

A LANGUAGE OF SIGNS: OBTAINING POWER IN ELIZABETH INCHBALD'S A  
SIMPLE STORY

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## ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Inchbald's A Simple Story (1791) is a groundbreaking novel that makes a complicated argument concerning feminine power and the possibility of undermining masculine authority. Inchbald, a trained dramatist and actress, uses her knowledge of theatrical gesture to demonstrate how eighteenth-century women could obtain a significant level of power by using their bodies as communicative instruments. The female characters in the novel forge an authentic feminine language for themselves through the performance of emotion and force their male counterparts to communicate with them in a discourse the women control. By impelling the male characters to use their system of language, the female characters forward their own desires and obtain a significant level of power and autonomy, thus, usurping the patriarchal system to a notable extent.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Gloria Walker, whose love and support have made so many things possible for me. She continues to be my most treasured friend.

## Introduction

A Simple Story is a fascinating novel written by the eighteenth-century woman of letters Elizabeth Inchbald, which until recently was largely neglected by literary critics. George Robinson first published the novel in 1791, and only a month later a second printing was required; it has been frequently reprinted since (1799, 1810, 1908, 1967, 1988). Though considered a popular classic in its time, A Simple Story has drawn little attention from contemporary scholars.<sup>1</sup> This dearth of attention is unfortunate because the novel is noteworthy on many levels; its social and political commentaries, Inchbald's innovative mechanics and reformulation of pre-existing literary techniques, and the stark realism of its characters are just a few of its intriguing and provocative elements. Terry Castle notes in her book Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction that A Simple Story "is a tour de force—a small masterpiece neglected far too long. Without exaggeration the case might be made for A Simple Story as the most elegant English fiction of the century" (290).

In the pages that follow, I argue that verbal communication is unattainable and ineffective for the female characters in the novel and that the women forge an original feminine language, a language of the body, using gesture and performance, to communicate in their male-dominated society. I also demonstrate how the lead male character, Dorriforth, is forced to learn and use this system of language, and when he does so, how Inchbald describes a power shift that occurs between the men and women in the book. Miss Milner and Matilda, the novel's heroines, achieve a limited degree of power, autonomy, and control in their male-dominated society by using a language based on gesture, physical performance, and visibility. Inchbald, a dramatist

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<sup>1</sup> All biographical information concerning Inchbald, the publication of the novel, and its popular reception taken from Pamela Clemit's introduction to the novel. (Penguin, 1996).

and actress, understood the unreliability of the spoken word, and offered a new mode of communication to women of the period through theatrical gesture and codified signs. Physical actions such as blushes, eye movements, and facial expressions often replace the spoken word in the novel, which places special importance on communication through the body and through the face in particular.

In the thesis, I also address how this feminine discourse of signs is connected to visibility, especially in the relationship between Dorriforth and his daughter, Matilda. I explore the ways in which Matilda's invisibility and displacement affect the amount of power she wields, and I challenge the position of other critics, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Eleanor Ty, and Candace Ward, who have dismissed Matilda as a nonentity and have tended to neglect the second half of the novel. I argue instead that Matilda's inability to be physically beheld by the other characters does not decrease her power within Elmwood House or make her a passive woman. It is Matilda's physical absence that provides her with real power because in trying to ignore her, the other characters are constantly aware of her presence and alter their actions accordingly.

Crucial to all of these issues is the notion of sensibility in the eighteenth century. I believe that Inchbald's characters demonstrate that sensibility, or susceptibility to emotion, is not gendered and that masculine authority can be undermined if female characters prey upon male sensibility using their own language of gesture and physicality. I also explore the powers and dangers of sensibility by examining how male characters must manage and withhold physical presence in order to protect male authority against this powerful feminine discourse.

A Simple Story leaves many questions unanswered, and perhaps the ambiguity accounts for all the critical disagreement surrounding the narrative. Castle is right in saying, "We do not

yet know, perhaps, how to read [Inchbald] fully [...]” (292). In the novel, Inchbald calls attention to the many inconsistencies and contradictions in male/female relationships, but ultimately leaves interpretation of the novel’s meaning and the author’s intentions up to the reader. I am convinced, however, that her training as an actress is the most important clue we have to understanding A Simple Story. If we examine the work in the context of gestures and physical performance, the text becomes less ambiguous. Inchbald’s heroines, Miss Milner and Matilda, use the language of the theater to elicit a sympathetic response from Dorriforth. They use their bodies to further their own causes, obtaining a limited, but still noteworthy, amount of power. The very fact that they can do so suggests that Dorriforth is made vulnerable by his emotions and sensibility. Inchbald provides her young female readers with an opportunity to undermine masculine authority and dominance. Inchbald believed the spoken language to be insufficient for truthful communication. To appreciate and to understand Inchbald and A Simple Story fully, we must train ourselves in the language of “simple signs.”

### The Writer

The creator of A Simple Story had a colorful and enterprising life that spanned the second half of the eighteenth century. Elizabeth Simpson was born in 1753, the daughter of a Roman Catholic farmer in Suffolk, England. At the age of nineteen she moved to London to pursue an acting career and there, met and married the actor and painter Joseph Inchbald, who was seventeen years her senior. Over the next several years, Inchbald acted in local productions at provincial theatres alongside her husband and friends John Philip Kemble, and his sister Sarah Siddons. Some critics, like Gerard A. Barker (1985) contend that the then twenty-year-old Kemble, towards whom Inchbald admitted an attraction, became the inspiration for the character



Dorriforth in A Simple Story and that Inchbald herself was the model for Miss Milner. Yet Inchbald stated in her own memoirs, that Kemble “never was at any time her lover,” not even after her husband’s death in 1780 though she somewhat paradoxically claims that “she would have jumped to have him” (qtd. in Barker 85). After Joseph Inchbald’s death in 1780, Inchbald made her debut on the London stage and eventually became a successful actress, playwright, and theatrical critic. Nine years later she quit the stage and turned her attention to prose writing, translation, and play editing before her death in 1821. Inchbald is best remembered for her two romantic novels, A Simple Story (1791) and Nature and Art (1796). Inchbald began working on A Simple Story in 1777 shortly after meeting Kemble for the first time, but the novel was not published until 1791. After the publication of A Simple Story, Inchbald’s work interests lay primarily in translation and editing. She translated Kotzebue’s Lovers’ Vows in 1798 and edited The British Theatre, twenty-five volumes of plays, between 1806 and 1809. Socially, Inchbald became involved with radicals William Godwin and Thomas Holcroft, both of whom are believed to have proposed marriage to her.

#### A Hardly Simple Story of Critical Reception

The major complication, and element most confusing to critics, is the two-part structure of A Simple Story. The first half of the novel details the life of the lively Miss Milner who, while entrusted to the guardianship of Dorriforth, a Catholic priest, falls in love with him. Dorriforth and Miss Milner eventually marry, after he is released from his religious duties and acquires the title of Lord Elmwood. The two have a daughter, Matilda, at the beginning of the second half of the novel. Lord Elmwood (whom throughout this study I refer to as Dorriforth for the sake of clarity and consistency) journeys to the West Indies four years after the couple is

married, and once there he has limited contact with his wife for many years. The second half of the novel picks up seventeen years later, after the former Miss Milner has had an adulterous affair and has been banished by her husband. The repentant Lady Elmwood dies at the start of the second half of the novel and Dorriforth allows his daughter Matilda to live in his home only if she agrees to hide herself from his sight. The novel's second half focuses on Matilda and her relationship with her father. Inchbald wrote the first half of A Simple Story between 1777 and 1779, but was unable to publish the work because of its short length. Sometime in 1789, she decided to combine the first half with another novella on which she had been working. Inchbald connected the two works by simply asking her reader to "imagine seventeen years elapsed, since he has seen or heard of any of those persons, who in the forgoing volumes have been introduced to his acquaintance" (183). Barker, who suggests a biographical reading of the novel, contends that joining the two works creates a lack of unity, and he argues that the second half undermines the positive progression of the first half with its "vapid sentimentality" (103).

Other critics, such as Michael Boardman (1996), have focused on the novel's inversion of the typical romantic formula. Boardman argues that Inchbald was most interested in creating an innovative novel, both structurally and mechanically, and he credits Inchbald with being one of the first writers "to construct serious plots out of romantic materials" (274-5). Both Paula Byrne (1999) and Peter Mortensen (2002) argue that Inchbald borrowed heavily from French sentimental fiction, especially Rousseau's use of the tutor/pupil relationship in Julie: ou, la Nouvelle Héloïse (1761). Mortensen goes further, suggesting that Inchbald also borrowed Matilda's name and Dorriforth's angry, forbidding character from Gothic romance and melodrama (365). George E. Haggerty (1996) also points to similarities between A Simple Story and Gothic texts, describing Dorriforth as a "darkly threatening paternal figure" and the "demon-

lover-mentor” toward whom Miss Milner and Matilda are attracted, but who remains inaccessible to both mother and daughter (655). Nora Nachumi (1999) argues that Inchbald’s theatrical background results in the use of gesture by the novel’s characters and forwards the plot, eliciting a sympathetic response from the reader.

Most of the criticism that has addressed A Simple Story has focused not so much on the novel’s structure or literary influences, but on its treatment of gender constraints and the power women wielded in Inchbald’s society. Critics, such as Jo Alyson Parker (1997) and Patricia Meyer Spacks (1990) see the two separate halves of A Simple Story as indicative of the two levels of power attainable to women, one of active resistance and one of passive submission. Spacks contends that the second half reaffirms the patriarchy and that the novel as a whole speaks of despair for women (201). Parker contends that Inchbald does not present a singular argument for either “female transgression”, depicted through Miss Milner, or, of “female self-regulation,” as seen in Matilda’s character (264). Parker believes that Inchbald struggled with the social expectations of women, and therefore that she both questions and affirms dominant beliefs to reveal their contradictions (265). Byrne partially agrees with Spacks and Parker, and credits Inchbald with expanding and complicating the coquette character, using Miss Milner to dispel social judgments about women (164), but she calls the novel one of education that meant to show young girls how to behave appropriately and demurely through Matilda’s character (163). Eleanor Ty (1993) contests the optimistic readings of A Simple Story and argues that Matilda is a symbol of “compromise and resignation” (87), accepted by the patriarchy only because of her passivity.

As even this brief synopsis of the critical reception suggests, the critics who have paid attention to the work tend to disagree with each other’s readings. Such controversy underscores

the novel's complexity both in subject matter and in form; and I would argue that it is its very complexity that shows the work is unusual and deserves more attention. A Simple Story presents a puzzle that until recently many scholars were quick to ignore or to dismiss. Terry Castle (1986) speculates that "[...] some of this neglect may be due to Inchbald's sardonic rendering, verging on parody, of a conventional world of eighteenth-century literary representation" (292). She goes on to say, "We do not yet know, perhaps, how to read her fully, for A Simple Story is a restlessly antiauthoritarian, even avant-garde work" (292).

The readings of A Simple Story as a commentary on gender politics in the late eighteenth century are especially provocative. Castle argues that the novel is a feminist critique of patriarchal order, and that Miss Milner and Matilda break through legal and paternal boundaries into a "physical order without negativity, a realm of ideal freedom" that she describes as "utopian" (295). Candace Ward (1999) takes a completely opposing view of the novel and claims, "Both women struggle against—and appear to lose to—mutually exclusive paradigms of proper and improper female behavior" (2). I believe, however, that neither Castle nor Ward are completely accurate in their readings and that the points Inchbald makes in A Simple Story are more complex and ambiguous than critics suggest. Rather than making a direct statement on feminine oppression, the narrative exposes, as Catherine Craft-Fairchild (1993) says, "defects in the patriarchal system not through explication, but through enactment [...] forcing readers to examine the foundations, assumptions, and implications of masculine domination" (120). The "novel achieves its strongest effect in what it does not say—in its silences and repetitions [...]" (Craft-Fairchild 120). Inchbald does not answer the questions or pose a polemic for her reader; she creates scenes that show us the complexities in men and women's relationships and interactions. In a letter to Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth noted this technique:

I am in the opinion that it is by leaving more than most writers to the imagination that you succeed so eminently in affecting it. By the force that is necessary to repress feeling we judge of the intensity of the feeling, and you always contrive to give us by intelligible but simple signs the measure of this force. (qtd. in Tompkins 351)

I believe Edgeworth one of Inchbald's most prescient readers.

### Speaking Through the Body

Unlike Castle and Ward, I do not see Miss Milner and Matilda as achieving absolute liberty and freedom, nor do I understand them to be crushed outright by the patriarchal system. Instead, in the pages that follow, I show how verbal communication is unattainable and ineffective for Miss Milner and Matilda, and that as women they are forced to create an original feminine language, a language of the body, using gesture and performance, to communicate with their male counterparts. Inchbald's female characters, like actors, use their physical bodies to perform emotion and to "express forbidden or inexpressible desires" (Nachumi 332). In doing so, the heroines create a new sort of language for themselves, more powerful and effective than verbal communication; gesture becomes "an alternative discourse to the logocentric language of patriarchal authority [...]" (Nachumi 337). By using a language based on gesture, physical performance, and visibility, both Miss Milner and Matilda achieve a limited, but still significant, level of power in the patriarchal system. Their creativity "mocks male binaries and control" (Craft-Fairchild 81) by transforming "Dorriforth from guardian to lover and from tyrant to father" (Nachumi 331).

## Understanding Sensibility

Crucial to my argument is the notion of sensibility, as it was understood in the late eighteenth century. In the mid-eighteenth century, “sensibility” was defined as one’s “capacity for refined emotion” and “a readiness to feel compassion for suffering, and to be moved by the pathetic in literature and art” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) (qtd. in Ward 1). Linked with the nervous system, sensibility presented itself as a physical reaction of the body to emotional stimuli. Mid-eighteenth-century sensibility was associated with virtue and compassion (Ward 1), but by the end of the century, sensibility had become increasingly suspect; “too much sensibility, too much indulgence in luxury or in association with women, might render men weak” (Breashears 454). At the time Inchbald was writing, “the sensible man came to be seen as emasculated, weakened by sentiment” and female sensibility was “viewed as a sign of self-indulgent emotionalism” and “dangerous sexuality” (Ward 1). In A Simple Story, Inchbald reaffirms the notion that male sensibility somehow weakens masculine authority, but she points to this vulnerability as an opportunity for women to achieve their own wishes by preying on this weakness.

Dorriforth’s sensibility opens the door for Miss Milner and Matilda, and his susceptibility to “refined emotion” and his “readiness to feel compassion” cause him to become affected by their language of signs and gestures. The narrator of the novel describes Dorriforth from the beginning of the novel as having “a gleam of sensibility” (9) and says that “on his countenance you beheld the feeling of his heart—saw all its inmost workings [...]. On this countenance his thoughts were pictured [...].” (10). Miss Milner and Matilda are able to communicate their desires and demands to Dorriforth through a language of the body because his sensibility is

affected by their physical presence; he is “susceptible to women and to sexuality” (Barker-Benfield 256). Their language is based on and dependent upon visibility and physicality. When Dorriforth is not in the physical presence of the women, his masculine authority regains its intensity, mostly with the encouragement of his mentor, Sandford, and he becomes determined to carry out his own desires for or against the women. Dorriforth is representative of the law of the father. He originally controls language and discourse through speaking rather than emoting, but the women are able to convert him into using their system of language by intruding their bodies upon him. The physical body becomes the essential element for the success of a feminine based language, and the relationship between visibility and sensibility is established. While temporarily removed from Dorriforth, Miss Milner receives a letter that describes him as “dejected” (94). Miss Milner “considered, and reflected upon it.—Dejected, thought she, what does that word exactly mean?—did I ever see Mr Dorriforth dejected?—how I wonder does he look in that state?” (94). Without the physical body, their communication is impossible; Miss Milner cannot communicate with Dorriforth or even imagine his true emotional state without physically beholding him. Later in the novel, Dorriforth becomes aware of this relationship between visibility and sensibility, and he attempts to manage his emotionalism by distancing himself from the women. He first uses distance as a “system he had marked out for himself, as the only means to keep his ward [Miss Milner] restrained within the same limitations” (25), and then later by removing Matilda entirely from his presence.

Ward argues that while this emphasis on body language enables the female characters a form of expression that does not violate the behavioral codes of the period, it points to their powerlessness in a patriarchal society. But I believe that in the novel the use of body language gives the women significant power and that body language in general can be more effective than

the spoken word. The narrator of the novel notes the unreliability of verbal communication: “But how unimportant, how weak, how ineffectual are *words* in conversation—looks and manners alone express” (19). Peter Brooks (1974) supports the notion that gesture is a powerful and natural form of discourse in an article examining the importance of mute characters in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century melodramas. Brooks describes gesture as “an effort to recover something like the mythical primal language, a language of presence, purity, immediacy” and contends that a language of gesture indicates that “the conventional language of social intercourse has become inadequate to express true emotional valences” (555). The inaccessibility and inefficiency of conventional language positions the women in A Simple Story as figurative mutes and because of this positioning they forge a more authentic language for themselves through gesture and performance. Ty describes the heroines’ language as “the pre-verbal, semiotic language” (91) termed by Kristeva as “the chora [...] associated with the maternal and the feminine” (89). Their feminine-based language is a legitimate and powerful mode of communication “so highly codified that all its signs—including a set repertory of looks, sighs, gestures—are fixed, and fully legible to the observer trained in the code” (Brooks 555). Interestingly, Brooks argues that codified language like that demonstrated by Miss Milner and Matilda, is a language of verbs and adjectives, and is unable to convey nouns; it is thus a language of “action and presence,” which is “incapable of expressing abstractions, hypotheses, preferential or optative situations” (557). Theirs is a discourse formed because “[...] words are considered inadequate to bear the charge of meaning required” (Brooks 552) and because their speech is limited by patriarchal boundaries which “effectually stifles [their] voice” (Parker 261). In an episode with Sandford, Miss Milner demonstrates the power of gesture when “[...] she darted a piercing look at Mr Sandford, which more pointedly expressed she was angry with him,



than had she spoken volumes [...]” (44). Miss Milner and Matilda may be powerless at first, unable to break into male discourse and express their true desires, but contrary to Ward’s assumptions, in creating their own language of signs, they claim power for themselves and eventually make the male characters learn to communicate with them on their terms.

As a trained dramatist, Inchbald was familiar with the unreliability of spoken language and knew gesture could sometimes communicate emotions more effectively than dialogue. She underscores this unreliability “by staging a series of stilted and artificial conversations between the inhabitants” and exposing “the repressiveness of a society where social decorum forbids both men and women to refer to genuine emotional, let alone physical, experiences” (Mortensen 362). Inchbald’s heroines use gesture to elicit sympathetic responses from their male counterparts much like an actor does to an audience, as Nachumi attests in her study of the presence of theatrical gesture and movements in A Simple Story. Nachumi argues that Inchbald draws on her “knowledge of the ways in which theatrical gestures were used to generate sympathy in order to make a feminist argument regarding ideas about gender popular society at the end of the century” (331). Understood in this way, Miss Milner’s behavior is a performance designed to elicit a response of sympathy and emotion from Dorriforth, much like an actress seeks a response from her audience. The performance works and Dorriforth is securely attracted by it: “[...] Miss Milner, whom he [Dorriforth] tenderly loved, could put on no change, or appear in any new character that did not, for the time she adopted it, seem to become her” (132). In testing Dorriforth’s love for her, Miss Milner determines to “retrieve that haughty character which had inspired so many of her admirers with passion” (156) and the narrator notes that “she acted this character well” (156). As an actress, then, Miss Milner is successful, and her performance affects Dorriforth: “He trembled—when he attempted to speak, he stammered—he

perceived his face burning with the blood that flushed to it from confusion, and thus one confusion gave birth to another, till his state was pitiable” (159). Dorriforth’s physical response to Miss Milner’s performance provides her with “convincing proofs of [his] love” (161), emphasizing the fact that body language is more trusted than verbal communication and that Miss Milner has significant power over him. Audiences and readers of the period recognized that emotion manifested itself in outward behavior and movement, and they understood stock postures to be indicative of certain emotions (Nachumi 318). Surprise, for instance, was indicated when the eyes and mouth were opened and the nostrils widened, the character standing with arms extended away from the body with fingers spread outward (Nachumi 320). Nachumi notes that Miss Milner’s response to Dorriforth’s engagement to Miss Fenton, is consistent with the understood expression of sorrow: “She leaned, pale as death, on the shoulder of Miss Woodley, her eyes fixed, with seeming insensibility to all that was said (109)” (332).

It is indisputable that Inchbald’s dramatic training flowed over into her prose as she incorporated “the new naturalistic style of acting [...] into the techniques of fiction” (Kelly 79) and took “seriously the sentimental convention that there are some things words cannot express” (Kelly 86). J. M. S. Tompkins (1961) points out that

Mrs. Inchbald, it is true, sees her whole scene as a producer must see it; she knows exactly how and where all her characters are placed, and, when it is relevant, imparts her knowledge; but the movements she describes are the significant ones, those that would catch a spectator’s eye in a theatre and add to his emotion or his knowledge. They are more often subtly than obviously relevant, and frequently they take the place of speech. (351)

One example of the technique Tompkins describes occurs during a dinner party at Elmwood House. Inchbald carefully constructs the scene so that verbal communication is unnecessary, and the true emotions and feelings of the characters are clearly evident in their body language.

Inchbald writes, “Some of the persons present laughed—Mrs Horton coughed—Miss Woodley blushed—Lord Elmwood [a relative] sneered—Dorriforth frowned—and Miss Fenton, looked just as she did before” (49-50). No conversation takes place, but the emotion each character experiences is conveyed. Inchbald herself noted in her criticism of a *Macbeth* production the importance of gesture and its preeminence over spoken language: “above all, the fear, the terror, the remorse...which speak in looks, whispers, sudden starts, and writhings [...] render this play one of the most impressive moral lessons the stage exhibits” (qtd. in Nachumi 319).

### Sensibility: Masculinity’s Demise?

In order for the feminine style of language to be effective, Dorriforth must learn the meaning and significance of the codified signs and gestures. In the beginning of the novel, Dorriforth is confused by Miss Milner’s body language. When discussing her relationship with Lord Frederick, Dorriforth cannot get a direct answer from Miss Milner, and says, ““Your words tell me one thing, while your looks declare another—which am I to trust?”” (52). Yet later in their relationship, Dorriforth uses the format himself, indicating that he has learned to decipher and to manipulate the language of signs:

‘It is impossible, my dear Miss Milner,’ he gently whispered, ‘to say, the joy I feel that your disorder has subsided.’

But though it was impossible to say, it was possible to *look* what he felt, and his looks expressed his feelings. (96-7)

Eleanor Ty (1993) accurately notes that this passage suggests that “linguistic expression is beginning to be unnecessary as Dorriforth learns to signify with gestures and looks” (91). Ty goes on to say that “[...] the verbal becomes totally expendable” (91) for Dorriforth and Miss Milner:

She instantly stifled her tears, and looked at him earnestly, as if to imply, 'What now, my lord?'

He only answered with a bow, which expressed these words alone: 'I beg your pardon.' And immediately withdrew.

Thus each understood the other's language, without either uttering a word. (168)

The verbal becomes not only expendable, but also uncomfortable and unnatural for Dorriforth:

[...] he did not utter a syllable.—Yet he took her hand, and held it closely between his.—He then bowed most respectfully, and left her.

No, 'I wish you well;—I wish you health and happiness.' No 'Prayers for blessings on her.'—Not even the word 'farewell,' escaped his lips—perhaps, to have attempted any of these, might have choked his utterance. (171)

These passages indicate that Miss Milner has forced Dorriforth to communicate with her in her own language. If she cannot break past the masculine boundaries of verbal communication, she can require him to communicate in a discourse that she controls, thus acquiring a significant level of power. Her performance of emotion, "[...] her eye-lids fell involuntarily [...] a thousand blushes crowded over her face," forces an action in him: "He was struck with these sudden signals; hastily recalled his former countenance, and stopped the conversation" (105); "He saw her countenance change—he looked at her steadfastly [...] she felt, and she expressed anguish.—Lord Elmwood was alarmed and shocked" (108). Dorriforth and Miss Milner communicate through gesture, "becoming the dearest friends in expressions" (142), and her power over him develops from his "compliance to what he knew was her earnest desire" (142). Ty notes that "[...] Dorriforth learns to trust less in language and the symbolic order, and to have more faith in the pre-verbal, semiotic rhythms [...] which are associated with the feminine and the world of emotions" (91). Miss Milner teaches Dorriforth to signify his emotions physically, to speak to her in her own language, and in doing so, she usurps his masculine authority and claims power for herself. Forcing Dorriforth to use the feminine-based language "is an example of how the

power of the female can result in reversal and disturbances in hierarchical positions and roles” (Ty 94). In a similar vein, G. J. Barker-Benfield (1992) concurs that “conversion is at the heart of Inchbald’s A Simple Story” (255).

The power shift occurs when Dorriforth is forced to learn and use the women’s system of language, as he responds to their performance and codified signs. Instead of masculine authority dictating the realm of discourse, the power to control communication is reassigned to the women. Miss Milner and Matilda take Dorriforth’s power away from him as they force him to communicate in their language, and reclaim the authority for themselves. Miss Milner is highly aware of her power over Dorriforth and revels in her victory:

‘Are not my charms even more invincible than I ever believed them to be? Dorriforth, the grave, the sanctified, the anchorite Dorriforth, by their force is animated to all the ardour of the most impassioned lover—while the proud priest, the austere guardian, is humbled, if I but frown, into the veriest slave of love.’  
(131-2)

Miss Milner’s confidence in her power is so great that she goes on to say, “‘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’” (132). She then decides to test his affection and “‘force him still to yield to his love’” (140). Miss Milner’s decision to test Dorriforth’s love and determine if he “‘love[s] me as I wish to be loved’” (132), proves that she is now completely in control of their relationship. The shift in power is evident as Dorriforth finds that “[...] she, who as his ward, had been ever gentle, and (when he strenuously opposed) always obedient; he now found as a mistress, sometimes haughty; and to opposition, always insolent” (132). This shift suggests that sensibility or the susceptibility to emotion, is not gendered as was thought in the period, but that men, too, could feel—deeply, passionately, and, ultimately, despairingly. By exposing masculine emotionalism, Inchbald presents the eighteenth-century female with the possibility of

attaining a limited, but nonetheless meaningful, level of power by using a feminine discourse based on the body.

#### Sensibility: Miss Milner's Power

In Inchbald's narrative, the heroines' performances "renders dialogue superfluous" (Kelly 84). The narrator of A Simple Story directly addresses the inefficiency of verbal communication, noting that even when Miss Milner does communicate through speech, it is her body language that delivers the true message. The narrator says,

Her replies had all the effect of repartee, not because she possessed those qualities which can properly be called wit, but that what she said was spoken with an energy, an instantaneous and powerful perception of what she said, joined with a real or well-counterfeited simplicity, a quick turn of the eye, and an arch smile of the countenance.—Her words were but the words of others, and, like those of others, put into common sentences; but the delivery made them pass for wit [...]. (17)

It is through this sort of dramatization, that Miss Milner is able to gain a "limited degree of agency within a patriarchal society" (Nachumi 331) and thus acquires significant power over Dorriforth. The relationship between Dorriforth and Miss Milner occurs almost exclusively through body language, and Dorriforth is always more moved by Miss Milner's blushes, sighs, and eye movements--her physical discourse--than by her speech:

His heart had taken the most decided part against her, and his face assumed the most severe aspect of reproach; when her appearance gave an instantaneous change to *his* whole mind, and countenance. (51)

Gary Kelly (1976) argues that gesture is the most natural language: "[...] since words are the language of this super-ego, only gestures can elude the censorship of conscience to tell the story of the heart's imprisonment" (86-7).

Ward sees Miss Milner's reliance on physicality as a "submissive posture (that) suggests a disembodiment" and goes on to say that Miss Milner sacrifices her "agency as a desiring subject to assume a passivity more likely to provoke Dorriforth's desire and become an object 'worthy' of his love" (8). It is impossible to understand Ward's claim that "Miss Milner's defiance evaporates [...]" (8) in scenes with Dorriforth or that she is powerless over him, when she openly declares that "[...] instead of stooping to him, I wait in the certain expectation, of his submission to me" (161). Miss Milner never truly submits to Dorriforth, but rather she controls him more effectively by playing the part of the submissive lover than she can through blatant defiance and disobedience: "[...] she sometimes put on the looks and gesture of assent, and sometimes even spoke the language of conviction;" (20), but she never truly submits. Miss Milner first overpowers Dorriforth through "delicate, struggles for power" (142). Miss Woodley acknowledges Miss Milner's performance of emotion, saying, "if you will only be humble, and appear sorry.—You know your power over him [...]" (152). Though Miss Milner appears submissive in some scenes, Ward fails to acknowledge that Miss Milner's behavior is carefully contrived to more completely overpower Dorriforth. Once she is "perfectly secure of the affections of the man she loved" (132), affection she created by preying on his sensibility through body language, Miss Milner begins to openly defy him; she "takes that acknowledgment [of his love] as an opportunity for the exercise of power" (Spacks 197). After Dorriforth forbids Miss Milner from attending the masquerade, she goes despite him, and declares, "[...] if he will not submit to be my lover, I will not submit to be his wife—nor has he the affection I require in a husband" (145). Caroline Breashears (2004) argues that Dorriforth forbids Miss Milner from attending the masquerade because he is "afraid of becoming effeminate" (458), but Miss Milner's power over Dorriforth becomes so significant that she is confident enough to outwardly

defy him and “put him to the proof” (140). She proclaims that if Dorriforth “will not give [her] a specimen of that power” (156), she “demands this submission [...] I will oblige him to it” (156). Miss Milner is willing to “do something that any prudent man ought *not* to forgive” (140), in order to ensure that in exchange for her love, she “will have something more than a *great regard* in return” (140). Miss Milner is not willing to be loved conditionally, but demands respect and equal footing in the relationship: “‘But is [Dorriforth’s love] such as mine?—*I could love him* if he had a thousand faults’” (141). Miss Milner, then, cannot be viewed as the submissive, powerless character Ward describes, but rather as a woman able to claim a great deal of authority and equality for herself by preying on Dorriforth’s sensibility through performance and body-language. “She retains her power over him despite—perhaps even because of—her lack of docility” (Parker 259), and her triumph through disobedience is contrary to eighteenth-century guidelines for proper female behavior.

Parker would disallow the proficiency and competence with which I credit Miss Milner. Parker claims that “Miss Milner relies on beauty, rather than intellect, as a means for gaining power: ‘as a woman, she was privileged to say any thing she pleased; and as a beautiful woman, she had a right to expect whatever she pleased to say, should be admired’ (40)” (259). Parker goes on to say this “maxim is a slippery one [...]. It implies that the reception of a woman’s speech has nothing to do with what she actually says, but only with how she looks as she says it; she is given the freedom to speak in a context that renders her speech meaningless or inessential” (259). I think Parker is right in pointing to the meaninglessness of women’s speech in Miss Milner’s society, but I also believe it is a credit to Miss Milner’s intellect that she recognizes this obstacle and so uses a language of signs to render her discourse with Dorriforth significant. She is innovative and finds a way to communicate and forward her desires, demonstrating a real



degree of power in what Mary Wollstonecraft, in Vindication of the Rights of Woman, called “the first fair defect in nature, the sovereignty of beauty” (55). Wollstonecraft found power obtained through ways like Miss Milner’s to be degrading and called such women “short-lived queens” (55) who were not willing to “labour to obtain the sober pleasures of equality” (55). But if Wollstonecraft would have decried Miss Milner’s actions, I celebrate them. Miss Milner does not attempt to achieve respectability or honor; she simply wants to win the power struggle with Dorriforth. She succeeds in obtaining Dorriforth’s love despite her unwillingness to submit to his desires, an unusual achievement for the period. Even Parker concedes, “although we cannot applaud the despotic power that Miss Milner wields, we can appreciate it as a gesture of resistance [...]” (261).

#### Matilda’s Power

Some critics have dismissed Matilda and the second part of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Ward notes that Matilda “is often dismissed by critics as a nonentity” and that “Mary Wollstonecraft was dismayed by her passivity [...]” (13). Ward seems to agree with this position, saying that Matilda’s “invisibility bespeaks her powerlessness” and that “Matilda becomes (im)material: like a ghost [...]” (13). I disagree with Ward, and believe that although Matilda remains invisible in Elmwood House, her presence is the most powerful force in the second half of the novel, determining the actions and behaviors of most of the characters. Matilda may be unable to alter her situation, but she is powerful as a presence, influential even without being physically beheld by the others living around her. Her invisibility works to her benefit because she is always

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<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Ty (1993) views Matilda as a symbol of compromise and resignation. Catherine Craft-Fairchild (1993) claims Matilda’s feelings for her father are Oedipal and argues Matilda’s only hope of redemption is to seduce Dorriforth. Paula Byrne (1999) and Gerard A. Barker (1985) largely neglect the second half of the novel and Matilda’s character in their criticism, focusing their attention on Miss Milner and the first half of the text.

present in the minds of the characters who are constantly trying to avoid her. Nevertheless, Matilda's real ability to exercise her power over her father through the language of gesture and performance is impeded by the physical distance between them; again the language relies on visibility and physicality to be effective. Dorriforth (now Lord Elmwood) and Matilda communicate through "substitutes," which establish "convoluted lines of communication" (Parker 263), and prevent Matilda from controlling their discourse as her mother was able to do. The narrator of the novel even suggests that "Lady Elmwood was no more, and the charm was broken" (235). Yet Matilda understands that the source of her power lies in her body and eventually she takes deliberate steps to assert her own desires.

Dorriforth's refusal to behold Matilda demonstrates that "he suspects his weakness (as he calls it)" (211) and is now aware of his sensibility. He has learned to barricade himself from Matilda physically in order to isolate himself from her emotionally. Matilda is an example of "the way in which bodies—as conduits to the emotions—are withheld or managed" (Nachumi 333) by her father. Nachumi notes that most of the suffering in the novel comes from the physical body being withheld (333), thus stunting the communication and the emotional connection between characters. Nachumi also points out that "maintaining [Dorriforth's] physical distance is a necessary part of his ability to lay down what contemporary writers call the 'law of the father' in non-negotiable terms" (334), so he uses letters to banish both his wife and daughter, thereby "wielding authority from afar" (333). By banishing Matilda, Dorriforth admits his vulnerability to the power of her physical presence and he returns to a "shell...[that is] a reversion to masculine culture" (Barker-Benfield 256). Physically isolating himself for protection, Dorriforth is unwilling to "suffer [his] heart to be again softened by an object [he] might dote on" (195). His withholding himself from Matilda temporarily thwarts

communication between them, and it also curtails her ability to overpower Dorriforth. Without direct contact with Dorriforth, Matilda only “tests her father’s command in subtle, obsessive ways, haunting his library in his absence, gazing at portraits of him, listening for the sounds of his carriage” (Castle 324). She secretly considers intruding herself on him, saying, ““My father within a few rooms of me, and yet I am debarred from seeing him!—Only by walking a few paces I might be at his feet, and perhaps receive his blessing [...] to entertain the thought, that it is possible I could do this, is a source of great comfort”” (212). Matilda is prevented from using the powerful language of the body until she and Dorriforth come face to face on the staircase of Elmwood House and he is forced to physically behold her.

The meeting seems accidental at first, but a closer reading of the passage indicates that Matilda intentionally pursues her own desire to meet her father:

When she had descended a few stairs, she heard a footstep walking slowly up; and, (from what emotion she could not tell,) she stopped short, half resolved to return back.—She hesitated a single instant which to do—then went a few steps farther till she came to the second landing place; when, by the sudden winding of the staircase,—Lord Elmwood was immediately before her! (255)

One can assume Matilda had traveled the staircase many times, and yet she does not turn back when she hears the footstep, although she is certain to encounter the other person ascending. She seems to accept responsibility for intentionally confronting her father as she says, ““I know I have done wrong—I know I had but one command from my father, and that I have disobeyed”” (257). Matilda goes on to say, ““What have I to fear if I disobey my father’s commands once more?—he cannot use me worse.—I’ll stay here till he returns—again throw myself in his way [...]”” (263). Matilda is aware that her power over her father lies in her physical body—this would be obvious to her because of her banishment— and so as a last minute attempt to reconcile with him, she throws herself in front of him. Knowing that she will be sent from

Elmwood House permanently does not prevent Matilda from “disobey[ing] the law of the father, but the tenor of her disobedience differs dramatically from that of her mother” (Parker 262). Matilda does not have the opportunities to test Dorriforth as frequently as Miss Milner had, but she understands her power lies in her physical body, and so she spontaneously tests her father’s sensibility by throwing herself before him. The incident does have the effect Matilda desires: “her conversion succeeds” (Barker-Benfield 256), and “for the second time in A Simple Story, patriarchal violence is quelled, and feminine delight made paramount” (Castle 325). Dorriforth’s sensibility is breached when collapsing in his arms, Matilda says, ““Save me”” (255), and “Her voice unmanned him.—His long-restrained tears now burst forth—and seeing her relapsing into the swoon again, he cried out eagerly to recall her.” (255). When Matilda falls into Dorriforth, “[...] he still held her there—gazed on her attentively—and once pressed her to his bosom” (255). The sight of her physical body undermines his emotional distancing, and though he is unable to speak the love he feels for her, he communicates it through the language of the body, pressing her to his heart. Dorriforth exits the situation by handing Matilda to a servant without “one word of any kind” (256), but his “face was agitated with shame, with pity, with anger, with paternal tenderness” (256). His body physically responds to “the external signs of Matilda’s emotions” (Nachumi 335).

After their encounter, Dorriforth again resorts to emotional distancing, “still fearful of sympathetic identification with her” (Ward 14), and sends Matilda away from Elmwood House. When she is later abducted, her effect on Dorriforth becomes obvious, as he instantly calls for his pistols and goes to save her. After he rescues his daughter, she is speechless and “could only turn to him with a look of love and duty; her tongue could not utter a sentence” (310). Again, Matilda’s reliance on gesture reminds us “that patriarchal power prohibits free speech”

(Nachumi 336), but Craft-Fairchild goes so far as to describe Matilda in this moment as “abject” and completely “forbidden verbal expression in masculine language” (115-16). I would argue, however, that Matilda, like her mother, utilizes the feminine-based language of signs and gestures and communicates more effectively what she intends through her female body, than she could through conventional masculine speech. Surely Matilda could have stood up and said, “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here, Father!,” but her tears and looks of love, are more effective in solidifying their relationship. In fact, the narrator says their reunion is “the happiest [moment Dorriforth] had ever known” (309), and rather than telling Matilda his feelings, Dorriforth “kissed her affectionately” as “a token [she had] nothing to fear” (311). Matilda gains control over him just as her mother was able to do through the performance of emotion.

The affirmation of gesture as a powerful tool is also reiterated at the novel’s conclusion, as Matilda takes Dorriforth's hand and kneels before him “with the utmost innocence painted on her face” (316) to plead mercy for her cousin, Rushbrook. Dorriforth “turned aside to conceal his sensations” (316) and ultimately tells Matilda that Rushbrook’s fate “*shall* be in [her] power,” and she is granted the opportunity “to give, or to refuse” at “[her] own pleasure” (317). Here she achieves a tremendous amount of power and control for herself and over Dorriforth and Rushbrook, by using her body as a performing instrument and preying on her father’s sensibility. Ward’s claim that Matilda recognizes “that her body is her ultimate weakness” (15) is unjustified. Matilda manipulates the situation, and succeeds in achieving her wishes. Her power lies in her body and “its ability to affect Elmwood emotionally—thus earn[ing] her a limited form of autonomy” (Nachumi 337).

## The Power of Bodies

Dorriforth's reactions to Miss Milner and Matilda suggest that men are susceptible to emotion and feeling in ways previously associated primarily with women. Men were thought to be able to control their emotions and reactions, and the notion of sensibility was thought of as a feminine fault by the 1790s. With Dorriforth's responses to emotional performance, however, Inchbald suggests that sensibility is not gendered and her "use of gesture helps collapse this distinction by showing that both men and women must respond sympathetically to the language of the body" (Nachumi 334). The women's physical bodies are communicative instruments toward which Dorriforth is responsive and "despite Elmwood's efforts to maintain an emotional distance, the heroines' intrusive bodies constantly undermine his emotional reserve" (Nachumi 334). Even at the end of her life, after her banishment, Miss Milner remains aware of the power her physical body wields over Dorriforth, and so she calls for her estranged husband to "cast (his) imagination into the grave where I am lying...—Behold *me*, also—in my altered face there is no anxiety—no joy or sorrow—all is over.—My whole frame is motionless—my heart beats no more [...]" (199). She realizes that her power over Dorriforth lies primarily in her physical manifestation, her visible body, rather than in her words, and she needs for him to evoke her image so that her wishes will be granted. Miss Milner's letter and her description of her body "creates a physical immediacy that emulates the effect of embodied speech" (Nachumi 335) and provoke a physical response in Dorriforth, as he begins to cry and decides to allow Matilda to live in his home.

If sensibility is not gendered, then Inchbald seems to be affirming the notion that concerned eighteenth-century culture, that sensibility undermined male authority and "subordinated reason to passion" (Ward 11). Ward sees Inchbald as restoring the social order

that she proved could be disrupted by male sensibility in the first half of the novel, by depicting Dorriforth as regaining control over his emotions in the second, which she reads as the “process of Dorriforth’s re-masculation” (11). This claim is partially correct. Inchbald does demonstrate in the first half of the narrative that men are just as emotionally susceptible as women and that sensibility can result in a power shift between men and women if one preys upon those vulnerabilities. But what Ward sees as evidence of Dorriforth’s “renunciation of sensibility” (11) in the second half, Inchbald’s description of him as “an example of implacable rigour and injustice” (183), is not a genuine description of Dorriforth’s character. Both halves of the novel seem to indicate that the only way Dorriforth can conquer his sensibility and protect himself is through a distance that he can never maintain for very long. He has not become insensible, but has become aware of his susceptibility and takes measures to protect himself, to isolate himself. His true feelings are thinly protected behind his pseudo-authority, and the women have only to intrude their presence before him to render him virtually powerless to deny them. He always goes back on his threats with Miss Milner; he agrees to take Matilda in when Miss Milner summons her image before his mind’s eye, and he cannot uphold Matilda’s banishment after their encounter on the stairwell. Inchbald demonstrates that “men have the capacity to be converted by women, [she] shows this twice [...] to be effective, such a conversion must be deserved by a virtuous and self-governing female” (Barker-Benfield, 257).

## Conclusion

Inchbald’s narrative technique allows her to demonstrate the opportunities for power available to women of her period. Her technique is more subtle than the “stagey” or “stylized gesture” seen in other “sentimental parts of eighteenth-century novels and romances” (Tompkins

354), and is also an ingenious device with a purpose. Like the approach she advocates, Inchbald, through gesture, discreetly points to real opportunities for female power and the undermining of masculine authority. The novel presents a complex argument concerning female power in the eighteenth century, one that could be threatening to both traditional and feminist critics alike. For Inchbald's heroines, the power to usurp masculine domination lies not in their words or critical rhetoric, but in their bodies. Inchbald's argument is potentially dangerous because it places the utmost importance on the female body, and perhaps that is why critics have chosen to largely avoid the novel. Some critics, like Gerard A. Barker and Michael Boardman, have avoided or argued against gender politics in the novel and have instead focused on biographical readings or the novel's form and arrangement. The complicated articulation of female power demonstrated in the novel does not appear to be a subject they are willing to delve into. Feminist critics like Eleanor Ty and Candace Ward generally view the novel as demonstrating the success of the patriarchy in crushing female autonomy in the eighteenth century. They argue that Miss Milner is destroyed by her attempt to rival Dorriforth and that Matilda is accepted by him only because of her passivity. For such critics, power based on the body is a dangerous issue that they are not willing to celebrate or advocate. Because the heroines' power is based on the body rather than the mind, Ty, Ward, and others perceive Miss Milner and her daughter as remaining constrained by patriarchal order and unsuccessful in their attempts to rival masculine authority.

It is unfortunate that the feminist critics have such a limited understanding of power. Through Miss Milner and Matilda's characters, Inchbald presents her readers with two very real examples of power attainable to women of the period. Without access to male-authored language, the women forge a new mode of communication for themselves, and force the patriarch of their family to communicate in a discourse they control: a definite credit to their



intellect. Their discourse is based on the body, but that too, is not as problematic as feminist critics suggest. Body language is more authentic than the spoken word in many situations, as Inchbald demonstrates, and is not exploitative to the women, because the men are also forced to use their bodies as communicative instruments. Miss Milner and Matilda are able to gain a significant level of power and autonomy for themselves through their language of the body and are able to transform their relationships with Dorriforth into situations they desire and control. Inchbald presents female readers of the eighteenth century with a woman who can confidently say, “[...] instead of stooping to him, I wait in the certain expectation, of his submission to me” (161), and she demonstrates to them how to subtly undermine masculine authority in their own lives. The novel does not depict complete female autonomy, but that would not be realistic for the period. The level of power Inchbald advocates is very real, however, and therefore is very significant in its scope.

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