

Research Grant Proposal
Lance Wilcox, Department of English

I would like to apply for one of the \$500 research grants to support my finishing one of the projects I began during my Fall Term 2002 sabbatical.

I. **Title:** The Implacable Deities of *A Simple Story*

Abstract: This study analyzes the characters and power relationships in Elizabeth Inchbald's 1791 novel *A Simple Story* in the light of the writer's Catholic faith.

Project Summary: Between the summer and my Fall Term sabbatical, I was able to develop the material for two scholarly projects. One of these was a study of the Civil War novel *The Killer Angels* and its film adaptation, *Gettysburg*, which I gave as a conference talk in November and then wrote up as an article. My second project was a study of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, a novel I taught in ENG 421: *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. As with the Civil War project, I researched the subject and wrote up the results as a conference paper, which I presented at a regional conference. In this case, however, though I was later able to develop an outline for a full-length article, I did not have time to write it. I would like to request a grant to support the writing of the article this summer.

II. **Narrative**

1. **Current Situation:** Elizabeth Inchbald was an actress, playwright, novelist, and scholar of the late 1700s and early 1800s. Her most famous work, the 1791 novel *A Simple Story*, was immensely popular in her own time, fell into eclipse in the late nineteenth century, and was rediscovered by feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s. Since its rediscovery, this elegant, sad novel has been studied almost exclusively in terms of its gender dynamics: what it reveals about power relationships between the sexes in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Though Inchbald certainly qualifies as a feminist, these

studies have overlooked another, crucial element in the novel: its author's deep, if troubled, Catholic world view. Intelligent and widely-read, Inchbald's religious beliefs implicitly color her portrayals of characters and relationships in her book, though this has gone largely unacknowledged in the critical literature. This is an oversight I would like to address.

- 2. The Project Plan.** My work on Inchbald grew out of my course *Eighteenth Century Fiction*. While not one of the century's most famous writers, Inchbald represents one of the many excellent novelists brought to light by the attempts to broaden the canon over the last two or three decades. Long seen primarily as a predecessor to Jane Austen, the breadth of her abilities, the brilliance of *A Simple Story*, and her role as one of the early British "Jacobin" writers (supporters of the French Revolution) have resulted in her becoming the focus of significant scholarly attention in her own right. I added *A Simple Story* to the reading list of my Spring 2002 *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* course rather by way of experiment. Finding myself, however, more and more intrigued by the novel as I taught it, I sketched out my observations on its religious themes with the goal of reviewing the criticism later to see if I were on to something useful or new.

For most of last summer I was occupied with my article on the Civil War novel, with the result that it was August before I could begin background reading on *A Simple Story*. I was, however, able to find and read the two extant biographies of Inchbald and pretty much all of the chapters and articles on her two novels. I then wrote a conference paper on the topic, which I delivered at the meeting of the Midwestern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in October. Following the conference, I returned to the novel, my notes, and the criticism, and developed a detailed outline for an article-length version of the study. That's when I ran out of time.

I now have two tasks before me. One is to read the new biography of the novelist, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald*, which is due out in April, 2003, and to review it for the scholarly annual *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*. My other task is to write

the article itself, building on my current research, the new biography, and any scholarly work which may have come into print since last summer.

My work on Inchbald is an extension of my long-standing scholarly work on eighteenth-century literature but also, in part, a new direction. My scholarship hitherto has focused on non-fiction literature: letters, sermons, autobiographies, and the like. My work on *A Simple Story* represents my first foray into the eighteenth-century novel. The research I have done has not only deepened my knowledge of Inchbald herself but has led to greater familiarity with the literary, cultural, and political situation in Britain in the 1790s, the period of the French Revolution and the dawn of Romanticism. The next time I teach the course, I will be in a much stronger position to discuss Inchbald, the fateful last years of the century, and the position of women writers at the time.

3. **Faculty Expertise.** The literature of the eighteenth century has been the focus of my scholarship since the mid-1980s. Besides my dissertation, my work in the area includes five articles, twelve conference talks, seven book reviews in print or forthcoming, and three more assigned. I am, furthermore, this year's President of the Midwestern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and have served as an officer in the national organization. Within the English Department, I share responsibilities for the Early British Literature and Early American Literature courses and have sole responsibility for *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*.
4. **Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination.** Given the continuing level of interest in women's fiction in the eighteenth century, I believe the article will have little trouble finding its way into print. Possible venues for it include *The Age of Johnson*; *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*; *Modern Philology*; *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*; or the new annual *Eighteenth-Century Women*.

IV. **Budget.** I am requesting the \$500 as salary support for my work this summer. I will not be teaching any summer classes.

Thank you for your consideration,

Lance Wilcox

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