

## **Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821)**

*by Elma Scott*

Elizabeth Inchbald began her working life as an actress, beautiful and hard-working but of moderate talent. Her fame came from elsewhere: her career as a popular dramatist and as author of two successful novels.

She was born on 15 October 1753 to John Simpson and his wife Mary at Standingfield, near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, the last child but one in a family of six daughters and two sons. Her father was a farmer and the family was Catholic and respected, comfortable but not affluent. When Simpson died in 1761, his widow carried on with the farm, the family's only source of income. Elizabeth received no formal education, but as she later claimed, 'could spell from infancy'. By 1770, the four older daughters were married and had moved to London.

The family was accustomed to attending theatres in Bury and Norwich and Elizabeth's brother George became an actor. Elizabeth herself, aged sixteen, applied secretly (and unsuccessfully) for a place in a Norwich theatre company. She endeavoured to overcome a stammer, and found that on stage it was better than in ordinary conversation.

During a visit to a married sister in London in 1771, she met the actor Joseph Inchbald, twice her age and the father of two illegitimate sons. On her return home, he began a correspondence with her, but she refused his proposal of marriage, although professing 'the strongest friendship' for him. In April 1772, Elizabeth left home in secret to go to London to find work on the stage, but she was again unsuccessful. In May she met Inchbald again and in June 1772 they were married by Catholic priest, followed by Protestant rites. Joseph Inchbald was an established, though not a great actor, and in September, Elizabeth made her debut in Bristol as Cordelia to her husband's Lear.

In October 1772, the Inchbalds joined West Digges' company in Scotland. They would tour with the company for almost four years. During this period, Elizabeth built up a repertoire of roles, both major and minor, including the Shakespearean heroines, Juliet, Desdemona, Miranda and Imogen, as well as main parts in Sheridan, Goldsmith and other popular playwrights. In their private life, as Elizabeth recorded frankly in her papers, there were rows, often due to his jealousy of attentions paid her by young men. Elizabeth had an independent frame of mind, and managed her own finances.

After their Scottish sojourn, the Inchbalds sailed to France in 1776 where they intended that Joseph should study painting, and Elizabeth declamation in French with a view to working on the French stage. However this venture was cut short by lack of money and they returned to England penniless after only a month. Soon after, they joined Joseph Younger's company in Liverpool, where Elizabeth met the actress Sarah Siddons, her husband and her younger brother John P. Kemble, who was destined to become a great theatrical actor-manager. The sister and brother became life-long friends of Elizabeth. Although close to Kemble, Elizabeth denied that he was ever her lover.

In 1777 the Inchbalds were hired by Tate Wilkinson's company. Just two years later, in June 1779, Joseph Inchbald died suddenly. Kemble wrote a Latin inscription for him, extolling his virtues. In the months following his death, Elizabeth worked on writing a novel, *A Simple Story*, which she had begun in 1777, discussing its progress with Kemble. This first draft was turned down by the publisher but she continued to work on it intermittently until 1791.

Elizabeth now resumed work with Wilkinson, and then in 1780, she joined the Covent Garden company, making her debut on the London stage as Bellario in *Philaster*, a male role in which she looked well in breeches. At this period, as a young and beautiful widow of twenty-seven, Mrs Inchbald received much male attention and proposals of marriage (or liaisons). One man who did not propose was Kemble, although she 'would have jumped to have him'. Among her admirers were her physician, Dr Bradley, the actor Richard Wilson, the Marquis of Carmarthen and Sir Charles Bunbury. Mrs Inchbald valued her independence. She sought to educate and inform herself through her reading of novels, literary letters and essays, poetry and philosophy.

She now tried her hand at writing for the stage, and succeeded in getting her farce *A Mogul Tale* (1784) produced at the Haymarket. *A Mogul Tale* is a two-act farce in which a hot-air balloon containing three English people unexpectedly lands near the seraglio of a great Mogul. The play's plot was topical - the first demonstration of hot-air ballooning took place in 1783 - and offers us the first example of a typical Inchbald heroine. Fanny, the cobbler's wife, is strong-minded, sensible and warm-hearted. The play ran to eleven performances and was well received, making Inchbald 100 guineas. But the farce represented only a beginning: between 1784 and 1805, Inchbald wrote twenty-one plays. Only one was a tragedy, the rest farces and light or serious comedies, and only three of them were never published. Her use of type-names to denote character (such as Lord Rakeland or Mr Haswell) may be seen as a weakness, but her strengths as a playwright lie in her witty dialogue and her handling of topical social events in the more serious comedies. Her light works often rely on misunderstandings and erring husbands, and her heroines are often women of independent minds.

In 1785, a second Inchbald play entitled *I'll Tell You What* was produced at the Haymarket. It was a success and ran to more than twenty performances in the season. Inchbald earned £300 from it and shortly afterwards bought stock. Her third play, a two-act comedy entitled *Appearance is Against Them* (1785) was produced at Covent Garden, and was the first to be published by George Robinson. The king commanded a performance, and the Prince of Wales went to see it, thus ensuring popular interest.

Her next work was a farce adapted from a French play, followed by *Such Things Are* (1787), which had great success at Covent Garden. This play, combining serious topical subjects with farce, is set in the East Indies, and concerns the tyranny of the Sultan. (Both the setting and the subject gave reference to the impending trial of Warren Hastings, erstwhile governor of India, accused of tyranny and corruption.) The Sultan is reformed by his love for Arabella, whom he supposed dead, but who is found alive in his prison. The character Mr Haswell was based on the prison reformer John Howard.

Several plays followed in the season of 1787 and 1788, the most memorable being a skilful adaptation of *Zelie*, a French comedy, which she retitled *The Child of Nature* (1788). As well as continually amending her own original works, Inchbald worked on further adaptations of translated plays. In her personal life, she was making prudent investments, and never spent much money on herself, although she entertained her friends regularly and was always generous to her family. Her health was not good and she was often laid up with 'face-ache' or abscesses. Even so, contemporary accounts say she kept her good looks.

By 1789, Inchbald was sufficiently well-known as a playwright to be able to give up work as an actress, and to concentrate on her writing. She had worked intermittently on her novel *A Simple Story* during the 1780s, and in 1790, she spent ten months completing it. The last two volumes which contain the story of Matilda (originally intended as a separate novel) were added at this point. She submitted the manuscript to Thomas Holcroft (actor, writer and committed Jacobin) for his comments, and acted on his suggestions. William Godwin, the philosopher, also read the novel in 1790. (Both these men later proposed marriage to Inchbald, who turned them down.) They each exerted some influence on Inchbald's thinking, being Jacobins and thus supporters of social reform and revolution. For a time she seems to have joined their fervour for reform.

*A Simple Story* was finally published in 1791, and has regularly been reprinted ever since. It is for this novel rather than her many plays that she is best remembered today. In the first two volumes, Miss Milner, a beautiful, young and spirited girl, brought up in fashionable society, is left on her father's death in the care of his friend, Dorriforth, a Catholic priest. (The wit of Miss Milner has caused critics to see a self-portrait of Inchbald in the character, while Dorriforth has been likened to Kemble, who had originally been trained for the priesthood.) When Dorriforth inherits a peerage, he becomes Lord Elmwood, and is released by the Church from his vows as priest. He and Miss Milner fall in love and marry, although there are indications they are unsuited. The second part of the novel takes place seventeen years later. Elmwood, bitter at his wife's infidelity, has cast her out, and will accept his daughter into his house (on his wife's death) only if he never sees her. The daughter, Matilda, is portrayed as a sweet and sensible girl, having received a classical education from Elmwood's own confessor, and from her mother's good and sensible friend, Miss Woodley.

The novel paints a psychological portrait of a father, convinced by his upbringing and education that he must conceal his love, but who nevertheless lets slip his true emotion in telling ways. Inchbald's theatrical experience helped her to convey feeling in gestures and telling dialogue. Maria Edgeworth noted this skill when she wrote to Inchbald to express her admiration of the novel, and the *Critical Review* wrote 'the workings of the passions are inimitably displayed'. However, the over-riding theme of the novel is expressed in its last paragraph, that a proper education for women is essential for them to make the right choices in life.

During the year 1792 Inchbald wrote her only tragedy, *The Massacre*, which was set at the time of the St Bartholomew's Eve massacre in 1572, but which speaks to the horrors

of the September 1792 massacre of royalists in France. The play was not performed and withdrawn from publication on the advice of Godwin and Holcroft. One of her best plays of this period is the five-act comedy, *Everyone has his Fault* (1793) which was a great success at Covent Garden. As always, she was generous to family and friends with the money she earned.

Inchbald's second novel *Nature and Art* (1796) contrasts the lives of two brothers who are left without means on their father's death. One, William, is educated and in time becomes a bishop, disdaining his generous musician brother, Henry, who has supported him. Henry leaves for Africa. Some years later, their sons, who carry their fathers' names, meet. William the younger is educated but self-serving, while Henry has been brought up in a Rousseau-inspired 'natural' environment. Each behaves in accordance with his upbringing and reaps accordingly. The novel takes a satirical look at corruption in the clergy and the judiciary.

Inchbald's friendship with Godwin drew to a close after his marriage to [Mary Wollstonecraft](#) in 1797. That year she wrote a new comedy, and the following year she adapted August Kotzebue's *Child of Love*, renaming it *Lovers' Vows* (1798). (It was this play which scandalised Fanny in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, on account of the flirtation between a mother and her son who do not yet know they are related.) It was popular and had a long initial run of forty-five performances.

In 1806, the publishers Longman asked Inchbald to write the critical and biographical introductions to a series of 125 plays from the sixteenth to late eighteenth centuries, an unusual request to a woman. Inchbald's comments were the considered opinions of an experienced actress and dramatist. By now she was in semi-retirement, and thanks to her financial prudence, reasonably comfortable.

She continued to move from lodging to lodging, always in and around London. She worked on her memoirs in her last years, although they were not published. She again began to correspond with Godwin, and with others too, including Maria Edgeworth, whom she finally met in 1813. She gained comfort from her faith in the Catholic Church in her last years. In 1819, Inchbald moved into a Catholic residence where she died on the first of August, 1821.

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