Educating Domestic Women: "Active Virtues" and Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Belinda* and *Helen*

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> The following work is offered to the public as a Morale Tale— the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel. [. . .] (*Belinda*[1] 3)

The "Advertisement" Maria Edgeworth attached to the frontispiece of *Belinda* is telling of one significant characteristic of her works. As the statement "a Moral Tale and not a Novel" indicates, Edgeworth considered her fictions as a tool to edify people of the moral points. In the cases of *Belinda* and *Helen*, Edgeworth's "novels of manners", she advocates the importance of domestic life for women by didactically tracing the young heroines' moral development in society to the goal of happy marriage with eligible husbands.

Because of the prevalence of didacticism, Edgeworth's society novels were admitted important only as a step in the development of the English novels that anticipated Jane Austen. However, recently critics have been taking her didacticism seriously as a response of an intellectual woman to the social problems of her days. Especially her advocacy of the domestic life is considered in the context of the increasing argument on the idea of femininity at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century. Partly because of the great influence her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth had on her, Edgeworth came to be considered as a specimen of "father's daughter" who has internalised the patriarchal value system of the landed society by feminist critics[2]. However, though the critics have paid attention to Edgeworth's biological father-daughter relationship, it has been overlooked that it is the mother-daughter relationship that is significant in promoting the domestic ideology in her novels. Thus their argument seems to fail to present where Maria Edgeworth exactly stood in the contemporary discourse on femininity and domesticity. By looking at her two novels about "a young lady just entering into the world", *Belinda* and *Helen*, I would like to discover the real significance of Edgeworth's didacticism on domestic woman. I will argue that though incorporated within the needs of the patriarchal landed society, Edgeworth was progressive in that instead of passivity she promoted active reasoning and judgement as the most important quality in the domestic woman; and that *Belinda* and *Helen* show an intelligent interest in the difficult role women have to play in society when the novels focus on the mother-daughter relationship in promoting these "active" qualities.

I

Throughout her novelistic career, Maria Edgeworth promoted the ideal of domestic woman. Her tales and novels insist on how much influence women have on their husbands' character and conduct. As the portrait of Lady Anne Percival in *Belinda* shows, it is crucial for the wife to share every interest with the husband, as it is owing to the wife's sympathy that the husband is inspired to become socially useful:

> [H]er sympathy and approbation, and the daily sense of her success in the education of their children, inspired him [her husband] with a degree of happy social energy, unknown to the selfish solitary votaries of avarice and ambition. (216)

"Education of the children", indeed, is another important task for married women. *Practical Education*, an educational guide book written by Edgeworth with her father, makes it clear that education (especially the early education) of children depends on the mother: "We have [. . .] endeavoured to adapt our remarks principally to *female* readers [. . .]" (vol. 3 292, emphasis mine). Viewed from one important perspective, Edgeworth's ideal woman seems to be the wholehearted supporter of her husband and wise educator of the next generation.

This ideal was, in fact, not an uncommon one in her days. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries experienced a surge of interest in the idea of femininity. The number of published educational works for women amounted to nearly a hundred between 1760 and 1820 (Todd xix). Typically, these conduct books and educational treatises encouraged women to cultivate their understandings, especially in the moral and religious sphere, and to gain the necessary knowledge to run a household, comfort a husband, and guide their children. On one hand, the new idea of femininity opened up the interest in female education, but on the other hand, it also defined women as "separate, special creatures", "guardians of the home and of moral and emotional values" (Spencer 15). One of the most popular conduct book writers, Dr Gregory advises women to "keep [their learning] a profound secret especially from men" (15), as "modest reserve" and "retiring delicacy" are "chief beauties in a female character" (13). The more reactionary Thomas Gisborne smugly argues that God, "with the most conspicuous wisdom", bestowed women with the gift "of modesty, of delicacy, of sympathising sensibility, of prompt and active benevolence, of warmth and tenderness of attachment"; whereas He assigned to men minds capable of "close comprehensive reasoning, the intense and continued application", as such strength is "not requisite of the discharge of the customary offices of female duty" (20-3). Not only male writers of conduct books but also female writers like Jane West, while advocating female education, stipulate that it should not challenge these "passive virtues", as Alan Richardson puts it (172-3). What these conduct book writers seem to be doing is to give out doubly restricting messages to women, if not catching them in a "double bind"; while expecting women to wish to cultivate their understandings to become good wives and wise mothers (otherwise who would read their conduct books?), the writers check women from going too far lest too much wisdom tampers with their essential "passive virtues" and fail to achieve the ideal of domestic women. Though a few radical female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay challenged such restrictive state, the mainstream of conduct book writers seems to have confirmed such ideology(3).

Maria Edgeworth seems to have been aware of these doubly restricting messages in the discourse of female education. Unlike the mainstream of conduct book writers, she sets highest value on understanding and reason in women. This, however, does not mean that she was quarrelling with the dominant ideology; far from it, she accepts it as the status quo. In her semi-fictional *Letters for Literary Ladies*, she presents reason and understanding not as in conflict with womanly "passive virtues" but as the basis of those virtues and of the making of ideal domestic woman:

> [T]he best method to make my pupil respect these things [the reserve and delicacy of female manners] is to show her how they are indispensably connected with the largest interests of society [. . .]. [B]y degrees as her understanding, that is to say as her knowledge and power of reasoning shall increase, I can explain the advantages of these [good] habits, and confirm their power by the voice of reason. (22)

Letters for Literary Ladies also at length argues how good understanding and power to reason are necessary for women in performing domestic duties appointed to them. For example, as the manager of the household, a woman should be able to perform "a judicious, graceful economy, [. . .] which, as it depends upon the understanding, can be expected only from cultivated minds" (*LLL* 21); if women are to "superintend the education of their children," they have "to instruct themselves" to be fit for it (*LLL* 20).

Edgeworth fictionalises this theory in the fashionable Lady Delacour, whose narrative takes as much as two-thirds of the novel *Belinda*. Lady Delacour first appears as a dissipated fashionable woman who is totally incapable of performing domestic duties; she is on the verge of financial ruin and estranged from her husband and daughter. She is also secretly despairing about her breast injury which she believes to be cancerous. While Lady Delacour insists on the fashionable life of dissipation, she is presented as "a woman who never listen[s] to reason" (*B* 122). However, once she accepts the rational advice to confide in her husband and to take the proper medical treatment, she finds not only a loving family but also that the breast injury is not a cancer but a mere bruise. Edgeworth thus juxtaposes Lady Delacour's restoration of health and reformation as a modest domestic woman with the rise of her power of reasoning.

So, in relation to their "passive virtues" and domestic duties, Edgeworth recommends reason and understanding in women. By thus compromising reason and understanding with the tradition of those female virtues, she seems to be endorsing the argument that the instilment of "passive virtues" is the most essential part of the education of women. We must note, however, that though she grants there are some things that are "peculiar to female education", she asserts that there certainly are things "which apply equally to the cultivation of the understanding both of men and of women" (*PE* vol.3 52). *Practical Education*, which mainly deals with practical methods of instructing children both in the academic field and in morality, discusses most of its topics without discriminating between the two sexes. In *Letters for Literary Ladies*, too, Edgeworth recommends such qualities as "the habit of industry and attention, the love of knowledge, and the power of reasoning", "strength of mind", and the "taste for truth and utility" (20-5), which are "active" and more likely to be attributed to men; very dissimilar to the traditional "passive virtues" particularly attributed to women. Moreover, Edgeworth recommends the serious literary education for women as the means of enlarging their minds in opposition to the common notion that women are only fit for light fiction and sentimental romances. It could be said that Edgeworth promotes reason and understanding in women not only because they are helpful in infixing traditional female virtues in their minds but also because the "active" qualities they promote are essential for both men and women in leading a happy life.

From one perspective, then, Edgeworth's novels about "a young lady just entering into the world", *Belinda* and *Helen*, are about promoting these "active" virtues in becoming the ideal

domestic woman. The reason Belinda succeeds as a "perfect" lady is because she realises the importance of being able to judge and reason at a very early stage of the novel. Witnessing the misery of Lady Delacour, who alternately indulges in fashionable life and in "irrational" Methodistical fear[4], she retires more and more from the fashionable world and applies herself to serious philosophical reading to enlarge her mind. She is also different from Virginia, Clarence Hervey's ward, whose reading is limited to romances, and who is completely innocent but totally lacks understanding. By learning to regulate herself rationally to perfection, Belinda comes to be preferred to Virginia by Clarence Hervey. The rational Belinda is rewarded by the hand of the most talented wealthy young man to take the place of the ideal wife; a wife who has "cultivated tastes, an active understanding, a knowledge of literature, the power and the habit of conducting herself" (*B* 379).

In *Helen*, the two girls, Helen and her married friend Lady Cecilia, undergo trials according to their strength of mind to abide by truth. Helen is courageous enough to face the truth where she herself is concerned, but she yields her principle for truth when out of affection she helps Cecilia to conceal the authorship of her adolescent love letters to Colonel D'Aubigny. Once she fails to uphold truth, Helen comes to be exposed to public slander. Lady Cecilia Clarendon, with the habit of petty lying, has to undergo even severer trial by letting her friend bear the disgrace of her youthful love affair. Not only does she hazard the welfare of her friend, but eventually she starts to destroy the cherished domestic happiness (for which she has lied) and experience the crisis of separation with her husband. Though the novel in the end accepts their weakness as a token of their affectionate hearts, the novel allows these girls happy domestic life only after they are fully convinced of the importance of strong principle in women as the element that affects the happiness at home.

Thus in Edgeworth's novels, women are expected to possess solid, rationalistic "active" virtues which enable them to judge and act for themselves: cultivated understanding and reason, principles of industry, of truth and utility, and strength of mind. This is very different from traditional conduct book writers, who emphasised mostly "passive virtues" such as modesty and obedience. As we can see from the fact that the heroines, Belinda and Helen, attain the goal of happy marriage only after they are fully capable of exercising their reasoning faculty and of acting according to the principles, these "active virtues" are closely connected to the idea of domestic woman. Through the experience of the young heroines, Edgeworth shows the process of women becoming ready to take a pivotal role in domestic life — the role of the supporting wife and wise mother.

II

In both *Belinda* and *Helen*, women who fail to take up such domestic role are seen as miserable "unnatural" beings who are governed "by anything but reason". Not only are such ladies miserable failures who wilfully refuse the "natural" role for women, but they are also seen more or less as a menace; ladies who defy domesticity and lead fashionable social lives are punished in one way or another in Edgeworth's worlds. *Belinda*, whose original title was "Abroad and at Home", is most conspicuous for its distrust and disapproval of these dazzling fashionable ladies. Lady Delacour suffers from bruise on the breast, which is evidently the

punishment for her most "unwomanly" dissipation of fighting a duel in man's clothes. The wounded breast, as many critics have already pointed out, is an embodiment of her ineptness as a domestic woman, especially as a mother(5); as a fashionable woman, Lady Delacour cannot caress her daughter because of physical and mental pain. It is telling that once she decides to quit the fashionable way of life, the bruise rapidly cures. The chastisement of her more aberrant "amazonic" friend, Harriet Freke is even more drastic, as she is maimed in the leg, deprived of the transgressive power that has allowed her to gain the public attention. Lady Cecilia in *Helen*, too, can be said to suffer from her coquetry in her younger days; her youthful love of admiration leads her to indiscreet letter writing with libertine Colonel D'Aubigny, which exposes her to scandal after her marriage. The seriousness of this love-letter crisis seems to suggest that her coquettish traits, her wish to manipulate people with her charm, still remains beneath her well-meant but thoughtless manoeuvrings and the habit of petty lying. Such a desire for public attention must be thoroughly curbed and remonstrated in Edgeworth's world.

Women with political interests are also considered to have fallen out of the "natural" domestic role. Though Edgeworth advocates the importance of female participation in politics to some extent as early as in *Letters for Literary Ladies* and later more specifically in *Helen*, she limits that extent by saying that "their [political] influence must be private" (*LLL* 31). Political women are seen as those who have "cease[d] to act as women" and who destroy domestic happiness and society itself (*H* 256)(6). Lady Cecila's mother, Lady Davenant is an example of an ambitious woman who risks domestic happiness for the love of power. In spite of her uprightness, Lady Davenant, by insisting on her political influence, faces with the danger of separation with her husband. Though she learns to regulate her ambition, even then Edgeworth does not free Lady Davenant from some forfeiture. Lady Davenant, engrossed in politics, neglects her daughter, the consequence of which is that Lady Cecilia is afraid of her mother. Perhaps it may be worth noting, too, that Lady Davenant loses her sons. Female concern for the public is important, but when it goes too far, it always risks domestic happiness, especially motherhood.

So we might say that because both fashionable and political women defy the domestic sphere and try to live public lives, they are condemned as a threat to the ideal of domestic woman and of family life. In showing this Edgeworth employs the logic that publicly active women are acting against what she calls their "nature" and therefore naturally punish themselves by becoming uncomfortable and unhappy. Granting that Edgeworth wished to promote the ideal of domestic woman, one may be struck by the degree of Edgeworth's hostility and concern towards "public" women in her novels. Still further, a modern reader may feel uneasy about the logic which takes it for granted the domestic sphere (which is, after all, a cultural product of the age in which she lives) as the "natural" sphere for women to live in.

As an explanation of the question why public women are condemned so severely in Edgeworth's novels, one may say that a woman leading a public life means that she is exposing her sexuality to the public. A fashionable woman's aim is to become the idol of society, attracting people (especially men) with her beauty, the elegance of her dress and ornament and her accomplishments— in short, by exploiting gendered aspects of her public persona, very often those which could be related to sexual attraction. Fashionable characters in Edgeworth's novels usually become in some way or other mixed up in clandestine heterosexual relationships. Lady Cecilia, who has used her charm to enjoy "the height of her conquests" (*H* 22), is eventually

entangled into the D'Aubigny affair. Lady Delacour leads flirtatious marriage life in order to excite her husband's jealousy and gain her power over him as well as to maintain her pose as a prominent fashionable figure to the public. To take up a leading role in the society, these fashionable belles display their sexuality in public; often going to the point of hazarding chastity and integrity.

It may not be so easy to spot the connection with sexuality in political women; especially as Lady Davenant is integrity itself (apart from her former ambitions and early neglect of her child). We find some hint from *The Letters for Literary Ladies*, which explains the problems of female politicians as follows:

> [T]he means by which the sex have hitherto obtained that species of power which they have abused, have arisen chiefly from their personal, and not their mental qualifications; from their skill in the arts of persuasion and from their accomplishments. [. . .] (33)

In short, female politicians are disapproved because their power depends not on their ability to reason but on sexual attractiveness. According to Claudia Johnson, as a reaction to the French Revolution, "progressive" women who demanded political rights were often charged with "sexual denaturalization", as "indulging in unbounded heterosexual activity" (8–9). In this sense, there is very little to choose between fashionable women and political women; as fashionable women, political woman not only covet eminence in public despite the dictates of their reason, but try to gain it by using their charms as members of the female sex. Political women leave room open for sexual association.

So it seems not unjust to suggest that on grounds of their "public" sexuality Edgeworth is being hostile towards fashionable and political women. The "public" sexuality, especially on women's part, directly affects the problem of inheritance and thus threatens the continuity of the family line, which destabilises the patriarchal system of the landed gentry. As Mary Jean Corbett aptly detected in Burke's argument for the continuation of the existing order, "[the] confidence in the security of hereditary transmission depends [. . .] on the tacit assumption of marital chastity among women" (880). Therefore the domestic ideology, which Maria Edgeworth advocates, tries to contain the female sexuality within the domestic sphere, and by this means sustain the patriarchal system that enables the continuance of the landed gentry.

Another reason for Edgeworth's hostility towards the "public" women seems to be linked with the disapproval of aristocratic behaviour among the middle class. Nancy Armstrong states in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that to distinguish themselves from aristocrats and to make a claim as one unified group (which is actually a heterogeneous group), the figure of domestic woman played the central role in forming the identity of the middle class. What differentiates the domestic woman of the middle class from the aristocratic woman (and from the working class woman, too, for that matter) is, or so it was claimed, the denial of the "display her body" and the claim of her inner qualities (Armstrong 77). In other words, with the rise of the middle class, the solid, frugal, private practice of domestic women came to be the norm for women rather than the luxurious, "public" behaviour of privileged women of nobility. Edgeworth's heroines' (especially Belinda's) rejection of aristocratic example and their preference for more "middle class-like" domestic examples, indeed, seems a highly pertinent example within contemporary fiction of Armstrong's theory. Seen from this aspect, the reformations or modifications of Lady

Delacour, Lady Davenant and Lady Cecilia (note that they are possessed with titles) illustrate the nobility's departure from corrupt aristocratic practice to the sound, solid disciplines of the middle class domestic woman.

So, it seems for such patriarchal and class reasons — directly connected to the stability and continuity of the landed gentry — the ideal of domestic woman was naturalised and promoted. Maria Edgeworth, as a daughter of a landed gentleman, was on the side of the continuity of the landed gentry and seems to have shared some of their ideas. She more or less takes it for granted that the most natural and desirable state for a woman is to stick to the domestic sphere, and frowns upon "unnatural" aristocratic "public" behaviour. The fact that she has to uphold and promote "natural" domestic woman with such vigour may betray her anxiety that domestic woman may not, in reality, be as "natural" as Edgeworth expects. However it seems fair to say that she believed in the value of domestic woman and the "naturalness" of domestic woman; so much so that Edgeworth did not even trouble herself to prove the naturalness or desirability of domestic woman.

III

Because she is pivotal in the reproduction of the family line, the "domestic woman" is a key figure in the patriarchal system of the land-owning class. Thus it is crucial for young women to be educated into domestic women, and this is what Edgeworth's novels about "a young lady just entering into the world" are about. If we focus our attention on the process of the young heroines' education, we begin to see that the mother-daughter relationship plays an important role in it.

In *Helen*, the theme of mother-daughter relationship is foregrounded as Lady Davenant as the mother-mentor plays a very important role in it. Lady Davenant gives motherly advice to the heroine, seriously directing her to learn to "judge for [her]self" and to acquire "some higher and more stable principle of action", as necessary for a domestic woman (*H* 31). She even recounts the story of her life with hopes that it would be useful to her young friend. Helen's good will and innate love of truth touches the older friend's mind, so that the rigidly upright Lady Davenant is able to feel perfect amity and confidence in Helen. In return, Helen is able to perceive the real concern for her beneath Lady Davenant's apparent rigidity, and tries to live up to her high moral standard.

While enjoying mutually trusting relationship with the young friend Helen, Lady Davenant fails to establish such relationship with her own daughter Cecilia; both the mother and the daughter declare that they do not "understand" each other. Not attending enough to her daughter at the early stage, Lady Davenant does not know her daughter's character well. Further, because of Cecilia's habit of lying (developed by the neglect of early education), Lady Davenant is in some ways reserved towards her daughter: "[T]here are persons with intrinsic differences of character, who [. . .] can never understand one another beyond a certain point" (*H* 82). Lady Cecilia, on the other hand, intimidated by her mother's strict principles, fails to understand her mother's love beneath her severity: "I am sure [. . .] that I do not understand anything: I never do, when mamma goes on in that way [. . .]" (*H* 55). This estrangement of the mother and the daughter turns out to be fatal, as it develops into Lady Cecilia's deception in the D'Aubingy

affair, which hazards Cecilia's domestic happiness and her own good character.

It is at her mother's deathbed Cecilia finally confesses everything and that the mother is able to show her love for her daughter fully. For the first time at the time of death do they come to complete understanding, and Lady Davenant approves of her daughter as reformed, ready to take the important role of domestic woman:

> "Now," said she [Lady Davenant], "I give my daughter to a husband worthy of her, and she more worthy of that noble heart than when first his. Her only fault was mine— my early neglect: it is repaired— I die in peace! [. . .]" (*H* 454-5)

The long estrangement of Lady Davenant and Lady Cecilia, Cecilia's deep-rooted faults— these problems are resolved only by the mother's death. Cecilia's rehabilitation at her mother's death emphasises the serious effect the mother has on the education of the daughter: to free from the effects of bad mothering, one has ultimately to bury the "bad mother".

In looking at the unsuccessful relationship with her daughter, it may be worth noting that Lady Davenant herself is the daughter of bad mothering, who has failed to establish the mutual confidence with her own mother. As a woman who has not experienced a trusting relationship with her own mother, Lady Davenant could not but fail to construct such a desired bond with her daughter; when the chain of a proper mother-daughter relationship is disrupted at one point, it is very difficult to re-establish it. Through Lady Davenant's reproduction of the failing relationship with her daughter, Edgeworth thus again stresses the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the domestic ideology.

Belinda can also be read as the female characters' quests for the suitable mother-mentor. In growing into the perfect domestic woman, Belinda has to be careful in her choice of the mother-mentor, as her chaperon, Lady Delacour, is in an equivocal position as a mother-mentor. At one point Lady Delacour does serve for Belinda because she impresses her protégée with the superficiality of public admiration contrasted with a more fundamental domestic felicity; but at another, she leads her into scrape with her ungovernable passion for fashionable life. It is not until meeting Lady Anne Percival that Belinda finds a wise mother-mentor. Together with her husband Lady Anne perfects Belinda's reasoning faculty and understanding as the basic of domestic happiness. In achieving the goal of the perfect rational domestic women, it is necessary for the heroine to have assistance from a woman firm in domestic principles herself.

In Lady Delacour's case, beginning with her irrational "methodistical mother", her earlier life is a life of suffering caused by a succession of "bad mothers". Her next company and guide is Harriet Freke, by whom she is led into every kind of scrape and dissipation, which finally costs her health. Then, by trying to keep her breast injury secret, Lady Delacour falls into the power of her ignorant waiting-woman Marriot. Seen from this point of view, the story of *Belinda* is in part the process of Lady Delacour getting over the influences of the "bad mothers" with the help of her rational friend, Belinda. In other words, it is a story of Belinda's success in re-educating Lady Delacour by acting as the good mother-mentor, as it were.

In *Belinda*, the success of female mentor-pupil relationship is contrasted with the failure of male mentorship. Filled with Rousseauistic ideas, Clarence Hervey resolves to educate an orphaned girl Virginia into the perfect ideal of innocent woman and to marry her. The absurdity of the scheme is symbolised in his presumptuous action of changing the girl's name from Rachel

to Virginia to meet his romantic ideal. Not unexpectedly the consequence is disastrous, as Virginia, living in total seclusion has become more ignorant than innocent, unfit to undertake domestic duties let alone to become an intelligent life-long companion to him. In a way, Edgeworth is rejecting male supervision over women, and instead by making female relationships more successful, is once again upholding the women's importance in transmitting the ideal of domestic woman. As Julie Shaffer points out, Edgeworth is empowering women by breaking the novelistic convention of the lover-mentor plot, in which the heroines conform themselves to the domestic ideology through the guide of men whom they marry in the end (32-3). Together with her advocacy of "active virtues", by introducing the importance of the mother-mentor, Maria Edgeworth is presenting women as more than a passive existence; within the domestic ideology she is raising women's social importance.

Through the contrast of good and bad mothering, Edgeworth in her domestic novels presents the mother's mentorship to daughter as crucial to domestic ideology. Edgeworth conceives that the mother, who herself lives (or is at least supposed to live) in conformity to the domestic ideology, is the most apt tutor of domestic principles for the daughter. If the mother fails, the chain or the reproduction of domestic woman is disrupted — and the domestic ideology thus collapses, so that the continuance of the patriarchal system of the landed gentry is in danger. Compared with Jane Austen, in whose novels the heroines have very little assistance from the elder women, this female mentorship can be said to be one of Edgeworth's important characteristics(7). It can also be read as Edgeworth's objection to the convention of lover-mentor, where male supervision is considered necessary for women to be accommodated to the domestic sphere. Edgeworth empowers woman within the patriarchal value system of the landed class by foregrounding their import role in the transmission of "active virtues" to the next generation of women.

However, at a closer look, Edgeworth's representation of the mother-daughter relationship begins to take a curious turn. The "daughters" who benefit from the "mothers" counsels are Belinda and Helen, both orphans, whose real mothers are dead; the real daughters tend to be victims of bad mothering. In the case of *Helen*, as Lady Davenant herself is the daughter of bad mothering, it is possible to see the estrangement of Lady Davenant and Cecilia as the dangerous reproduction of the failing mother-daughter relationship, which foregrounds the preciousness of the proper mother-daughter relationship. At the same time, however, the failure of the relationship between biological mother and daughter suggest the difficulty women have in conforming themselves to the ideal mother-daughter relationship that transmits the ideal of domestic woman. Contrastively, Lady Davenant succeeds in the relationship with Helen precisely because they are not real mother and daughter. Domestic virtues can be transmitted only through this quasi-mother-daughter relationship, which is the relationship built up within the society, within the system where the domestic ideology works. In transmitting the domestic virtues in a roundabout relationship, rather than in the straight biological mother-daughter relationship, Edgeworth is perhaps inadvertently revealing the difficulty the domestic ideology has for women.

Moreover, in *Belinda*, the positions of Lady Delacour and Lady Anne are strangely reversed in choosing the heroine's husband, which is another important goal of the novels about "a young lady just entering into the world". Lady Anne recommends Belinda to marry the apparently upright Mr Vincent: "In a mind as well regulated as yours, esteem [for Mr Vincent's good

qualities] may certainly in time improved into love" (*B* 242). As a rational domestic woman, Lady Anne appeals that her love must be "regulated" by reason and prudence. With all her sagacity, however, Lady Anne Percival fails to detect the gambling habit in Mr Vincent, which shows up that his virtues, as the narrator explains, are of passion and not of steady principles. Lady Delacour, on the other hand, detects the mutual love between Clarence Hervey and Belinda, and urges her to follow her sentiment. Though it is depicted that Lady Davenant is wrong in playing with the heroine's rational self-control, her repeated allusion to amorous desire seems to be reminding Belinda that however she represses it the force of her emotion is there. By persisting on sentiment and by thus bringing about the marriage the heroine truly desires, the unprincipled Lady Delacour unexpectedly turns out to be a better mother-mentor than sound Lady Anne. Although reason is upheld as necessary for the realisation of a domestic woman, Edgeworth fails to make it work in the choice of husband, which is equally important for the heroine if she is to fulfil the role. By thus reversing the two mother-mentors' positions, Edgeworth even seems to problematise the idea of good mother-mentor as rational domestic women.

As the person who supports the landed gentry at the very basic, Edgeworth pursues the ideal of rational domestic woman in *Belinda* and *Helen*. According to her, it is vital for women to possess solid, rational "active virtues" which enable women to judge and act for themselves if they are to take the pivotal role of supporting wife and wise mother of the family. By thus defining "active virtues" as fundamental in domestic woman, Maria Edgeworth's domestic novels succeed in accommodating the conflicting demands involved in the discourse of female education: women have to cultivate themselves to become able mothers and wives but, as domestic beings, must not develop understanding too much .

Further, *Belinda* and *Helen*, as educational novels for young ladies, put weight on the mother-daughter relationship in instilling the "active" domestic principles in women. Here Edgeworth's argument becomes fundamentally circular. To appreciate the domestic life, "naturally" suitable for women, a woman, as daughter, has to be instilled with "active virtues" of reason and understanding through her mother; and the mother in turn "naturally" has to be able to exercise her reason and judgement actively in domestic life, and so the cycle goes on. Edgeworth explores the theme of mother-daughter relationship in *Belinda* and *Helen*, considering it as the channel of transmitting the ideal of domestic woman to the next generation of women.

It is possible to see behind the "naturalness" of domestic woman and the chain of mother-to-daughter an intelligent interest in the position of women and an understanding of woman's socialisation in society. However, as we detected behind Edgeworth's hostility against "public" women, it is also possible to see the transmission of such mechanism of a patriarchal and class bound society. Female sexuality has to be contained within the domestic sphere for the continuity of the gentry, and the ideal of solid, frugal solid woman must be upheld in opposition to the luxurious women of aristocracy.

However, what is even more interesting in these domestic novels is that however strongly Edgeworth emphasises the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the education of domestic women, the biological mother-daughter relationships are, in fact, more or less failures. The failures of the actual mother-daughter relationships may imply that the mother-to-daughter transmission is not as easy as the novels' didactic surface indicates. The fact that the daughters

with living mothers misconduct themselves and the daughters whose mothers are dead is truer to principles may even suggest that the mother's influence, in spite of Edgeworth's assertion in her novels, are in reality apt to be hindrance to the domestic ideology. In this sense, Elizabeth Kowalleski-Wallace may be quite right in perseveringly and indefatigably reading in Edgeworth's works "the persistent shadows of irrational force"— the female power to resist against containment in the patriarchal, domestic ideology, which she terms "maternal" power (104-5, 15).

As if to support this reading, we may note that the erring women are the most vivid; we are impressed with Lady Davenant's magnanimous speech, and Lady Celilia's arch manners in *Helen*. In *Belinda*, the rational heroine is even shut up by the volubility of the fashionable ladies. Lady Delacour is brilliant in wit and glamorous in language in her long speeches, while Belinda's reply is condensed into strict summaries. The vivacity of these erring women seems to upstage the position of the rational heroines. If we consider this together with the fact that Maria Edgeworth severely reprimands these women even by physically disabling some of them, again we may see that Edgeworth is not so complacent about the "naturalness" of domestic woman as she seems.

Further, Edgeworth let the unprincipled Lady Delacour be right over the rational, sound Lady Anne in choice of the heroine's husband. Though she upholds "active virtues" as necessary for the education of the domestic women, Edgeworth fails to make them work in the choice of husband, equally important for the heroine's fulfilment as the domestic woman. For all her didacticism about rational domestic woman, Edgeworth suggests that reason is not almighty. Even the perfectionist Lady Davenant in the end comes to prefer human weakness and imperfection to rigid integrity in principle, which, again, seems to counterbalance the didacticism of domestic woman and "active virtues". Thus, behind her didactic upholding of a "natural" domestic life and its "active virtues", behind her emphasis on mother-daughter relationships, Edgeworth's novels about "young lady just entering into the world" seem also to involve at some level a criticism of that domestic ideology. Edgeworth may have sensed, even if unconsciously, the strain it has on women— that women may not be so easily conformed to the needs of domestic ideology.

Notes

(1) Hereafter, Edgeworth's works will be cited in parentheses as follows:
LLL Letters for Literary Ladies (1795)
B *Belinda* (1801)
H *Helen* (1834), Vol. 10 of *Tales and Novels by Maria Edgeworth*
PE Maria & Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (1801)

(2) See for example Gilbert and Gubar (146-52), Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace and Caroline Gonda (204-38).

(3) For the detailed history of conduct books of this period see Todd (xv-xxiii) and Richardson (170-85).

(4) As Heather MacFadyen noticed, Lady Delacour's reading habits are symbolic of her lifestyle and of the state of her mind. Lady Delacour either performs "fashionable reading" of literature for display (425-6), or "Methodistical" reading which appeal to irrational and mystical fear to evoke

religious feeling.

(5) See, for example, Kowaleski-Wallace, 128.

(6) It is interesting to note that such comment is made in reference to the French political ladies. The implication is obvious: the decline and ruin of the French monarchy and the chaotic results of the French Revolution are due to the female interference in public affairs.

(7) "Mothers" in Austen's novels are often bad advisors and even hindrance to the heroines' moral development and happiness, as we can see in Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or in Lady Russell of *Persuasion*.

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