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 **The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda: Maria Edgeworth's Female Philosopher**

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Eighteenth Century Fiction

University of Toronto Press

Volume 19, Number 4, Summer 2007

pp. 441-461

10.1353/ecf.2007.0027

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda:
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Deborah Weiss (bio)

The radicalism of Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of the social, political, and economic structures of her day has been beyond dispute since she achieved notoriety in the early 1790s. Maria Edgeworth, on the other hand, has never been considered a radical thinker despite the fact that she was as critical as Wollstonecraft of her society's gender codes and their effect on the moral and intellectual lives of women. At the level of theory, as well, Edgeworth resembled Wollstonecraft in her rejection of the period's essentialist understanding of gender. Like Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth took Enlightenment concepts of the cultural formation of the individual—ideas used by radical male thinkers such as William Godwin to argue for the universal equality of "mankind"—and applied these concepts to the formation of feminine identity.¹ Both believed—radically for the time—that female attitudes and behaviours were the product of cultural, rather than natural influences. As Edgeworth's "first gentleman" in *Letters to Literary Ladies* remarks, "woman, as well as man, may be called a bundle of habits."² **[End Page 441]**

What is remarkable about Edgeworth is that, despite her philosophical kinship with Wollstonecraft, her writings garnered her success, esteem, and a favourable international reputation. To this day, she is not seen as an agitator, but rather as a mild reformist, a writer whose support of rational domesticity and the improvement of female education did not challenge dominant social structures. Even though Marilyn Butler recognized Edgeworth's extraordinary approach to gender thirty years ago in the groundbreaking *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*—Butler describes Edgeworth as "the most thorough-going individualist writing outside the Jacobin movement"—most scholars have not followed suit.³ Instead, critics such as Julia Douthwaite, G.J. Barker-Benfield, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, and Kathryn Kirkpatrick have viewed Edgeworth's attempts to assert women's capacity for reason and self-regulation as inherently conservative.⁴ Even Claudia Johnson, whose *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* argued for a wider political interpretation of late eighteenth-century novels by women, characterizes Edgeworth as a timid reformist unwilling to directly confront the dominant social system.⁵

Thus, the radicalism of Edgeworth's understanding of gender has generally been overlooked owing to what scholars have taken to be the timidity of her approach to reform. What I suggest is that this interpretation of Edgeworth is based on a confusion about her **[End Page 442]** investment in pragmatism. Unlike Wollstonecraft, whom Edgeworth critiques obliquely in *Belinda* for her disruptive devotion to theory without regard to application, Edgeworth's interest in reform was founded on a deep belief in the unity of theory and practice. As a philosophical pragmatist, Edgeworth was able to launch her attack on her culture's debilitating gender codes in a carefully targeted fashion, using theory to identify the precise causes of social problems while at the same time employing the generic resources of the novel to put those theories into practice in the form of psychologically complex characters manoeuvring through a difficult and largely realistic moral world.

The way to a more accurate assessment of Edgeworth's challenges to prevailing social codes is, I think, to go back to Butler's positioning of her as a writer in direct conversation with Enlightenment moral philosophy. Two more recent scholars also offer useful approaches for thinking about Edgeworth in this vein. Mitzi Myers, in her essay "My Art Belongs to Daddy? Thomas Day, Maria Edgeworth, and the Pre-Texts of *Belinda*: Women Writers and Patriarchal Authority," discusses Edgeworth as a gender theorist working to counter masculine fabrications of the feminine in works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Day.⁶ And Clíona Ó Gallchoir, in her recent book *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation*, makes a larger argument, using Edgeworth to demonstrate that gender should be central to our understanding of the Enlightenment.⁷ In this article I have tried to take more precise stock of the nature and significance of Edgeworth's engagement with Enlightenment thought by submitting *Belinda* to an analysis that combines Myers's method of careful philosophical reading with Ó Gallchoir's larger concern...

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1 Resolute in his belief in the impact of the environment on the individual, Godwin entitled chap. 4 of *Political Justice* "The Characters of Men Originate in their External Circumstances." William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (1793; London: Penguin Books, 1985), 97.

2 Maria Edgeworth, "Letters from a Gentleman to His Friend," in *Letters to Literary Ladies* (1795; London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 22.



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