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Two Belindas: Maria Edgeworth's Revision of *Belinda*

Tetsuko Nakamura

Eighteenth-century Britain witnessed a vast expansion in women's literary activities. Towards the end of the century, not only did their enthusiasm for novel-reading grow remarkably, but women also came to express their own thoughts and feelings through publishing their writings¹⁾.

Against this background, Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) began her literary career as a pioneer of children's stories. However, she gradually developed her interest in how young, married women should behave at home as well as in fashionable society: marriage and love became subjects of great concern to her. These were in fact topics which appeared constantly in women's fiction in the course of its growth during the eighteenth century. Edgeworth engaged herself in these issues whole-heartedly in 1800–01, and opened up a new stage in her literary career by writing a novel dealing with the fashionable world: *Belinda* (1801). This was her first full-length novel, written in the tradition of the three-volume novel founded by Fanny Burney (1752–1840).

Belinda concerns a young lady educated in the country, Belinda Portman, who makes her debut in high society under the patronage of Lady Delacour, an important figure in fashionable society. Belinda gradually builds up relationships with various people in the world of fashion and finally becomes engaged to her first lover, Clarence Hervey, Lady Delacour's protégé.

Clarence appears as a perfect man of fashion, a witty, pleasant Oxonian. He happens to become a great admirer of Lady Delacour, and

then makes the acquaintance of Belinda. In the course of the story, a great affinity develops between Clarence and Belinda, and Lady Delacour is confident that they will marry. Clarence, however, suddenly removes himself for quite some time without explaining the reason. In fact, he has to settle a private problem which is related to Virginia, the woman secretly intended to be his future wife. Belinda is left not knowing whether Clarence feels a special attachment to her.

Under these circumstances, Belinda meets Vincent, Son of opulent Creole merchant, who has been sent from the West Indies to England to obtain a good education. She begins to feel more than friendship for him, and he in turn expresses his affection for her. Her inclination towards him is then encouraged by the rumour that Clarence has a mistress called Virginia. Wavering between Vincent and Clarence, Belinda holds a long conversation with Lady Delacour in Chapter 24, and discloses her real feelings. As regards Belinda's feelings towards her two suitors, it is interesting to note that the author completely revised her original plan.

Belinda appears to have originated in the eight-page 'Original Sketch of Belinda', dated 10 May 1800; this was included in *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth*²¹. In this sketch, Vincent does not appear at all, but Clarence, who is introduced in a scene where he is drinking for a wager, repents of his behaviour and turns into an honourable and sensible man, perfectly suitable for Belinda's husband. In the completed novel, this negative aspect of Clarence's character—his passion for games—is transplanted into a newly created character, Vincent. It is likely that the remarkable reformation of Clarence was later considered improbable; furthermore, such a serious blemish would have been regarded as an obstacle to forming an alliance with Belinda—a spotless, virtuous woman.

Such changes in the plot are generally considered to have been motivated by suggestions provided by Maria Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who influenced her literary activities throughout his life. Critics have long discussed to what extent he was responsible for the changes in *Belinda* and whether his advice contributed to improving

the novel as a whole. Butler discusses this problem in detail, tracing past scholarly opinions regarding the suggestions he made after reading the 'Original Sketch of Belinda'. She concludes that there is no evidence that Richard Lovell Edgeworth 'decisively changed the course of the novels when he saw the sketches' and that his concern was 'almost certainly to supply detail to fill out the plot'³). No matter how much advice Edgeworth received from her father and others, it should be noted that Maria Edgeworth took responsibility for any alterations she actually made.

The depiction of Belinda's relationships with Vincent and Clarence is in fact transformed in a very complicated way; for the first edition of this novel is different from the text widely accepted afterwards. The first edition was published by Joseph Johnson in London in 1801 and, in the same year, a pirated edition was also produced by H. Colbert and J. Stockdale in Dublin⁴). In the following year, Johnson produced the second edition, which says 'corrected and improved' on the title page. This improvement, however, is not of sufficient magnitude enough to change the impression created by the novel: some changes are typographical and others are minor omissions and insertions⁵). A more thorough revision was conducted in 1809-10. Edgeworth's *Belinda* and *The Modern Griselda*, first published in 1804, were to be included in *The British Novelists*, which was edited by Mrs Barbauld⁶). For this edition of *Belinda*, Edgeworth made considerable alterations to the text, especially in the third volume. *The British Novelists* was published in 1810 and later in 1820, and the version of *Belinda* it contained became the basis for all subsequent editions—not only independent publications but also numerous editions included in collections of Edgeworth's works⁷).

As a result of the second revision for the 1810 edition, Belinda's relations with Vincent and Clarence were changed to a great extent. In the first and second editions, Belinda's long conversation with Lady Delacour in Chapter 24 clarifies her serious attachment to Vincent and also the fact that her fondness for Clarence has already cooled. When Lady Delacour criticizes her for intending to marry Vincent 'without

being in love with him ⁸⁾, Belinda's true feelings are revealed:

“ But not without loving him,” said Belinda.

“Absolutely you blushed, my dear, as you pronounced those words. And you *can* blush about loving Mr. Vincent? ”

“ I hope, and I believe, that I shall never have any reason to blush *for* loving him,” said Belinda.

“A deeper crimson!—Good Heavens!—Can I believe my senses? Was it the blush of anger or of love? ”

“ Not of anger,” said Belinda. Lady Delacour was silent some moments.

“And is it possible, that you are seriously attached to this man? ”

“ Where is the impossibility?

(1801: III, 36–37)

Although Lady Delacour—who wishes to believe that Belinda loves Clarence—doubts her attachment to Vincent, Belinda's serious affection for the latter is emphasized.

In the early part of Chapter 24, Lady Delacour's desire to see Belinda marry Clarence is contrasted with Belinda's coolness towards him. Thus Lady Delacour expresses resentment during the conversation about Virginia:

“ Not jealous! ” thought her ladyship [Lady Delacour]; “ then it is all over with Clarence. If one latent spark of love for him had remained in her mind, anger, in spite of prudence, would have blown it to a flame—but she is not jealous, alas!—her love for Hervey has been smothered by cold philosophy—but I cannot yet think it possible, that it is utterly extinguished.”

(1801: III, 18–19)

This virtually confirms the reader that Belinda's affection for Clarence has evaporated.

This is evidently a preparation for the following scene, in which Belinda's partiality for Vincent is further emphasized. In this scene, he visits Belinda and shows her an anonymous letter he has received. It maliciously reports that Belinda's '*fair* heart is Clarence Hervey's' (1801: III, 26); the intention is clearly to injure her reputation and discourage Vincent from proposing to her. Nevertheless, Vincent's feelings for Belinda are sincere, so he dares to show her the letter, which has failed to weaken his love for her and trust in her good faith. In the first and second editions, after Belinda reads this letter, she expresses her profound thanks for his kindness and trust in her; as a result, they are drawn yet closer together. Belinda even implies the probability of their marriage with denying her fondness for Clarence: 'If ever we are united, this will lay a sure foundation for the confidence which supports domestic happiness. . . . His [Clarence's] name excites no emotion in my mind, that could give you pain' (1801: III, 27). This can be regarded as the scene in which the love between Belinda and Vincent is confirmed.

Therefore, Belinda's conversation with Lady Delacour at the end of the chapter reassures the reader of her love for Vincent, and this leads to their engagement in the next chapter.

In the course of the second revision, the description of Belinda's affection for Vincent was toned down, while her fondness for Clarence came to be emphasized. The two passages which imply Belinda's coolness towards Clarence in Chapter 24 of the earlier editions were completely deleted, and the long conversation at the end of the chapter naturally underwent a dramatic alteration. Although Belinda values Vincent's 'sense and virtue' and feels 'a great deal of esteem' for him, she does not 'love him yet'⁹⁾. Since she considers that love is necessary for her marriage, she cannot decide to marry Vincent at this stage: 'I do not yet love him, and till I do, no earthly consideration could prevail upon me to marry him' (1986: 310). When Lady Delacour asks Belinda, 'you acknowledge . . . that you liked Clarence better than you do Vincent?', the latter answers, 'I acknowledge it . . . but that time is entirely past, and I never look back to it' (1986: 310). She continues

further: 'I have permitted Mr Vincent to address me. You cannot imagine that I am so base as to treat him with duplicity. . . . He shall have a fair trial whether he can win my love; the moment I am convinced that he cannot succeed, I will tell him so decidedly' (1986: 310). While Belinda insists that her partiality for Clarence is something past, the reader becomes conscious of her greater love for Clarence and the fact that she is waiting for the moment her *esteem* for Vincent turns into *love*, which she finds indispensable to her marriage.

Interestingly, the above dialogue in which Belinda admits that she had liked Clarence more than Vincent is originally seen in the long conversation at the end of Chapter 25. In the first and second editions, after the engagement between Belinda and Vincent is announced and the wedding day is fixed, Lady Delacour again has a long conversation with Belinda concerning her feelings towards the two men. In the first edition, when Lady Delacour questions Belinda, 'you acknowledge . . . that you liked Clarence better than ever you did Vincent?', the latter confesses 'I do—but that time is intirely past, and I never look to it' (1801: III, 87). This dialogue is almost identical to the passage in the 1810 edition and confirms Belinda's past fondness for Clarence. Edgeworth seems to have considered this to imply Belinda's wavering between the two lovers even after her marriage to Vincent is settled; for, in the second edition, she has Belinda reply more carefully:

"I do—but you will please to observe, that I say *like*—not love. Had Mr. Hervey addressed me as a lover, I should certainly have loved him; but he never did declare any attachment to me, and therefore, I have not permitted my imagination to dwell upon his good qualities; nor do I now ever look back upon them¹⁰."

In order to dispel the impression of Belinda's 'duplicity', Edgeworth tactfully differentiates 'like' from 'love', and emphasizes that Belinda has not loved Clarence. However, the statement that his courting would have encouraged reciprocation suggests that Belinda had a latent

affection for him. But only men could take the initiative in the courtship process¹¹, so Belinda could not disclose her feelings until Clarence declared his. Edgeworth seems to have been dissatisfied with this Belinda, who was passive and subjected herself to the unfair restriction of society, so in the second revision she further changed this scene. She incorporated this whole conversation into that at the end of the previous chapter.

In the first and second editions, Belinda's real feelings are thus exposed twice in her conversations with Lady Delacour—in Chapter 24 and 25—and, in between, Belinda's engagement is announced. Although, in Chapter 24, her serious affection for Vincent is emphasized, her inclination towards Clarence is referred to even after her engagement. Lady Delacour also tries to remind Belinda of her fondness for Clarence and strongly expresses her own apprehension regarding Belinda's marriage to Vincent: 'you [Belinda] are deceiving yourself; you are not in love with Mr. Vincent; if you marry him, you will repent it; you will be miserable' (1801: III, 85). Furthermore, it is revealed that Belinda loves only Vincent's good qualities, his sense and virtue, and that she is not really in love with *him*. Thus, the discussion about Belinda's feelings at the end of Chapter 25 causes the reader to doubt the strength of the bond between Belinda and Vincent. In contrast, in the 1810 edition, Belinda's wavering feelings are clarified only in Chapter 24 and, without being engaged to Vincent, Belinda waits for the moment she falls in love with him. Without doubt, this Belinda is consistent in her love to Clarence.

In the earlier editions, after Belinda is engaged to Vincent, Clarence suddenly returns, and the details of his absence are revealed in his long confessional letter to Lady Delacour. Meanwhile everything has been settled for Belinda's marriage and, on the day before their wedding, Vincent, who has gone to fetch some trinkets for Belinda, is involved in a brawl and injured. Therefore, the wedding is abruptly postponed. Later, in spite of his superficially good temper, Vincent's passion for games is accidentally discovered and, consequently, the marriage is called off. Attention should be paid to the fact that Belinda has nar-

rowly managed to avoid marrying the ungentlemanly man by sheer chance; she might well have had a miserable married life. Fortunately, however, Belinda is given the opportunity to reconsider Clarence:

“ You could refuse him [Clarence]? ” interrupted Lady Delacour, with a look of indignation—“ you would refuse him? ”

“ I did not say no, I *believe*. ”

“ You would accept him? ”

“ I did not say so, I *am sure*. ”

(1801: III, 302)

Belinda is rather fickle, especially since the anguish caused by the cancellation of her marriage and her compassion for Vincent are expressed more forcibly in the first and second editions.

This development of the story is not welcomed by the reader. A writer for *Monthly Review* (1802) remarks that Belinda ‘ does not altogether meet with our approbation ’¹², and criticizes her capriciousness:

Old as we are, and cold too, perhaps, as critics ought to be, we have still so much romance with us, as to deem the virgin’s first love an almost sacred bond; to regard with reverence and respect in inviolable constancy to its object; and to feel a kind of repugnance at the admission of a second attachment . . . a want of constancy is no virtue.

The critic concludes that, although Belinda is ‘ a good reasoner ’, and ‘ a very proper example for some of our outrageously romantic ladies ’, she does not appear as ‘ a perfect model of the female character ’.

Even Maria Edgeworth herself was anxious about Belinda’s fickleness. Before the above review appeared, she already completed the revision for the second edition to strengthen Belinda’s consistency. In a letter to her aunt, Harriet Beaufort, Edgeworth wrote that she had inserted a passage to explain that ‘ Belinda would have loved Clarence better than any other person *always* if he had declared any attachment to her ’¹³. As for the second revision, Edgeworth’s intention was the

same; this is clear from her letter to Mrs Barbould:

In the third volume, I have taken out every thing that gave encouragement (beyond esteem) to Mr. Vincent; for great complaints were made against Belinda for want of constancy to Clarence Hervey, and for jilting Vincent. By taking out her consent to marry, I hope I shall, in some degree, satisfy all parties¹⁴).

Edgeworth's revisions were thus intended to show that Belinda was constant in her love for Clarence, and not in love with Vincent.

Given the contemporary image of the 'respectable woman', Belinda should have been a spotless, virtuous woman in order to appeal to the reader as a heroine of a novel. *Belinda* was in fact intended to be didactic; although it was written in the tradition of the contemporary women's novel, Edgeworth declared that it was not a 'Novel' but a 'Moral Tale' (1801: I, 5). In spite of this moral purpose, she dared to risk injuring the heroine's honour. In the sketch, the heroine was portrayed as faultless, while Clarence was to be involved in dubious pursuits. Nevertheless, in the first and second editions, Edgeworth has Belinda involved in a dishonourable incident—the cancellation of her engagement. This attempt to threaten the image of the perfect heroine is a matter of importance when we focus on the transformation of Belinda. Interestingly, her situation is almost the same as that of Clarence, who was once engaged to Virginia in spite of his love for Belinda. Through the good offices of Lady Delacour, he is able to leave Virginia and get married to Belinda. In this respect, Edgeworth treats Belinda and Clarence equally.

Eighteenth-century women writers were extremely concerned with the notion of the 'proper lady'; this is connected with the dramatic change in the woman's role in society. Increasing affluence and the growth of a middle class led to the appearance of wives who had no need to work or to become involved in their husbands' work¹⁵). Such idle wives were regarded as 'a man's status symbol'¹⁶), and their daugh-

ters were expected to be accomplished and to acquire femininity in order to find good husbands. Women were, in a sense, regarded as men's property, possessing propriety and femininity. This notion was closely related to the growth of sentimentalism in the mid-eighteenth century, for the perceived value of women's femininity rose under the influence of sentimentalism, which philosophically unifies the significance of feeling and morality¹⁷⁾. Marriage and love, and also the concept of the proper woman became important issues which women writers discussed. Most of them were middle- or upper-class women, and they intended to write mainly for the women of their class, who had the leisure and inclination to read.

The focus of attention for these women writers was female chastity¹⁸⁾. Public opinion was far stricter on women, and a double-standard was firmly established: 'A husband's infidelity was not important, a wife's was a catastrophe¹⁹⁾.' Towards the end of the century, feminist resistance to this irrationality emerged. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), for example, vehemently attacked the illogical notion that only men could regain their reputation and honour once they had lost their chastity²⁰⁾.

Taking this attitude into consideration, Belinda's jilting of Vincent in the first and second editions must appear improper and immodest. It is true that Belinda does not lose her chastity. But her wedding is accidentally postponed by Vincent's injury, so that, from the reader's point of view, she is exposed to the danger of a bad marriage because of her own lack of insight. In those days, once married, people rarely managed to divorce; also, divorced women had to endure various disadvantages²¹⁾. Belinda is about to be involved in an unhappy life. Nevertheless, because the discovery of Vincent's real character is so sudden and unexpected and, furthermore, because only Vincent is to blame for causing the cancellation of the engagement, Belinda's honour remains intact. In addition, the engagement between Belinda and Clarence is totally arranged by Lady Delacour, so that her leaving Vincent is more acceptable. The abrupt cancellation of Belinda's engagement to Vincent offers these two interpretations. It is noted that

Edgeworth ran the risk of sullyng Belinda's perfection by deliberately having her enter into an engagement with Vincent. It would appear that Edgeworth strongly wished for a fair treatment of Belinda's propriety and Clarence's character, each of whom had been engaged to another. This is perhaps a manifestation of Edgeworth's feminist ire in the face of society's double-standard.

Cancelled engagements are not especially rare in the writings of contemporary women. Secret engagements between lovers often unravel, for example, in the novels of Jane Austen (1775–1817)²². In *Northanger Abbey*, even an open engagement is broken off. Although Isabella Thorpe is once publicly engaged to James Morland, the heroine's brother, she is attracted by the flirting of Captain Tilney to the point where her engagement is cancelled. In this case, however, she is eventually deserted by her second lover and fails to regain her first. She has to pay for her immodest behaviour in the end. All ladies who break off their engagement in Austen's works are subordinate characters who are unfavourably portrayed. In contrast, the cancellation of Belinda's open engagement is not pictured in a bad light; in fact, it allows her to obtain future happiness with Clarence.

On the occasion of its first publication, Edgeworth seems to have had confidence in *Belinda*. This was her first adult fiction in which the author's name was mentioned on the first edition. Presumably, the reputation of her previous fiction, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), somewhat strengthened her confidence as a writer. She also wished to call *Belinda* a 'Moral Tale', and expressed her intention to create something better than a 'Novel', which included 'much folly, error and vice' (1801: I, 5–6). Thus pretending to be a didactic writer, Edgeworth managed to present her feminist views in a still patriarchal society. This skilful presentation of her feminist awareness reminds us of the jilting incident in the first and second editions.

In making revisions for the 1810 edition, Edgeworth compromised her feminist attitude and inched closer to the generally accepted image of the heroine of a novel by removing the jilting incident. However, she has in fact succeeded in establishing Belinda's individuality and in-

dependence in the story. At the end of Chapter 25 in the earlier editions, only Lady Delacour reads Clarence's long confessional letter. But in the 1810 edition Belinda reads the letter with Lady Delacour, and is informed of Clarence's relationship with Virginia, who is more like a ward than a mistress. This provides Belinda with an opportunity to reconsider Clarence and the possibility of marrying him, although her thoughts are not described in the novel. As Hawthorne points out, the second revision 'puts more responsibility for action on the heroine'²³). In the previous editions, the preparations for Belinda's marriage to Clarence are completely managed by Lady Delacour. Belinda is ignorant of his situation with regard to Virginia, accepting her happy union as if it were a gift from heaven. Clarence is similarly freed from Virginia unexpectedly owing to Lady Delacour's efforts. Both characters are passive and puppet-like. However, after the second revision, Belinda takes the initiative in obtaining happiness with Clarence, an independence that can be interpreted to imply Edgeworth's feminist attitude. Since Clarence's passivity remains the same, Belinda's new assertiveness becomes more noticeable. Thus, although Edgeworth was compelled to omit Belinda's engagement to Vincent, she did manage to express her feminist viewpoint by transforming Belinda into a much more independent, active woman.

In conclusion, it can be said that, in revising *Belinda*, Edgeworth explored the ways in which she could promote her feminist views without causing offence. The two Belindas exhibit her feminist consciousness and also her dilemma she had to face as a woman writer in a conservative, patriarchal society. The transformation of *Belinda* thus sheds new light on Edgeworth's attitude as a feminist writer in her early literary career.

NOTES

- 1) Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
- 2) *A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, with a Selection from Her Letters by the Late Mrs. [Frances] Edgeworth*, edited by her three children (London:

Joseph Masters & Son, 1867), III, 269–76.

- 3) Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 284–85.
- 4) Mark D. Hawthorne, ‘Maria Edgeworth’s Unpleasant Lesson: The Shaping of Character,’ *Studies* 64 (1975), 167. Joseph Johnson (1789–1809) was a publisher and patron of radicals, who contributed to the appearance of writers of various fields such as politics, science and literature. See Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979).
- 5) Hawthorne remarks that ‘the text [of the second edition] is identical to the first edition except for the correction of typographical errors and better type font’ (p. 177, n. 5); however, according to my research, omissions and insertions of both short and long passages are also to be found.
- 6) *Belinda* and *The Modern Griselda*, in *The British Novelists; with an Essay, and Prefaces Biographical and Critical*, ed. Mrs [Anna Laetitia Aikin] Barbauld (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1810 & 1820), XLIX & L.
- 7) Hawthorne explains that the edition in *The British Novelists* ‘has been reprinted without change in all subsequent collections’ (p. 168); however, according to my research, some textual changes—not just changes to punctuation—were made.
- 8) *Belinda* (London: J. Johnson, 1801), III, 36. Further references to this edition are indicated in the text as follows: (1801: volume number, page number).
- 9) *Belinda*, introduced by Eva Figs (London: Pandora, 1986), pp. 308–09. Further references to this edition are indicated in the text as follows: (1986: page number).
- 10) *Belinda*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1802), III, 87.
- 11) Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 398.
- 12) Review of *Belinda*, *Monthly Review*, 37 (1802), 369. The succeeding references to this review are taken from this page.
- 13) Maria Edgeworth, Letter to Harriet Beaufort, n. d. [1802], as quoted in Butler, p. 494.
- 14) Maria Edgeworth, Letter to Mrs Barbauld, 18 November 1810, as quoted in Hawthorne, 171. Butler (p. 498) mentions that this letter was written on 18 January 1810.
- 15) Miriam Brody, ‘Introduction,’ in Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 32–35.
- 16) Spencer, p. 13.
- 17) Spencer, p. 77.

- 18) Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 3–30.
- 19) Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), p. 50.
- 20) Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 242–51.
- 21) Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), pp. 108–22.
- 22) Engagements were totally private. When parental consent was obtained, it became socially known that the two ‘are to marry’, rather than ‘engaged’. F. G. Gornall, ‘Marriage, Property and Romance in Jane Austen’s Novels (2),’ *Hibbert Journal*, 66 (1967), 27.
- 23) Hawthorne, 173.

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