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English and Spanish

# Amorous Complaint in *A Simple Story*:
# A Manipulation and Rejection of Traditional Gender Roles

from English 323 Seminar: Desire and Consent in the Eighteenth Century

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As a fourth year English and Spanish major, I have explored literature from various countries, time periods, and perspectives. This work reflects one of my greater interests: the effect of perspective and identity in writing, particularly as it relates to issues of gender and sexuality. Through my seminars at Grinnell, I have explored these issues in Feminist Memoirs and Desire and Consent in the Eighteenth Century, examining how gender and sexuality are construed in works of memoir and fiction, and how these works can not only depict trends in society, but even work to critique and subvert them. Through this symposium, I hope to demonstrate how close reading and textual analysis of fictional texts can reflect and comment on changing perspectives and beliefs in the general society, and work with other scholars to discuss how literature and its history can be seen to have political and social impact in the real world.

The eighteenth century saw a variety of changes in the literary world, including new genres, new kinds of authors, and new takes on established traditions. Among these innovations, aspects of past genres and literary tropes appear within new forms, transforming the ways in which these literary devices function in order to reveal changes in society over time. An early romance novel, Elizabeth Inchbald's 1791 publication of *A Simple Story* presents one such adaptation, the incorporation of traditional tropes of amorous complaint poetry into the novel's marriage plot, yielding complicated and unexpected representations of gender roles in desire and suggesting the changing conceptions of gender expectations in the eighteenth century.

The first half of *A Simple Story* narrates the forbidden desire of a young woman, Miss Milner, for her religious guardian, Dorriforth. Despite many conflicts and with great persistence by Miss Milner, they marry. In the second half, more than a decade later, Miss Milner has been cast off for her infidelity. Miserable and repentant, she passes away, leaving behind their daughter, Matilda. Though Dorriforth has refused to acknowledge his wife or daughter, he allows Matilda to stay in his home, as long as she stays out of his sight. As his heir Rushbrook falls in love with and pursues Matilda, like the love of the generation before them, their love is forbidden and creates many obstacles. However, through a series of misfortunes (peaking with Matilda being stolen away by the conniving rapist Lord Margrave), Matilda gains forgiveness for her mother and Dorriforth accepts her as a daughter, permitting Rushbrook to marry her.

The unusual relationships in this story raise questions about the messages Inchbald intended on such issues as gender roles and expectations in desire. Scholars debate the seemingly disconnected first and second halves: Does Inchbald propose a bold argument for the power of women in the first half and attempt to take it back in the second half (Spencer)? Is Inchbald's argument a moralizing prescription for women to restrain themselves (Kelly)? Is this a subversive celebration of female transgression (Castle)? Scholars fail to agree on the meaning of the tension between the obstinance of Miss Milner and the submission of Matilda and debate the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of masculinity represented in Lord Margrave, Dorriforth, and Rushbrook. Thus, *A Simple Story* proves to have no simple stance on the topic of gender norms and expected behavior—with the first and second halves of the story seemingly working to negate each other's primary claims.

However, by examining Inchbald's characters through the lens of traditional amorous complaint discourse, parallels can be drawn between the first and second halves of *A Simple Story*, adding to our understanding of its representations of masculinity and femininity and demonstrating ways in which the gendered expectations of amorous complaint rhetoric transfer to the eighteenth century marriage plot. Furthermore, analysis of the manipulation of amorous complaint tropes reveals the changing views of gender norms over three centuries.

To begin this exploration of Inchbald's work, let us first define "amorous complaint" through its history. In the sixteenth century, both Shakespeare and his contemporaries used tropes of amorous complaint to describe the pursuit of, and rejection of, desire. Scholars have explored Shakespeare's discourse of "love melancholy" (Ravassat 1) as "torture" (2), "depression" (18), "cruelty" (3), "mourning" (18), and even "madness" (4). Furthermore, examples from literary works such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrate the suffering of love melancholy as more than mere metaphor, but rather "literal and painful" (2). This painful love often appears as a "physical and mystical wound" or a plague of "lovesickness" (4). In this way, love melancholy or amorous complaint involves suffering because of the pursuit of, and/or rejection of, desire or love. These symptoms of love melancholy appear in many characters in Shakespeare as signs of the act of falling in love, as a response to rejected love (7), as consequences of unfulfilled sexual desire (12), or as longing and sadness because of separation between lovers (14).

In these representations of amorous complaint, gender roles are decidedly fixed: The man is the subject, the speaker, and the pursuer of desire while the female is the object, the addressee or topic of conversation, and the pursued. Though amorous complaint does give some power to the woman in her ability to say yes or no, the reaction of the man is often to degrade the woman in response to her (proclaimed or imminent) rejection. In this way, while the woman is complimented in the pursuit of desire, she is often insulted for refusing to obey the speaker's will—as well as denied the opportunity to speak for herself or her wishes. Thus, the traditional tropes of amorous complaint propose an unequal relationship between genders in the pursuit of desire.

Later, in the seventeenth century, amorous complaint tradition continues, but is influenced by changes in society and the emergence of popular female writers such as Aphra Behn. Writing from a woman's perspective, Behn engages with the tropes of amorous complaint, manipulating the traditional structure, point of view, and gender roles of the genre. Scholars perceive Behn as satirizing her contemporary male poets, examining the relationships between masculine power and authority and resisting the assumptions of power that appear in her contemporaries' gendered language (Young 1). She critiques social relations between men and women and demands that poets include women's perspectives and concerns in their art (1). Behn criticizes these representations, "show[ing] how both men and women are adversely affected by the hierarchical sexual dynamic, men with their loss of desire and women with their lack of sexual satisfaction" (3). While Behn satirizes women's behavior as well, she sympathizes with the societal causes which influence it, identifying herself with the female objects she portrays. In this way, Behn's work demonstrates the manipulations of traditional amorous complaint discourse which reflect changing attitudes towards gender roles in sexual relationships.

A century after Behn, Elizabeth Inchbald published *A Simple Story*, and critics have read the various forms of gender representations as reflections of the conflicting gender expectations of the eighteenth century. Scholars explore the drastic switch between Miss Milner's performance of femininity and that of Matilda, some reading Miss Milner's version of female power as her "active resistance to authority" and Matilda's influence in her "passive acquiescence [to authority]" (Parker 257). These contrasting femininities, separated by the two halves of the book, may show Inchbald's "inability to reconcile the contradictory cultural expectations facing women and women writers in the eighteenth century" (257) that "both castigate women for their frailty and disallow them the means to improve their lot" (265). Yet, neither option appears entirely convincing as the best choice; rather, Inchbald appears to be asking for a "proper education" which allows for a happy medium between the two (267).

Scholars also examine the representations of masculinity in the characters of Dorriforth the "man of honour" and Rushbrook the "man of feeling" (Breashears 453) as a commentary on the conflicting masculinities in eighteenth century "culture of sensibility" which sought to reform "violent brutes" into "men of feeling," leading to anxieties about appearing either too harsh and insensible or too weak and therefore effeminate (454). Rushbrook's emotional attempts to fulfill his desire prove un-desirous and ineffectual, while Lord Margrave (who kidnaps Matilda) is feared and despised because his pursuits are violent and forced, leaving Dorriforth as the middle ground—fighting between his devotion to his manly honor and his softer side (470).

As scholars continue to debate these complicated messages, reading the gendered behavior of the characters as reflections and manipulations of tradition amorous complaint discourse can further reveal ways in which Inchbald represents conflicting expectations of gender roles in desirous pursuit, rejecting traditional roles as un-desirous, unequal, and even dangerous. While Miss Milner's amorous pursuit of Dorriforth is not written in verse, her impossible desire for the religiously devoted Dorriforth reflects the same frustrations of amorous complaint. She displays a physical reaction to interactions with Dorriforth. When he refuses to allow her to pursue her desires, she responds trembling "with shame or with resentment" (Inchbald 28), two emotions that appear in the lover's complaint of frustrated attempts to fulfill desire. When Dorriforth permits her desires, she responds with overflowing gratitude: "[She] sunk underneath this kindness, and wept with a gentleness and patience" (33). Here, Miss Milner displays the same overwhelming response to the slightest indication that desire might be fulfilled, such as a man sobbing over a handkerchief or token left to him by the object of his desire or relishing the scent his beloved left where she visited. Thus, Miss Milner behaves, from the start, as a melancholic-lover, assuming the male's position in amorous complaint.

As it becomes clearer that Miss Milner's desire is Dorriforth himself, she is physically affected by every obstacle of fulfilling this desire. Confronting Dorriforth after behaving contrary to his wishes, she appears physically different: "[S]he was shorter in stature [...] paler [...] thinner—and a a very different contour presided over her whole air, and all of her features" (50). Furthermore, Inchbald points out the physical pain of Miss Milner's desire with her definition of love: "Sincere love [...] is often gratified by the degree of enjoyment, or rather forbearance, which would be torture in the pursuit of any other passion" (81). In this description, Inchbald acknowledges the strange pleasure which exists in the otherwise torturous pursuit of desire.

Following the tradition of amorous complaint, Miss Milner's desire is impossible, due to its immorality. Similar to women's virtue, Dorriforth's religious devotion makes any sexual encounter an assault on his honor. When Miss Milner's friend proclaims the impossibility of their relationship, she is devastated with "shame [and] anguish!" (89), and is only consoled by the "cherishing of her fatal passion" (93), displaying the amorous complaint trope of persistent, fatalistic determination to continue her impossible pursuit.

Through the discourse of amorous complaint, Miss Milner expresses her un-satiated desire, representing a female's desire that proves as strong and violent as male's desire. When Dorriforth is absolved of his religious vows in order to assume his family's title, Miss Milner is permitted to pursue her desire directly, and even receives help from those who had originally spurned her (102). Her health is restored with the hope of desire fulfilled (110, 114). She displays moments of power, standing up to those who oppose her desire (125). In these instances, Inchbald represents the power gained by pursuing desire, especially in Miss Milner's changing interactions with men—as she acts as the active pursuer of passion.

However, as Dorriforth reciprocates this desire, she appears to gain too much power, leading to uncivil, irrational behavior. Dorriforth appears disturbed by her refusal to submit to simple requests (127); and though she apologizes (135), and expresses self doubt (138), she still expects him to permit her defiant behavior as proof of his desire (144). Her language changes from one of desperate pleading to one of demanding submission. She schemes to create obstacles: "I will do something that any prudent man ought not to forgive [...] I will force him still to yield to his love" (148). She demands that he fulfill her desire: "[I]f he will not submit to be my lover, I will not submit to be his wife" (154). She even flaunts the interests of other lovers and refuses to apologize: "[I]nstead of stooping to [Dorriforth], I wait in the certain expectation, of his submission to me" (173). In these instances, Inchbald presents the consequences of amorous complaint: when desire is reciprocated, the lover is overwhelmed with the change in the power dynamics of the situation and uncertain how to further prove the beloved's submission.

Yet, when Dorriforth responds by breaking off the engagement, Miss Milner is once again reduced to the pathetic melancholic-lover. Her features are changed (179), she is prone to fainting spells (182), and her death becomes a probable result of his rejection (177). In response to this return to her submissive, powerless state, Dorriforth's advisor approves of and even demands their marriage, which Miss Milner accepts with physical fits of both ecstasy (191) and shame (192). By presenting Miss Milner's loss of power as the only way to fulfill her desire, Inchbald uses amorous complaint to highlight the problematic power dynamics that occur in eighteenth century amorous pursuit, showing the difficult consequences of both submission and force, for either gender. In this way, Inchbald, much like Behn, appears to use the tropes of amorous complaint in order to highlight their problematic assumptions of power and reject them.

In the second half of the book, Inchbald proposes a similarly impossible desire—Rushbrook's love for Matilda. Though this returns the amorous complaint to its traditional gender assignments, Inchbald presents Rushbrook and Matilda as performing extreme versions of these roles—leading them to perform unusual versions of masculinity and femininity.

Rushbrook's pursuit of Matilda affects him physically, making him weak and ill (242), "tortured" and "hurt to the greatest degree" by Matilda's avoidance (257), and looking "pale" and "dejected" (266). Furthermore, Rushbrook seems to feel pleasure in this pain, "an anxiety so pleasing, he could have wished it to have lasted for a year [...] the never-failing symptom of ardent love" (251). Later, he trembles and describes his hope of pursuing Matilda as "a more exquisite sensation of pain, than despair would have done" (292). In these descriptions, Rushbrook displays the typical behavior of the male lover in amorous complaint. However, as other scholars propose, Rushbrook's actions prove ineffectual and represent his failed performance of masculinity. Thus, his devotion to the role of the lover renders him un-masculine.

On the other hand, Lady Matilda shows extreme restraint and barely responds to any of Rushbrook's advances. Scholars propose that "within Matilda's very victimization—her inability to fight against adverse external circumstances except in a purely passive way—lies her particular power" (Parker 263**.** In this way, Matilda's inactive, un-passionate response to his pursuit represents a kind of power. Matilda seems to hate Rushbrook for his kindness, one of the few emotions she displays: "Matilda was moved, but she possessed too much of the manly resentment of her father, to discover what she felt" (259). In this way, in contrast with the typical female expectations, she rejects her softer emotions and hides the physical displays of her feelings. Though Rushbrook's intrusion affects her, she refuses to show it publicly: "She entered grave, majestic, and apparently serene, while her poor heart fluttered with a thousand distressing sensations" (259). In her refusal to be influenced by his advances, Matilda may demonstrate a rejection of typical female roles and display a "manly" distance from her emotions.

Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* presents complicated variations of traditional gender roles and expectations in the pursuit of desire, as demonstrated by her characters' different portrayals of what it is to love and be loved. While these representations may prevent the transmittance of any one, clear message about gender roles within Inchbald's work, they permit a broader, more varied understanding of the unique negotiation of masculinity and femininity—and the gendered performances of desire and sexuality—in the eighteenth century. By looking at the representations of amorous complaint rhetoric in *A Simple Story*, the two halves of the story demonstrate different manipulations of traditional amorous complaint tropes, and a comprehensive rejection of its prescribed gender roles.

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