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Experimenting upon the Feelings

Maria Edgeworth's Empirical Approach to
Love in *Belinda*

Emily Hopwood Durney

“We should let children see things as they really are,” Maria Edgeworth argues in *Practical Education*, a book of lessons for children that she wrote in 1798 with Richard Lovell Edgeworth, her inventor father (629). Maria Edgeworth's emphasis on “seeing things as they really are” is not limited to her educational texts—it permeates her fiction writing as well. Her 1801 novel/moral tale *Belinda* follows the experiences of eligible, morally upright Belinda Portman as she stays with the coquettish Lady Delacour. In British high society, Belinda experiences new customs and conflicts in courtship which require her to make judgments for herself as she finds her way and strives to make moral decisions while surrounded by immorality and vice. *Belinda* is a story of love, family, reconciliation, and education in a time when the popularity of companionate marriages was rising in British society along with the acceleration of scientific innovations

and advancements. Mixing these two interests of love and science, Edgeworth, empirically minded like her father, frequently has her characters debunk illusion and deceit through induction and logic.

Critics, such as British Romanticist Nicole M. Wright, have argued that Belinda is a far more significant character than is often recognized because of her logic and reason—especially as she helps Lady Delacour rebuild her family life and find relief from “the negative feelings, supernatural preoccupations, and antiquated beliefs that haunt and isolate” her. With Belinda’s assistance, Lady Delacour returns to a “caring domestic community” (Wright 512). Mark Hawthorne, a scholar of Edgeworth, also focuses on Lady Delacour’s progression but argues that she and Lady Anne Percival (a character who embodies good sense and domestic perfection who later befriends Belinda) are set up as each other’s foils regarding scientific knowledge and logic. In her research concerning love and courtship during the Georgian period, Sally Holloway has evaluated the connection between love and science at this time by looking at the pseudo-scientific practices of physicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that influenced perceptions of love and gender based on new ideas about biological composition. She notes how terms such as “chemistry” and “electricity” also began to be used to describe romantic attraction as those scientific processes became better understood (Holloway 30).

There is a lack of discourse, however, concerning a more active science of love: the inductive methods used by *Belinda*’s characters to achieve conjugal bliss. While Andrew McCann focuses on the “process by which rationality overcomes . . . various forms of fetishism” in the text, I will argue that Maria Edgeworth presents love as a science in *Belinda* by demonstrating that romantic relationships are successful and avoid the pitfalls of artifice and deceit when they are built upon empirical principles (57). I will specifically look at how Clarence Hervey and Belinda Portman scientifically determine their compatibility as a couple through observation and experience, and I will analyze how their personal worldviews are influenced by logical characters such as Dr. X—and the Percival family. Looking at the experimental, scientific processes of love in *Belinda* will help expand the reader’s understanding of how Maria Edgeworth’s dual, seemingly unrelated interests of love and logic connect in her literature and life in a way that promotes the power and responsibility women have to make judgments and decisions for themselves.

Edgeworth’s other writings and life experiences strengthen the connection that *Belinda* establishes between the ideal marriage relationship

and empiricism. For example, her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth, when describing Elizabeth Sneyd (his future sister-in-law and later, future wife), writes, “[Elizabeth] had not then acquired the same powers of reasoning, the same inquiring range of understanding, the same love of science, or, in one word, the same decisive judgment of her sister [Honora]” (113). Because of these distinguishing characteristics, Richard was surprised and relieved that his friend, Thomas Day, formed an attachment with Elizabeth rather than with her sister, Honora, since he deeply loved and admired Honora’s reasonable, scientific mind. Maria Edgeworth also affirms her family’s love of reason in a personal letter to Miss Sophy Ruxton in 1792, when she mentions a Lunar Society friend of her father’s, Dr. Erasmus Darwin, and Darwin’s definition of a fool: “A fool . . . is a man who never tried an experiment in his life” (19). Additionally, in a letter to her brother, Henry, Maria goes on to list “common sense and experience” as traits “[she] respect[s] even above Dr. Darwin” (145). This emphasis on experience is significant considering Darwin’s prominence in Edgeworth’s family *and* society as a natural philosopher, physiologist, inventor, abolitionist, and poet. In 1689, John Locke, the acknowledged founder of British empiricism, similarly stated, “No man’s knowledge here can go beyond his experience” (160). Edgeworth and her family’s ideals were clearly focused on the importance of education in general, but they were especially interested in the knowledge that could be developed from personal experience. Since Edgeworth made a point to label *Belinda* as a moral tale rather than a novel, she uses the book as a platform to promote empiricism and demonstrate the morally severe consequences that result from illogical, irrational behavior that takes place during the creation and maintenance of families.

To create this contrast between the irrational and the empirical, Edgeworth presents readers with the awkward and somewhat dissonant beginning of Clarence Hervey and Belinda Portman’s friendship. Their interactions reveal Clarence’s weaknesses as he tends to make assumptions without evidence. Edgeworth introduces Clarence as someone who had been “early flattered with the idea that he was a man of genius” (14). However, Edgeworth, in *Practical Education*, notes that “both genius and perseverance must now be united to obtain the prize of distinction,” and although readers are immediately aware of Clarence’s potential as a genius, he does not demonstrate perseverance in any pursuit (530). Knowing that Clarence has yet to develop some essential traits to become a worthy spouse for the composed and humble Belinda, it

is not surprising that Clarence is diverted by the fact that Belinda is a niece of the “catch-match-maker” Mrs. Stanhope (14). With this association, and without having met Belinda before, he is “prejudiced by the character of her aunt” and “suspect[s] [Belinda] in artifice in every word, look, and motion” (14). These assumptions contrast with Belinda who waits to form an opinion of Mr. Hervey until she can quietly and carefully observe him and his conduct. Clarence completely misunderstands Belinda’s motives because he is solely searching for evidence that confirms his hypothesis. Locke would have heartily disapproved of Clarence’s assumptions, seeing as he taught, “He, that would not deceive himself, ought to build his hypothesis on matter of fact, and make it out by sensible experience, and not presume on matter of fact” (151). Clarence’s hypothesis even leads him to be “most inclined to despise [Belinda] for what he thought such premature proficiency in scientific coquetry,” which is ironic considering his admiration of Lady Delacour, an accomplished coquette (*Belinda* 14). Clarence’s unclear perceptions of reality demonstrate that he is prone to make judgments before he observes, and accordingly, his observations faultily confirm his suspicions. The reader’s introduction to Clarence hints that his issues with self-deceit will lead to further unfair and inaccurate judgments of Belinda and stall the coming-together of their relationship.

Despite Clarence’s frequent struggles with inductive reasoning, he and Belinda romantically progress at a faster rate when Clarence thinks empirically—only then is he capable of cutting through his own layers of self-deceit. Instead of making assumptions, he cautiously spends time in Belinda’s company to gather evidence from their personal interactions—to learn whether she is simply avaricious and cutthroat like her aunt or if she is a logical, thinking, feeling woman. As they spend more time in each other’s company, Clarence makes observations: Belinda does not accept Lady Delacour’s flattery on her harp playing and he thinks, “It would be very unjust to blame her for the faults of another person—I will see more of her” (66); he notes that she is “grave and reserved” (67) while also wielding “modest, graceful dignity . . . without even the charge of prudery” (70); and he gains some self-awareness as he recognizes, “I had the presumption to judge of miss Portman so hastily—I am convinced, that though she is a niece of Mrs. Stanhope’s, she has dignity of mind and simplicity of character” (70). His experience-based opinion is tested, however, when Lady Delacour inaccurately informs him that Belinda has made a frivolous request to

purchase finer horses. Consequently, Clarence is internally “vexed to find that Belinda had so little delicacy,” and he “relapse[s] into his former opinion” (74). Clarence is deceived once again because he relies on Lady Delacour’s disinformation rather than firsthand experience.

Since Clarence is so often derailed by hasty assumptions and false information, Edgeworth introduces the characters Dr. X— and Mr. Percival as Clarence’s moral and logical guides. While Mr. Percival physically saves Clarence’s life after he almost drowns during an unwise wager, Dr. X— ultimately saves Clarence’s reasoning and romantic prospects with Belinda. He guides Clarence to Belinda through the expert application of empirical values. Nicole M. Wright wrote that Dr. X— has an empirical mindset similar to Belinda’s, making him “the novel’s ever-upstanding, inveterately rational practitioner of the scientific method” and that he “evinces a healthy skepticism of received notions and relishes the observation-based reasoning that is so crucial to the scientific method” (513). Since Clarence Hervey trusts and respects Dr. X—, Clarence entreats him to analyze Belinda’s character. To understand Belinda’s true character, Dr. X— approaches the matter through inductive reasoning and quietly observes. Although he learns from Clarence that Belinda is a niece of Mrs. Stanhope, he withholds judgment. Dr. X— is depicted as having pure and accurate judgment, so when he determines that Belinda is worthy of Clarence, both the reader and Clarence can trust that his judgment is true. Since the reader is also aware of Belinda’s upright morality, Dr. X—’s approval certifies and cements his credibility as someone who can see past prejudice and artifice as he seeks to learn through his own experiences.

While Clarence Hervey is actively trying to deduce what Belinda’s character consists of and what her motives are, Belinda uses simple inductive reasoning to measure Clarence’s character and his potential as a spouse. Both Lady Delacour and Mrs. Stanhope warn Belinda that Clarence Hervey is not “a marrying man” (26), yet she makes her own decisions based on the evidence she gathers. Later in the novel, when Belinda speaks with her trusted friend Lady Anne Percival to determine whether she should continue a relationship with one of her other admirers, Mr. Vincent, Belinda admits that she is hesitant to attach herself to him, since “men have it in their power to assume the appearance of everything that is amiable and estimable, and women have scarcely any opportunities of detecting the counterfeit. Without Ithuriel’s spear, how can they distinguish the good from the evil?”

(219). In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Ithuriel is the angel who reveals Satan's true identity by touching him with his spear. This reference in Belinda's statement not only emphasizes the difficulty women experience trusting men, but it also directly refers to Clarence, who dressed as the tempting serpent for a masquerade that took place earlier in their acquaintanceship. This demonstrates that Belinda, despite her careful, logical efforts, is unsure of her ability to detect counterfeit. As a result, she is unsure of Mr. Vincent after her disappointment with Clarence.

Accordingly, Belinda exhibits caution as she gathers evidence and comes to the correct conclusion that Clarence is involved with another woman. She accepts this fact and never flatters herself with the thought that Clarence is in love with her, even though that is also the truth. When she sees Clarence accidentally drop a lock of female hair that is not her own, she expresses gratitude and relief that "it [was] yet in [her] power to command [her] affections" (127). Through this scene, Edgeworth demonstrates an ideal balance of logic and morals. Belinda uses her keen observations to guide herself to make moral decisions. Once she is aware of Clarence's commitment to another woman, she eliminates him as a prospective mate. While Belinda's denial of the fact that Clarence loves her could be seen as a flaw in her empirical thinking, Belinda's eventual union with Clarence shows that she approached the situation wisely by waiting to pursue the relationship until it was morally correct.

While Belinda attempts to let go of her feelings for Clarence, she enters the Percival family's home—a world of reason and a house of logic. The Percivals exemplify Edgeworth's argument that a home thrives when two empirically minded people come together in marriage. The experimentation and curiosity of the Percival children and their focus on impressions and ideas (Hume 1–2) embody much of what Maria Edgeworth encourages in *Practical Education*. When describing teaching chemistry to children, Edgeworth instructs, "Objects should be selected, the principal properties of which may be easily discriminated by the senses of touch, taste, or smell; and such terms should be employed as do not require accurate definition" (*Practical* 489). She gives examples of drying off a child by the fire, warming a teacup of snow, melting sealing wax, and placing sugar in tea (490). She pushes a method which helps establish "general knowledge . . . without the formality of a lecture" (492). In *Belinda*, the Percival children are described as having interests in chemistry, gardening, painting, and music—all



“acquirements and accomplishments [that] contributed to increase their mutual happiness” (198). Edgeworth’s presentation of the Percival family and her focus on children’s education in her nonfiction writings place a lot of responsibility on parents to teach. This supports Edgeworth’s argument that love is most successful when approached as an empirical science for the couple and for the future generations that follow.

In addition to providing idealistic examples like the Percivals, Edgeworth continues to strengthen her argument by also supplying a character who personifies the antithesis of Edgeworth’s ideology. While staying at the Percival’s home, a center of reason and learning, Belinda’s experience is juxtaposed by a visit from Harriet Freke, the dissipated and conniving former friend of Lady Delacour, who attempts to recruit Belinda as an ally and have her abandon any remaining loyalty to Lady Delacour (205). Harriet not only pushes an aggressive conversation with Belinda, but she sparks a debate with Mr. Percival. In this conversation, Harriet introduces an ideology that starkly contrasts with the other rational characters’ views, and, as a result, Harriet appears ignorant and illogical. This encounter helps Belinda feel affirmed in her own ideas concerning love, womanhood, and learning. While Harriet claims that she does not read books because she can think for herself,

Belinda counters, “I read that I may think for myself” (207). This emphasis on learning from personal experience rather than having innate ideas and knowledge is completely empirical. When Mr. Percival questions one of Harriet’s claims by asking, “You speak from experience?” and she responds, “No, from observation,” Belinda logically shuts down Harriet’s argument by stating, “But you have not proved” (209). Harriet, Edgeworth’s embodiment of deception, clearly does not stand a chance against empiricism.

While much of Harriet’s deceit throughout the novel literally takes shape in her physical costumes and disguises, in this scene, she also represents uninformed and harmful ideologies that threaten Belinda’s standing as a logical woman and her marital prospects with a respectable, thinking man. Harriet’s protégé, Miss Moreton, is later observed in a foolish position and is seen with pity and disgust by Mr. Vincent (229). If Belinda had followed Harriet Freke like Miss Moreton, it would have been unlikely for Clarence Hervey and Mr. Vincent to still desire Belinda’s hand in marriage. While Deborah Weiss describes Harriet as masculine in appearance and dress but mentally “illogical and irrational, capricious and emotional, vain and vainglorious,” Belinda stands apart as someone completely feminine in appearance. But with a “principled mind and rational self-control, [she] clearly exhibits the virtues that the culture believed stemmed from a masculine understanding” (448–49). Belinda’s power that comes from wielding what would have been considered a “masculine understanding” starkly contrasts with Harriet’s ineffective and masculine manners.

This “masculine understanding” causes Mr. Vincent, a friend of the Percivals, to develop respect for Belinda just as Richard Lovell Edgeworth did for Honora Sneyd: Belinda is an attractive marital prospect to good men because she knows how to think. Although Mr. Vincent did not initially desire to romantically pursue Belinda, and “at the first sight of [her], he did not seem much struck with her appearance” (*Belinda* 200), he rapidly changes his mind as Belinda shows that her mind is filled with more than just “art and affectation” (24). Belinda helps Mr. Vincent’s servant Juba by revealing that the “Obeah woman” who haunts him is none other than the troublesome Harriet Freke (203). To accomplish this, she observes, develops a theory, and conducts an experiment to replicate Harriet’s trickery. This exercise allows Mr. Vincent and Belinda to be sure through their senses—smelling a strong odor, seeing burnt paper, and witnessing the same reaction—that Harriet Freke was deceiving Juba (203). Belinda’s reasoning,

rather than her manners, beauty, and grace, attract Mr. Vincent. Although later Mr. Vincent claims to prefer ignorance in women, Mr. Percival claims that this opinion is due to “taste and feeling” and that he’s “leav[ing] reason quite out of the question” (213). As a guardian and mentor, Mr. Percival holds authority in Mr. Vincent’s life, and this reminder is accepted in the same manner as Dr. X—’s logical advice to Clarence.

As a mentor to Belinda, Lady Anne Percival is presented as an intelligent domestic goddess, and although Belinda deeply respects her, they are divided on how Belinda should approach her potential relationship with Mr. Vincent. Belinda asks, “Is it not a sufficient objection, that I am persuaded I cannot love him?” to which Lady Anne counters, “No; for you may be mistaken in that persuasion. Remember what we said a little while ago about *fancy* and *spontaneous affections*” (221). Lady Anne is taking a completely logical view of the matter and reminds Belinda that she has neither sufficient observations nor experience to make a proper judgment. Throughout their conversation, Lady Anne echoes famous Enlightenment thinker John Locke’s claim that “we precipitate the determination of our wills, and engage too soon before due examination. To prevent this, we have a power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire as every one daily may experiment in himself” (365). By making this point, Lady Anne is voicing her concern that Belinda is perhaps distracted by unrealistic, romantic notions of her eventually ending up with Clarence or even never loving again. Lady Anne is motivated to help because she is aware of the risk that comes with rejecting too soon “before due examination.”

For this reason, Lady Anne suggests a period of experimentation to resolve Belinda’s uncertainty. Lady Anne “request[s], that Belinda would take three days . . . before she should decide against Mr. Vincent” (*Belinda* 223). Belinda’s trial run with Mr. Vincent is approached as a scientific experiment, and Belinda is pushed away from questioning whether she loves Mr. Vincent so that she can objectively consider whether he would make a good husband. Belinda more easily gathers results as she observes and analyzes his behavior rather than trying to untangle and interpret her feelings. Although Lady Anne was ultimately incorrect in her notion that Mr. Vincent and Belinda would be a successful couple, her advice still allowed Belinda to confidently reject Mr. Vincent once his gambling issue was exposed, thanks to the intervention of Lord Delacour and Clarence. Interestingly, at this point in the tale, the previously belligerent and gruff husband of Lady Delacour has become an

enlightened, empirical figure; he is able to recognize the effects of his past gambling habits on his marriage, and he reaches out to help Belinda because he does not want her to suffer the same fate.

In conclusion, analysis of the scientific processes in *Belinda* teaches readers that sound reason and patient observation are essential qualities of a successful couple or family. Although Belinda, as a character, has been labeled by readers and even her creator as “that stick or stone Belinda” (*Life and Letters* 106), new depth and feeling can be attributed to her character when love is treated as a science in the novel. In *Practical Education*, Edgeworth suggests, “Let [a child] try experiments upon his own feelings; the more accurate knowledge he acquires, the sooner he will be enabled to choose prudently” (692). As Belinda experiments, feels, and strives to make prudent decisions in love, her good reasoning is rewarded when she happily becomes engaged to Clarence at the book’s end. The difficulties that Clarence and Belinda face on their way to love and marriage can be attributed to illogical assumptions and decisions which can only be redeemed through observant, methodical empiricism. Looking at *Belinda* through this lens teaches readers that women can and should be personally involved in their own marital decisions, as Edgeworth clearly proves that Belinda is entirely capable of making choices based on the evidence of her experiences.

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