Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

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Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other Creative Writers Who Died between 1800 and 1899, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Jessica Bomarito
Russel Whitaker
Project Editors

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Maria Edgeworth
1768-1849

English-born Irish novelist, short story writer, essayist, author of children's books, and playwright. For further information on Edgeworth's career, see *NCLC,* Volumes 1 and 51.

INTRODUCTION

Edgeworth's novels, once relegated to the margins of the literary canon, have been reevaluated in recent years by both feminist critics and postcolonial scholars. Noted for her contributions to the English novel of manners, Edgeworth is now also credited with virtually inventing the regional, or more specifically, Irish novel. Her ambivalent treatment of English/Irish relations and her innovative narrative techniques have recently been studied in conjunction with her essays on education and linguistics.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Edgeworth was born January 1, 1768, in Black Bourton, Oxfordshire, England, at her mother's family home. Her parents, Anna Maria Elers and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, an Anglo-Irish landed gentleman studying at Oxford, had an unhappy marriage that ended when her mother died in 1773, after giving birth to her fifth child. Four months later her father married his longtime love, Honora Sneyda, and the family took up residence at the Edgeworth estate in Ireland. Honora shared her husband's interest in innovative educational theories—a subject Edgeworth herself would later embrace. In 1775 Edgeworth was sent to school in Derby, England, and four years later her stepmother died. Her father again married; he was married four times in all and fathered a total of twenty-two children. When she was fourteen years old, Edgeworth returned to the family home, where she assumed responsibility for managing her father's tenant farmers, as well as for the education of the younger children. Her father was a man of diverse interests and abilities who paid little attention to Maria throughout her childhood. Nonetheless, she was deeply devoted to him and he became the most important influence in her life and in her writing career.

In 1792 Edgeworth began writing stories for children. She had been a favorite storyteller at school and had often amused her siblings at home with tales she composed. She also began writing novels during the 1790s and was acutely aware of the political events of the decade—unrest and rebellion in Ireland against English rule and Britain's attempt to stabilize the situation by forging a union between the two countries. Anglo-Irish tensions and the 1800 Act of Union are often featured, either directly or indirectly, in her fiction, particularly in her novels. Despite her popular and critical success as a novelist, Edgeworth remained in Ireland all her life, preferring domestic life to the fashionable society of London. She continued producing novels and collaborating with her father on various literary projects. Edgeworth was devastated by his death in 1817 and although she had promised she would complete his memoirs—a work left unfinished when he died—the task proved a painful experience for Edgeworth. Her father had been almost universally despised outside his small circle of family and friends, and the publication of his *Memoirs* in 1820 brought a fresh round of criticism of his political and educational theories and of his interference in Edgeworth's writing. During the 1820s Edgeworth be-

gan visiting England more often and mingling in the literary and intellectual circles to which her success provided access. Around this time she took control of the family estate, and successfully handled every aspect of its operation until 1839. She also continued writing, publishing her last novel, *Helen,* in 1834, and her last children's story, *Orlandino,* just a year before her death on May 22, 1849.

MAJOR WORKS

Edgeworth's first publication was *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), a work based on an exchange of letters between her father and his friend, theorist Thomas Day, on the relative merits of education for women. A year later she published a collection of didactic children's stories, *The Parent's Assistant; or, Stories for Children,* followed by a two-volume set of essays written in collaboration with her father, titled *Practical Education* (1798). Edgeworth's first novel, *Castle Rackrent,* published anonymously in 1800, became her most famous work. It was the only major project she ever published without her father's oversight. By the time the highly successful novel went into a third edition, Edgeworth agreed to add her name to the title page. *Castle Rackrent* recounts the story of four generations of the Rackrent family, narrated by Thady Quirk, the family's elderly servant. In 1801 she published *Belinda,* in which she employed the conventions of the novel of manners to criticize the excesses of the upper class. Edgeworth's other novels, none so critically acclaimed as her first two, include *Leonora* (1806), *Patronage* (1814), *Harrington, a Tale, and Ormond, A Tale* (1817), and *Helen. Harrington* is regarded by many critics as Edgeworth's apology for her use of negative Jewish stereotypes in some of her earlier work, particularly *The Absentee,* which was included in her 1809-12 collection, *Tales of Fashionable Life.* This work, a follow-up to her first collection of satirical tales, *Popular Tales* (1804), also includes *Ennui* and *Vivian.* Edgeworth's other work consisted of collections of moral tales for children and a collaborative effort with her father on linguistic differences between the Irish and the English, *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802). Edgeworth also published a collection of humorous plays in 1817.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

According to many literary historians, Edgeworth was the most critically acclaimed, as well as the most commercially successful, female writer of her time. After her death, however, her innovations in domestic fiction were overshadowed by Jane Austen's novels, while her pioneering work as a regional novelist was eclipsed by Sir Walter Scott. Both writers were generous in their praise of Edgeworth. Austen is said to have especially admired *Belinda,* to which she paid tribute in her *Northanger Abbey.* Scott acknowledged Edgeworth's mastery of Irish dialect and her avoidance of stereotypes in her representations of the Irish peasantry. Mitzi Myers has researched Edgeworth's considerable reputation in her own time and her subsequent critical neglect in the twentieth century. Despite Edgeworth's impressive literary output, she "gets little space and grudging praise" in modern histories, according to Myers. She suggests that one possible reason may be "the myth of paternal ventriloquism," according to which critics attribute many of Edgeworth's ideas to her meddling father—an extremely unpopular figure in nineteenth-century England. Although some feminist scholars have begun to assess Edgeworth's work more positively, Myers fears that the author may be dismissed by others for being far too dependent on her father's approval to be a proper feminist.

Recent critics have also reevaluated Edgeworth's novels in the context of the critical discourse on postcolonialism. Her understanding of the relationship between masters and servants, particularly evidenced by the narrator Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent,* has lately been explored as a parallel for her concern with relations between the British rulers and their Irish subjects. James Newcomer is among the scholars who find Thady, long considered a simple-minded and loyal retainer, to be in actuality shrewd, opportunistic, and subtly critical of the Rackrent family. For Newcomer, "the true Thady reflects intellect and power in the afflicted Irish peasant, who in generations to come will revolt and revolt again." This new perspective on the character also suggests that Edgeworth's treatment of her subject was more skillful and subtle than originally believed. Robert Tracy comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of Thady: "In inventing him, Edgeworth examines the process by which the colonized subject simultaneously feigns loyalty, manipulates the ruling class, and subverts its control. Inventing the Irish novel, she invented the colonial novel as well."

Scholars have also begun to reevaluate Edgeworth's other novels and their findings again suggest that the works are far more complex than was originally thought. *Belinda,* particularly in the revisions made to the second and third editions of the text, exhibits more evidence of Edgeworth's concern with colonialism, according to Andrew McCann, who finds the work indicative of contemporary anxieties over slavery and over Britain's colonial presence in the West Indies. Mark D. Hawthorne, in his discussion of this novel, also notes that the work's apparent preoccupation with marriage is misleading since "what at first appears to be an overly didactic novel of manners is really one of the precursors of the psychological novel," indicating that Edgeworth was a pioneer in yet another genre. Hawthorne

believes that the author was trying to achieve a balance between excessive reason and excessive passion in her characters, seeking the moderation she found missing in her father and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose educational theories the Edgeworths once embraced. Marjorie Lightfoot has also studied *Belinda* and she too believes the work has been misjudged by critics and literary historians; it is, according to Lightfoot, "a strikingly satirical novel."

Several scholars have studied Edgeworth's representations of the Other, which includes women, Irish peasants, West-Indian servants, and Jews, among others. Her early novels featured Jewish characters in various stereotypical roles, and she was forced to examine her own contributions to anti-Semitism when she was called to task by a young American, Rachel Mordecai, for her use of negative Jewish stereotypes. By way of apology, Edgeworth wrote *Harrington,* in which she portrayed Jews far more sympathetically than she had earlier in her career. She was increasingly aware of her own status as Other since, like her Jewish characters, Edgeworth, an Anglo-Irish woman in Great Britain, was herself a member of an ethnic minority. Her position and the ambivalence associated with it, particularly towards the Irish and the Act of Union, has been noted by several scholars, among them Susan Glover, who contends that this ambivalence is apparent in Edgeworth's hesitancy and inability to maintain narrative authority in *Castle Rackrent.* Glover compares Edgeworth to an absentee Anglo-Irish landlord and maintains that "the absentee author of *Castle Rackrent* sublets her text to the Editor, who in turn sublets it to an Irish narrator who further subdivides it." Rebecca Shapiro also notes Edgeworth's failure to identify with either the English or the Irish in *Castle Rackrent,* but affirms that in the *Essay on Irish Bulls* Edgeworth exhibited a strong pro-Irish stance, albeit one that advocates the unity of the two cultures and languages and minimizes the position of the Irish as Other.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Letters for Literary Ladies (essays) 1795
The Parent's Assistant; or, Stories for Children. 3 vols. (juvenilia) 1796-1800
Practical Education [with Richard Lovell Edgeworth] (essays) 1798; also published as *Essays on Practical Education* 1815
Castle Rackrent: An Hiberian Tale (novel) 1800
Belinda (novel) 1801
Moral Tales for Young People (short stories) 1801
Essay on Irish Bulls [with Richard Lovell Edgeworth] (essay) 1802
Popular Tales (short stories) 1804
Leonora (novel) 1806
Tales of Fashionable Life (novels and short stories) 1809-12
Patronage (novel) 1814
Comic Dramas (plays) 1817
Harrington, a Tale, and Ormond, a Tale (novels) 1817
Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun by Himself and Concluded by His Daughter, Maria Edgeworth [with Richard Lovell Edgeworth] (memoir) 1820
Helen (novel) 1834
Orlandino (juvenilia) 1848

CRITICISM

James Newcomer (essay date fall 1964)

SOURCE: Newcomer, James. "The Disingenuous Thady Quirk." *Studies in Short Fiction* 2, no. 1 (fall 1964): 44-50.

[*In the following essay, Newcomer questions both the simplicity and loyalty of* Castle Rackrent*'s narrator.*]

Since the publication of Maria Edgeworth's ***Castle Rackrent*** in 1800 there has been a consensus of the critics concerning the character of the narrator, Thady Quirk. The more perceptive have pointed to the curiously enigmatic quality of the story and Thady's contribution to that quality. But in the main the critics have been content to refer to him as "the old family retainer," characterized by an unthinking and prejudiced loyalty. They pay tribute to Miss Edgeworth for creating him, but there is doubt that anyone yet has perceived exactly the kind of man that Thady is. The originality of ***Castle Rackrent*** and its influence on subsequent novelists being what they were, it is a matter of importance to understand correctly the qualities of the central character in the novel.

We should at the least be skeptical of the ingenuousness and the loyalty that appear to be Thady's characteristics. If he is simple, he has the native shrewdness that may sometimes be the companion of simplicity; if he is loyal to the family, that loyalty is made somewhat more comfortable by the perquisites that have accompanied his service. It is in the character of his crafty, grasping son Jason, who by the end of the novel is master of the Rackrent estate, that we see reflected, as in an imperfect mirror, the projection of Thady's simplicity and faithfulness; and of course in the reflection the simplicity has become sophistication and the faithfulness, self-serving.

If this judgment is correct, it contradicts the critics from Lawless[1] to Flanagan.[2] Jeffares, when he says that "the art of Maria disappears in the artlessness of Thady, and, one might add, the artfulness of his son Jason,"[3] makes her imagination as it appears in these two characters a simple contrast between black and white. Gerould, when he says that "Thady Quirk, an old family retainer, was made to tell in his own simple-minded and confused way how the Rackrent family came to ruin,"[4] reduces Thady's shrewd simplicity to mere simple-mindedness; and, incidentally, this observation reduces Miss Edgeworth's art to artfulness. Flanagan, who is more perceptive on the subject of the Edgeworth novels than others (perhaps because he has a deeper knowledge of the Irish), finds that "the acts and statements are ambiguous and unsettling,"[5] but this observation turns out to be only a near miss when he speaks of "the disparity between the family as it exists in fact and as it appears to the imagination of the peasant Thady."[6]

For Thady is ever and always the realist. How does he begin his story? Not with "I and mine have lived time out of mind" but with "I and mine have lived rent-free, time out of mind" (p. 3) upon the Rackrent estate. How innocent of judgment is he when he says what follows of Sir Murtagh's lady?

> However, my lady was very charitable in her own way. She had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return. . . .
>
> (pp. 8-9)

Since there is no evidence that he was not on good terms with all the servants and the tenantry, we are not to suppose that when he pays tribute to Lady Rackrent's husbandry he is not also exposing, deliberately, her parsimony. So great is the burden that Sir Murtagh and his wife laid on the tenants that they were "always breaking and running away" (p. 9), and from Thady's summary of their afflictions we wonder that they had even a morsel for themselves after providing the bounty that the landlords consumed. Thady, who is one of the peasantry, could not in all reason witness the suffering that came from affliction and present that affliction in such revealing detail without meaning to render judgment. We find a clue to this conclusion a few pages later when Thady is writing about the heir, Sir Kit:

> . . . bad news still for the poor tenants, no change still for the better with them.
>
> Sir Kit Rackrent, my young master, left all to the agent; and though he had the spirit of a prince, and lived away to the honour of his country abroad, which I was proud to hear of, what were we the better for that at home?
>
> (p. 15)

Here his sympathy and his criticism are both plain. And though he spreads a shadow of defense across the picture of suffering that he paints, and his voice has the tone of the sycophant, his indictment is plain and sincere:

> The agent was one of your middle men, who grind the face of the poor, and can never bear a man with a hat upon his head: he ferreted the tenants out of their lives; not a week without a call for money, drafts upon drafts from Sir Kit; but I laid it all to the fault of the agent; for, says I, what can Sir Kit do with so much cash, and he a single man?
>
> (pp. 15-16)

Certainly this is all disingenuous.

What are the loyalties of the man who tells us that when Sir Kit came home with his bride "I held the flam full in her face to light her, at which she shut her eyes, but I had a full view of the rest of her, and greatly shocked I was" (p. 19)? And how self-deluded is the man who tells us that

> . . . there were now no less than three ladies in our county talked of for his second wife, all at daggers drawn with each other, as his gentleman swore, at the balls, for Sir Kit for their partner,—I could not but think them bewitched; but they all reasoned with themselves, that Sir Kit would make a good husband to any Christian but a Jewish, I suppose, and especially as he was now a reformed rake; and it was not known how my lady's fortune was settled in her will, nor how the Castle Rackrent estate was all mortgaged, and bonds out against him, for he was never cured of his gaming tricks; but that was the only fault he had, God bless him!
>
> (pp. 26-27)

That certainly is not simple-minded, or self-deluded, or ingenuous.

The evidence of Thady's clear-headed judgment continues to reveal itself in the section dealing with Sir Kit's wife:

> All these civilities wrought little with my lady, for she had taken an unaccountable prejudice against the country, and everything belonging to it. . . .
>
> (p. 30)

[She had been immured in her room only seven years by her husband!]

> Had she meant to make any stay in Ireland, I stood a great chance of being a great favourite with her; for when she found I understood the weathercock, she was always finding some pretence to be talking to me, and asking me which way the wind blew, and was it likely, did I think, to continue fair for England.
>
> (p. 31)

[Thady knows which way the wind blows.]

> This much I thought it lay upon my conscience to say, in justice to my poor master's memory.
>
> (p. 31)

[How black a character his conscience has given his master!]

The calculating mind of Thady shows itself in relation to two other characters particularly—in the affair of his niece Judy to a rather slight extent, and to a great degree in the role that his son Jason plays. Judy loses the opportunity to become the wife of Sir Condy, but not before her great-uncle Thady has made a final ploy to help her. It appears that Sir Condy will choose Isabella Moneygawls; but when he is in his cups, he decides, at Thady's suggestion, to flip a coin to make his choice between the two girls. It is not Thady's fault that the gamble fails to pay off by advancing a Quirk to the position of mistress of the estate.

Thady is successful, though, through Jason. It is evident that his fine finger helps manipulate Jason's rise to affluence and power. In no other connection do Thady's actions so much belie the easy conception of him as the ignorant, faithful retainer. Thady may not have planned that Jason displace the Rackrents, but the groundwork that Thady lays makes it possible for Jason to seize the opportunities that come his way. The evidence of Thady's astuteness lies largely concealed, but breaks through not once or twice, merely, but time and again—often enough and subtly enough to prove both the author's intentions and her subtle artistry.

"I wash my hands of his doings," says Thady of his son Jason on page two, "and as I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family." But this is in keeping with his relationship with Jason throughout the story, and it confirms his loyalty to the Rackrents not at all. Except in Jason's first moves, Thady appears to play no part—apparently he has washed his hands long since—but there is evidence that Jason is acting not out of sympathy with his father.

The expressions "my son" and "my son Jason" occur no fewer than thirty times in the short novel. Not only does the frequency attract attention, but also the situations in which Thady emphasizes his relationship with Jason. How is it, but through Thady, that Jason gets the opportunity to serve the estate agent as clerk? When Jason puts in for the possession of a valuable lease, "I spoke a good word for my son," Thady says, "and gave out in the country that nobody need bid against us" (p. 17). Note the word *us*—inadvertent on Thady's part if we would keep him in character, but surely deliberate on the part of Miss Edgeworth. When the agent is turned out, "my son Jason, who had corresponded privately with his honour occasionally on business, was forthwith desired by his honour to take the accounts into his own hands . . ." (p. 18). Privately? How is it that Thady has been privy to that correspondence?

When Thady apologizes to Sir Kit's new wife for the few bonfires that have greeted her, "Jason and I forbid them" (p. 20), he says. When Sir Kit dies, Thady tells us that "*We* got the key out of his pocket the first thing *we* did, and my son Jason ran to unlock the barrack-room, where my lady had been shut up for seven years, to acquaint her with the fatal accident." (p. 28)

One would suppose, if Thady is as loyal to the family and as disapproving of Jason as he declares himself to be, that he would not emphasize the father-son relationship, especially in those instances when Jason is marking off the steps toward the Rackrents' ruin. But it is precisely in those instances that Thady speaks of "my son Jason." We have already seen that Thady has been an instrumentality in his son's early affluence. The following quotations reveal Thady's identification with Jason in his continuing rise in the world. It is "my son Jason" who makes Sir Condy see how financially distressed he is; it is "my son" who requires to be paid for his "many years' service in the family gratis" (p. 36); it is "my son" who receives a lease from Sir Condy at a bargain and makes "two hundred a-year profit rent; which was little enough considering his long agency" (p. 36). It is a hunting lodge near "my son Jason's land" that Jason hopes to acquire from Sir Condy.

When the bills come in thick and fast, "my son Jason had 'em all handed over to him, and the pressing letters were all unread by Sir Condy, who hated trouble . . ." (p. 47). When the Rackrents are so poor that at a company dinner they run out of candles, it is "to my son Jason's" that they send to borrow some. At this point, "my son Jason put in a word again about the lodge," and "it was a good bargain for both parties, for my son bought the fee-simple of a good house for him and his heirs for ever, for little or nothing, and by selling of it for that same, my master saved himself from a gaol." (p. 49)

Up to this last event matters may be working out for Jason and the Rackrents as Thady wishes them to. He is pleased enough with Jason's rise in the world, and Sir Condy's election to Parliament provides the Rackrents with a new lease on life. But this nice balance is not long maintained, and it is Thady himself who in his next move seals Sir Condy's fate. It is evident up to this point that Thady has deliberately helped his son to affluence at the Rackrents' expense. Whether his next move is deliberate or not (it is impossible to be positive here), certain it is that Thady finds the man and delivers the information that together destroy the Rackrents. Ironically, Thady sets in motion the machinery that fin-

ishes off the Rackrents at the very moment of Sir Condy's triumph, his election to Parliament.

The scene is a public house at the height of the election drinking. The stranger says:

> ". . . there was a great report of his being ruined."
>
> "No matter," says I [Thady], "the sheriffs two years running were his particular friends, and the sub-sheriffs were both of them gentlemen, and were properly spoken to; and so the writs lay snug with them, and they, as I understand by my son Jason the custom in them cases is, returned the writs as they came to them to those that sent 'em; much good may it do them! with a word in Latin, that no such person as Sir Condy Rackrent, Bart., was to be found in those parts."
>
> "Oh, I understand all those ways better, no offense, thank you," says he, laughing, and at the same time filling his glass to my master's good health, which convinced me he was a warm friend in his heart after all, though appearances were a little suspicious or so at first.
>
> "To be sure," says he, still cutting his joke, "when a man's over head and shoulders in debt, he may live the faster for it, and the better, if he goes the right way about it; or else how is it so many live on so well, as we see every day, after they are ruined?"
>
> "How is it," says I, being a little merry at the time, "how is it but just as you see the ducks in the chicken-yard, just after their heads are cut off by the cook, running round and round faster than when alive?"
>
> At which conceit he fell a-laughing, and remarked he had never had the happiness yet to see the chicken-yard at Castle Rackrent.
>
> "It won't be long so, I hope," says I; "you'll be kindly welcome there, as everybody is made by my master: there is not a freer spoken gentleman, or a better beloved, high or low, in all Ireland. . . ."
>
> And little did I think at the time, or till long after, how I was harbouring my poor master's greatest of enemies myself. This fellow had the impudence, after coming to see the chicken-yard, to get me to introduce him to my son Jason; little more than the man that never was born did I guess at his meaning by this visit: he gets him a correct list fairly drawn out from my son Jason of all my master's debts, and goes straight round to the creditors and buys them all up. . . .
>
> (pp. 53-54)

Thady is playing the part of the opportunist here, his disclaimers notwithstanding. His eyes are wide open to the imminent destruction of his master's family, as we may know from the realistic and cynical sentence about the ducks with their heads cut off. Within the context of the chicken-yard figure, he offers, casually as it were, the invitation to visit the Castle, and contrives the introduction to "my son Jason." He has set the juggernaut rolling that will destroy Sir Condy. Jason will join forces with the visitor, they will bring an execution against the entire Rackrent property, and what has belonged to the Rackrents will henceforth belong to the Quirks.

From this point in the story we shall be most nearly honest if we judge the evidence against Thady to be inconclusive. The chicken-yard speech is damning, but a sense of humor, mixed motives, and tipsiness may combine to give flawed evidence. Jason is still "my son Jason," even if Thady does not share in his son's new affluence; and Sir Condy is still "my master" even when he has no land or servants.

A final irony concerning Thady's part in the Rackrents' ruin derives from the great drinking horn of Sir Condy's forebear, Sir Patrick. Sir Condy "was fond often of telling the story that he learned from me when a child, how Sir Patrick drank the full of this horn without stopping, and this was what no other man afore or since could without drawing breath." (p. 91)

As a result of these stories, Sir Patrick has ever been Sir Condy's model. Now, with only his life left to him, Sir Condy orders Thady to fill the horn for him. "And so, wishing his honor success, I did. . . . He swallows it down, and drops like one shot" (p. 93). So it is that Sir Condy meets his death, with Thady at his side to help him to his dying, as Thady had helped him to his penury.

Faithful Thady! the old family retainer—generations of readers have taken these words at their face value, pleased with the character as they think Miss Edgeworth created it, satisfied aesthetically, perceiving no more and asking no more than they perceive. It is something of a measure of her achievement that her novel should have been enjoyed and praised without readers' recognizing the full dimensions of its central character.

The Thady whom we now recognize is a more important creation than Thady the unreflecting servant. Far from being simple, he is relatively complex. The true Thady reflects intellect and power in the afflicted Irish peasant, who in generations to come will revolt and revolt again. He is artful rather than artless, unsentimental rather than sentimental, shrewd rather than obtuse, clear-headed rather than confused, calculating rather than trusting. There is less affection in our view of the true Thady, but now we have to feel a degree of admiration for him.

Seeing Thady in a new light, we perceive subtleties and complexities that color the tone and complicate the plot of the novel. Consequently, we recognize Maria Edgeworth now to have been more imaginatively creative in ***Castle Rackrent*** than our old conception of Thady Quirk permitted her to be.

Notes

1. Emily Lawless, *Maria Edgeworth* (London, 1904).
2. Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists 1800-1850* (New York, 1959).
3. A. Norman Jeffares in his Introduction to Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent, Emilie de Coulanges, The Birthday Present* (London and New York, 1953), p. xxiii. Page references in the essay are made to this edition.
4. Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Patterns of English and American Fiction* (Boston, 1942), p. 152.
5. Flanagan, p. 69.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Mark D. Hawthorne (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: Hawthorne, Mark D. "Chapter Three." In *Doubt and Dogma in Maria Edgeworth,* pp. 39-48. Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1967.

[*In the following excerpt, Hawthorne discusses Edgeworth's* Belinda *and suggests that by placing such characters as Lady Delacour and Lady Anne in opposition, the author was trying to achieve a balance between the rational and the imaginative.*]

After the attack on novel-reading in **"Angelina,"** Mr. Edgeworth cautiously introduced ***Belinda*** to the public. "The following work" (he seemed to hesitate as he wrote) "is offered to the public as a Moral Tale—the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel" (***Belinda,*** I, 5). But Miss Edgeworth was no longer writing simple "moral tales" for children; ***Belinda*** is a highly complicated novel of manners that won even Jane Austen's critical admiration. In fact, Miss Edgeworth wrote with greater subtlety of action and better characterization than she had before, even in ***Castle Rackrent.*** In that novel, she experimented with the possibilities of ironic understatement in a first-person narration; now she used both ironic understatement and point of view to mold the novel of manners into a probing analysis of the breakdown of reason.

If Belinda is really the central character, Miss Edgeworth's theme is simply that the person who places reason above emotion will finally marry the most qualified suitor. From this viewpoint, ***Belinda*** is a typical romantic novel in which the heroine is a little more rational than usual, but this viewpoint overlooks Miss Edgeworth's artistic and intellectual development in ***Moral Tales.*** She had already discarded the rational premises on which ***Practical Education*** had been based and in their place had suggested new ones. For the rational premise that prudence is its own reward, Miss Edgeworth substituted a material reward; then she made reason subservient to the claims, however nonrational, of the society that granted the reward. As if this limiting of reason were not enough, she implied that experience was a satisfactory means to proper conduct. This was the most devastating blow that she had thus far leveled against the system of the "Friend's" letter and ***Practical Education,*** because it completely undermined the assumption that only reason can lead to prudence. Finally, she portrayed a character who epitomized her doubts about her father's rational utilitarianism; this character—appearing as little Oliver, Forester, or Angelina—is neither wholly rational nor wholly imaginative but is still prudent. It is a character that most reflected her own personality and one that Mr. Edgeworth said was mere fantasy. Miss Edgeworth used these new premises as the philosophical foundation upon which she constructed ***Belinda.*** The structure of this novel, her first to deal specifically with education, is so intricately wed to her rejection of rationalism that it has often been misunderstood by persons who ignored her development in ***Moral Tales.***

Miss Edgeworth was especially concerned with the education of Lady Delacour, not with the matrimonial problems of Belinda. On the one hand, she created a galaxy of characters who have little or nothing to do with Belinda's romance. These characters—Mrs. Freke, for example, or Virginia—add little interest to a heroine who is already too rational to "fall in love" without careful deliberation. On the other hand, they do add greatly to her analysis of Lady Delacour. Belinda is the catalyst for the change in the fashionable lady, but she is herself insipid. "I really was so provoked," Miss Edgeworth exclaimed when she was revising the novel in 1809, "with the cold tameness of that stick or stone Belinda, that I could have torn the pages to pieces" (Hare, I, 178). Despite this flaw, the novel remains a carefully unified whole in which the entire group of characters centers around Lady Delacour, giving her depth and developing her into a fully rounded character. In other words, Miss Edgeworth used the technique that she had learned in **"The Good Aunt"**: what at first appears to be an overly didactic novel of manners is really one of the precursors of the psychological novel.

In broad outline, the plot is rather simple. Lady Delacour, like Mrs. Harcourt, is a fashionable woman of the world who is caught up in a constant round of amusements. When Belinda comes to her house, she attempts to sweep the young girl off her feet, but Belinda quickly discovers that her hostess is dying from a breast disease, contracted years before in—of all things—a duel. From Belinda's example, the woman of the world begins to learn patience and resignation, but her greatest change follows her separation from Belinda. Like Forester, Lady Delacour learns from experience. Mean-