

INTRODUCTION
THE ROMANTIC MORAL ROMANCE: AN
ALTERNATIVE TRANSATLANTIC SUB-GENRE
FOR ELIZABETH INCHBALD AND NATHANIEL
HAWTHORNE

Every author has a right to give what appellation he may think proper to his works.
The public have also a right to accept or refuse the classification that is presented.

– Maria Edgeworth¹

For a study in the evolution of Anglo-American Romantic fiction, Elizabeth Inchbald (1753–1821) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) may seem an unlikely pair (see Figure 1, Portrait of Elizabeth Inchbald, and Figure 2, Portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne). While Inchbald published *A Simple Story* and *Nature and Art* for a British audience in 1791 and 1796, respectively, Hawthorne published most of his books, most importantly *The Scarlet Letter* of 1850 and *The Marble Faun* of 1860, half a century later for an American audience.² And while Hawthorne rose quickly to occupy a position as one of the great writers of the American literary tradition, Inchbald has received less critical attention as a contributor to the British literary tradition, especially given the usual preference given to male poets during the Romantic Period.³ Yet, despite the distinct differences between the two authors in terms of patrimony, chronology and critical acclaim, and despite the cultural differences inherent in situating their literary efforts on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, an undeniable transatlantic connection binds the two writers' fiction in textual parallels that suggest a more than coincidental relationship among their books. Both writers, based on their own social, political and personal agendas, sought to develop literary vehicles that would best express their intentions and views as writers and perhaps realign and expand the literary tradition they had inherited. And, while the two authors' individual intentions were divergent in terms of the exact nature of that realignment and expansion, the results were so similar in their effects, patterns and resolutions that the two authors rightly may be classified as practitioners working within the same form of mixed genre that might be called Romantic moral romance. This sub-genre of the novel represents an important tie between the two writers and their intentions and between British Romanticism and American versions of Romanticism.

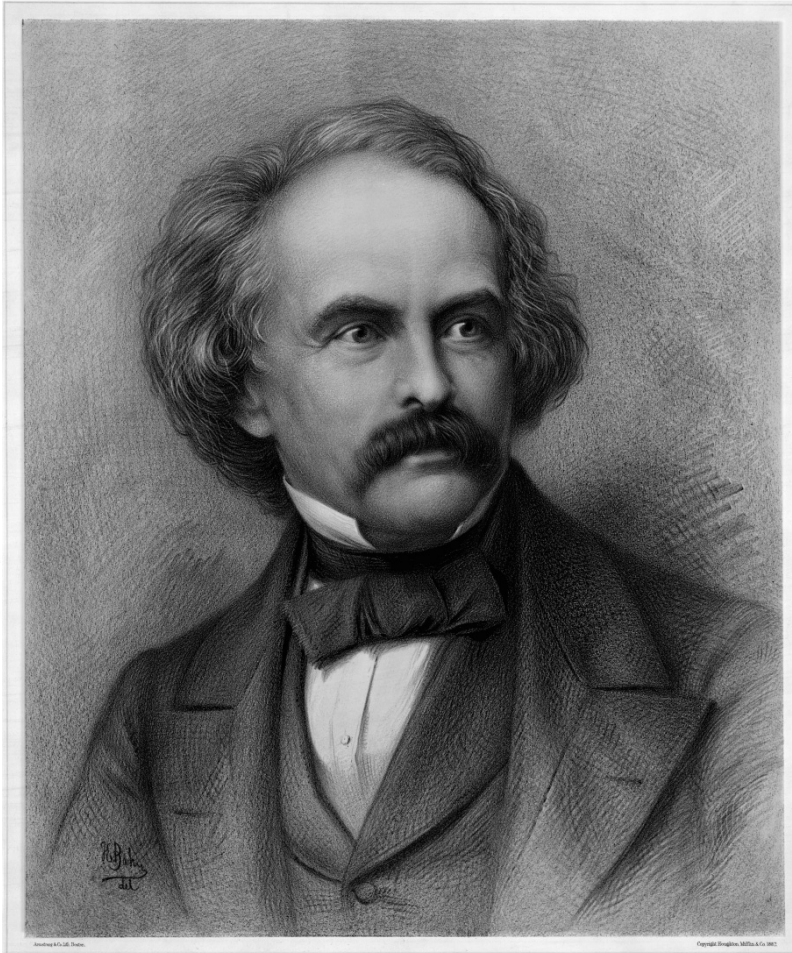


Painted by Lawrence - Engraved by Freeman.

Mrs. Inchbald.

Published by Vernor, Hood & Sharpe, Poultry, July 22, 1807.

Figure 1, Portrait of Elizabeth Inchbald. An 1807 engraving by Samuel Freeman after a painting done by Inchbald's friend Sir Thomas Lawrence. Inchbald wears French-style clothing in this image. *Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library (Folger ART File, I37, No. 3).*



Nathaniel Hawthorne

Figure 2, Portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne. An engraving published around 1883 of Hawthorne as he appeared at some point after 1857. He grew the moustache during his time in Italy when he was working on *The Marble Faun*. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-DIG-pga-00065).*

The Romantic moral romance was a profoundly self-reflexive sub-genre, for it provided Inchbald and Hawthorne a means of examining the very nature of fiction and of the writer's role as an artist. Inchbald wrote her fictions during a time when women novelists often were denigrated as frivolous or even immoral, so although she may have used the term *novel* in private, she avoided using it in print. Years later across the Atlantic, Hawthorne composed his works in an atmosphere that encouraged American writers to break free of British literary tradition and to avoid becoming mere imitators of the novel tradition that had developed in Britain. Paradoxically, both writers wished to write novels but felt obliged to avoid the traditions associated with the very form they wanted to produce. The solution was the Romantic moral romance, which borrowed enough from the novel tradition to be considered a sub-genre but which also borrowed elements of symbolism and an interest in moral order from the mediaeval chivalric romance and perhaps the French *conte moral*.⁴

Romantic-Period writers are well known for revising or reforming older, simpler forms, particularly the romance, which received innovative treatment from such writers as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats and Lord Byron.⁵ The traditional chivalric romance focused attention on class issues, since its hero was an aristocratic knight, and on the preservation of the moral order established by the aristocracy and the clergy. A romance followed a knightly hero on a quest, usually successful, whose ultimate goal involved the knight's union with a chaste maiden, who may have been imprisoned in a desolate tower or enchanted by an evil sorcerer. Anna Shealy's entry on romance in the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature* begins with the 'cliché of the knight rescuing the damsel in distress' and points out the genre's preoccupation with rank, chivalry, adventure, the fantastic and light-hearted fighting on the part of the hero.⁶ During his quest, the hero encountered a variety of obstacles ranging from the temptation of his immortal soul to the obstruction of his progress by natural or supernatural means. Critic Northrop Frye notices the importance of symbolism in this genre with his comment that 'allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes.'⁷ Certainly, this potential for allegorical interpretation provides ample opportunity for the chivalric romance to uphold the aristocratic social order along with established religious order. The idea of resisting temptation and overcoming obstacles (supernatural or otherwise) bears striking parallels with allegorical Christian conceptions of one's progress through life, and the male chivalric hero's trials can be interpreted symbolically as a self-reflexive exploration of faith – or as a test of faith – particularly in his responses to sin and guilt.⁸

While the traditional chivalric romance may seem conservative, Northrop Frye acknowledges it as a revolutionary form, and writing more recently, Jacqueline Labbe suggests that while chivalric romances uphold the *status quo*, they quietly and simultaneously reject social order.⁹ Likewise, Krueger asserts that

the traditional romance often has 'a critical perspective that calls social ideals or practices into question'.¹⁰ Among other characteristics, it is this questioning of social practices that marks the Romantic moral romance as unique because this sub-genre overtly and daringly challenges, on multiple levels, the very definition of 'moral order' as a construct for 'correct' conduct, suggesting that the parameters established by a government, by a particular religion or by a social group for correct behaviour may be inadequate for the individual, for whom an individual moral code may be more appropriate. Hence, the hero of the Romantic moral romance written by Inchbald or Hawthorne, unlike the hero of a mediaeval chivalric romance, may exhibit 'correct' conduct that directly subverts traditional religious or social moral codes. In fact, the very identity of the hero himself may be subversive because he may be a *she* in the sub-genre, as exemplified by Miss Milner and Matilda in Inchbald's *A Simple Story* and by Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The revolutionary nature of the romance form attracted Romantic writers like Inchbald and Hawthorne, who recognized its potential for further development, especially since they both were familiar also with William Shakespeare's Renaissance experimentation in his last plays with romance forms to create another mixed sub-genre – the tragicomedy.

Inchbald, perhaps sensing the overuse of features of the chivalric romance for morally didactic purposes that upheld traditional codes of conduct, but still inspired with a Romantic interest in the romance's earlier and simpler literary form, decided to borrow features from the mediaeval genre to create a viable tool for evoking the social and political issues that were contemporaneous with her writing.¹¹ In so doing, she ironically positioned the romance, no longer a chivalric form, as moral rival to the popular – and sometimes scandalously Gothic – novel. The irony is that the Romantic moral romance would only masquerade as a traditional didactic form. While Inchbald's contemporaries would consider it morally superior to the novel because of its apparent conservatism, it would simultaneously subvert contemporary moral codes. Sixty years later, Hawthorne, among the American practitioners of Romanticism, continued Inchbald's transformation of the romance form, evoking similar precedents and adapting the Romantic moral romance sub-genre to the literary imperatives and agenda of his own era. Hawthorne's experimental tales suggest closer deliberative ties with British writers like Inchbald and a continuum of literary experimentation with genre that reaches forward to the modern and symbolic novel as developed by writers like Henry James.

This study of the Romantic moral romance developed by Inchbald and Hawthorne briefly evokes some of Inchbald's plays (especially her experimental dramatic adaptation *Lovers' Vows*), her published prefaces on British drama, one of Hawthorne's short stories, his prefaces to his romances, and his three completed romances, *Fanshawe* (1828), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The*

Blithedale Romance (1852). The discussion focuses primarily on *A Simple Story*, *Nature and Art*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun* as Inchbald's and Hawthorne's best-known and most representative books. In the succeeding chapters, after discussions of the transatlantic connections between the two authors and after a discussion of the authors' intentions and motivations, the four primary texts are juxtaposed first in separate pairs and then as a group to demonstrate how Inchbald and Hawthorne experimented in such revolutionary terms with the very forms and purposes of fiction writing and how, by probing the limits of Romantic fiction in their attempts to avoid writing traditional novels in favour of writing new fiction for their Romantic Era, they can be seen as contributing ironically, but significantly, to the evolution of the modern symbolic novel.

The discussion in Chapter 1 explores the transatlantic relationship between Inchbald and Hawthorne, solidifying the connection between the two by focusing first on common influences that may have inflected the evolution of their fiction. Both were familiar with mediaeval chivalric romance forms and probably had some knowledge of the French *conte moral*, or moral tale. These older forms likely provided common sources for Inchbald and Hawthorne in terms of their allegorical potential and their use of simplified characters. Moreover, both authors knew the Gothic genre very well – Inchbald through her association with the Godwin circle, and Hawthorne through his admiration of Gothic writers like William Godwin and Charles Brockden Brown. Both authors were familiar with other Gothic novel writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Mary Shelley, whose dark, transgressive fictions so significantly altered the Romantic spirit on both sides of the Atlantic, providing yet another common source for the Romantic moral romance. Indeed, Inchbald was a significant figure in London in the Godwin/Shelley circle, whose revolutionary ideas, promulgated particularly by Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, established much of the groundwork in the 1790s for the British Romanticism that so profoundly influenced Hawthorne's intellectual milieu. Finally, this chapter turns specifically to Inchbald and her popularity and influence both in Britain and America during and just prior to Hawthorne's lifetime. As first an actor and then a playwright who wrote over twenty plays, Inchbald became an important figure in British culture during the final two decades of the eighteenth century, and her ideas formed part of the current of British Romantic thought that was to influence American writers like Hawthorne in the decades that followed.¹² Most of Inchbald's plays were produced repeatedly in London, and many of them were published soon afterward, with some of them being reprinted several times within a given year. *A Simple Story* and *Nature and Art*, Inchbald's two Romantic moral romances, also achieved great success, and, in fact, as of 2009, the former book has never been out of print. Inchbald's plays and two romances were so popular that they appeared rapidly in America, where enterprising publishers

reprinted them (undoubtedly without permission and without paying royalties) before the texts were sold to American readers and to the many circulating libraries that provided reading material to a large segment of the public that could not afford to buy the volumes. Even the critical material that Inchbald wrote for such collections as *The British Theatre* appeared in America, where Hawthorne and his contemporaries had ready access to them. Moreover, many of Inchbald's plays were produced in the former American colonies, particularly *Lovers' Vows*, whose inflammatory subject matter paralleled many of the themes in her two Romantic moral romances.

After this survey of common sources for the Romantic moral romance and of Inchbald's direct and indirect influence on American writers of Hawthorne's era, Chapter 2 examines the two authors' divergent intentions in experimenting with the novel and romance forms and with developing their particularly Romantic versions before moving to a tentative definition of their alternative sub-genre. Attention to both authors' prefaces and to the contexts in which they wrote reveals that Inchbald and Hawthorne, though motivated for different reasons, essentially positioned themselves in opposition to the same cultural construct – the tradition of the British novel. By the late eighteenth century, the British novel was established as a popular genre with its own traditions and broad readership – and its own critics among those who found it to be an immoral influence on impressionable young women. Moreover, although a few male writers had attained success with the genre, the novel had become associated with frivolous writing by women because women writers had been attracted to the classless freedom they perceived in the narrative structure and domestic subject matter of the genre.¹³ Inchbald, conscious of the reputation of the novel as a genre and perhaps in agreement with its critics, avoids publicly labelling her books novels and instead calls them *stories* and *little histories*, terms that Roberta Krueger points out often were used to describe mediaeval romances.¹⁴ Using narrative techniques derived from her background in drama, Inchbald appropriates elements of the mediaeval chivalric romance form to construct tales whose depictions of passion and use of fable-like symbolism suggest dramatic character types with the ostensible didactic purpose of reforming attitudes on education. In the process, she also creates a legitimate, acceptable form of women's writing that circumvents the imputed immorality of the British novel.

In contrast, Hawthorne had no such qualms about the morality of the novel genre. His concern, founded on a longstanding sense of American cultural insecurity, an insecurity that was further reinforced by contemporaries of his like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was that the novel was too British.¹⁵ In the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States remained a relatively young nation, and although the country had emerged triumphantly from both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, Ameri-

cans still worried that British cultural ascendancy could weaken the developing identity of the United States as a fully independent nation. Hence, Hawthorne, too, developed his romances with dramatic techniques, symbolic character-types and allegorical potential akin to that used in fables, myths and legends. His desire was the creation, or at least the further development, of a uniquely American literature, as opposed to British literature, so, preferring to call his books *romances*, he avoided the term *novel* nearly as much as Inchbald had done half a century earlier. In a discussion of the French prose romance, Norris Lacy contrasts the mediaeval romance form with the novel, which ‘tends generally toward a more linear structure, with direct links between cause and effect, with character providing the main impetus for narrative developments, and with an emphasis, unknown to earlier periods, on individual psychology.’¹⁶ Inchbald’s and Hawthorne’s experimental sub-genre retains these primary characteristics of the novel – linear structure, clear sequences of cause and effect, emphasis on psychology – but incorporates the idealism, symbolism and moral interest of the traditional mediaeval romance, and even of the French moral tale.

Chapter 3 discusses the evocation of Shakespearean precedent in Inchbald’s and Hawthorne’s romances, especially in their adaptation of the experimental romance genre of Shakespeare’s last plays. The Romantic moral romance form depended heavily on the continuing influence of Shakespearean drama, with which both Inchbald and Hawthorne were intimately familiar, in Anglo-American literature.¹⁷ Both Inchbald and Hawthorne borrowed techniques from *The Tempest*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare’s later plays in which a unique experimental blending of genres, also based on mediaeval chivalric precedent, results in tragicomedy. Through this unusual blend that tends to emphasize the potential for tragic resolution, Shakespeare challenges conceptions of moral order, involving, among other issues, the questioning of patriarchy and the sympathetic depiction of the ‘fallen woman’ as victim in anticipation of the way that Inchbald and Hawthorne position their characters in *A Simple Story* and *The Scarlet Letter*. The very structures of each of these narratives are tightly controlled, too, so that, just as *The Winter’s Tale* can be split into distinct tragic and comedic sections, *A Simple Story* also splits into two halves, as does *The Scarlet Letter*, and this type of binary narrative structure parallels and reinforces the binary relationships between many of the pairs of characters.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Inchbald and Hawthorne go beyond Shakespeare’s example to express the concerns of their era by questioning religious tradition and by exploring the issues of sin and guilt at the individual and social levels. Specifically, *Nature and Art* and *The Marble Faun* contrast individual faith or religious belief with religious social practice in Anglicanism, Catholicism and Puritanism, questioning the moral order prescribed by these three established religious traditions. A Catholic who lived in a repressive Anglican state, especially

at a time when the French, also officially Catholic, threatened invasion, Inchbald retained an acute awareness of the disparity between the tolerance and love that the Anglican religion taught and the actual practice of that religion in England. Hawthorne experienced no such official religious repression, but as a native of the originally Puritan town of Salem – notorious for the witchcraft trials of 1692 – he did sense the repressiveness and effecteness of Puritanism in providing viable solutions to the problems of mundane existence. With such negative experiences surrounding religious practice in their lives, Inchbald and Hawthorne had ample incentive to question the effectiveness of organized religion in their romances. *Nature and Art* casts the elder William Norwynne, a clergyman, as a foolish political animal who, concerned with nothing more than his own advancement within the Anglican Church, shuns his brother Henry in favour of society dinners that offer him chances to flatter his bishop; William's son, also named William, may be seen as a further indictment of the moral order of his father's Anglicanism because, as a judge, he participates in the secular functions of the Anglican state; and Hannah Primrose's end in a gruesome execution censures the church because both father and son are complicit in her doom. Likewise, *The Marble Faun* declaims against the ineffectiveness of Puritan doctrine since its tenets provide no solace to the innocent Hilda, who witnesses a murder. Even the Italian Catholicism that pervades the book, although it eventually relieves Hilda's guilt, does not provide meaningful answers to how Donatello and Miriam can manage the inherited guilt for the sins of their ancient families.

Inchbald and Hawthorne further expand their experimentation with romance forms in their depictions of the fragmented Romantic psyche, as discussed in Chapter 5. Using the contrast between nature and art in *A Simple Story*, *Nature and Art*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun*, they construct tetrads of characters whose shallow development casts them as character-types or figures rather than believable human beings. John Stevens and Roberta Krueger note that the traditional romance tended to idealize experience, and Inchbald's and Hawthorne's Romantic moral romance appropriates this idealizing quality to apply to its characters.¹⁸ Inchbald and Hawthorne create simplified figures who represent individual elements of a single psyche, both in dyadic opposition – or conjunction – with one another and in more complex tetradic relationships. These characters exist as deliberately simplified entities whom readers would have difficulty imagining as existing beyond the confines of the texts in which they appear, but their simplicity is deceptive since Inchbald and Hawthorne are interested primarily in how these characters, *in combination*, negotiate their relationships with one another. For instance, contrasting the naturalness of one character with the artfulness of another in *Nature and Art* allows Inchbald to uphold the primacy of nature over art, ostensibly suggesting, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau had done, that the noble savage is superior in many ways to the cul-

tivated, civilized gentleman.¹⁹ Only the juxtaposition of the two characters can reveal the primary motivations behind their actions, allowing a subjective judgement of the superiority of one over the other, but ironically, Inchbald uses the very art that she denigrates to engender these deceptively simplistic figures so that while ostensibly favouring nature, she actually approaches the nature/art dichotomy as a continuum rather than as a simple dichotomy. Hawthorne does the same in his fictions. The fragmentary characters become quasi-allegorical representations of social and political concerns that were contemporary to Inchbald's and Hawthorne's composition of their tales, and the passionate, emotional and often single-minded wilfulness that the characters demonstrate acts as a way for the authors to represent moral 'truth' for the individual in opposition to established social convention. The fragmented Romantic psyche thus becomes a means for both authors to promulgate their own ideas of individual moral order that will allow the full expression of female writing and the development of distinctively American literature.

Finally, a brief conclusion clarifies the tentative definition of the Romantic moral romance advanced in Chapter 2 by presenting a list of specific criteria, as elaborated in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, that help to define the experimental sub-genre. The criteria show that fiction written by Inchbald or Hawthorne was revolutionary in theme and form, that both writers ultimately wrote similar types of fiction, and that the self-reflexivity of the Romantic moral romance questioned the very nature and purpose of literary art. The conclusion also briefly speculates on the way the Romantic moral romance helped to shape subsequent permutations of the novel in English.

Despite the apparent incongruity of pairing Elizabeth Inchbald and Nathaniel Hawthorne for this study of Romantic fiction, in fact, both writers and their works complement one another exceptionally well. Modifying earlier and simpler examples of mediaeval chivalric romance and moral tale, and drawing on Shakespeare's experimentation with the romance form in his last plays, both Inchbald and Hawthorne set out to create a new mixed sub-genre for their own purposes. While their intentions were divergent, their results were remarkably similar as they enacted a metamorphosis of the novel and the romance into a particularly Romantic form of narrative expression in their fiction, recasting the symbolic and allegorical potential of existing genres. The result was a unique type of fiction that blended symbol and allegorical figures for its effect, probing psychological motivation in terms of the divided psyche and the burdens of sin and guilt, and challenging readers' conceptions of moral order on multiple levels. Although Inchbald's and Hawthorne's works lie over half a century apart in terms of publication dates and are separated from one another in both geographical and cultural terms, the two authors' books nevertheless suggest an undeniable transatlantic relationship and connection to the development and

traditions of Romantic fiction, acting as important links between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction and the modern, symbolic novel. Indeed, the sub-genre developed by Inchbald and Hawthorne likely helped to deflect the evolution of the modern novel into a more symbolic and more psychologically motivated arena.

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