When Women Watch Women: Women's Friendship and Female Gaze in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*

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Woman is centered as a crucial figure in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801). Critics have found in the work such themes as women's education and the domestication of women through the notion of motherhood. As scholars have claimed, eighteenth-century England saw the increasing concern over women's body and nature, and this concern over women's nature culminated in the notion of motherhood which played a vital role in the process of the domestication of women through the reconsideration of their sexuality. Written in the time of the social reconfiguration of the sexes, *Belinda* seems to provide its readers with a woman's new role in a society. While a sense of power is suggested in the role, the narrative rather functions for the domestication of women, along with its contemporary discourses about women, and, I argue, women's friendship and female gaze are the keys to understanding the way in which the text convinces women into a new role and domesticity.

In the eighteenth century, the rise of motherhood and domestic ideology was strongly related to medical discourse on women's body. According to various studies which look into discourses about the woman's body in the eighteenth century, women's body served as the basis of women's sexuality or motherhood which described and prescribed women's role in society. In *Sexual Visions*, Ludmilla Jordanova regards biological and medical science

since the eighteenth century as discourses which have contributed to the process of clarifying or 'naturalizing' gender. Jordanova reads the eighteenth-century concerns with the breast and women's reproductive capacity as the attempt to differentiate masculine and feminine, to clarify gender boundaries. In *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur points out that the "two-sex/flesh model" (8), which views woman not as an imperfect man but as a different being, appeared during the eighteenth century. He argues that this view emerged because of the social need for the clear distinction between men and women. Londa Schiebinger's *The Mind Has No Sex?* also examines a discourse of anatomy, and Schiebinger claims that it brought up the idea of natural law as the ground for explanation or reconfiguration of sex roles in society, at the time when Enlightenment thinkers faced the contradiction between the subordination of women to men and the liberal political theory that all men are equal in nature. She discusses that the anatomy and philosophy of sexual difference made a way to the notion of sexual complementarity which held that men and women are complementary opposites and have their own places in society according to their "natures." All these critics show that sexual anatomy offered a site for a new arrangement of power and position of the sexes in the eighteenth-century society. As their studies reveal, the understanding of women's body as the source of woman's "nature" contributed to the emergence of motherhood and domestic ideology.

It is against this historical moment that critics such as Beth Kowaleski-Wallace and Ruth Perry read *Belinda*. Both Kowaleski-Wallace and Perry see that Edgeworth's text reflects how an emerging ideology of motherhood functioned for the creation of domestic women. In their reading of the text, the breast is a locus where ideological conflicts over the idea of "natural" maternal feeling take place. These two critics respectively point

out that motherhood is learned by women in the work while it is presented as "natural" character to them, and they pay a particular attention to the story of Lady Delacour who learns motherhood and domestic happiness in the course of the narrative.[1] Yet, they differ in how her story can be read. Perry regards Lady Delacour's history as "festering resentment at the colonization of her body" (232) and "a record of her alienation from her female body and its vulnerability to male control" (232). Hence, she suggests that Edgeworth's text documents the moments of resistance in the ideological construction of women's body as maternal. On the other hand, Kowaleski-Wallace argues that Belinda, especially Lady Delacour's story, rather contributes to the spread of domestic ideology or what she calls "new-style patriarchy" which operates "according to the more psychologically compelling themes of guilt and obligation" (243). Kowaleski-Wallace states, "Lady Delacour's narrative records the process of internalizing a specific image of womanhood, and it registers the sense of maternal guilt and obligation which was to be a necessary component of that process" (243). The narrative's treatment of "the guilt over failed maternity" (252) as "'natural' mark of woman's deviancy" (252), she argues, is the "implementation of a particular domestic ideology" (252). Kowaleski-Wallace thus regards the story of Lady Delacour works not as resisting but as pointing a way to the emerging ideology.

In fact, Edgeworth's text seems to offer and encourage a reading of women's body and mind, and a cultural attention to the psychological can be seen in this reading, as Kowaleski-Wallace discusses. In her study of domestic fiction, Nancy Armstrong refers to a view of fiction as products and production of culture at the same time, "as the document and as the agency of cultural history" (23), and she aims to show "how domestic fiction helped to produce a subject who understood herself in the psychological

terms that had shaped fiction" (23). Armstrong writes:

> I believe it helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior. In doing so, fiction contested and finally suppressed alternative bases for human relationships. (23-24)

That is, domestic fiction functions as an apparatus of domestic ideology.

Indeed, *Belinda* seems to meet such a function, and I would like to consider relationships between women as one of the sites where contests of ideologies have taken place. For, when we consider the ideologies of motherhood and "domestic happiness" in Belinda, we cannot ignore a way in which those ideologies appear in the text—by being observed and discussed by both men and women. Characters, both male and female, gradually come to subscribe to the picture of "domestic happiness" and the idea of "natural" maternal affection, through good and bad examples of their friends. Here, it is worth noting that friendship, especially women's friendship, receives a particular attention in Edgeworth's work. In this essay, I would like to look into women's friendship, since it seems that *Belinda* can be read as a struggle over women's friendship. I would argue that the text records society's concerns about women's friendship which is presented as a potential threat to society but is reread as a vehicle for emerging ideologies of motherhood and domestic happiness. The narrative introduces women's friendship as a site for making sense of a new understanding of women's body and mind, and thus creates an arena which serves for the dissemination of those ideologies.

A few works of the eighteenth century present women's friendship or communities of women as an alternative site from which women can resist patriarchal social customs and orders. Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1767)

posits a community which is created and maintained by women and separates itself from a capitalist economy by a community-based economic system. Another work, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1796) resists the patriarchal social orders through a cross-class alliance between women who share the systems of patriarchal society as sources of their suffering. In these narratives, then, women's friendship holds a disruptive potential that can work against domestic ideology. Women's friendship, these narratives suggest, can function as a site to envision alternative relationships or position in society to ones that already existed at that time.

A relationship between women which leads to moments of resistance appears in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, too. What she calls an "aching void" (43) in the house where she fails to play her expected roles as a mother and a wife, turns Lady Delacour to a search of a "bosom friend" (43) outside the household, and she makes friends with Harriot Freke who likes to dress men's clothes. Lady Delacour speaks of Harriot Freke as a masculine woman: "She supported the character of a young rake with such spirit and *truth*, that I am sure no common conjurer could have discovered any thing feminine about her" (47).[2] With Mrs. Freke, Lady Delacour goes out into the fashionable world rather than contains herself in the domestic sphere. Together, they trespass socially-inscribed women's role, by wearing men's clothes and attempting a duel with another woman, which inflames the crowd: "the untutored sense of propriety amongst these rusticks was so shocked at the idea of a duel fought by women in *men's clothes*, that I verily believe they would have thrown us into the river with all their hearts" (58). This sentence clearly records the sense that their behavior is a threat to society. Yet, *Belinda* rather negates a disruptive potential in women's friendship, since such moments as above are narrated as mere "frolic" and

a source of regret and pain by Lady Delacour herself.

Although the episode of a duel is dismissed quickly, a sense of terror and concern over Harriot Freke, who is called a "man-woman" (219), remains in the narrative. It occasionally expresses concerns over the characters and behaviors of Harriot Freke, who is contrasted to the characters of Belinda or domestic ideology of the Percivals. Her transvestism, her wearing of men's clothes, is marked in *Belinda* as horrifying and threating to society not only because it is against the feminine virtues but also because it is the "outward manifestation of the adoption of masculine attributes" (104) as Colin B. Atkinson and Jo Atkinson state. Furthermore, it does not subscribe to the view of the women's body as the basis of women's nature—the view which allowed the emergence of motherhood and domestic ideology. In other words, a character such as Harriot Freke, is a woman who has a body that does not lead—nor convince—her into motherhood. Her act, as well as the capacity of her body, is beyond people's expectation, as she surprises Mr. Vincent's black servant, Juba: "Threat was loud enough to reach his ears, and he looked up in astonishment to hear such a voice from a woman" (219). Sexuality was reconfigured on the women's body during the eighteenth century, according to the studies mentioned earlier in this essay, but it seems that "naturalizing" sexuality in medical discourses alone was not enough. "Naturalized" sexuality must be located deep in the body—in the women's subjectivity. It requires internalization.

The narrative seems to work for internalization of 'naturalized' sexuality by offering and encouraging observation of women's body and mind. It invites readers for a new reading of women's body and mind; sometimes by giving the association of women's body with feelings or characters—what is deep inside the individuals—and other times by suggesting that the connec-

tion between the body and mind is not so clear. Lady Delacour tells Belinda: "Yes, pity me, for what you have seen; and a thousand times more, for that which you cannot see—inveterate remorse—remorse for a life of folly—of folly which has brought on me all the punishment of guilt" (32). She also says later, "You stare—you cannot enter my feelings" (65). These words by Lady Delacour implies the existence of her feelings ,which is not visible, underneath her skin. Yet, she implies the connection between the body and mind, as she mentions: "Since my health has been weakened, I believe I have acquired more conscience" (65) and "She has cost me my peace of mind—my health—my life" (65). Both the body and mind of Lady Delacour is there to be examined by readers and characters. For instance, Dr. X--- takes interest in her character: "These high spirits do not seem quite natural. ···but this gayety of lady Delacour's does not appear to me that of a sound mind in a sound body" (115). The work proposes, then, that appearance needs examination.

In her reading of Michel Foucault, Nancy Armstrong especially points to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' discovery of "desire hidden within the individual" (12). She writes:

> The discovery of this repressed sexuality thus provided justification for reading and interpreting sexual behavior wherever one found it, always with the Enlightenment motive of discovering truth and producing freedom, always consequently with the very different result of enclosing sex within an individual's subjectivity. (12)

In *Belinda*, too, we can find this placement of sexuality within an individual's subjectivity. The narrative offers the spaces or connections between women's body and mind that still need to be looked into.

Edgeworth's work invites both its characters and readers to a new

reading of women's body and mind, since how to read the body as maternal needs to be learned, as can be seen in the examples of Lady Delacour. That is when women's education becomes an important theme, especially *for women*, in *Belinda*. In examining this issue of women's education, Julie Shaffer first discusses a "lover-mentor" convention in which a male character acts as a mentor of a heroine, and points out that *Belinda* departs from that convention by giving examples in which "a woman can be a better mentor than her male protagonist" (62). As Shaffer shows, women are presented as possible agents of, not just the target of, education in Edgeworth's text. Heather Macfadyen is another critic who deals with the issue of women's education in the rise of domestic ideology. Macfadyen pays special attention to a theatrical motif in *Belinda,* and she looks into how Lady Delacour "uses texts to provide her with a series of nondomestic identities" (426) in her "fashionable reading," or public display of her knowledge about literature. She sees that Edgeworth successfully presents Lady Delacour as "a reformed fashionable reader" which "suggests that a woman may possess both domestic and literary authority" (439), although the fashionable woman was considered as a threat to demsticity because of her public display of the female body. In this process, Macfadyen states that "Lady Delacour needs a friend rather than an admirer" (431) for her 'cure,' too. Both Shaffer and Macfadyen, then, see that women play a significant role in the education of women into domesticity and gain a sense of power through that role. Here, I believe, women's friendship needs more attention. Although Macfadyen takes friendship as "the product of domestic not fashionable reading" (431), I would like to examine it as a site of production or dissemination of domestic ideology. The text presents friendship as a place where ideologies of motherhood and domestic happiness can be talked about: that is, women's friendship becomes a site for

women's education toward domestic ideology.

Even after the dismissal of women's friendship—one between Lady Delacour and Harriot Freke, Edgeworth's work presents extraordinary concern toward women's friendship. Women in the work yearn for and appreciate the relationship with other women, as Lady Delacour needs Belinda's understanding and friendship, and Belinda discusses and shares her views of the world with Lady Anne Percival. From the beginning to the end, the work turns away from "guardian" figures to "friends." Guardian figures are depicted as not sufficient for the domestication of women. Belinda's aunt, Mrs. Selina Stanhope, only cares about 'marrying her nieces off,' and is of no help in educating domestic women, as her married nieces are reported to be facing the domestic ruptures in their marriages and Belinda has to observe and learn the value of domestic happiness on her own. Mrs. Ormond, who attends and educates Virginia, cannot raise her into a domestic woman, either. For the domestication of women, a more effective relationship of friendship is needed.

Women's friendship is thus one of the book's central issue, as well as "companionate marriage" or friendship between a husband and a wife. Women's friendship is a subject which is often thought about and discussed by both male and female characters in the text. Belinda learns Harriot Freke's character from Lady Delacour's history, and, she rejects Mrs. Freke's invitation to associate with her. To Mr. Percival and Mr. Vincent, Belinda says, "I think her friendship more to be dreaded than her enmity" (232). Later, when she witnesses another of Mrs. Freke's 'frolics,' Belinda cannot help saying "What a lesson to young ladies in the choice of female friends!" This is the very lesson that Lady Delacour draws from her own experiences. In her anxiety, Lady Delacour resolves to "at once cast off all the acquaintance that are unworthy of me" (292) after the operation on her

breast. Then, she tells her daughter, Helena, to be careful in the choice of friends: "Choose your friends well, my dear daughter! It was my misfortune, my folly, early in life to connect myself with a woman, who under the name of frolic led me into every species of mischief" (298). Women's happiness, Edgeworth's text describes, depends on their choice of female friends.

It becomes clear that women's conduct is regarded as having some effects not only upon other women but also upon society, when Mr. Percival states: "It is difficult in society, ···especially for women, to do harm to themselves, without doing harm to others" (253). He sees that society "excommunicates" "female outlaws" since they "defy the world" (253). His comments present the view that women's conduct is rightly a social concern. *Belinda* not only reiterates this view; it also urges women to learn to be careful with other women. As we can see in the remarks on the choice of female friends, the narrative suggests that it is a woman's responsibility to stay away from female outlaws and to acquaint themselves with 'real' friends. When Belinda, Mr. Vincent, and Mr. Percival come across the sight of Miss Moreton, a new friend—or victim, staying with Mrs. Freke, Mr. Percival says to the others: "She is certainly to be pitied, but also to be blamed" (251), and tells them that it was her decision to stay with Mrs. Freke. Hence, women is responsible for their choice of friends.

Instead of simply rejecting women's friendship entirely, then, *Belinda* presents that women's friendship can be a site of women's education, education of women into domesticity or motherhood in particular. Belinda comes to appreciate the view of domestic happiness through Lady Anne Percival; and Lady Delacour is introduced to the pleasure of motherhood by Belinda. It seems that women's friendship is imagined to serve for the dissemination of ideologies of motherhood and domestic happiness. The

work encourages women to help each other in learning those ideologies, and discourages leaving women alone without social contacts. Lady Delacour misguides herself to the wrong kinds of religious books during "the solitude of her illness" (270). Virginia, who is kept in solitude by Clerance Hervey, retains her innocence and sensibility, but she falls prey to romantic view of love through books and fails to learn domestic ideology: "without companions to interest her social affections, without real objects to occupy her senses and understanding, Virginia's mind was either perfectly indolent, or exalted by romantic views and visionary ideas of happiness" (379). Clerance Hervey later recognizes his fault in leaving Virginia in the solitude: "Nothing could be more absurd than my scheme of educating a woman in solitude, to make her fit for society" (472). As Belinda herself gradually learns domestic ideology through her contact with the Percivals, the work implies that social relationship, women's friendship in particular, is necessary for education and circulation of ideologies of motherhood and domestic happiness.

Belinda imagines women's friendship as a site for women to carefully reflect and guide others and themselves. Women do so by watching others and themselves. This sense of women watching others and themselves is obvious in the text. Lady Delacour's life initiates Belinda into careful observation. Belinda sees difference in Lady Delacour's public gaiety and domestic misery: "Abroad, and at home, lady Delacour was two different persons" (10), and the effect of listening to Lady Delacour's history is that "Belinda saw things in a new light; and for the first time in her life she reasoned for herself upon what she saw and felt" (69). Then she resolves "to profit by her bad example" (70). Conversation with Mrs. Freke "roused [Belinda], upon reflxtion, to examine by her reason the habits and principles which guided her conduct" (232). The gap between appearance and

reality and possible disaster which might come from misreading make Belinda very careful in her contact with others.

When Lady Delacour gets jealous and doubts Belinda's friendship to her because of a gossip, she suffers an enormous psychological disturbance both from the suspicions of Belinda's real minds and from the scrutiny of her own thoughts and feelings. Even of domestic happiness, Belinda cannot let her imagination or desire flow: "she feared to indulge the romantic hope of ever being loved by a man of superiour genius and virtue, with a temper and manners suited to her taste" (138). Lady Delacour herself tells Helena not to trust the appearance: "Do not judge always of the kindness of people feel for you, child, by their looks; and remember that is is *possible* a person might have felt more than you could guess by their looks" (289). Helena is depicted as "*a nice observer*" (296), who has a good ability to observe situations and people, when she prevents a female servant from sneaking into her mother's secrete chamber. Helena, we are told, also "carefully repressed all curiosity" (296). The text depicts such mental activities as observation, self-reflection, or suppression, as virtuous characteristics of admirable women or necessary process of domestication. Edgeworth's narrative involves women into surveillance of women—of others and themselves—as men or society do.

As discussed above, *Belinda* suggests that women should carefully guide themselves and others in their friendship, and it thus produces women's friendship as a site for making sense of a new understanding of women's body and mind, as a vehicle for the ideologies of motherhood and domestic happiness. The act of watching others and themselves functions to lead women to the domestic sphere, whereas it gives women a sense of power in that it allows women to be moral agents for society. Yet, women gain the sense of power and responsibility at the stake of a space for

alternative values and relationships to domestic ideology. Even the last two lines by Lady Delacour reveal the sense of her being the object of readers' scrutiny: "Our *tale* contains a *moral*, and, no doubt,/ You all have wit enough to find it out" (478). In her classic text, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey discusses the gaze as a gendered phenomenon in films; the gaze is associated with male while the spectacle with female. However, Edgeworth's narrative invites women to observation, while men are left unmarked as objects of observation. Thus, in *Belinda*, women are put into a space between body and mind or between society and household, and women's friendship serves for domestic ideology when women watch women.

Notes

1 For more information on the social concerns over women's breasts and an analysis of Lady Delacour's breast cancer in the narrative, see Nakamura (2001).

2 Hereafter, an emphasis in the quotation is in original, unless noted otherwise.

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