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Author(s)	Katayama, Miho
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The Predominance of Reason over Sentiment: Fatherhood in *Belinda*

Miho KATAYAMA

In the advertisement of *Belinda*, first published in 1801, Maria Edgeworth declared that her work is not what is called a "novel" but a moralizing story. This remark of Edgeworth's on her literary product reflects the unfavorable situation for the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when it was thought that novels led young people astray into excessive sentimentalism. The term "novel" is ascribed to highly romantic works in this period. Let us consider the following quotation:

The following work is offered to the public as a Moral Tale--the author not wishing to acknowledge a Novel. . . . [S]o much folly, error, and vice are disseminated in books classed under this denomination, that it is hoped the wish to assume another title will be attributed to feelings that are laudable, and not fastidious. (3)¹

Here, we see Edgeworth emphasizing the seriousness of her "Moral Tale" in a position against the "novel" of sensibility which is often considered to be delusive. Giving a lesson to her readers, Edgeworth places great importance on reason. In a comment on this advertise-

ment of Edgeworth's, Marilyn Butler writes: "Maria . . . joined the group of rational women writers . . . whose first novels were so to speak anti-novels" (307).

The plot of *Belinda* attempts to carry through this moral purpose. The eponymous heroine, Belinda Portman, is invited to stay for winter at the house of Lady Delacour. However, it does not take long for Belinda to realize that Lady Delacour lives a dissipated life, suffering from domestic misery. Lady Delacour often has harsh words with Lord Delacour, who drinks excessively; furthermore, she cannot rear her child up in her own care. In the plot, we also read of Harriet Freke, who leads Lady Delacour into misguided conduct fatal to her domestic peace. The discreet Belinda helps to restore the domestic harmony with a clever young man, Clarence Hervey.

In the meantime, although she has come to like him, Belinda hears that Hervey is already attached to a woman called Virginia St Pierre. Belinda comes near to marrying Augustus Vincent, whom she becomes acquainted with at the house of the Percivals. In the end, Belinda, however, has a proposal of marriage from Hervey, who breaks off his marriage with Virginia. He has recognized that the woman whom he really loves is Belinda and that Virginia wants to marry another man.

The marriage of Belinda, a protagonist of great discretion, with Hervey is a suitable conclusion to the "Moral Tale" in that it shows a high value which this work sets upon reason. The fact that Belinda, a rational heroine, is rewarded with happiness certainly proves that *Belinda* has much to do with reason.

We, nevertheless, have a feeling that there is an attempt to shift the focus to something sentimental in this story when we are shown Virginia St Pierre and Augustus Vincent, both of whom are closely associated with romances. The sensitive Virginia is so indulged in reading them that she is possessed with the idea that a man whose picture she has once seen is her knight to be. Although she has never met him, she is haunted by his image all day long. Similarly, the ardent Vincent has a romantic sensibility. The fact that Virginia and Vincent are inseparably linked to susceptible feelings reminds us what Ernest A. Baker says on Edgeworth's view about the romance: "She herself [Edgeworth] had a weakness for romance of the old stamp, in spite of her ridicule of sentimentalism and of Gothic and other extravagances" (15). This unconscious inclination toward sensibility is noteworthy because it is the marriage of Virginia to Hervey and that of Vincent to Belinda which springs up and causes crises that prevents Hervey, a suitable partner for Belinda, from proposing to Belinda, in this rational "Moral Tale" of marriage.

When we look at Belinda's marriage to Hervey in relation to the romantic Virginia and the passionate Vincent, Belinda's marriage with Hervey, or her winning over them in her marriage quest for Hervey, suggests the dominance of reason achieved at the inevitable expense of the suppression of sentimentalism. *Belinda*, consequently, is concerned with how the heroine overcomes the difficulties which the characters of sensibility bring to her. Therefore, although it seems that not so much attention has been turned to the story of

Virginia or that of Vincent as, for example, the effect Lady Delacour has or that which Freke does, yet the crucial role which they play strongly draw our interest. In this paper, focusing and discussing in detail Virginia and Vincent, I wish to show that the marriage of the rational Belinda is based on the repression of sentimental feelings, which Virginia and Vincent incorporate.

There is wide agreement that the treatment of *Belinda* describes the contention of reason with sentiment. O. Elizabeth McWhorter Harden makes the comment: “[I]t [*Belinda*] dramatizes the conflicts within Maria Edgeworth's own personality and environment, conflicts between reason and feeling, restraint and individual freedom, society and the free spirit” (*Maria Edgeworth* 50).

Reason has the function of inhibiting socially deviant behavior. In other words, it restrains activities which are not acceptable to the norms of society. One of the forms it takes is fatherhood, which is typified by the father's regulation of the child's behavior at home with the social code. Especially noteworthy as a way to exercise this power of fatherhood is giving the name to the child. In his study of the question of the metaphor “the Name of the Father,” Jacques Lacan observes that it is the figure of the father which bans the child from contravening the societal standards of conduct by enabling him to give the name “the father” to the cause of the mother's absence. When the mother is away, the child thinks that she is beside the father. Her absence, consequently, comes to be explained by using the name “the father.” Fatherhood, therefore, has

the naming power to make it possible to designate mother's absence, or the thing with the word in the language system.

The father's restrictive role for the child is well represented by the fact that "the Name of the Father" is the metaphor meaning "the prohibition which the father lays." The "name" symbolizes "prohibition," as suggested by similar sounds which French *nom* 'name' and French *non* 'prohibition' make. Accordingly, "the Name of the Father" is the metaphor of the prohibition of the father. Remarking on this theory of "the Name of the Father," Keith Green and Jill LeBihan note that it is the naming act of fatherhood that curbs, or rather forbids publicly inadmissible child behavior:

It is in the Name of the Father that meaning is, however provisionally, fixed. Just as the familial metaphor suggests, the paternal figure who orders and controls wayward children is necessary if that child is going to grow up properly adjusted. (164)

As for Belinda Portman, she upholds the norms which reason requires. Belinda's rationality is expressed in the following quotation. This extract is concerned with not only Belinda's but also that of Virginia, but I shall be taking up the question of Virginia's characteristics later. "The virtues of Virginia sprang from sentiment: those of Belinda, from reason" (379; ch. 26).

Hence, the home which Belinda hopes to have in her marriage is that in which the father, the mother, and the child live with high regard to what is rational. Belinda believes that marriage

should bring her a happy home life. When she stays for a while at the house of the domestic Percivals and sees the family pass a life full of joy before her eyes, Belinda comes to appreciate the happiness which home gives. She compares the Percivals and the Delacours whose house she has been invited to. Although she is often talked of in admiration as a highly fashionable lady, Lady Delacour is disappointed with her husband and dissipates herself in desperation. Moreover, she cannot bring up her daughter herself. Lord Delacour, too, is prodigal and drinks intemperately. Saying "I am not a man to be governed by a wife" (38; ch. 3), he quarrels with Lady Delacour. Making a visit to the two contrasting families, "Belinda was convinced by this comparison, that domestic life was that which could alone make her really and permanently happy" (217; ch. 16).

In the Percivals' domestic life which impresses Belinda very much, Mr Percival, Lady Anne, and their children have a great respect for reason. As Julia Douthwaite suggests, "[t]he Percival home represents the ideal of rational domesticity . . ." (44). At the Percivals', reason is an important criterion of judgement:

In conversation, every person expressed without constraint their wishes and opinions; and wherever these differed, reason and the general good were the standards to which they appealed. (215; ch. 16)

I would now like to turn to the question of sensibility, which is often a serious threat to rational behaviour. Sensitive feelings manifest themselves as sentiment or passion. Excessive emotion

leads to socially intolerable conduct, because a person of strong sentiment or ardor does not act according to the generally accepted standards, and acts as he feels.

One of the things that has the power to awaken these violent feelings is romance. In this genre of novels, a man who is more readily subject to enthusiasm or a tenderhearted lady is completely his or her self in their romantic setting, released from shackles of everyday life. Describing the identifying quality of the romance in his preface to *The American*, Henry James writes of this characteristic power of the romance to free people from restraints:

The only *general* attribute of projected romance that I [Henry James] can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals--experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a *related*, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities. (10) ²)

An example of a character under this "liberating" power of romance are the parents of Virginia St Pierre, who elope because Virginia's mother reads so many romantic novels that her sentiment is aroused.

She [Virginia's mother] was scarcely sixteen, when he [Virginia's father] ran away with her from a boarding-school; he was at that time a gay officer, she a sentimental girl, who has been spoiled by early novel-reading. (407-08; ch. 27)

In a comment on this scene, Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick points out the danger of reading romances. Lady Delacour says to Belinda, “[N]ovel reading for young ladies is the most dangerous--” (72; ch. 5). Echoing her word “dangerous,” Kirkpatrick remarks thus: “[I]n *Belinda*, novel-reading sometimes *is* dangerous” (xii).

So far, we have seen how reason or sentiment functions and that Belinda is on the side of reason. These discussions bring us further into a consideration of the crises which Virginia and Vincent cause to Belinda's marriage with Hervey. First, we will deal with the question of Virginia, to whom Hervey has been attached before meeting Belinda.

What draws our particular attention in *Virginia* is that she sees Hervey as a father, who assumes the charge of rearing her up. After her parents run away, the husband leaves his wife and his child, never letting them know his whereabouts, and the wife passes away in despair. Hence, Virginia becomes an orphan and eventually comes to be taken care of by Mrs Ormond, receiving aid from Hervey. He gains the sudden awareness that Virginia has seen a paternal figure in him when his marriage with Virginia is broken off. She is found to be mad and have a fantastic love for the man whom she

knows only in a picture.

'I [Hervey] might have foreseen what must happen, that Virginia would consider me as her tutor, her father, not as her lover, or her husband; that, with the most affectionate of hearts, she could for me feel nothing but *gratitude*.' (472; ch. 31)

Hervey, who has in him the quality of the oppressive father, tries to prescribe to Virginia how she should behave by using his naming power. He gives her the name "Virginia St Pierre," so that she will observe the principle of honor. In fact, this name comes from the French romance, *Paul and Virginia* written by Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. The original name of the orphan, Virginia, is Rachel Hartley. This renaming act clearly demonstrates Hervey's unwitting imposition of the standards of acceptable behavior on her. Although he is very particular about the books which Virginia reads, he makes an exception for romances and does not oppose her coming by them.

[H]e made no objection to romances: these, he thought, breathed a spirit favourable to female virtue, exalted the respect for chastity, and inspired enthusiastic admiration of honour, generosity, truth, and all the noble qualities which dignify human nature. (380; ch. 26)

Virginia shows an intense love of novels of sensibility and indulges herself in reading them. From this inclination of hers for

romances one may say that Virginia is the embodiment of sentiment.³⁾ These good qualities, therefore, derive from her tender and susceptible nature. "The virtues of Virginia," as has been quoted, "sprang from sentiment . . ." (379; ch. 26).

Virginia, who is absorbed in romances, is a threat to Hervey, because she is marked by sensibility, which relates to the resistance to rational fatherhood. Ordinarily, Virginia shows love for him, though Hervey, a great admirer of the Rousseauian education, places her in a secluded house. It is surrounded with garden walls, and he imprisons her, never permitting her to see the outside world. When Sir Philip Baddely and Mr Rochfort say to her that she cannot love such a tyrannical man, Virginia cries, "He is not a tyrant—I *do* love him . . ." (384; ch. 26).

Virginia, however, takes a completely different attitude toward Hervey in a dream where the fetters of reason are shaken off. She is reluctant to accept paternity in him and becomes deeply rebellious. One day Virginia relates to Mrs Ormond a romantic dream which she has and in which she becomes the Virginia, or the heroine, of the romance *Paul and Virginia*. A knight in a helmet with white plumes has a duel for her with a knight wearing black plumes. Virginia hopes that the knight of the white plumes wins the duel, and he pulls a sword on the one in the black plumes. It turns out, however, that the knight wearing the black plumes is Hervey. This scene where Virginia wants Hervey to lose clearly illustrates the fact that she is trying to resist Hervey.

'One of the knights wore black plumes in his helmet, and the other white; and, as he was passing by me, the vizor of the knight of the white plumes was let down, and I saw it was--'

'Clarence Hervey?' said Mrs Ormond.

'No; still the same figure that knelt to me; and I wished him to be victorious. And he was victorious. And he unhorsed his adversary, and stood over him with his drawn sword; and then I saw that the knight in the black plumes was Mr Hervey, and I ran to save him, but I could not. I saw him weltering in his blood, and I heard him say, "Perfidious, *ungrateful* Virginia! you [sic] are the cause of my death!" and I screamed, I believe, and that awakened me.' (388; ch. 26)

Her sentiment stirred up by the dream world of romances, Virginia, who is, to quote James, "liberated" from restraints, is defiant toward Hervey and tries to subvert the paternal values which he symbolizes. The threatening Virginia in this romantic setting recalls us to Gillian Beer's comment: "[I]t [The romance] was . . . felt to threaten the dominance of reason" (55).

Virginia, who devotes herself to romantic novels, poses a grave threat to Hervey. However, a person who attempts to defeat the rational figure of the father is fated to be seized by madness. In her insanity, Virginia not only dreams a wild dream of stabbing Hervey but also lapses into delirium. She raves about a man whose

picture she has seen before. The man is in armor and kneels down to her. In fact, he is the white knight in the dream. Hearing about this vision from her, Hervey recognizes that the deranged Virginia harbors love for another man. The marriage of Virginia with Hervey is, consequently, called off.

Thus Virginia's rejection of submission to reason is dismissed as the mere sentimentality of a girl in love with a man whom she believes to be her knight. Virginia's desperate cry does not gain attention since it comes from madness. With its repressive power, reason prevails against sensible feelings in real life.

Having considered the question of Virginia, I now would like to go on to a discussion of Vincent. Although Vincent's declaration of his love for Belinda poses a great danger to her marriage with Hervey whom the rational Belinda loves, the marriage of Vincent to Belinda is broken off when Belinda parts from Vincent, "a man of feeling" (424; ch. 28).

Vincent, who takes the side of sensibility, is described as being "as handsome as any hero of romance, ancient or modern" (277; ch. 20). Vincent has strong passions which are easily worked up. He, therefore, is completely absorbed in billiard gambling once he develops his passion for it. When Belinda leaves the Percivals' in Oakly-park where he meets her, Vincent, who is bored because he cannot meet her, indulges in gaming.

[P]recisely because he was under the dominion of one strong passion [passion for Belinda], he thought he could

never be under the dominion of another [a passion for gambling]. Thus persisting in his disdain of reason as a moral guide, Mr Vincent thought, acted, and suffered as a man of feeling. Scarcely had Belinda left Oakly-park for one week, when the *ennui* consequent to violent passion became insupportable; and to console himself of her absence, he flew to the billiard-table. (424; ch. 28)

From this quotation, it will be clear that Vincent does not think highly of reason: “[H]is feelings are always more powerful than his reason . . .” (423; ch. 28). Vincent, as Patricia Voss-Clesly argues by quoting extracts including this one, is characterized by “passion uncontrolled” (594). Belinda comes to part from Vincent, who is a heavy gambler carried away by destructive emotion. In the case of Vincent, too, sensibility has to be discarded.

In terms of the conflict of reason with sensibility, *Belinda* can be regarded as the story of Belinda’s marriage quest for a rational husband. Hervey, who symbolizes the restrictive father figure with the naming power to cast the child into the mold of meaning, or the established one of behavior, tries to prescribe how Virginia should behave. Virginia’s resistance, which is a threat to Hervey, however, is eventually subdued. Similarly, Vincent’s passion is looked on as inadmissible delusive feelings which have to be curbed. The apparent predominance of reason in the ending has been achieved on the inevitable suppression of sensibility.

Notes

- 1) Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 3. Subsequent parenthetical references will be to the 1802 edition.
- 2) For this marked feature of the romance which Henry James indicates in the preface of *The American*, see Beer 16.
- 3) For the association of Virginia with sensibility, see Harden, *Maria Edgeworth* 51.

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(Graduate Student)

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