



2009-03-18

# Reinventing Virtue: Sensibility and Sentiment in the Works of Maria Edgeworth

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REINVENTING VIRTUE: SENSIBILITY AND SENTIMENT IN THE  
WORKS OF MARIA EDGEWORTH

by

Octavia Sawyer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

April 2009



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Octavia Cathryn Sawyer

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Octavia Cathryn Sawyer in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements, (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### REINVENTING VIRTUE: SENSIBILITY AND SENTIMENT IN THE WORKS OF MARIA EDGEWORTH

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While literary scholars have written extensively about sensibility in the past two decades, most of the studies have treated either the history of sensibility itself or how it interacted with a particular aspect of English culture and literature, such as sexuality or politics. My project instead examines how a single author, Maria Edgeworth, used sensibility in her writing over the course of her career. I analyze the use of sensibility in three of her novels: *Belinda* (1801), her first full-length novel; *The Absentee* (1812), her influential Irish national tale, written at the height of her popularity in the middle years of her career; and *Helen* (1834), her last novel. This analysis illustrates the changing attitude of both Edgeworth and English society to sensibility and its representations in literature.

In *Belinda*, Edgeworth uses sensibility to demonstrate the virtue and superiority of the characters who possess it and also to rehabilitate the concept itself. She differentiates between mere affectation and true sensibility by creating both positive and negative examples of sensibility in *Belinda* – characters who clearly possess true sensibility and those who only pretend to it. In *The Absentee*, Edgeworth adheres much more closely to the conventions of

sentimental fiction than she had in her previous society novels. In my discussion of *The Absentee*, I demonstrate how Edgeworth uses these conventions of sentiment both to make Irish culture accessible to her English audience and to justify the Irish estate system which put Anglo-Irish landowners in a position of authority over native Irish tenants. My final section focuses on Edgeworth's last novel, *Helen*, which marks a return to the genre of the society novel with which she began her career. While Edgeworth still uses sensibility as a sign of virtue in *Helen*, she is also much more interested than previously in the interplay between education and inborn qualities of personality – the very qualities whose existence she was so skeptical of in her education manual, *Practical Education*, published two years before she began her career as a fiction writer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the guidance of my committee, Nicholas Mason, Matthew Wickman, and Leslee Thorne-Murphy. Their diverse viewpoints and candid critiques at all stages of my research and writing improved my project immeasurably.

Thanks also to my family, who have been so patient with me as I have worked toward my degree. I appreciate the tolerance of my two children, Johnathan and Catherine, who have never known a mother who was not in school. Finally, special thanks to my husband, Glen, without whose constant support and encouragement this thesis would not have been possible.



## Introduction

As a well-educated, well-traveled, and prolific writer, Maria Edgeworth is rightly seen as a rich source of information about Romantic-era Anglo-Irish culture. Particularly in the past ten years, her works have increasingly appeared in undergraduate syllabi as part of the canon of the Romantic period and as an important milestone in the development of both the domestic and the regional novel (Nash xv). Yet gaps remain in Edgeworth scholarship. Julie Nash notes that “few projects examine the range of Edgeworth’s writing from her moral tales, to her letters, to her novels. In fact, prior to 2004, only one collection of essays has ever been published on this prolific and influential author, and that book [...] is devoted to a single novel, and it was published in 1987” (xv).

Much of the recent scholarly work on Edgeworth focuses on her position as a writer of the regional novel. Of course, much of this criticism relates to Edgeworth’s status as the seminal writer of the Irish national tale, but it also gives attention to her influence on Scottish national literature<sup>1</sup> and her engagement with colonialism. And while post-colonial and national issues have come to the forefront, previous topics, such as Edgeworth’s vexed relationship with feminist thought, are still prevalent in published criticism. On the other hand, biographical criticism in Edgeworth studies has become less popular in recent years, as scholars have moved away from the idea of Maria’s father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, as the dominant influence in her work, looking instead to other contexts, such as national politics, to illuminate her writing.

In the 1980s and 90s, critics often subscribed to what might be called the either/or fallacy of Edgeworth studies, variously claiming that Edgeworth was a feminist, or a staunch opponent of feminism; an anti-Semite, or a reformed anti-Semite; and so forth. More recent scholarship,

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<sup>1</sup> James Chandler, for example, refers to her as “Scott’s acknowledged teacher in the practice of ethnographic realism” (122).

however, avoids attempts to pigeon-hole Edgeworth or her ideology; in fact, tension and contradiction are now seen as salient features of her work. Julie Nash's description of Edgeworth nicely summarizes the current academic attitude toward her: "Maria Edgeworth is difficult to label: a feminist who parodied Wollstonecraftian radicalism, an abolitionist who idealized the loyal slave, a paternalist who undermined patriarchal power, a realist who never lost sight of the ideal" (xvii). This is the puzzle, and the attraction, of Edgeworth scholarship: her contribution to public discourse on matters of culture and philosophy is often self-conflicted.

The difficulty of interpreting Edgeworth's stand on a particular issue is, paradoxically, exacerbated by the fact that she was inclined to act as her own Greek Chorus, telling the audience what to expect and how to react to the drama she was about to present. Her designation of her 1801 novel *Belinda* as a "moral tale" famously signaled her intention to write tales – not novels – that would serve as conduct books for her adult readers, just as her moral tales for children had done. Having thus announced her didactic intentions, she leaves her readers with no option but to assume that the lessons presented in the novels must represent the real beliefs of the author. As Michael Gamer notes of *Belinda* in particular, "it is impossible even for a few pages to misread the ideological and moral burden it inculcates" (250). Within her novels, obtrusive third-person narration provides commentary on various characters and situations, lest the reader should have missed their significance. Yet for all her explication, within and without her novels, many of the elements of plot and character in her fiction appear to undermine the very statements she makes so broadly in her narration and her non-fiction.

One topic on which Edgeworth's views appear typically contradictory, and yet which has been largely ignored by scholars, is the culture of sensibility. The 1980s and 90s saw a surge of scholarly interest in the notion of sensibility and its importance in eighteenth-century British

culture and literature.<sup>2</sup> Several influential book-length studies and numerous articles were published on the subject, but Edgeworth was, for the most part, absent from the discussion. For example, she garners only two brief mentions in Janet Todd's *Sensibility: An Introduction*, and in both instances is essentially described as being opposed to sentimentality (48,138).<sup>3</sup> While it is true that Edgeworth protested against the sentimental excesses of the novel of sensibility, she nevertheless used the stock characters and situations of sentimental literature in her own fiction, and in fact, the signs of sensibility are often the markers she uses to designate her characters as exemplary, or superior, or virtuous.

Edgeworth wrote extensively on the topic of sensibility, both in her novels and in her non-fiction prose. In her two-volume instructional manual, *Practical Education* (1798), she spends a great deal of time and energy expounding the idea that a proper education is more valuable than any native quality of personality, such as sensibility. At times she seems skeptical even of the existence of such qualities, remarking that “virtues, as well as abilities, or what is popularly called genius, we believe to be the result of education, not the gift of nature” (396-7). Education, she declares, has such sovereign power that it can prevent “almost all the [...] evils of life” (162). “Experience,” on the other hand, “does not teach us, that sensibility and virtue have any certain connexion with each other,” and that in fact “that quickness of sympathy with present

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<sup>2</sup> See Janet Todd's *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986); John Mullan's *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (1988); J. G. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1992); Chris Jones' *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (1993); Anne Jessie Van Sant's *Eighteenth-century Sensibility and the Novel* (1993); Markman Ellis's *The Politics of Sensibility* (1996); Jerome McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (1996); and Adela Pinch's *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Jones notes that the Edgeworths “distrusted the excesses of sensibility” (26) and even claims that they contributed to “the death of sensibility” (120); Van Sant does not mention Edgeworth at all, perhaps because her book focuses on the eighteenth century, while Edgeworth did not begin publishing novels until 1800; Ellis also has no mention of Edgeworth; Pinch's sole reference to Edgeworth is a quote from one of Edgeworth's letters, in which she discusses a scene in Austen's *Persuasion* (153). A few other scholars touch on the topic of Edgeworth and sensibility in the context of other issues. Jennie Batchelor, for example, addresses sensibility and sentiment in *Belinda* in one chapter of her book *Dress, Distress, and Desire*, but this discussion is incidental to her larger study of women's clothing in eighteenth-century literature.

objects of distress, which constitutes compassion, is usually thought a virtue, but it is a virtue frequently found in persons of abandoned character” (155-6). This is all fairly straightforward: education is paramount; “innate” qualities of personality are nothing more than a result of proper education; it is education, not nature, which produces virtue. In her fiction, however, Edgeworth continually undermines the idea of a disjunction between sensibility and virtue. She may write immoral characters who possess some symptoms of sensibility, but she never draws an admirable character who is lacking in sensibility.

Edgeworth was a careful writer, and a didactic one, whose work was subject to much revision before publication. She would not have employed the vocabulary or conventions of sensibility carelessly. What, then, was her object in writing novels and heroes of sensibility, when she opposed them in principle? Why are her admirable characters men and women of feeling, while her deplorable characters are explicitly described as lacking true feeling? In this essay, I will suggest that what Edgeworth intended to accomplish in her fiction was not a dismissal of sensibility or even the conventions of the sentimental novel, but rather a return to something more like the Shaftesburian notion of “moral sense” mediated by “self-reflexive refinement” (Ellis 11). In other words, she wanted to show her readers how to separate the excesses and dangers of sentiment from the virtues of sensibility and true feeling.

#### Novels of Sensibility and Sentiment

As with so many other literary terms, the novel of “sentiment” and the novel of “sensibility” suffer from a lack of clear definition – or rather, they may be easy to define in theoretical terms, but more difficult to identify or differentiate from each other in practice. If, as Todd claims, “the terms ‘sentiment,’ ‘sensibility,’ ‘sentimentality,’ and ‘sentimentalism’ are counters in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy, sometimes representing precise

formulations and sometimes vaguely suggesting emotional qualities” (6), it would seem to follow that the “novel of sentiment” and the “novel of sensibility” ought also to be interchangeable terms. But, in fact, Todd goes on to argue that “the novel of sentiment of the 1740s and 1750s praises a generous heart and often delays the narrative to philosophize about benevolence; the novel of sensibility, increasingly written from the 1760s onwards, differs slightly in emphasis since it honours above all the capacity for refined feeling” (8). The emphasis on refinement is an important distinction, since it allows the novel of sensibility to escape some – though not all – of the pejorative connotations of the sentimental novel. However, in practical terms, the two types of novels shared many of their prominent conventions, often differing only in the degree to which those conventions were utilized.

Susan Manning effectively summarizes the components of “sensibility” in eighteenth-century literature, listing anti-rationalism, set pieces of virtue in distress, somatized responses to that distress, a prevailing mood of melancholy, and fragmentation of form as its defining characteristics (81), while Todd more concisely describes “the arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices” as “the mark of sentimental literature” (2). The features on each of these lists could easily be applied to the other genre, and in fact some scholars might argue that Manning was really describing sentimental literature rather than the literature of sensibility.

There is also some discussion about the time period in which the novel of sentiment/sensibility was popular or even acceptable. The prevailing attitude among critics for the past decade or more has been that sentimental fiction was popular beginning in the 1740s, waning in popularity in the 1780s, and that “by the end of the century the concept [of sensibility] and its associated vocabulary were virtually unusable except for purposes of satire” (Jones 3).

This assertion seems odd in light of the publication of novels such as Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811.<sup>4</sup> The title did not appear to hurt the novel's sales, as the first edition sold out completely, and Austen clearly intended the work to be a serious examination of sensibility rather than simple satire. Recently, scholars have begun to recognize elements of sensibility in other works published after 1800, prompting Christopher Nagle to propose a "long age of Sensibility extending from the late seventeenth century through the nineteenth century" (4). While Nagle's refiguring of the long eighteenth century as the "long age of Sensibility" may be overly ambitious, it is worth noting that the elements of sentimental fiction can be seen well into the Victorian period and beyond in the works of popular authors such as Charles Dickens in England and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the United States.

Although rumors of its demise at the end of the eighteenth century may have been exaggerated, certainly by the time Maria Edgeworth began her career as a fiction writer the sentimental novel had acquired a somewhat tawdry reputation. Even while the novel itself was still considered a "low" form of literature (Mullan 243), the sentimental novel was the lowest of the low, residing at the bottom of the novel hierarchy. In the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800), Wordsworth laments that "the invaluable works of our elder writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies" (243); seven years later, Byron writes in the poem "To Romance" (1807) that he has given up the "childish joys" of romance and its attendant "sickly Sensibility" in favor of a more adult realism and "Truth" (104-5). And ten years further on, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge is still railing against those who subscribe to circulating libraries, the notorious havens of sentimental fiction: "I dare not compliment their pass-time, or rather kill-time, with the name of reading. Call it rather a sort of beggarly day-

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<sup>4</sup> Although Austen began the work in 1795 under the title *Elinor and Marianne*, she evidently felt it worth revising and publishing some fifteen years later under the title *Sense and Sensibility*.

dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness, and a little mawkish sensibility.” He groups the reading of “novels and tales of chivalry” with such pernicious activities as gaming, smoking, snuff-taking, and spitting off bridges (34).

Two things become apparent when retrospectively observing this ongoing commentary on sentiment and sensibility: by the end of the eighteenth century, it was fashionable to disdain both concepts; and yet twenty years later, they were still perceived as enough of a cultural force to warrant notice and disdain. In other words, while it was popular to denigrate sensibility, sentimental literature had refused to disappear. Hence Edgeworth coyly dissociates herself from the pejorative connotations of the sentimental novel, and novels in general, by claiming that she was writing “moral tales” rather than novels. A close examination of her fiction writing, however, reveals that not only did she write what look suspiciously like novels, but she used the conventions of sensibility and the sentimental novel frequently and intentionally in her work.

### *Belinda*

Although *Castle Rackrent* (1800) preceded *Belinda* by one year, *Belinda* is Edgeworth’s first full-length novel, and the first of her novels in which she deals with sensibility in any meaningful way. As previously noted, Edgeworth was careful to distinguish her “moral tale” from the less reputable fiction of her day, yet in writing it she still borrowed freely from the conventions of novels of sensibility and sentiment. This is not to say that *Belinda* should be read as a sentimental novel, since Edgeworth uses these conventions in innovative ways to achieve her own ends; nor can *Belinda* be accurately defined as anti-sentimental, given the author’s liberal use of sentimental conventions. Rather, as Jennie Batchelor suggests, it could be described as “counter-sentimental” (17), since Edgeworth’s intention was not to “denigrate sentiment,” but instead “to strip it of the fashionable veneer of affect” (156). Batchelor believes

that Edgeworth's underlying purpose was to restore "instinctive sensibility [...] mediated by reason" as "an essential characteristic of the domestic, maternal woman" (156). In fact, one might argue that the author's project was broader than this. Edgeworth remained deeply invested in the patriarchal ideal of domestic female virtue to the end of her career, but in her novels she often bestowed both sensibility and reason equally on her male and female protagonists. In *Belinda* she attempts to reclaim sensibility from the negative cultural associations it had acquired and promotes it as a quality her audience should aspire to, regardless of gender. Her methodology is to illustrate for the reader what true sensibility entails, by creating both positive and negative examples – characters who possess true sensibility, and others who fail to achieve it.

At the time when she wrote *Belinda*, Edgeworth and her readers had already been inundated with sentimental novels and poetry, as well as newspaper and journal articles and conduct books about sensibility, for decades (Todd 12). Her audience could therefore be expected to recognize the signifiers of sensibility in her characters without a great deal of prompting or overt labeling on her part – even if they couldn't define it, they would know it when they saw it. Generally, the archetypal female and male characters in novels of sensibility are "the chaste suffering woman, happily rewarded in marriage or elevated into redemptive death, and the sensitive, benevolent man whose feelings are too exquisite for the acquisitiveness, vulgarity and selfishness of his world" (Todd 4). Their sensibility may be expressed through involuntary, somatized responses to emotional stimuli, a natural sense of propriety and taste, and a sympathetic perceptiveness of feeling. Each of the main characters in *Belinda*, and even some of the minor ones, possesses enough of these traits to make it clear to the nineteenth-century reader that the characters are to be read as men and women of feeling.



*Belinda* tells the story of Belinda Portman, a young lady who has entered London society under the auspices of her aunt, a notorious matchmaker, who in turn hands her off to the popular and somewhat scandalous Lady Delacour. Through her connection with Lady Delacour, Belinda meets various other characters, including Clarence Hervey, the hero of the novel; and the exemplary Percival family, who are modeled on Edgeworth's educational ideals and who are fostering Lady Delacour's daughter, Helena. Although she falls in love with Clarence Hervey, Belinda is convinced he will never marry her, and she instead becomes engaged to Mr. Vincent, a rich planter from the West Indies. She breaks the engagement, however, when she discovers that he is a gamester. The last third of the novel is almost entirely occupied with a bizarre subplot in which Hervey is discovered to have raised a beautiful orphan girl entirely in seclusion, with the purpose of educating her to be the perfect wife. Although he realizes after meeting and falling in love with Belinda that he does not love the orphaned Rachel, whom he has renamed Virginia, he still feels obligated to her. This obstacle to his marriage with Belinda is resolved when Virginia reveals that she has fallen in love with a man she has never met, but whose miniature portrait she has seen. The original of the portrait is located, and Hervey is then free to propose to Belinda.

Although Edgeworth had professed skepticism about the existence of sensibility a mere three years earlier in *Practical Education*, Clarence Hervey is intended to be read as a man of sensibility. He is somewhat vain and flighty at the beginning of the novel, and keeps company with a rather dissipated set of friends, but he nevertheless has "a strong sense of honour, and quick feelings of humanity" (15). The expression "quick feelings" is used more than once by the narrator to describe Hervey, and is significant mainly for its connotations. Although the phrase "quick feelings of humanity" seems vague and undefined, any form of the word "feeling,"

whether nominal, verbal, or adjectival, would immediately have been connected with sensibility in the minds of Edgeworth's readers. If "hero of sensibility" and "man of feeling" were not strictly synonymous, they were at least interchangeable in many cases. This connection is strengthened by her use of the adjective "quick," which throughout the nineteenth century still retained the meaning "keen" or "strongly felt."

In the one episode where Hervey is given the opportunity to display real, selfless benevolence, Lord Delacour asks him to help cure Mr. Vincent of his gambling problem. Vincent is engaged to Belinda at the time, and Delacour is unaware that Hervey himself is in love with Belinda. Hervey gives no indication to Lord Delacour of this potential conflict of interest; rather, he simply agrees to help Delacour with the project. Edgeworth then uses third-person narration to describe the virtues that make it possible for Hervey to respond in this improbably correct way:

Clarence's love was not of that selfish sort, which, the moment that it is deprived of hope, sinks to indifference, or is converted into hatred. Belinda could not be his; but, in the midst of the bitterest regret, he was supported by the consciousness of his own honour and generosity: he felt a noble species of delight, in the prospect of promoting the happiness of the woman, upon whom his fondest affections had been fixed; and he rejoiced to feel, that he had sufficient magnanimity to save a rival from ruin. He was even determined to make that rival his friend [...]. (324)

In spite of his many flaws, Hervey is portrayed here as a true hero of sensibility. Had he been affecting sensibility, he would not have behaved so benevolently toward Belinda and Vincent, nor received so much emotional gratification from his own sacrifice. But because his sensibility

is real, his feelings are deep and pure, and thus his bitter regret at losing Belinda's love does not prevent him from behaving properly, and in fact can even be assuaged through virtuous behavior. Nor does there appear to be any internal struggle on his part to rise to the occasion, no question in the reader's mind of what Hervey's response will be; he will behave selflessly and virtuously, because it is his nature to do so. Hervey's behavior belies the notion espoused by late eighteenth-century critics that sensibility is too focused on affected demonstrations rather than true affect. He not only behaves benevolently, but does so without displaying his "bitter regrets" through the traditional signifiers of weeping and sighing, or falling into a deep melancholy.

Another way in which Edgeworth connects Hervey's sensibility with virtue and true feeling is through the medium of "taste." For Edgeworth's audience, a middle class with increasing amounts of discretionary income and the leisure time to spend it, the notion of taste in general was an important one: luxury goods could be bought with money made through business and trade, but cultural capital could not be so easily purchased. To have "a good taste" – to instinctively understand what is culturally valuable – was the mark of a truly superior person, especially since taste could not always be taught. Certainly, a good education could instill cultural knowledge and moral values, but good taste sometimes eluded even the well-educated members of the upper classes. Indeed, Marjorie Garson argues that in the nineteenth century, "though aping and attempting to appropriate certain elements of gentry culture, the bourgeoisie redefined taste in terms of their own priorities, forging a fresh connection between good taste and moral sensitivity and distinguishing their true gentility both from the decadence of the aristocracy and from the 'violence' of the working class" (8).

Clarence Hervey demonstrates his good taste by engaging in a wine-tasting contest with Sir Philip Baddely. That Edgeworth is interested in exploring notions of taste in this episode is

obvious from the way she plays with the word itself, calling attention to its various meanings. At times she seems to pun on the literal and metaphorical uses of the word as she describes the contest:

In his way to St James's street, where the wine merchant lived, sir Philip Baddely picked up several young men of his acquaintance, who were all eager to see a trial of *taste*, epicurean taste – between the baronet and Clarence Hervey. Amongst his other accomplishments our hero piqued himself upon the exquisite accuracy of his organs of taste. (70)

The joke, of course, is that Sir Philip, although a baronet and thus a representative of the upper classes, has no taste whatsoever, either literally or metaphorically, while Hervey's "organs of taste" are well-developed. His sensitivity in matters of taste – both "epicurean" and aesthetic – is emblematic of his sensibility, and as such is seen as further evidence of his virtuous nature, especially as compared to the crass and unprincipled Sir Philip. Edgeworth always had a horror of vulgarity (Butler 297), so it seems only natural that for her good taste would be an important component of "true" or "real" sensibility. In contrast to false, affected, or exaggerated sensibility, good taste is refined, genteel, and very difficult to fake. This episode allows her to demonstrate to her readers that good taste is an indispensable component of true sensibility, and one to which they ought to aspire.

Belinda Portman, like Clarence Hervey, follows Todd's prescription for a heroine of sensibility. Her "chaste suffering" is not the traditional sentimental or gothic version which may involve physical threats to the heroine's virtue; rather, as with many domestic and society novels, it is the virtuous character's reputation that is at stake. When Belinda is accused by a spurned lover of having designs on Lady Delacour's husband, she dutifully but naïvely tells Lady

Delacour of the rumor. Lady Delacour believes the rumor, even though Belinda is the one who reported it to her, and Belinda immediately and voluntarily leaves for Oakly-park, the home of the Percivals, essentially turning herself out of the Delacours' house. Although she is completely innocent of the accusation against her, Belinda remains in her self-imposed exile until Lady Delacour repents and asks Belinda to return and forgive her.

Belinda Portman was written as a rational character – indeed, she seems so unemotional at times that Edgeworth herself disliked her<sup>5</sup> – yet she is equally a heroine of sensibility, who acts not on reason but on an instinctive sense of propriety. In spite of the corrupting influence of society, she not only behaves correctly in this instance, but overcorrects for something that is clearly not her fault: rather than try to defend herself against a false accusation, she retreats immediately, because Lady Delacour no longer trusts her. When unjustly accused, the heroine of reason might reasonably be expected to make an effort to clear up the error and exonerate herself. But the heroine of sensibility acts instinctively to remove herself from the situation, rather than cause her friend further distress. This episode also plays into Edgeworth's project of differentiating between true and affected sensibility. A character who affects sensibility will probably know enough of societal expectations of propriety to behave in a way that appears virtuous or at least reasonable, but a character who possesses true sensibility has an instinctive sense of propriety that goes beyond simply behaving rationally or meeting societal expectations.

While Edgeworth intends to redefine sensibility for her readers as a desirable quality, she is equally intent on making them aware of its potential dangers. In addition to the Rachel/Virginia episode, which among other things shows the dangers of believing everything one reads in a sentimental novel, she uses Mr. Vincent to warn against the sensationalism which

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<sup>5</sup> While working on a revision of *Belinda* in 1809, Edgeworth wrote in a letter to her aunt, Mrs. Ruxton, "I really was so provoked with the cold tameness of that stick or stone Belinda, that I could have torn the pages to pieces; and really, I have not the heart or the patience to *correct* her" (Hare 1:178).

was a concern for many of her contemporaries, such as William Wordsworth. His “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” published at nearly the same time as *Belinda*, decries society’s “craving for extraordinary incident” and “degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation,” while Edgeworth personifies – and cautions against – this same craving for sensation in the character of Belinda’s suitor and sometime fiancé:

Mr Vincent thought, acted, and suffered as a man of feeling. Scarcely had Belinda left Oakly-park for one week, when the *ennui* consequent to violent passion became insupportable; and to console himself for her absence, he flew to the billiard-table. Emotion of some kind or other was become necessary to him; he said that not to feel, was not live; and soon the suspense, the anxiety, the hopes, the fears, the perpetual vicissitudes of a gamester’s life, appeared to him almost as delightful as those of a lover’s. (424)

Critics have occasionally taken this as an indication that Edgeworth is opposed in principle to the man of feeling. Harry Blamires, for example, concludes from this episode that “through Vincent, [...] generous and warm-hearted, frank and handsome but perilously devoid of principle, we are taught that the Man of Feeling is unreliable” (255). However, when taken in context with her portrayal of Clarence Hervey, it becomes evident it is not the man of feeling Edgeworth distrusts, but rather the unbridled excess of sensationalism. As previously discussed, Clarence conforms to many of the conventions of the man of feeling, and in fact he has much in common with Vincent besides his admiration of Belinda. Both men feel deeply, but Clarence is better educated, more refined, more in command of himself, less at the mercy of his own sensibility. Vincent, lacking “the power and habit of reasoning” (218) which would serve to moderate his feelings, allows his sensibility to command him and seeks sensation constantly. Both Vincent and Hervey are by

nature instinctively honorable, but Vincent deceives himself as to the nature of his behavior, and what it means to be a gentleman:

to his generous temper it seemed ungentlemanlike to stand by the silent censor of the rest of the company; and when he considered, of how little importance a few hundreds, or even thousands, could be to a man of his large fortune, he *could not help feeling*, that it was sordid, selfish, avaricious, to dread their possible loss; and thus social spirit, courage, generosity, all conspired to carry our man of feeling to the gaming table” (427).

Vincent’s fatal flaw is not that he is a man of feeling, but rather that he has failed to refine and discipline his feelings, to achieve the true sensibility mediated by reason that Edgeworth advocates. Edgeworth had previously noted in *Practical Education* the tendency of “men of superior abilities, and of generous and social tempers,” to become gamblers because “they have exhausted other pleasures, and they have become accustomed to strong excitements” (394), and the narrator in *Belinda* adds that “moral instinct, unenlightened or uncontrolled by reason or religion,” often makes such errors as that made by Vincent (330). In other words, the very virtues Vincent has in common with Clarence lead him to ruin, because he lacks Clarence’s education and ability to reason.

While Edgeworth’s main characters such as Clarence and Belinda are intended to differentiate true sensibility from affectation, some of *Belinda*’s secondary characters are recognizable as the stock characters of romance and melodrama and conform more closely to the excesses of the sentimental genre rather than the genteel and refined sensibility advocated in the protagonists. Edgeworth appears to have no interest in reinventing the innocent, deserted orphan or the loyal slave. Instead, she emphasizes their circumstances in exactly the way a sentimental

novel would, in order to excite and demand the reader's sympathy. While this may seem to conflict with her project of redefining sensibility in contrast to the merely sentimental, the conflict can be at least partially resolved by the fact that these stock characters belong to the lower classes.

At the time that Edgeworth wrote *Belinda*, sensibility had a vexed relationship with socio-economic class. On one hand, there was the primitivist notion, popularized by Rousseau, that the virtuous peasant or noble savage could possess a species of sensibility; while, on the other hand, sensibility was often promoted as a sign of gentility and superiority. These two conflicting ideas meet in the lower-class characters of sentimental fiction such as servants and slaves, who often display sensibility through their feudal-style loyalty to their masters (Todd 13-14). Edgeworth is not interested in deconstructing *all* the conventions of sentimental literature, only the ones that pertain directly to her middle-class audience. And in fact it may be important to her audience, and to her personally, that the lower-class characters remain sentimental, because to allow them true sensibility is to imply a kind of superiority which creates a threat to social order – something that Edgeworth would have abhorred.

As Jennie Batchelor has stated, *Belinda* “is remarkable for its systematic appropriation and dismantling of the conventional tropes of sensibility in a bid to rewrite the sentimental novel from within” (155). Edgeworth went to a great deal of effort to make Clarence and Belinda conform to popular notions of sensibility, and it is apparent she intends them to represent an ideal of virtue to which her audience should aspire. By reframing their virtues as “true” sensibility, however, and conceding the dangers of sensibility in the form of Mr. Vincent, Edgeworth forestalls criticism of sensibility as “mere affectation,” and is able to present it to her audience as a genuinely desirable quality.



*The Absentee*

In *Belinda*, Edgeworth manipulates the conventions of sensibility and sentimental literature to mark her heroic characters as virtuous, to demonstrate the potential dangers of sensibility, and to model correct behavior for her middle-class audience. In her Irish novels, however, she retreats from her project of refiguring sensibility and instead moves toward a more conventional use of sentimental tropes. Sensibility is still used to indicate virtue and superiority in her characters, but rather than interrogating popular constructions of sensibility, as she did with her earlier society novels, Edgeworth adheres to the traditional use of sentimental rhetoric, stock characters, and contrived sentimental situations. *The Absentee* (1812), the second of the four national tales published between 1809 and 1817, is one of Edgeworth's most influential and popular novels (Kelly, par. 26; Butler 302) and was said by Walter Scott to be the novel that prompted him to complete and publish *Waverley* (Butler 394). While contemporary critics hailed it as realistic, and perceived it as an accurate portrait of Irish life (Butler 302), hindsight shows several characters and plot points that would now be considered a step back from realism, rather than a step forward. As Heidi Thompson notes in her introduction to the 1999 reprint of the novel, "it has to be said that Edgeworth's supposedly realist novels are actually closer in terms of plot to the romances she claims to reject" (xxvi).

*The Absentee* is part *bildungsroman*, part travelogue, and tells the story of Lord Colambre, only son of Lord and Lady Clonbrony. The Clonbronies are absentee owners of two Irish estates, one of which will fall to Colambre when he attains majority. Lady Clonbrony is Irish, and her desperation to be accepted into English high society makes her at once a ridiculous and pitiable character. She hypercorrects her Irish accent, making it all the more obvious that she is not English, and spends so much money to appear fashionable that she drives the family into

debt. Lord Colambre has been educated in English schools and has just finished his education at Cambridge as the novel begins. He has no experience of Ireland and appears entirely English both culturally and linguistically. However, he determines to visit Ireland to learn about the country, observe the family's estates, and determine whether he too will be an absentee landlord. Before leaving on his tour, he falls in love with his cousin, Grace Nugent, an orphan whom his family has fostered but with whom he has had little contact because he has been away at school. As Colambre travels through Ireland, he is accompanied by the witty but crass Lady Dashfort and her young, widowed daughter, Lady Isabel, who try to convince him that Ireland is a forsaken wilderness populated with lazy, backward peasants and tasteless *nouveau riche* shopkeepers. Lady Dashfort's object is for him to marry her daughter and remain in England, an absentee landlord like his parents. Eventually Colambre parts company with the Dashforts and tours his family's Irish holdings incognito. One of the estates is managed by a benevolent agent, the other by a greedy and vicious agent; Colambre is struck by the resultant difference in the condition of the two estates, and vows to return to Ireland to oversee the estate that will be his. He then returns to England with the intention of convincing his parents to do the same.

The initial description of Lord Colambre is sentimental to the point of hyperbole. Although the reader is told little or nothing about his appearance, he is nevertheless described as irresistibly attractive: "Lord Colambre had an air of openness and generosity, a frankness, a warmth of manner, which, with good breeding, but with something beyond it and superior to its established forms, irresistibly won the confidence and attracted the affection of those with whom he conversed" (38). Nor is he vain or superficial like Clarence Hervey, even at the beginning of the novel: "young and careless as he seemed, Colambre was capable of serious reflection. Of naturally quick and strong capacity, ardent affections, impetuous temper [...]. He was not spoiled

– not rendered selfish” (8). Nevertheless, his character is not static; although well-educated by English standards, he receives a sort of second moral education as he comes to know the culture of Ireland and becomes aware of and accepts his responsibilities as a landowner. It is essential for Colambre, as the Anglo-Irish landlord, to be a hero of sensibility rather than a mere stock sentimental character; otherwise there is little to distinguish him from his tenants besides his formal education and his dialect. His sensibility and the virtues connected with it mark him as the natural and appropriate ruler of his estate.

Colambre has an opportunity to demonstrate his sensibility early in the novel by showing that, to harken back to Todd’s phrasing, his “feelings are too exquisite for the acquisitiveness, vulgarity and selfishness of his world.” In the early decades of the nineteenth century, and especially during the Regency, when *The Absentee* was published, the *ton* was notorious for its materialism and ostentation and for the debts incurred to sustain such a lifestyle. It was not uncommon for society families to be tens of thousands of pounds or more in debt, nor was this necessarily seen by their peers as particularly offensive or dishonorable. This is the situation in which Colambre finds his family at the beginning of the novel, due to his mother’s social ambitions. When Colambre returns home from school upon completing his education, his mother informs him that she has arranged for him to marry an heiress in order to ensure his “independence.” Colambre is shocked at the suggestion; although he realizes that the real motive for the marriage is to relieve his parents’ financial distress, he positively refuses to consider the heiress. He declares, “I will never marry for money: marrying an heiress is not even a new way of paying old debts – at all events, it is one to which no distress could persuade me to have recourse” (17-18). Colambre’s shock is both instinctive and instantaneous: he needs no time to consider or to debate the relative merits of such a strategy. Although society would have excused

or even condoned his behavior in marrying an heiress to alleviate his family's debt, his sensibility is inextricably connected with a sense of propriety that goes beyond societal expectations and will not allow him to pursue such a course. His response also suggests that he will be a benevolent and responsible landlord – mere monetary considerations would not compel him to sell off parts of the estate, cut down and sell the timber, or rack the tenants for more income.

Like Clarence Hervey, Lord Colambre also has an acute sense of aesthetic taste. This particular signifier of sensibility was one which lingered in cultural consciousness well into the nineteenth century. Garson reports that in 1830, landscape designer J. C. Loudon referred to “the rigid disciplines of good taste, which are always in unison with those of good morality” (6-7). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Edgeworth should choose good taste as one of the markers of superiority and virtue in the exemplary Lord Colambre. In the episode where he and his traveling companions visit Count O'Halloran's castle in Ireland, Colambre is contrasted with the idiotic Colonel Heathcock, who very much admires the fare at dinner, but has no appreciation for anything but what he can, literally, taste. Edgeworth is even more explicit about the pun on the word “taste” this time as she describes Heathcock and his companions: “by the common bond of sympathy between those who have no other tastes but eating and drinking, the colonel, the major, and the captain, were now all the best companions for each other” (95). Colambre is tellingly absent from this part of the scene. Clearly he must be at the table with the other guests, but there is no indication of his reaction to the meal. In fact, the narrator transitions away from the gluttony of Heathcock by stating that “whilst ‘they prolonged the rich repast,’ Lady Dashfort and Lord Colambre went to the window to admire the prospect” – thus drawing a pointed contrast between the physical “tastes” of Heathcock's crew and the more refined aesthetic taste of

Colambre (95). Colambre's aesthetic taste is a part of Edgeworth's litany of the virtues of a gentleman landowner: he is well-educated, but more than that, his good taste marks him as both socially and morally superior, and thus different from – in fact, better than – his tenants.

Grace Nugent, the heroine of *The Absentee*, is much more like a sentimental heroine than the earlier Belinda Portman. Grace's background and description immediately mark her as a stock sentimental character, and she is presented to the reader as a woman without fault or flaw. Early in the novel, the narrator explains that Lady Clonbrony "had received Grace into her family when she was left an orphan, and deserted by some of her other relations" (35). Edgeworth refrains from overplaying the "deserted orphan" angle; no details are given as to whether Grace suffered privation or hardship before being fostered by the Clonbronies. Nevertheless, the mere fact of her having been orphaned and deserted as a child is exactly the type of conventional situation, designed to arouse pathos in the reader, which is described by Todd as a hallmark of the sentimental novel (2).

Grace is first shown to the reader through the eyes of Lord Colambre, and while his observations might be discounted as unreliable simply because he is so obviously attracted to her, they are later confirmed through the presumably unbiased narrator as well as other characters. Physically, Grace is described as handsome, pleasing, graceful – twice in the space of a paragraph – and beautiful, with a soft, soothing voice and eloquent, animated countenance. But more attention is given to the qualities of her personality: propriety, delicacy, superior intelligence, humor, modesty, respect, kindness, sympathy, good sense, good taste, patience, and unconsciousness of her own charms (15). There is little besides her wit and social skills to distinguish her from *Belinda's* orphaned Rachel/Virginia, the ingenuous child of nature, and if anything Grace's description is more elaborate and fulsome than Virginia's when she is first

introduced. Miss Nugent's beauty attracts several wealthy suitors, in spite of her relative poverty and low social standing, but she refuses them all for reasons that amount to good taste and moral high-mindedness.

Based on the vocabulary used to describe her, Edgeworth obviously intended Grace to be read as a heroine of sensibility. Yet in some ways she treats her like the lower-class characters in *Belinda*: there is no attempt to deconstruct the conventions of sentiment or to make her dynamic or complex. Indeed, the most sentimental aspect of Grace's character is her static nature – she shows neither growth nor significant change over the course of the novel, and, in spite of the effusive descriptions of her many virtues, her personality remains something of a cipher. It's possible that Edgeworth simply didn't feel a need to make Grace more complex – after all, this is not really her story, but Colambre's, and Grace's major function in the novel is to provide an ideal wife for the ideal landowner. However, it is also possible that her sentimentality is in part connected with her supposed Irishness.<sup>6</sup> While Grace is not a lower-class character who might represent a threat to established social order if she were too realistically superior, she is presented to the reader as Irish. Ireland was seen by the English as foreign, unknown, to the point of being exotic, and part of Edgeworth's avowed purpose in writing the Irish tales was to present a realistic picture of Ireland to the English. However, while her representations of idiolect and culture may have been realistic overall, her representations of individual Irish people were often less so. This allowed her to make Ireland realistic and yet unreal and to render Irish characters as

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<sup>6</sup> The circumstances of Grace's birth remain in question until the end of the novel. The reader is initially told that she is Irish and later told by an unreliable character that she is illegitimate. In the last few pages of the novel, it is revealed that Grace is neither Irish nor illegitimate. However, since she spent her childhood in Ireland, considers herself to be Irish, and is represented to the reader as Irish through most of the story, it seems reasonable to assume that Edgeworth intends her to be read as culturally Irish, even though she is technically English. Heidi Thompson's introduction to the 1999 reprint of the novel describes Grace's "aura of Irishness," which helps give the Clonbrony family's rulership of their estates "an added dimension of legitimacy" through her eventual marriage to Colambre (xxiv-xxv).

other than English, yet with an underlying structural familiarity her readers could be comfortable with.

The excursion section of *The Absentee*, in which Colambre visits his family's Irish estates, is replete with conventional sentimental characters and situations, including a very typical "rent distress" episode common to depictions of the poor in sentimental novels. Ruth Perry's essay on "Representations of Poverty in Eighteenth-Century Fiction" identifies some of the common elements of these "scenes of deserving need and responsive benevolence" (452): the virtuous poor are evicted from their homes with nowhere else to go; their belongings, especially their beds and clothes, are seized or sold to pay their debts; if they are farmers, they may be forced to sell their crops or cow to the landlord for much less than the goods are worth; and they often receive a reprieve at the last moment, through the kind act of a benevolent stranger (442-9). Edgeworth's peasant O'Neil family adheres to every one of these particulars, and are spared from eviction at the eleventh hour when a disguised Colambre reveals his identity and intervenes with the evil agent.

Perry argues that when such a benevolent act occurs, "both giver and receiver voluntarily re-enroll in a kind of temporary feudalism," which "emphasizes the difference in the haves and have-nots, and reinforces the inequality that privilege requires." Thus, although such episodes may appear superficially to critique the system that causes such painful episodes of injustice, in fact they "prove and perpetuate the very social and economic disparity that they presumably deplore" (450). Edgeworth has no intention of critiquing the larger system in which the O'Neils live. She does not suggest that the Clonbrony family should sell off their land to the peasants who lease it, and she certainly does not question the means by which the family came by the land in the first place. Rather, Colambre's ability to exercise benevolence from a position of privilege

forestalls any criticism of the Irish estate system. If he were not in a position of privilege, he would not be able to rescue the O'Neils from the evil agent in the short term, nor have the power to remove the evil agent in the long term. Everything good that comes to the virtuous tenants in the course of the novel comes as a direct result of Colambre's acting from a position of authority, a position which Edgeworth has already taken great care to justify by giving him the attributes of a hero of sensibility.

Although Edgeworth uses the signs and vocabulary of sensibility to define the virtuous characters in *The Absentee*, she also cautions her readers against those who pretend to sensibility in order to appear virtuous. While Colambre is traveling with Lady Dashfort and her daughter, Lady Isabel attempts to appear as a woman of sensibility as a means of inducing him to fall in love with her. She and her mother carefully orchestrate situations in which she can display her faux sensibility, such as taking Colambre on a tour of a squalid, poverty-ridden Irish village. The reader is always aware of Lady Isabel's duplicity; in contrast to the straightforward declaration of Grace Nugent's many virtues, the narrator frequently comments on Lady Isabel's "airs" and "expressions" of sensibility, or her "appearance" of delicacy. Lady Isabel is beautiful, and well-versed in the signifiers of sensibility. She smiles sweetly, she speaks softly, she languishes and sighs deeply, she shrinks delicately from her mother's coarse behavior, she expresses sympathy for obnoxious peasants, and acts with a "becoming grace" (89).

In spite of a friend's prior warning, Colambre is completely taken in by Lady Isabel's act and is only saved from attaching himself to her by an accident of circumstance. He finds himself in a position to overhear a candid conversation between Lady Isabel and her friend, in which her appearance of virtue is dispelled by the narrator with a magician's flourish:



The face, the whole figure of lady Isabel, at this moment, appeared to lord Colambre suddenly metamorphosed; instead of the soft, gentle, amiable female, all sweet charity and tender sympathy, formed to love and be loved, he beheld one possessed and convulsed by an evil spirit – her beauty, if beauty it could be called, the beauty of a fiend (98).

In Edgeworth's view, sensibility is a quality to be desired, but simply being deficient in that quality is not enough to make a character reprehensible. After all, not everyone can be born with sensibility, just as not everyone can be born beautiful, and characters like Lady Clonbrony are not described as fiends, even when they completely lack sensibility. To feign sensibility, however, makes a character something worse than merely inferior, shallow, or affected; Lady Isabel is in fact a horror, a succubus, a dangerously beautiful fiend. Like the cautionary episode of Mr. Vincent in *Belinda*, Edgeworth here concedes that there are dangers associated with the culture of sensibility. But as in the case of Mr. Vincent, her purpose is not to denigrate sensibility itself; everything that Lady Isabel does for the purpose of deception could just as easily have been done honestly and spontaneously by Grace Nugent. Hence this episode represents a preemptive maneuver against those who would protest that actions alone do not necessarily indicate virtue. Edgeworth is conceding the point, but in the broader context of a novel in which she consistently praises sensibility as a virtue.

### *Helen*

While Edgeworth made use of both sensibility and sentimental conventions in *The Absentee*, it is possible to attribute some of its sentimentality to the mere fact that it is one of her Irish novels. Anna Weirida Rowland suggests that sentimentality was common to the emerging genre of the national tale, which used “the familiar conventions of sentimental fiction to package

its less familiar geographical and cultural settings” (197). This may also explain why the sentimentality is scaled back – although far from absent – in her last novel, *Helen* (1834), which, according to Marilyn Butler, was designed to “amuse fashionable people” (440). Indeed, as Butler points out, the first two-thirds of the novel focus mainly on “the upper class in conversation [...] in the drawing-room, dining-room, and grounds of a large country house” (469). Considering its subject matter and the date of its publication (1834), the extent to which Edgeworth still uses the conventions of sentiment and sensibility in *Helen* makes it worthwhile to examine how and why she does so.

Between 1812, when Edgeworth published *The Absentee*, and 1834, when she published *Helen*, there was no dramatic change in the general attitude toward sensibility and sentiment; rather, the issue simply ceased to be so important. The term “sentimental” was still used pejoratively, but it was used less frequently, and fewer critics seem to have been interested in using the term at all. Sentimental conventions were still used in literature, and would continue to be used in both novels and poetry of the Victorian period, yet the anxiety over sensibility’s subversive aspects appears to have abated. Rather than something idle and useless or even depraved or dangerous, sentimentality was viewed as merely clichéd, while sensibility may have regained some of the cultural cachet that Edgeworth appealed for as early as *Belinda*. The OED traces the usage of the word “sensibility” in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, noting that it was only rarely used after that period. While Byron disparages it in 1807, and Carlyle cautions in 1827 that “unless seasoned and purified by humour, sensibility is apt to run wild,” in 1843 William Prescott associates it with virtue, praising the “traveller of sensibility and taste” who is able to appreciate the magnificence of ancient monuments. Instead of the satire that Jones asserts is the only possible use for sensibility after the eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth

century Prescott explicitly connects it with good taste and apparently feels no need to add caveats such as Carlyle's.

Edgeworth's final novel, published in 1834, tells the story of Helen Stanley, born to aristocratic parents but orphaned at a young age. It begins just after the funeral of the kind but financially incompetent uncle who raised her after her parents' deaths. Helen is soon invited to stay at the home of her recently-married childhood friend, Lady Cecilia Clarendon, née Davenant. While at the Clarendons' home, she is introduced to Granville Beauclerc, hero of the novel and protégé of Cecilia's mother. Throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, Cecilia continuously tells small lies to smooth the progress of relationships among the various members of her family circle, including her authoritarian husband, General Clarendon; her talented but unaffectionate mother, Lady Davenant; Helen; and herself. As the last third of the novel begins, Cecilia persuades Helen to temporarily admit – or rather, not deny – the authorship of some compromising letters, in order to spare the dangerously ill Lady Davenant the distress of seeing Cecilia's marriage fail. Once her mother leaves the country, however, Cecilia reneges on her promise to admit that she is the real author of the letters. During the final third of the novel, Helen suffers public scorn, a broken engagement, and exile from the Clarendon household, because Cecilia will not admit the truth. She herself is unwilling to expose her friend, even to clear her own name, and she instead retires to Wales with General Clarendon's sister, who suspects the truth about the letters. Ultimately Cecilia is compelled by her dying mother to confess, and Helen is allowed to marry Granville.

*Helen* occupies a unique place in Edgeworth's oeuvre and in subsequent criticism of her work. It was the only novel she completed after her father's death, and it was published after a hiatus of 17 years, during which time she completed and published her father's memoirs as well

as some stories for children, but did not publish any novels. And although she lived for 15 years after its publication, it was the last novel she wrote. In some respects *Helen* represents a departure from Edgeworth's previous work. As Butler mentions, it is much more concerned with the lives of upper-class characters, and stylistically it has more in common with the late-Romantic silver-fork novels than with Edgeworth's own earlier society novels. Indeed, Gary Kelly suggests that *Helen* was written as a "critical revision" of society novels by popular figures such as Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton (par. 36). Edgeworth also abandoned the Irish national tale in writing *Helen*, not because she felt there was nothing more to be said on the subject of Ireland, but rather because she felt the political climate had become so tense that it was no longer possible or useful to say anything at all about the situation.<sup>7</sup>

There is some question as to how this departure from Edgeworth's previous style was perceived at the time of *Helen*'s publication. Devoney Looser's thorough study of both contemporary and subsequent reviews describes the conflicting information that makes assessing the novel's impact difficult: Coleridge mentions in a letter that *Helen* was making "noise" and exciting "great interest"; Zimmern (1883) declared that "concerning *Helen* contemporary public opinion was much divided; some regarded it as a falling-off in power, others as an advance, but all agreed there was a change"; Lawless (1905) claimed that "at the time it was written, it was possibly the most successful of all [Edgeworth's] novels"; Slade (1937) described it as "not only well received and widely read, but one of Miss Edgeworth's most popular books"; while Marilyn Butler states that the novel was not a "runaway success," despite its bringing Edgeworth a total

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<sup>7</sup> Maria wrote to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth in 1834 that "There is no humor in [*Helen*], and no Irish character. It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass. The people would only break the glass, and curse the fool who held up the mirror to nature – distorted nature, in a fever. We are in too perilous a case to laugh, humor would be out of season, worse than bad taste. Whenever the danger is past, as the man in the sonnet says, – 'We may look back on the hardest part and laugh'" (Hare 2:550).

income of £1,100 (46-7). According to Butler, the only substantial review of *Helen* to appear in a British journal was written by Edgeworth's agent, John Gibson Lockhart (478).

There is, however, no question that *Helen* has received relatively little attention from modern critics, in spite of the general increase in Edgeworth's popularity among academics. Considering the scholarly debate over Richard Lovell Edgeworth's influence on his daughter's writing, this lack of critical attention is puzzling. Since *Helen* is the only novel Maria could have written without any influence from her father, it would appear to be a likely focus for scholarly interest, but, in fact, few critics have addressed the novel at all. Butler and Kowaleski-Wallace are notable exceptions, while Looser more recently dedicated a chapter of her book on women authors and aging to a comparison of *Helen* and Burney's *The Wanderer*. Butler remarks that aesthetically Edgeworth "belongs to a more primitive stage of the novel's development, so that *Helen* is no more equal than the Irish tales to accommodating all the real-life material put into it" (480). However, she also finds that "as a sustained drama of personal relationships, the last volume of *Helen* is superior to anything else in Maria's tales" (473). Butler also feels that *Helen* represents progress in Edgeworth's development both personally and as a novelist, reflecting a less "self-conscious" author, more willing to engage with descriptive language and the beauties of nature and place (430-1). Mark Hawthorne, however, writing only a few years after Butler, declines to discuss the novel at all in *Doubt and Dogma in Maria Edgeworth*, because "the intellectual and artistic structure of this final novel shows no remarkable advance over *Ormond*," and any discussion would therefore be "anticlimactic" (qtd in Looser 49). Kowaleski-Wallace's analysis of *Helen* is more or less limited to Edgeworth's expression of her own anxiety over the act of authorship in the absence of her father.

Whether or not *Helen* represents a stylistic improvement on or departure from Edgeworth's earlier work, the author is demonstrably still worrying at the same issues that are found in her other tales: questions of morality and appropriate behavior, education and maternal failure, and gender roles in society. And she is still using sensibility as an indicator of virtue. Her tone has changed somewhat; she has forsaken much of the sentimentality of *The Absentee* in favor of more dynamic and complex characters, and even those who are held up as paragons of propriety and wisdom are shown to be imperfect. The biggest difference in Edgeworth's approach to sensibility in *Helen* as compared to her earlier novels, however, is that she is much more interested in exploring the interplay between education and the inherent nature of the individual. Always obsessed with the importance and methodology of education, she felt that her novels were really an extension of her prose writing on the subject, and in *Helen* she still makes obvious statements about the importance of education on more than one occasion. Yet she is also more explicit about the fact that her characters sometimes do certain things or behave in certain ways because it is their nature to do so. This represents a significant departure from her earlier assertion that education is the ultimate source of personal probity and societal virtue.

Helen Stanley has some features in common with Edgeworth's other, more sentimental characters. Like Grace Nugent, she is an orphan dependent on the kindness of others. Her character is also described by the narrator in glowing, hyperbolic terms, some of the specifics of which are very reminiscent of Colambre's description:

Everybody loved her that knew her, rich or poor, for in her young prosperity, from her earliest childhood, she had always been sweet-tempered and kind-hearted; for though she had been bred up in the greatest luxury, educated as an

heiress to a large fortune, taught every accomplishment, used to every fashionable refinement, she was not spoiled – she was not in the least selfish. (7)

Although it is stated in the text on several occasions that Helen's virtues are part of her nature, the narrator is also explicit about the part Helen's education played in forming her character. The word "education" is used in a general, moral sense in addition to the traditional, formal meaning. Helen was given an "excellent education" by her uncle, "excellent not merely in the worldly meaning of the word, as regards accomplishments and elegance of manners, but excellent in having given her a firm sense of duty, as the great principle of action, and as the guide of her naturally warm, generous affections" (7). Here Edgeworth emphasizes Helen's inherent nature more than with previous characters, but there is also thematic continuity in her attitude toward education: in addition to a good nature, refinement is required to make a truly moral person. Helen's refinement or education makes her a superior character, in the same way that Mr. Vincent's lack of principles makes him an inferior character. He fails because his natural goodness – his "moral instinct" – is "unenlightened or uncontrolled by reason or religion." Helen succeeds because her natural goodness is guided by principle, a blending of nature and nurture.

While Helen's circumstances as a beautiful heiress-*cum*-orphan reduced to relative poverty have all the trappings of sentiment, she is more complex and dynamic than a stock character and does experience growth over the course of the novel. At first she is ridiculously naïve, a result of her "natural quickness of sensibility" (11); she always believes the best of everyone, not by choice, but because she is literally unable to believe otherwise. When her uncle's various friends and acquaintances send their condolence letters, none of them invite her to visit, because her uncle's bad financial management has left her with a merely adequate income instead of the large fortune they had always assumed would be hers at his death. Helen,

however, does not notice the omissions or doubt the transparent excuses. “She suspected nothing, saw nothing in each excuse but what was perfectly reasonable and kind” (11). The narrator then foreshadows Helen’s coming disillusionment. Although her nature is subject to mediation through “education” – and, in her case, life experience – it is still Helen’s inborn nature that underlies her virtuous qualities. For Edgeworth, sensibility is still connected with virtue, and both are now explicitly connected with one’s nature.

Another circumstance which aligns Helen Stanley with the conventions of sensibility is the deep melancholy she suffers while exiled in Wales. Her melancholy, like her other somatic responses to distress, demonstrates her superiority as she is contrasted with the character of Miss Clarendon, the general’s sister. Miss Clarendon is a very admirable woman in strictly rational terms. Impeccably honest, she is determined to act benevolently toward Helen, regardless of society’s censure. However, she lacks even a hint of sensibility. She cannot understand or sympathize with Helen’s melancholic behavior, and thus cannot ameliorate her distress. The obvious – although not the only – moral of *Helen* is that honesty is crucial both to one’s character and one’s relationships with others, but the contrast between Miss Clarendon and Helen shows that something more is required of a truly superior character – moral principles such as honesty must be augmented by innate compassion and sympathy for others. Miss Clarendon illustrates that education alone is not enough, since her education cannot provide her with the sensibility she lacks. In this way Edgeworth equates sensibility with virtue, as she has previously, but again emphasizes the fact that it is not available to everyone, because some people are simply born without it. If, as Butler contends, *Helen* is a novel intended to be read by “fashionable people,” it may be Edgeworth’s intention to assure them that their sensibility marks



them as not only virtuous, but truly superior in a way that cannot be imitated or purchased by the aspiring middle class.

As with Edgeworth's other novels, good taste is a reliable indicator of both sensibility and virtue in *Helen*. Granville Beauclerc finds Helen attractive not only because she stands out as different from the "London female world" (106), but also as a direct result of her natural taste (255). Edgeworth is now even more explicit than in previous novels about the fact that the heroine's good taste is natural, rather than learned: "nor would [Beauclerc] have been contented with that show taste for the picturesque, which is, as he knew, merely one of a modern young lady's many accomplishments. Helen's taste was natural, and he was glad to feel it so true" (255). In speaking of a taste for the picturesque as an accomplishment, Edgeworth may be referring to William Gilpin's work on the subject. Published in 1782, his essay attempts to codify the exact nature and specifications of the picturesque. A young lady who had read his work might be expected to know what qualifies as picturesque and what does not, but Edgeworth makes it clear that such accomplishments are to be disdained as nothing more than rote learning. In this case, it seems, education leads only to affectation, while an inborn sense of taste is the mark of true gentility. Again the message to the reader is that no amount of formal education can bestow real taste on anyone – *real* taste is a function of one's personality, not a measure of one's accomplishments.

When Helen first meets Granville, she knows through "a sort of intuitive perception" that he is a gentleman. Edgeworth uses this moment to illustrate the superiority of both Helen and Granville, and to demonstrate the ways in which nature and education combine in their characters to make them superior. Not only is he a gentleman by nature, but she is a lady whose abilities allow her to recognize a gentleman when she sees one: "as Cuvier could tell from the

first sight of a bone what the animal was, what were its habits, and to what class it belonged, so any person early used to good company can, by the first gesture, the first general manner of being, passive or active, tell whether a stranger, even scarcely seen, is or is not a gentleman” (73). Edgeworth is thus able to equate sensibility with virtue by making the virtuous Helen so perceptive, and by making Granville’s behavior both exemplary and part of his nature. Her mention of Cuvier also brings science and education into play with nature. Animals are classified by their natural attributes, and the educated observer can gain substantial information about those attributes due to his education. The analogical implication is that a gentleman is a gentleman by nature, not by education, and that his nature is obvious to the educated observer.

Like Clarence Hervey, Beauclerc initially has some unorthodox liberal philosophies, but unlike Hervey, his idealism does not lead him into bizarre actions or situations like the Rachel/Virginia episode. Rather, he seems to work out intellectual or philosophical questions with the guidance of his guardian, General Clarendon, his mentor, Lady Davenant, and, significantly, his own “good habits and good natural disposition” (93). Yet again, Edgeworth emphasizes the role of the character’s natural abilities, even more than his education or training, in making him a virtuous character. Indeed, his education even appears dangerous at times, as it has taught him some of the liberal notions that alarm his guardian. However, the perceptive Lady Davenant realizes that there is

no underhand motive, no bad passion, no concealed vice, or disposition to vice, beneath his boasted freedom from prejudice, to be justified or to be indulged by getting rid of the restraints of principle. Had there been any danger of this sort, which with young men who profess themselves ultra-liberal is usually the case,

she would have joined in his guardian's apprehensions, but in fact [...] his good habits and good natural disposition held fast. (93)

In Beauclerc's case, it is his nature that rescues him from the dangers of his education, dangers which have already proved harmful to many other young men in his position.

As in her other novels, Edgeworth extols sensibility as a desirable virtue, but still feels the necessity to caution her readers against those who would use the signifiers of sensibility to their own ends. In *Helen* she creates a false man of feeling to provide this warning, in the person of Lord Beltravers. Like *The Absentee's* Lady Isabel, Beltravers has entirely mercenary reasons for his deception: he wants Granville Beauclerc to give him money and/or marry Beltravers' sister, which would have the same net effect. And like Lord Colambre, Beauclerc is initially taken in by Beltravers' deceit. When Beauclerc's newly-minted friendship with Beltravers comes up in conversation, Edgeworth crafts a clever bit of dialogue to demonstrate both the general attitude toward Beltravers, and Beauclerc's naïve attitude toward him:

"I thought he had been a very distressed young man, that young Beltravers," said the aide-de-camp.

"And if he were, that would not prevent my being his friend, sir," said Beauclerc.

"Of course," said the aide-de-camp, "I only asked."

"He is a man of genius and feeling," said Beauclerc, turning to Lady Davenant.

(75)

Edgeworth employs no adjectives to describe Beauclerc's responses, but the reader feels his defensiveness on the subject. And the traits he chooses as a defense against the aide-de-camp's implications of Beltravers' insolvency and profligacy are "genius" and "feeling" – because, in his mind, those qualities are an assurance of moral rectitude. If Beltravers is distressed for

money, Beauclerc suggests, it must not be his fault, because a man of true feeling cannot but behave appropriately.

In fact, in spite of his apparent sensibility, Beltravers turns out to be a consummate villain. He pretends to befriend Beauclerc, and then swindles him out of tens of thousands of pounds; he publishes rumors about Helen in the tabloids in hopes of breaking up her engagement with Beauclerc, which would in turn leave Beauclerc free to marry Beltravers' sister; and, when confronted, he lies about his authorship of the tabloid articles and blames Helen's former suitor, Mr. Churchill, for their publication. This last falsehood nearly leads to murder, as Beauclerc fights a duel with Churchill in defense of Helen's honor, and severely wounds him. Beauclerc is then forced to flee the country for several months, while Churchill hovers at the brink of death. Although the reader is privy to Beltravers' perfidy from the beginning, Edgeworth, as usual, finds it necessary to spell out the fact that his character should not be read as a true man of feeling. When Beltravers has committed the final dishonorable act of blaming the tabloid articles on Churchill, the narrator sarcastically remarks, "Yes, this man of romantic friendship, this *blasé*, this hero oppressed with his own sensibility, could condescend to write anonymous scandal, to league with newsmongers, and to bribe waiting women to supply him with information" (332). In this case her obligatory warning overlaps conveniently with her project of demonstrating that sensibility is a natural or inborn characteristic, since Beltravers clearly has enough familiarity with the concept to simulate it, yet is so lacking in virtue that he is willing to commit these malicious and even criminal acts.

Edgeworth's approach to sensibility in *Helen* can be seen as a continuation of her earlier ideas on the subject, in that she still uses it to indicate virtue in her characters. Over the course of her career, however, her attitude had become more flexible with regards to the role of education

in forming the individual and, by extension, society. Rather than insisting that education is the sovereign remedy for all personal and societal ills, as she did in *Practical Education*, she intentionally shows the limits of education in Miss Clarendon's character and even hints at the potential dangers of education in characters like Beauclerc and Beltravers. This is an incremental shift in attitude and not a complete reversal of earlier beliefs, but for a lifelong educator like Edgeworth it represents a significant rethinking of the paradigms that had informed her earlier work.

### Conclusion

Edgeworth's goal of reclaiming sensibility from the excesses of affectation and sentiment was at least partially realized by the 1830s and 40s. Loudon's connection of taste with morality and Prescott's coupling of sensibility and good taste are among many instances of positive mentions of sensibility in public discourse. This change could have been influenced by any number of historical factors. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century, sensibility was connected with other ideas and movements which were considered subversive, but by 1840 the threat of the radical politics of the 1790s had been replaced by other sources of anxiety. Perhaps this allowed sensibility to enjoy a second life in the public consciousness without the attendant political baggage it had previously carried. It is tempting to speculate as to whether Edgeworth's fiction could have influenced this shift as well. She was, after all, an immensely popular author both critically and commercially; her novels were widely read, and often considered to be more substantive and principled than many other novels of the time. On the other hand, it seems equally possible, and perhaps more likely, that her insistence on the moral value of sensibility simply anticipated cultural trends rather than creating them.

The larger significance of Edgeworth's use of sensibility, however, lies in the effect her work had on the development of the English novel. Edgeworth herself never professed any interest in developing the novel as a form of serious literature, and indeed showed a strong desire to dissociate her own work from the genre. But by avoiding most of the excesses and superlatives of the sentimental tradition, she made her characters more dynamic, more nuanced, and more realistic than was common in the fiction of her day. Perhaps because of her didacticism, her works are now seen as somewhat unrealistic, and her characters do seem improbably virtuous on occasion. Nevertheless, even the more conventionally sentimental heroes and heroines of her Irish novels are paragons of realism in comparison to the sentimental characters on which they were modeled. And Edgeworth's work in turn influenced such writers as Jane Austen, whose novels are considered among the great achievements of the genre in English, and Walter Scott, who became the great emblem of "ethnographic realism" in the national tale.

The sentimental novel was alive and well throughout the nineteenth century, and the Victorians would have their own political and cultural uses for the conventions of sensibility. Yet this is not the sum of nineteenth-century fiction. Even as authors like Dickens played on the same facile sentimental stereotypes that had flourished in the eighteenth century, others like the Brontës were able to incorporate the conventions of sentiment and sensibility into their work in ways that still allowed their characters to be compellingly realistic. And in the nineteenth century, for the first time, it became possible in English culture for a novel to be considered an artistic achievement rather than just cheap entertainment.

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