

The myth of the ideal in belinda



In *Belinda* by Maria Edgeworth, portrayals of gender and womanhood have crucial and complex roles. In addition to the binary it asserts between Lady Delacour and Lady Anne Percival, the novel also provides a young generation of female characters, namely Belinda and Virginia, whose characters cause notions of womanhood to be questioned and altered, since they are growing into these constructs with certain implications. Through all of these female characters and their positions and development throughout, Edgeworth depicts traditional ideas of the domestic woman as unrealistic and impractical, as the narrative displays the attributes of independence and a strong sense of self through Lady Delacour's personality and growth.

Lady Delacour's character starts out as dramatic and defiant, and does not necessarily relinquish these traits entirely by the conclusion. Although she was known for being dissipated, Lady Delacour had a certain timeless and uncanny charm that defied the usual laws of fashionable society, and outlived her transition from youth into womanhood; she "continued to be admired as a fashionable *bel esprit*" beyond the novelty of her appearance in society (Edgeworth 8). Much of this perception still characterizes Lady Delacour in the close of the novel, but in the beginning it is given a more artificial air and exaggerated in a way that portrays her not only as a spectacle, but also certain times, as a caricature. Interestingly, this occurs in both feminine and masculine ways, which introduces gender ambiguity and complexity. For example, when initially revealing her condition to Belinda, Lady Delacour, "with a species of fury, wiped the paint from her face, and returning to Belinda, held the candle so as to throw the light full upon her

livid features,” which seems deliberately theatrical, and she also cross-dresses with Harriot Freke for the duel (Edgeworth 53).

However, in every manner in which Lady Delacour makes herself into a spectacle, she does so in order to act out against the gendered society and the possibility of being subjected by a man and confined to domesticity. Harriet’s character serves as an antithesis of traditional domestic womanhood, and as a potential anarchical force. Lady Delacour is drawn to Harriot’s defiance of convention and her independence, and her loneliness attracted her to Harriot’s façade of genuine camaraderie. Lady Delacour is simultaneously self-conscious about her ability to be a good wife and resentful about her husband’s claims that he is “ not a man to be governed by a wife,” which both fuel her withdrawal from any kind of domestic lifestyle (Edgeworth 66). In not realizing the destructive capacity of Harriot’s character, Lady Delacour clings to her friendship and lets herself be guided by Freke’s principals, due partially to her own anxieties about living in the gendered world. The beginning conveys that while Lady Delacour is a corrupt character, it is partially a result of her past misfortunes and her attempts to not be subjected by convention. In such attempts, which are manifest in her lifestyle in which she is admired and gossiped about, Lady Delacour objectifies herself.

As a direct opposite, Lady Percival embodies ideas of domestic happiness and exudes these into the home and lives of her family members. The introduction of Lady Anne Percival, when Edgeworth first describes her children, “ who all turned their healthy, rosy, intelligent faces toward the door,” offers a stark contrast to Lady Delacour’s household (Edgeworth 191).

It is especially important that one of these children is Helena, the daughter of Lady Delacour who she was unable to mother and nurture. However, Edgeworth's tone in describing the Percival household is more simplistic, which speaks not only of the simplicity of their domestic happiness, but also of the characters themselves. The fact that the children are all rendered alike—or even interchangeable—shows the undiscerning nature of the household; Also, to describe them as “ healthy, rosy, intelligent” is strange because of the parallel adjectives which are somewhat dissimilar. The words themselves seem to follow in a rote way, and therefore, are given a degree of satire. Further, Edgeworth attributes the concept of an automaton to Lady Percival when she describes how “ the unconstrained cheerfulness of Lady Anne Percival spoke a mind at ease” (Edgeworth 192)/ The cheerfulness being unconstrained is not only unnatural, but also shows an element of undiscerning acceptance, which the characters often praise. In contrast with Lady Delacour's mind, which is anything but “ at ease,” this description may come across as comforting through its tranquility, but for any mind to be proclaimed utterly “ at ease” denotes a lack of humanity or perceptibility.

It becomes clear from the general opinion of the people that Edgeworth mocks this society's ideal concept of domestic wife and mother; the narrative structure belies the impossibility of the ideal nature of Lady Anne Percival to exist as she first appears. Every person who knows or meets Lady Anne Percival, excepting Lady Delacour in the beginning, esteems her very highly and believe her to be the ideal wife and mother and therefore, ideal women. In fact, even Lady Delacour, following her reform, thinks kindly of her as well. People overarchingly find Lady Anne to be sensible, kind and to

be learned enough to assert opinions and thoughts. Although Clarence Hervey is struck by her “essential charm of beauty” and her “expression of happiness,” she even renders an undiscerning quality upon him, which is identified by inability to distinguish “Whether her eyes were large or small, blue or hazel,” and “the colour of her hair” (Edgeworth 191). Compared against Lady Delacour’s innate command to admire her, this seems notably less worthy. Clarence, however, seems relieved and at ease because of this, and in effect, “his heart was immediately in her favor” (Edgeworth 191). Soon afterwards, he is “struck with the intelligent countenance” of Helena, without knowing who she is (Edgeworth 193). A direct juxtaposition is set up between anyone having to do with Lady Percival setting a mind at ease, and any connection with Lady Delacour “striking” a person, and causing the necessity to think more; Such is even the case with Lady Margaret Delacour, even though she is not biologically related to Lady Delacour. Lady Margaret Delacour seems more dynamic and opinionated than anyone else at “The Family Party” in this section. When Lady Percival speaks, she tends to make kind and open-minded statements, but they also are in sync with the kind of woman she is and that men feel comfortable with. She tells Clarence that “Women, who have met with so many admirers, seldom meet with many friends” (Edgeworth 204) which is likely the view held by faithful wives, to ensure the domestic tranquility.

Lady Percival is not a bad character, however she is lacking many dimensions that would make her come across as more realistic. When discussing Mr. Vincent as a prospective husband with Belinda, she advises her “As we cannot alter the common law of custom, and as we cannot

render the world less gossiping, or less censorious, we must not expect always to avoid censure; all we can do is never to deserve it” (Edgeworth 296). This advice is not altogether bad, since Lady Anne accounts for the fact that there will be unfair judgments from people, but she still does not account for the fact that good people are capable of imperfections which may provoke or deserve censure. She has certain theories, but they are always stated calmly and usually always predict or assume the positive outcome. For instance, when she and Lady Margaret Delacour are speaking about younger Lady Delacour, she states “ when she is tired of the insipid taste of other pleasures, she will have a higher relish for those of domestic life, which will be new and fresh to her” (Edgeworth 206). This proves to be largely true, aside from the fact that Lady Delacour never is as effectively domesticated at Lady Anne and the pleasures of domestic life for Lady Delacour end up perhaps being satisfying because she is still the witty and intelligent woman who is scheming surprises and fixing wrongs behind the scenes. This ending where Lady Delacour finds Captain Sutherland and negotiates both engagements is important, because it shows that, although domestic pleasures are one dimension of her new life which have brought her great joy, there are still other dimensions, seemingly just as significant.

The reader is also given glimpses at many undesirable dimensions of Lady Delacour’s nature when she was under the belief that she was dying, such as bitterness, selfishness, lack of trust, and extreme jealousy, which all caused her to turn away on Belinda. Her treatment toward Belinda when she makes accusations shows that she is not always guided by the right principles and circumstances, but it also shows that, in spite of her sometimes over-

dramatized character, she is like an actual person. Lady Percival, on the other hand, does not seem to make any mistakes until the end makes it evident that she should not have advocated for the marriage between Belinda and Vincent. Having been the only and only mistake she made throughout the novel, the nature of this misguidance is significant; since Lady Anne stands so unwaveringly for domestic happiness, it is ironic that the area in which she is wrong is that area precisely. There are also remarks she makes through the novel, which are unremarkable in themselves, but take on greater irony when considered with the ending, such as “ A woman who has an opportunity of seeing her lover in private society, in domestic life, has infinite advantages; for if she has any sense and he has any sincerity, the real character of both may perhaps be developed” (Edgeworth 228). In general, this idea seems reasonable, but when considered with Belinda and Vincent, it becomes less strictly a rule and more of an ideal that one may hope for, given the particular circumstances. Belinda is considered to have sufficient sense, and Mr. Vincent is certainly sincere, however, her theory is only certainly true in a society where everything is so ideal that everybody receives what they deserve and unforeseen situations do not exist. This mistaken prediction points to Lady Percival’s singular knowledge of idealism and not the less desirable circumstances of reality, and also of her lack of experience in the world. Lady Delacour has lived and traveled and learned a great deal from her independence while Lady Percival does not seem to show knowledge of the ways of the world, perhaps because in promoting domestic felicity, she relinquishes all independence.

The importance of the necessity of independence in order for a woman to glean a greater and more thorough understanding of the world is nowhere more prominent than in Virginia, Clarence's experiment. Belinda, while she is not completely knowledgeable about the world yet, has lived a reasonable amount for her age and continues to develop from thinking critically and making the decisions that suit her. Virginia, on the other hand, has been locked up in a house and not allowed even to look at pictures, let alone venture out and learn the real meaning of anything. They are directly compared since both are potential wives for Clarence Hervey and both are young and beautiful. Also, the novel-long contrasts and comparisons between Lady Delacour and Lady Percival set the stage for Belinda and Virginia to be seen in relation to one another. Virginia's naivete has already been established for the reader, particularly when Clarence offers her diamond and she responds with "They are pretty, sparkling things, what are they? Of what use are they" (Edgeworth 447). Although Clarence is charmed with her unjadedness at this point, it becomes clear that he cannot be truly in love with somebody who understands so little and who does not know any concept of relativity or society to guide their thoughts and ideas. This becomes especially poignant when Clarence regrets his obligation, but must not go back on it, but Virginia only plans to marry him so that he does not call her "perfidious, ungrateful Virginia" which is her main anxiety (Edgeworth 560).

The inability of the two to communicate and Virginia's extreme unfounded fears display the dangers of a woman who is not independent or educated. However, Virginia's lack of understanding is the fault of her grandmother's

wishes and the fault of Clarence, in a sense. The part of the blame that belongs to Clarence was imposed upon Virginia because of society's ironic obsession with absolute sincerity and lack of artifice, which manifested itself in Clarence's desire for such a wife. Society's fixation on such a woman is ironic because this society simultaneously forces women to such extremes as the initial Lady Delacour; certain women find that their only values in such a society are to be beautiful and fashionable, although "the reign of beauty is proverbially short, and fashion often capriciously deserts her favourites, even before nature withers their charms" (Edgeworth 9). Such is why the reader can easily forgive Lady Delacour for placing such emphasis on these superficial values early in the book.

This paradox in society is the likely reason that Lady Anne Percival is seen to be the ideal woman among the men who meet her. While Lady Anne is not a compromise of these ideas, she is extremely peaceful and complacent as merely a housewife. Lady Anne is nowhere near the extreme of Virginia, in terms of lack of autonomy, however she does not display any desire to develop. Through her many conversations with Belinda she does show that she has acceptable understanding and sense, many of these conversations revolve around Belinda's marriage prospects. Lady Anne does not seem subjected, and this is perhaps the reason that she is a stagnant and unrealistic character. The men of this society respond very positively to a woman who makes them feel as at ease as she does and has some ability to think, yet does not have any ambitions of taking on more independence or more world views. As a character, Lady Anne is identifiable as a wife and mother, while Lady Delacour is an interesting woman in her own right. Even

after Lady Delacour reconciles with her husband and is reformed, she retains her wit and her spirited nature, but channels these properties for humane purposes. For example, when lady Delacour desires to restore the old gardener's money to him after the aloe incident, she tells Lord Delacour that " though I know it is rather ungracious to dictate the form and fashion of a favour. But as my dictatorship in all human probability cannot last much longer," she would prefer to do something for him. Even when lady Delacour is anxious about her encroaching death, she jokes spiritedly at her own cost.

Belinda's reactions to Lady Delacour are significant through the course of the book. She may be seen as the moral center of the novel, and one of the important opinions throughout. In this way, it is crucial to notice that Belinda, though she esteems Lady Percival very highly, develops a far stronger friendship with Lady Delacour. This stronger and closer friendship is due to the fact that Lady Delacour exhibits her immense ability to grow and evolve in response to experience. In fact, even Belinda is not always able to understand Lady Delacour, such as when she cannot " entirely enter into those feelings, which thus made Lady Delacour invent wit against herself and anticipate caricatures," but she appreciates her open-mindedness and her dedication to their friendship (Edgeworth 352). Lady Delacour plays a far larger role in the novel than Lady Percival's role, which pales in comparison. Also, Lady Delacour arranges Belinda's future nicely for her while, mistakenly, Lady Percival's advice could have potentially been destructive. The fact that even Belinda is sometimes baffled by Lady Delacour, and that Lady Delacour has outlived the usual reign of fashionable people in society, and has maintained her admirers even through her reform, demonstrates

that the sort of womanhood she represents is ideal. Lady Delacour remains spirited, witty and fascinating, even while she develops her ability to be a wife and mother, and retains an air of enigma. Through experiencing her independence and her own opinions, which allows her to have many dimensions and to be consistently dynamic and interesting, Lady Delacour shows that women can develop their internal lives and be domestic as well.