THE NOVEL AS EXPERIMENT: MARIA EDGEWORTH'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: The present paper examines how Maria Edgeworth turned the novel into an experiment in practical philosophy. First, tracing the intellectual influences of the author, her personal philosophy is explored based on her treatise *Practical Education* co-authored with her father R.L. Edgeworth, which united her views on the novel, education and personal conduct into an integrated whole. This is followed by the case study based on her novel *Belinda*, which is a prime example of the manner Edgeworth applied her philosophy to fiction.
Keywords: Maria Edgeworth, novel, experiment, education, reason, passion.

In his book *The Rise of the Novel*, which became standard reading for anybody studying the formation of the genre in English, Ian Watt describes the novel as "begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding."[1] His omission, if not exclusion, of any female authors from his analysis provoked much criticism and many devoted their efforts to showcasing the numerous women writers who had a great impact on the development of the form.[2] Maria Edgeworth's (1767-1849) fate as a novelist seems to have followed a similar trajectory. Despite her transatlantic success during her lifetime, becoming a household name and earning the esteem of contemporaries such as Sir Walter Scott or Jane Austen, she herself was "shot from canons" and forgotten, being recovered

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[1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (University of California Press, 2001), 9.
[2] See Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (Pandora, 1986), Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), Josephine Donovan, "The Silence is Broken," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (Praeger, 1980).

for scholarly interest only during the last decades of the 20th century.[3] Regarded as "the great Maria" by Scott[4] and portrayed by Mrs. Barbauld as an author whose "excellencies" were widely known and appreciated[5], it is only fitting to inquire into what the novel became in her hands.

Watt defines the central characteristic of the novel as a certain kind of realism, an interest in the individual experience of particular people, as opposed to collective tradition, which dominated literary texts of earlier times. He links this shift in literary style with the changes undergoing in culture and philosophy, to "the method of Descartes and Locke [who] allowed their thought to spring from the immediate facts of consciousness;" locating the source of the aforementioned realism not in a specific subject matter, but the "methods of investigation" applied.[6] This empirical approach to reality is an unavoidable presence in Edgeworth's writing as well, as her plots can be described as having been shaped by the "protocols and structures of experimental science."[7] Edgeworth was conscious of this aspect of her style. She expresses in a letter, after having read Colonel Stewart's criticism of her novel *Helen*, "a suspicion that [her] manner was too Dutch, too minute", unfavourably marked by "the most acute observation of individuals, or diligent accumulation of particulars."[8]

But where did her predilection towards the experimental and empirical originate from? In the eighteenth century, before the development of the modern delimitations of scientific disciplines, philosophy was understood to include hard and social sciences, as well as some branches of the humanities, being seen as "a way of life and a guide to living well," a concept inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans.[9] This understanding brings a highly practical approach to the study of philosophy, which was encapsulated by John Locke in the following words: "Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct."[10] Having lived during these times, it comes as no surprise that Edgeworth was greatly influenced by this perspective, in general by Enlightenment thought, and particularly by Locke. However, what shaped her in a much more personal manner was her interaction with the Lunar Society of Birmingham, of which her father was a correspondent. This small and exclusive group of scientifically-minded intellectuals meeting between 1765 and 1813 was a community of prominent industrialists, natural philosophers, and thinkers who were known to meet each month on the

[3] Mitzi Myres, "Shot from Canons; or, Maria Edgeworth and the Cultural Production and Consumption of the Late Eighteenth-Century Woman Writer," in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (Routledge, 1995), 193, 195, 197.

[4] Sir Walter Scott quoted in Elisabeth Inglis-Jones, *The Great Maria: A Portrait of Maria Edgeworth* (Greenwood Press, 1959), 3.

[5] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *The British Novelists*, Vol. 49 (London: 1810), i.

[6] Watt, *The Rise of the Novel,* 11-15.

[7] Yoon Sun Lee, "Bad Plots and Objectivity in Maria Edgeworth," *Representations* 139, no.1 (2017): 35-36, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.139.1.34.

[8] Maria Edgeworth, *Maria Edgeworth: Chosen Letters,* ed. F.V. Barry (Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 238.

[9] Frans De Bruyn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 15-16.

[10] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (Penguin,1997), 58.

Monday nearest to the full moon.[11] They were self-described "projectors" committed to practical matters, whose inventions and improvements had an impact beyond Britain, their work being a splendid example of eighteenth-century prediscipliniarity where "the differentiation between what we now call literature and what we now call science remained productively messy."[12] As historian Jenny Uglow remarked, for them "science and art were not separated; you could be an inventor and designer, an experimenter and a poet, a dreamer and an entrepreneur all at once without anyone raising an eyebrow."[13]

Inspired by the intellectual outlook of the Society, in all the affairs of estate and family Edgeworth undertook as the primary assistant of her father, as well as in her own projects, she participated in "the dual Lunar ethos of experimental pragmatism and disciplinary syncretism."[14] Her treatise *Practical Education*, for instance, was born out of such an undertaking shared with her father, R.L. Edgeworth, to educate her numerous younger siblings, their intention to reduce education "to an experimental science"[15] being stated in the first lines of the preface. This work, though at first sight unrelated to the question before us, proves to be highly relevant, as it offers valuable insight into Edgeworth's personal philosophy, which unites her views on the novel, education and personal conduct into an integrated whole. Therefore, in order to be able to understand what the novel was for Edgeworth, we must first understand what she thought about education, morality and life.

While seeking insight on this topic, one must keep in mind not only that *Practical Education* is the shared project of Maria Edgeworth and her father, but also that R. L. Edgeworth had a great impact on all of her daughter's works as critic and editor. Though time and time again Maria wrote of their relationship in terms of love, respect and filial gratitude, especially for today's reader, it fails to escape the suspicion of undue influence. Such suspicion is warranted, among others, by a comment made in a letter to a relative concerning the addition of explanatory material to the novel *Castle Rackrent* proposed by her father, which Maria opposed. She writes: "in the last event of things you know that I must do what my acting and most kind literary partner decides."[16] The difference between their actual opinions and the extent of R.L. Edgeworth's control over his daughter's life and intellectual endeavours has been discussed and represented from various angles, some seeing him as the source of the moralizing tendencies, others representing him in a

[11] "Lunar Society," Maria Edgeworth Centre, accessed April 5, 2025, https://mariaedgeworthcenter.com/meet-the-edgeworths/edgeworths-links-to-science/lunar-society/

[12] James Chandler, "Edgeworth and the Lunar Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, No. 1 (2011): 88-89, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2011.0053.

[13] Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), xviii.

[14] Chandler, "Edgeworth and the Lunar Enlightenment," 99.

[15] Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (London: 1798), v.

[16] Maria Edgeworth, *Maria Edgeworth's Letters from Ireland*, ed. Valerie Pakenham (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2017), 133.

more positive light.[17] However, since the goal of the present paper is not the investigation of the relational intricacies between Maria Edgeworth and her father, I will henceforth consider the ideas expressed in their educational treatise as representative of Maria's thinking.

It is important to note that for Edgeworth experimentation does not constitute merely a means of finding the best educational methods by testing through trial and error what works, but it is the most basic tool of learning itself. Thus, she outlines how young children, with the guidance of their caretakers, can "discover"[18] scientific facts through applying observation and reflection to the everyday events of life, such as snow melting or water freezing. What is more, the same method is employed when learning moral behaviour. According to Edgeworth, the knowledge and ability to make moral judgements can only be attained through an experience in experimentation: "In moral reasoning we proceed in the same manner; we recollect the result of our past experiments, and we refer to this moral demonstration in solving a new problem. In time, by frequent practice, this operation is performed so rapidly by the mind, that we scarcely perceive it, and yet it guides our actions."[19] This experimentation focuses on the feelings of the individual, the source of knowledge and the guiding light which enables him "to choose prudently."[20] When detailing the method of teaching children to make this choice, Edgeworth stresses that these experiments and consequently, the development of the moral faculty needs time: the educator "will wait till the child feels, and at that moment he will excite his pupil to observe his own feelings."[21] Building her educational system on the basis of personal observation and reflection, it comes as no surprise that she considers personal conviction superior to received wisdom: she believes that the individual has to learn to think and act independently by relying on his own ability to discern the right path instead of taking at face value the advice given by others, which can be both right and wrong.

Her assertion that children "must feel for themselves"[22] echoes the motto of the Enlightenment – *Sapere aude*, sometimes translated as 'Dare to use your own reason' –, shedding light on the connection between her various philosophical influences. As briefly outlined above, Edgeworth's thinking was saturated by the empirical way of seeing the world, however, the other major paradigm which has left a mark on her mind was the Moral Sense School of Philosophy, which comprised thinkers such as the third Earl of Shaftesbury, David Hume and Adam Smith. The former, by fixing the source of any knowledge about reality in sense perception, laid the necessary groundwork for the latter, which applied the same logic to ethics, drawing the conclusion that moral ideas and behaviour are derived from a kind of moral sense. As Adela Pinch encapsulates

[17] See, for instance, Caroline Gonda, *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), or Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edeworth and Patriarchal Complicity* (Oxford University Press, 1991).
[18] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 490.
[19] Ibid., 695.
[20] Ibid., 692.
[21] Ibid., 692.
[22] Ibid., 693.

this view: "empiricism allows emotion to be a way of knowing"[23] (19). With some differences in the details, both Hume and Smith construct their moral system by drawing on Locke's definition of good and bad in reference to pleasure and pain.[24] The key of these systems is sympathy, also termed fellow feeling, through which a person can take on the feelings and emotions of the other, leading him to moral action. This way of thinking had an immense impact on literature and culture in general, creating the obsession with sentiment and giving rise to the idea so prevalent during the Age of Sensibility that a capacity for deep and powerful feelings is a sign of virtue. The key term of this period, 'sensibility', during this time came to denote "the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering,"[25] and was attended by a number of cognate terms such as 'sentiment', 'sentimental' and 'sentimentalism', which became the common currency of literature, philosophy and everyday life.

However, this reliance on feeling does not mean that Edgeworth, either in her personal philosophy, or in her writing, foregrounded sentiment as the superior guide to the detriment of reason. Quite on the contrary, some see "the rule of reason [as] the ultimate moral doctrine urged"[26] in her novels. Key to her thinking about right living is the concept of prudence, a term which can serve as an instrument for understanding how Edgeworth conceptualised the cooperation of the emotional and intellectual faculties. Defined as "wisdom applied to practice"[27] by Samuel Johnson, Edgeworth describes it as follows:

> "Prudence is a virtue compounded of judgement and resolution: we do not speak of that narrow species of prudence, which is more properly called worldly wisdom; but we mean that enlarged, comprehensive wisdom, which, after taking a calm view of the objects of happiness, steadily prefers the greatest portion of felicity. ... Two things are necessary to make any person prudent, the power to judge, and the habit of acting in consequence of his conviction."[28]

According to Edgeworth's interpretation, central to the nature of prudence is the ability to see beyond the impulses of the immediate moment and to recognize which course of action would confer the greatest degree of happiness in the long term. Therefore, the "power to judge," or in other words, discernment, results from reason bringing a long-term perspective to the present-focused intensity of emotion. This, however, must be coupled by corresponding behaviour – reason and passion must be brought into harmony on this level as well, the individual gaining

[23] Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion. Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 19.
[24] Locke, *Essay*, 216, 219, see David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon Press: 1888) and Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[25] Janet Todd, *Sensibility. An Introduction* (Methuen, 1986), 7.
[26] Joanne Altieri, "Style and Purpose in Maria Edgeworth's Fiction," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 23, No. 3 (1968): 278, https://doi.org/10.2307/2932555.
[27] *Johnson's Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Prudence,"
https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=prudence (accessed April 16, 2025).
[28] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 689-690.

agency over their own actions. Practising discernment and discipline however are not the final goal, but the noble means to an end – for Edgeworth the ultimate value is happiness, both at the individual and the societal level.[29]

Edgeworth calls prudence "a virtue of so much consequence to all the other virtues,"[30] since it is not only the standard by which the propriety of any action can be measured, but comprises the ability of self-command as well – action which puts theory into practice. This idea seems to be a variation of Smith's thoughts on prudence and self-command, a philosopher whom Edgeworth greatly admired.[31] Yet, Edgeworth is not reticent to express her disagreement with Smith in her assessment of where virtues originate from. Reflecting on his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Edgeworth readily acknowledges the role sympathy plays in virtues such as compassion, friendship and benevolence. Nonetheless, she offers a caveat to his theory and calls the connection between virtue and sensibility into question, stating that sympathy alone cannot be depended on for either the correctness of one's moral sentiments, nor the steadiness of one's moral conduct, as a person governed by it could be influenced both by good and bad passions, which renders him liable to imprudence and guilt. Therefore, to decrease the deeply feeling individual's vulnerability to pernicious influences, Edgeworth prescribes "the assistance and education of reason" as well as "directing sensibility to useful and amiable purposes," contending that virtue is "the result of education, not the gift of nature."[32]

Therefore, for Edgeworth, proper education is key to not just a moral, but ultimately a happy life. While her precepts for the education of boys and girls are quite similar, yet when it comes to the topic of prudence, she adopts a gendered approach. Though the means of learning and exercising prudence – that of observation and reflection – remain the same, the proportion in which experimentation and reasoning should be applied is different. Edgeworth states that "[the] prudence [of girls] must be more the result of reasoning than of experiment; they must trust to the experience of others, they cannot always have recourse to what ought to be, they must adapt themselves to what is. They cannot rectify the material mistakes in their conduct."[33] These comments reflect contemporary ideas about gender, according to which the honour and social standing of a young woman is particularly delicate and has to be guarded with great care.

Not only does she consider that women have to be even more prudent than men, but stresses that they should have command of their temper and should be "excited to reason about their own feelings."[34] Asserting that "peculiar caution is necessary to manage female sensibility,"[35] Edgeworth implies that women are more susceptible to emotion, running a greater risk of acting

[29] Iain Topliss, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth's Modern Ladies," *Études Irlandaises* 6 (1981): 20, https://doi.org/10.3406/irlan.1981.2271.
[30] Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 688.
[31] Chandler, "Edgeworth and the Lunar Enlightenment," 93.
[32] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 266, 269, 713.
[33] Ibid., 699.
[34] Ibid., 700.
[35] Ibid., 296.

imprudently and, in consequence, ruining their future prospects of happiness. In order to equip themselves to resist and control emotional impulses, making "what is called the heart, a source of permanent pleasure, [women] must cultivate [their] reasoning powers at the same time that [they] repress the enthusiasm of *fine feeling*."[36] The words italicised by Edgeworth teem with irony and announce her subsequent comments on sentimental literature, which articulate the negative effects of "common novel-reading."[37] She claims that these books can bring about an addiction to the "violent stimulus" of fictional emotion, which distorts women's perception of reality and renders them not only incapable to savour day-to-day life, but to "endure the languor to which they are subject in the intervals of delirium."[38] She contrasts readers of sentimental romances with those who develop a taste for science and literature, arguing that, contrarily to the discourse around 'fine feeling', it is the latter who are actually able to feel the emotions and enjoy the happiness which the former profess to possess, since their "sympathy and sensibility are engrossed by proper objects, and connected to useful exertion."[39]

The emphasis Edgeworth lays on the proper education of women, which empowers them to think for themselves and resist harmful emotional influences is reminiscent of the views of her contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft. While Edgeworth is seen to this day rather as a "mild reformist" whose views did not challenge dominant social structures,[40] Wollstonecraft was regarded and rejected as a radical and a disruptor during her time, and later celebrated as an early advocate for the feminist cause. Yet, not only is there evidence of Edgeworth having read Wollstonecraft, but she was profoundly influenced by her, integrating her essential insights into her writing.[41] As Weiss points out, Edgeworth creates a pragmatic middle-ground between Burkean reverence for social custom and Wollstonecraft's desire to entirely eliminate behaviours that trade on sexual distinctions, holding a deep belief in the unity of theory and practice.[42]

A passionate advocate for the rights of women, Wollstonecraft argued that by neglecting to cultivate their intellectual abilities they are totally exposed to emotional influences, as a "reed over which every passing breeze has power."[43] This neglect of the understanding is all the more grievous, as it is only through the exercise of reason that one can become virtuous, "the exercise of which ennobles the human character."[44] While she believed that reading can contribute to a "process of self-cultivation that simultaneously engages the emotional, rational and imaginative

[36] Ibid., 296-297.
[37] Ibid., 279.
[38] Ibid., 279.
[39] Ibid., 298.
[40] Deborah Weiss, "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda: Maria Edgeworth's Female Philosopher," *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 19, No. 4 (2007): 442, https://doi.org/10.1353/ecf.2007.0027.
[41] Topliss, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth," 14-15.
[42] Weiss, "Belinda," 443, 452.
[43] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man with A Vindication of the Rights of Women and Hints*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 98.
[44] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 88, 75.

faculties,"[45] she also recognised the potential of certain readings to thwart the intellectual development of young women. Wollstonecraft called into question the representational accuracy of sentimental novels and romances, an error which can lead to the misguided behaviour of their readers. According to her, by working on their sensibilities and keeping them in constant emotional upheaval, these works make young women unable to benefit from "sensible books"[46] which could help them cultivate their understanding and lead to virtuous conduct.

Maria Edgeworth's and Mary Wollstonecraft's concerns echo the anxiety of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society about the influence of sentimental fiction on its readers, especially in relation to the emotions derived from books. The common fear that these feelings could enter the reader and substantially disorder him – by promoting selfish individualism, affectation or vice – can be found in conduct books, educational treatises and novels themselves.[47] The reason why the impact of these readings was seen as so dangerous to women – and men as well – was located in their capacity to undermine scientific and moral absolutes considered necessary for the foundation and seamless functioning of society. The novel "was an excessively particularizing genre, which interfered with rational generalization because it encouraged emotional responses to individual stories."[48]

Yet how can it be that somebody who held the belief that novels are like "deadly poison"[49] and "drams"[50] was also a famous and successful novelist, who was read internationally? It may be helpful to take a look at the short 'Advertisement' Edgeworth affixed to *Belinda*, her second novel written for adults:

> "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.
> The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel. Were all novels like those of madame de Crousaz, Mrs Inchbald, miss Burney, or Dr Moore, she would adopt the name of novel with delight: But so much folly, error, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination, that it is hoped the wish to assume another title will be attributed to feelings that are laudable, and not fastidious."[51]

[45] Irmgard Maassen, "Mary Wollstonecraft: Romance and the Anxiety of Reading," *Romanticism* 5, No. 2, (1999): 175, https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.1999.5.2.172.
[46] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (Augustus M. Kelley, 1977), 50.
[47] Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*, 137-138.
[48] Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (University of California Press, 1994), 275.
[49] Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (London: 1814), 73.
[50] Edgeworth's personal letter to Fanny Robinson quoted in Kathleen B. Grathwol, "Maria Edgeworth and the 'True Use of Books' for Eighteenth-Century Girls," in *New Essays on Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Julie Nash (Routledge, 2018), 76.
[51] Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpartick (Oxford University Publishing, 2008), 3.

Exactly because she sees the majority of novels as carriers of precarious influence, Edgeworth is eager to avoid any kind of association with them, styling her own work as a "Moral Tale", in a manner usual during her time. Nonetheless, she is conscious that her readers are more than able to reclassify her work, and interpret it according to their own perception. While she does not want to "acknowledge" it, she is aware that her work is a novel – she even uses the same denomination for the positive examples she desires to emulate. Just as she did with Wollstonecraft's ideas, she does not dispose of the form and language of the polite novel, but integrates and repurposes them to serve her own goals. Being one of the few authors who sincerely assumed the role of the educator,[52] she turns the novel into a teaching tool. However, as we have seen above, for Edgeworth the most basic instrument of learning is experimentation. Thus, what the novel becomes in her hand is an experiment in practical philosophy. As Lee shows, Edgeworth's plots are similar to scale models whose goal is 'operational knowledge,' the protocols and structures of experimental science being built into the stories.[53]

How this happens can be well observed in her 1801 novel *Belinda*. This novel is a fictional experiment which puts Edgeworth's personal philosophy about right living into practice by investigating how sentiment and reason should work together in real life, what it means to be prudent and how one can achieve happiness by striving to cultivate this quality. The use of reason bringing order to the disorienting vortex of sentiments is referred to by a variety of terms and phrases throughout this novel, such as 'composure', 'presence of mind', 'common sense', 'firmness', 'steadiness', 'calm and dignity', or actions such as 'collecting one's self', 'commanding one's temper' or 'guarding one's heart'. However, not only does the term 'prudence' appear, in various forms, over ninety times in the novel, but this concept is both indirectly examined and directly discussed.

For this experiment the author chose a character who is endowed with many of the necessary good qualities of a heroine. The eponymous main character, Belinda Portman, is described at the beginning as "handsome, graceful, sprightly, and highly accomplished."[54] Despite being the protégé of a famous "catch-match-maker" aunt bent on marrying off her nieces with the help of art and affectation, Belinda is "more undesigning, and more free [sic] from affectation and coquetry, than could have been expected" and is "disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity."[55] However, in spite of all these promising aspects, she is not the ideal young lady: "Her taste for literature declined in proportion to her intercourse with the fashionable world, as she did not in this society, perceive the least use in the knowledge that she had acquired. Her mind had never been roused to much reflection; she had in general acted but as a puppet in the hands of others."[56] In the words of Deborahh Weiss, at the beginning Belinda is "a kind of everywoman—or

[52] Altieri, "Style and Purpose," 265.
[53] Lee, "Bad Plots and Objectivity," 35-36, 47.
[54] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 7.
[55] Ibid., 15, 10.
[56] Ibid., 10.

at least a figure who could be any woman of her age and class;"[57] somewhat of a blank canvas, her character "yet to be developed by circumstances."[58]

Nonetheless, instead of a safe and isolated environment where she could be guided by a reliable mentor towards moral refinement, she is placed in the very heart of dissipated fashionable society when she is invited by Lady Delacour, a witty and highly popular viscountess, to stay with her during the season. The author's rationale behind this choice is put in the mouth of Lady Anne Percival, a character who stands for reason and domestic happiness in the story: "some young people learn prudence by being placed in dangerous situations."[59] This precarious situation proves the most efficient and beneficial for her education, since it provides ample opportunities for Belinda to gain experience, which according to Edgeworth is indispensable for developing the ability to form judgements[60]. In fact, what Belinda goes through, especially in the first volume, is a course of practical education by way of negative examples. Coming in such close proximity to all that is improper and immoral, she has a chance to exercise her own intellectual faculties, observing and reflecting on what she sees behind "the thin veil"[61] of politeness and coming to her own conclusions. After witnessing Lady Delacour's wanton way of life and private misery, she becomes "wonderfully clear-sighted" and is said to have "a newly acquired moral sense,"[62] a change which the narrator explains in the following way:

> "When the understanding is suddenly roused and forced to exert itself, what a multitude of deductions it makes in a short time. Belinda saw things in a new light; and for the first time in her life she reasoned for herself upon what she saw and felt. It is sometimes safer for young people to see, than to hear of certain characters. ... The result of Belinda's reflections upon Lady Delacour's history was a resolution to profit by her bad example; but this resolution it was more easy [sic] to form than to keep."[63]

Belinda's resolution not to emulate Lady Delcour, "a woman who never listened to reason"[64] and is controlled by her passions, spurs her to do the exact opposite: to control her passions by listening to reason. This skill is essential not only for morally sound conduct, but as Edgeworth demonstrates time and time again, for a happy and successful life as well. It is an instrument of gaining personal agency, since it protects the individual from the virus-like contagion of harmful emotion or manipulation which threaten him with a complete loss of self.[65] Though at the beginning she is

[57] Weiss, "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda," 460.
[58] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 7.
[59] Ibid., 108.
[60] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 657.
[61] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 10.
[62] Ibid., 15.
[63] Ibid., 69, 70.
[64] Ibid., 122.
[65] Stephen Ahern, *Affected Sensibilities: Romantic Excess and the Genealogy of the Novel 1680- 1810* (AMS Press, 2007), 38.

said to have paid "unlimited, habitual, blind obedience" to her aunt Mrs. Stanhope, Belinda does not turn out to be "such a docile pupil as her other nieces."[66] She is repeatedly described as judging and acting for herself whenever her moral agency is threatened, for which she is reprimanded and discarded by Mrs. Stanhope as "dead loss to her friends,"[67] admired by Clarence and commended by Dr X for not acting "like almost all other heroines, that is to say, without common sense."[68] This comment expresses Edgeworth's own criticism of 'common novels' and their heroines, both of which are dominated by their feelings and passions, consequently communicating erroneous examples of conduct to their audiences.

Yet, the passage above also showcases the subtleties of how Edgeworth understands the term experience. Belinda does not necessarily commit mistakes to later learn from them, but profits by the good or bad examples of others around her through observation and reflection, practically embodying the author's maxim expressed in *Practical Education*. In the novel Edgeworth sets out three possible ways of relating to experience, rendered through the categorization made by Dr. X, who "divides mankind into three classes. Those who learn from the experience of others. They are happy men. Those who learn from their own experience. They are wise men. And, lastly, those who learn neither from their own nor from other people's experience. They are fools."[69] Belinda clearly falls into the first class, however, where her suitor Clarence Hervey belongs exposes the problematic aspects of this educational principle. Reflecting on the words of his friend, Dr. X, Clarence admits that he "shall pay too dearly yet for some of [his] experiments," yet he is content to belong to the second category because he sees it as the only productive way towards not just personal, but societal progress in "knowledge and virtue."[70] He remarks that the members of the first class are dependent on other people for their progress, at "whose expense they are to live and learn."[71] To avoid having to pay too dearly for instructive experience, Belinda's scheming, worldly-wise aunt Mrs. Stanhope advises listening to the counsel of those who have a "thorough knowledge of the world."[72] Nonetheless, Mrs. Stanhope's alternative is just as precarious, since it promotes sidestepping the responsibility of forming a personal conviction and blindly taking other people's advice – advice, which could be disastrous, seeing the truly awful outcomes of Mrs. Stanhope's matchmaking. All this reveals that knowledge and experience is not to be had for free – if not the learner himself, somebody must pay for the lessons.

The idea that there is a price to experience throws light on the reason why Edgeworth turned to the novel as the place for experimentation. In a world where women "cannot always have recourse to what ought to be, [but] must adapt themselves to what is,"[73] experiential learning

[66] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 10, 7.
[67] Ibid., 85.
[68] Ibid., 133.
[69] Ibid., 276.
[70] Ibid., 276.
[71] Ibid., 276.
[72] Ibid., 198.
[73] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 699.

may be just as detrimental to their reputation and happiness, as a lack of knowledge is. Therefore, conducting the same experiments in the scale model of fictional space might be a much safer alternative for them. Thus, readers can learn from the various positive or negative examples of the novel's characters and be the happy people included in Dr. X's first category.

What differentiates Clarence from Belinda, as already mentioned above, is that he learns much of his lessons not by observing other people's life, but from his own hard-earned experience, being forced to practise self-command: "The happiness of his life and of hers were at stake, and every motive of prudence and delicacy called upon him to command his affections."[74] By committing foolish mistakes for which he might have to pay with sacrificing his felicity and life, Clarence's character seems much more believable than Belinda's, whose faults receive barely any coverage before they are quickly repaired by prudence. Mr. Vincent, otherwise deeply in love with her, observes that "if Belinda had more faults she would be more amiable."[75] Even the author herself confesses in an 1809 letter having been "so provoked with the cold tameness of that stick or stone Belinda"[76] on rereading the novel for correction before it was published in Mrs. Barbauld's collection. The reason behind the 'coldness' of the character which irritated Edgeworth might be that the novel serves rather as an illustration of practical philosophy than of life, as a consequence of which, the way Belinda is represented aims more to demonstrate prudence, than to delineate a believable, human-like character. In fact, this is what separates exemplary characters from the rest in the novel. Those whom Edgeworth desires to showcase as positive role models are able to calmly reflect on and examine their responses to events by "separating their disorderly bodies from the cool deliverances of their intellectual judgment."[77] This peculiarity was remarked by Edgeworth's contemporaries as well. John William Ward observed in the Quarterly Review: "[Edgeworth's] heroes and heroines are far more thinking, cautious, philosophizing persons than ever before were produced in that character."[78]

In order to drive her lesson home, Edgeworth also offers the negative examples of three characters – Lady Delacour, Mr. Vincent and Virginia, whose lives are ruined or almost lost due to a lack of prudence and self-control. Here I would like to take a brief look at the last one only, as her storyline is the most relevant to Edgeworth's understanding of the role of books and experience in one's education and happy life. Virginia clearly serves as Belinda's foil, her case being meant to demonstrate the inadequacy of a purely sentimental education, a plot point through which Edgeworth critiques Rousseau's ideas, and illustrates the validity of her own. A poor orphan left alone in the world after the death of her grandmother, the young girl wins the sympathy and support of Clarence Hervey, who changes her name from Rachel to Virginia, the name of a romance novel's heroine. Clarence is charmed by her beauty and innocence, and, inspired by Rousseau's

[74] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 374.
[75] Ibid., 426.
[76] Edgeworth, *Letters*, 213-214.
[77] Simon Shafer, "Self-Evidence" *Critical Inquiry* 18, No. 2 (1992): 339, https://doi.org/10.1086/448635.
[78] John William Ward, "Patronage," *Quarterly Review* 10, No. 20, (1814): 305, https://archive.org/details/sim_quarterly-review-1809_1814-01_10_20/page/322/mode /1up.

precepts laid out in *Emile*, decides to provide for her financially, secretly setting her up in a house with a governess, with the ulterior motive of educating a wife for himself. Despite Virginia's endearing attributes, Clarence is forced to admit the failure of his system after he meets Lady Delacour and Belinda. Compared to Belinda's "cultivated tastes, … active understanding, ... knowledge of literature, [and] power and habit of conducting herself," Virginia's lack of these acquirements renders her unequal and consequently unable to become Clarence's "companion, a friend to him for life."[79] But where do these shortcomings originate from? Due to the isolation she was kept in both by her grandmother and later by Clarence to protect her from the corruptive influence of society, Virginia has remained completely unacquainted with the world, a vast lack of both factual and social knowledge Clarence's feeble educational attempts are completely insufficient to rectify. In other terms, Virginia has been precluded from learning from experience and consequently mastering prudence. Her profound sensibility is unregulated by reason, which, united with her ignorance, leaves her not only vulnerable and totally unable to navigate the world, but keeps her from attaining superior morality as well. Clarence comes to see that the "virtues of Virginia sprang from sentiment; those of Belinda from reason" – the former the fruits of momentary feelings, the latter reliable at all times.[80]

Not only is Virginia's life consumed by romance, but she also consumes romances "with the greatest eagerness,"[81] which inculcate in her mind ideas completely foreign from real life. She becomes enamoured with an imaginary figure composed from all the heroes she has read about and endowed with the appearance of the first man she has ever seen in her life, being convinced that a union with such a figure would constitute her greatest happiness. Her mistaken notions about life and moral duty almost cause her to condemn to unhappiness not only herself, but Clarence and Belinda as well. However, despite appearances, what Edgeworth is critiquing here is not fiction itself or a specific genre, but as Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick points out in her introduction to the novel, any work "that appeals more to feeling than reason;"[82] works which lead away from experience instead of towards it.[83]

The right kinds of reading, fit for cultivating a well-balanced, rational mind are discussed in a fascinating chapter entitled "Rights of Woman." The dialogue takes place primarily between Belinda and Harriet Freke, Lady Delacour's former confidante turned enemy, a figure of the false female philosopher through which the author lampoons the idea of the masculine woman and the perception of Wollstonecraft, which circulated in the culture.[84] Bent on winning her to her side, one of her attacks is directed at flattering Belida's intellectual abilities, during which she expresses her contempt for reading, contending that books "spoil the originality of genius [and] ... are full of

[79] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 379.
[80] Ibid., 379.
[81] Ibid., 380.
[82] Ibid., xiii.
[83] Chandler, "Edgeworth and the Lunar Enlightenment," 101.
[84] Weiss, "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda," 446.

trash—nonsense"[85] and therefore should not be read by those who can think for themselves. Countering this statement, Belinda exclaims: "But I read that I may think for myself."[86] Thus, she gives voice to Edgeworth's views concerning the power of books in refining the reader's understanding and keeping unruly passions in check, also reflecting Hume's thoughts on the topic.[87] Amongst Belinda's books, all of which are discarded by Mrs. Freke as useless, we find moral philosophy and travel writing, revealing what qualifies as proper reading: Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, John Moore's *Travels* and Jean de La Bruyère's *The Characters, or the Manners of the Age*. It is conspicuous that no novel is explicitly mentioned here, creating a hard contrast between Belinda and her foils Virginia and Lady Delacour, who both consume kinds of literature – be it romances or 'Methodistical books' – which cloud their understanding and prove harmful in the long run. However, what Edgeworth would recommend for perusal in that genre can be deduced from the 'Advertisement' she prefaces her work with.

The final moral, which closes the story, encapsulates the central message of Edgeworth's novel in a way which shows that her book is meant to be the kind of reading which fosters independent thinking:

> "Now, Lady Delacour, to show that she is reformed, comes forward to address the audience with a moral—a moral!— yes,
>
> Our tale contains a moral, and, no doubt,
> You all have wit enough to find it out."[88]

This refusal to spell the moral out for the readers is part and parcel of the author's educational project, one that calls for the readers' active participation in putting theory into practice. Contrarily to Altieri's remark that except for her first novel, Edgeworth does not trust her readers to draw conclusions,[89] this ending shows that she actually requires the reader to think for himself, to learn from the experiences shared through the novel and develop his own personal conviction in its light. As Deborah Weiss puts it, "the meaning of the story will emerge through the kind of careful analysis, use of good judgment, and intelligent consideration that Belinda has developed and demonstrated over three volumes and thirty-one chapters."[90] Edgeworth's didactic intention is directed exactly at the reader learning, just as the characters do, to bring reason and sentiment into harmony.

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[85] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 227.
[86] Ibid., 227.
[87] In his essay *On the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*, Hume advises the refinement of the delicacy of taste, that is, a sensibility to beauty in literature and polite conversation, in order to subdue a sensibility to everyday events. See David Hume, *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford University Press, 1996).
[88] Edgeworth, *Belinda*, 478.
[89] Altieri, "Style and Purpose," 275.
[90] Weiss, "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda," 461.

Thus, Edgeworth participated in the disciplinary syncretism of the Lunar Society by bringing together the novel, education and experimental science and repurposing the novel as a didactic tool. According to her, reading has an immense impact on personal conduct, which she sought to harness in the service of building her readers' ability to pursue intellectual agency and maturity, and ultimately, a happy life. Being deeply aware of the precariousness of learning from experience for the women of her age, she employed fictional space for the purpose of producing experience which they could learn from without any risk. Though later times forgot her because of her moral didacticism, which might be an effect of her father's influence, she is worthy to be remembered for her ingenious integration of fiction and philosophy.