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Abstract
Within the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Elizabeth Inchbald and Jane Austen both responded to the need to critique and rewrite the biblical story of the Fall and the stature of Eve in Christian Britain as a way to turn the romance novel towards feminist social criticism. In A Simple Story (1791) and Persuasion (1817) the Catholic Inchbald and the Anglican Austen, respectively, turn the novel into a forum for feminism and towards a recognizably Romantic method of inquiry. Each edits Eve, in characters such as Miss Milner, Lady Matilda, Louisa Musgrove, and Anne Elliot, in order to anatomize the fate of women in the fallen world. For each, the novel must rewrite the fall of woman if it is to rise above certain eighteenth-century limits and thereby modernize itself. Although they engage with the same Christian tradition, Austen more profoundly explores its ethical consequences, while Inchbald vividly dramatizes its psycho-sexual dynamic.

Keywords
Jane Austen, Elizabeth Inchbald, the Fall, Eve, comedy, novels

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abstract

Within the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Elizabeth Inchbald and Jane Austen both responded to the need to critique and rewrite the biblical story of the Fall and the stature of Eve in Christian Britain as a way to turn the romance novel towards feminist social criticism. In *A Simple Story* (1791) and *Persuasion* (1817) the Catholic Inchbald and the Anglican Austen, respectively, turn the novel into a forum for feminism and towards a recognizably Romantic method of inquiry. Each edits Eve, in characters such as Miss Milner, Lady Matilda, Louisa Musgrove, and Anne Elliot, in order to anatomize the fate of women in the fallen world. For each, the novel must rewrite the fall of woman if it is to rise above certain eighteenth-century limits and thereby modernize itself. Although they engage with the same Christian tradition, Austen more profoundly explores its ethical consequences, while Inchbald vividly dramatizes its psycho-sexual dynamic.

THE STORY of the Fall in the Bible generated many of the master plots of English epic poetry, from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* through William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and in the eighteenth-century English comic novel the same story of commandments, disobedience, and consequences reappears, most prominently in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). Tom's fall from Paradise Hall into the arms of Sophia is certainly fortunate for him, since he not only gets the girl but also returns to other cultural privileges of eighteenth-century patriarchy: a lenient and comic view of male youthful sexual exploits, a wealthy estate, and a free choice of a suitable spouse with whom to produce male heirs. Ending with each of these signs of power and privilege reserved for men of property helped Fielding to preserve the comic novel, envisioned as a "comic Epic-Poem in Prose," from perceived threats by continental and domestic romances and their more female-centred forms, language, and readership.[1] By

[1] Henry Fielding's famous description of *Joseph Andrews* as a "comic Epic-Poem in Prose" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4, fits *Tom Jones* all the better, given Fielding's addition of epic length and Miltonic allusion

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the end of the century's skirmishes to gender the novel and control its cultural capital, two of Fielding's readers writing a decade apart, Elizabeth Inchbald and Jane Austen, turned to the same Christian tale. While Fielding had deployed the tale of the Fall to keep the genre both masculine and moral, Inchbald and Austen do so to expose the comic-romantic novel's collusion between providential plots based on the Fall and patriarchy. Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791) and Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) present scenes of falling both literal and figurative in order to consider what the fate of the Fall has been for women and whether that fundamental myth can justify its sway over English letters and society in the new century.[2]

In their pioneering feminist analysis of myths of authority, knowledge, and power, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar intimate that Austen's ability to turn away from Fielding's plotting of the Fall was catalyzed by her parallel and competing interest in Samuel Richardson. After framing *Mansfield Park*'s voluble Mary Crawford as "a damned Eve who offers to seduce prelapsarian Edmund Bertram," Gilbert and Gubar claim that Austen follows Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, her favourite of his novels, in the strong resemblance

to his already comprehensive picture of the world. Fielding's enemies-list of novels would likely include, in addition to *Pamela*, Delarivier Manley's *New Atalantis*, Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess*, and the books Arabella obsesses over in Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*, especially Madeleine de Scudéry's *Le Grand Cyrus*. Choosing Fielding's particular picture of the Fall highlights how Jane Austen, despite sharing his largely latitudinarian Anglican religious education and much of his comic taste, diverges significantly in turning her novels into what Colin Jager appropriately calls "a critical reading of her own religious history." Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 127. Although Jager focuses on *Mansfield Park*, I argue that this spirit of sceptical critique applies as well to *Persuasion*.

2 For more on the the idea of the Fall in Austen and Inchbald, see Stefanie Markovits, "Jane Austen and the Happy Fall," *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 47, no. 4 (2007): 779–97; Jane Nardin, "Christianity and the Structure of *Persuasion*," *Renascence* 30 (1977): 43–55; Michael Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 178; David Fairer, "Sentimental Translation in Mackenzie and Sterne," *Essays in Criticism* 49, no. 2 (1999): 144; Jocelyn Harris, "Jane Austen and the Case of the (Male) Past: The Case Reexamined," in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, ed. Devoney Looser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 95; and Susan Ford, "'A Name More Dear': Daughters, Fathers, and Desire in *A Simple Story*, *The False Friend*, and *Matilda*," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. Carol Shiner and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 51–71.

between Edmund's refusal of Mary's temptations and how Richardson's Harriet compliments Sir Charles. Sir Charles overwrites Adam, for "[Charles Grandison] would not have been so compliant as to taste the forbidden fruit; instead he would have left it to God to annihilate the first Eve and supply a second."[3] But while Richardson may prompt Austen's interest in erasing Eve, his heroines fail to supply her with substitutes with which to fill the void. For Pamela Andrews ends as "mere cypher on the wrong side of a figure," signified by her marital place, whereas *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot must transform herself from one "knowing [her] own nothingness" into a mature heroine who knows her own value.[4] If *Mansfield Park* features the most overtly Edenic plot in Austen, in which a diabolical Mary openly tempts Edmund during the home theatricals, and the most overt ties to Inchbald, because she translated the play that is the scene of temptation, *Persuasion* supplies an equally intriguing link between Austen and Inchbald in a shared feminist master plot of rewriting Eve and her story. Annihilating Eve by editing and rewriting her so that she is not formed primarily for moral opprobrium or domestic docility entails retelling the Fall altogether, and that retelling requires a willingness to question one's own religion. This daring act joins Austen's last novel strongly to Inchbald's first one, for both are complementary works of feminist narrative revision of the romance novel and the culture it addressed.

Austen knew *A Simple Story* directly and knew of Inchbald's dicey social reputation as actress-novelist, as revealed in the way Inchbald's translation of Augustus von Kotzebue's *Lovers' Vows* becomes the stuff of taboo in the theatrical chapters of *Mansfield Park*.[5] Further persuasive Austen-Inchbald links

3 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 166, 168. Despite their more essentialist focus on "woman" less inflected by class and race as the proper subject for feminism, Gilbert and Gubar's work remains invaluable for its acute analysis of narrative.

4 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Peter Sabor (1740; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, 1985), 388. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (1817; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 44. References are to this edition.

5 On Inchbald's translation of August von Kotzebue's play and Austen's knowledge of Inchbald's comedies, see Paula Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theater* (New York: Hambledon Press, 2002), 100–5, 149–76; Ford, "'It is about Lovers' Vows': Kotzebue, Inchbald, and the Players of Mansfield Park,"

have been proposed for *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility* by Susan Ford and Jo-Allyson Parker, and Stefanie Markovits notes that "the degree to which *Persuasion* revisits the concerns of *Mansfield Park* is remarkable," making a line of artistic transmission from early Inchbald to late Austen all the more likely.[6] Yet I am less interested in pursuing the influence of Inchbald's first on Austen's last novel than in showing their shared interest in using the convention of the Fall to advance the comic romance novel as a forum for feminism. Both novelists, as I will argue, examine how useful knowledge of good and evil requires recognizing that the rules of Christianity and courtship often collude to keep women in a fallen state from which they can only be redeemed by first revising some fundamental stories about the sexes, ethics, and romance.

Despite their different social and religious backgrounds—one a Catholic professional actress and playwright, the other a clergyman's daughter seen by her family as an "unostentatious, yet consistent and mainstream Anglican"—Inchbald and Austen share an ideological project.[7] Each novelist is willing to take on her own church; each counters representations of fallen women in literature and culture in order to challenge dominant myths and ideologies moral, aesthetic, and sexual. Noticing Austen's focus on the Fall also helps reposition her on Marilyn Butler's still influential spectrum from *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* (1982) as further from either reactionaries or conservatives, and closer in methods of social critique to her more liberal and sceptical Romantics peers, from early Wordsworth to Keats, and even Byron, despite *Persuasion*'s overt criticism of both him and Scott.[8]

Persuasions Online 27, no. 1 (2006): n.p., http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no1/ford.htm; and Elizabeth Steele, "I'll Tell You What about *Mansfield Park*," *Persuasions* 29 (2007): 180–83.

6 Markovits, 782. For more Austen-Inchbald comparisons, see Byrne, "*A Simple Story*: From Inchbald to Austen," *Romanticism* 5, no. 2 (1999): 162–63; and Jo-Allyson Parker, "Complicating *A Simple Story*: Inchbald's Two Versions of Female Power," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 255–70. Parker notes that "the ghost of Elizabeth Inchbald haunts Austen novels to a greater extent than we have considered" (265). See also Ford, "'It is about Lover's Vows.'"

7 Gary Kelly, "Religion and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152.

8 Marilyn Butler develops her classification of Austen as conservative in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and *Romantics,*

Similarly, Inchbald's shared focus on fallen women, religion, and ideology positions her ideas somewhat further from Gary Kelly's and Terry Castle's view of her as best understood within the intellectual world of Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and the Jacobin and London radical societies of the 1790s.[9] For despite Inchbald's Wollstonecraftian interest in education and her command over a similar theory of gender-as-position, Inchbald shifts the focus of her feminism from what Peter Knox-Shaw aptly calls "the austere rationalism of eighteenth-century feminists," seen in Wollstonecraft's classical republicanism, to what Castle has called Inchbald's sense of the "morbid state" of civilization itself, and thus to a more Freudian future by engaging sexuality more profoundly and showing a keener grasp of the psychopathology

Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Claudia Johnson counters, arguing for a progressive if not radical Austen, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). William Deresiewicz's *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) finds Austen equally persuaded by Byron, via her interest in Napoleon and Waterloo, and by Scott, thanks to *Persuasion*'s moving between personal and national trauma, loss, and recovery. The resulting fusion of Scott and Byron's widely divergent party politics in Austen's own party politics, however, remains unexplored in this often speculative reading. See also Ford, "Learning Romance from Scott and Byron: Jane Austen's Natural Sequel," *Jane Austen Journal* 26 (2004): 72–88. Ford notes that Louisa's fate after her fall is to be "Byronized" (83) in the way her former sexual pursuit leaves her in a position where she never speaks again and lives apart from the world. In contrast, Peter Knox-Shaw in *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) points out that Byron's own concern for the emancipation of women in the very Eastern Tales mentioned by Austen in *Persuasion* shapes Austen's feminist critique of romance, and of Scott's brand of it, and further aligns Austen with Wollstonecraft (through her influence on Byron) in an historically particular feminism in "oblique relation" to Enlightenment feminism of the 1790s and "perhaps best described as post-Enlightenment in its bearing" (237).

[9] Jane Spencer concludes that Inchbald "had Revolutionary sympathies and numbered both" fellow dramatist Thomas Holcroft and anarchist philosopher William Godwin among her friends. Spencer, introduction to *A Simple Story*, by Elizabeth Inchbald (1988; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiii. Kelly, in *The English Jacobin Novel 1780–1805* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), sees *A Simple Story* as ultimately pre-Jacobin, but Jacobin-influenced in its focus on the progressive possibilities of education (64–93). Inchbald could also be branded radical-by-association for choosing to translate into English Kotzebue's *Das Kind der Liebe* [The Love-Child], a play estimated by Robert Southey as Jacobinical yet one that, according to Ford in "'It is about Lover's Vows,'" Inchbald greatly depoliticizes by removing the overt class politics of the German original.

of everyday lives.[10] Neither Inchbald nor Austen should be read ahistorically, however, as simply ahead of her time; each author conjures recognizably Romantic spirits of the age 1790–1816, complete with the overtones of contradiction that Hazlitt posited for the times. They blend faith and feminism, each employing methods better known from the Romantic lyricists: using a highly individualized point of view to dissociate religion from its dominant doctrines and institutions, and making that the first step towards a more comprehensive vision of social reform. However, unlike more radical Romantics such as the young Wordsworth of the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandath*, Wollstonecraft, or Byron, neither novelist considers rejecting faith outright or finds it incompatible with feminism and progressivism.[11] Byron and Scott are themselves shown to be more incompatible with feminism, as Austen intimates that even the newest lyric poetry tells the same tired old stories about women. Both Austen and Inchbald engage in feminist theology in their willingness to start rewriting a crucial story from the Bible about women and knowledge, to edit Eve, and to see what might change for the better about social and gender relations accordingly.[12]

10 Knox-Shaw, 241. For Terry Castle's Freudian frame for *A Simple Story* see *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 292.

11 Inchbald's novel, written only 10 years after the violently disruptive anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, when Londoners voted with feet and fists against any relaxation of Catholic penal laws, is remarkably unconcerned with the ideas of schism that would have dominated any novel about Catholic priest and Protestant pupil appearing earlier in the same century. Kelly detects in Austen's plots, narrative, and point of view "an Anglican reading of human history as a form of romance journey in which an omniscient yet benevolent deity presides over a historical plot of human error, fall, and redemption by both free will and grace, and which instructs the reader to hope for and aspire to redemption" ("Religion and Politics," 165). In my focus on Austen's interest in religion conceived of as part of a series of interdependent social discourses, I diverge from the tendency in some studies of Austen and religion either to dissociate her sensibility about her own faith from her more evident kinds of social progressivism, or to wish to prove her piety. See, for example, Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993); and Giffin, *Jane Austen and Religion.*

12 For feminist theology, see Allyson Jule and Bettina Pedersen, *Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality*, ed. Kristina Groover (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). In their focus on Eve figures, Austen and Inchbald both support Barbara Benedict's aim, in "The Curious Genre: Female Inquiry in Amatory Fiction,"

For the Inchbald Eves (Miss Milner and her daughter) the apple, that most forbidden knowledge women seize at excessively grave cost, is carnal knowledge, sexual desire, and its fulfillment. Austen's Edmund Bertrand, in *Mansfield Park*, fears that Inchbald's work is unsuitable for impressionable youngsters, and his fears are indeed justified.[13] Austen is certainly never as frank about sex as Inchbald, and instead reads the apple that her new Eve will need exactly as knowledge of good and evil—as ethics. Anne Elliot helps her creator to quest for moral knowledge more finely tuned to the real social dilemmas of courtship, rendering her able to avoid others' gross temptations and hapless falls. I thus pair and historicize these novels' similar modes of Romantic feminism, but place Inchbald after Austen to highlight how Inchbald's revision of Eve is more explicit and her critique of gender and power in the marriage market is more modern in its feminist stance by making self-determination over sexuality and gendered identity key to a more enlightened and less repressive life in the body politic.

Falling into Quotation: "Persuasion"

Whether considered for its social criticisms, as the epitome of Austen's rules of amiable courtship, or for its special authority as the last complete Austen novel, *Persuasion* challenges its critics to make some sense of Louisa Musgrove's startling fall from Frederick Wentworth's arms onto her head. While many have noticed this peculiar incident that ends the first volume of the novel, literally a fall that turns a story around, many critics wonder what to do with it.[14] Initially, the narrative encourages

Studies in the Novel 30, no. 2 (1998): 194–210, "to define the novel as a female genre, the genre of the questions of Eve" (206).

13 Graphic evidence of Inchbald's association with taboo sexuality, and of her era's continuing suspicion of successful women writers, comes not just from her reputation as an actress, or from modern studies of her writing, but from an anonymous print, a late eighteenth-century satiric caricature of her immediately after the publication of *A Simple Story*. She sits at her writing table, while inspirational books litter the floor and clutter the table, including one marked "The Art of Puffing" and another clearly labelled with a most damning word: "Rochester." See Anibel Jenkins, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), n.p. (illustrations follow 312).

14 Alan Richardson sees in this incident Austen's engagement with changing theories of mind and embodied subjectivity, in "Of Heartache and Head Injury: Reading Minds in *Persuasion*," *Poetics Today* 23, no. 1 (2002): 141–60.

readers to see the humour in this disruptive moment, especially once any mortal danger to Louisa's health has passed. Admiral Croft remarks of this "sad catastrophe": "Ay, a very bad business indeed.—A new sort of way this, for a young fellow to be making love, by breaking his mistresses' head!" (120). Similarly, the narrator, given to especially sharp-tongued appraisals of characters in this novel—notoriously Mrs Musgrove's "large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for" (68)—remarks with humorously skewed concern that "Louisa's limbs had escaped. There was no injury but to the head" (109). The scene, however, is not merely played for laughs.

This serious pivotal moment in the novel, coming as the catastrophe in the plot, ends the action of volume 1 and significantly redirects the action of volume 2. Although Louisa's accident marks no sustained turn to tragedy, the importance of her fall lies in taking seriously the dialogue this novel stages with the idea of a fall as an event that structures not just novel plots, but fundamental myths about the moral lives of men and women. Akin to Inchbald's later explicit emphasis on "A PROPER EDUCATION" in *A Simple Story*, *Persuasion* targets the traditional Christian story of the Fall as an especially damaging kind of false education for women and men alike.[15] Austen seeks to re-educate all who appropriate fundamental myths of woman's inconstancy and fickleness, such as Captain Harville in his penultimate dialogue with Anne Elliot at the White Hart Inn.[16] Such dangerous traditions are maintained, as Anne Elliot claims, by myriad "examples in books" (221), examples roundly criticized in the narrator's final comments on education, sex, and sensibility. When Captain Harville claims that all literature is a variation on the constant theme of woman's treachery, Anne retorts by ruling out his evidence entirely. She wants to hear of "no reference to

His claims about Austen's interest in minds, brains, and notions of innate character can complement my own by making a more radical Austen plausible. He notes how injuries to bodies and heads can immediately affect character: "Head injury, strange as it may seem in retrospect, was a politically loaded topic at the very time Austen was writing *Persuasion*, when to question the immateriality of mind could mean to question the philosophical underpinnings of orthodox religious belief" (146).

15 Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, ed. J.M.S. Tompkins (1791; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 338. References are to this edition.

16 Harris notes that in *Persuasion* "Austen revisions the entire history of western culture when she denies its traditional assumption that women are vain, inconstant, necessarily mute, ignorant, and unequal" (96).

examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling our own story. Education has been theirs in so much a higher degree; the pen has been in their hands" (221).

Given this emphasis on rules for women penned by men, it is appropriate that Austen focuses on the Fall as crucial to a comprehension of the issues of writing, gender, and power. *Persuasion*, rather than settling on conservative religious intimations of women's innate weakness, instead reveals in Austen's revised and inverted story of the Fall an untraditional, critical appraisal of Christian sagas. In Austen's revision of the Fall, Satanic temptation is identified not only with the devious and avaricious William Walter Elliot, but also with the apparently innocuous Captain Benwick and with the dangers of a contemporary "Satanic School" (as it was commonly called) of Romantic poetry glimpsed in the novel's rare direct address to Byron and Scott (158). Austen reveals surprising similarity between the Whig-to-radical Byron and the conservative Tory Scott, for each tempts women with a devilish and seductive mode of discourse readily available to either party in 1816. Simple Louisa Musgrove, like an innocent Eve, is talked by Captain Benwick into a curious version of the fallen world, one marked not by labour but by constant readings in lyric poetry of men of leisure, Scott's nostalgic "tender songs," already out of synch with Austen's "unfeudal tone of the present day" (131) and Byron's "impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony" (98). Louisa, Anne intimates, "would learn to be an enthusiast for Scott and Lord Byron ... the idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection, was amusing, but she had no doubt of its being so. The day at Lyme, the fall from the Cobb, might influence her health, her nerves, her courage, her character to the end of her life, as thoroughly as it appears to have influenced her fate" (158). It seems no accident that one paragraph before Louisa's "sad accident" (120) at the Cobb, Austen's narrator pointedly mentions Louisa and Benwick together gazing on "Lord Byron's 'dark blue seas'" (106).

Many of the important parts of the biblical story of the Fall find counterparts in Austen's novel, but her scenes reverse the order of the Christian story and alter its expected outcome. One page before Louisa lands on her head, Austen introduces her readers to William Walter Elliot, the heir presumptive in Anne's family and a character quite accurately described as a snake. As Tony Tanner points out, "Mrs. Smith's description of

the true Mr. Elliot ['a man without heart or conscience'] is never challenged or controverted. It is the most unqualified summary of unmitigated evil in all Jane Austen's work."[17] In Anne's later terms, William represents those "manoeuvres of selfishness and duplicity" that should inspire only revulsion (195). William does partly play the devil in Austen's plot, and he is irredeemably evil when acting in concert with the corrupt and aptly named Mrs Clay. However, William first enters the scene on the Cobb not to tempt Louisa, but to court Anne, who mistakes him for a fine gentleman. Meanwhile he, rather like Milton's Satan gazing on Eve, "admired her [Anne] exceedingly" for her "bloom and freshness of youth" (101). But it is not Anne herself who falls for his unctuous charms.

Louisa Musgrove's mock-tragic tumble is initially called both an accident and a catastrophe. Its function in the plot as classical catastrophe, however, is superseded in the novel, as tragedy is by comedy. Her fall becomes oddly fortunate in the big picture. Captain Wentworth, later recalling to Anne that distressing day at Lyme Regis, remarks, "The day has produced some effects however—has had some consequences which may be considered as the very reverse of frightful" (172). For Wentworth and Anne the remark is just. As Laura M. White notes, the fall from the Cobb marks a critical point at which Wentworth's and Anne's roles begin to reverse, improving each, and allowing them gradually to overcome many barriers to mutual communication and understanding.[18]

Understanding who benefits from this fall becomes, for Austen, an explicitly woman-centred issue: "As to the sad catastrophe itself," states the narrator, "it could be canvassed only in one style by a couple of steady sensible women, whose judgments had to work on ascertained events" (120). Giddy Louisa herself, however, is hardly one of these steady, sensible women, nor does any good fortune from the sad mishap extend to her. Louisa Musgrove keeps her life but forfeits much of what makes it, for Austen, worth living. Formerly high-spirited, she becomes docile in her permanent convalescence, and is both infantilized and reduced

[17] Tony Tanner, "In Between: *Persuasion*," in *Persuasion: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Contexts Criticism*, ed. Patricia M. Spacks (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 246.

[18] Laura M. White, "Traveling to the Self: Comic and Spatial Openness in Jane Austen's Novels," in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. Laura M. White (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 198–213.

to something reminiscent of a small, frightened bird, "like a young dab-chick" (206), as her brother Charles describes her to Anne. Louisa, though often annoying, seems an unlikely figure to shoulder the weight of this fate, much less to bear Austen's larger critique. As a minor character (Anne's sister-in-law) initially representing "all the usual stock of accomplishments" and "living to be fashionable, happy and merry" (43), this frivolous socialite hardly seems any worse than Anne's sister Mary, and looks to be an unlikely point on which the whole novel should pivot. Her acting as Anne's rival for Captain Wentworth's affections might make her a better target, but even the importance of such a romantic rivalry is played down, because Anne has her eye as much on the newly introduced William as on Wentworth. Why then does Austen so forcibly and definitively remove Louisa from the action with her fall?

If Louisa is punished for daring to express overtly a too-sexualized pleasure, the fate of many "fallen women," then the immediate circumstances of her fall might suggest that the novel's view of religion indicates a switch from Romantic license to proto-Victorian piety and growing prudishness. From this vantage, Louisa falls because she insists on being jumped down from step to step, a process in which she has Wentworth lift and carry her through the air because, as Austen puts it, "the sensation was delightful to her" (106). John Wiltshire explores a psychologized reading of this scene as Freudian fantasy, remarking, "Louisa's fall then is not far from a parapraxis, since it does enact each of the participants' unconscious processes."[19] According to this reading of Louisa's psychopathology, of her fall into illness, Austen does not squeamishly avoid the sexualized body but instead contextualizes sexuality, desire, and repression within health and illness generally. Indeed a reading of Austen as repressive prude, never willing to venture beyond a tame "amiability" as the proper passion for courting couples, would entail some direct narrative punishment treating Louisa primarily as sexual sinner. This moment never arrives and is hardly consistent with other parts of the same plot. Austen does not, I believe, ultimately side with any strict voice of repression in the novel, but she remains especially interested in what constitutes Louisa's invalid versus Anne's healthier psychic and sexual life. Anne

[19] John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: "The Picture of Health"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 188.

Elliot is, after all, rescued from a life of guilt, regret, and celibacy by getting to marry in her late twenties. Neither Austen nor her narrator arrogates to herself the voice and power of an angry and punitive god. That role is instead played by Lady Russell, who speaks the most powerful prohibition in this novel—to not marry Wentworth—but it is this ban on desire that itself is lifted by Austen as unjust. That unjust commandment not only occasions the scene on the Cobb but also more accurately explains the immediate cause of Louisa's fall.

Lady Russell's earlier life with Anne is helpful in understanding Louisa's later folly. When told not to jump again Louisa retorts, "I am determined, I will" (106). It is less the pleasure Louisa feels but instead what Louisa emphatically says that precipitates her fall and connects her fate to Lady Russell and to Anne. Lady Russell initiates the whole story of *Persuasion* as Anne's adversity, much as God does the story of man's adversity, with a commandment. She tells young Anne that she may not marry Wentworth, a mere navy man of no apparent means or prospects. Lady Russell's potent spoken influence far outweighs Anne's ineffectual father, and Anne is persuaded to give up the romance. In this context, when Louisa later commands the flagging Wentworth that she will be jumped down one more stair a reading favourable to Louisa initially seems applicable: if she will have her last jump, she will have her sexualized pleasure, she will have self-determination, she will apparently become a strong, admirable, perhaps even feminist figure. In contrast, Anne, diffident victim of others' will, has spent years regretting her own prior inability to say "I will" and "I do," and she will languish while Louisa seems poised for happiness. Louisa, however, plummets insensible to the pavement, while Anne regenerates and triumphs precisely because Louisa's fall leaves Wentworth "unshackled and free" (159).

Persuasion poses an ethical problem in reading the value of woman's self-determination and agency. The reader, like Wentworth, needs to separate Anne from Louisa by coming "to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind" (228). A strong will is no apology for a pointless pursuit. But Austen suggests a more radical response to the critical business of commandments and ethical choices in women's lives: that no single rule can be had

for taking or rejecting apparently authoritative advice. Having already supplanted the patriarchal authority of Anne's father Sir Walter with her aunt Lady Russell, Austen has Anne question a further aspect of traditional Christian ethics, the link between the will of God and the voice of the parent.

Anne, after telling Wentworth that she was perfectly right in being guided by Lady Russell, adds an unsettlingly honest coda to her attempt at trying impartially to judge of the right and the wrong, as she puts it, "with regard to myself" (232). Of Lady Russell she concludes: "To me she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad *only as the event decides*" (232, emphasis added). This is a strikingly relativistic appraisal from the author who earlier seems to advocate Christian education by means of "strongest examples of moral and religious endurance" (99). Even though Anne adds that "a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion" (232), her intriguingly destabilizing words about cases and events do carry the added authority of being part of Anne's last speech in the novel. But which cases are to be evaluated only as the event decides, admitting of no categorical imperative? The broader circumstances of Louisa's fall provide a possible answer.

Louisa is not simply selfish and obstinate, she is self-deluded. Her tumble from the reader's respect is carefully prepared by Austen as the necessary consequence of an unhappy mix of trivial will with habitual deference. Louisa is best appraised in the scene late in volume 1, just before the incident on the Cobb, in which Wentworth makes a moral exemplum out of a hazelnut.[20] Wentworth believes he has spotted in Louisa the admirable firmness of mind that he claims to value so highly, and so he compares her to a hazelnut still on the tree, one that has not "fallen and been trodden underfoot" (86). Such verbs, combined with the telling mention of autumn throughout this chapter make it clear that fall is very much in the air. Perhaps Austen's specific choice of a hazelnut further recalls Wordsworth's hazels in *Nutting*, a contemporary example of what the narrator calls in the same chapter "those thousand poetical descriptions

[20] Markovits appropriately emphasizes this episode, calling this parable of the nut the most curious version of the idea of the fortunate fall in the novel (789).

extant of autumn."[21] *Nutting* aptly represents a decidedly male retelling of the loss of paradise. Precisely these kinds of poetical descriptions occupy Anne's musings while she overhears Wentworth and Louisa discoursing on the nut as an allegory of the spectrum of moral choices to be revisited in the White Hart Inn: constancy, persuadability, inconstancy. Yet, even without benefit of allusion, Austen indicates that Wentworth here admires some questionable aspects of Louisa's character. Louisa earns Wentworth's admiration by criticizing Mrs Croft, Wentworth's own sister, for too much independence and agency in her marriage to Admiral Croft: "If I loved a man as she loves the Admiral, I would be always with him, nothing should ever separate us, and I would rather be overturned by him, than driven safely by anybody else" (83). Immediately after Louisa's "stand-by-your-man" remark, the narrator quietly counters Louisa's "enthusiasm" (83) by juxtaposing her case for the virtues of being unpersuadable with Anne's apparently unrelated way of passing the time by rehearsing old autumnal poems. Anne's first thought upon hearing Louisa's case, echoing uncomfortable memories of being too persuadable by Lady Russell a decade ago, are that she "could not immediately fall into quotation again" (83). To avoid falling into Louisa's ideological position with respect to male authority, Anne must also not fall back into the male-dominated poetic canon, precisely the tradition typified in Anne's and Louisa's time by Scott and Byron's poems about women, and into which Louisa is poised to fall. Before Anne comments on Louisa's post-lapsarian turn to poetry, Louisa has already fallen into quotation.

Moreover, prior to being physically overturned by Wentworth on the steps, Louisa's traditional feminine deference to male authority was already overturned by the very subject of her deferential effusion, Mrs Croft. In a deft piece of plotting, Austen concludes the same chapter with Mrs Croft's literalizing and reversing Louisa's remarks on being safely driven. When a carriage driven by Admiral Croft comes perilously close to hitting a post, Mrs Croft grabs the carriage reins from him and prevents the carriage from crashing. As the narrator pointedly adds, "by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself ... they neither

[21] As Markovits points out, William Wordsworth's *Nutting* makes a provocative parallel given its direct focus on gender, violation, and a fall from grace translated into rural English terms (790).

fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart" (90). Louisa, however, lacking the narrator's recognition of the value of active women such as Mrs Croft, and that constancy need not entail passivity, falls into a more dangerous and foul kind of rut, one formed not by carriage wheels, but by the repetitive lines of male myths about proper female moral character, those very quotations that Anne learns to avoid.

Louisa's alternately laughable and pathetic fate is to become a parody of the proper sentimental female reader, for she plays out her life being doted on by the feminized and bookish lieutenant Benwick, who, despite being a Man of Feeling and a figure of sympathy in his mourning, acts much like Evelyn Waugh's later mad Dickensian in *A Handful of Dust*. Benwick is incessantly at Louisa's ear "whispering to her all day long" (206) the latest Romantic verse. According to the narrator, he especially favours Scott's *Marmion* and Byron's eastern tales such as the *Giaour*. However distinct these two romantic poets seemed to many others, especially politically, in Austen's hands they collectively represent a truly Satanic school of poetry by presenting equally diabolical and debilitating choices for women's acceptable romantic conduct. Scott can only offer women pining chivalric effusions, while Byron aligns women with smouldering, (self)-destructive sexuality, what Austen's narrator terms "hopeless agony" (98). Women who, like Louisa, assume only these narrow roles have already fallen from grace.

In Benwick's suggestive position as one crouching and whispering at Louisa's ear Austen has placed before Louisa's unseeing eyes a devilish emblem of that most subtle kind of real temptation that led to her fall, an inflexible ideology of gender through which much of the new verse of the early nineteenth century merely recapitulates traditional stories about women. Unlike Louisa, perpetually fallen into a restrictive world of masculine quotation in which all choices have been prewritten for her, Anne will conclude that it is high time that women wrote the texts to be quoted. And whereas Louisa slips into passive inanition verging on catatonia, Anne is fortunate, roused to action by Louisa's disaster. Anne moves closer in gender position to Mrs Croft, who, unlike the false divinity of Lady Russell, represents in her forthright opinions, strong marriage, and admirable bearing something rare and divine in this world in which, as Austen knows, men insist on holding both the reins and the pen.

Austen's rewriting of the idea of the Fall is allusive and suggestive rather than exhaustive. She is certainly critical of the moral of the story, that among mortals women should especially avoid seeking knowledge of the difference between good and evil. To convey that worldly ethical knowledge, and the delights and responsibilities it brings, to teach readers to spot the subtle gradations between constancy as mere obstinacy and persuadability as crucial to learning anything, is arguably Austen's greatest desire in all her novels. Even the traditional punishment brought on women and men, the burdens of two labours—childbirth and work—can be seen instead as blessings at the end of this novel. Anne's reward for avoiding becoming a spinster is surely partly about finally being able to have a child, and her husband Wentworth's job conspicuously contrasts the rewarding work of the professional navy man with the stultifying and straightening situation of Anne's unproductive, vain, and leisured gentry father.

Austen revises both the moral and the plot of traditional Christian narratives. Rather than retelling a myth of temptation, fall, and consequence in chronological sequence, the clearest picture of Austen's devil-in-the-details-of-ideology is revealed after Louisa's downfall, in the procrustean bed of categorical and inflexible rules for the conduct of ladies in love. Such rules, parroted to Louisa by Benwick in a scene of ideology in action, were all too available in 1815 in the works of Byron and Scott, but also in other "Satanic" writers, those who imagined proper women should conform to the model of sentimental reader that is ultimately no better than a Louisa-like neurasthenic invalid.

As for the crucial role of God in Austen's revised myth, although Lady Russell attempts the part, she too fails. She is hardly omniscient. Even Austen's narrator, usually as close to omniscience as one finds in fiction, may be more limited and human than not, as in that disarmingly cutting remark about Mrs Musgrove's weight and her son Richard's "worthless" life. Gene Koppel describes those not as slips in tone that Austen would have revised had she not been so ill, but as indications that the narrator's imperfection are the true measure of her humanity.[22] With the failures of all persons who try to play God in this novel fails any belief that timeless, inflexible commandments will suffice for guiding women to discern good from evil in this

[22] Gene Koppel, *The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 104.

world. For, however initially persuasive it seems, any single, fixed rule warning women about being persuadable by others, such as in the Christian tradition about Eve's simply being wrong to desire ethical knowledge, does not suffice.

Seeing Austen's novel as engaged in a dialogue with other stories of the Fall sheds light on the way in which social criticism and feminism in the novel becomes inseparable from rewriting primary myths of culture.[23] Such connections become visible in Austen's alternative to a world where women too often fall into a quotation. In the crucial hazelnut scene, Anne's antidote to falling into quotation is observing "the ploughs at work, and the fresh-made path ... counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence" (83). Austen recognizes here that it will be hard work clearing the way for such fresh-made, alternative paths through established myths. She further implies that any patriarchal or pastoral ideal of dwelling in happy contemplation on the land of one's fathers is bankrupt, because this very desire characterizes Anne's useless and socially prejudiced father at the start of the novel. Instead, Austen advocates a life that sees work in more Georgic terms, not as post-lapsarian curse, but as the blessing of directed activity and true virtue. If this welcome acceptance of work is also a tenet of Austen's Protestant faith and is central to her new mythology, it is quite fitting that Anne would leave her father's world of stagnant leisure and land for the vigorous activity and constantly shifting circumstances that characterize the trustworthy moral guide Mrs Croft, and that await Anne in her new career at sea.[24]

Falling into Repression: "A Simple Story"

Inchbald's dramatic story of one fallen woman, Miss Milner, and the consequences of her life for a second one, her daughter Matilda, reveals its debt to the biblical story of the Fall most explicitly in the daughter's distraught remark to Sandford, her Jesuit guardian, at the end of volume 3: "Do not reproach me, do

[23] According to Ford, Mary Robinson's *The False Friend* and Mary Shelley's *Matilda* offer a "redaction of the banishment from Eden, a fall due to sympathy, to the desire for knowledge, to speech" ("'A Name More Dear,'" 53).

[24] A similar emphasis on fluidity of place is the point of White's essay on *Persuasion*, using the metaphor of Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to claim that Austen "has allowed her two protagonists the latitude to escape longitude." White, "The 'Positioning Systems' of *Persuasion*," *Persuasions Online* 27, no. 1 (2006): http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no1/white.htm, last paragraph.

not upbraid me—I know I have done wrong—I know I had but one command from my father, and that I have disobeyed" (275). Like Eve ashamed, Matilda after this remark seeks to remove herself from her father's domain and sight. Castle has argued that transgression "is the very essence of Inchbald's plot," that "patriarchal injunctions ... are repeatedly overturned," calling Matilda "a new Eve."[25] More recently, critics have affiliated *A Simple Story* with a "Romantic fascination with the myth of the fall from innocence into the dark world of experience and with the consequent motif of exile."[26] However, none of the many studies of the novel as a critique of patriarchy develops the consequences of the way that evident critique is fused, as in Austen, with Inchbald's re-examination of one fundamental Christian myth of the imbalance of power and knowledge between the sexes.[27]

Unlike Anne Elliot, Matilda has not dared to attain primarily ethical knowledge; rather, her forbidden fruit has grown from a complex tree of sexuality and shame entwining her with her late mother, who is never given a first name, and the Catholic priest and patriarch who has been guardian to both, Lord Elmwood, formerly Mr Dorriforth. Matilda, at seventeen, breaks Lord Elmwood's commandment by daring to appear in his sight inside his estate. His prohibition, an imposed half-blindness to her presence, is portrayed as a wholly authoritarian, pointedly unreasonable, and, in Freudian terms that prove highly applicable to this novel, an overdetermined and transferential response to an earlier incident.[28] Matilda's mother, Miss Milner, is conspicuously

[25] Castle, 294, 325.

[26] Candace Ward, "Inordinate Desire: Schooling the Senses in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*," *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 1 (1999): 1–18.

[27] For further illuminating studies of *A Simple Story*, see Caroline Breashears, "Defining Masculinity in *A Simple Story*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16, no. 3 (2004): 451–70; Dianne Osland, "Heart-Picking in *A Simple Story*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16, no.1 (2003): 79–101; and Peter Mortensen, "Rousseau's English Daughters: Female Desire and Male Guardianship in British Romantic Fiction," *English Studies* 83, no. 4 (2002): 356–70.

[28] For a dissenting view about reading Inchbald through Freud, or as ideological or anti-patriarchal at all, see Michael Boardman, "Inchbald's *A Simple Story*: An Anti-Ideological Reading," in *Ideology and Literary Form*, ed. David Richter (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1999), 207–22. For the best counterpoints to Boardman, demonstrating the analytical power of psychoanalytic theory to reading Inchbald well, see George Haggerty's impressive Kristevan interpretation, "Female Abjection in Inchbald's *A Simple Story*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 36, no. 3 (1996): 655–71; and Catherine Craft-Fairchild's exploration of the psychology

portrayed as a fallen woman. She had an affair with the Duke of Avon (formerly Lord Lawnly) while Elmwood was seeing to his Caribbean properties, causing Lord Elmwood to exact punishment on Matilda—even though she is his legitimate daughter—to get back at the now-deceased mother's sexual transgression. The narrator is explicit about Elmwood's motive: "his own daughter, his only child by his once adored Miss Milner, he refuses ever to see again, in vengeance to her mother's crimes" (195). On the same page, moreover, Inchbald clarifies how this story of Miss Milner's worst disobedience will enable some suggestive revisions of earlier stories of mothers' crimes: "To state the progression by which vice gains a predominance in the heart, may be a useful lesson; but it is one so little to the satisfaction of most readers, that it is not meant to be related here, all the degrees of frailty by which Lady Elmwood fell; but instead of picturing every occasion of her fall, come briefly to the events that followed" (195–96). In a novel wherein the author is especially adept at transferring theatre to prose via subtle descriptions of often unspoken and implicit hints and gestures, this seems an uncharacteristically blunt statement. But if this little satisfaction of "most readers" hints at the dissatisfaction of women readers in particular with yet another coquette's progress, a further reading becomes plausible. Unlike typical male-authored cautionary tales that delight in linking the chain of frailties and vices that leads us to blame a fallen woman's fall on vanity, intellectual weakness, curiosity, or hysteria, Inchbald's novel immediately follows this narrator's aside with a full account of just how complicit Lord Elmwood was in his wife's fall from only his graces. If we consider what really led Lady Elmwood to have an affair—an event already strikingly taboo for the way Inchbald makes her the agent of the affair—it is arguably a combination of emotional and sexual dissatisfaction with a husband who is becoming overtly cold, callous, and, as the narrator underscores, "a hard-hearted tyrant" (195).[29] As Inchbald's narrator hints, smugly blaming only the woman by anatomizing her frailty tells merely half of the story of women's transgression. In *A Simple Story* Inchbald dwells on the events that follow Lady Elmwood's fall, not because the story of her

of patriarchy in *Masquerade and Gender: Disguise and Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century Fictions by Women* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

29 Ward similarly explores how both mother and daughter shift between active and passive roles, from objects to subjects of desire (4–8).

daughter's eventual reconciliation with her father fully atones in the next generation for the mother's guilt, but because Matilda's story best clarifies just what kinds of frailty, and whose, ought to be criticized in a world where the knowledge most forbidden to women is so often carnal.

The novel's signature feature, its daring structural split, jumping seventeen years from mother to daughter between volumes 2 and 3, represents the mother's fall into adultery exactly as what Elmwood claims it is, a "subject we cannot speak on" (293). That part of the story—what many a novelist now would relish telling—is left entirely out of the progressive narration. However, the novel ends with a repetition of this unspeakable taboo in some ways even more startling than the original "crime." Matilda's story culminates with a question mark and the traditional comic ending, a marriage, is left seriously in doubt.

It is striking how critical commentaries on this novel, especially those seeking all signs of feminine resistance and transgression, have not remarked that we simply never know with certainty whether Matilda does or does not marry her cousin Rushbrook, the heir presumptive to the Elmwood estate. Matilda is seriously misread if taken merely as the dutiful and obedient figure of atonement for the sins of her unruly mother. After all, as the narrator explains, once Lord Elmwood finally allows his daughter to decide her own fate and marriage, Matilda's decision about her suitor's fate is left ambiguous. One woman's disobedience is a complex matter in Inchbald's world, a place where men can no longer discern Eve from serpent, priests playing God turn tyrant, and once-confident moral commandments from lords and patriarchs to ladies become psychologically twisted cautionary parables of shame, guilt, repetition, and repression. Inchbald's psychological acuity has been remarked by Kelly, who sees the novel as an influence on Godwin's psychologizing mode in *Caleb Williams*, and Dianne Osland, who sharply sums up the story's divergence from its proposed moral of proper education, noting its "tale of decent, intelligent people who do some stupid things for no good reason, who love unwisely, and who do not always learn from their mistakes."[30] What has been less developed, however, is how fully Inchbald's thought aligns her sharp psychologizing with an essentially psychoanalytic understanding of character. Her characters in their extended

[30] Kelly, *Jacobin Novel*, 66. Osland, 101.

unhappy family indicate that male and female powers of mind are shaped predominantly by sexuality and by its repression. Whereas Austen's Louisa experienced in one crisis "an instance in the psychopathology of everyday life," all of Inchbald's characters dwell in that disordered state.[31]

Read as a revision of the Fall, Inchbald's story resembles Austen's in that neither novel attempts any allegory of Genesis 3. Each biblical character does not correspond to a particular character in the novel. And compared to the conspicuously Satanic William Walter Elliot, no clear single snake stands out in Inchbald's story of the mother, although the notorious masquerade scene earlier is definitely one of temptation, as Castle recognized.[32] Yet all such parts of the original story would fall under the heading of those degrees of frailty in woman that Inchbald says do not interest her. What Inchbald instead preserves and amplifies from the biblical story is a patriarch and lord's repeated, but here repeatedly fruitless, attempt to legislate against the perceived crime of curious women making critical choices. Inchbald understood that in her world, as in Austen's, the most critical choice for any woman was selecting a spouse.

Well before Lord Elmwood is raised to the peerage, his most notable familial act as humble Mr Dorriforth, Catholic minor gentry man, is his refusal to acknowledge his nephew Rushbrook, because he sees in this child only the lingering sign of his wayward sister's disgraceful marriage: she had "married a young officer against her brother's consent" (34). Because she married down, Dorriforth shows "not one trait of compassion for his helpless nephew" (36), letting him literally fall from his grasp when he realizes the six-year-old's identity. He repeats this displaced vengeance for what he perceives as women's wrong spousal choices by exacting punishment on his own wife and their daughter, Matilda. Elmwood's draconian commands are doubled across generations: his daughter must never appear in his sight, and her mother's name must never be uttered in his presence. Inchbald herein rearranges the story of shame from the Fall. Unlike Eve, who hides from God's sight because she is ashamed of what she has learned, Lord Elmwood keeps his daughter out of his sight because he is ashamed of what the world has learned her mother

31 Wiltshire, 187.

32 Castle makes this masquerade scene central to her reading of the novel's carnivalesque mode (35).

did, just as he was already ashamed of what his own sister did. In both cases, he institutes a severe punishment for the perceived crime of a woman expressing her active desire.

God's punishment for Eve and her daughters includes not only pain in childbirth, but also a pointed warning to women about marriage in the fallen world: "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16). In Inchbald's novel, a domineering husband's extreme rules, perhaps reminiscent of Mr B's for Pamela, create a legacy of psychologically twisted punishments for sister, wife, and daughter alike. This levying of commandments is the part of the original myth that Inchbald most directly revises by suspending the rule of one husband, ultimately freeing one woman to direct her own desire and make her own choices.

In order to imagine Matilda out of the confinement of traditional patriarchal power and the myths that underwrite it, her version of "falling out of quotation," Inchbald initially confounds the positions of characters from the Fall who would need to be kept straight for the story to provide any cogent moral lessons. Elmwood the priest is singularly unable to reconcile his twin roles as man of God and man of the house, and his prohibitions show neurotic fear rather than divine knowledge. Inchbald's treatment of Elmwood's Catholicism, despite her own Catholic faith, is consistent with Anglican culture's Gothic representations. Catholicism in this novel offers a charged narrative context for showing forbidden love and the clash of sacred with secular, the inability of perhaps even the confessional to address what "we cannot speak on," and the general dangers of making any one man a priestly, privileged reader of others' texts and lives.[33] Elmwood misreads women and himself by embracing

[33] Inchbald's Catholicism is not prominent in this novel, and where it appears it is often puzzling. She exploits its Gothic tones, useful for cloistered confinements and for making and breaking courtship taboos, as is underscored in Inchbald's (mis)quotation (by Lawnly) of Alexander Pope's *Eloisa*. This negative and stereotypical picture of Catholic belief and behaviour, surprising from a Catholic, might be strategic, as a protective screen and wise marketing strategy for an English novelist who deploys what Protestant and often anti-Catholic readers expect, only to undermine that expectation. However, Inchbald's treatment of confession and interpretive authority suggests a writer more deeply worried about the habits of her own church. Whereas many can still agree with the review of *Persuasion* in *Quarterly Review* 24 (January 1821): 352–76, that Austen was "evidently a Christian writer," but not obtrusively so, it is much harder to see Inchbald as evidently Catholic in

the validity of a dangerously simple myth in order to gloss the real world of women's social lives. He conflates Eve and serpent, as in the Lamia myth, in the person of Miss Milner, the wayward mother. As the woman whose unaccountable and lamentable crime pains many, she is clearly Eve-like; but despite the ready scapegoat of the devilishly handsome Frederic Lawnly, Elmwood attributes any evil and the driving motive behind their sexual liaison as much to her as to him. She is the snake in Elmwood's own mental garden. Unfortunately, like Lycius facing the Lamia in Keats's poem, he cannot tell the tempter from the tempted, especially when it becomes clear that he comes to occupy Eve's gendered position in the story, the first of many transpositions of gender roles to come. Elmwood is the one tempted by what is forbidden as much as she is. As Miss Milner's priest and guardian he confounds his separate proper roles when he falls in love with her. This scenario's undertones of sexual impropriety and incest are aptly brought out by Lord Lawnly as rival suitor, when he scandalously but correctly sees in Miss Milner and her conflicted Catholic guardian a type of Eloisa and Abelard, and (mis)quotes Alexander Pope to prove the point.[34]

In the daughter's subsequent story, as Ford points out, incestuous dynamics are amplified.[35] Elmwood's reaction on finally finding himself face to face with the daughter he has so assiduously kept from his view is to embrace her while uttering a telling parapraxis: "—Her name did not however come to his recollection—nor any name but this—'Miss Milner—Dear Miss Milner'" (274). Having verbally transformed her into her mother, thereby transposing one object of his ban with the purported cause of it, Elmwood has, in effect, intimated that the real cause of his commandments is his own wayward desires. Acting to show that he is determined to hate his former wife, his slip with her daughter also shows that he cannot forget loving her. Immediately after this, Matilda makes the pivotal remark with which we began, about disobeying a father's one command. Inchbald thus

her best novel (cited in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage,* ed. B.C. Southam [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968], 92).

34 This makes the novel also read as a more sexualized version of Frances Burney's *Evelina*, while affiliating it with further fraught tutor and pupil tales beyond England, including Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, explicitly referenced in Inchbald's story, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's updating of Eloisa in *La Nouvelle Heloise*, and Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigne*, as Mortensen has shown.

35 Ford, "'A Name More Dear,'" 51–71.

places the scene as part of an ongoing revision of Eve, Eden, and an idea with strong eighteenth-century novelistic precedents, the expulsion from paradise.

However, what Matilda calls one simple command has already unfolded into a complex text of the way one man's laws for women's behaviour speaks indirectly of contradictory and uncontrollable male impulses. Such conflicted desires turn a simple ban on others into a sign that the one issuing the commandment does so out of frustrated desires to master himself. If Elmwood incoherently punishes others for his own failings, Matilda soon quite coherently arraigns Elmwood and Rushbrook for the very unspeakable failings they displace onto women—sexual ones.

As the second part of the novel unfolds in volumes 3 and 4, Matilda is able to expose flaws of the father through his nephew Rushbrook. At the end of volume 4, chapter 3, Lord Elmwood orders Rushbrook out of the room for having committed a grave error. Elmwood explains to his mentor Sandford (and to the reader) the nature of the nephew's transgression:

> "What was his offence, my lord?"
>
> "Such as I would not have forgiven you, or any earthly being besides himself—but while you were speaking in his behalf, I recollected there was a gratitude so extraordinary in the hazards he ran, that almost made him pardonable."
>
> "I guess the subject then," cried Sandford; "and yet I could not have supposed"—
>
> "It is a subject we cannot speak on, Sandford, therefore let us drop it." (293)

Rushbrook, next in line to inherit Lord Elmwood's estate, has declared that he wishes to marry the very daughter whom Elmwood has refused to lay eyes on (just as Elmwood had earlier refused to lay any helping hands on Rushbrook to spite his wayward mother). Perversely, Elmwood has already symbolically thwarted this plan for this marriage, because his rules stipulate that the nephew can neither appear to the father nor ask permission for his daughter's hand by name. Yet the truly unspeakable subject here remains less the name of the daughter Matilda than the act of her mother. Trying as always to punish that unrecoverable and inarticulate offence, Elmwood instead relies on a fraught dreamwork of condensation, displacement, and repression to punish Rushbrook for conflating the symbolic place of Elmwood's legitimacy and his estate with the taint of two women's errant

choices for spouses. He sees Rushbrook, though his rightful heir, as merely a monument to his sister's vulgar mistake of marrying down, and he sees in Matilda only a memento of her mother's sexuality, and by extension her unforgivable affair with Lawnly. To turn this young couple of miscreants into the inheritors of his proper line is thus doubly perverse.

Yet Elmwood's attempt to chasten these mothers retroactively has unintended effects common in wish-fulfillment dreams: he unmans the nephew and exposes himself. During the scene of Rushbrook's banishment (only the latest in a potentially infinite series of repetition compulsions) Inchbald's archly sexualized dialogue emphasizes how the stern uncle has effectively emasculated his nephew. Rushbrook first bursts into tears on hearing the edict, and then comes an appeal from Sandford: "He is but a boy, my lord, and do not give him the punishment of a man," underscored by the narrator in the following sentence: "Rushbrook now snatched his hand from Sandford's, and threw it with himself upon his neck; where he indeed sobbed like a boy" (291–92). Nor is this the only time that Rushbrook is considered juvenile, helpless, and ultimately, if implicitly, impotent. Throughout the second part of the novel, Rushbrook's suitability as a husband for Matilda is consistently undermined in passages animated with psycho-sexual power. For example, after an apparently innocuous description of Elmwood and Rushbrook's going shooting, Matilda says, "All that pleasure is now eclipsed which I used to take in listening to the report of my father's gun, for I cannot now distinguish his, from his parasite's" (232). Even though Elmwood has proven a most inhospitable host to his own daughter, Rushbrook is lower, a mere parasite on the host, and the competing report of his gun suggests invidious sexual comparisons that continue to echo through Rushbrook's part of the story.

The time-honoured conjunction of guns and masculine potency returns when Elmwood must act to rescue the daughter he has previously spurned from Lord Margrave, the rake turned rapist. Elmwood demands his pistols from Rushbrook, and Sandford, like a Greek chorus, replies with a wholly apt question. When Elmwood asks, "'Where are my pistols, Harry?' Sandford rose from his seat, and forgetting all the anger between them, caught hold of his lordship's hand, and cried, 'Will you then prove yourself a father?'" (324). In contrast, Rushbrook twice fails to prove a

father, to "raise his pistols" and to act the proper man. This theme builds to a critical moment when Matilda turns precisely these implied sexual failings against Rushbrook. When he survives his uncle's earlier wrath to entreat a now mollified Elmwood for his daughter's hand in marriage, she gives her opinion in suggestive terms that follow directly from the consistent language of pistols and potency:

> But for some time before Rushbrook was called to his private audience, he had by his unwearied attention, endeavoured to impress upon Matilda's mind, the softest sentiments in his favour.—He succeeded—but not as he wished.—She loved him as her friend, her cousin, *her softer brother, but not as a lover*.—The idea of love never once came to her thoughts; and she would sport with Rushbrook like the most harmless child, while he, all impassioned, could with difficulty resist telling her, what she made him suffer. (334, emphasis added)

Every word in this remarkable exchange serves as a psychic minefield and an aid to gloss the whole novel's implicit but vital subtext of sexual discourse. Rushbrook conveys soft sentiments that bespeak other kinds of flaccidity. This "softer brother" has no hope of becoming a proper husband, and she sports with him partly because he has earlier failed to be a sportsman who can hold his gun and measure up to real men. Furthermore, he is reduced to a culturally feminine courtship position of being the one who is distraught, impassioned, suffering, and, most pointedly, passive to another's decision about choice of marriage partner.

Most importantly, Matilda now arraigns Rushbrook for sexual failings exactly as Elmwood had earlier condemned her mother for the same sin, though in her case of excess as opposed to Rushbook's deficit. The unspeakable crime that Elmwood spends his life trying to punish—woman's audacious acting on her own sexual desires—is therefore repeated in reverse during this critical scene with Rushbrook. Moreover, much as Rushbrook is symbolically convicted here of failing to be able to satisfy Matilda's desires, this whole scene encourages a re-reading of her mother's fall as a myth about sexuality, which is read and rewritten differently by various characters within the story.

Elmwood's version of the myth of Miss Milner's fall runs as follows: she, just like all fickle and frail women penned by men and reiterated later by Captain Harville to Anne Elliot, exemplified inconstancy by switching her love back to Lawnly; she could

not restrain curiosity, desire, and passion and thereby succumbed to her own weakness. The rakish young Lord Lawnly provided the temptation, but she was already ripe to fall. Outside of his narrative, however, in that place of revisionist stories of women and love and constancy that Inchbald opens up in *A Simple Story* and Austen revisits in the denouement of *Persuasion*, exists a very different story in outline. With her reserved and formal husband overseas for three years, and after only four years of marriage, Miss Milner chooses to do something about his failure to satisfy her, and takes a lover. She therefore acts out what Inchbald the skilled actress shows simply cannot be talked about in even the more progressive 1790s: any man's failure to satisfy any woman sexually. Inchbald nowhere suggests that Miss Milner is morally blameless, but she does insist that the mother should hardly be alone in shouldering the blame.

The entire story of Matilda and Rushbrook repeats exactly the same purported sin that unravelled Miss Milner's and Elmwood's marriage: a woman daring to tell a man—one way or another—that he does not satisfy her. Elmwood's repeated and excessive patriarchal banishment of a series of disobedient women ultimately fails to dispel his own rampant insecurities and neuroses, and Inchbald highlights his final (and rather unbelievable) critical alteration in policy. Rushbrook tells Matilda of his exchange with Elmwood, who decides to let Matilda herself decide Rushbrook's nuptial fate: "I boldly told him of my presumptuous love, and he has yielded to you alone, the power over my happiness or misery.—Oh! do not doom me to the latter" (337). Elmwood finally cedes that most crucial choice over a marriage partner to the woman. Such a choice represented, in 1792 and well beyond, a most critical locus of power for any active and effective feminism to interrogate, and one ideally suited to exploration in a deceptively simple revisionist romance novel.

As soon as Matilda holds this holy grail of social and sexual self-determination, Inchbald makes an extraordinary move that explodes the narrative altogether—as if to say that this story cannot yet be told in novels of any kind. Rather than Matilda's replying directly to Rushbrook, the narrator instead answers Rushbrook in the novel's highly ambiguous ending addressed straight to the reader: "Whether the heart of Matilda, such as it has been described, could sentence him to misery, the

reader is left to surmise—and if he supposes that it did not, he has every reason to suppose their wedded life was a life of happiness" (337). Much virtue exists in that "if." Inchbald's question-mark ending, no clichéd resolution, instead forces us to think outside the traditional confines of masculine romance-plot conventions in several ways. As soon as Elmwood cedes power of choice over others' lives, the narrative reaches a Pisgah view of culture similar to the one Austen later discerns in *Persuasion*, a new Eden somewhere outside of the usual quotations, stories, and myths where patriarchs command vocally and women obey silently. Given all the doubts that cloud Rushbrook as husband material well before this dramatic scene, it is every bit as likely that the reader may surmise that Matilda could "sentence him to misery." Inchbald's phrasing of the punishment is perfect, because sentences spoken and unspoken are exactly the place of contested cultural power, just as they are in Anne Elliot's later but much better known complaints about male pens.

Inchbald, like Austen, implies a drastically different world awaiting women who manage to step outside of quotation to write their own master myths of culture. Once Matilda removes the burden levied on Eve—to desire a husband who will lord it over her—Inchbald finally shows how she makes good on the earlier decision to tell a revisionary story about the consequences of the mother's fall, rather than any oversimplified version of the steps leading up to it.

Nor is one Christian tradition the only one addressed in her abrupt non-ending of Matilda's love story. When she freezes the moment of Rushbrook's desire and suspends the reader's prior sense of chronology with that abrupt *narrative interruptus*, she sketches a kind of feminist revision of Ovidian mythologies as another biased narrative of sexual desire. Ovid's metamorphic tales typically transform a sexually threatened woman into a figure that both prevents the consummation of a rape and preserves an eternally titillating and voyeuristic version of that threat. In that sense Ovid's narrative structure is a thoroughly masculinist discourse. Erotic desire is frozen and heightened, and the woman is its object. In Inchbald's revision, complete with penultimate threat of rape from the aptly named Margrave, Matilda's possible choice of refusing Rushbrook creates a frozen moment where a man is instead made to hover just as permanently, yet now far

more uncomfortably, under an eternally unresolved threat of unfulfilled desires. Inchbald's readers are in turn made to feel through her performative discourse exactly what drove Miss Milner out of a wedded life of desperate loneliness, as Inchbald deftly passes the final power of narrative choice on to her readers. What we are all left to surmise about the daughter's fate supplies the knowledge needed to rethink problems of carnal knowledge, since it allows for a better understanding of the mother's fate as its precondition. We are certainly left with a thoroughly unsatisfying ending; this ending is, nonetheless, beautifully consonant with Matilda's "PROPER EDUCATION" read as a feminist lesson in demystifying mythologies, for it is the ghostly voice of a woman telling a man, "if you have failed to satisfy me, why am I the one always punished?"[36] Such taboo remarks from women have yet to become fully utterable more than two hundred years later.

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36 Breashears reads the narrative non-closure of the ending as fitting for a story in which Elmwood is the real centre of interest, but her claim that the odd ending to the Matilda and Rushbrook story "only indicates its relative insignificance" (469) downplays the female leads too much, and Ward's claim that the "abrupt conclusion echoes the abruptness with which sensibility appeared to have been sacrificed to the demand for unquestioned patriarchal authority" (15) too readily renders Matilda an obedient woman. Inchbald's final novel, *Nature and Art* (1796), makes clear that her interest in the moral dynamics of fallen women explored in *A Simply Story* is an abiding one. *Nature and Art* returns to the moral character of tyrant men, but this time the fallen woman is more clearly framed, blamed for a wayward son's own sexual transgression, and not only banished, but killed by that son. Inchbald consistently dwells on the ways tyrannical patriarchal power is transmitted over generations and acts as a veneer over guilt and insecurity.