Lumen
Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

"And I will, henceforward, be a father to him": Fathers and Sons in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*

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Volume 27, 2008

North America at the Crossroads of European Cultures in the Eighteenth Century
L'Amérique du Nord au Carrefour des cultures au XVIII^{e} siècle

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012053ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1012053ar

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)
1927-8284 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Olliver, J. (2008). "And I will, henceforward, be a father to him": Fathers and Sons in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*. *Lumen*, *27*, 99–108. https://doi.org/10.7202/1012053ar

8. "And I will, henceforward, be a father to him": Fathers and Sons in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*

Critical commentary on Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* has focused almost exclusively on the relationships between women in the novel, leaving largely unexplored constructions of maleness and the discourse of masculinity that sustains them. This paper argues that relationships between male characters, and particularly filial ones, deserve equal attention. Even though fatherhood is raised as a broad critical topic, it is most often considered only in relation to the role of the maternal.[1] For example Terry Castle focuses on what she calls the novel's "incorrigibly

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1 In *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760,* Toni Bowers sees paternity and paternal authority as bound up with questions of motherhood (Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). While Ruth Perry acknowledges the motif of "fatherlessness" in Inchbald's novel, a specifically masculine dynamic remains unacknowledged (Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In *Mothering Daughters,* Susan C. Greenfield, argues that "Whether she is dead, missing, emotionally detached , or present without the daughter's realizing it, the mother is conspicuous in her absence" (Susan C. Greenfield. *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance: Frances Burney to Jane Austen.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002, 18); the same could be argued for the fathers in relation to sons in *A Simple Story.* Although Caroline Breashears suggests that *A Simple Story* "illustrates how gender constructions limited men as well as women in late eighteenth-century England" (Caroline Breashears. "Defining Masculinity in *A Simple Story.*" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16.3 (2004): 453), much of her discussion of the text works in relation to the male-female dynamic, and does not take as its focus the relationships between men or the discourse of the household family that arguably structures the novel. Inchbald's novel, then, has been judged as a story primarily about relationships between women: the absence of mothers, the use of female mentors, and the mother-daughter bond.

1209-3696 / 2008 / 2700-0099 $10.00 / © CSECS / SCEDHS

feminist plot,"[2] by examining the ostensible abolition of its "patriarchal injunctions."[3] Jane Spencer also centers her discussion primarily on women, considering Lord Elmwood only in the context of the actions surrounding Miss Milner. While Spencer acknowledges that the latter half of the novel "bears witness to the difficulties of questioning masculine authority," this mode of inquiry, once again, functions only in relation to women.[4] In fact, there is little in the novel's "range of female sensibility" that has been left unexplored by critics.[5] By creating a space within scholarly studies for specifically feminist readings of *A Simple Story*, critics have simultaneously displaced narratives of masculinity and denied their centrality to Inchbald's novel.

One reason for the imbalance in the criticism may be that the relationships among women are more easily identified with modern definitions of the family: mother, father, and children. Naomi Tadmor's important questioning of the family dynamic demonstrates the need for a more porous definition of this construct, one that allows for the exploration of a less rigid set of familial roles. Moreover, her important historicizing of the early modern family helps to clarify the significance of male relationships to the novel's ultimate confirmation of a traditional hierarchy. Working, then, within the parameters of Tadmor's definition of the household-family — that is, "people living under the same roof and under the authority of a householder"[6] — this paper argues that the father and son paradigm in Inchbald's novel refuses to adhere to the consanguineal bonds that conventionally link families. The father-son relationship extends beyond one's genetic markers, instead becoming a connection defined by "the boundaries of authority and household management."[7] In the novel, the father-son relationship becomes synonymous with that of the mentor-protégé. The intimate bonds between men function on a premise of masculine power maintained through

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2 Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 294.

3 Ibid, 295.

4 Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 161.

5 Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel: 1780-1805* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 65.

6 Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 22.

7 Ibid, 24.

respect, and these homosocial relations further demonstrate a need to disallow sexualized relationships. Moreover, exclusively male relationships bridge the novel's two parts, creating a patriarchical continuity and emphasizing the importance of maleness. Thus, diametrically opposed to the incest plot and the sexualized realm of the feminine, the father-son dynamic privileges a patriarchal hierarchy that seeks to reinforce the authority that binds the traditional family together.

Inchbald initially explores father-son bonds through a religious rather than secular context. Dorriforth's priestly background links him with both emanations of religious patriarch, Father and Son. His bond with the Holy Father, however, is tenuous at best after he becomes the guardian of Miss Milner, and the personification of female sexuality enters his home. Surrounded by two priests and "two such unseductive females,"[8] Mrs. Horton and Miss Woodley, Miss Milner as Terry Castle suggests, "embodies sexual energy in a house of celibates."[9] Miss Milner's arrival destabilizes Dorriforth's connection with God, and also works to undermine his authority. Her refusal to conform to his household authority is obliquely sexual. Although the novel's plot is propelled by the tensions between men, Miss Milner is most often the occasion for these tensions. Her presence ruptures both Dorriforth's divine relationship with God and his paternal relationship with Sandford. Since he is unable to unburden his mind to his mentor and fellow priest Mr. Sandford after yet another incident with Miss Milner because he is "ashamed to tell him the cause of [his] uneasiness,"[10] Dorriforth turns to God. Aware that he has "offended" divine precepts, Dorriforth prays for counsel and forgiveness: "Thou all great, all wise, and all omnipotent being, whom I have above any other offended, to thee alone I apply in this hour of tribulation, and from thee alone I expect comfort." In this conversation with God, Dorriforth re-establishes the parameters of male authority, taking on the role of son once more. The formal institutional father-son relationship between God and priest ends with the death of Lord Elmwood. Dorriforth receives not only the title and estate of Lord Elmwood, but also a "dispensation from his vows."[11] As

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8 Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, ed. J.M.S. Tompkins (1791; London: Oxford University Press, 98),7.

9 Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization*, 298.

10 Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, 63.

11 Ibid,104.

one aspect of his formal relationship with the Church ends, Elmwood's close connections to his other father-figure, Sandford, remain strong.

The line of continuity that carries maleness and priestly vocation shows readers how Dorriforth's relationship with Sandford emphasizes another version of the family within the novel. If "servants and apprentices could be members of household-families,"[12] then Sandford falls within this definition of the family in his role as tutor and mentor to Dorriforth, and Elmwood. The narrator emphasizes Sandford's influence upon the heart and mind of both Lord Elmwood and his cousin:

> This Preceptor, held with a magisterial power the government of his pupil's passions; nay, governed them so entirely, no one could perceive (nor did the young lord himself know) that he had any.
>
> This rigid monitor and friend, was a Mr. Sandford, bred a Jesuit in the same college where Dorriforth was educated, but before his time the order was compelled to take another name. — Sandford had been the tutor of Dorriforth as well as of his cousin Lord Elmwood, and by this double tie seemed now entailed upon the family.... The young earl accustomed in his infancy to fear him as his master, in his youth and manhood received every new indulgence with which his preceptor favoured him with gratitude, and became at length to love him as his father — nor had Dorriforth as yet shook off similar sensations.[13]

Here, Inchbald demonstrates Sandford's place within the family tradition, establishing a twofold mentor-protégé connection between Lord Elmwood and Dorriforth. We observe the characteristic paternal authority and respectful bonds that tie the two men to their tutor. In this passage, the narrator also informs us that Lord Elmwood's emotions towards Sandford are those of a son for a father. In terms of Dorriforth and Sandford, the "as yet" in the narrator's choice of phrasing is ambiguous. I would argue that the particular phrasing foreshadows Dorriforth's eventually rejection of "similar sensations" that tie him to Sandford.

Indeed, Dorriforth supplants his mentor, establishing a new power dynamic in which Sandford figures as the errant son. The change in status from Dorriforth to Elmwood alters the relationship between Elmwood and Sandford with the younger man no longer willing to heed the advice of his long-time friend. The two men invariably disagree on

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12 Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, 45.

13 Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, 38-39.

the subject of Miss Milner, and when the female world she represents more fully undermines the bonds between father and son, their relationship changes again. When Sandford presumes to speak about Miss Milner "with severity one evening while she was at the opera,"[14] Lord Elmwood reproaches him and defends her:

'There is one fault, however, Mr. Sandford, I cannot lay to her charge.'

'And what is that, my lord?' (cried Sandford, eagerly) 'What is that one fault, which Miss Milner has not?'

`I never,' replied his lordship, 'heard Miss Milner, in your absence, utter a syllable to your disadvantage.'

'She durst not, my lord, because she is in fear of you; and she knows you would not suffer it.'

'She then,' answered his lordship, 'pays me a much higher compliment than you do; for you freely censure her, and yet imagine I will suffer it.'

'My lord,' replied Sandford, 'I am undeceived now, and shall never take that liberty again.'

As his lordship always treated Sandford with the utmost respect, he began to fear he had been deficient upon this occasion.[15]

As Lord Elmwood assumes a position of authority in the conversation when he corrects Sandford for the liberties taken with both Miss Milner and himself, he tacitly asserts the change from his previous status as the older man's protégé. Just as Dorriforth felt the rebuke of Sandford's earlier admonishments, Sandford now takes on the role of the chastised "son," who must learn his place in the new household hierarchy. Although Lord Elmwood offends the elder man, he commences a pattern of reversal, in which he increasingly insists on his status as patriarchal authoritarian in all masculine relationships, first with Sandford and subsequently with his adopted heir.

Henry Rushbrook's filial obligations to Lord Elmwood stem from the early benevolence of Miss Milner, who brings about the initial meeting between uncle and nephew. Rushbrook loses his father and mother

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14 Ibid.,105.

15 Ibid.,105-106.

early in life, and he is "at the age of three years left an orphan."[16] Miss Milner acquiesces to the pleas of young Harry who begs her to take him home with her. There, he meets a horrified Dorriforth who possesses "not one trait of compassion for his helpless nephew."[17] However, after having established a more intimate relationship with Miss Milner, Lord Elmwood agrees that the nephew may return, "if you desire it, this shall be his home — you shall be a mother, and I will, henceforward be a father to him."[18] Lord Elmwood's relationship with Miss Milner facilitates his official role as father, a familial title that will be more fully realized in the latter half of *A Simple Story*.

In the second part of the novel, the Lord Elmwood-Rushbrook father-son plot, along with the parallel narrative of Lord Elmwood and Sandford, works in opposition to the father-daughter plot, establishing respectful homosocial bonds of authority that refuse the sexuality often implicit in the heterosexual family bonds. Significantly, the father-son plot links the two narratives. We learn in the second part that the "child Rushbrook is become a man, and the apparent heir of Lord Elmwood's fortune,"[19] and despite the seventeen-year gap in the narrative, Lord Elmwood retains his position as father. Through the ensuing description of the father-son dynamic between Lord Elmwood and Mr. Rushbrook, the narrator affirms Lord Elmwood's affections for his "nephew, and his adopted child, the friendless boy whom poor Lady Elmwood first introduced into his uncle's house".[20] Furthermore, Rushbrook "was received by his lordship with all that affectionate warmth due to the man he thought worthy to make his heir." In the last two volumes the male relationships established in the early volumes are further defined.

Rushbrook, too, must learn the necessity of paternal ties, and accept his role as son to Lord Elmwood. The father and son bond between Lord Elmwood and Rushbrook in the latter half of *A Simple Story* can be traced through the marriage question. Lord Elmwood has chosen a wife for his nephew, and he fails to comprehend why Rushbrook will not answer him on this matter. Rushbrook, "Divided between the claims of obligation to the father, and tender attachment to the daughter,"[21]

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16 Ibid, 34.

17 Ibid, 36.

18 Ibid, 151.

19 Ibid, 195.

20 Ibid, 230.

21 Ibid, 254.

tries to avoid discussing the issue in order to avoid upsetting Lord Elmwood, who would not welcome the news that his heir is in love with his estranged and outcast daughter. The marriage question becomes central to the father-son relationship, since Lord Elmwood views his adopted son's poorly constructed falsehoods as a family betrayal. He informs Rushbrook that his one untruth about the woman whom he favours will go unheeded, "but after this moment it is a lie between man and man — a lie to your friend and father, and I will not forgive it."[22] Rushbrook manages to delay his response to his benefactor, and narrowly escapes his uncle's (father's?) wrath twice more with the aid of Sandford. What is central here is not that Rushbrook plays the role of wayward son and evades his surrogate father's demands; rather, it is that Rushbrook must realize that the will of the father reigns supreme, and the decision to marry Matilda must be one made by Lord Elmwood.

Increasingly Lord Elmwood assumes the role of paternal authority in all other male relationships. The father-son or mentor-protégé relationship between Sandford and Lord Elmwood has been completely reversed in the second half of the narrative. Elmwood grows impatient with the elderly priest's persistent advice and with his ties to Matilda and he informs Sandford that "we may still be friends. — But I am not to be controlled as formerly; my temper is changed of late; changed to what it was originally; till your scholastic and religious rules reformed it."[23] All of Dorriforth's earlier admiration for his tutor's advice disappears. Sandford exclaims, "I really believe I am more afraid of [Lord Elmwood] in my age, than he was of me when he was a boy."[24] Lord Elmwood's role, however, is not to inspire fear but to re-establish the patriarchal bonds that unite the family under one roof.

Indeed, under the paternal gaze of Lord Elmwood, Sandford, the subverted father, and Rushbrook, the surrogate son, compete for Lord Elmwood's approval and attention. Although Sandford claims that his distaste for the young man stems from the situation of Lady Matilda, his various comments about Rushbrook are akin to jealousy. Sandford sees this young man usurp his position and influence with Lord Elmwood. The narrator remarks upon the old priest's feelings: "Sandford saw this young man treated in the house of Lord Elmwood with the

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22 Ibid, 252.

23 Ibid, 214.

24 Ibid, 223.

same respect and attention as if he had been his lordship's son," and "at the name of Rushbrook [Sandford's] countenance would always change, and a sarcastic sneer, and sometimes a frown of resentment" would appear on his face.[25] Most of the animosity in the relationship comes from Sandford's side, and he "seldom disguised his feelings, to Rushbrook he was always extremely severe, and sometimes unmannerly."[26] His earlier status as mentor/father, is further undermined by his churlish attitude to Rushbrook. When Edwards, the head gardener at Elmwood House, asks Sandford for assistance in saving his job, Sandford declines, telling Edwards to turn to Mr. Rushbrook:

'I am afraid,' said Sandford, sitting down, 'I can do nothing for you.'

'Yes, sir, you know you have more power over my lord than any body — and perhaps you may be able to save me and all mine from misery.'...

'Ask Mr. Rushbrook,' said Sandford, 'prevail on him to speak; he has more power than I have.'[27]

Sandford's unwillingness to help Edwards is arguably tinged with some jealousy of Rushbrook's position with Lord Elmwood. Moreover, Lady Matilda functions as a vehicle through which these two men can converse, since she is the subject each time they speak. At the end of one of their verbal battles, Rushbrook defends his intentions towards his cousin:

'You wrong my meaning — it is she — her merit which inspired my desire of being known to her — it is her sufferings, her innocence, her beauty' —

Sandford stared — Rushbrook proceeded: 'It is her' —

'Nay stop where you are,' cried Sandford; 'you are arrived at the zenith of perfection in a woman, and to add one qualification more, would be anti-climax.'[28]

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25 Ibid, 231.

26 Ibid, 258.

27 Ibid, 271.

28 Ibid, 297.

Vying for the validity of her virtue and goodness, Sandford and Rushbrook engage in many linguistic battles to establish their positions under Lord Elmwood, a decision that seems largely based on who better defends Matilda.

Ultimately, Sandford reestablishes himself as a father figure to Rushbrook, even though it is a submissive one to that with Lord Elmwood. Nearing the novel's conclusion, Lord Elmwood seeks Sandford's advice concerning Rushbrook because Sandford "can reason with moderation,"[29] whereas Elmwood finds himself hastily giving in to Rushbrook's various provocations. When Sandford agrees to help, Lord Elmwood still attains his authority by coaching the elder priest in the ideas he wishes to convey to Rushbrook. This role, under the guidance of Lord Elmwood, allows for the development of a father-son relationship between the formerly feuding brother figures. Thus, in advising Rushbrook, Sandford again becomes a mentor figure, and through his role as a mediator between father and son, he makes possible the reconciliation wherein Rushbrook becomes the son of not only Lord Elmwood, but also a new protégé to Sandford.

The resolution of the marriage plot at the end of the novel finally grants Rushbrook the formal appellation of *son*-in-law, and the reconciliation of the bonds between fathers and sons, masters and protégés, facilitates the novel's sentimental ending. While the relationship between father and son appears to be a tenuous one, as demonstrated through Lord Elmwood's tyrannical treatment of Rushbrook in the novel's final pages, Inchbald merely reinforces the patriarchal structures that govern the bonds of family. Although Lord Elmwood claims that Rushbrook's fate depends on Matilda's will,[30] the marriage decision is ultimately one made by both father and son: Rushbrook conveys his wish to marry his cousin, and Lord Elmwood eventually consents as her father. Matilda will now accept the match in order to please both Rushbrook and Lord Elmwood. Inchbald removes the realm of the feminine from this final union, which presumes female consent and becomes more about the father-son dynamic. By governing the marriage-plot that both unites and solidifies the structure of his household-family, Lord Elmwood affirms his patriarchal authority.

The novel thus affirms Naomi Tadmor's porous definition of the family as it establishes a traditional familial hierarchy. The family unit that concludes Inchbald's novel demonstrates the need for a permeable

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29 Ibid, 313.

30 Ibid, 336.

definition of the family as the members of the household, fathers, sons, daughters, and servants alike, reside under the authority of one householder. Further, the father-son relationships in the novel extend beyond genetics to include close relatives and the mentor-protégé relationship that defines much of the novel's male-male dynamic. Ultimately, the definition of the family expressed Inchbald's *A Simple Story* is not a subversive one, as the paternal authority of Lord Elmwood joins the family together under one household.

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