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Special Issue:
Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by Alice Crossley

**“A Strange and Ghastly Spectacle”:
Aging, Illness, and Intimacy in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda***

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“I thank God not only for my recovery but for my illness. In very truth...[M]y illness was a source of more pleasure than pain to me” – Maria Edgeworth([1](#))

<1>To grow old in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (not unlike today) was to engage in a relational process, one shaped not only by reaching a certain number of years, but also a variety of functional, social, and biological factors (Ottaway 17). While throughout the century, chronological years became gradually more important as a marker of place within the life cycle, the category of “old age” was still very much in flux and dependent on number of contributing factors: one’s numerical age; a disability or deformity; social and economic status, the way one looked, dressed, or acted; or one’s role within the family and society at large (Ottaway 17). We are familiar with the image of the spinster, a familiar stereotype and harsh economic reality of the period, deemed old by the time she is thirty because of her failure to marry and the potential burden she brings to her family. In Maria Edgeworth’s 1801 *Belinda*, the title character’s matchmaking, social-climbing aunt, Mrs. Stanhope, warns Belinda of the briefness of her current position as a young desirable woman and the wretchedness of being a single woman past a certain age, writing:

nothing to my mind can be more miserable than the situation of a poor girl, who, after spending not only the interest, but the solid capital of her small fortune in dress, and frivolous extravagance, fails in her matrimonial expectations...She finds herself at five or six-and-thirty a burden to her friends, destitute of the means of rendering herself independent..., de trop in society, yet obliged to hang upon all her acquaintance, who wish her in heaven, because she is unqualified to make the expected return for civilities... (Edgeworth 8)

Here Mrs. Stanhope links a woman’s miserableness to her inability to perform social expectations. Though Mrs. Stanhope herself is not the moral center of the novel, she echoes many other courtship novels in the period in warning against the wasting of youth and beauty,

limited resources that they are, on anything other than quickly finding a suitable match. The woman who fails in this becomes a social and economic burden, and correspondingly is positioned so much closer to old age and death than her married, socially (and financially) able peers. Her lack of capital value is such that her friends might wish her dead to be rid of her social handicap. This familiar story of the spinster narrativizes the system of use value that circulated women's bodies through the marriage market. However, it also underlines that the failure to follow normative life paths can render one prematurely old. Her "oldness" at such a time of life when others would still be considered in their prime, correlates directly to her fulfillment of normative life stages and economic and cultural significance. This problem of aging is not erased through marriage, but must be carefully prepared for and acted out accordingly. After marriage, conduct manuals of the period dictate that women begin a shift in behavior toward quietness and domestic moderation. In the nineteenth century, women were expected to take on a role of "sexless service" once they reached midlife, serving their families and the next generation by facilitating and supporting good matches for the young women around them (Heath 81).

<2>The difficulty of growing up is of course central to the courtship narrative: the young heroine must find her match before it is too late and she becomes too old. Similarly, as Marilyn Francus has argued, mothers in domestic novels, which I aim to expand to encompass older women more broadly within the domestic space, were rarely given their own meaningful narratives, and instead often act as missing, spectral figures, flat paragons of femininity, or warnings against deviance. Representations of aging women who did not accept this role and insisted on their own public or sexual lives were laced with ridicule and "even feared for daring to defy the precepts of sexless service" (Heath 81). This "problem" of aging women appears throughout Edgeworth's novel, circulating particularly around Lady Delacour, Belinda's would-be caretaker and guide. While Edgeworth's "moral tale" (as it is called in the Advertisement to the text) purports to tell the story of the young Belinda Portman as she navigates public life and learns to use her reason to negotiate dangerous influences and marriage prospects, readers both recent and contemporaneous have noted that Belinda's story, and the novel itself, is consumed by that of "the fashionable wit" Lady Delacour,⁽²⁾ who's insistence on publically pursuing her own desire has all but destroyed her domestic happiness.

<3>In one reading of the novel, Lady Delacour's tale serves as a warning to young women, promoting individualized domestic rationality in the face of aristocratic excess as the key to happiness. Lady Delacour is dangerous to herself, her family, and the novel's heroine, because of her refusal to take on the role of "sexless service" as wife and mother. She torments her husband with her wit; maintains an active public social life, sends her daughter away and rarely sees or speaks of her; and engages in "inappropriate" activities such as unscrupulous spending, incessant and line-blurring flirting, participating in politics, and, of course, dressing as a man to participate in a duel. As she grows older, gets married, and has a child, her youthful indiscretions become threateningly indecorous, an embarrassing example of a woman who has not learned to act her age and adequately foster and maintain domestic tranquility. She is "punished" for her actions through an injury to her breast, for which she refuses to seek medical attention, and believes herself to be dying of breast cancer. However, by the novel's end she is reformed and reconciled, restoring her marriage, her health, her relationship with her daughter, and the peace of her home.

<4>While some scholarly work on *Belinda* has read the injured/diseased breast as a manifestation of Lady Delacour's "maternal failure," a punishment for her transgressive behavior, specifically the ways that she violates a domestic, maternal, heteronormative femininity or an expression of the loss of her children and "failure" as a mother,(3) recent scholars have challenged this notion of punishment in *Belinda*. Building on work by Ruth Perry, Kathryn Montweiler, Patricia Matthew, and Ula Klein, I maintain that the injury works to undermine the seeming preeminence of heteronormative domestic happiness in the novel. While Lisa Moore and Ula Klein have written about the erotic nature of the relationship between Belinda and Lady Delacour, what has gone under-considered is the way the pressures of aging/disability open the possibility for this queer friendship. Specifically, I argue that aging, illness, and defect, linked as they were during the period, might be desirable spaces for Lady Delacour to inhabit, in that the wound and subsequent illness become a means of evading the duties of domesticity and, more importantly, actively creating space for the expression of her own, potentially queer, desire. These acts of narrative deferral that stall the courtship narrative's imperative toward domestic felicity, might instead be read as moments that disrupt the chrononormative construction of the courtship novel and shift emphasis away from the promise of the future.(4)

<5>As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, "for a life to count as a good life, it must take on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course" (71). The notion of happiness serves a regulatory power aimed at orienting subjects toward normative positions and goals, and for women in particular is often linked with milestones such as marriage and childbirth. In the eighteenth century, conduct manuals served this sort of regulatory function, delineating appropriate behaviors for women from youth to death to ensure domestic order. These manuals often position the years after marriage but before old age as a time in which women must move gradually away from public life and the pursuit of pleasure and toward a life of quiet domesticity and service to family. As Thane and Bothelo note, the growing emphasis on chronological age in the period emphasized 50-60 as the transition into "old age," leaving this middle period to stretch from as early as late twenties until this time. Kay Heath contends that this poorly defined period, which begins sometime after marriage and lasts until "old age," becomes seen as a time of decline for both men and women during the Victorian period.(5) However, the roots of this concern can be found earlier, especially for women, who were often deemed old much earlier than men for a number of medical and social reasons throughout the early modern period (Ottaway 35). While for men, midlife or the middle period of life could be a time of peak success, stability, and respect,(6) for women, entry into the middle period of life was associated with the loss of youth and beauty, and the recognition of impending old age. Defining the middle period of life is difficult, as it "lacks clear cultural or biological markers of onset and cessation" (Heath 5), however this transition was linked with the end of courtship, an activity reserved for the young, and the shift into a role of service for middle-class women.

<6>As Ottaway notes, in the eighteenth century the most "significant transition for women is the shift past youth to middle age, from their potential to marry" to married life, not the onset of menopause and the end of "reproductive capacity" (41). The refusal to do so is then represented as unnatural, deformed, or grotesque, an all too common trope of eighteenth-century literary and visual culture. George Saville, Earl of Halifax's 1724 *The Lady's New-year's Gift: Or, Advice to*

a Daughter cautions against becoming like those “*Girls of Fifty*” who attempt to maintain youthfulness, “what ever Time with his Iron Teeth hath determined,” warning that “unnatural things carry a Deformity in them never to the Disguised; the Liveliness of Youth in a riper Age, looketh like an old patch upon a new Gown” (115). If the female ideal is the young, reproductive woman, the aging or ill woman presents a problematic undermining of the definition of the “natural” female body and the visibly desiring older woman an inconceivable aberration.

<7>Thomas Rowlandson’s 1792 etching, “Six Stages of Mending a Face, Dedicated with respect to the Right Hon-ble. Lady Archer” emblemizes the way that old age and deformity were used as a symbol of inappropriate female behavior. In the image, we see the head and shoulders of Lady Archer, one of the “Faro Ladies” known for her excessive gambling, as she transforms herself from a decrepit old woman into a pretty young girl. Lady Archer, born 1741, is only 51 at the time of this print’s publication, yet appears here as wrinkled, bald, and toothless—descriptors that here take on negative implications and are meant to highlight her inner deviance.



Figure 1: Thomas Rowlandson’s 1792 etching, “Six Stages of Mending a Face, Dedicated with respect to the Right Hon-ble. Lady Archer. Image courtesy of the British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

<8>Read from right to left, we see her as an old, somewhat grotesque, howling figure inserting a glass eye, putting on her wig, and covering and shaping her exposed sagging breasts; then, on the bottom row, inserting a set of false teeth into her toothless mouth, applying her rouge, and smoothing her skin, finally appearing as an attractive young woman. This image, though a specific attack on a woman associated with habits deemed unacceptable (gambling and Whig politics in this case), represents a caricature of older aristocratic women common in the print culture of the period.⁽⁷⁾ Older women who attempt to inhabit public spaces in a way deemed inappropriate are rendered as physically grotesque, and that grotesqueness is portrayed in print through aging and deformity.

<8>The aging woman in the eighteenth-century novel as well becomes both a reminder of an unavoidable future and a roadblock to the promise of happiness for other characters in the text. Either she must fade into the background, becoming a flat example of ideal, quiet, femininity or she is marked as vulgar or deviant, and often physically deformed, unsightly, or unnatural. As Francus has argued about mothers, and which I would extend to include women in general, they often function as plot devices within the courtship novel, rarely receiving their own story lines, acting as the “good” or “bad” examples. Similarly, the aging woman more generally takes on this role as well, often functioning as a road block to the future happiness and security of the heroine. Novel’s such as France Burney’s *Evelina* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, for example, present older women as dangerously destructive to the future of the heroine. While moments of deferral are central devices of the courtship novel, I’d like to look beyond blocking as plot device in courtship narrative and instead discuss the ways that moments of interruption, centering on older female characters, can queer the novel’s sense of time and futurity. There is an important link between queer theory and age studies that has not yet been significantly explored, as Cynthia Port has argued in one of the few articles exploring these connections, “the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future” as older individuals confront “a shrinking horizon of future potentiality” (Port 3). While Lady Delacour’s depressed view of her prospects does not necessarily combat this narrative of decline, she continually pushes against it by both stalling and collapsing her own narrative future. As Jack Halberstam argues, of the contemporary AIDS crisis, “The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and...squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (Halberstam 2). In a similar way, Lady Delacour’s own lack of futurity becomes a means of more fully existing in the present, engaging in acts that feed her desire instead of working toward domestic tranquility.

<9>At 38 and married with a child, Lady Delacour is both past this monumental shift from courtship to marriage, and yet, because the physical effects of her aging are not readily visible, coupled with her spirit and social standing, she has not yet been disregarded by the public, the fortunate exception to the norm. As the opening narrator states:

Female wit sometimes depends on the beauty of its possessor for its reputation; and the reign of beauty is proverbially short, and fashion often capriciously deserts her favourites, even before nature withers their charms. Lady Delacour seemed to be a fortunate exception to these general rules: long after she had lost the bloom of youth, she continued to be admired as a fashionable *bel esprit*; and long after she had ceased to be a novelty in society, her company was courted by all the gay, the witty, and the gallant. (10)

We quickly learn, however, that Lady Delacour’s public popularity comes at the expense of her stability at home, and as the guide who will escort Belinda into public life and potentially shape her understanding of courtship, and presumably of domesticity/married life, she becomes a dangerous model. She discloses to Belinda that she married her husband, Lord Delacour, not for love or security, but in an attempt to get back at the man she truly loved, and that the two husband have been locked in a power struggle since very early in their marriage. Not only does she violate her duties as wife and mother in her constant party-going, she threatens the future

matches of the novel with her continued persistence as an object of desire. It is not just as a chaperone that Lady Delacour immerses herself in Belinda's own courtship, but as an active participant, oscillating between mediator and rival with Belinda for Clarence Hervey's attention. Lady Delacour openly admits that she enjoys his attentions; however, while she does seem to use Hervey's attentions as a means of validating her desirability and social worth, the way that she draws Belinda into their relationship without stepping back, complicates this reading. Her presence simultaneously derails and pushes the heteronormative courtship narrative. She refers to Hervey as "our Hervey," (157), triangulating the space of desire, drawing both Hervey and Belinda in to her flirtatious plot and muddying the role of guide to the younger woman's courtship with her own flirtations. That her age is equally as important as the fact that she is a married woman and a mother is evident in Edgeworth's changing of both Hervey and Lady Delacour's ages in later editions of the novel. As Kathryn Kirkpatrick notes in her introduction to *Belinda*, in the 1801 and 1802 editions of the novel, Lady Delacour is 38 years old and Clarence Hervey 28. However, in subsequent revisions for the 1810 edition, Edgeworth changes Lady Delacour's age to 30 and Hervey's to 25 to lessen the scandal of their flirtation (Kirkpatrick xxviii).

<10>Lady Delacour is haunted by the threat of old age and the loss of her status as beautiful wit, and even more so by the perception that she has been defeated by her age. It is essential to her that it does not appear as though her husband has forced her reform, that she has suffered punishment for her actions, or more importantly that she can no longer pull off being the coquette, as she tells Belinda:

But it would be unexpressible, intolerable mortification to me, to have it said or suspected in the world of fashion, that I retreated from the ranks disabled instead of disgusted. A voluntary retirement is graceful and dignified; a forced retreat is awkward and humiliating...I could not endure to have it whispered – "Lady Delacour now sets up for being a prude, because she can no longer be a coquette." Lady Delacour would become the subject of witticisms, epigrams, caricatures without end... We should have "Lord and Lady D–, or the Domestic Tête-à-Tête," or "The Reformed Amazon," stuck up in a print-shop window! Oh, my dear, think of seeing such a thing! (293)

Lady Delacour expresses fear over appearing in a print like Rowland's *Six Stages*, a caricature of her former self as a tamed animal, punished and chastised for her behaviors. More than that though, she fears that her leaving public life would be the end of her interest, that she must "become a prude." She uses the language of soldiers and war to talk about the placement of her body in social spaces, positioning female life as a constant battle against time and disability, one in which she must continually fight for her own relevance and visibility. Failure to play the coquette then is rendered as a disability, a failure of the body in its war against time and social isolation.

<11>As numerous works of satire the period warn will happen, Lady Delacour turns to her dressing table to protect herself from this reading. Even Belinda, who is a sympathetic friend to Lady Delacour throughout the novel, pities her when she is freshly made up and shocked when seeing her without her makeup, uncomfortable with the sight of her uncovered age and illness. In a scene late in the novel, Lady Delacour accuses Belinda of hoping to marry her husband once

she is dead (a rumor started by a rejected suitor of Belinda's) and in a moment of anguish, harshly wipes away her makeup:

The tears rolled fast down her painted cheeks; she wiped them hastily away, and so roughly, that her face became a strange and ghastly spectacle. Unconscious of her disordered appearance, she...threw up the sash, and stretching herself far out of the window, gasped for breath. Miss Portman drew her back, and closed the window, saying, 'The rouge is all off your face, my dear Lady Delacour; you are not fit to be seen. Sit down upon this sofa, and I will ring for Marriott, and get some fresh rouge. Look at your face in this glass –you see–'" (205)

The revelation of Lady Delacour's unpainted face evokes a horror in Belinda of another "ghastly spectacle"—that of the aging woman who has concealed the "truth" of her body from those around her. While the reader can imagine the disorder of a face with makeup smeared by tears and the ways that might make one's features unbecoming or even frightening, it is also clear that Lady Delacour is unbearable for Belinda to look at when "the rouge is all off [her] face," because of the reality that she represents: her own future as a middle-class woman, grown old and paranoid of her own diminishing status. As Port contends, "the old have projected onto their bodies that which normative culture fears and represses within itself: the knowledge of eventual bodily failure and mortality" (3). Lady Delacour herself reminds Belinda of this fact, writing to her to come to her room after she's readied her face, and then catching herself writing, "But you don't paint – no matter – you will – you must – every body must, sooner or later" (Edgeworth 34), forcing Belinda to face the possibility of her future and the waning of her beauty. While a problematic rendering of what a life can be after childbirth, this confrontation challenges the goals of the courtship novel.

<12>Lady Delacour is not represented as a comic figure to readers in the way that her counterpart Harriet Freke is. Where Harriet is made ridiculous—for example, her mannerisms and speech pattern all seek to evoke a sort of comic over-the-topness that makes a joke of her performance of masculinity—Lady Delacour becomes a source of sympathy to both Belinda and the reader. Indeed, Lady Delacour's expressions of emotion become some of the most powerful scenes in the text, so much so that, as stated earlier, she overrides Belinda's place as the central heroine of the novel. The pain of her body, the illness of her breast, and her fading health all work to push against the reading of her body as punished and reformed. The removal of her makeup marks a moment of intimate revelation and passionate refusal of the narrative of the passive domestic mother. Her body becomes a site of productive deferral, one that works to delay and disrupt the progression of the domestic middle class life narrative's imperative toward the future as centered in the domestic heteronormative family, revolving around the nurturing, domestic mother, and challenge the narrative progress and resolution as the desired end of her story.

<13>Lady Delacour's unwillingness to follow the prescribed points of domestic happiness coincide with her refusal to heal her body after she is injured. While Ahmed argues for unhappiness as a way of undermining this imperative toward the good life, in *Belinda*, we might think about illness or pain, alongside the seemingly radical act of growing older in public, as a means making space within the domestic home. Lady Delacour's illness, and her refusal to even

attempt to heal her illness, become a means of delaying the future or “good life” as it is imagined in the domestic novel, the obligation to adopt the role of “sexless service.” This deferral is productive in that by resisting the resolution of her bodily injury, Lady Delacour also facilitates the creation of an alternative set of relationships within the home, ones that do not circulate around her role as wife and caretaker (though they are entirely dependent on her position as an upper-class, married woman). In refusing to be healed or to become “fit to be seen” Lady Delacour wrests control of access to her body from her husband and instead imparts that access to Belinda and her maid Marriott. Lady Delacour relates the story of her injury to Belinda, explaining that about two years prior to Belinda’s coming to stay with her, Lady Delacour is enticed by her then intimate friend, the gender nonconforming Harriet Freke, to participate in a duel with Mrs. Luttridge after an escalation of the two women’s personal and political disagreements. Dressed as men, the women (and their seconds) prepare to duel, but instead decide to fire into the air. Lady Delacour’s pistol backfires and she receives an injury to her breast. Because of the impropriety of the situation and her refusal to appear tamed or chastised for her actions, Lady Delacour refuses to subject herself to treatment by a trained physician and instead relies on a “quack” doctor who leads her to a laudanum addiction. As the injury continues to grow worse, Lady Delacour comes to believe that she is dying of breast cancer.

<14>Recent work in disability studies by scholars such as Felicity Nussbaum has looked at the ways that defect might be a productive space for articulating alternative modes of living, in that while destroying a woman’s position in the marriage market, and thus their chance at an “appropriate” future, it also creates a way around normative expectations. Though she is already married and has children, Lady Delacour’s illness works in a similar way as it forces/allows her to shut her husband out of her private spaces, foreclosing the physical and emotional intimacy she shares with Harriet and Belinda. Lady Delacour’s history, which she related to Belinda early in the novel, marks her life as a series of power struggles for control over her actions and her actual physical body from her husband and his family who attempt to regulate and restrict her body throughout pregnancy and in the raising of her children. For example, after Lady Delacour becomes pregnant, she continues her active lifestyle against the wishes of her husband and his family. When the child is still-born, Lord Delacour they blame her refusal to lie-in for the customary period. With the birth of their second child, Lady Delacour is pressured into following national trends toward breastfeeding, keeping the child home with her and nursing it, rather than hiring a wet nurse as she would have preferred. Despite this more traditional form of maternity, ultimately this child dies as well after few months. Lady Delacour reflects that not to breastfeed in the face of social pressures would’ve marked her as an “unnatural mother” in the eyes of her friends, and yet believes strongly that abstaining would’ve saved her child’s life. Because of this ostensible “failure,” her third and only living child, Helena, is sent to a wet nurse when she is born and then away to school, spending all her time away from her family. Lady Delacour’s seeming rejection of motherhood thus might be read as a rejection of a future in which she plays an increasingly unimportant or restricted part, and the loss of her children, instead of signaling her maternal failure, emphasizes the complex relationship that Lady Delacour has with her own body and her future in the domestic model of home and family. When Lady Delacour relates the loss of her children to Belinda, she highlights the strict control over her movements from her husband and his family and the intense blame that was placed on her when her first two children died. It is not motherhood itself that Lady Delacour rejects, but the lack of control over her own

body and a maternal relationship that replicates the patriarchal one that dictates access to and movement of the female body.

<15>As Ruth Perry has argued, the wounded breast makes visible the “festering resentment of the colonization of her body” and the loss of her independence, which she seeks to regain in her relationship with Harriet. Perry argues that “her body is never her own, as its traumas register vividly; her desires pervert its natural functions, and its health is beyond her capacity to understand or maintain” (232). However, I would add that this perversion of the function of her body moves her closer to a life where she can express her desire by allowing her some control over access and movement. So, when Lord Delacour drunkenly rushes up to Lady Delacour’s dressing room (which was “very unusual” of him to do) and forces his way in, we might read this as another attempt to regulate control over her body. In the scene, in which Lady Delacour has just been injured in a carriage accident, Lord Delacour bursts in to her dressing room and then demands entrance into the small closet where Lady Delacour’s medical supplies are kept. While this violence is directed toward an imagined male rival, his attempts to force his way in works with a reading of the text that understands Lady Delacour as using illness and injury to resist a patriarchal power that seeks to control access to her body and to carve out a space for herself and her desire. Belinda leads Lord Delacour to the sofa where his wife lays and reveals her swollen ankle as a means of calming his temper: “his lordship, who was a humane man, was somewhat moved by this appeal to his remaining senses, and he began roaring as loud as he possible could for arquebusade” (128). The sight of her injured body, even this slight revelation, is used to evoke sympathy in the drunk and enraged Lord Delacour and to dissuade him from violence.

<16>Injury and illness then help Lady Delacour assert some control, albeit in an incomplete and painful way over access to her body. Her injured ankle and her injured breast used both to evoke sympathy in the viewer and the secret becomes the excuse through which Lady Delacour justifies her actions and desires. In this way, she fights against the resolution of the narrative, both delaying her reunion with her husband and speeding up the time of her death—two things that are seemingly counter to what she should “want.” The injuries do more than just stall or disrupt the resolution of the courtship and reformation narratives: it actively courts and creates an alternative by using her illness as a means of fostering relationships between women. Lady Delacour works to actively control the reading of her body in both health and illness, and uses it to break through convention and overcome the limitations of polite friendship. As Marriott goes to the boudoir to get the arquebusade, Lord Delacour demands entrance, and when refused, he becomes infuriated and jealous.

““Oh, my lord, you can’t come in, I assure you, my lord, there’s nothing here, my lord, nothing of the sort,” said Marriott, setting her back against the door. Her terror and embarrassment instantly recalled all the jealous suspicions of Lord Delacour. ‘Woman!’ cried he, ‘I will see whom you have in this room! – You have some one concealed there, and I will go in.’ Then with brutal oaths he dragged Marriott from the door, and snatched the key from her struggling hand.” (128)

While this violence is directed toward a male rival and is rooted in jealousy, Lord Delacour notices the intimate suggestion of the locked doors refused entry and suggests that perhaps “a lover of lady Delacour’s” is concealed in the room, or perhaps “a lover of miss Portman’s” (128),

when of course no one is in closet. When he suggests that a lover of Lady Delacour's or Miss Portman's is hidden in the "mysterious boudoir," he touches on something intimate and erotic about the moments that these women share while occupying this space. Importantly though, these are not moments of chaste friendship, but charged expressions of emotion and desire, and the queer potential between Lady Delacour and Belinda deserves more direct recognition. While Susan Greenfield makes more explicit the Sapphic or homoerotic undertones that surround Lady Delacour's breast, she argues that the ultimate healing of the wound marks her previous behavior as merely an act. Klein however argues that Lady Delacour's "wounded breast becomes a central signifier of female desire in the novel," and "comes to symbolize not only Lady Delacour's internal battle for happiness, but also her desires for friendship, love, and reciprocal desire, as well as the struggle for female empowerment and the possibilities for strong, emotional and possibly even sexual same-sex bonds" (2). Indeed, Lady Delacour often conflates the various injuries to her breast: the ache in her chest from her unhappiness at home, the pain she feels at the betrayal of her bosom friend Harriet, and the pain of the injury itself.⁽⁸⁾ Her despair at her condition seems to refer to the loss of that person who filled the "aching void of her heart" even more so than her pain and possible death. The healing of the wound would mean the acceptance of that loss, and its continued presence and prominence instead unsettles the idea of what Lady Delacour should want from her future and works against the imperative to happiness. Instead of seeking happiness as it has been defined for her, Lady Delacour courts her own suffering as a means of creating space for herself, defying the structures which seek to organize her life and shape the reading of her body.

<17>That Belinda takes Harriet's place as Lady Delacour's object of desire becomes clear early in the novel. After seeing Harriet with her nemesis Mrs. Luttridge, Lady Delacour, lamenting her situation and pain of the betrayal, reveals to Belinda that she is dying. Seeking to prove the truth of this statement, Lady Delacour draws Belinda through her rooms into a "mysterious cabinet," immediately locking the door behind them, and hastily smearing her makeup to unveil a "death-like countenance" She then bares her breast to Belinda, revealing the "hideous spectacle" of her injury (31-32). Overcome with emotion, Lady Delacour throws herself into Belinda's lap begins to sob (32). As Klein has argued, the breast here becomes a means of both physical and emotional intimacy between Lady Delacour and Belinda as the exposure of the physical body becomes the vehicle for the emotional release that follows. The confined space of the cabinet, the bodily undressing and physical closeness of the two as well as the personal, and intimate nature of the revelation creates a charged and erotic connection. As Marim Balin has argued, illness "authorized the relaxation of rigidly conceived behavioral codes" (12) allowing for both physical intimacy and openness, and the cabinet works in a similar way here. Lady Delacour uses her injury and the space of the cabinet to create an intensity and vulnerability that draws the two women closer and leads to Lady Delacour to share the story of her past with Belinda.

<18>Belinda's believed betrayal seems to hurt Lady Delacour more than Harriet's as well. Their relationship takes prominence over all the others in the novel as Belinda's more "appropriate" friendship seems to stir in Lady Delacour even stronger emotions. On hearing the rumor that Belinda was aiming to marry Lord Delacour after her death, Lady Delacour exclaims

"In the moment that I discovered the treachery of one friend [Harriet Freke], I went and prostrated myself to the artifices of another – of another a thousand times more dangerous

– ten thousand times more beloved! What was Harriet Freke in comparison with Belinda Portman? Harriet Freke, even whilst she diverted me most, I half despised. But Belinda! Oh, Belinda! how entirely have I loved! trusted! admired! adored! respected! Revered you!” (184)

The comparison that Lady Delacour lays out here complicates the distinction between the two women and the two ‘types’ of desire, Harriet’s transgressive, sexual desire and Lady Delacour’s seemingly more appropriate romantic friendship (Moore 93). In this moment, Lady Delacour is seemingly incapable of putting into words the emotion that she feels for Belinda, falling back on a string of exclamations that all fail to encompass her feelings yet show the reader the intensity of her passion and suggesting an intensity beyond the bounds of “appropriate” female friendship. The reunion and reconciliation of Belinda and Lady Delacour after they have fought and Belinda has left for the Percival’s clearly depicts this intensity as well. After Belinda leaves her house, Lady Delacour grows even more ill, relying on the “quack” doctor again, and the seeming large doses of laudanum he gives her greatly affect her health. She takes a turn for the worse and in her drug-induced illness, is constantly calling to Belinda, both dreaming she has returned and in anger at her for her treachery. When Lady Delacour learns that Belinda is in fact not scheming to marry her husband after her death, she sends Marriott to beg her to come back and, of course, share how much worse her health has become in Belinda’s absence, immediately drawing Belinda back to her. Upon hearing of Belinda’s return, Lady Delacour “claspe[s] her hands with ecstasy,” cries out for the “Admirable Belinda,” and rushes to open the door of her dressing room:

At the sight of Belinda she stopped short; and, totally overpowered, she would have sunk upon the floor, had not Miss Portman caught her in her arms, and supported her to a sofa. When she came to herself, and heard the soothing tone of Belinda’s voice, she looked up timidly in her face for a few moments without being able to speak.

‘And are you really here once more, my dear Belinda?’ cried she at last; ‘and may I still call you my friend? – and do you forgive me? – Yes, I *see* you do – and from you I can endure the humiliation of being forgiven.’ (265)

Lady Delacour is so overcome by emotion that she faints at the sight of Belinda in her room, her frail body collapsing into Belinda’s arms. Her illness acts as the means through which she can express herself to Belinda, and the sick room allows for the intimate physical closeness and emotional urgency that permeates their relationship. She revives from her spell and opens her eyes seeking, and finding, forgiveness in Belinda’s. It is only after this moment, that she will consider submitting herself to her husband’s intimacy. In fact, it is to convince Belinda to stay with her that she agrees to tell Lord Delacour about her injury and later submit to the doctor’s care. As she readies herself for the operation which she believes will bring about her death, it is Belinda she longs to have by her side, not the husband with whom she has newly reconciled, reminding Belinda “Your promise was to be with me in my dying moments, and to let me breathe my last in your arms” (303). Belinda comes to occupy the space that Harriet once did, replacing her as the much worthier witness to Lady Delacour’s last breath. Lady Delacour thus uses her illness to create and maintain her relationship with Belinda and foreclose a similar intimacy to her husband. In doing so, she breaks down the goals of the courtship novel, eclipsing

the romance between Belinda and her suitors as well as the restoration of her own marriage, with that of her friendship with Belinda. Her frustrating and at times nonsensical refusal to seek help can be read as an attempt to maintain this intimacy and her suffering becomes the means through which she can manifest it. In this way, rather than reading her obstinate refusal to seek treatment as simply her inability to “let go” of her youth, we might see it as a way of disrupting what she should “want” from her life.

<19>Her acceptance of treatment almost immediately reunites Lady Delacour with her husband and daughter, and she assumes her “proper place” in her home. And yet, she reminds her family, while overwhelmed by their kindness, she has been “won, not tamed!” as “A tame Lady Delacour would be a sorry animal, not worth looking at. Were she even to become domesticated, she would fare the worse” (314). It is not that she has been restored to domestic perfection or transformed into a paragon like Lady Anne Percival, but that she has found a way to maneuver within the confines of the domestic home with Belinda by her side. The final scene of the text sees a cured and reformed Lady Delacour arranging the major characters, pairing them in their appropriate couples, “all in proper attitudes for stage effect” (478). However, instead of marking a return to a normative heterosexuality, the final tableau that Lady Delacour assembles underlines the performative nature of social roles and expectations. As Klein’s reading of the tableau argues, this clearly performative moment highlights the falseness of the staged heteronormative pairings and only serves to underscore the intensity of her relationship with Harriet, Belinda, and even Marriott (8). While the erotic potential of Lady Delacour’s desires must, of course, be contained by the novel’s end, and Marriott and Harriet Freke excluded from the relationship, the final scene is contrasted greatly to the moments of intense intimacy and vulnerability between Lady Delacour and Belinda. While the image of domestic happiness enacts a clean ending to the tensions of the text, it ultimately falls flat, containing none of the emotional intensity that the relationships between women manifest and stressing again where the real emotional currency resides. Indeed, the image itself “reminds the readers that the novel is a performance within a performance, a construction that can obscure the truth,” and hides the “Sapphic resonances” that still exist between Lady Delacour and Belinda (Klein 9).

<20>Lady Delacour’s final refusal to “wash off her rouge” reiterates that the problem of her physical body still lingers once her injury has been healed, shedding light on the *act* of domestic femininity and, in particular, aging womanhood as it must be performed on the public stage (Edgeworth 314). She is still working to avoid being read as a stereotype of the aging woman who is forced to acceptance social irrelevance because she can no longer command attention through her beauty or wit. Her refusal to take off her rouge continues the pressure against the middle-class woman’s future as shrinking in size and visibility. In her opposition to treatment then, Lady Delacour uses a space of pain to counteract the push toward domestic happiness and futurity, and to resist the disappearance from public life that her age and position call for. Her aging and injured body works to disrupt our reading of what she should “want” from her life (a healthy body, marriage, and children) and instead complicates the novel’s sense of progress. The refusal to heal her wound could therefore be read as a rejection of the middle-class woman’s future as it is imagined to coalesce around the child or a “looking forward” toward the future and instead works to destabilize the novel’s notion of courtship and moral reform, using the pain of her body as a means of reliving and then actively manifesting her desire. Thinking of illness and aging, not as the same, but as working similarly to disrupt the subject’s relationship to normative

timelines draws important connections for queer theory and age studies that can help us not only recognize the complicated acts of deferral within the courtship novels as something more than a narrative trope, but engage with questions of aging today in a way that continues to complicate narratives of decline and disappearance.

Endnotes

(1) Edgeworth, Maria. *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*. Ed. Augustus J. C. Hare. 1895 Vol. 2 pg. 198. (▲)

(2) Maria Edgeworth herself wrote in a letter to Miss 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" (December 1809) in *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth*, ed. Augustus J.C. Hare (London: Edward Arnold, 1894), 169. Heather MacFadyen argues that many readers have seen Belinda as "a tiresome distraction from the witty woman of fashion, Lady Delacour" and "While the novel champions domesticity in its accounts of the courtships of Belinda Portman and Virginia St. Pierre, its primary goal is the transformation of the scintillating Lady Delacour from a fashionable woman into a domestic woman" (424). (▲)

(3) Heather MacFadyen argues that Lady Delacour's diseased breast "metonymically represents her diseased mind and her refusal to accept that legitimate femininity is defined by its domesticity and its ability to regulate a domestic circle" (425). Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace contends that the injury becomes "the psychic wound which [Lady Delacour] suffers in connection with her inability to perform the mother's role" (19). Andrew McCann asserts that Lady Delacour's "abnegation of maternal responsibility and...inability to sustain children beyond early infancy is enacted in the literal corruption of her natural, maternal body" (187). (▲)

(4) Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity" (3). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Freeman argues that subjectivity emerges through the mastery of time and that "institutionally and culturally enforced rhythms, or timings, shape flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment" (4). (▲)

(5) The *Oxford English Dictionary* approximates the first usage of "midlife" at 1818, and Kay Heath argues that this term didn't find common usage until the Victorian period. The term "Middle Age" in association with the period of life between young and old, dates to the 1400s. Middle Period itself does not appear in the *OED*, but it is a term commonly found in the medical and conduct texts of the period. This chapter will predominantly use the term middle period, following the usage in the sources cited. (▲)

(6) As Kay Heath states "literary evidence consistently demonstrates that women were aged into midlife earlier than men due in particular to the concept of spinsterhood and medical theories of reproduction" (9). For men however, Middle Age could be a time for men of inheriting property or achieving career success if they were "professionals" because that in the 18th century "masculinity" was "understood in terms of gentlemanliness manifested by elite upper class status obtained at birth, highly polished manner, and proper social conduct" (Heath 27). (▲)

(7)In the seventeenth century, caricatures of the aging proliferated in “cheap print” and were widely accessible, so these stereotyped images would have been widely circulated to the lower classes (228-229). Though the diversity and depth of portraits of older women expanded in works geared toward the “elite,” (Bothelo 229), this cultural stereotype would’ve been common and heavily circulated.(^)

(8)The sexual desire that grounds Lady Delacour’s relationship with Harriet Freke has been thoroughly explored by scholars like Lisa Moore, Susan Greenfield, and Susan Lanser.(^)

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