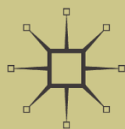


Selected
Tales
for Children
and
Young
People
maria edgeworth

a new critical edition of the classic texts
edited by **susan manly**



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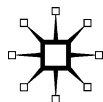
Maria Edgeworth

Edited with an Introduction by

Susan Manly

Reader in English, University of St Andrews, Scotland

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First published 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-0-230-36142-3

ISBN 978-1-137-34120-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-34120-4

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

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Acknowledgements

I thank Matthew Grenby and Lynne Vallone for instigating the Palgrave Classics of Children's Literature series and for their valuable editorial advice. Many thanks to Marilyn Butler, who first prompted my interest in Edgeworth and generously shared her expertise and enthusiasm with me; and thanks to David Butler for making archival material available to me. I am grateful for the funding provided by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, which enabled me to read original correspondence in the Edgeworth Papers archive held at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin; and for the assistance given by Special Collections staff at the University of St Andrews, the National Library of Ireland and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. I thank my colleagues at St Andrews, particularly Susan Sellers, Lorna Hutson, Gill Plain, Nicholas Roe, and Jane Stabler, for their encouragement. Thanks above all to Angus Stewart, for technical help as well as moral support.

Introduction

Life and Work

Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) is widely regarded as a pioneer of children's literature. Edgeworth was an innovative writer of numerous tales and novellas for children and young people, whose work was enjoyed by generations of juvenile readers from the late eighteenth until the early twentieth century. She was also the author of *Practical Education* (1798), an important manual on early education that broke away from the speculative approach of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the class-specificity of John Locke (both of whom focused their efforts on the education of boys) to create an experimental, scientific pedagogy, based on observations and anecdotes drawn from the experience of bringing up real girls and boys (eight of her half-siblings from her father's third marriage).¹

Edgeworth's prolific writing for and about children was grounded in a sympathy for young people strengthened by her own turmoil in early childhood: she lost her mother when she was five years old, and her father (a virtual stranger to her) remarried within a few months. Her response to this emotional trauma was to behave so badly that she was sent away to school at seven, and did not return to live amongst the family until she was fourteen, having experienced her stepmother's loss in addition to her first bereavement. From this point in 1782 until her death in 1849, Edgeworth spent most of her time at the family home in Edgeworthstown in Ireland, not far from Longford, where she became her father's estate manager as well as taking a leading role in the education of the younger children (in total there were

¹ John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), focuses on the education of young gentlemen, although it contains much generally applicable advice that Edgeworth incorporates in her own educational theory; Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or Education* (1762) focuses mainly on the fictional boy of the title.

twenty-one Edgeworth children by his four wives). Besides *Practical Education* and her tales for younger readers, Edgeworth wrote many novels and essays about Ireland, and was acknowledged by Sir Walter Scott as a pioneer of the national tale. These include perhaps her best-known work, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), as well as *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), and *Ormond* (1817). She wrote a number of witty, complex fictions about women as authors and independent beings, often subtly reflecting on women's exclusion from public life, and on the politics of marriage and sexual liberation, including *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795/1798), *Belinda* (1801), *Leonora* (1806), and *Helen* (1834). In addition, she wrote *Whim for Whim* (1798), a comic play focusing on political subversion in London and based on real events involving the French Queen and the parliamentary opposition; *Professional Education* (1809), about the preparation of young men for careers in the professions; *Patronage* (1814), a long, ambitious tale about two contrasting families; and *Harrington* (1817), which deals with anti-semitism in 1770s London.

This is not an exhaustive catalogue: Edgeworth was a productive and wide-ranging thinker and writer. In her heyday (1800–14), she was the most commercially successful and prestigious novelist in Britain and Ireland: the £2,100 she earned from *Patronage* trebles the £700 Scott earned from *Waverley* (1814), which John Gibson Lockhart thought unprecedented, and was seven times what Jane Austen earned from *Emma* (1816). Edgeworth herself calculated that in all she made more than £11,000 from her writing. Her reputation has suffered since, in part because of her choice of form, the philosophic or moral tale, which became unfashionable as readers began to expect a more uniform naturalism. With the publication of the 12-volume Pickering & Chatto *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (1999/2003), however, and distinguished editions of individual works, as well as fresh insights in critical studies, Edgeworth's achievements as a writer and novelist of ideas are once again being recognized.²

² Marilyn Butler's *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) remains the fullest treatment of Edgeworth's life to date, and is the main source for this biographical sketch.

The tales in this edition are drawn from four collections published over eight years. Four of the tales are from the first edition of *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) ('The Little Dog Trusty', 'Lazy Lawrence', 'The Bracelets', and 'The Purple Jar'); one from the much expanded third edition of 1800 ('Waste Not, Want Not'); one, 'Rosamond's Day of Misfortunes', from *Early Lessons* (1801); one story, 'The Good Aunt', from *Moral Tales* (1801) and one, 'The Grateful Negro', from *Popular Tales* (1804).³ While 'The Little Dog Trusty', a simple and very short tale, was meant for children aged between three and eight, most of the stories in *The Parent's Assistant* were intended for readers aged between eight and twelve, while *Moral Tales* was aimed at readers of around thirteen upwards. *Popular Tales* was presented as a work primarily for those not usually considered 'polite', and therefore relatively unengaged by tales centring on people of wealth and fashion, but it was widely read by adolescents and young adults.

Education, Enlightenment, and the 'Moral Tale'

The author of five major works for and about children between 1796 and 1804, Edgeworth is known for her realism, her technical virtuosity, her psychological acuteness in depicting the thoughts and feelings of children, her secularism, and her commitment to the increased diffusion of knowledge. Edgeworth began writing in the wake of Immanuel Kant's essay of 1784, 'What is

³ There has been some discussion about the publication date of the first edition of *The Parent's Assistant*, since it is advertised in the first edition of Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), but the likeliest date is 1796; the second edition appeared later the same year. See Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 159. *Practical Education* was nominally jointly authored by Maria Edgeworth and her father. Letter evidence, however, suggests that it was very largely her project, and mainly written by her: see Edgeworth Papers, National Library of Ireland MS 10,166/7/161, for instance, in which Richard Lovell Edgeworth refers to it as 'Maria's great work', and hopes that it will 'meet with as favourable a reception as her other works' (letter dated 17 July 1797). Her father contributed the chapters on grammar and mechanics, and material for the chapters on geography, geology and arithmetic, and her brother, Lovell, offered material for the chapter on chemistry; but she is responsible for the rest.

Enlightenment?': his precept for this age of enlightenment was 'Have courage to use your *own* reason', and he envisaged the result as '*man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity*'.⁴ Echoing these ideas, James Keir, one of Maria Edgeworth's father's close friends and fellow Lunar thinker,⁵ celebrated the year 1789—the first year of the French Revolution—as distinguished for

the sudden and extensive impulse which the human mind has received, and which has extended its active influence to every object of human pursuits, political, commercial, and philosophical. The diffusion of a general knowledge, and of a taste for science, over all classes of men [...] seems to be the characteristic feature of the present age.⁶

Chiming with Richard Price's assertion, also in 1789, that the Revolution was the latest sign of a 'diffusion of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error', Keir linked the democratization of knowledge to social transformation: 'In this age, the flame that passes over all kindles the sparks of genius wherever they happen to lurk.' Knowledge was no longer to be 'confined to public schools, or to particular classes of men'; nor was it to be confined to adults.⁷ Keir responded enthusiastically the same year to *Sandford and Merton*, a children's book by another Edgeworth family friend, Thomas Day, describing it as 'more likely to be of

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (1970; London: Penguin Books, 2009), 1.

⁵ Richard Lovell Edgeworth was a member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham in the late 1760s and 1770s, although the group retained a lasting influence on him as a thinker and inventor. Other prominent members of the Lunar circle included Erasmus Darwin, Josiah Wedgwood, James Watt, Joseph Priestley and James Keir, all of them committed to science, invention, and free enquiry. For an excellent account of the Society and its influence, see Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: The Friends who Made the Future, 1730–1810* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

⁶ Keir, *The First Part of a Dictionary of Chemistry* (Birmingham & London: Printed by Pearson & Rollason for Elliot & Kay, 1789), iii.

⁷ Keir, *Dictionary of Chemistry*, pp. iv, iii, cited by Mitzi Myers, 'Aufklärung für Kinder? Maria Edgeworth and the Genders of Knowledge Genres', *Women's Writing* 2.2 (1995), 113–40: 113–14; Price, *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London: T. Cadell, 1789), 41–2.

solid service than any that has been published. It is of little use to write for grown-up people; their acquired habits will generally prevail: but young, unformed minds may be influenced into action'.⁸ Maria Edgeworth's work, too, is grounded in the conviction that reading can play a part in encouraging children to be innovative, independent thinkers, and that they can thus be part of the expanding public sphere invoked by Kant, Keir and Price.

Contemporaries recognized the extent to which Edgeworthian education allied itself with enlightenment and enquiry, and some expressed disquiet at the secular moral principles that this suggested.⁹ For Sarah Trimmer the secularism of *The Parent's Assistant*, Maria Edgeworth's first book for children, undermined its usefulness. To the suggestion in its Preface that gaining a distinct knowledge of children's minds through observation might be considered a 'treasure of natural history',¹⁰ Trimmer retorts: 'Enough may be known of the infant mind to enable parents to educate their children both for Time and Eternity, without their being able to ascertain such facts as these.' Many of the stories, Trimmer felt, neglected opportunities to offer religious education to their readers: 'Lazy Lawrence', for example, depicted Jem's honesty and industry without reference to 'Christian motives', while Lawrence's idleness was not pointed out as an instance of 'sinfulness'. 'Old Poz', meanwhile, in which a cantankerous but good-hearted old magistrate is gently mocked by his daughter, is interpreted by Trimmer as actively subversive, a satire on established state authority: 'Children [...] should be taught, as their catechism directs, to "honour and obey those who are in authority under the king"'.¹¹

⁸ Keir, letter to Day, 29 September 1789, cited by Myers, 'Aufklärung für Kinder?', 114. Myers makes a strong argument for reading Edgeworth as a writer bringing the values and ideas of enlightenment to children.

⁹ See for instance, the review in the *British Critic* XV (1800), 210; and Sarah Trimmer, *Guardian of Education*, 5 vols (London: J. Hatchard, 1802–6), I, 2; II, 171.

¹⁰ Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Preface to *The Parent's Assistant* (London: J. Johnson, 1796), v: Edgeworth is quoting from Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, which proposes this close scientific attention to the growth of a child's mind.

¹¹ Review of *Parent's Assistant* in *Guardian of Education* II (1803), 353–60, 415–18: 355, 356, 415.

Maria Edgeworth's interest in writing for children and encouraging children as thinkers was firmly rooted in family projects and interests of long standing, beginning with Richard Lovell Edgeworth's enthusiasm for Rousseau's scheme of natural education in the late 1760s and early 1770s, which led him (disastrously) to attempt to create a real-life 'Emile' in his eldest son. More productive was the 'child register' begun in 1776 by Honora Sneyd Edgeworth, Richard Lovell Edgeworth's second wife and Maria Edgeworth's first stepmother, in which she collected children's conversations as a means of establishing how they thought. In the 1790s, as she was preparing *Practical Education* and helping to bring up a large family of step-brothers and -sisters, Maria Edgeworth revived these child registers. They were an important part of the experimental approach to children's learning which was to form the foundation of her educational writing, and which informs the realistic child characters of *The Parent's Assistant* and later collections of tales for the young.

Edgeworth began telling stories while still at school in Derby (a particularly vivid one told of 'an adventurer who had a mask made of the dried skin taken from a dead man's face, which he put on when he wished to be disguised'), but her earliest published work dates from 1787.¹² Her first tales for children include the autobiographically based 'The Bracelets', written in 1787, and a saga called 'The Freeman Family', inspired by a series of stories about a large family of adventurous children, made up by Richard Lovell Edgeworth and told to his children in 1788–9. This was never published, although parts of it were used for her later novel for adults, *Patronage*. Between finishing the first draft of 'The Freeman Family' and beginning a second, Edgeworth began work on what were to become her first set of *Parent's Assistant* tales, all written between 1790 and 1795, adding eight new tales, written between 1796 and 1800, for the third edition of 1800. Like the unfinished Freeman saga, Edgeworth's tales began their textual life in oral form, as stories written on a slate, read aloud, and adjusted according to the Edgeworth children's comments, as well as editorial advice from other family members, principally

¹² Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 55; Frances Edgeworth, *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth*, 3 vols (London: printed by Joseph Masters & Son, 1867), I, 10.

her father.¹³ She often solicited ideas and suggestions from family and friends as a basis for her tales: a letter of 1797 to her cousin Sophy Ruxton, for instance, asks for ‘any stories or anecdotes from the age of 5 to 15’ for the third edition of *The Parent’s Assistant*.¹⁴ In 1780, her father and first stepmother had jointly written a privately printed collection of stories about two children, Harry and Lucy, making their first discoveries about the world outside their home, and Edgeworth later incorporated and added to these in her *Early Lessons* (1801), writing sequels in 1814 and 1825.¹⁵ In the years when Edgeworth was writing the first *Parent’s Assistant*, there were at least two children in the family aged between ten and thirteen, so the idea of writing for older children and adolescents naturally suggested itself: we can see *Moral Tales* (1801) as growing organically out of her first collection.¹⁶ At the same time, her father’s fourth marriage in 1798 meant that new infant half-siblings could benefit from the science-rich educational programme in the lightly fictionalized tales of *Early Lessons* (1801), which follow Harry, Lucy, Frank and Rosamond in their first discoveries about the world.

At least six of the *Parent’s Assistant* tales (including two in the current selection) are set in or around Bristol, where the Edgeworth family spent two years. Maria Edgeworth’s father and third stepmother, Elizabeth, and her half-brother Lovell left Ireland for England in early summer 1791 in search of treatment for her half-brother Lovell’s incipient tuberculosis—the disease that had already killed his sister Honora in 1790. They left her at home in charge of her younger half-siblings, ranging in age from two to ten. On 14 October 1791 their father sent for them and for the

¹³ Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 156, 157.

¹⁴ Edgeworth Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 10,166/7/165.

¹⁵ The stories written by Richard and Honora were never published, and only one volume (the second) of this collection of stories, which they called *Practical Education*, was printed. There is no overlap between this earlier collection and the work of educational philosophy of the same title published in 1798.

¹⁶ ‘Mademoiselle Panache’ is an interesting example of a tale that bridged the two collections, beginning in *The Parent’s Assistant* with its characters as small girls, and carrying them through to adulthood in the second part, when it was transferred into *Moral Tales*.

next two years the family lived in Prince's Buildings in Clifton, a fashionable part of Bristol. Regular outings included walks on the Downs, where the children ran about hunting fossils and clambering on rocks, and visits to an excellent library in town.¹⁷ The months when she remained behind in Edgeworthstown and the years in Clifton were clearly important times for Edgeworth as a writer: the children relied on her for tales to keep them entertained and interested, especially in Clifton, where they lived in relatively cramped conditions, and had few toys or books of their own. Many tales were written or incubated during this period.

Edgeworth's writing for children has serious purposes, but it is never unimaginative, and is often infused with humour. Although her chosen form for children was the 'moral tale', this was not the moral tale as generally understood by children's literature critics, Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard for instance, who describe it as strongly didactic in tendency, hostile to fancy, pre-occupied with children's self-correction, and dominated in narrative terms by adult preceptors who 'are almost always present, guiding and admonishing the children, and drawing every possible lesson from what has occurred'.¹⁸ Mitzi Myers rejects this description and points out how inapplicable it is to Edgeworth's tales for children: 'Given the family background, the odd thing about the Edgeworth canon is the comparative dearth of lively, wise father figures and the abundance of powerful maternal figures, some wise and many anything but. Equally surprising perhaps are the numerous orphans, emigrés, and displaced persons.'¹⁹

Meanwhile, Alan Richardson questions the common assumption that moral tales are essentially an attempt to stamp out fairy-tales, the genre often thought of as most imaginative, noting the persistence of fairy-tale motif and plot in Edgeworth's first

¹⁷ Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 105.

¹⁸ Carpenter and Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984; Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 358–60: 359.

¹⁹ Myers, 'Little Girls Lost: Rewriting Romantic Childhood, Righting Gender and Genre', in *Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources*, ed. by Glenn Edward Sadler (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 131–42: 133.

Rosamond story, 'The Purple Jar', with its magically attractive object of desire.²⁰

Edgeworth in fact wrote 'moral tales' for both children and adults, modelled on the French genre of the moral or philosophic tale, as used by Voltaire (François-Marie d'Arouet), Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis and Arnaud Berquin, the latter prominent and important writers for children in the 1780s, when Edgeworth was beginning her career as an author.²¹ Jean-François Marmontel, whose *Contes Moraux* were published in 1763, was particularly influential in forming Edgeworth's sense of the philosophical potential of the genre. Marmontel thought of the tale as primarily a witty often comic form that prompts reflective thought. As Mitzi Myers observes, Edgeworth

self-consciously used the term 'tale' for her fictions not because she is prudish about the novel (the usual explanation), but because she thus signals to contemporary readers the intellectual, argumentative, analytical genre she domesticates, feminizes, and frequently subverts. [...] for a woman writer who wants to be taken seriously and explore serious issues, who values her youthful protagonists and is interested in more about them than who they'll marry, the moral tale offers progressive possibilities.²²

Edgeworth's 'moral tale' was thus vitally connected to her commitment to enlightenment.

The Parent's Assistant and Early Lessons

'The Little Dog Trusty' and 'The Orange-Man', simple tales for very young children, were written in 1790 or 1791. Together with 'The Purple Jar', these stories were published in the first and second

²⁰ Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 116.

²¹ Edgeworth's 'Advertisement' to *Belinda* (1801) insists that it is a 'moral tale', not a novel; and *Harrington* (1817) was similarly conceived: see Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 221–2.

²² Myers, 'Little Girls Lost', 136.

editions of *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), but were transferred to *Early Lessons* in 1801. Both 'The Little Dog Trusty' and 'The Orange-Man' address child readers directly ('Little boys, I advise you, never be afraid to tell the truth; never say, "*stay a minute*," and "*stay a little longer*," but run directly and tell of what you have done that is wrong'); and both end unhappily for one of the two child protagonists. 'The Little Dog Trusty' is focused, as its title suggests, on the issues of trustworthiness and obedience to parental authority, the parity between the submissive, innocent dog and the boy hero, Frank, indicated as the tale closes by the renaming of the dog (which is henceforward also to be called 'Frank').

The disciplinary impulse can be strong in Edgeworth's earliest stories although others, like 'The Bracelets' (written in 1787), present error as something that can help to develop children's moral sense. Edgeworth's own early experiences at the hands of her much admired but strict first step-mother, Honora, and her father, might have prompted the emphasis in these first stories on stern instruction and stringent punishment. Honora's preoccupation with obedience is evident in a manuscript notebook entry that shows her reflecting on the beating of her four-year-old son for refusing to recite vowel sounds, as well as in a letter expressing her conviction that

almost everything that education can give, is to be given before the age of 5 or 6—therefore I think great attention & strictness should be shewn before that age; particularly, if there is anything refractory or rebellious in the disposition, that is the time to repress it, & to substitute good habits, obedience, attention, & respect towards superiors.²³

'The Little Dog Trusty' is true to this authoritarian model of moral education: its hero, Frank, escapes punishment by admitting his culpability in overturning a basin of milk while romping with his brother, but his brother is punished by being 'whipped, till he cried so loud with the pain, that the whole neighbourhood could hear him'. In addition, Robert is made an object of

²³ M.S. Eng.misc. c.895, fol.76, Bodleian Library, Oxford; letter to Mrs Margaret Ruxton, n.d. [?1776], cited in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 47.

disapprobation in order to enforce the lesson for the benefit of neighbouring families (his father renames the dog with the express intention that Robert's dishonesty will be publicized among all the local children when they ask about the dog's name-change).

The story of Trusty, Frank and Robert is drawn from an incident in the Edgeworth household, related in the chapter on truth in *Practical Education*, in which 'H——' (Maria Edgeworth's half-brother Henry) broke a looking-glass while his parents were out: 'As soon as he heard the sound of the returning carriage, he ran and posted himself at the hall door. His father, the moment he got out of the carriage, beheld his erect figure, and pale, but intrepid countenance.' Instead of punishing Henry, or expressing anger on hearing his frank confession, Richard Lovell Edgeworth praised him: 'he would rather all the looking-glasses in his house should be broken, than that one of his children should attempt to make an excuse'. Maria Edgeworth urges parents in such cases to explain to children the 'great disgrace' of falsehood as opposed to the 'slight inconvenience' involved in speaking the truth.²⁴ In contrast, if physical punishment is used to stigmatize lying, children remain in subjection to authority, obedient from fear rather than honourable from the ambition to build and maintain integrity.

In the two Rosamond tales selected for inclusion in this edition, we see Edgeworth moving away from the punitive treatment of error. Edgeworth's endearingly fallible child heroine, Rosamond, is introduced in 'The Purple Jar' (1796), where she is seven; but she returns in further stories in *Early Lessons* (1801), in the *Continuation of Early Lessons* (1814), and finally in *Rosamond: A Sequel* (1821), by which time she is thirteen. The longevity of the character, appearing in tales spanning some 25 years, suggests her popularity and indicates the appeal that this voluble, inquisitive and irrepressible fictional child had for her creator.

As 'The Purple Jar' opens, we are plunged with Rosamond into a busy London shopping street, a world that she has not yet learnt to interpret: 'she saw a great variety of things, of which she did

²⁴ *Practical Education* (1798), ed. by Susan Manly, vol. 11 in *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 12 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), General editors Marilyn Butler, Mitzi Myers & W. J. Mc Cormack, 118.

not know the use, or even the names' (p.6). Despite knowing very little about the objects on sale in milliners' and jewellers' shops, Rosamond avidly admires their displays—'festoons of artificial flowers' and 'pretty baubles'—and urges her mother to buy 'all these pretty things', without pausing to consider what they are for and why they should be desired. When her amused mother asks, 'What, all! Do you wish for them all, Rosamond?' the reply is unselfconsciously and comically prompt: 'Yes, mamma, all' (p.6). Seeing through Rosamond's eyes, we cannot help but empathize with this hedonistic capacity for unthinking consumption. Yet we are also given the mother's gentle interrogation of her daughter's terms, in which she mildly questions Rosamond's superficial judgments of value and tries to prompt her to examine the objects of desire 'more attentively', and to consider redefining worth as usefulness rather than beauty (p.8). When Rosamond is invited to choose between the beautiful purple jar that she admires in a chemist's window and a new pair of shoes to replace her outworn ones, taking into consideration which will conduce most to her happiness, she is ingenious in thinking up plausible reasons for the object of her choice (the jar) and wants her mother to confirm whether she is right. But her mother urges her: 'Nay, my dear, I want you to think for yourself' (p.9). Rather than thinking for her daughter and requiring unreflective obedience, Rosamond's mother encourages the child to consider her reasons: in short, to philosophize.

Edgeworth herself saw Rosamond as 'une petite Raisonneuse', a thinker in the making.²⁵ Rosamond at seven is not yet equipped to make a rational choice, since happiness for her signifies transient sensory pleasure. Reasoning begins here, however, through the child's senses, in true Rousseauvian fashion, since not only is the 'beautiful colour' of the vase, as Rosamond discovers, an illusion created by a vile-smelling liquor, but the choice in its favour means days of pain, limping about in her disintegrating shoes, unable to 'run, dance [or] jump'. Rosamond ends the tale

²⁵ Maria Edgeworth to Ann Taylor, 14 March 1809, Osborne Collection, Toronto Public Library; cited by Mitzi Myers, 'Portrait of the Female Artist as a Young Robin: Maria Edgeworth's Telltale Tailpiece', in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 20 (1996), 230–63: 242.

regretting her misjudgment, but her irrepressible optimism and active desire for self-improvement predominate: 'I am sure—no, not quite sure—but, I hope, I shall be wiser another time' (p.11). Already, Rosamond is learning to consider her terms and observe her own thinking processes. She has in fact been making an experiment, learning from experience, and as Edgeworth emphasized in the second part of *Early Lessons*, trial and error are a necessary part of gaining knowledge and strengthening the reasoning powers:

Harry. But we can try, papa.

Papa. Yes, my dear, that is the only certain method of knowing.²⁶

The glossary included in *Early Lessons* confirms that by 1801 Edgeworth is not greatly interested in enforcing obedience; she is preoccupied instead with 'embodied' learning in which moral ideas are formed through individual experiences and experiments in thinking in real-life situations. When she defines 'conduct', Edgeworth accordingly lays emphasis on this individualized process: 'People, by thinking whether they are going to do right or wrong, can judge and determine how they ought to act: their judgment conducts or leads them. Judging wisely, and acting accordingly, is good conduct; the contrary is bad conduct.' Rosamond's and her mother's conversations are part of this process of forming judgments, as the definition given to 'conversation' also suggests: 'Answering what people ask; listening to what others say; hearing from others what they know, and telling them what we know.'²⁷

Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard consider 'The Purple Jar' to be 'the moral tale at its most banal', and F. J. Harvey Darton wonders at its being so 'unfailingly readable', since he considers its rational mother so repellent. Darton finds Rosamond herself endearing, with 'that illuminating little hesitation about her future goodness' as the tale ends ensuring that she is 'not the

²⁶ *Harry and Lucy* Part II, in *Early Lessons*, ed. by Elizabeth Eger, vol. 12, *Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 107.

²⁷ *Harry and Lucy* Part I, in *Early Lessons: Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, 84.

horrid little prig her mother wished her to be'.²⁸ Mitzi Myers, on the other hand, reads 'The Purple Jar' as having 'liberating potential' and suggests that Edgeworth takes up a 'progressive reformer's stance toward her period's consumerism and fashionable display', depicting the little heroine as capable of a 'rational socialization' that runs counter to contemporary stereotyping of girls and women as intellectually inferior by nature. Rosamond is guided away from being a stereotypical girl, 'seduced by beauty, glamour, and fashion', gaining power over herself.²⁹

The second of the Rosamond tales included here bears out this reading. 'Rosamond's Day of Misfortunes', with its inset story, 'The Robin', amplifies the political resonances present in 'The Purple Jar'. Without losing sight of the comic potential in Rosamond's errors and self-dramatizing tendencies, Edgeworth allows her child reader to think seriously about the benefits and responsibilities of freedom and independence, and to reflect on the just use of superior power. The structure of the tale ingeniously suggests Rosamond's internalization of the lessons she learns from her mother through her re-enactment of her own progress from passivity to self-reliance, with the robin who needs her help allowing her to see herself as others see her. In this tale as in many others, Edgeworth communicates her conviction that it is attention and perseverance, which depend on the determination of the individual, that yield progress. Rosamond's mother neither indulges her nor condemns her for her self-pity and bad temper, instead gently asking her to look at and into herself to analyse her feelings by drawing her towards a mirror so that she can see herself more objectively: 'Look at this cross face [...] is that an agreeable little girl, do you think?' (p.14). Rosamond achieves a measure of self-command when, prompted by this new view of herself, she decides to 'do what was disagreeable to her', but she still feels 'dismal' (p.15) until her mother, instead of reprimanding her, encourages her to examine her thoughts and

²⁸ Carpenter and Prichard, *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, 358; Darton, *Children's Books in England*, rev. by Brian Alderson (3rd edition: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 140, 174.

²⁹ Myers, 'Socializing Rosamond: Educational Ideology and Fictional Form', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14.2 (1989), 52–8: 52, 55.

feelings in order to ascertain why she is sure that she is going to have a bad day.

All of this connects to the story of the robin that follows. Running about to warm herself in the garden, Rosamond finds a robin, immobile on a snow-drift, eyes half-closed, starving and frozen. Like Rosamond when she awoke, the robin is cold and potentially subject to the will of those with more power; but just as her mother works to show Rosamond how free she really is—not the passive victim of misfortune, but a child who can overcome the fear of unpleasant sensations and give herself reason for self-approbation and self-esteem—Rosamond comes to the realization that the robin is not hers, but its own creature with a right to its liberty. Through this object-lesson in independence, Rosamond is being initiated into a sense of herself as self-reliant, able to draw on her own moral agency.

Like the Rosamond tales, 'The Bracelets', written in 1787, when Edgeworth was nineteen, is interesting for its depiction of the development of individual selfhood and female rationality. The action of the story takes place between 1 May and 1 June, and this two-part structure is mirrored in the competitions that take place on the first of each month as well as in the contrast that Edgeworth establishes between Cecilia and her best friend, Leonora.

The two-part structure of the tale is in fact somewhat complicated by the competing models of femininity presented through the characters: the more carefully one looks at this tale, the more ambivalent it appears on the subject of conformity to conventional gender stereotypes. Leonora is held up as a kind of model of good temper, but she is in other respects a less sympathetic character than Cecilia (something that Edgeworth signals in the narrative viewpoint, which grants her readers far more sustained access to Cecilia's thoughts and feelings). While Leonora is more considerate and more forgiving of others' foibles, she is in part man-made, for the description of her upbringing by her mother, in which she has been 'habituated to [...] restraint [...] and early accustomed to yield' (p.37), closely resembles Rousseau's sketch of his ideal girl in *Emile*: 'Girls should [...] early be accustomed to restraint [...] This habitual restraint produces a docility which woman requires all her life long, for she will always be in subjection

to a man'.³⁰ With her habit of submission, it is easier for Leonora to be even-tempered and inoffensive; but as Edgeworth points out, it also means that she lacks the powers of 'exertion to overcome [...] disagreeable feelings of sensibility' (p.38). Cecilia's identity is to some extent constructed along masculine lines: motherless, she emulates her father and brother, and it is this early education, 'insensibly infused' via paternal influence, the narrator tells us, that has formed her 'eager desire to improve', her 'enterprising, independent spirit', and her 'abilities to excel'. As a result, her virtues have become 'such as were more estimable in a man, than desirable in a female'. Cecilia is 'active, ambitious, enterprising' and 'eager in the pursuit [...] of her wishes', highly motivated by the desire to 'do what was right', and 'anxious to please' her companions; Leonora is 'unaspiring', 'proud', 'too indolent to govern', and only 'anxious to avoid what was wrong' (pp.36, 33).

Encouraged by her father's approbation for public displays of magnanimity and candour, Cecilia desires her companions' admiration, which she is tempted to win through what she self-doubtingly calls a 'parade of [...] generosity' (p.43). Her exhibition of largesse puts her in danger of losing her best friend, since she sells a small silver box given to her by Leonora as a keepsake in order to buy a showy gift for a third girl, Louisa. Cecilia's biggest mistake is to undervalue the small gifts that symbolize and perpetuate bonds of private affection; with her male-influenced upbringing, she regards all 'small objects', as well as 'small errors', as 'trifles' (p.36). This gains particular significance when we consider that for Edmund Burke, theorist of the sublime and beautiful, femininity is consistently associated with smallness and with beauty, whereas the sublime is linked with greatness and masculinity.³¹ The omniscient narrator in the tale notes Cecilia's divergence from conventional ideas of proper femininity with some disapproval, but her efforts to unite 'masculine' ambition and 'feminine' regard for others' feelings are drawn sympathetically.

³⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1911), 332–3.

³¹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1757): see especially part III, sections XIII ('Beautiful objects small') and XVI ('Delicacy'), 96–7; 101–2.

Critics of 'The Bracelets' differ in their assessments of its gender politics. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace views it as a vehicle for 'the message that Edgeworth's maternal persona most often conveys to its female readers [...] the necessity for the cultivation of a separate series of female attributes and virtues'. The 'purpose' of 'The Bracelets' is 'to teach young girls the necessary social skills that enable them to accommodate themselves to a life with and among other women', rather than for the public life, among men, that boys have in view.³² In contrast, Mitzi Myers's reading of the tale recognizes its ambivalences: she notes that 'The Bracelets' is about both 'the pleasures and pains of interdependence', since it depicts 'a subjectivity constructed in community, with life's happiness depending on the "pleasures of sympathy" and "the suffrages of others"'. In addition, she comments on the ways in which this tale, originally written as a surprise gift for Edgeworth's father, 'both idealizes and critiques the educational practices of the parent whom it addresses'.³³

'Lazy Lawrence', published in the first edition of *The Parent's Assistant*, similarly invests in the non-conformity and indomitability of its hero, Jem, a resilient, active and inventive boy who through his own energy and persistence earns enough money for his widowed mother to pay her rent and keep their beloved horse, Lightfoot. Although we might expect the tale to be a cautionary history focusing on the lazy Lawrence of the title, Edgeworth seems more interested in depicting Jem's tireless efforts and busy creativity than Lawrence's moral errors. Jem epitomizes the Edgeworthian child hero of stories like 'The Orphans' and 'Simple Susan'; as Marilyn Butler observes, he is typified by 'courage and determination to act on his own, often

³² Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers' Daughters* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 118–19.

³³ Myers, 'De-Romanticizing the Subject: Maria Edgeworth's "The Bracelets", Mythologies of Origin, and the Daughter's Coming to Writing', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover NH & London: University Press of New England, 1995), 88–110: 108, 101, 108. The phrases about sympathy and the suffrages of others are drawn from Edgeworth's chapter on vanity, pride and ambition in *Practical Education* (174), which has clear relevance to 'The Bracelets'.

in defiance of the adults and children about him'.³⁴ Jem is given gardening work by a lady to whom he has sold some fossils, and subsequently invents a way of weaving doormats out of heather, which the lady sells to her friends. Her benevolent patronage is clearly crucial to Jem's fortunes, but she forfeits the reader's sympathy, which has been strongly engaged by Jem's optimistic outlook and incessant activity, when she reacts with cold suspicion to his discovery that the money he has earned is gone, and that the horse might have to be sold after all. As readers, we know that Jem is a truthful boy and sympathize with his refusal to respond to the lady's hostile questions. Perhaps significantly, a lucky penny plays an important role in solving this impasse: Jem needs luck as well as resourcefulness and perseverance to achieve the aims that he has set himself.

'Waste Not, Want Not', published in 1800, echoes the emphasis placed in 'Lazy Lawrence' upon the inventive capacities of children, although here the problem-solving child is relatively well off. Again, as in so many of the stories, Edgeworth begins with a contrasting pair of characters, here, two boys named Ben and Hal. More directly political than 'Lazy Lawrence', this tale interrogates the conspicuous excess of aristocratic presumption and vanity, and posits, through its use of the motif of threads, the importance of reciprocal social bonds. Along the way it also questions what the conservative thinker Edmund Burke had considered the natural loyalty to the 'little platoon', those local, quasi-familial attachments which Burke thought integral to the maintenance of 'public affections'.³⁵ In his preface to *The Parent's Assistant*, Richard Lovell Edgeworth queries the ways in which vanity and partiality work 'in opposition to the abstract love of justice, and the general desire to increase the wisdom and happiness of mankind'.³⁶ Maria Edgeworth's story accordingly probes unreflective conformity and loyalty to the 'little platoon' as an element in the perpetuation of inequality and injustice.

³⁴ Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, 161–2.

³⁵ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (3rd edition, London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 68.

³⁶ Edgeworth, *The Parent's Assistant*, vi.