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Uncovering Maria Edgeworth's Strategic Political Influence Through Her Unpublished Letters

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Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) was one of the most prolific Anglo-Irish novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Edgeworth's novels are regularly discussed among Regency-era scholars, researchers have rarely considered her letters and correspondence, especially in relation to her role in contemporary politics. During my time on the Maria Edgeworth Letters Project team, I researched Edgeworth's previously unpublished letters, which provided a unique view of her strategic political correspondence network. Through her writing, Edgeworth was able to voice her thoughts while also remaining publicly complacent with restrictive societal norms imposed on women. In my article, I argue that through her careful use of reason in her letters, Edgeworth was also able to persuade her male correspondents to consider her political ideas, especially in the case of her interactions with British Whig politician Thomas Spring-Rice, who in turn connected her to figures such as Prime Minister Henry John Temple.

Women's Conduct and the Enlightenment

Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) was one of the most prolific Anglo-Irish novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She published her first work in 1795 and her last in 1848, spending 53 years of her life as an active member of the literary sphere. Her works, while mostly fictional, include underlying political themes that correlate with the conditions of the time and reflect Edgeworth's opinions on class and gender inequality. While Edgeworth's literary works are regularly discussed among Regency-era scholars, researchers have not considered her letters as frequently, especially her views on contemporary politics. Edgeworth frequently "stated her opposition to discussing politics," but she managed to use her correspondence network within both the literary and political spheres to establish consistent lines of communication with prominent politicians (Nash 162). Edgeworth was already embedding her sociopolitical ideas in her novels, but I argue that through her reasoned arguments in her letters, she was also able to persuade her male correspondents to consider her political ideas, especially in the cases of her interactions with British Whig politician Thomas Spring-Rice, who in turn connected her to figures such as Prime Minister Henry John Temple. By comparing the political ideas found in her novels to those in her letters, it becomes clear that she had a much more direct connection to politics through her private correspondences than her public-facing narratives.

Edgeworth wrote during the Age of Enlightenment (1685-1815), which centered on the expansion of ideas within the realms of reason and science. Literacy rates rose to all-time highs, especially for the middle class, who were now able to consume printed matter on a much larger scale.¹ Although Enlightenment thought began nearly a century before Edgeworth's birth, her writing played a crucial role in the later years of the movement. Her novels were not only some of the most popular works among women of the time, but they were the most popular among all writers. British historian Roy Porter admits that while not every expression of the time was technically aligned with Enlightenment philosophy, "novels were often vehicles for exploring the implications of Enlightenment ideas" (59). Even if these novels were not directly intended to make a statement regarding Enlightenment period philosophies, they were undeniably influenced by issues and experiences concerning the Enlightenment. While female novelists in similar positions to Edgeworth only hinted at political ideas in their stories, they were still able to promote activism through these subtle details in their works.

The spread of information during the Enlightenment allowed for more educated conversations regarding subjects such as politics, class, and equal representation. Individuals would often gather in group settings to discuss ideas related to what they had read or heard, leading to open discourse communities that inspired new conversations about social change. British chemist and inventor Humphry Davy, an acquaintance of Edgeworth's, "became renowned for his 'laughing gas parties,'" where he would analyze the effects of inhaling nitrous oxide on the human brain (Bristol City Council Museum Collections). At these social gatherings, attendees would discuss issues relating to Enlightenment thought and activism. Groups such as

the Bluestockings formed in the 1750s with an “emphasis placed on wit and conversation rather than on dress and etiquette” (Schnorrenberg para. 11). Enlightenment era discourse communities were especially important in sparking the later movements that Edgeworth herself would become involved in. Though Edgeworth was not outwardly involved in many of these discussions, proto-feminist movements for rights such as equal access to education and work began to form during this time. These movements enabled Edgeworth and other women to obtain influence through their writing and make their own contributions to the sociopolitical sphere.

While Enlightenment era activism furthered female education in some respects, such as literacy and communication, women writers were continuously excluded from meaningful political conversations. Porter states:

The (male) Enlightenment ... broadly encouraged the view that women ought to be treated as rational creatures, and such authors as Locke held that girls should have more or less the same education as boys ... But beyond that, philosophes did not generally commit themselves to the general emancipation of women as men's equals (45).

Oftentimes, men saw the Enlightenment as an opportunity to critique the existing norms of Western society, but they failed to acknowledge that in the process of doing so women were being intentionally silenced. Despite encouraging equal education, popular thinkers such as John Locke often held the belief that “the last determination - i.e., the rule - should be placed somewhere, it naturally falls to the man's share, as the abler and stronger.” At the same time, however, Locke held that a woman had “full and free possession of what by contract is her peculiar right” (27). Locke is most known for his promotion of natural born equality and has often been considered a proto-feminist thinker. However, his writings denied women the right of ownership, putting them under the control of their male partners in the event of a disagreement. This promotion of female advancement in education without tangible action toward women's equality in the household left many women in similar positions to Edgeworth; they used highly conventional media to convey their ideas, arguably in a subversive way. These ideas of women's silencing were more directly communicated by conduct writers of the time, who popularized the concepts of an ideal, obedient womanhood. In John Gregory's 1774 conduct book *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, he states, “one of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve ... which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration” (Gregory 31). Gregory and other conduct writers promoted the spread of these ideas, which led to a popular stigma around women participating openly in social movements. This belief system was not directly forced on women, yet it was pervasive and often caused them to keep quiet in the public eye.

Despite this attempted erasure of female speech, women had access to a variety of new educational materials, leading to an increase in women's authorship that would result in them

outpublishing their male counterparts by a margin of 137 novels between 1770 and 1799 (Raven).² Activists achieved increased economic equality in many areas as a result of the Enlightenment, but gendered equality remained mostly unchanged. Despite being in this position, Edgeworth and many of her contemporaries were able to become influential, thought-provoking artists, communicating their views “not only through the economic institutions of print culture ... but also through the public forums of debating societies and the theater” (Mellor 3). Edgeworth’s own experiences are present in her novels, as she discusses issues that were familiar to many women who lived through the Enlightenment period. The significant change in the level of female education at the time was a sign of improved independence for women. However, not everyone saw this development as positive. Prominent conduct writers discussed the ideal woman, often holding women to a much different standard than their male counterparts. Gregory states, “But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (37). In his writing, Gregory urges all educated women to keep their intelligence hidden to avoid emasculating their male counterparts. The Bluestocking Hester Chapone echoed Gregory’s opinions and argued against reading for entertainment – especially in the case of fictitious novels – as she believed that they had the potential to corrupt young women’s minds. In her 1773 book *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, Chapone argues:

I think the greatest care should be taken in the choice of those fictitious stories that so enchant the mind; most of which tend to inflame the passions of youth, whilst the chief purpose of education should be to moderate and restrain them ... The expectation of extraordinary adventures—which seldom ever happen to the sober and prudent part of mankind—and the admiration of extravagant passions and absurd conduct, are some of the usual fruits of this kind of reading; which, when a young woman makes it her chief amusement, generally render her ridiculous in conversation, and miserably wrong-headed in her pursuits and behaviour (para. 169).

Chapone explains that while she believes it is essential for women to be well read, it is not advisable for them to read openly, as it could lead to disobedience. Edgeworth and Richard Lovell’s 1798 educational treatise *Practical Education* similarly promotes female restraint: “So much depends upon the temper of women, that it ought to be most carefully cultivated in early life; girls should be more inured to restraint than boys, because they are likely to meet with more restraint in society” (149). Edgeworth reveals that she is aware of the adversities faced by women, as she and Richard Lovell propose that women restrain themselves from an early age to avoid eventual pushback. Edgeworth likely experienced this issue herself given her reticence in the early years of her career, but she would ultimately make subtle, yet meaningful commentary through her novels. Despite these shared beliefs among conduct writers, the prior writings of

female writers such Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft would eventually shape Edgeworth's literary works and letters, as they were a foundation for her political thought. Edgeworth was able to vocalize her thoughts directly through her letters while simultaneously remaining publicly complacent with the ideological expectations imposed on her through the subtle political themes of her novels. I argue that Edgeworth's letters help us to better understand her life as well as those of the women who came before her, providing lasting insight into what political involvement looked like for women of the Regency era, given their social circumstances.

Edgeworth and Her Novels

Though she had spent her early years with her mother's family in England, Edgeworth moved to her father Richard Lovell's Irish estate in Edgeworthstown shortly following her mother's death. The Edgeworths, being well-known and important members of the Irish community, were involved in many political matters of the time. After her move to Edgeworthstown, Edgeworth's priorities shifted as she garnered early Irish sympathies, witnessing important events such as the Rebellion of '98, the Union, and the Famine. Edgeworth regularly accompanied Richard Lovell on his various trips and duties, and the events of time reflected the many political tensions between Ireland and Britain. The fight for Irish rights continued well throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and up to modern day, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals injured and deceased. When Edgeworth was nearly blinded in 1781, Richard Lovell became more focused on her educational growth, which allowed for her increased proficiency in the fields of reading and writing. She was also at an intellectual advantage because of the political and scientific value of her father's work. Butler states, "The mechanical experiments in which her father was happily absorbed at the period when Maria Edgeworth was born were ultimately to enrich and help to extend her education far beyond what was common for a woman" (36). Because of her father's interests and motivations to instruct his children, Edgeworth had a strong educational foundation that enabled her early success in the literary sphere. Though Edgeworth was not heavily involved in the political matters she oversaw alongside her father, the memories of these events and her father's focus on her education would reflect in her future successes and contributions to the political realm, especially relating to Irish, class-related issues.

The skills that she developed during this time transferred to her eventual writing career, allowing her to build a literary network that would later permit her influence within the political sphere. Richard Lovell became her literary partner and helped her establish a large network of correspondents before she ever began her writing career. With her preexisting network and educational level, Edgeworth was able to become even more well acquainted with those around her, becoming one of the most popular writers within the literary community of the time and establishing a network that would later help her make important contributions in politics despite being unable to directly participate in politics.

Edgeworth frequently incorporated social commentary into her novels, and her novels were studied by researchers long before her letters were published. One of Edgeworth's most strikingly political literary works is her 1814 novel, *Patronage*. The novel is centered around a didactic principle, as Edgeworth educated her readers on the corruption and inequities of the patronage system through her realistic depictions of the Percy and Falconer families. Edgeworth weaves in her own critiques of the patronage system within the story's entertaining plot twists and dramatic events that affect the Percy family's marriage and career prospects, focusing on issues relating to gender, class, and social norms. Her presentation of realistic social types mimics the true moral dilemmas of the patronage system through which individuals often sought higher political and financial standing. Edgeworth focuses not only on the expectations for women at the time, but she also reveals the difficulties men who were dependent on private or political patronage faced. This representation of the societal standards of both men and women helps to show that Edgeworth's sociopolitical concerns extended to individuals in vastly different positions from herself. Though the story involves several politically unrelated incidents, Edgeworth's true point is clear as she describes Count Altenberg's ideal woman as someone who had:

the noble simplicity of character that was once the charm of Switzerland, joined the polish, the elegance, that was once the pride of France; a woman possessing an enlarged, cultivated, embellished understanding capable of comprehending all his views as a politician and a statesman; yet without any wish for power, or love of political intrigue. Graced with knowledge and taste for literature and science, capable of being extended to the highest point of excellence, yet free from all pedantry, or pretension – with wit, conversational talents, and love of good society, without that desire of exhibition, that devouring diseased appetite for admiration, which preys upon the mind insatiably, to its torture (143).

In this passage, Edgeworth explains what Count Altenberg, a liberal German nobleman, is searching for in a potential wife, revealing that the expectations for women were nearly impossible to achieve at the time. While Altenberg hopes to find a woman who is both educated and knowledgeable about politics, he simultaneously hopes that she will remain quiet about her beliefs and not become involved in political discussions. This desire for women to have an education while remaining silent closely resembles the societal expectations imposed on women in Edgeworth's context, as they achieved more opportunities for education through the Enlightenment. Despite this improvement, women did not receive social equality. Edgeworth's discussion of gender inequality, while not the predominant focus of the story, reveals how she used her novels to convey her thoughts on political issues through the complexity of her narratives.

The standards of perfection for women are further shown as Altenberg pursues Caroline Percy. Like her sisters, Caroline hopes to marry and uphold her Protestant identity. Altenberg finds her to be a suitable candidate for marriage according to his standards of perfection. That is, until he learns that she is rumored to have had loved another man in the past, and he temporarily finds her alleged behavior to be repugnant:

‘Who would prize the tainted posies,

Which on ev’ry breast are worn?

Who could pluck the spotless roses

From their never touched thorn?’

... he knew that some of the ladies spoke from envy, others from the mere love of scandal; but still, altogether, an impression unfavourable to Caroline, or rather unfavourable to his passion for Caroline, was left on his mind. The idea that she had been suspected ... that she had even been named as one who had coquetted with many admirers — the notion that she had been in love ... all this took from the freshness, the virgin modesty, the dignity, the charm, with which she had appeared to his imagination, and without which she could not have touched his heart — a heart not to be easily won (Edgeworth 394).

Though Count Altenberg ultimately finds these allegations about Caroline to be untrue, he has a momentary loss of attraction immediately after hearing them. This loss of attraction shows just how rigid the expectations for women were, as he was deeply emotionally affected by hearing that she potentially engaged in romantic interest in the past. Despite Caroline fitting all his standards for a potential wife, Altenberg is still hesitant to believe her in this moment. Altenberg’s hasty turn on Caroline reveals the control that men had over their female counterparts at the time. Without even knowing whether this rumor about Caroline was true, Altenberg temporarily chose to give up his pursuit of her. This decision could have made Caroline’s circumstances extremely difficult had he not found out the truth about her past. Through this incident, Edgeworth further depicts the impossible expectations imposed on women, showing that if a woman were to make the wrong choice in communications or outward opinions, she would have to worry about being ostracized and left without a social identity of any kind. While this criticism of the social standards for women might seem straightforward in its message, it could also serve as a representation of Britain’s control and mistreatment of the Irish people during this time, further reflecting Edgeworth’s complex position being both Irish and a woman during this time of violent inequality and mistreatment.

Though *Patronage* symbolized an elevated level of political conversation within Edgeworth's novels, the book was commonly seen as boring among reviewers such as Lord Byron, de Staël, and Frances Burney, among others. Despite literary acclaim over Edgeworth's previous novels, these reviewers did not receive *Patronage* nearly as well. According to Burney, the book was "dull & heavy," and Byron thought the book to be "very bad for her, and worse than any of the others" (Connolly). The novel even garnered attention from Jane Austen, who wrote "It was one of my vanities, like your not reading *Patronage*" in one of her 1814 letters to her sister Cassandra. Austen was likely referring to the time-consuming nature of the original four-volume work in saying that her sister was fortunate to have not read it, and it is unknown what her true opinions of the novel's contents were. The broad spectrum of opinion surrounding Edgeworth's *Patronage* reveals the importance of the social message, as it continued crucial conversations about social norms in eighteenth-century Europe. *Patronage* reveals the important role that novels played in women's advocacy, as it allowed them to circulate thoughts and ideas both among their supporters and adversaries in spaces that they would not be able to communicate their ideas as outwardly as their male counterparts.

Nearly twenty years after publishing *Patronage*, Edgeworth continued her discussion of women's roles in her 1834 novel *Helen*, acknowledging a recent shift in feminine influence on politics through her dialogue. Her character Lady Davenant states:

Women are now so highly cultivated, and political subjects are at present of so much importance, of such high interest, to all human creatures who live together in society ... You cannot, I conceive, satisfy yourself with the common namby-pamby little missy phrase, 'ladies have nothing to do with politics' (Edgeworth 337).

This passage shows how aware Edgeworth was of the political context of the time. While she acknowledged that women were often left out of politics and their opinions seen as lesser than their male counterparts at the time, she also shared her opinions through the words of Lady Davenant, revealing that she believes that women have evolved intellectually. *Helen*, which Edgeworth wrote in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, reflects the influence the literacy boom had on women's cultural and social values. Edgeworth focuses on the importance of educated women, admiring women who speak about their political beliefs in public while making a mockery of those individuals who say that women have no place in the political sphere. Through her use of the phrase "common namby-pamby little missy," Edgeworth plays at the commonly held idea that women should remain complacent and silent, referring to those who hold that belief as boring and weak. This phrasing helps to further show Edgeworth's success at conveying her ideas through her narratives, as she indirectly comments on the topic of female silencing through her characters' dialogue. While this statement clearly represents the educational shift of the time, it is likely a reflection of Edgeworth's true feelings on female education and role in politics. Lady Davenant serves as a role model to Helen, urging her to educate herself and not to

fall into the traditional role expected of women, but at the same time instructs her to “keep the line between influence and interference” (338). The conflicting views of female involvement in politics show how complex the social norms were, especially when it came to the political involvement of women. While women were commonly encouraged to educate themselves on political matters, they were at the same time taught to remain domestic to avoid violating societal customs and offending their male counterparts.

Edgeworth often wrote according to experiences both of her own and those of the women in her network, and though she expressed her frustration with the existing social expectations, she was able to voice her political and social concerns through her novels. While *Helen* shows a shift in both Edgeworth and society, it is simultaneously representative of a shift in her personal life following the death of Richard Lovell in 1817. Edgeworth, who had been under her father’s guidance for much of her literary career, had newfound independence upon writing *Helen*, and was therefore able to come into her own during this time. On the other hand, Edgeworth published *Patronage* shortly after the end of “twenty-five years of revolution, war, and political and cultural transformation” across Europe, leaving lasting impacts on the existing social and political structures that were in place prior (Bander). This novel, while similar in political discussion to *Helen*, symbolizes a new, more outwardly political side of Edgeworth’s writing. Though her political ideas were still disguised in the plots of her stories, they were much more obvious to individuals who read and reviewed *Patronage*. While the novel was an early medium for Edgeworth’s commentary, she was able to become even more influential through her letters, as she communicated her political statements in a much more direct manner.

Letters and Politics

For many individuals and especially women, letters were a strategic tool used to discreetly communicate ideas. Public discussion of ideas was at an all-time high, but women were continually left out of discussions, resulting in written documents becoming the common medium of expression among female political activists. Edgeworth and other women would use their letters to communicate political ideas while maintaining obedience in the public eye. Not only would women writers compose letters of their own, but they would also pose letters in their novels as a means of personal intervention, allowing them to indirectly show their true feelings to the reader. Mary Favret states, “In the late eighteenth century, under the pressure of revolutionary activity and political upheaval, the practice of correspondence produced subversive and contradictory effects” (12). The action of letter writing, which was seemingly negative at the time as it was “feminized” and emasculating according to Favret, proved to be a helpful tool in Edgeworth’s social, literary, and political endeavors. Writers such as Edgeworth and Wollstonecraft used their letter writing abilities to their strategic advantage when communicating their social and political ideas. Favret states, “Wollstonecraft’s letters exploit the conventional voice and posture of the ‘feminine’ letter-writer” in her novels, allowing her to garner

sympathies for the feminist movement, as she was able to convince her readers that women could be both feminine and rational simultaneously.

Similarly to Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth was able to spread information and communicate her ideas through her letters. Although Edgeworth's literary career had already begun, she developed a strong affinity for realism and letter writing in the late eighteenth century. Butler states, "she was consciously trying to improve her manner as a letter-writer, a fact which helped both her style and her sense of intimacy with the reader." Edgeworth was able to make a valuable connection with her English school friend Fanny Robinson, who was "one of the most relaxed and agreeable letter-writers of the period" and "the best model she could have had" (153-154). This connection allowed for Edgeworth to develop her letter-writing technique, and she was able to develop her own sophisticated writing style at a young age. This skill would play a large role in Edgeworth's later political contributions, as she was able to make an impact while also remaining discreet and indirect in her approach. In a way, the development of her letter-writing skill carved a path toward a new sense of liberation in her life. Despite these letters working to Edgeworth's advantage in the literary and political spheres, some scholars argue that these letters were not strategically sent, but rather, they were sent out of loneliness and need for connection. Oftentimes, Edgeworth was insecure about her writing, and Nash argues that "she desperately craved approval, but she lacked the self-confidence to believe in the approval she received" (Nash 98). While it is unknown whether this assessment of Edgeworth's character is true, it does not discount the usefulness of these connections in her endeavors, as her skillful letter writing paved the way for her later successes, even if her initial reasoning was emotionally driven. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that through Edgeworth's letters, "we find the real Maria," who is "impulsive, warm-hearted, keeneyed, humorous" (Francis para. 2). Though researchers disagree on the true message behind Edgeworth's letters, it is clear that she overcame her inability to directly socialize her political beliefs by communicating her ideas to male politicians who could relay her concerns outwardly.

While Edgeworth's letters might not seem discreet in their composition, her strategic subtlety becomes clear when considering that the majority of her private letters remained unpublished until the 1970s, when some of "the originals of her private letters made accessible to readers by her great great niece, Christina Colvin, and deposited partly in the National Library in Dublin, and partly in the Bodleian Library in Oxford" (Pakenham). Edgeworth wished for women to break through the silence being imposed on them by societal standards, and she even spoke out for what she believed in publicly, becoming more politically involved than ever in the 1820s through her correspondences relating to issues facing Ireland. Her letters played into the greater movement of correspondences taking place at the time, making lasting impacts on the political and literary world that would not have been possible otherwise.

Edgeworth's Unpublished Letters and Indirect Political Influence

Although some of Edgeworth's letters were published in the 1970s, many letters still remain unpublished today. Libraries worldwide have submitted photocopies of Edgeworth's letters to the Maria Edgeworth Letters Project (MELP), allowing for close review and transcription of many of Edgeworth's written documents that had previously been unpublished. Through the Zooniverse crowdsourcing platform, volunteers can transcribe photo files of Edgeworth's. On this team, I have edited volunteer transcriptions and researched people, places, characters, and novels referenced in each of Edgeworth's transcribed letters to compile relevant pieces of metadata into a centralized location that we are using to power a searchable archive of Edgeworth's letters and correspondents. During my time on the MELP team, I researched Edgeworth's previously unpublished letters, which provided a unique view of her strategic political correspondence network.

Edgeworth's relationship with British Whig politician Thomas Spring Rice has not previously been discussed in depth, but it is crucial to understanding her involvement in the political sphere. Over the course of his life, Spring Rice held the positions of Comptroller General of the Exchequer, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and Chancellor of the Exchequer. He had an extensive knowledge of Irish politics and history, largely promoting movements against class conflict and for Catholic Emancipation. Spring Rice was considerate of the Irish people's plights whereas his political counterparts were apathetic. His ideas often aligned with those posed by Edgeworth, as he "was ecumenical in the political and educational controversies surrounding religion," and he played an active role in Catholic Emancipation efforts (Wasson para. 7). This alignment between their ideologies likely could have been a reason for Edgeworth's initial correspondence, as he had the potential to bring her ideas of educational reform and Catholic Emancipation to fruition.

Edgeworth was first introduced to Spring Rice and his wife, Lady Theodosia Rice, in a letter from her cousin Sophy Ruxton on May 28, 1822:

We have just breakfasted with Spring Rice our Irish patriot who has all the characteristic excellencies of his nation ... He has genius without imprudence and generosity without extravagance.

Though Edgeworth had not previously known Thomas Spring Rice, she was able to build a political relationship with him through their mutual connection, Sophy Ruxton. It was likely this letter that inspired Edgeworth's first communication with Spring Rice, leading to her further political influence in the 1820s and 1830s. In a letter addressed to Thomas Spring Rice on March 9, 1825, Edgeworth expressed her disgust with an ongoing situation, urging change in the political and educational system that allowed Anthony Francis Ashley Cooper, the fourth son of Lord Shaftesbury, to die in a brawl with a classmate. Edgeworth states:

Surely some good will be brought from this great evil by - who? - Ask yourself - by such men as you who have power to raise your voice in the cause of helpless youth A Master of Eton standing by while this barbarous deed was done - was doing for two hours! - A boy of 15! ... betted upon by his companions - as if he were a game cock - his offer to make it up forbidden by those who betted *upon* his life - Drenched with brandy! - an incredible quantity! Enough to have killed him without a blow - Oh if he was not murdered what is murder? - There was no malice - no - but there was death ensuing ~~from~~³ & caused from being engaged in an unlawful act – Gambling – drunkenness – cruelty – what a complication of vice

In this section of the letter, Edgeworth acknowledges the unlawfulness that she believes contributed to the young boy's death. She solicits change from those in power, believing that their political complacency was what justified the actions of the assailant and audience, as they stood by, and rather than helping, poured alcohol on and down the throat of the boy. She goes on to urge Spring Rice into action, stating "If I do not much mistake your character & your power you will not let this horrid act rest as a disgrace upon England in the eyes of the whole civilised world as it must unless some public of indignation be raised against it." Edgeworth, clearly in disbelief about the "unlawful" actions that she believed politicians permitted in this occurrence, demands action from Spring Rice, calling upon his moral character to act in preventing the future harms that could occur from this unlawfulness. Additionally, Edgeworth believed that the issues that caused this incident were a result of the educational institutions of the time. Edgeworth believed that schools often carelessly gave children work that was exhausting and harmful to their overall wellbeing, as it did not properly accommodate students' educational needs (Sobe). For this reason, Edgeworth believed that institutional change made through political activism could prevent similar occurrences from happening again in the future, and her letter to Spring Rice helps us to better understand how she acted on this belief given her limited position as a woman.

For this reason, Edgeworth believed that institutional change made through political activism could prevent similar occurrences from happening again in the future. Edgeworth was correct in these assumptions, as Spring-Rice later entrusted her with political information, consulting her with his plan to combat poverty in Ireland:

Spring Rice, whom I very much like, tells me he has been touched to the heart by the generous eagerness with which the English merchants and city people have contributed to this fund. A very large sum is already at his disposal,

and he has wisely considered that if this money be not judiciously applied it will do more harm than good. He has done me the honour to consult me about his plan, of which I enclose a copy (*The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth, Volume 2*).

Edgeworth's participation in political activism helps to show a shift in empowerment during the turn of the century. Not only was she able to communicate her political ideas to Thomas Spring Rice through her skillful letter writing, but she was able to do so effectively, causing her to gain respect and trust within the political world without being directly involved in ongoing conversations. This letter, though its date is unknown, reveals that Edgeworth's correspondence with Spring Rice provided her with a political contact that allowed her to access and influence inside political plans. Spring Rice strongly opposed the actions of the English during this time, stating that the English government had "degraded" the Irish people and urged the English to "shrink" from their decision-making responsibilities (Farrell). It is likely that the plan that he disclosed to Edgeworth contained his upcoming oppositions of these movements, including his prominent decision to call for reform to existing Irish tithes. The Irish tithes were "a tax levied on all occupiers of agricultural land regardless of their religious affiliation," and they were "bitterly resented, particularly by the Roman Catholic population" (The National Archives of Ireland). Spring Rice's call for reform aligned with the ideas of many Whig politicians of the time, as many called for the dismantlement of the tithing system. Edgeworth, like Spring Rice, believed that politicians at the time were not doing enough to protect citizens of Ireland, and she decided to take a stand in efforts to motivate them to do so. This action would not only make a point; it would cement her as one of Spring Rice's lasting political correspondents. Edgeworth's letters to Spring Rice allowed her to have an influence that, while indirect, made powerful waves in the world of politics, even before she had met with him.

Edgeworth's main political involvement, however, predominantly concerned the rights of Catholics in the 1820s. Butler states, "In the 1820s Maria was an eager supporter of the movement to extend full rights to Catholics, and, although depressed by delays at Westminster, she was so sure that Emancipation would prove effective when it came that in general she remained optimistic" (451). The exclusion of those individuals who were not practicing members of the Church of England was not new, however, as the exclusionary pieces of legislation comprising the Test Acts were passed in 1672, taking away many rights of non-conforming individuals, including their ability to hold public office. Though Edgeworth discussed a myriad of political issues affecting Irish citizens at the time, one of Edgeworth's main focuses was the ongoing debate over whether to pass the Catholic Emancipation Act, a decision that would allow Roman Catholics in Great Britain to purchase and inherit land, hold political seats or military offices, and openly practice religion without fear of penalty (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Edgeworth and Spring Rice were often optimistic when considering the positive outcomes that could result from granting Catholic Emancipation. (Gallchoir 158). Edgeworth held a similar opinion to that of Richard Lovell and Spring Rice, believing that Catholic Emancipation should be granted across England. She believed those practicing Catholicism in Great Britain were often unfairly oppressed by the limitations that were strictly imposed on them by the British government, leading to many disadvantaged individuals within the Catholic community of the time.

Edgeworth once again corresponded with Spring Rice regarding politics in February 1828, this time addressing the issue of Catholic Emancipation:

It is not for you or for Lord Lansdowne that I feel but for Ireland – the loss of place and power may for aught I know may be again of happiness to you both – But the loss to Ireland of such friends in power is I fear irremediable – I have much that I wish to say to you, which I cannot & ought not to put on paper – for instance – circumstances I have privately learned from Catholics respecting late disturbances in this Town of Navan – and elsewhere – The hand of despotism may press down & *keep* down a nation if that hand be strong enough – ... The *reconquest* of Ireland would appear & be easy perhaps; & therefore his <xxxxx 2 words>⁴ may brave & despise the danger of putting things to this issue – But – afterwards – he must be prepared to exterminate – he can no otherwise extinguish public⁵ opinion Cromwell – who was better made for the purpose than any other man stopped short of the mark & after wading through slaughter to his church left 50,000 to tell the tale – But I have no business with these things – ... I do not think from what I have heard that the priests would dare to let themselves be paid by Govt unless *Cat - Eman.* were same time granted – Great debating may be upon the means & tenets of said words – We shall hear from the pope and I suppose soon – & from you? – When?

In this letter, Edgeworth both expresses her sympathies for the Catholic individuals who lost many of their rights because of the Test Acts and her concerns regarding her lost correspondence with Thomas Spring Rice as he departed from his office. Her closing remarks “& from you? – When?” reveal the value of her connection with Spring Rice, as she awaits his response with urgency. At this point, Edgeworth had communicated with Spring Rice for years, and his decision to take leave was not ideal for Edgeworth’s continued political involvement through her letters. Still, she makes efforts to explain the severity of the treatment facing Catholic individuals, mentioning the deaths and harmful experiences of many people. Rather than make efforts to continue her personal connection with Spring Rice, Edgeworth plays upon the importance of the political issues facing the people of Ireland. Edgeworth’s emphasis on the

ongoing political situation despite their upcoming separation helps to show how important these matters were to her. Her political power was mostly held within the effectiveness of her letters, so it was crucial that she got her point across to have the impact that she desired. Only one year later, the British Parliament would pass the Roman Catholic Relief Act, overturning many restrictions that had previously been imposed on Roman Catholics in the United Kingdom and most importantly granting these individuals the right to vote.

Although Edgeworth was able to obtain Spring Rice's trust and make contributions to the Catholic Emancipation movement through their correspondence, it is likely that she did not physically meet him until December 1830. In a letter addressed to Ruxton, Edgeworth explained the interaction, stating, "Spring Rice far surpassed all I had expected from him in kind attention and cordiality of manner to me." This delayed in-person interaction reveals Edgeworth's ability to make political change through her letters. Though they only knew each other through mutual connections, Edgeworth was able to have her voice heard through her letters. This lack of in-person communication reveals how crucial Edgeworth's letters were to her political involvement, as she was able to maneuver her way into the political sphere without playing a direct role.

Edgeworth's political reach would expand even further on August 18, 1839, when she sent a letter to Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston and two-time Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Although this letter was sent nearly a decade after Edgeworth's early letters to Spring Rice, it symbolized the path to higher political influence that her connection with Spring Rice made, and potentially led to the formation of one of her most important political connections. Edgeworth introduces herself to Temple, explaining that she has previously met Temple through their shared contact and prominent Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart:

Permit me, my Lord Palmerstone, to hope that the deep and kind remembrance which I know you retain of the Dugald Stewarts, in whose family I first had the honor of being made acquainted with You, may raise some agreeable recollection of me?

Although previously unknown, this letter shows just how far Edgeworth's reach was within the literary community. Her earlier connections with politicians such as Spring Rice would set her up for even more political encounters, extending her level of influence on politics while remaining mostly quiet in the public eye. Temple was one of the most prominent politicians of the time, and despite his power, Edgeworth did not hesitate to comment on his involvement and even request a favor of him:

A request in favor of a foreigner, but one of my nearest connexions, a Spaniard - Don

Ysidro Eroles, whose sister Rosa ^{nee} Eroles is married to my brother Francis Beaufort Edgeworth. - Col^l. Eroles, the father of Ysidro lost the property of the family in the

Spanish revolution, became a refugee with his wife and children in England many years ago, and received a pension from the English government --- which pension they gave up when the Queen of Spain's amnesty put it in their power to return to their native country ... Ysidro Eroles received while he was in England an excellent education which has perfectly qualified him to fill any diplomatic situation ... It is of the utmost consequence to him for his own sake and for the sake of all of his family who have returned to Spain that he should obtain some employment by which he could secure their independance ... The favor which I have to ask of your Lordship is that you would use your influence ... to obtain for him some situation under the Spanish government ... One line from you to the Spanish Minister or to our Ambassador at Madrid could not fail to succeed.

Edgeworth's sympathies for disadvantaged individuals have remained unchanged, and she continued to make strides toward political change in their favor. In the case of her communication with Temple, Edgeworth remains determined to make political change, asserting her opinions of the political and personal situation within her letter. This letter, while similar to those written to Spring Rice, demands action in a new, more direct way, symbolizing her development in political correspondence. Edgeworth provides a direct path of action for Temple, urging him to write to his political correspondents and guaranteeing that her plan "could not fail to succeed." Edgeworth's sense of certainty in the letter reveals a newfound sense of confidence that she established over the decade between her correspondence with Spring Rice and this letter. Though she had just begun increasing her involvement in the political sphere in the 1820s, she would become a much more active, confident influencer in the late 1830s. While this communication with Temple was still in the indirect medium of a letter, Edgeworth's direct tone indicates a newfound confidence that likely stemmed from the success that she had in her previous conversations with politicians such as Spring Rice. Without the earlier connections and influences that were attainable through her skillful letter writing, it is unlikely that Edgeworth would have been able to achieve this level of reach within her correspondence network. These connections with Spring Rice and Temple, while previously known, have not often been discussed extensively as being an asset to Edgeworth's political influence.

Conclusion

As I have worked on the MELP team to develop a database of digitized versions of Edgeworth's letters, I have witnessed the direct story behind Edgeworth's correspondence network and her strategic political approaches as they have never been seen before. While most scholars have focused on Edgeworth's strategic narratives within her novels, I contend that it is also essential to examine the calculated methods that allowed Edgeworth to have influence during a time when women's voices were often excluded from public conversations surrounding

politics. The Enlightenment period encouraged much social change, but the hypocritical exclusion of women from public conversations pertaining to politics made it difficult for women to communicate their ideas, despite being the most published authors of the time. After close review of Edgeworth's letters to Thomas Spring Rice and Henry John Temple, it is clear that she was able to make lasting political influence without directly involving herself in the political sphere. This intervention has not previously been explored in depth, and when comparing the political ideas presented in Edgeworth's novels to those in her letters, it is clear that she was able to have much more direct influence through her private correspondences. This action on Edgeworth's part inspired change relating to the education system and the treatment of Roman Catholics, as her male correspondents were able to pass her ideas along in their political endeavors, allowing for Edgeworth to make an indirect mark on politics. Edgeworth was not alone in this effort, as many of her female contemporaries – including Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft – also made great impacts through their proto-feminist novels and letters.

Notes

1. St. Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
2. This figure only includes the novels with verified authors. It does not include novels that were published anonymously between 1770-1799.
3. "From" was a later deletion.
4. Two words in the original handwritten document are unintelligible.
5. "Public" was a later insertion.
6. Edgeworth's spelling, grammar, and punctuation are reproduced in concordance with the editorial principles of the Maria Edgeworth Letters Project (<https://mariaedgeworth.org/>).

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