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Chapter 5

Rethinking surrender: Elizabeth Inchbald and the ‘Catholic Novel’

Kaley Kramer

Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* might easily be mistaken for a standard Gothic tale, offering a warning about the dangers of unrestrained female desire, littered with typical generic detritus: a vulnerable heroine, a stern guardian, an isolated and insular household, malevolent foreign influence, and an indefinable threat of violence. Orphaned at the age of 17, Miss Milner is sent to live with Mr Dorriforth, a Catholic priest. Burdened by grief, isolated from her friends, taken from her life among fashionable society, the heroine is plagued by the suspicions of her new guardian and his Catholic household. Visitors are forbidden and her movements are carefully watched. Her guardian dispenses with his religious vows and becomes a powerful landowner. Guardianship turns to a hurried and tumultuous courtship and hasty marriage. A momentary happiness, however, leads back to distrust and betrayal. Freed from the constraints of priesthood and cuckolded by his neglected wife, Dorriforth unleashes the tyrant lurking within. Hypocritical Catholic to the core, Dorriforth (now Lord Elmwood) banishes his once-beloved wife, and neglects their daughter. After the requisite trials and tribulations, reconciliation comes through the sufferings of his Protestant daughter, whose filial devotion overcomes religious conflict and leads her back to her inheritance.

Of course, *A Simple Story* is not that simple. Under the guise of genre fiction, Inchbald unravels a deep tension in the political climate of her England. Until recently, criticism has tended to shy away from discussing Inchbald’s religious affiliation, aided by her own declaration that her life after leaving home and before her final retirement was without religion. As her obituary in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* demonstrates, Inchbald was, nevertheless, publically known as a Roman Catholic, an identity that, by 1821, did not preclude her being warmly praised as a ‘celebrated’ woman of ‘unimpeachable’ conduct.¹ Annibel Jenkins’ recent biography of Inchbald downplays the novel’s religious concerns, refuting J.M.S. Tompkins’ 1968 claim that it was the ‘first English Catholic novel’. More

¹ *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, vol. 91, pt. 2 (1821), p. 184. I am grateful to Teresa Barnard for pointing out the level of interest that the obituary evinces in the details of Catholic observations of death and burial.

recently, Bridget Keegan has demonstrated the depths of Inchbald's theological concerns in her exploration of the influence of John Philip Kemble on *A Simple Story* in particular.² While Kemble's presence in Inchbald's life continues to titillate literary historians, Keegan re-visioned the relationship as based on a mutual interest in Catholic doctrines and animated by extended discussions about Catholicism. Her reading of the novel delves deeper than any other recent study into the nuance and complexity of Catholic doctrines that inform Inchbald's representations of English Catholicism. This chapter does not aspire to the theological nuance of Keegan's argument, but takes from Keegan the belief in Inchbald's truly innovative and radical introduction of Catholicism in a Protestant literary form. While the deeper engagement of Jesuit spirituality recovers Inchbald's contentious novel, Keegan's argument relies on a level of theological learning unlikely in a popular readership. This is not to say that it is not a valid and very persuasive interpretation but that there are other ways that the novel participates in the rational discourse about religious and cultural difference in the 1790s.

Only the second half of *A Simple Story* has been read as Gothic; the first half sets up the Gothic environment and characters needed for the drama of the later volumes. The markers, nonetheless, are all there from the beginning. If the Gothic demonstrates the 'natural aversion' of Protestantism to Catholicism, offering a 'means of anti-Catholic expression', then Inchbald's novel explores the reasons that require such a cultural outlet.³ Her subject is not simply the self-conscious exploration of genre, however. While the generic markers (sensibility and Gothic) locate the novel in an appropriately 'feminine' literary milieu, the novel also participates in traditionally male-dominated discourses of theology and national history. Though J.M.S. Tompkins argued that the novel keeps Catholicism within tight bounds, it is clearly not there merely for show.⁴ *A Simple Story* explores the familiarity of Catholicism in English society at the end of the eighteenth century. Even characters as 'alien' as a Jesuit priest, who is the tormentor of the Protestant heroine, are rendered as resolutely English characters and not caricatures. The novel accomplishes a remarkable feat of demonstrating the intimate relationship between English Catholics and Protestants,

² Bridget Keegan, "'Bred a Jesuit": *A Simple Story* and Late Eighteenth-Century English Catholic Culture', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71/4 (2008): pp. 687-706.

³ Maria Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism: Religion, Cultural Exchange, and the Protestant Novel, 1785-1829* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 2-3.

⁴ J.M.S. Tompkins, ed., 'Introduction' in Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story* (1791) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. vii-xvi (p. xi).

acknowledging the unity of a shared cultural inheritance and the lingering distrust caused by a long history of ‘violence, persecution, and [for Catholics] apostasy’.⁵ Inchbald’s theatrical experience clearly informs her fiction, her ‘dramatic’ style noted by her earliest reviewers and recent scholarship. It is this attention to the unspoken, to the language of gesture and movement that enables Inchbald’s most compelling statement on the continued tension between Catholics and Protestants and the possibility of reconciliation through a mutual surrender.

The relationship between Catholics and Protestants had, in many ways, reached new levels of tension in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Though the penal laws restricting Catholics in England were rarely exercised, they remained in place until 1778, when the reforms began that would lead to Catholic Emancipation in 1829. In 1780, reaction to the first Relief Act catalysed violent protests culminating in the Gordon Riots. These events served to remind English Catholics that tolerance depended on their ‘modest and unthreatening behaviour’, not in agitating Parliament for reform.⁶ Michael Tomko’s recent exploration of Inchbald’s earlier drama, *The Mogul Tale* (1784) discusses Inchbald’s reaction to the Gordon Riots, caught as she was between ‘the two sites of Lord Gordon’s riots’, Edinburgh (where her acting company were headed in the summer of 1780 and where the first protests against the 1778 Bill occurred) and London (where Inchbald intended to pursue her acting career).⁷ While Inchbald’s novel was published in the same year as the second Catholic Relief Act, it was likely begun much earlier – possibly during the 1770s, around the first Catholic Relief Act. If the speculations about the composition of the novel are true, then it is unsurprising that the central dynamic tension of *A Simple Story* revolves around the relationship between Catholics and Protestants.

In *Miss Milner*, Inchbald offers a thought-experiment to her Protestant readership: the exploration of a minority subject position within a dominant and hostile majority. In this case, Miss Milner is the Protestant minority in a Catholic community: her movements are restricted, her desires rendered odd or wicked, her expressions dissected for hidden meaning and motivation. The novel dramatises the reality of English Catholic experience. The fact that this element of the novel has been overlooked or dismissed emphasises Inchbald’s success in

⁵ Michael Tomko, *British Romanticism and the Catholic Question: Religion, History, and National Identity, 1778-1829* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 52.

⁶ Michael Mullett, *Catholics in Britain and Ireland, 1588-1829* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 144.

⁷ Michael Tomko, “‘All the world have heard of the devil and the Pope’: Elizabeth Inchbald’s *The Mogul Tale* and English Catholic Satire”, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*. 31.1/2 (2012): 117-136 (123).

her depiction of an English Catholic domestic setting. Religious difference is everywhere apparent but rarely noted except in cutting remarks between Miss Milner and her Jesuit tormentor, Sandford. But, in *A Simple Story*, neither the characters nor their relationships are caricatured: Dorriforth, the Catholic priest, does not slaver over Miss Milner's conversion, nor does he shut her up in a convent, and Miss Milner fails to manifest the virulent anti-Catholicism that might have been her Protestant cultural inheritance. Instead, the text depicts an easy and domestic familiarity, in which friendship and acceptance replace 'tolerance'. There is little doubt that these characters (in all their political allegorical significance) share at least a common society, common values and, quite literally, common ground. Since Catholics were prohibited from participation in the political sphere, Inchbald's choice of a domestic setting (and the novel happens almost exclusively indoors) is the only narrative space available for her subject. The claustrophobic stage of the novel saturates every word and gesture with meaning beyond context, and the narrative 'zooms', camera-like, between the grand expressive gestures of late eighteenth-century theatrical conventions and the 'minute signs' that characterise novels of sensibility. The intimacy of setting in *A Simple Story* mirrors the intimacy of real, lived inter-faith experience in England of the time.

A guidebook from 1768 to the ruined abbey near Inchbald's childhood home depicts it as a 'lost city whose fragments interpenetrate the current town'; a fitting analogy for the status of Catholicism in the modern Protestant nation.⁸ Cut off from the Church in Rome, and from the continental Catholic community, English Catholics were the largest and wealthiest minority in England. Although the laws restricting Catholics' abilities to own or inherit land, worship freely, educate their children as Catholics, or participate in civic society remained, they were seldom enforced. This laxity around 'bloody papists' betrays a more relaxed attitude at a cultural level, in which Protestants could make a distinction between 'Catholicism' and the person who practiced it. In the space of this distinction, lay enough room for Catholics to enter the national life via the cultural, if not the political or religious. By the 1780s, Bath was both an important centre for polite and fashionable society and a cultural centre for English Catholics. In *A Simple Story*, when Milner leaves Dorriforth in a moment of desperation, she visits her aunt in Bath where she immerses herself in the effervescent social waters appropriate to a pretty, young, wealthy woman in search of a

⁸ Tomko, *British Romanticism*, p. 53.

husband.⁹ Religion is important to the narrative by virtue of its absence. Through Bath, Inchbald takes a sidelong glance at an England where religious orthodoxy is trumped by participation in the social. Generally, there was a growing distaste for displays of intolerance, but anti-Catholic hysteria did flare up periodically throughout the century to keep the laws (at least) in place. While the actual power of Rome decreased steadily throughout the century, the cultural imaginary replaced the fear of direct threat with paranoia about the subtle and insidious enemy already present.

The threat of a Jacobite uprising flavoured anti-Catholic rhetoric in the first half of the century. If the Battle of Culloden was the ‘last gasp’ of Jacobitism, it did not put to rest the anxiety over suspected Catholic intentions to return the country, by force or by sly manoeuvring, to the control of Rome. The Jacobite scares reaffirmed the cultural perception of Catholicism as a bogey-man from England’s past: one that continued to threaten the nascent Protestant nation with a return to superstition, tyranny, and moribund mysticism. The ‘Pretenders’, old and young, threatened to drag England back to Rome by resurrecting the Stuart dynasty. But the most dramatic and violent anti-Catholic action took place long after the threat from Jacobitism had languished at Culloden and reacted not to a threat from history, but to an act that would have begun to move forward. In 1780, in reaction to a petition for relieving English Catholics of some of the restrictions on freedom of worship and property ownership, anti-Catholic activists destroyed much of London. This event stalled Catholic Relief in parliament (though it did not accomplish a repeal of the Act) and remains one of the most violent, and least explored, acts of domestic terrorism on British soil in the eighteenth century. The Gordon Riots were not responding to Catholicism as a historical bogey-man, but to the possibility of a present Catholicism. While the actual extent of the act was limited, it was the first effort of parliament to redress what were increasingly seen as embarrassingly archaic and intolerant laws restricting English Catholics. For the educated middle-classes of the later eighteenth-century, anti-Catholic prejudice was, in itself, a spectre from a less tolerant, less Enlightened time.

Whatever the larger picture now available with the benefit of 200 years of perspective, the real, lived experience of England’s Catholics in the eighteenth century was something else. The treatment of Catholics differed according to region and population.

⁹ Mullett, p. 145. Mullett notes that by the latter half of the century, the traditional rural character of English Catholicism had begun to move towards the growing urban centres. The Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791 ‘fostered the ascendancy of middle class and urban attitudes’ among English Catholics – part of a larger, ‘unfolding geographical and social re-orientation of the Catholic community’ in line with the extensive urbanisation of English society more generally (140-142).

Lancashire remained strongly Catholic, as did parts of the north east. Where there was a wealthy and established Catholic family, less wealthy Catholic families could find community and some security. Again, the perception of Catholicism was clearly very different from the daily interactions with Catholics, who were neighbours, friends, and associates. While foreign Catholics might have nefarious political ambitions, English Catholics were familiar. Yet, of course, this familiarity was also a source of anxiety. Equivocation, the doctrine that allowed Catholics to lie to non-believers, continued to haunt the Protestant imagination, long after outright acts of treason ceased to be realistic fears. Against Protestant enlightenment and ‘transparency’, Catholicism was mired in deliberate lies, manipulation, and fear. If there was no longer a realistic threat of regicide, or invasions of idolaters from France or Ireland, there remained the problem of interpretation and the possibility of multiple and contradictory meaning of both words and gestures. Henry Garnet’s *Treatise on Equivocation* (c. 1598)¹⁰ became part of the legend of the Gunpowder Plot, part of the deep level of anti-Catholic rhetoric contained in the mnemonic rhymes that circulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that preserved the lingering fear of such terrifying doctrines. After the death of the Stuart line in 1766, the threat of the Catholic in England was no longer about regicide, or invasion by idolaters from France and Ireland, but instead a problem of interpretation and the subtleties of gesture. Equivocation threatened to destabilise meaning in any communication, an anxiety that continued and appeared in cultural discourses of sensibility throughout the eighteenth century.

The culture of sensibility in the eighteenth century accomplished a wide-spread consensus on the cultural interpretation of a complex language of gesture. Grounded in the belief that the body could not lie, sensibility coded action with specific intentions. Women’s bodies, in particular, were used as proof of the transparency of the body’s demands and desires. The hallmark of the properly virtuous woman was silence: a silence in which her body could speak more eloquently than language. Yet, as many critics have pointed out, this apparent transparency was immediately suspicious and many novels of sensibility struggle to demonstrate the distinction between ‘true’ sensibility and affectation. Gestures ‘natural’ to virtuous women could be mimicked (another ‘natural’ talent of women) by those without virtue in order to take advantage of the noble efforts inspired by a performance of virtue-in-distress. The need to be vigilant is emphasised repeatedly in novels from the latter half of the century: For example, Frances Sheridan’s eponymous heroine suffers extravagantly

¹⁰ See D. Jardine (ed.), *A treatise on equivocation* (by H. Garnet) (London, 1851).

throughout *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph* (1761),¹¹ her repeated trials and tribulations proving beyond any doubt the veracity of her virtue. The acme of sensibility, Sidney demonstrates the importance of the display of suffering in order to affirm women's proper virtue. Sheridan's critique of sensibility includes Sidney's foil, Miss Burchell, a woman who is able, through a felicitous performance of sensibility, to convince Sidney of her virtue. Miss Burchell's sensibility is entirely superficial, but staged on exactly the same lines as Sidney's. A beseeching letter, a pose of supplication and distress, and an acceptance of her fate accomplish what her assertion of her dues (she has been seduced and abandoned) cannot achieve. At its most idealistic, sensibility insisted that women were inherently, naturally virtuous, capable of inspiring men to noble and worthy behaviour; at its most suspicious, it presumed that women were practiced and skillful liars, naturally artificial.

By loading gestures with meaning (the more autonomic, the better – hence the importance of blushing), doctrines of sensibility articulated a profound distrust of language, particularly women's language. In novels of sensibility, the heroine's opinions are not required – indeed, her speech often indicates exactly the opposite of the 'truth' expressed through her body. Trembling, weeping and blushing, heroines imply their consent, their bodies' over determined responses replacing the need for mere verbiage. A system of education as well as entertainment, novels of sensibility guided their readers' (and concomitantly, their culture's) responses. What emerges from the variety of literary outputs that make use of the popular fashion for sensibility, however, is a wide-spread cultural anxiety over the stability of interpretation that sensibility offered for decoding individual virtue. The demands that pile up on heroines increase: sensibility must be detectable in the most minute of characteristics, including her responses to literature, art, music, conversation, scenes of real distress (both reported and seen), her performance of love and loyalty to family, friends, and those in recognised positions of authority, her willingness to sacrifice her own desires, including food, sleep, and comfort, and her inability to detect personal danger (particularly sexual threats). She must be (and this is repeated across eighteenth-century novels) unable to dissimulate, but equally unable to distinguish lies from truth. Paradoxically, the heroine of sensibility must be ignorant of the skills in which she shows the most proficiency.

Maria Edgeworth's 1810 letter to Inchbald attempts to identify the reason for lasting effects of *A Simple Story*: 'I am of opinion that it is by leaving more than most other writers

¹¹ Frances Sheridan, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Biddulph*, ed. by Patricia Köster and Jean Coates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

to the imagination, that you succeed so eminently in affecting it ... Writers of inferior genius waste their words in describing feeling; in making those who pretend to be agitated by passion describe the effects of that passion and talk of the rending of their hearts, &c. A gross blunder!’¹² Leaving the reader to work out the meaning of action forges a unique connection with the characters: without explanation from the narrator, behaviour must be ‘read’ according to the scant information available in the text and through the conventions, contexts, and associations brought to the text by each reader. In theatre, watching a character’s ‘tics’ and idiosyncrasies over the course of a performance creates an illusion of realism, of ‘knowing’ a ‘real’ person. This very same condition is precisely what creates a texture of interpretation – my reaction may be sympathetic, while my fellow spectator reviles. Inchbald, by leaving out the more expository features her readership might expect, creates a collaborative interpretive space in which equivocation is the rule – at the level of form, and in content. It is in this space of radical indeterminacy that Inchbald explores the potential for reconciliation based on rethinking surrender as a catalyst for mutual negotiation and affirmation between the faiths.

An accomplished playwright, Inchbald was keenly aware of the power of gesture and made the description rather than the interpretation of physical behaviour key in her prose writing. The theatricality of *A Simple Story* is evident in its use of gesture in the place of monologue and the careful delineation of physical movement and reaction. Miss Milner is notable as a heroine for the lack of description offered of her person. Dorriforth, true to his character, despairs when she is described as beautiful in the context of her many suitors but responds warmly to a recounting of her impulsive virtue that concludes by insisting on the relative perception of beauty according to virtue. For Mrs Hillgrave, the beneficiary of Miss Milner’s impulsive charity, Miss Milner is ‘beautiful as an angel’, a comparison coloured by Miss Milner’s actions rather than simply Mrs Hillgrave’s observation.¹³ Miss Milner’s fluent understanding of gesture should be understood as part of her questionable education which has prepared her to ‘open the ball, or delight with hearers her sprightly wit’ (5).

With a swipe at Protestant education, the narrator notes that Miss Milner’s religious knowledge is no more than that which fashion dictates. Protestantism, like her other ‘accomplishments’, is another marker of ‘taste and elegance’, not the rigorous devotion that

¹² Edgeworth quoted in Annibel Jenkins, *I’ll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (Lexington, KT: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), p. 279.

¹³ Elizabeth Inchbald (1791), *A Simple Story*, ed. J.M.S. Tompkins, intro. Jane Spencer (Oxford: World’s Classics, 2009), p. 13. All further references are to this edition and will be noted in-text.

comforts her father in his illness. Her relationship to gesture is complex: ‘She sometimes put on the looks and gesture of assent, and sometimes even spoke the language of conviction’ (18). Miss Milner understands agreement/assent as the inevitable result of a carefully orchestrated series of ‘looks and gestures’. For her, ‘conviction’ is less about the content of what one says, but is lodged in vocabulary and delivery – she has no conviction of her own, only its external signs. When Mrs Horton crosses herself in Milner’s presence to ‘prevent the infectious taint of heretical opinions’ (namely Milner’s), the heroine laughs out loud at the old lady’s ‘superstitious’ gesture (17). In this moment, we can see the saturation of meaning I raised earlier. Miss Milner’s flirtation with Dorriforth, seen from Mrs Horton’s staunchly orthodox point of view, is ‘heretical’; Miss Woodley¹⁴ understands the same set of actions and reactions as stemming from ‘an involuntary sin of ignorance’, excusing Miss Milner, but registering the inappropriateness of the exchange; Milner herself is surprised ‘that any thing so lightly said, should be so seriously received’ (17). When Miss Milner accidentally lies to Dorriforth about her evening’s engagement and Dorriforth takes her to task for the lie, Mrs Horton quite literally takes steps to defuse the situation: ‘[She] rose from her seat—moved the decanters and the fruit round the table—stirred the fire—and came back to her seat again, before another word was uttered’ (28). Mrs Horton’s response is entirely ineffectual but her gestures symbolise an attempt to impose order on the space that Miss Milner’s presence threatens to destabilise.

Inchbald’s attention to gesture is not confined to the comic performances of Mrs Horton; the more important exchanges and miscommunications occur between Dorriforth and Miss Milner. Mrs Horton’s comic gestures act as a foil for Dorriforth’s condensed expressions and ‘minute signs’.¹⁵ Unlike Miss Milner, Dorriforth is transparent. Of all the characters in the novel, the longest single description is given to Dorriforth, the Catholic priest and protagonist.¹⁶ Explained as an aid to the reader in the necessary effort of piquing their interest in ‘what [he] says and does’, the description given of Dorriforth sketches,

¹⁴ Miss Woodley is Mrs Horton’s niece. A young Roman Catholic woman, she occupies the important role of confidante and foil for Miss Milner. Her reactions to Miss Milner’s behaviour regarding Mr Dorriforth’s injunctions and restrictions are an important measure of the protagonist’s ‘true’ feelings.

¹⁵ Jane Spencer, ‘Introduction’ in Elizabeth Inchbald (1791) *A Simple Story*, ed. J.M.S. Tompkins (Oxford: World’s Classics, 2009), pp. vii-xx (p. xvi).

¹⁶ Dorriforth’s status as the protagonist is evident in the earliest reviews of the novel, which base claims for the text’s ‘unity’ on the ‘picture of Lord Elmwood, in all these trying circumstances’ (Monthly Review, new series, 4 (1791), pp. 207-208 (208)). The review in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* considered Dorriforth the ‘hero’ of the novel (vol. 61, pt. 1 (1791), p. 255).

without much detail, his figure ('tall and elegant') and his features, none of which apparently cause particular admiration (8). The convoluted sentence structure nonetheless betrays a narrative uncertainty with how to represent this 'entirely new' character: a Roman Catholic lord:¹⁷

His figure was tall and elegant, but his face, except a pair of dark bright eyes, a set of white teeth, and a graceful fall of his clerical curls of dark brown hair, had not one feature to excite admiration—he possessed notwithstanding such a gleam of sensibility diffused over each, that many people mistook his face for handsome, and all were more or less attracted by it—in a word, the charm that is here meant to be described is a countenance—on his countenance you beheld the feelings of his heart—saw all its inmost workings—the quick pulses that beat with hope and fear, or the placid ones that were stationary with patient resignation. (8)

Dorriforth's desirability is coded in a series of observations that attempt to defer the object of that desire. The narrative voice must go back, clarify, rephrase, and adjust the description: Dorriforth is plain, 'except' for his eyes, mouth, and hair – the same features that mark out sensibility in numerous heroines of late eighteenth-century novels. He is handsome because of his sensibility. The 'charm' of his person is actually not his person: it is a quality derived from the transparency of his body. In textbook sentimental fashion, the narrator describes Dorriforth's external attractiveness via his internal qualities and shows them to be in harmony. The reader is invited to '[behold] the feelings of his heart'. This figure of speech disguises a perilously intimate observation of Dorriforth's body with its 'inmost workings' in language taken from the conventions of sensibility. The narrator continues:

On this countenance his thoughts were pictured, and as his mind was enriched with every virtue that could make it valuable, so was his honest face adorned with every emblem of those virtues—they not only gave a lustre to his aspect, but added a harmonious sound to all he uttered; it was persuasive, it was perfect eloquence, whilst in his looks you beheld his thoughts moving with his lips, and ever coinciding with what he said. (8-9)

Dorriforth's countenance now manifests his thoughts rather than his 'feelings'; his mind, rather than his body, gives rise to his virtues. The description ends with wholeness, emphasising the continuity between Dorriforth's mind, his body, and his words.

It is worth recalling the initial description of Dorriforth that opens the novel. In setting the scene, Inchbald draws a detailed but compressed portrait of 'a Roman Catholic priest' (3). The passage articulates much about Inchbald's perception of English Catholicism through her description of the protagonist. Dorriforth's Catholic faith is due to both upbringing and inclination: his education at St Omer's and his 'solemn vows' (3). His faith is deeply

¹⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 61, pt. 1 (1791), p. 255.

philosophical and untainted by the superstition that the narrator tacitly admits as part of the religion. Dorriforth's actions are, however, given more precedence than his philosophical learning: the virtues he extols in his preaching are 'his care to practice' (3, my emphasis). Furthermore, he is in the world, not cloistered from the 'temptations of the laymen' (3). Catholicism, in this initial description, is active, involved, and community-minded; his arguments, even when disappointing his ward's preferences, make him 'appear[] rather like a man who has passed his life in the gay world ... rather than like one who has lived his whole time secluded in a monastery or his own study' (25). Miss Milner's assumption that Dorriforth's Catholicism demands his seclusion from the world gestures at the force of cultural assumption. What place could there be for a Catholic in the gay (Protestant) world? Dorriforth might have been bred in the bosom of continental Catholicism, but his practice of the faith is resolutely English, emphasised in his embodiment of the cardinal Christian virtues: 'prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance' (3).

The harmony of Dorriforth's language and gesture stands in opposition to Miss Milner's impulse to harmonise any exchange through appropriate, if meaningless, expressions. Her conversation is marked by inclusion, but also by a witty lightness that prioritises the exchange of words over their content or meaning. Her education and experience have taught her to privilege the momentary and fashionable, a preference that extends to her reputation as a 'wit':

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 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. (15).

It is worthwhile to note that the first exchange between Dorriforth and Miss Milner turns the final lines of this description towards religion. Faced with Dorriforth's youth and pleasant aspect, Miss Milner automatically engages the language and gestures that she understands as proper for such a conversation. Telling Dorriforth that she 'expected to find you an elderly man, and a plain man', her 'artless manner' divulges nothing but her tone 'obviously declared she thought her guardian both young and handsome' (16). Dorriforth's attempt to participate in the light raillery is brief and awkward and his attempt to bring the conversation to a serious discussion is poorly cued. To his 'serious question' of whether or not Miss Milner believes herself beautiful, she responds that she 'should from my own opinion believe so, but in some respects I am like you Roman Catholics; I don't believe from

my own understanding, but from what other people tell me' (16). Otherwise awkward in exchanges of wit, Dorriforth does not miss a beat with his response that her own example (her polite refusal to acknowledge her beauty) is the criterion 'that what we teach is truth; for you find you would be deceived did you not trust to persons who know better than yourself' (16). Stereotypical Catholic ignorance is given a Protestant model.

For Dorriforth, gesture (and language) is absolute – it is fixed and meaningful, not indeterminate. As a priest, Dorriforth has a very different relationship to gesture than Miss Milner; his office demands an awareness of the importance of gesture as part of religious ritual. He is constantly surprised by Miss Milner's lack of conviction and her seemingly willful equivocations, reservations, and reversals. When Dorriforth finally accepts Miss Milner's decision to remain unmarried, he offers her the continued security of his guardianship. Her initial claim that she 'has no objection' is undermined by her 'anguish' when she realises that he intends her to live as a ward of himself and the new Lady Elmwood, rather than fulfilling her desire to be the new Lady Elmwood (111). Unable to articulate her desire, Miss Milner subsides into silence and leaves Miss Woodley to explain that Dorriforth had been deceived 'again': 'How am I to accomplish her wishes? what am I to do? how can I judge, while she will not confide in me, but thus grossly deceives me?' (112). In Dorriforth's mouth, the language of 'confidence' and 'confession' take on deeper meanings, given his (very recent) office as a Catholic priest: to 'confide' in him might place Miss Milner in a position of unequivocal supplication as a social and/or religious dependent. Miss Milner's silence signals the limits of familiarity in this odd household. This moment of crisis is relieved by Miss Woodley's equivocation, which hints at the climax of the novel and Dorriforth's eventual satisfaction of Miss Milner's 'wishes'.

Both J.M.S. Tompkins and Jane Spencer focus on the importance of gesture and unspoken communication in *A Simple Story*. For Tompkins, Inchbald's familiarity with theatre is the key to her successful prose. Her attention to a character's observable reactions shows 'how much Mrs Inchbald transferred to her novel of the methods of her first profession' (Tompkins viii). This 'actor's viewpoint' was an early and lasting point of praise; the *Monthly Review* claimed that the 'secret charm, that gives grace to the whole, is the art with which Mrs Inchbald has made her work completely dramatic'.¹⁸ Spencer's introduction to the novel argues for Inchbald's deployment of the body-language of sensibility: in *A Simple Story*, 'the bodily signs which usually, in the literature of sensibility, speak more truly

¹⁸ *Monthly Review*, vol. 4 (1791), pp. 434-438 (p. 437).

than words, are radically ambiguous'.¹⁹ There is a subtle shade of difference in these arguments. Tompkins traces Inchbald's attention to gesture to public performance, noting the 'expressive gestures' that mark character's reactions throughout the text (Dorriforth's 'silent dropping of his hands', for instance, or Miss Milner's sudden faint when she hears of the duel between Dorriforth and Lord Lawnley).²⁰ By linking them to theatre and public performance, Tompkins implicitly emphasises the public visibility of such responses; they are dramatic in a scripted sense. Like the 'shapely, ringing sentences' declaimed by both Dorriforth and Miss Milner in 'passionate revelation', the expressive gestures belong to the stage.²¹ They are, like sensibility's 'body-language', coded actions but on a much larger scale.²² Spencer's focus, by contrast, is at the micro-level of 'minute signs like the movement of [Miss Milner's] knife and fork in her hand, or [her] mistake at cards'.²³ Inchbald's skill with unspoken communication in the novel depends on an awareness of what Tompkins calls 'expressive gestures' and of the intimate, close-up perspective required by the domestic setting and for the novel reader.

The most significant gesture in the first half of *A Simple Story* and the one subject to the greatest symbolic burden is in kneeling. The examples of kneeling between Miss Milner and Dorriforth bring together the 'expressive gestures' and 'minute signs' throughout the novel. Kneeling is a familiar ritual in eighteenth-century literatures, dramatising relationships between genders and generations. Virginia Cope's analysis of the gesture focuses on the ways in which kneeling refigures power relations, with the kneeling heroine simultaneously signalling her submission to parental or conjugal authority and her own (potential) independence. Cope's interest is in how the gesture recalls the investiture of vassals by the king under feudalism and the ways in which shifting property relations changed the meaning of the kneeling heroine throughout the century. The complexity that Cope uncovers in the gesture is useful, however, for considering other ways in which this central motif might serve other purposes. The feudal ritual and, by extension, the echoes of that ritual in eighteenth-century literature, revolve around 'gratuitous' offers of property and loyalty: 'the lord gives

¹⁹ Spencer, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

²⁰ Tompkins, 'Introduction', p. viii.

²¹ Tompkins, 'Introduction', p. viii.

²² Tompkins, 'Introduction', p. ix.

²³ Spencer, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

(land) before receiving the promise or demonstration of fealty; the vassal gives (obedience, loyalty) having already received the gift'.²⁴ The ritual marks the inequality of the exchange while it preserves the value of each 'gift'. The exchange is not straightforward and the posture of kneeling is deeply ambiguous, performing surrender and authority simultaneously.

Kneeling separated Catholic from Protestant after the Reformation. While it persisted in some Protestant denominations as part of the service, the possibility that it might be mistaken for the Catholics' posture of adoration was a serious concern. The 'Black Rubric' from the 1552 edition of the Book of Common Prayer offers clear evidence for the anxiety caused by the ambiguity of the gesture and the possibility of being 'misconstrued, depraved and interpreted in a wrong part':

Whereas it is ordained in the Book of Common Prayer, in the administration of the Lord's Supper, that the communicants kneeling should receive the holy Communion, which thing being well meant, for a signification of the humble and grateful acknowledging of the benefits of Christ, given unto the worthy receiver, and to avoid the profanation and disorder, which about the holy Communion might else ensue: Lest yet the same kneeling might be thought or taken otherwise, we do declare that it is not meant thereby, that any adoration is done, or ought to be done, either unto the sacramental bread or wine there bodily received, or unto any real or essential presence there being of Christ's natural flesh or blood.²⁵ ('Black Rubric', BCP, 1552).

The history of the 'Black Rubric' in itself offers a sense of the complexity of Protestantism in England. Inserted into the Book of Common Prayer during the reign of Edward VI, it was removed by Mary Tudor and left out by Elizabeth I. It returned, with updated phrasing, in 1662 and remains part of the English prayer-book. Being mistaken for a pose of 'adoration' threatened to blur the distinction between Protestant and Catholic by bringing Protestant practice close to the idolatry of Catholicism; kneeling, according to Protestant practice could only have one clear and unambiguous meaning (though it might serve two purposes). It is necessary to set out in the 'Black Rubric' exactly how the gesture should be interpreted, though this exercise of standardising interpretation comes dangerously close to Miss Milner's observation that Catholics do not 'believe from [their] own understanding, but from what other people tell [them]' (16). The complexity of the gesture, signifying in the Catholic mass, penitence as well as adoration, is removed and the practicality of kneeling (as a way of avoiding 'disorder') overtakes the suspicious enthusiasm of the Catholic gesture. Thus, while

²⁴ Virginia Cope, *Property, Education and Identity in Late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Heroine of Disinterest* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 16.

²⁵ The 'Black Rubric', Book of Common Prayer, http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1552/communion_1552.htm (accessed on 4th April 2014).

kneeling achieves a secular meaning in eighteenth-century novels it also carries a religious resonance. Cope's reference to the ritual of feudal investiture does not mention the ways in which the exchange between vassal and king gains legitimacy from its borrowing the rhythms and gestures of the ritual exchange between supplicant and God (or his representative). The secularisation of the ritual in Cope's analysis makes it a complex gesture in relation to socio-economic discourses of property and gender. In 'the first Catholic novel', *Inchbald* stages the gesture in ways that demand an acknowledgement of its cultural as well as religious significance.

The first example of kneeling in the text comes at the first meeting between *Dorriforth* and his new ward. Denied the opportunity to prove her filial devotion at her father's deathbed, Miss Milner first kneels in a gesture that combines a farewell to her father with an acknowledgement of the continuation of that paternal authority in *Dorriforth*. Miss Milner's performance of fealty in this instance, matched with her promise to 'ever obey [*Dorriforth*] as her father', turns out to be superficial – her surrender to her father's choice of guardian is as lasting as her penitent pose (13). Kneeling, like all actions described in the novel, cannot be read as an unambiguous performance of surrender. Miss Milner's gesture is empty and exists only to answer the contingency of her present circumstances. Yet Miss Milner is not guilty of equivocation: she improvises her way through unfamiliar situations. Miss Milner does not equivocate; she reacts, responds, and adjusts her expression to make social situations harmonious. Gestures are instrumental for Miss Milner and can be mobilised to suit various social situations.

Yet, her indeterminacy is not vicious. The 'truth' of *Inchbald*'s character is located in her ability to change and adjust her behaviour. *Dorriforth*'s stability, on the other hand, is rooted in his discipline. Action and sentiment are in lock-step with one another: he says what he means, he means what he says, and furthermore, he does what he means. When *Dorriforth* kneels, he is not improvising to meet the requirements of a situation; he is performing his intentions in a present and future tense. At the end of volume 2, the Jesuit, *Sandford*, brings an abrupt end to the protracted farewells of Lord Elmwood and Miss Milner. To *Sandford*'s demand that they 'separate this moment...or resolve never to be separated but by death!', Lord Elmwood 'struck his forehead in doubt and agitation; but still holding her hand, he cried, 'I cannot part from her.'—Then feeling this reply as equivocal, he fell upon his knees' (190, 191, my emphasis). As a (now ex-) Catholic priest, Elmwood's anxiety over equivocation cannot be read as neutral. Elmwood's 'equivocal' reply includes his pose of 'doubt and agitation' compounded by his continued hold of Miss Milner's hand, which he

had taken in farewell, as well as his ambiguous declaration that he ‘cannot part from her’ which defers Sandford’s demand rather than submitting to it. Without relinquishing her hand, Elmwood changes the meaning of his gesture from release to possession. His ‘doubt and agitation’ changes to supplication and surrender as he ‘falls upon his knees’ and offers an unequivocal proposal of marriage: ‘[W]ill you, in marriage, show me that tender love you have not shown me yet?—will you, in possessing all my affections, bear with all my infirmities?’ (191). Lord Elmwood forcibly brings his words and gestures back into alignment and with that, the narrative appears to snap back to convention (ending with a triumphant marriage).

Kneeling marks the beginning and the conclusion of the first half of *A Simple Story*. In its first iteration, the gesture is semantically empty but socially volatile. The second iteration is overcharged with meaning, to the extent that the meaning spills beyond Lord Elmwood’s gesture and destabilises the narrative. Inchbald’s insistence that gestures carry significance aligns sensibility with a potentially subversive Catholic faith in ritual. In the second half of the novel, the story is recast and the difficulties of interpreting gesture and meaning rebound onto Dorriforth – now Lord Elmwood – and his estranged daughter, Matilda. The third and fourth volumes have been read as an attempt to redress the ‘boldness’ of the first two, with the troubling questions raised by Miss Milner ‘laid to rest’ or at least nullified by the daughterly submission of Matilda, ‘a properly feminine father’s daughter’.²⁶ Whereas J.M.S. Tompkins claimed that ‘Miss Milner needs no praise and no explanation’, her daughter, Matilda, is frequently charged with emptying the novel of its provocative and refreshing ‘boldness’.²⁷ Yet, Matilda is, in many ways, her father’s daughter –by education as much as physical traits. It is Sandford who educates her and while the narrative does not explicitly state that she is given a Protestant religious education, it does specifically remind the reader of Sandford’s Jesuit training. Matilda as a scholar ‘excelled most of her sex’ thanks to the ‘great pains Sandford had taken with that part of her education, and the great abilities he possessed for the task’ (221). Also, as John Morillo argues, few critical commentaries note the final ambiguity of the novel: ‘we simply never know with certainty whether Matilda does or does not marry her cousin Rushbrook’.²⁸ This is a crucial oversight, demonstrating the

²⁶ Spencer, ‘Introduction’, p. xx.

²⁷ Tompkins, ‘Introduction’, p. xv; Spencer, ‘Introduction’, p. xx.

²⁸ John Morillo, ‘Editing Eve: Rewriting the Fall in Austen’s *Persuasion* and Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23. 1 (2010): 195-223 (214).

power of generic convention and the willingness to interpret actions according to a pre-determined pattern. The assumption that Matilda's decision is already made ignores Inchbald's careful exploration of equivocation, gesture, and communication. Matilda is a deeply conflicted character, but her apparent subservience is part of a much broader recasting of the first two volumes of the novel. She accomplishes more than simply the redressing of her mother's adultery: through her, Inchbald projects the final application of the novel's lessons on reconciliation and surrender.

There remains a tension in criticism of *A Simple Story* over whether the novel displays a 'daring structural split' or whether volumes 3 and 4 develop and continue the story of Miss Milner and Dorriforth.²⁹ Miss Milner's adultery, her death, and physical absence make her, in the Gothic second half of the novel, the most persistently present character. In spite of Lord Elmwood's commands, her name is literally on everyone's lips until Elmwood himself breaks his own rule and utters the name twice when confronted by Matilda. The unspeakable act of betrayal, which falls into the seventeen-year chasm between volumes 2 and 3, is not only the cause of the changes that the second half of the novel explores, it is also caused by the failure of the reconciliation offered at the end of volume 2. The symbolic weight of Dorriforth's surrender in his proposal to Miss Milner, figured in his kneeling posture, distracts from another ceremonial gesture that anticipates the misfortunes to come:

Nevertheless, on that first wedding-day, that joyful day, which restored her lost lover to her hopes again; even on that very day, after the sacred ceremony was over, Miss Milner—(with all the fears, the tremors, the superstition of her sex)—felt an excruciating shock; when, looking on the ring Lord Elmwood had put upon her finger, in haste, when he married her, she perceived it was a—MOURNING RING. (193)

Dorriforth's observation of the symbolic gesture of a wedding ring attempts to re-inscribe the object's original purpose – to transform it from sorrow to joy. Given the complex emotional reactions to the second ceremony, it would seem an entirely appropriate object. The hollowness of this gesture at the end of the first half of the novel carries over into the 'bridging' chapter at the beginning of volume 3, in which it is revealed that the superstitious fears of Miss Milner have been realised. Freed from the ceremonial burden of gesture and interpretation, the narrative is less concerned with the specific dynamic that informed the Catholic-Protestant tension of the first two volumes. Nonetheless, the exploration of gesture

²⁹ Morillo, 214. Michelle O'Connell notes that Boaden suggests that there were 'two novels' commenced in 1789 and there is still speculation over the fate of the novel *Inchbald* began in 1777, which was sent to a publisher in 1779 and rejected. 'Miss Milner's Return from the Crypt: Mourning in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.4 (2012): 567-580 (567).

and meaning, of ‘equivocation’, remains. Lord Elmwood is now ‘haughty, impatient, imperious, and more than ever, implacable’ (230). These qualities are not new to the character, as John Morillo argues. Lord Elmwood’s resolution regarding his daughter, who he clearly loves deeply as his daughter, is anticipated in Dorriforth’s absolute rejection of his nephew, Harry Rushbrook, in the first volume (35-36).³⁰ Nonetheless, as a peer and landowner, Lord Elmwood lacks the transparency that marked Dorriforth. As a priest, Dorriforth’s ‘countenance’ is in harmony with his ‘feelings’, his thoughts with his speech and his actions. Elmwood, however, is a mystery; the ‘injunction’ against mentioning Lady Elmwood’s name in his hearing ‘was, by many people, suspected rather to proceed from resentment, than his tenderness’ (202). The privacy available to Elmwood enables him to conceal his intentions; the visibility of Dorriforth, based on his own choice to reject the cloister for the ‘centre of London’ (3), demanded and produced the strict correlation of thought, word, and deed that marked his character and formed the core of his initial conflict with Miss Milner. Yet, on the central issue of the plot, Elmwood insists that he is unequivocal. Cautioning Sandford on the conditions of his daughter’s admission to his household, he claims that he has ‘been clear and explicit in all I have said; there can be no fear of mistaking my meaning’ (215). His words and actions, are clearly not in alignment with his heart. The narrative offers less secure grounds for interpreting his gestures and reactions but nonetheless complicates reading Elmwood as a wholly changed person. This narrative perspective still privileges the minute observation of characters in private, where they are able to reveal a self that acknowledges the effects of events past.

Posthumous communication between Lady and Lord Elmwood takes place through a letter in an episode that gestures forcefully towards the original events that brought Dorriforth and Miss Milner together. Lady Elmwood’s writing ‘discomposes’ Lord Elmwood to the point that he ‘trembles’ in its presence. His anxiety is briefly alleviated when Sandford conveys Lady Elmwood’s desire that Elmwood read it ‘*for her father’s sake*’ (208, italics in original). This provides Elmwood with the authority that he originally obeyed and the excuse he makes demonstrates how far his character is removed from his original vows: ‘for [Mr Milner’s] sake alone, his daughter died my wife— ... no other motive than respect for him, prevented my divorcing her’ (209). Tompkins notes at this point in the text that Elmwood ‘seems to think in the terms of English law rather than of Catholic marriage’ (344). The continuation of the peerage as part of the presence of Catholicism in Protestant England,

³⁰ Morillo, 215.

which required Dorriforth's release from his priestly vows, is raised briefly when he takes up the title and inheritance in the first volume. The only offspring of his marriage to Miss Milner is a daughter, who, it is assumed, follows her mother's religious profession. Thus, the 'mourning ring' takes on a greater significance retrospectively, the death of the Catholic peerage that Dorriforth hoped to continue. His inheritance is doubly negated: the family line and the family profession alike have become extinct.

To excuse his lapse in resolution in reading Lady Elmwood's letter, Lord Elmwood reframes his actions, up to and including his marriage, as obedience to a Catholic countryman, Mr Milner. In spite of this, the moment of confrontation is deferred and the narrative presents a close observation of his actions before reading the contents:

[I]t was some time before he read the letter Sandford had given him. He first walked backwards and forwards in the room—he then began to take off some part of his dress, but did it slowly. At length he dismissed his valet, and sitting down, took the letter from his pocket.—He looked at the seal, but not at the direction; for he seemed to dread to see Lady Elmwood's hand writing.—He then laid it on the table, and began again to undress. He did not proceed, but taking up the letter quickly, (with a kind of effort in making the resolution) broke it open. (210)

Attentive to the larger picture (his pacing) as well as the minute details of Elmwood's gestures (his glance), the narrative description here aligns with scenes from the earlier volumes of the novel. The relatively brief missive from Lady Elmwood not only insists on Elmwood's obedience to her father but also rewrites her own past: 'It is Miss Milner your ward, to whom you never refused a request, supplicates you' (211, my emphasis). The complete surrender implied in Lady Elmwood's letter is not simply gestural; indeed, the letter draws attention to the fact that she is now incapable of the same kind of equivocating gestures taken on by Elmwood. She is beyond 'seems' or interpretation. The letter is focalised through a writer already dead, her 'frame is motionless', her heart is still (212). Taking the place of a legal will, the letter functions as a textual gesture towards her final, post-mortem surrender to her husband's will. Elmwood's assent is signalled by his rejection of the letter itself, as he returns it to Sandford with instructions to give it to Matilda. This is a complex action that both recognises and ignores Lady Elmwood's gesture of surrender. Matilda's acceptance of her father's terms is signalled by her continued invisibility. Thus, in place of Miss Milner's visible surrender to Dorriforth in volumes one and two, Lord Elmwood attempts to command surrender without reconciliation – to presume surrender based on the lack of action, equivocal or otherwise. The burden of physical communication shifts not to Matilda, however, but to

Rushbrook, who replays the central dynamic of antagonism and intimacy that existed between Dorriforth and Miss Milner.

Harry Rushbrook's actions to reconcile Lord Elmwood and Matilda are analogous to Miss Milner's earlier attempts to reunite Dorriforth with his sister. The similarities between Rushbrook and Miss Milner are intensified by Rushbrook's gestures of supplication that also anticipate Matilda's eventual pose of daughterly devotion when Elmwood delivers her from Lord Musgrove. During his first meeting with Matilda, Rushbrook falls to his knees in a gesture of supplication that Miss Woodley, who is also present, reads as entirely equivocal. The imbalance in their respective statuses vis-à-vis Lord Elmwood makes his kneeling plea for pity a 'mockery' (238). Finding 'professions' have no weight with Matilda, whose 'haughtiness' is 'all her father's', Rushbrook's presence creates feelings of ambivalence (239). When he kneels, it is Matilda who pronounces ultimatums. However, Rushbrook also commands, turning Matilda's pronouncement that 'This is the last time...we shall ever meet' into a positive order that he can obey to prove his respect (239). While kneeling in the first two volumes signalled a transfer of power, Rushbrook's gesture can be read as manipulative and, when leaving, he emphasises the complexity of the gesture by bowing 'with reverence, as if he had left the presence of a deity' (240). As kneeling tends to occur more frequently in the latter sections of the novel, the repetition lessens the importance of the symbolic value that is attached to the gesture when performed earlier between Dorriforth and Miss Milner. In the final chapter, Matilda has cause to kneel again in supplication to Lord Elmwood, asking him to repeal his intended banishment of Rushbrook. Elmwood's anger, however, is in jest – a play to gauge Matilda's feelings for her cousin. Nonetheless, from her perspective, the gesture works; yet, taking into account the ways in which this scene enacts a reversal of the conclusion of volume 2, the dynamics of surrender and reconciliation undergo a transformation. Elmwood's equivocal question – 'perhaps you would grant him what he requested?' – leads to a deeply ambiguous exchange between Rushbrook and Matilda (336). Without querying the content of the request that apparently infuriated Elmwood, Matilda offers Rushbrook 'satisfaction' for his request of 'that which is dearer to me than my life' (336). As Eun Kyung Min argues, Matilda's promise to 'satisfy' Rushbrook is both 'perfect' and 'perfectly empty', a gift 'that does not know its own consequences, cost, or measure'.³¹ It is, nonetheless, a moment of reconciliation and surrender – both by Elmwood and Matilda. The lack of clarity extends Elmwood's 'jest' to the end of the scene. Rushbrook, for his part,

³¹ Eun Kyung Min, 'Giving promises in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*', *ELH*, 77.1 (2010): 105-127 (125).

presumes that Matilda understands what she ‘bestows’; Matilda remains unknowing until, ‘falling at her feet’, Rushbrook declares that they should immediately be joined, ‘til death alone...part us’ (337).

The lack of clear resolution allows the conclusion to establish a different possible path from the misfortune that followed Miss Milner and Dorriforth’s convoluted betrothal and marriage. Matilda’s only response is to enquire of Rushbrook whether Elmwood knew the demand she was sent to satisfy. It is Rushbrook who reminds the reader that the power ‘over [his] happiness or misery’ is still with Matilda: her decision is not yet given. Min reads this ambiguity as Inchbald’s ‘gift’ – recalling Rushbrook’s insistence about his own attachment that the ‘heart is a free gift to the possessor’.³² The novel ultimately enacts a complete surrender to the reader’s surmise but the final ‘message’ regarding the value of a proper education is not wholly detached from the scene. If Matilda is an example of a properly feminine character, it must be remembered that her education resembles her Catholic father’s – not her Protestant mother’s. The gradual disappearance of Catholic ‘trappings’ from the text does not imply that they are left behind, forgotten relics in the ‘progress’ of Protestant England. Rather, they are firmly a part of English culture in ways that demonstrate the value and valence of reconciliation and surrender. The logic of sensibility echoes a Catholic ethos; the intertwining of religious devotion, cultural negotiations, and personal experience blend in the final scene. Elmwood is, finally, an equivocator – like Miss Milner, he demonstrates that responses depend on specific situations. But Rushbrook’s oft repeated gesture finally finds its place and meaning.

Inchbald’s negotiation of the cultural and religious tensions end with a final equivocation: of the various ways in which characters are ‘educated’, which is the final message advocating? A ‘proper education’ refers as well to the ways in which the text ‘educates’ the reader on the subtle exchanges that enable peaceful co-existence between Catholics and Protestants. She understands that gestures can be traded like so many counters, but when it matters most it is possible for the individual to invest gesture with meaning. Virtue is not simply autonomic; it is a choice made by an individual to impose motivation on an ambiguous world. By considering these two moments of surrender, we uncover a meaningful feature of the ‘Catholic novel’. Well beyond simply the setting or the superficial details of characters’ religious devotions, Inchbald’s text expresses a deeply felt experience of the complexity of Catholic life in Protestant Britain. The playful theatricality throughout

³² Min, p. 125.

and Inchbald's awareness of generic conventions lift the text away from dull polemic. At the same time, the lively attack on tyranny and sympathy for alternative 'reasons' demonstrates Inchbald's perception of the ways in which religious difference could impede common understanding and respect. In this, her novel takes an important place in theological discourse that was traditionally regarded as the preserve of educated men at the end of the eighteenth century. The lack of resolution, the tumultuous break, the hesitancy, mistakes, and fragile trust exhibited throughout the plotting and writing of *A Simple Story* attest to its status as an 'English Catholic' novel and to the potent insight of its English Catholic author.