benefits of intellectual learning. She does not “rise above her misfortunes” but employs affectations more closely aligned with an eighteenth-century woman’s reliance on femininity, mainly weeping and fainting. Therefore, because she is “no advertisement for the better education she received,” Matilda represents another extreme possibility of the eighteenth-century woman. Inchbald undermines the importance of intellectual advancement and continues to exploit the paradox of promoting “fashionable education” and cunning versus the “school of prudence” and sexual repression.

Another way Matilda represents the opposite extreme of her mother is in her own sexual repression. Contrary to Spencer’s assessment of Wollstonecraft’s criticism, Matilda and her mother seem complete opposites, rather than “not enough contrast.” In fact, Inchbald seems to purposely create a mother and daughter that are so unlike in their handling of sexuality, both characters become cautionary tales because of the extremes of their actions. While Miss Milner takes advantage of her sexuality, Matilda represses hers. This is not Inchbald’s attempt to reconcile Miss Milner’s nonconformity with a more conformist daughter; rather, Inchbald creates an undesirable character, even by Wollstonecraft’s standards, who represses her own sexuality to her detriment. In “suffering her health to be undermined by the trials of her patience,” Matilda submits to her father. In addition, the “school of prudence” that the narrator seems to value teaches Matilda that repressing sexuality is appropriate. She sees the extreme behavior of her mother and its consequences, and she acts in the opposite, but still extreme, way. As illustrated in the ending with impending marriage between Rushbrook and Matilda, though, this character’s behavior is still not preferable to Inchbald. Once again, sexual repression, even self-imposed, is not the solution to elevating the eighteenth-century

woman's status.

Given these two unappealing options, Inchbald creates an interesting paradox. Because, as I have discussed, it would have been impossible for Inchbald to write about sexuality without alienating her readers, she was forced to be creative in her treatment of sexual repression, sexuality, and power. She manages to handle these subjects brilliantly in *A Simple Story* by presenting two extremes and parallel cautionary tales. Miss Milner, possessing "many virtues" even by Wollstonecraft's admission, is a likable character despite her reliance on cunning and manipulation. I would argue that is because of her overt display of sexuality. Matilda, on the other hand, could still be appealing despite her weakness and because of her elevated intellect. What makes her unappealing, especially to present-day readers, is her repressed sexuality. The solution Inchbald implies is a balance of these two extremes; in order to advance the eighteenth-century woman's status, a young woman must embrace her sexuality while embracing intellectual development. Rather than relying on one and sacrificing the other completely, both sexuality and intellect must serve to shape a woman's identity. Recognizing this need for balance, Inchbald's novel implicitly advocates a solution that would make it possible for a woman to exist respectably in eighteenth-century society and still remain free to acknowledge her own sexual power.

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