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Women Support Women: A Vindication for Protofeminists

The courtship novel of the late eighteenth century is often considered alongside feminist scholarship and gender theory. The former study is especially relevant, in part, due to women authoring multiple popular novels of the genre, but such analysis requires a complex understanding of the latter: gender theory. Specifically, the conversation surrounding authorship of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries necessitates the use of *protofeminism*. Protofeminism describes the philosophies that prelude and establish the feminist theory contemporary audiences are familiar with. This provides context for the conversation surrounding women before the formal establishment of “feminism,” which The Oxford English Dictionary defines as an, “Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex; the movement associated with this” with record of its first use in 1895 (“Feminism n3”). To discuss novels predating the twentieth century with consideration of authorial intent, protofeminism must be utilized since the feminist lens could not have been integrated in their drafting. This analysis is necessary to defend the value of protofeminist writers in modern conversations, and reemphasize their contributions in context.

A pertinent comparison to contextualize protofeminist ideals is the relationship between Mary Wollstonecraft’s creation of the theory and Maria Edgeworth’s application in the novel form. These selections are relevant due to the intertextuality between Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Edgeworth’s *Belinda*, as both share close examination

of women's education. Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 publication, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an appropriate selection of theory due to the essay's evaluation of the differences between the sexes and its masterful dissection of eighteenth-century society's influence on their respective behaviors. In this protofeminist writing, Wollstonecraft suggests that the negative attributes of women, often lamented by men, result directly from a misguided education that promotes bad behaviors for purposes of competing on the marriage market. *Belinda* acts as a manifestation of Wollstonecraft's assertion by applying its claims to a morality novel in 1801, which allows for a more subtle reflection of the essay's protofeminist claims. Wollstonecraft articulates these claims about women's education most directly in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'s passage, "The Prevailing Opinion About Sexual Differences" and conveys new philosophy about the relationship between men, women, and the rights they are respectively afforded.

A misconception often emerges from contemporary audiences that these essays were shunned for a radical nature, but their reception was predominantly positive in Wollstonecraft's society and even received less criticism than that originating from modern audiences. This history is discussed thoroughly by scholar R.M. Jane in the article, "On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*." Jane explains that, "with one important exception, every notice the *Rights of Woman* received when it first appeared was favorable" due to the shifting cultural values in Wollstonecraft's lifetime (Jane 293). Women's status in the Western home was experiencing dramatic change and, "the contest for improvement of women's education and their status in the family had been largely won" by 1792 (Jane 293). Controversy would not emerge until Wollstonecraft's defamation later in the decade due to William Godwin's publication of her biography he drafted after her death. This unintentional

exposé resulted in the condemnation of Wollstonecraft's more progressive ideals, not the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a whole. The determinant of which ideas would be shunned resulted from the idea that, "those elements of the works in question that corresponded to changes that had been in train for half a century were approved; those that marked out the direction of more drastic social transformations were...remarked as revolutionary and visionary, if they were seen at all" (Jane 293). This account proves that while *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* may be accepted as revolutionary, Wollstonecraft's work remains an appropriate representation of intellect within the society she critiques. Protofeminism, despite its now-dated aspects, is a mandatory foundation for modern feminist thinking.

This segregation of protofeminist ideas separates *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and specifically, "The Prevailing Opinion About Sexual Differences," into two categories: the set of progressive ideas that brandished Wollstonecraft as a "fallen woman" by Edgeworth's society, and the philosophies accepted by Edgeworth's society, some of which causing discomfort amongst current readers. The latter category is partially characterized by Wollstonecraft's acknowledgement of a divine hierarchy between the sexes, as she states, "let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue" (Wollstonecraft 26). Wollstonecraft concludes this thought, however, by asserting there is, "[no] shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature" (Wollstonecraft 27) and establishes a conflict between demanding women's natural rights while conceding inferiority to men. This intellectual tension distinguishes protofeminist theory. Maria Edgeworth's novel, *Belinda*, is an appropriate choice among many to evaluate the integration of Wollstonecraft's ideas after her death.

To understand the effect and intent of *Belinda*, it first must be acknowledged that Maria Edgeworth operates within the the latter set of aforementioned philosophies in Wollstonecraft's work. The novel does not demand women's entry into the political sphere or call for a complete upheaval of the social order. Instead, Edgeworth adheres to Wollstonecraft's praised ideas of, "intellectual equality, improved education, and reformed manners" (Jane 293). The impression of Edgeworth as a philosopher is therefore also split amongst scholars. Some praise *Belinda's* pragmatic approach to protofeminism and the thoughtful investigation of the failures of her society, while others criticize Edgeworth of being too tepid and conservative in embracing dramatic change for women. Scholar Deborah Weiss addresses this debate in her article, "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda: Maria Edgeworth's Female Philosopher" and argues that "the radicalism of Edgeworth's understanding of gender has generally been overlooked [due to the] timidity of her approach to reform" (Weiss 442). In contradiction to this supposed tonal rift between *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Belinda*, Weiss suggests there is a "philosophical kinship" (Weiss 443). By this rationale, the work's differences should be cited within their styles of argumentation, not a rift caused by ideological inconsistencies. Edgeworth prioritizes subtlety and approaches her call for reform within an allegorical context as an intentional device to navigate a society disapproving of Wollstonecraft.

The format and storyline of *Belinda* supports Weiss's argument of positive intertextuality, even considering Edgeworth's unflattering portrayal of Wollstonecraft through the character Harriet Freke. There are two major interpretations of this inclusion: an attack on Wollstonecraft similar to those occurring after her public defamation, or a critique on those very condemnations. This caricature is the most specific allusion to Wollstonecraft's philosophy in the novel and the discernment of Edgeworth's intent for including it allows intellectually faithful

discussion of *Belinda's* characters of Lady Delacour, Belinda and Rachel. As stated by Weiss, “Edgeworth entitles the chapter in which Belinda and Freke first meet ‘Rights of Woman,’ and she gives Freke an approach to change that is decidedly revolutionary. Freke’s language in this chapter is full of allusions to Wollstonecraft’s most famous work” (Weiss 445). This seemingly aggressive attack on Edgeworth’s female contemporary may present the negative optic of infighting between women in a patriarchal society, giving cause for some scholar’s negative depictions of Edgeworth as conservative. An alternative investigation of Edgeworth’s intent, however, may assuage these concerns and reveal underlying respect for her predecessor.

Throughout her appearances in *Belinda*, Harriet Freke acts as a clear detriment to Lady Delacour by leading “her to torment her husband” and feud with other women, but Wollstonecraft’s intellect and rationality are missing within this character (Weiss 447). This accounts for the common accusation of Mary Wollstonecraft instigating the ruin of women who subscribe to her radical ideas after she was posthumously rebranded. Weiss therefore suggests that, “Edgeworth uses Freke not to assail Wollstonecraft and to condemn her ideas, but rather to lampoon the idea of Wollstonecraft that circulated in the culture” (Weiss 445). In this interpretation, Maria Edgeworth therefore places herself on the side of Wollstonecraft’s societal critiques with a novel palatable to audiences who rejected the perceived radicalism of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

These themes demanding systemic reform of women’s education appear within the similarities and differences of the characters Lady Delacour, Belinda, and Rachel. Each woman embodies different aspects of the education system, as they are molded by different environments. Respectively, the societal influence results from the country, the city, and Clarence Hervey’s private residence. As stated by Wollstonecraft, “Men and women must be

educated, to a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in,” (Wollstonecraft 19) which is evident in *Belinda*. The novel acts as a thought experiment in this way, matching each woman with a certain behavior.

Lady Delacour serves as a clear model for the negative effects of poor, yet standard, education on both women and marriage. Wollstonecraft defines this “poor education” by stating, “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives (Wollstonecraft 19).

As Lady Delacour is a grown woman with both a husband and a daughter, her behaviors must be perceived as fully developed. Unlike Belinda, she is not an ingenue in the process of determining her identity or figuring out how to navigate society. Lady Delacour’s behavior both exposes the trend of teaching women to be conniving and shallow to succeed financially in the marriage market, and illuminates the outcome of such education: disinterest in domestic life and lack of virtue. Edgeworth characterizes her as, “two different persons. Abroad, she appeared all life, spirit and good humor—at home, listless, fretful and melancholy; she seemed like a spoiled actress off the stage...exhausted by the exertions of supporting a fictitious character” (Edgeworth 10). She is therefore always donning a persona, and her life is performative.

This duplicity proves to be complex, however, in Edgeworth’s pursuit of forming the ideal woman. In Sharon Smith’s article, “Lady Delacour's ‘Mask’: Plotting Domesticity in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*,” Smith explains, “the conclusion of the novel makes clear, it is not Lady

Delacour's penchant for performance that is problematic; rather, the problem lies in the way she has plotted her performance, a purely 'fictitious' display which is designed to hide 'domestic misery' rather than promote domestic happiness" (Smith 72). This suggests that the proper behavior and performance of a woman would be to appear satisfied with domestic life both in public and private spheres. Lady Delacour would, therefore, present as fulfilled in her marriage, manage her household, and raise her children regardless of her personal feelings.

This assertion of intent is questioned by Lady Delacour's widely acknowledged foil character, Lady Anne Percival, and the modest heroine of the novel, Belinda. To contrast Lady Delacour's behavior, Belinda displays the merits of upbringing away from the fast-paced, competitive and materialistic city life. As she navigates her friendship with Lady Delacour and the demands of society, her principles guide her to become more similar to Lady Anne Percival, Edgeworth's pinnacle of a virtuous woman. Both characters are fulfilled by their presentation of womanhood, and there is little evidence for either to be perceived as disingenuous. Edgeworth instead alludes to the idea of virtue driving women to a fulfilling life, when such virtue is taught in a sincere and thorough way. Duplicity and performative behavior are both negative attributes in the context of *Belinda* despite the active incentive for women to practice them.

Edgeworth comments on the source of characters such as Lady Delacour in Book Three of the novel, and prompts a line of questioning into the methods necessary to reform education. She does this through the condemnation of Clarence Hervey's experiment with the young Rachel, or Virginia St. Pierre. In this passage, it is revealed that a year prior to meeting Belinda, Hervey studied the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau and, "felt, that women, who were full of vanity, affectation, and artifice... were incapable of conferring, or enjoying real happiness" and therefore, "formed the romantic project of educating a wife for himself. Full of this idea, he

returned to England, determined to carry his scheme immediately into execution” (Edgeworth 330). The failure of this experiment to philosophically mold his own wife reveals Edgeworth’s belief that such a pursuit is not the action that must be taken to cure society’s issue that she has represented in the form of Lady Delacour. To understand the nuance of her commentary and Hervey’s failure itself, it is necessary to understand the framework by which he operates, and therefore by which, Edgeworth takes dissent in: the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's philosophies on education focus on the individual and emphasize the importance of early learning occurring away from societal influences. In consideration of the acknowledgement of the intertextuality between *Belinda* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, then the conversation between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau regarding this claim becomes imperative for understanding the discourse of ideas relevant to Edgeworth’s novel. As detailed by Jamie Gianoustos in her publication with Baylor University, “Locke and Rousseau: Early Childhood Education,” Rousseau’s ideas suggest that, “instead of an educated man being guided by societal norms... a child [should] have no other guide than his own reason by the time he is educated” (Gianoutsos 9). While Wollstonecraft does not disagree with every aspect of Rousseau’s philosophies, she opposes this specific assertion in the statement, “I do not believe that a private education can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it” (Wollstonecraft 19). Therefore, each author lends a different perspective to be explored in application.

Maria Edgeworth puts this argument into context within Book 3 of *Belinda* and explores the connotations of Rousseau’s model through Clarence Hervey’s pursuit of educating Rachel. She intentionally informs the reader that his inspiration for doing so originates from his readings of Rousseau and disdain for the shallow women around him. He therefore searches for an

impressionable young woman to become his wife and discovers Rachel in a secluded cottage, living with her grandmother. Intrigued by her beauty, Hervey visits consistently until discovering Rachel's grandmother has become extremely ill. Edgeworth establishes the plausibility of Hervey conducting this experiment by the grandmother's explanation that her, "only comfort is, I have bred Rachel up in innocence; I have never sent her to a boarding school...In this cottage she has lived with me, away from all the world...She is innocence itself" (Edgeworth 334). Therefore, with Rousseau's thoughts of, "naturalism as a guide to education" (Gianoutsos 9) considered, the foundation for Hervey's social experiment is primed for commentary to be revealed in the outcome of such a pursuit.

Hervey's attempts to groom Rachel into a suitable bride fail, and Edgeworth clearly sides with Wollstonecraft in the necessary methods of education. As is consistent with the criticism proposed by Deborah Weiss of her critiques on the presentation of Wollstonecraft's philosophy rather than its actual message, Edgeworth does not appear to condemn Rousseau's assertions as much as their practical application. Clarence Hervey's intentions are questioned with the consistent subtlety of the rest of the text. For example, as he decides, "the name of Rachel he could not endure, and he thought it so unsuited to her, that he could scarcely believe it belongs to her" (Edgeworth 337) the audience is made to question whether he is truly attempting to form a virtuous woman, or if he is creating a personalized fantasy. Also, since Rousseau's philosophy is typically in regards to early education of impressionable children, rather than an adolescent woman, it is suspect Hervey would be truly able to adhere to Rousseau's outline at all. His attempts despite this reveal extreme hubris and the unwitting progression to make Rachel reliant upon him, rather than to transform her into a virtuous wife. Book 3 of *Belinda* therefore questions the practicality of Rousseau's suggestions as well as their effectiveness on the

betterment of society, as this situation quickly becomes detrimental to both Clarence Hervey and Rachel alike.

Jeanine M. Britton discusses the particular significance of the name given to Rachel in the article, “Theorizing Character in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda*” and uncovers an important allusion for the context of *Belinda*’s Book Three. The theme of women’s education is emphasized by the novel’s, “engagement with *Paul et Virginie* through Edgeworth’s Virginia St Pierre, whose subplot serves as a counternarrative that must be overcome in order for *Belinda*’s plot to reach its end in a predicted marriage with Clarence Hervey” (Britton 435). Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s novel published in 1788, *Paul et Virginie*, is primarily about children who grow up in the country, away from the influence of society. Upon their eventual integration into city life, they are met with personal ruin, thus reflecting Saint Pierre’s Rousseauist ideals and distaste for society (Godden 561). By intentionally referencing this work, Edgeworth not only suggests that Hervey is attempting to emulate the secluded and pastoral heroine without regard for the reality of his situation; she immediately reveals that his pursuit is destined for tragedy.

This sequence of Hervey’s ill-conceived experiment highlights the responsibility of men for the miseducation, and therefore, the bad behavior of women. Wollstonecraft states that, “the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband” (Wollstonecraft 26). Likewise, Edgeworth illustrates the unrealistic quality of one individual completely sharpening the other to become virtuous. Instead, education akin to *Belinda*’s upbringing in the country, or a perfected model of Saint Pierre’s *Virginie*, must replace the mandates for women to superficially please men in order for true societal change to occur.

Reformations must first, therefore, be made of male expectation in order to allow the full reformation of women's education, a sentiment echoed within Lady Delacour's failed marriage, Rachel's inability to form a companionate marriage with Clarence Hervey, and Belinda's ultimate "making" of him.

Wollstonecraft's distinct challenging of society, as well as this specific plotline of *Belinda* would also inspire the interrogation of women's education in later nineteenth century works. A notable example in close proximity is Jane Austen's 1814 publication: *Mansfield Park*. In this novel, Austen discusses themes of colonialism (as Sharon Smith's article explains was also prominent within preliminary drafts of *Belinda*) and the effects of wealth on society.

The most direct correlations between this novel and Edgeworth's, however, arise from their similar juxtapositions of character. This may be observed within the contrast between Mary Crawford and Fanny Price and its similarities to that of Lady Delacour and Belinda. As described in the article, "Mansfield Park: Three Problems" by Joel C. Weinsheimer, "Fanny is reserved, humble, and obedient; Mary vivacious, often vain, and irreverent of authority" (Weinsheimer 185). Austen's characterizations are therefore in complete agreement with the observations conceptualized in *Belinda*. Despite this, Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* is not a regurgitation of Edgeworth's morality novel as she contributes complexity to the conversation; Mary Crawford is not the epitome of flaws and bad behavior just as Fanny is not the idealized modest heroine. Weinsheimer even outlines their complete equality and asserts that, "Mary stands as an alternative mode of conduct which, formally considered, is neither superior nor inferior to that of Fanny" (Weinsheimer 188).

A second subversion presented by Austen is the allusion to Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* and the resulting commentary on women's education. Unlike the clear connection drawn by

Rachel's name in *Belinda* and Hervey's partial attempt to recreate the philosophy of the novel, *Mansfield Park* presents this subplot in a natural way throughout the story. For example, Fanny is positioned in almost total seclusion within the family's estate during her upbringing and Edmund assumes the role of educator without intention. She therefore emerges as an introverted woman with simple, non-materialistic aspirations. Whether her marriage to Edmund should be seen as a success is debated within literary conversations, but the inspiration from Edgeworth is clearly demonstrated through the respective portrayals of *Mansfield Park*'s female cast throughout the story. This novel also presents similar critiques on early education and male responsibility for women's bad behavior in a new and contributing way.

To be thorough in the conversation of these authors' context and their intentions, however, it must be remembered that these early nineteenth century novels cannot be perceived as radical calls to modify the social order. On the contrary, British reformers "sought to ameliorate the condition of the sex, not to alter positions between the sexes" and Wollestonecraft concedes several points akin to this assertion (Jane 295). This is observed in the following passage from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

"Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature" (Wollestonecraft 20).

While Edgeworth does use *Belinda* as an appeal for better opportunity of virtue amongst women, it must not be suggested that her purpose is for true

equality between the sexes in every regard. This distinction is the protofeminist lens necessary to accurately grasp her critique of Clarence Hervey and society as a whole.

These caveats often disappoint readers of the 21st century, as even the famous progressivism of Mary Wollstonecraft bends to patriarchal values that are reflected in succeeding works such as Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*. It is essential, however, to consider the fact that these women are products of the society they aim to critique. Their philosophies should not be lamented for their concessions to the patriarchal authority, but celebrated for the intellect utilized in articulating new definitions of women's place in marriage, motherhood and society. The cooperation of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Belinda* allow women, such as Jane Austen, to expand upon calls for reformation and provoke thought in society.

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