

**Corporeal Lessons and Genre Shifts in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda***

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“A tamed Lady Delacour would be a sorry animal not worth looking at.”<sup>(1)</sup>

<1> In the original sketch for *Belinda* (1801), Maria Edgeworth planned for Lady Delacour, the novel's irrepressible coquette, to die as a result of a wound she receives by engaging in the least lady-like of activities: a duel with pistols. Believing she has a kind of cancer, Delacour begins her history by explaining, “My mind is eaten away by an incurable disease like my body” (481), spending most of the novel trying to hide her failing health from unreliable friends and her unruly husband, prepared to face death rather than allow a physician to treat the wound. Rather than being the story of her demise, however, the novel is a model of how science and wit can come together to heal bodies and reconcile families. This essay considers how Edgeworth evades nineteenth-century narrative conventions that require the death or complete submission of a rebellious woman, arguing that she preserves the spirit and body of Lady Delacour by writing in two genres at once and in doing so creates a narrative space that demonstrates women are as open to logic and reason as their male counterparts. It also considers how Lady Delacour's body is used to offer a complicated set of lessons to the novel's audience in and outside of the text. Her wounded breast serves as a barometer of the shifting, expanding boundaries of appropriate female conduct and offers a set of lessons about women's conduct and their bodies' obligation to family structures and, by extension, a post-Revolutionary England.

<2> Edgeworth tells the story of Belinda Portman, a young woman sent by her matchmaking aunt to live with the Delacour family with the hopes that Lady Delacour will help her find a suitably wealthy, socially appealing husband. Moving from country life to the Delacour's fashionable household, Belinda is appalled by her hosts' lack of decorum and dismissal of duty. The household is in a state of chaos, and Lord and Lady Delacour are entrenched in a battle of wills each wanting to be in control and, as a result, rushing headlong into destructive behavior that damages their bodies and the threads that tie them tenuously to one another. Although readers don't meet the Delacour's daughter until the middle of the narrative, it is clear that her future is at stake, and that the dysfunctional family she was born into threatens her future happiness. Belinda's attempts at preserving her integrity and her reputation as she learns how to assess people and situations by moving her between a utopic model of enlightenment domesticity<sup>(2)</sup> and the chaos and artificiality of aristocratic farce provide the frame for the narrative. Lady Delacour's struggle, as a misguided, willful woman wrestling with reconciling

her desires and temperament with the demands of being a “pattern wife” — a battle she is losing at the start of the novel — works as the heart of the novel. Two of her children have died, her one living child, the one readers meet midway through the story, lives with her nemesis Anne Percival; her “bosom friend” is conniving and cruel; and illness threatens to undermine her reputation as a *bel esprit*. And it’s all her fault. Her rapier wit and impatience with performances of propriety cause her troubles. Yet the novel allows this badly behaved woman to recover and even to triumph. The novel’s dénouement finds Lady Delacour triumphant, having put in place a social order that rewards women for resisting male dominance. Her concern in the epigraph above that she will be “a sorry animal not worth looking at” is replaced with hope that she can be herself — irreverent and bold — and still enjoy the pleasures and privileges of domestic life. Edgeworth accomplishes what was, in the nineteenth century, an impressive feat — that is giving a transgressive woman a wholly satisfying ending — by using the elements of Restoration comedy to protect her coquette from the requirements of a courtship narrative.

<3> Broadly speaking, Edgeworth’s novel reflects a number of significant cultural moments, specifically the shift towards companionate marriage and conflicting models of ideal womanhood, especially the role of mothers in childrearing and their role in nation building. Additionally, hovering over the entire novel is the spirit of coquetry embodied by Lady Delacour, and its potential to destabilize the social order. She is pitted against the ideal model of maternity, embodied, or, rather, disembodied in Anne Percival, and the conflicts in *Belinda* are only resolved after Lady Delacour learns that the wound she sustains to her breast will heal. As a result, the emblem of all that is wrong with Lady Delacour, which disrupts her role as mother, friend, and wife, turns out to be a specter, a slight problem ameliorated by scientific knowledge. From Belinda’s blush early in the novel, to the mantrap clamped to Harriet Freke’s leg, to Lady Delacour’s wounded breast, the problems Edgeworth narrates work themselves out through the bodies of the novel’s characters, and the notion readers are left with is that residing in the corporeal might be more natural than the Enlightenment tradition that idealized erasing the body and its inconvenient desires.

<4> Edgeworth’s choice to focus her story on the wounded figure of a woman who wears all the habits of the coquette and then to allow Lady Delacour to fully recover without capitulating to the demands of a courtship novel, invites us to read *Belinda* as an oppositional narrative, a term I take from Ross Chambers, who argues: “every rule produces its loophole, every authority can be countered by appeal to another authority, every front-stage social role one plays has a backstage where we are freer to do, say, or think as we will.”(3) Readers are invited to read *Belinda* for the oppositional in the advertisement that serves as the front piece (“The public have also a right to accept or refuse the classification that is presented”), in the narrative’s invitation to mock the rituals of courtship narratives in particular and the novel as a genre in general,(4) and, finally, in the conclusion: “Our tale contains a moral and, no doubt, /you all have wit enough to find it out” (478 emphasis mine). This last statement allows readers the agency to develop their own sense of what lessons this seemingly didactic novel attempts to teach.

<5> The rules Edgeworth originated came from multiple sources. As Miranda Burgess explains in *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order*, women writers in the early nineteenth century faced the “urgent demand that their fictional efforts align...with a clearly defined network

of ideals that existed ‘beyond’ the narrative.”(5) In other words, novels were expected to reflect rather than comment on societal expectations. Beyond the constraints she faced as a woman writer and the bad reputation novels enjoyed at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Edgeworth had her own reputation and her relationship with her father to negotiate. As a woman whose earliest writings were designed to educate and mold, Edgeworth felt more pressure than most to write narratives that were useful. Her father’s insistence that she write instructive narratives(6) and the cultural pressure on women writers to tell proper tales results in a narrative tension—between the desire to tell an appropriate story and the urge to write an interesting and even entertaining novel—that an ambitious author needed to resolve.

<6> The expectation was that women novelists tell proper stories where transgressive behavior is punished while dutiful conduct is rewarded. As the narrator explains to the reader in *Emma*, “Goldsmith tells us that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill fame.”(7) Canonical courtship narratives required young women to learn their way to marriage to a safe, financially stable young man who inspires feelings of esteem rather than passion. Those who stumble upon the way are punished through their bodies and required to repent by altering their personalities. Additionally, women who demonstrate an unseemly interest in money, or marriage, for that matter, are forced to reform or find themselves at the novel’s conclusion either unmarried or dead. Edgeworth fulfills the first obligation of a proper courtship narrative with the creation of the careful, proper Belinda Portman and the positioning of Lady Delacour’s life as a cautionary tale. But by revealing that Lady Delacour’s wound is not, in fact, life threatening and by returning her family to her *and* giving her the concluding words of the novel, Edgeworth opposes the strictures of courtship narratives. She uses cross-genre narration, creating a loophole to preserve her coquette: alongside the courtship narrative with its Enlightenment heroine, readers see a Restoration comedy with Lady Delacour as the lead. I am using cross-genre narration as a term that describes the strategy that allows women novelists to mount ideological critiques within their novels while still maintaining their status as proper women: narrative turns to restoration comedy in Edgeworth’s *Belinda*.

<7> Using the conventions of Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy within the framework of a traditional courtship narrative, Edgeworth offers an alternative to the Cartesian dualism that permeates Romantic era fiction by women. The mind-body divide that privileges the arena of the mind (reason, sense, reality, form) as superior to the liabilities of the body (passion, sensibility, appearance, matter) and which also works along gender lines are complicated in this novel when it is revealed that Lady Delacour's wound will result not in a mastectomy and sure death as she fears. Instead, Lady Delacour does not suffer the traditional fate of rebellious women: corporeal punishment for bad behavior or bad judgment. As a married woman she has more license than an unmarried ingénue, but as a mother novelistic convention requires that she be dealt with—either as a cautionary tale or as a model of reformed womanhood whose inconvenient habits are submerged. Edgeworth does neither. "Won, not tamed," (243) Lady Delacour is restored to her body, to her abandoned child, and to her estranged husband while still mocking the conventions of courtship novels. As a result, what seems a simple mind versus body narrative is a depiction of the tension between the corporeal and the complex phalanx of Lady Delacour’s legitimate fears, desires, and her response to how the culture expects her to relate to the body.

<8> Critics view Lady Delacour's wound as the narrative meting out punishment for Lady Delacour's improper conduct—one in a series of stories in which women who operate outside of acceptable modes of conduct are punished physically.<sup>(8)</sup> Catherine Craft-Child argues that the novel “comes to rest on a final binary opposition of female characters that once again underscores the split between the body and the mind necessary for the creation of the fully domestic woman.”<sup>(9)</sup> Susan C. Greenfield suggests that the “hideous spectacle” of Lady Delacour's breast is her punishment for neglecting her family. This reading, which makes useful observations about how Lady Delacour must allow her body to be “circulated among men” in order to discover the truth about her injured breast, places the responsibility for the accident on Lady Delacour's shoulders. According to Greenfield, once Lady Delacour takes off the mantle of mother and wife, she is susceptible to the rakish charm of Harriet Freke and engages in dangerous conduct. The novel invites this interpretation as Lady Delacour says, “You see I had nothing at home, either in the shape of a husband or children to engage my affections” (43). I would suggest, however, that depicting the “aching void” Lady Delacour faces and the conflict surrounding her breast is written as an indictment of late eighteenth-century habits towards women and ignorance about their bodies. Greenfield claims that the “injury that results is arguably caused as much by society's commodification of women as by Lady Delacour's sexual proclivities”—an interpretation that characterizes Lady Delacour as resisting the expectations of married women. But she seems to be struggling with conflicting ideas that operate on numerous levels but relate most specifically to her own body. Thus, Lady Delacour's story about the deaths of her two children and the life of the third is more than the story of a stubborn coquette failing at motherhood. It functions, instead, as a chronicle of eighteenth-century confusion about women's bodies, and the breast's function in particular. As Felicity Nussbaum explains:

At mid-century mothers become the object of numerous pediatric manuals providing advice on the care and nursing of children. New attention to the management of children, and to the affectionate bond between mothers and children, idealized women's socializing and educational role over their children while recruiting those women to a domesticity associated with the national destiny.<sup>(10)</sup>

Lady Delacour's struggle with motherhood and marriage reflects a cultural dilemma, the intersection of ideology and corporeality. Understanding the functions of her body means comprehending and accepting her place in the “national destiny.” The culture requires this and so does the novel. While such a system must surely grate on modern political sensibilities, Lady Delacour is not opposed to it, but she does struggle throughout the novel to participate in the system on her own terms, with her body as her own.

<9> Edgeworth's use of the body as a metaphor is not accidental. In *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Alan Richardson describes the relationship between the arts and the sciences in the early nineteenth century:

It was a time when poets (like Coleridge) consorted with laboratory scientists and when philosophical doctors (like Darwin) gave point to their scientific theories in verse, when phrenology and mesmerism gained adherents across the medical community, when Bell could work out his physiological psychology in a series of lectures to London artists,

scientists could perform as showmen, and Galvani's experiments with "animal electricity" could be replicated by an eager public "wherever frogs were to be found." (7)

If we consider how often Edgeworth uses anecdotes from her circle in the plot of *Belinda*,<sup>(11)</sup> we might consider her narration of the mind-body conflict as her contribution to the conversation Richardson describes in his work, especially since her father, with whom she co-wrote *Practical Education*, participated in an experiment with Coleridge and others which, according to Richardson, was the first concerted attempt to observe the effects of mind-altering drugs. *Belinda* is a novel about experiments and testing, about trial and error at a time when scientists, philosophers, and writers were reconfiguring commonly held notions about the relationship between a society and the bodies of its citizens in general and women's bodies in particular. Rousseau's claim in *Emilé* that "a feeble body makes a feeble mind" hung in the air while Wollstonecraft's discussion about the development of reason and the nurturing of the body tied women even more fully to their bodies at the same time it demanded they be treated as reasoned and reasonable creatures. According to Richardson, Erasmus Darwin and Charles Bell, along with physicians in Austria and France, were developing a new paradigm for understanding the mind and its relationship to the body. Rather than locating the mind in a metaphorical heart, Darwin and Bell, located it in the mind, seeing it as an organ with distinct regions that could be mapped out through rigorous and careful experimentation. This work is particularly interesting for the way it complicated the binary Descartes set up with his dictum *Cogito ergo sum*. His further claim that "This 'I' [the "I" in *cogito*] that is to the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body"<sup>(12)</sup> is a claim that, as Elizabeth Grosz describes it, "necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms [mind and body] so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart."<sup>(13)</sup> Grosz's work is useful here as it aims to return feminist thinking to the body rather than away from it, which is a turn Edgeworth makes in *Belinda*. Although Belinda Portman is set up as ideal and Anne Percival is her guide to the proper match, their disembodied models of femaleness are pushed aside in favor of Lady Delacour who successfully wrestles with her body and her sensibilities. The Virginia St. Pierre plot of the novel provides another example of feeling being rewarded, and, of course, in the end Belinda's feelings for Clarence overcome her common sense, and at the novel's conclusion he is in possession of one small part of her body—her hand. If Edgeworth requires anything from women in this novel, it is that they embrace rather than eschew the complicated work of balancing desire and reason, passion and duty.

<10> Edwin Hood's exclamation that, "The hope of the age is in women! On her depends mainly the righting of wrongs, the correcting of sin, and the success of all missions,"<sup>(14)</sup> amplifies the story of Lady Delacour's wounded breast, and the significance of her recovery invites readers to read her narrative as a critique of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideas about women's bodies as crucial to the state of the nation and their role as nurturing mothers as the first step towards securing the moral and physical well being of their children, and, by extension, the nation. Julie Kipp explains in *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic* that:

The broad-based medical reassessment of the conditions in which women gestated and gave birth to their children—which coincided neatly with a political reevaluation of the environment in which they reared them and from which they subsequently "delivered" them

into society—distinguished the second half of the eighteenth century from historical periods that had preceded it.(15)

In “Great Breasted and Fierce,” Nina Prytula shows that “Representations of the breast in eighteenth-century literature suggests that the period’s well-documented fascination with the maternal breast both derives from and is subsumed within a larger conviction that the breast is intimately connected to the female self in all its aspects.”(16) Or, as Nussbaum, explains, “New ideologies of maternal affection and sentiment between mothers and children, conflicting with the nascent doctrine of feminist individualism, encouraged women to adjust to a domestic life compatible with the pursuit of empire.”(17) Equally important is how little Edgeworth’s culture knew about breastfeeding—its importance to infant development, the conditions required for lactation, and the logistics of the process. Rather than concrete information that might have helped Lady Delacour make informed choices about her body during and after pregnancy, she was, as Ruth Perry explains, “expected to learn these things from other women in a tradition of oral advice and lore...women were expected to muddle through it as best as they could.”(18) It is worth noting that the breast as lactating organ entered scientific discourse in 1758 when Carolus Linnaeus used it as the defining characteristic for the category *Mammalia*.(19) Whether or not Lady Delacour is a tamed animal ceases to be the point; instead, she must be an animal with understanding of her own body. This seems to be Edgeworth’s larger goal in the novel—not to subdue her with scientific education but to release her through the information it provided.

<11> Instead of practical information, Lady Delacour faces the mythology of motherhood espoused by conduct writers like William Kenrick, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft. The latter connects motherhood to citizenship. Wollstonecraft writes in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that the woman who “neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of wife and has no right to that of citizen”—a pronouncement that lines Wollstonecraft up with William Kenrick, who likewise connects the family’s state to the well being of the nation. Advising women to leave the cares of the nation to men he counsels them “Thy kingdom is thine own house, and thy government the care of thy family.”(20) This can be added to Rousseau’s claims in *Emilé*:

More depends on [breastfeeding] than you realize. Would you restore all men to their primal duties, begin with the mothers...every evil follows in the train of this first sin: the whole moral order is disturbed, nature is quenched in every breast, the home becomes gloomy...But when mothers deign to nurse their child, then will be a reform...there will be no lack of citizens for the state.(21)

This context allows for a better understanding of what is at stake in Lady Delacour’s story about how her children die and why she seems to have abandoned Helena to the care of other women. Lady Delacour fails as a mother first on a physical level because she lacks the knowledge or, to borrow Edgeworth’s title from her educational treatise, the “practical education,” to care for herself or her child. Wollstonecraft’s lament resonates in Lady Delacour’s narrative: “What can be a more melancholy sight to a thinking mind than to look at the numerous carriages that drive helter-skelter about his metropolis in a morning full of pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves.”(22) With Lady Delacour’s narrative, it becomes clear that this is not a frivolous

activity. Her longing for a “bosom friend,” affection for Belinda and her love for her daughter show her to be a woman in conflict—wrestling with her natural wit and passion and the necessity that they not become obstacles as she tries to be a good mother. Unlike her contemporaries who use the vulnerabilities, real or perceived, of women’s bodies towards didactic ends, Edgeworth uses those vulnerabilities to narrate what she claims in *Letters to Literary Ladies*: “Till women learn to reason it is in vain that they acquire learning.”(23) To understand Lady Delacour’s narrative and her quick recovery, is to recognize that Maria Edgeworth does not require Lady Delacour to change but only to heal, but the process of healing and understanding places a remarkable burden on her recovery. The disorder in the novel only dissolves once Lady Delacour heals, but she will not yield to any male power simply because societal norms dictate that she bow to it. When Dr. X is finally granted permission and access to her body, it is worth noting, it is only after Belinda and the reader see his willingness to treat women like rational individuals who exist as being more than objects of pleasure.

<12> In addition to reconciling with her husband and reuniting with her daughter, Lady Delacour untangles every courtship knot in the novel. Clarence Hervey is released from his promise to Virginia St. Pierre who, thanks to Lady Delacour, meets and instantly falls in love with a man who meets her father’s approval (said father is also found by Lady Delacour so he can approve of their union). Thus released, Clarence is free to take Belinda’s hand, even if the super rational heroine’s heart is “not at present inclined to love ” (471). It is Lady Delacour who explains to Clarence Hervey that Belinda’s heart is not available to him. Belinda is furious with Clarence Hervey once she discovers he is already engaged to a woman he met in the woods and whom he kept secluded so he could teach her the values he wants his wife to have. Although he is the man the novel and its readers know Belinda should marry, Edgeworth faces a difficult dilemma: she wants to write a realistic ending in a genre that relies on fantasy and on idealistic conclusions. Restoration comedies allow her to do that. She regularly uses this genre throughout the novel and by the novel’s end, it has actually turned into a play.

<13> Claiming that *Belinda* has within it the elements of a Restoration comedy is not to suggest that it can be successfully compared to any one play. Rather this discussion demonstrates how Edgeworth adapts dramatic conventions for her own purposes to the form of the novel.(24) The ribald humor of Restoration comedy, while hardly appropriate for Edgeworth, does allow women, especially older women, the discursive and narrative space to be sexual, witty, and irreverent. Thus when Lady Delacour says archly to Clarence Hervey, “Did you never see a woman blush before—or did you never say or do anything to make a woman blush before?” (27), Edgeworth leaves to the reader’s imagination what might be described through puns and innuendo in a Restoration comedy. With the description of Lady Delacour as “a spoiled actress off the stage, over stimulated by applause, and exhausted by the exertions of supporting a fictitious character” (10-11), and the actual elements of Restoration comedies including the antics of characters with names like Philip Baddley and Harriet Freke (pronounced “freak”), the masquerade ball early in the novel, and servants who cause chaos, the elements of Restoration comedy are present from the beginning. Pat Gill explains that Restoration comedies “broach and endeavor to resolve serious cultural concerns, such as the definition of gender roles, the regulation of sexual behavior, the characteristics of class, and the compatibility of marriage partners.”(25) These are the same concerns the Lady Delacour narrative addresses. Next to the novel’s enlightenment characters (Belinda, Anne Percival, and Dr. X), Edgeworth places the

dramatis personae readers might find in William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), or Richard Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777). Readers are given the background of this Restoration tale in the history Lady Delacour shares with Belinda, which she mockingly titles "The life and opinions of a Lady of Quality, related by herself." If we integrate what she tells us along with the information the narrator provides, we can see the Restoration narrative unfolding.

<14> In Restoration comedies wit is that bewitching quality both sought after and resisted. In *The Country Wife* (1675), Horner says to Pinchwife "But methinks wit is more necessary than beauty, and I think no young woman ugly who has it and no handsome woman agreeable without it."(26) In *The Man of Mode* (1711) Dorimant describes the Young Belair as "handsome, well-bred as must be by most tolerable young men that do not abound in wit"; Emilia asks, "is there any new wit come forth"; Harriet compares the pursuit of wit to a woman's obsession with beauty: "That women should set up for beauty as much in spite of nature as some men have done for wit!"; Sir Fopling is scolded in the same play for letting wit distract him: "Wit has more power over you than beauty, Sir Fopling, else you would not have let this lady stand so long neglected."(27) Witwoud in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) claims, "A wit should no more be sincere than a woman constant."(28) Wit in *Belinda* is a weapon that Lady Delacour has not yet learned to manage. Lord Delacour says to Belinda about his wife,

...between you and me, her sense is not the right kind. A woman may have too much wit—now too much is as bad as too little, and in a woman, worse; and when two people come to quarrel, then wit on either side, but more especially on the wife's, you know is very provoking. (155)

He goes on to consider wit a concealed weapon that would "be safest and best out of the power of some people" (155). In a conventional courtship narrative, his comments would signal the lesson that Lady Delacour must learn—the lesson of replacing her impulses towards wit with maternal ones, but the novel offers her some middle ground. Or, to be more specific, the narrative pokes fun at the idea that a woman like Lady Delacour can let go of her natural inclination towards wit.

<15> The narrator describes Lady Delacour thusly: "Female wit sometimes depends on the beauty of its possessor, for its reputations; and the reign of beauty is proverbially short...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*" (10). Lady Delacour picks up the story, and after a preface in which she denounces novels ("I can tell you, that nothing is more unlike a novel than real life" (36)), she describes herself: "'I was handsome and witty—or, to speak with that kind of circumlocution which is called humility, the world, the partial world, thought me a beauty, and a *bel esprit*'" (37). The social order of the novel is jeopardized by the charms and behavior of a female wit. Margaret Lamb MacDonald's study of Restoration heroines discusses a series of female figures with characteristics similar to the ones we see in Lady Delacour: "This witty fair one in her fullest and finest development is possessed of a sparkling wit and keen intelligence, an aggressive will to power and heightened awareness of her own precarious position in a libertine world."(29) *Belinda* tells the story of what happens

after the curtain falls, how an aging coquette tries to achieve success in a culture with very few role models for spirited women. Lady Delacour has ruled past her prime and needs to keep this social whirl intact because her life at home is in complete disarray. Her husband is a drunk, her maid has strange control over her life, and her daughter lives in another woman's home. The only things she owns are her wit and her reputation, both of which become liabilities.

<16> If there is any lesson for Lady Delacour, Belinda, and the reader to learn it is how to manage natural wit. It is this power that is at stake in the novel, and successful women are allowed to embrace and wield it. Belinda realizes this in the middle of the novel:

Reasoning gradually became as agreeable as wit; nor was her taste for wit diminished, it was only refined by this process.... Mrs. Freke's wit, thought she, is like a noisy squib—the momentary terror of passengers—lady Delacour's, like an elegant firework, which we crowd to see, and cannot forbear to applaud—but lady Anne Percival's wit is like the refulgent moon, we “Love the mild rays, and bless the useful light.” (232)

When wit is misused in the novel, physical harm always results. This becomes evident in the way Harriet Freke's story unfolds. She is Lady Delacour's first teacher, a poor one whom the novel does not treat kindly. Harriet Freke has many of the characteristics Edgeworth planned for the original Lady Delacour, and she becomes a convenient model of all that can go wrong when anyone has too much liberty. As her name suggests, Harriet is the “unnatural” woman in the novel. She also embraces what Lady Sneerwell says about wit in *The School for Scandal*: “there's no possibility of being witty without a little ill nature: the malice of a good thing is the barb that makes it stick” (390). Harriet Freke's wit is full of playful, careless malice, and it eventually catches up with her. Estranged from her husband, she dashes around on a horse dressed in men's clothing, trying to seduce women, young and otherwise, into compromising and dangerous situations. She supports “the character of a young rake with such spirit and truth, that...no common conjurer could have discovered any thing feminine about her” (47). Harriet is, for a time, Lady Delacour's “bosom friend,” and it is at Harriet's urging that Lady Delacour agrees to the duel with another woman. It is Harriet who attacks Belinda for educating herself through books and is revealed to be little more than a parrot of trendy anarchic ideas. She is also revealed to be a truly despicable person when she tells Mrs. Luttridge of Lady Delacour's possible impropriety and when she plays on the fears of the slave Juba (and almost frightens him to death). This final bad act proves to be her downfall. “Comedies of manners,” Gill reminds us, “prove to be less tolerant of fallen females. Indeed, these characters undergo some of the most scathing satire found in the plays” (194). Bellinda in *The Man of Mode* and Mrs. Fainall in *The Way of the World* come to mind immediately, but neither of them suffers to the same degree as Harriet Freke. Once she is revealed to be superficial and as a rambler of fashionable ideas with no clear sense of their meaning, the novel does away with her. Here the values of the Restoration comedy and Enlightenment narratives overlap. Seeking revenge against her former friend, Harriet is caught in a mantrap while trying to spy on Lady Delacour and like fallen women in restoration comedies, she loses her influence in the social circle she longs to control.

<17> The significance of Harriet Freke's punishment serves as an essential part of *Belinda's* mind-body rubric. The conflicts for the actors in the Restoration comedy (Lady and Lord

Delacour, Harriett Freke, and, for a time, Clarence Hervey) are resolved through the body; further, whenever Belinda encounters the Restoration ethos, her rational thinking protects and effaces her body. Lady Delacour's narrative arc requires her body to heal or, to be more precise, to be healed, but even the men in the Restoration comedy face bodily deterioration that they must reconcile in order to earn a happy ending. "Only the body of my lord Delacour" are the first words we read when Lord Delacour enters the narrative. Lady Delacour goes on to say "this funeral of my lord's intellects is to be a nightly...ceremony" (11), an observation that directly links his physical demise to his moral and intellectual one. He drinks, we are told, in response to his fear that Lady Delacour is leading the household when the right and privilege of that position should be his and, perhaps more importantly, that their social circle believes his wife is in charge. A closer look at the narrative reveals that Lady Delacour chafes not so much against her husband's role as patriarch, but works as a critique of how he functions in that role. She calls him a fool ("O, I married my lord Delacour, knowing him to be a fool..." (37)), and, to some degree, she is not wrong. He mismanages his money and is a fop. He also disrupts their household when he has an affair with a governess Lady Delacour hires. As he shows that he wants to be better in all things, Lady Delacour shows her interest in being a more amiable partner. Clarence Hervey's figurative baptism ushers him into the Enlightenment narrative with Belinda, the Percivals, and Dr. X. Belinda's imperfect suitor almost drowns when, in a game of genteel one-upmanship, he tries to prove his physical prowess by swimming, though he's never actually learned the skill. The moment illustrates how ignorance and an attempt to be fashionable puts the bodies of the clever and the ambitious in harm's way: "and instantly Hervey, who had in his confused head some recollection of an essay of Dr. Franklin's on swimming, by which he fancied that he could ensure at once his safety and his face, threw off his coat and jumped in to the river" (91-92). It is Dr. X, the novel's man of science who saves his life, literally and figuratively: he pulls him out of the river, takes him home, and sets him on a more appropriate path, one that eschews the vulnerabilities of the body.

<18> In the Enlightenment narrative, women and men are divorced from their bodies. So, for example, after Clarence Hervey meets Lady Percival for the first time, all he remembers is her temperament:

Clarence Hervey was so much struck with the expression of happiness in lady Anne's countenance, that he absolutely forgot to compare her beauty with Lady Delacour's. *Whether her eyes were large or small, blue or hazel, he could not tell; nay, he might have been puzzled if he had been asked the colour of her hair.* (98 emphasis mine)

Lady Anne is, indeed, beautiful, but she is considered ideal because hers is a beauty of the spirit rather than the body. Set up as a foil to Lady Delacour, she is not only married to Lady Delacour's first choice for a husband but also enjoys the domestic bliss of a well-regulated family, the affection and approval of all who meet her (including Lady Delacour's dragon of an in-law(30)), and is proving to be the ideal mother to Lady Delacour's daughter. When Belinda turns towards the Percivals and their rational, regulated universe, we are in the middle of the novel, and Anne Percival has displaced Lady Delacour. The regulated world of the Percivals replaces the chaos and unpredictability of the Restoration comedy, with the temptation of Clarence Hervey who is reformed but still embroiled in his experiment with Virginia St. Pierre.

The narrative encourages us to see her as ideal, but Edgeworth complicates the model of perfection with Anne Percival's attempt to match Belinda with Mr. Vincent, the Percival's Creole protégé. Here the attempt to shift Belinda's focus from the inconvenient sensations of the body to the moderated realm of esteem and affection faces a corporeal and ideological obstacle. Although Vincent has "large dark eyes, an aquiline nose, fine hair, and a sunburnt complexion" (217), he is a Creole, a designation that, according to Kathryn Kirkpatrick and Greenfield, blurs racial boundaries. Despite his "aquiline nose," a signifier of his Englishness, his ruddiness suggests a racial designation that Anne Percival recognizes as a detractor.

<19> Anne Percival's attempt to help Belinda overcome her reservations about Mr. Vincent is evident in the question she asks Lucy, a young farm girl who has fallen in love with Mr. Vincent's black servant Juba: "Have you overcome your fear of poor Juba's black face?" (244). It is clear that she is asking Belinda to make the same turn with Mr. Vincent. With the help of Lucy's grandmother, Lady Anne offers a lesson about "fancy" that Belinda recognizes immediately. Lucy's grandmother explains the young woman's initial resistance to Juba's skin color but then explains that "the eyes are used to a face after a time, and then it's nothing." She continues with what may well be the theme of the novel's enlightenment narrative: "They say, Fancy's all in all in love. Now, in my judgment, fancy's little or nothing with girls that have sense" (244). Anticipating Austen's taming of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, a sensible woman carried away by "fancy," Edgeworth offers Belinda the proper lesson taught by the proper wife, and Belinda gets it: "One would think...that this lesson upon the dangers of *fancy* was intended for me" (245). This is the perfect lesson for a novel with a critical history of being read as didactic,<sup>(31)</sup> but Edgeworth complicates her own ends when she not only turns the novel back towards Lady Delacour but undermines Lady Percival's carefully constructed lesson about fancy when it is revealed that Mr. Vincent has moral failings that make him unsuitable for Belinda. This revelation not only undermines Lady Percival's lesson but her moral authority in the novel, and she is erased from Belinda's life and the novel's ending, an ending that calls into question the problems of genre at the same time that it confirms Lady Delacour's power.

<20> The ending of *Belinda* is so improbable that Edgeworth returns to the freedom a play allows. As the prudent, dispassionate Belinda observes, "there is nothing in which novellists {sic} are so apt to err, as in hurrying things toward the conclusion. In not allowing time enough for that change of feeling, which change of situation cannot instantly produce" (477). Lady Delacour agrees but then points out that another five volumes might be needed to narrate what readers recognize as Belinda's slowly changing heart and her move towards Lady Delacour's world. All the women in the novel, and it is only the women who have a say, elect Lady Delacour to conclude the novel. She has some definite ideas on the matter. She "might conclude the business" by quoting a line from Pope's *Martin Scriblerus on the Art of Sinking in Poetry*. She does not, she says, want to describe wedding dresses or ceremonies, and she finds long speeches as conclusions "tiresome." She will consent to a letter from Belinda to Mrs. Stanhope, but since Belinda isn't even speaking to the man she will, in all likelihood, marry, Lady Delacour poses them as for a portrait:

Captain Sunderland--kneeling with Virginia, if you please, sir, at her father's feet. You in the act of giving them your blessing, Mr. Hartley. Mrs. Ormond clasps her hands with joy--

nothing can be better than that madam...Clarence, you have a right to Belinda's hand...where's my lord Delacour? He should be embracing me, to show we are reconciled. (478)

This, she explains is “good and natural.” Her decision to end the novel in the manner of an eighteenth-century comedy satisfies Belinda's need for a more natural pacing to the conclusion and invites readers to reconsider whatever lessons they think they've understood. It is also, I think, the moment when readers know Lady Delacour has triumphed, when the play overcomes the novel, and when healing or mind/body integration overcomes the repression of the punitive or didactic Enlightenment narrative. We can look at the epilogue in *The School for Scandal*, spoken by the grumpily contrite Lady Teazle: “I, who was late so volatile and gay/Like a trade-wind must now blow all one way. Bend all my cares, my studies, my vows/ To one old rusty weathercock—my spouse! So wills our virtuous bard—the motley Bayes/ Of crying epilogues and laughing plays.” She goes on to lay out each important lesson and then concludes:

Blest were the fair like you; her faults who stopped,  
And closed her follies when the curtain dropped!  
No more in vice or error to engage  
Or play the fool at large on life's great stage.

We know how Lady Delacour concludes her play—not pointing to herself but to the reader-turned-audience, allowing them the agency to determine for themselves how they might play their own lives on stage. This is the only place she can live—on a stage embedded with the confines of a courtship novel. The image of Helena in her mother's arms signals the end of certain kinds of sentimental narrative that we see in novels like Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1805)—novels about young women who must live around their mother's errors. Lady Delacour will be there to raise her daughter in a home that celebrates rather than tames female wit—a cultural space that embraces the complications of the body while giving the mind its proper due.

#### Endnotes

(1)Edgeworth, Maria. *Belinda*. (ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick) New York: Oxford UP, 1994, 314. (All subsequent references are to this edition).(^)

(2)My use of the term “enlightenment domesticity” is informed by Andrew McCann's claims about the novel in his essay “Conjugal Love and the Enlightenment Subject: The Colonial Context of Non-Identity in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*.” He describes the text as “a novel of domestic enlightenment, in which characters move inexorably towards the idea of conjugal love and harmonious private space” (56). And writes;

In *Belinda*, I want to argue, the apparent universality of bourgeois individualism is figured through the conventions of the domestic novel, in which marriage and harmonious private life not only mandate certain behavioral norms, but also predicate resistant and otherwise

unassimilable traces of non-identity that must be renounced as the condition of enlightenment. (57)

McCann, Andrew. "Conjugal Love and the Enlightenment Subject: The Colonial Context of Non-Identity in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (30): 1, 56-77. For Lady Delacour, the unassimilable that the genre requires her to renounce is her wit and independence, and the novel is set up to teach Belinda to eschew that model and replace it with the Enlightenment model where her desire is erased and she is guided purely by reason.(^)

(3)Chambers, Ross. *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991, 7.(^)

(4)Lady Delacour tells Belinda, "nothing is more unlike a novel than real life" (36). Dr. X. makes fun of Clarence for behaving like a hero in a courtship novel. When Clarence expresses concern about Belinda's fidelity, Dr. X teases him:

"You are in a prodigious hurry to be miserable...upon my word, I think you would make a mighty pretty hero in a novel; you take things very properly for granted, and stretched upon that sofa, you act the distracted lover very well—and to complete the matter, you cannot tell me why you are more miserable than ever man or hero was before." (133)

Similarly, Percival pokes at Mr. Vincent's attempt to rescue Belinda in the manner of a novel: "You must not be surprised at that, said Mr. Percival laughing; "For Mr. Vincent is a lover and a hero" (251). Percival then continues to explain various plots that require young women to be in harm's way so that men can save them, thus causing the young woman to fall in love.(^)

(5)Burgess, Miranda. *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order, 1740-1830*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002, 86.(^)

(6)In *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel*, Vineta Colby's story about Maria's desk is a useful way to think of Richard's influence on his daughter. He had a desk made for and inscribed the following on it:

"On this humble desk were written all the numerous works of my daughter, Maria Edgeworth, in the common-sitting room of my family. In these works, which were chiefly written to please me, she has never attacked the personal character of any human being or interfered with the opinions of any sect or party, religious or political; while endeavouring to inform and instruct others, she improved and amused her own mind, and gratified her heart, which I do believe is better than her head" Colby, 90

Richard Edgeworth's opinions about his daughter's writing projects are well documented in, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (1991). Edgeworth's *Practical Education* (1798), written with her father, detailed a model for educating children.(^)

(7)Qtd in. Johnson, Claudia. A "Sweet Face as White as Death": Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (22): 2, 159-174.(^)

(8)I am thinking of Amelia Opie's eponymous heroine *Adeline Mowbray*, Austen's Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and Louisa Musgrove in *Persuasion* whose head injury Alan Richardson writes about in "Of Heartache and Head Injury: Reading Minds in *Persuasion*." But, as Ruth Perry explains in *Forbidden History*, others including Sarah Fielding, Elizabeth Inchbald and Mary Wollstonecraft present "unrelenting plots punishing fictional women for what was rapidly become improper—and tragic—sexual behavior" (113). Quoting Emma in "A 'Sweet Face as White as Death': Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility," Claudia Johnson writes: "'Goldsmith tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill fame" (159). Johnson goes on to argue that the idea of death "is the only culturally 'recommended' way a woman can clear her name...is a stunning, deadly serious piece of social criticism" (160). It is worth noting that while Lady Delacour's husband kills a man because he believes his wife has had inappropriate relations with him, he is mistaken. She hasn't, so while she is a bad mother and lousy with a gun, she is not quite a fallen woman.(^)

(9)Craft-Child, Catherine. "Cross-Dressing and the Novel: Women Warriors and Domestic Femininity" *Eighteenth-century Fiction* 10 (2) January 1998: 171-202, (201).(^)

(10)Nussbaum, Felicity A. *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, (24).(^)

(11)*Belinda* is populated by real people and events. Thomas Day, whose attempt to raise his own wife using Rousseau's *Emile* as his guide is told in S.H Scott's. *The Exemplary Mr. Day, 1748-1789, Author of Sandford and Merton: A Philosopher in Search of the Life of Virtue and of a Paragon Among Women*, is the basis for Clarence Hervey's attempt to train Virginia St. Pierre, a young woman in the novel, to be an ideal wife. Sir Frances Delaval is the basis for Lady Delacour, and Richard Edgeworth assured Dumont that he could "give 'chapter and verse for the female duel and the pigs and the turkeys.'" (Butler, Marilyn. *Maria Edgeworth: a Literary Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 10.) Dr. John Moore, the novelist, is Dr. X.(^)

(12)quoted in Synnott, Anthony. "Tomb, Temple, Machine, and Self: The Social Construction of the Body." *The British Journal of Sociology* (43.1): March 1992: 79-110.(^)

(13)Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1994, 3.(^)

(14)Poovey, Mary. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.(^)

(15)Kipp, Julie. *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003, 7.(^)

(16)Prytula, Nina. “‘Great-Breasted and Fierce’: Fielding’s Amazonian Heroines” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.2 (2002): 173-193.(^)

(17)Nussbaum, 24.(^)

(18)Perry, Ruth. *Forbidden History: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe*. Chicago: U of Chicago, P, 1992, 117.(^)

(19)Nussbaum, 25.(^)

(20)Kenrick, William. *The Whole Duty of a Woman, by a lady*. London: 1753. (1) (spelling in citations to this text has been modified). (^)

(21)Rousseau, 14-15.(^)

(22)Wollstonecraft, 284.(^)

(23)Edgeworth, Maria. *Letters for Literary Ladies; to which is added An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification*. (1798). Ed. Claire Connolly. Rutland, VT: Charles T. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1994, 15.(^)

(24)Encouraged by Sheridan, Edgeworth did write a play, *Comic Dramas, in Three Acts* (1817). The editors of *The Quarterly Review* gently describe it as a failure: “many may be surprized that a writer, whose novels are read with mingled amusement and instruction, should have given the world dramas of no higher merit than the three contained now in the volume before us. (April 1817, (101). (I am grateful to Wendy C. Nielsen for alerting me to this review).( ^)

(25)Gill, Pat. *Interpreting Ladies: Women, Wit, and Morality in the Restoration Comedy of Manners*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, (1994), (191).( ^)

(26)Wycherley, William. *The Country Wife* In Scott McMillin, ed. *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy* (second edition). New York: Norton (1997), 14. Pinchwife’s response summarizes the problem between Lord and Lady Delacour: “’Tis my maxim, he’s a fool that marries, but he’s a greater that does not marry a fool. What is wit in a wife good for, but to make a man cuckold? (14).( ^)

(27)Etherege, Geroge. *The Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter* In Scott McMillin, ed. *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy* (second edition). New York: Norton (1997), 99, 105, 113.( ^)

(28)Congreve, William. *The Way of the World* In Scott McMillin, ed. *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy* (second edition). New York: Norton (1997), 261.( ^)

(29)McDonald, Margaret Lamb. *The Independent Woman in the Restoration Comedy of Manners*. (Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Erwin A. Sturzel. Poetic Drama and Poetic Theory James Hogg.) Institut Fur Englische Sprache Und Literatur. Universitat Salzburg, Austria, 1976, 7.(^)

(30)Mrs. Margaret Delacour appears three times in the novel. Lady Delacour mentions her as the “vile Cassandra” who predicts the death of Lady Delacour’s first child. Belinda meets her at the Percivals and readers see first hand that she is critical and derisive. But by the end of the novel she is among the women who elect Lady Delacour to conclude the novel.(^)

(31)Four histories of women’s literature categorize *Belinda* as a didactic or *tendenz* novel: Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s canonical project *The British Novel* (1810); Julia Kavanagh’s two volume *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches* (1863); Miss Thackeray’s *A Book of Sibyls* (1883); and B.G. MacCarthy’s *The Female Pen: The Later Women Novelist, 1744-1818* (1948). Vineta Colby describes Edgeworth’s “didactic imperative” (86) in *Yesterday’s Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (1974). Gary Kelley in “Amelia Opie, Caroline Lamb, and Maria Edgeworth: Official and Unofficial Ideology” writes about her “Maria Edgeworth could perhaps be described as the popular-didactic...[her] fiction is dominated by social and moral purpose to a much greater and even more obvious extent” (18).(^)