



STAGING MARIA EDGEWORTH'S NEW WOMAN IN  
*WHIM FOR WHIM* (1798)

*LA MUJER MODERNA EN EL ESCENARIO WHIM FOR WHIM*  
(1798) DE MARIA EDGEWORTH

Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez  
EOI A Coruña /University of A Coruña  
([c28fernandez@gmail.com](mailto:c28fernandez@gmail.com))  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5165-6083>



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**Abstract:** Literary lioness Maria Edgeworth (1767-1848) is best known for her narratives of Irish setting and for the pedagogical volumes of children's stories written in collaboration with her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. A prolific multifaceted author, Edgeworth composed some plays which, in general, have been overlooked by scholars. Nevertheless, Edgeworth was interested in the stage though drama represented a genre that cast some doubt on the reputation of a woman writer. It is precisely in one of Edgeworth's comedies, *Whim for Whim* (1798), where she offers a portrait of the new woman as envisioned at the end of the eighteenth century. The play not only inspired memorable characters in Edgeworth's canon, but also explored women's role in the public and private sphere and dealt with women's education and importance in the family.

**Palabras Clave:** Maria Edgeworth-eighteenth-century British drama-gender studies-English literature-*Whim for Whim*.

**Resumen:** Maria Edgeworth (1767-1848) fue una celebridad literaria conocida, sobre todo, por sus historias localizadas en Irlanda y por los volúmenes pedagógicos de cuentos infantiles escritos en colaboración con su padre, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. Autora prolífica y polifacética, Edgeworth compuso algunas obras de teatro que, en general, han sido pasadas por alto por los estudiosos. Pese a sentirse muy atraída por los escenarios, Edgeworth sabía que el drama representaba un género que ponía en duda la reputación de una escritora. Es precisamente en una de las comedias de Edgeworth, *Whim for Whim* (1798), donde se ofrece un retrato de la nueva mujer como se imaginaba a finales del siglo XVIII. La obra no sólo inspiró personajes memorables en el canon de Edgeworth, sino que también exploró el papel de la mujer en la esfera pública y privada y abordó la educación y la importancia de la mujer en la familia.

**Key Words:** Maria Edgeworth-teatro británico del siglo dieciocho-estudios de género- literatura inglesa-*Whim for Whim*.

**Sumario:** 1. Introduction. 2. Analysis. 3. Conclusion. 4. Works cited. 5. Notes.

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CARMEN MARÍA FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ (es actualmente profesora de la Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de A Coruña (España) y tiene un doctorado en Filología Inglesa. Su tesis de doctorado se centró en la contribución de Frances Burney y Maria Edgeworth a la literatura inglesa curando el período 1778-1834. Miembro de *The Burney Society* y colaboradora habitual de *The Burney Letter*, Fernández es también coeditora y traductora al español de las obras de Frances Burney *The Wiltings* and *A Busy Day* (2017), y ha publicado artículos sobre Jane Austen, Frances Burney y Sarah Harriet Burney, y sobre la recepción de la obra de Maria Edgeworth en el continente en los siglos XIX y XX. Los campos de interés de Fernández son los estudios de género, la literatura comparada y la teoría de la traducción.

## I. INTRODUCCIÓN

Maria Edgeworth was the daughter of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, an enlightened man who always relied on education to reform society and had Unionist views. Though she was a member of the Anglo-Irish landed class, Edgeworth preserved her liberal views condescending to the Irish in most works, and she cultivated the novel of manners to the point that Edgeworth became more famous than Jane Austen. Edgeworth pioneered the Big House novel and the regional novel in English, which she inaugurated with the chronicle of the collapse of an Irish family at the turn of the nineteenth century. *Castle Rackrent* (1799) was admired by Walter Scott, but it was just one work in Edgeworth's prolific corpus: she had previously collaborated with her father in pedagogical essays (*The Parent's Assistant* [1796]) and would later produce an amazing collection of epistolary (*Leonora* [1806]), educational (*Practical Education* [1801], *Essays on Professional Education* [1809]), and pedagogic fiction (*Moral Tales* [1801], *Popular Tales* [1804]) together with feminocentric works (*Belinda* [1801], *Helen* [1834]). Envisioning a novel as a play was nothing new to Edgeworth —it happened with *The Absentee* (Fernández, 2012)—, and, in fact, she never discarded the idea of composing dramas, so in 1816 she published *Comic Dramas* set in Ireland. A literary lioness in nineteenth-century London, Edgeworth was revitalized in the 1970s after Marilyn Butler's landmark biography. Nowadays, on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth, Edgeworth continues being analysed by (post)colonial, gender, and, more recently, translation studies, though the focus of attention is still predominantly set on her regionalist fiction.

This article deals with *Whim for Whim* (1798) whose genesis is related to amateur family theatricals and has recently drawn the attention of the Edgeworth studies.<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Eger have stated that Edgeworth's light comedy showcases female characters and issues that would be later developed in *Belinda*: Mrs. Fangle is a rehearsal of the woman who is probably Edgeworth's strongest woman character, Lady Delacour, and she «bears arms, dominates her husband, and urges her friend Belinda to be courageous» (Eger, 2003, pag. 285). I argue that female characters in *Whim for Whim* share more traits in common than it seems since both the rational and the passionate heroines are projections of Edgeworth herself. This crucial aspect has been overlooked by Edgeworth critics. According to Emily Hodgson Anderson, female playwrights had a desire

for authorship and expression itself that was filtered into their plays. In Edgeworth's case, Anderson maintains that she associates thinking and feeling: «expression in her work finally signifies the articulation of a rational and emotional process» (2009, pag. 11). Also, for Edgeworth, the authorship of a fictional text was a version of theatrical performance (2009, pag. 13). Consequently, analyzing characters on stage as embryos of novel characters is a useful approach. Edgeworth was well aware of the fact that the theatre was an important social space, and that society itself assumed theatrical features, as Luppi has explored in *Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth* (2019, pag. 163). The Anglo-Irish author promoted woman's learning and *Whim for Whim* is about women's social role in the public and private sphere. An examination of the way she approaches women's education and socialization can be interesting, especially considering that *Whim for Whim* was composed so early in Edgeworth's career. For my purpose, I examine the play using feminist studies on eighteenth-century theatre and the work of Edgeworth's scholars.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Before *Belinda*

*Whim for Whim* was produced in a very specific period of British drama history corresponding with Georgian England (1780-1832). Plays aimed at the middle classes, and theatres, such as the Drury Lane and Covent Garden, gained importance. There was some formal variety, and some of Shakespeare's plays were rewritten and adapted to bourgeois audiences who enjoyed operas and pantomimes. Actors, theatrical managers and playwrights, like David Garrick or Richard Sheridan, stood out while topics like colonialism recurred on stage (Burroughs, 2000, pages. 5-6), where women dominated in a double way. Firstly, after the scandalous Restoration drama —which made actresses the focus of attention—, the British stage turned to sentimentalism and there were lots of private or amateur performances for restricted audiences, for example, as families, which were keen on domestic issues. The theatre was also a marker of economic status, as Kristina Straub points out:

Amateur theatricals were a part of household and even neighbourhood leisure-time amusements, as evidenced in the personal letters and diaries of writers such as Frances Burney and Jane Austen. Some wealthy aristocrats even built elaborate permanent theatres as part of their estates in which well-born amateurs tried out their theatrical chops, sometimes with the assistance of a professional or two supplementing their regular income from commercial theatre. Theatricality permeated British literature culture and even reached those who could not read as many servants and lower status artisans benefited from cheap tickets, accompanying their employers to the theatre, or invitations to fill out the audience at amateur events (Straub et al., 2017, pag. xxiv).

Secondly, at the end of the eighteenth century female playwrights proliferated in *England*: Elizabeth Inchbald (*Every One has His Fault* 1793), Hannah Cowley (*The Belle's Stratagem* 1780), Elizabeth Griffith (*The School for Rakes* 1769) and Hannah More (*Percy* 1777) are some of the brand names on the list and they can be attributed a social role highlighted by Misty G. Anderson:

The domestic matters at the heart of comedy provided material for creative compromises as well as direct critiques of social mores and norms. Navigating between social conventions and generic expectations, these playwrights speak to private and public failures of justice through plays which attempt to draw their characters into ethical communities and, when they cannot, to stretch the boundaries of genre in search of other ways to tell the story (2007, pag. 156).

Despite the irresistible attraction of the theatre for self-expression — in that it was technically free from the comments of a third-person narrator—, it was not seen as a reputable place for a woman. Not only were actresses criticized for their roles and for freely mixing with men and theatrical entrepreneurs on the stage, but writing drama was not considered a proper genre for established writers. Lisa A Freeman explains in a book that reassesses how eighteenth-century drama contributed to other literary forms and cultural contents of the period:

[...] a woman's work was supposed to be confined to the private sphere and her products reserved for private consumption. Instead, the woman writer, like the female actress, entered the public sphere and directed her labor toward the production of goods for public consumption. Transgressing the gendered division between public and private realms, women's writing was thus 'defined as a threat to the existing social order' (2002, pp. 7-8).

That is why Edgeworth had some scruples on her plays and limited her dramatic production to those with an Irish setting — like *Comic Dramas* —, or plays performed for a family audience, as it happened to *Whim for Whim*.<sup>2</sup>

Edgeworth's work can be defined as a «lighthearted comedy about an abominable group of political enthusiasts, in which political fanaticism, paranoia and summary justice are sidelined and not an issue» (Eger et al, 2003, pag. 280). Set in West London in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, *Whim for Whim* is based on real episodes and real people, as is extensively explained in the introduction. Structurally, *Whim for Whim* is composed of five acts containing up to six scenes each. As typically in English drama, the units of time and space are not respected, so action shifts from Mrs. Fangle's<sup>3</sup> drawing room and Count Babelhausen's apartment to Sir Mordent's study. This feature adds a lot of dynamism to Edgeworth's work, which contains many stage directions about the characters' gestures and props and ill-willed characters' actions are not always visible to the audience. In *Whim for Whim* Count Babelhausen plans to marry Mrs. Fangle, who is a widow with two children, Heliodorus and Christina, and is more attracted by the Count's ideas than by conservative Sir Mordent whose ward, Opal, is in love with Caroline and has no profession. Events get complicated as Felix, the Count's assistant tells his lover Mlle. Fanfarlouche to steal Mrs Fangle's jewels. Then, Quaco, Opal's black servant discovers and alerts on Felix's plans until finally the truth is revealed thanks to Mrs Fangle's children.

It seems that Edgeworth aimed to include this piece in a collection for young people, as she did with the play «The Knapsack» in *Moral Tales*. As a matter of fact, the Edgeworths prepared a theatre over Richard L. Edgeworth's study and Maria hoped that the dramatist Richard B. Sheridan would like it, but that was not the case for different reasons:

The play mentioned in the foregoing letter was twice acted in January 1799, with great applause. Mr. Edgeworth's mechanism for the scenery, and for the experiments tried on the children, were most ingenious. I painted the scenery, and arranged the dresses. The piece was afterwards sent to Sheridan, but rejected: the subject was not considered of sufficient interest or comic enough for the stage (*A Memoir*, 1867, pag. 95; letter to Miss Sophy Ruxton, 19 November 1798).

Notwithstanding that Sheridan rejected the play<sup>4</sup> (Fernández, 2012, pag. 34), Edgeworth admitted her defeat and characters from *Whim for Whim* migrated to *Belinda*, one of her most popular novels.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, several points need some clarification. *Whim for Whim* certainly mocks exaggerated behavior, but it cannot be ignored that in England there was a tradition of intellectuals vindicating woman's rights: Mary Wollstonecraft was perhaps the most representative one. She had made an impression on the English public and was as praised as attacked in parodies, pamphlets, etc. Inevitably, her image would be in the mind of the audience. Also, Edgeworth had just finished *Letters for Literary Ladies* where she showed that abstract ideas if not properly put into practice are useless, which was related to sponsors of woman's right. In *Whim for Whim*, Mrs. Fangle is an independent new woman and dares to defy conventional femininity. Rather than sponsoring erudition, Mrs. Fangle yearns to come back to Antiquity and she sticks to her beliefs as much as the other female protagonist in the play.

## 2.2. Mrs. Fangle and travestied maternity

Mrs Fangle is based on several respectable ladies, like the Duchess of Devonshire and Catherine Macaulay<sup>6</sup> (Eger, 2003, pp 286-9). Her approach to culture is certainly neither common, nor unique since other ladies had intellectual aspirations too. At that time, having some polite skills, such as playing an instrument, dancing, etc, was the norm in the upper classes, but erudition was considered men's realm, and so were science or classical languages. Eugenia in Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796) knows firsthand the marginalization of the young female scholar with no beauty. Women's inferior intellectual capacity was taken for

granted despite the existence of the *salonières* in France or the Blues-tockings in England. Imaginative fiction was condemned while sentimental literature and romances flourished and increased throughout the century. Moralists insisted that the role of woman was centered in the family and her home. The woman of the upper classes, as Mrs. Fangle is, had enough servants around so as not to have to worry about daily tasks. Edgeworth wrote at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Angel in the House (Poovey, 1984) appeared. This submissive image was promoted by sermons and conduct books and it would dominate Victorian literature. A clear example of the Angel of the House is Anne Percival in *Belinda*, for instance. Mrs. Fangle is the opposite of this image and defines what a woman of fashion is: «a woman who can say what no other woman dares to say — who can do what no other woman dares to do — Courage — Sir Mordent — is the chief virtue of a woman of fashion» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 341).

Intertextually *Whim for Whim* revolves on two relevant classical female figures: the Greek Aspasia, a cultivated woman who attracted powerful men and was the partner of Pericles, and Pulcheria, the Roman Empress who influenced the Christian Church and took a vow of virginity. Mrs. Fangle corresponds with the latter and her hotchpotch of feminist ideas is part of the fun of the comedy. With Mrs. Fangle, Edgeworth introduces a particular type of the Amazon in the English theatre, a myth which represented women's ability to form a Utopian society in which men are unnecessary for procreation and protection. If closely examined, Mrs. Fangle has no real female friends. She is very independent from a feminine circle and is a widow, a woman who is economically free to find a partner and is not interested in any man for his money.<sup>7</sup>

In Mrs. Fangle's world there is no room for curtsies. She replies to Jemina: «Curtsies are symbols of slavery — Odious homage to man, — Remains of the feudal system which subjugated, and imbruted our unfortunate sex» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 314). At the same time, she attacks patriarchal language and tries to create a new one which is not based on shared knowledge, so nobody understands her and she is marginalized. Therefore, «cosmopolitanism», «co-operation» and «cohabitation» are nonsense to Sir Mordent (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 308), and even the Count has problems to know what «vibrantiuncle» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 313), or «Milo-like» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 315) refer to.<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Fangle's skill amazes Caroline:



MRS. F. Folly and forever! Jemina why will you teach my children that senseless interrogatory? How do you do? Phrase disgraceful to philosophic tongues — they should as the great Mrs. Macaulay advises be taught to say — How are the affections today? — Is it all well within? (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 314)<sup>9</sup>

CAR. [...] A masquerade raisonée sounds new — When one can't have a new thing, give an old thing a new name and it will go down the public throat directly — Mrs. Any body may have a masquerade. That's nothing — but Mr Fangle is to have a masquerade raisonée — are you to be there? «Were you there?» — «To be sure! — Every body's to be there — What is it? — Charming thing! — Quite new! Mrs Fangle I declare deserves a patent for whims — (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 316).

Another interesting point in *Whim for Whim* is that in this play clothes empower women and are related to feminist awareness. A symbol of her unwillingness to conform to custom is that Mrs. Fangle transgresses gender by her clothes, so she provocatively wears trousers and vesties, that is, she trespasses her gender. Sir Mordent criticizes Mrs. Fangle's trousers as much as she mocks Sir Charles Grandison's outfit:<sup>10</sup>

MRS. F. Times are altered good Sir Charles, and women are altered with the times — Would your thrice amiable Miss Harriet Byron with her hoop and her long ruffles, and her starch, and her — Oh fyes! — and her airs, and her egotism, and her suitors in long wigs and her delicacy be fit company think you for women of fashion now-a-days! (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 370).

After this witty conversation in the best Restoration tradition, neither Sir Mordent nor Mrs. Fangle gives up, and both leave the stage wearing a wig and trousers respectively. The following is just one of the funny scenes with Sir Mordent where Mrs. Fangle triumphs over the old bachelor:

SIR M. Mrs Fangle I cannot reconcile myself to this scandalous dress — pardon my abruptness — If you appear in this dress at the masquerade

raisonnée to night — I never have the honor of seeing you again — I am serious — This is carrying new whims too far.

MRS. F. This is carrying old whims too far. — Sir Mordent Idem — pardon my abruptness — I cannot reconcile myself to that abominable wig of yours — if you appear in that wig at my masquerade raisonnée to night I never have the pleasure of seeing you again — I am serious —

SIR M. Madam excuse me if I have a prejudice in favor of my old wig.

MRS. F. Sir excuse me if I have a prejudice in favor of my new trowsers.

SIR M. The very word Trowsers from a woman makes me blush.

MRS. F. The very word wig from a man makes me blush.

SIR M. Will you give them up or not.

*(pointing to the trowsers)*

MRS. F. Will you give it up or not?

*(pointing to the wig)*

SIR M. I shall take time to consider.

MRS. F. I shall take no time to consider.

SIR M. I shall be guided by your example.

MRS. F. I shall be guided by no example.

*(Sir M going out at one door)*

*(Mrs F at the other)*

MRS. F. I hear company below — if you appear before all the world in that thing we part — I'm serious.

SIR M. If you appear before all the world in those things Madam, Sir Mordent will never more appear in your presence — I'm serious.

*(Exeunt)*

(Edgeworth, 2003, pags. 369-70).

Wealth and how to manage wealth are in the mind of many characters. Good sense and property are related in *Whim for Whim* since Mrs. Fangle's adoption of extravagant ideas runs parallel to her loss of fortune, as Sir Mordent reveals to Caroline and Opal, but to losing her family too. As a matter of fact, *Whim for Whim* is more focused on economy and the family than it seems. The eighteenth-century family hinged on patriarchy which provided stability and security to men and reproduced the hierarchical scheme of the head of state governing his

subjects. The masculine line was privileged: men inherited, protected women, and established moral principles. Meanwhile, the system was oppressive for women, who depended on male parents and relatives, and they suffered more than anyone from the changes in society. The aristocrats saw marriage as a way to maintain their status (incorporation) or improve it (alliance) and they did not care about their daughter's love choice as long as that was respected.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Fangle is in love with a mask, with what the Count represents, which is not real at all. She is seduced by his words and reputation, not by the man himself. In a way, *Whim for Whim* deals with the social use of language and Caroline is the only character that realizes that words are used to flatter. She sees the Count through and when they are talking about duty to relatives, she hints to Opal: «Opal your uncle is not talking of what you sign yourself [sincerely affectionate], but of what you are» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 336). In *Belinda*, the Count's self-interest is transformed into Harriet Freke's selfishness and manipulative nature. However, in *Whim for Whim* the Count is a criminal and the most important mask of the play at a time in which masquerades themselves were very popular in Britain: «At a masquerade participants were freed by their disguise from the restraints of convention and the boundaries of the self. The facial mask made a major contribution to the 'universal privileges granted to voyeurism and self-display' on such occasions» (Clery, 2002, pag. 59). Edgeworth populates her work with pleasing characters who feed on pleasing others through flattery and sectarianism. Count Babelhausen orchestrates a secret society to become rich by duping wealthy people. To achieve his goal, he surrounds himself with a huge number of dependants. The incorporation of servants into Edgeworth's drama is not new and must be related to the French tradition she knew so well, as Ryan Twomey points out:

Since the age of fifteen, when she had been disheartened by the «mere machinery» of the «waiting women & valets» of French theatre, Edgeworth had a drive to provide her fictional characters with an enhanced level of realism, and to ensure that they were afforded a recognizable voice — one with a definable location (2019, pag. 176).

In *Whim for Whim* the masquerade *raisonnée* provides the occasion for the Count to get subscribers with the help of his associates, like Felix, who feels intimidated by the Count:

COUNT (*stamping*). Dangerous! Cowardly reptile! Have not I your life or death in my power? — Talk to me of danger! — Did not I save you from hanging once and cannot I hang you tomorrow with half a word. (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 306).

The Count's aim is clear: Sir Mordent must not marry and everything must come to his nephew Opal who is as manipulated by the Count as Mrs Fangle is. In order to accomplish this task, he counts with his self-victimizing French mistress, Mlle. Fanfarlouche. Ready to adopt the role required by the Count, Mlle. Fanfarlouche has no identity of her own and does not stop complaining. In the play, however, she gives very useful information to the audience on the Count's mysterious background:

MLLE. Your angel! But don't talk to me of angel, don't talk to me of calm myself — I will never calm myself — I will never be an angel till you tell me wat you have done wid de hundred guineas you got from the English man whose name has passed me — And de fifty Louis d'or you got from de lady, subscription for de great work — I live in poor lodgings — you in dis palais — I go on rack my head for you — I am your german Princesse, — I am your ghost — I am your everything — I play all your roles — I pay for my own dresses, and I have but two chemises in dis world — and when will you marry me as you promise Scelerat? — in writing Scelerat? (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 303).

The Count's farce and imposture is linked to elaborate stage directions describing the particular atmosphere of the play to the spectators. Edgeworth paid attention to detail and elaborated on the props and instructions for the actors. An example is the one opening act four about the sacrificial altar:

COUNT BABELHAUSEN's *house*

*An Apartment hung with blue  
with stars of silver over it*

*An Altar*  
on which is inscribed in large gold letters  
To Pure Reason

*The green curtains fringed with gold on each side of the Altar. On the Altar stands the statue of the Goddess of Reason with a lamp half veiled in her hand — On one side of the Altar stand six female novices swathed in various colored silk scarfs like Egyptians mummies — On the other side of the Altar stand 6 men dressed like slaves in chains — All the figures have the right arm at liberty and each holds an unlighted torch.*

*The stage is darkened*  
*Mrs. Fangle — Count Babelhausen e<sup>3</sup> Opal*  
*The COUNT dressed like Socrates*  
*FELIX as the High priest*

(Edgeworth, 2003, pags. 353).

Another attractive issue in *Whim for Whim* is Edgeworth's approach to children's education, or more specifically, their educational satisfaction. Neither Christina nor Heliodorus find any pleasure in their course of education, which in the eighteenth century was different for boys and girls.<sup>12</sup> Christina and Heliodorus have a court of masters (elocution, music, geometry, attitudes and anatomy) and in their Gymnastikum there is a path of danger, a man of straw, a bag of sand and a pulley. Edgeworth does not go into detail, but they are following an innovative physical and intellectual course of education and they are educated together, without any sexual difference.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Mrs. Fangle is not aware of her children's real needs and she has Christina and Heliodorus walk a path of danger minutely described by Edgeworth in a note:

[A NOTE IN EDGEWORTH'S HAND IS ATTACHED TO MS  
HERE:

IT WAS ORIGINALLY INTENDED TO EXHIBIT A GYMNAS-  
TIKUM WITH A PATH OF DANGER UP WHICH HELLE &

CHRYSSE WERE TO WALK AND FROM WHICH ONE OF THEM WAS TO FALL & TO BE CAUGHT BY THE COUNT.

A BAG OF SAND WAS TO BE DRAWN UP OVER A PULLEY WHICH CHRYSSE WAS TO PULL UP TOO HIGH & TO DRAW OVER THE PULLEY SO AS TO OVERWHELM HERSELF WITH A SHOWER OF SAND – BRAN TO BE USED INSTEAD OF SAND.] (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 315).

Far from being a traditional nurturing or passive mother, Mrs. Fangle does not really care if her children get hurt since «Children must be hurt in trying experiments – Count you know maternal weakness spoils everything» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 314). Perhaps Mrs. Fangle's eccentricities are just an excuse to draw attention as an adult, which neither her nor Maria Edgeworth herself got as children.

Mrs. Fangle is not a happy mother and has mixed feelings towards her children. They are just an excuse to try her «experiments in Education» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 349). For Mrs. Fangle, her children are a source of anxiety because they give her problems and limit her freedom: «These children are the plagues of my life – I wish I had no children! – Nay not so either – for then I could not so conveniently try my new course of experiments in Education – Nor could I have a Gymnasticum with propriety» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 349). Mrs. Fangle falls prey of her own contradictions: she generates problems she does not really care about.

Family drama lurks behind comedy: Mrs Fangle's bad relationship with her children anticipates Lady Delacour's problematic connection with Helena. Both are cheated by a Count and by a quack respectively. Giving up her whims brings about the cure of her eccentricities and the reconciliation with her children. Mrs. Fangle's diamonds then become secondary to motherhood and female friendship. This part of the play is unfortunately too brief and has some Quixotic echoes. Mrs. Fangle realizes that she has been in love with an illusion and is restored to everyday life:

MRS. F. (*suddenly changing her tone*). All's gone! I'm glad of it – Some stroke as this was wanting to cure me of my follies.

(*Mrs. F. turns to her children*)

My dear children — you have lost a governess — (and what a Governess did I give them!) — but you have found a mother.

(Mrs. F. *embraces her children*)

Let these diamonds be sold — this is the last night of Mrs. Fangle's extravagance — I will shew the world I can bear adversity better than prosperity — yes Caroline — forget my follies — I will be worthy of your friendship (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 384).

The truth comes to light in two moments: in the first place, when Mrs. Fangle's children explain that the mysterious foreign princess in disguise is really Mlle. Fanfarlouche who took Mrs. Fangle's diamonds; in the second place, when male honour (Sir Mordent) rescues Mrs. Fangle: «The broker, the fellow who managed her money in the funds in whose hands against my [Sir Mordent's] advice she placed her whole fortune has played the villain — not a penny is forthcoming» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 336). Sir Mordent feels bound to Mrs. Fangle since the honor of a gentleman is sacred for him. In spite of Sir Mordent's efforts to preserve dignity, the proposal scene cannot be funnier with Mrs. Fangle paying little attention to him:

SIR MORDENT (*gravely*). I hope Madam now that you are at leisure, you will do me the favor to be serious, and to give me a definitive answer to the proposal I had the honor to present you on the 7th Inst.

(Mrs. Fangle *takes her tambourine and begins to play and practice steps*)

SIR M. You don't hear me Mrs Fangle.

MRS. F. (*pausing*). I do — I hear you perfectly well — I can hear you, and beat my tambourine and practice my tarantalla dance perfectly well — Caesar you know could do three things at a time — One thing at once is such a loss of life you know (Edgeworth, 2003, pages. 341-2).

The Count takes advantage of the masquerade to leave the stage and bow to all the company alarming Mrs. Fangle.

COUNT. And I am upon earth — firm ground (*advancing with effrontery*). Sir Mordent Idem, I have the honor to leave you in a degree of astonishment which the occasion justifies — Mr Opal I wish you a happy descent from the clouds — My charming lady (*to Caroline*) I am rejoiced to see you in heaven (*to Mrs Fangle*) Dear, Dearest, dear lady for your sake & my own I lament your fatal loss of fortune.

(COUNT *bowing to all the company as he passes*)

MRS.F. My fatal loss of fortune! What can the man mean?

(OPAL *springs forward e<sup>3</sup> attempts to stop the Count who evades him and goes out bowing with an air of assurance*)

(Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 382).

Gestures matter too since Mrs. Fangle discovers what has happened to her fortune through other characters' expressions which add tension to the scene, so no words are needed:

MRS. F. Upon my word have had a narrow escape — Was this what the Count meant by my fatal loss of fortune?

(*Sir Mordent e<sup>3</sup> Caroline look at one another in silence*)

MRS. F. Why do you all look at one another? Sir Mordent! Caroline! Have I or have I not lost my fortune?

(Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 383).

### 2.3. Caroline: rationality and love trials

If Mrs. Fangle inspired Lady Delacour, an earlier Caroline could have inspired Caroline in *Whim for Whim* and this character will reappear later in the novel *Patronage* (1815). Caroline is not only the name that strong women bear in Edgeworth's works. Butler argues that Caroline is the typical Edgeworthian heroine and was inspired by Honora Edgeworth, one of Maria's stepmothers (1972, pags. 54, 248).<sup>14</sup> Edgeworth's first Caroline appears in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), where she embraces



rationality and common sense opposing Julia, the exalted sentimentalist who is described as a «wanderer» and a «castle builder»: «What castles in the air are built by the synthetic wand of imagination, which vanish when exposed to the analysis of reason!» (Edgeworth, 1805, pag. 160).

We might be led to think that Edgeworth believed in the rational woman, like Caroline, but Caroline is far from perfect and has more features in common with Mrs. Fangle than it seems. The first one is that both confront patriarchy. Caroline sounds as independent as Mrs. Fangle and, when she tells Opal she prefers the general good, she hints to the possibility of remaining single: «And as I prefer yours to that of your fellow men and mine to that of my fellow women I will not sacrifice what I consider as the means of contributing to both — Perhaps vows of celibacy as well as poverty may be required of me» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 329). On another occasion she resorts to irony and says to Opal «it is one of the imprescriptable unalienable rights of woman to be heard» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 333).

Caroline is relevant in that she is not only placed at the same level as Mrs. Fangle in that both suffer and are the victims of the Count, but Caroline also mistrusts Opal and sees his faults, as clearly as Sir Mordent does. Caroline is jealous of the foreign German princess at the masquerade *raisonnée* because Opal is following her: «Yes all my fears are now certainties — He loves another — And yet— perhaps I do him injustice — What suspense, what agony I feel amidst this scene of festivity, and noise, and folly» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 376). For Sir Mordent, Opal has whims, enthusiasm and will be a dupe, and Caroline agrees: «from what I can understand of the matter what he calls pure reason I should call it pure folly» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 328). Opal's romantic discourse is mixed with the political aspirations he puts first and makes him suffer:

OPAL. (*Aside*). Oh Caroline, Caroline! Why cannot I force myself to love another? Prejudice of constancy am I your slave in despite of pure reason — Is this the eternal enmity I have vowed to prejudice? To the wig of wigs (*Aloud*) If I could but see her face! Her eyes! (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 381).

The first time that Opal asks Caroline to renounce the wealth he despises, he faces a stout refusal and a challenge: «Tell me the object and the means [of Illuminatism] —and do not treat me like a machine that is wound up and runs down without consciousness of its own motions» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 329). Adopting a down-to-earth stance, Caroline knows she cannot do much without money and she also realizes that Illuminism has no goals and no meaning. Then Opal romantically proposes Caroline giving her money to «the great work» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 338). The audience can see that Caroline's views are not selfish and Caroline is not cold, but a woman in love with an idealist, which will give her pain. Her soliloquy is a reflection on Opal's love and a depiction of her concern:

*Caroline*

*Sola*

*(Throws herself into a chair, and burst into tears — then rises hastily)*

I am a fool to be angry with this madman — I am a greater fool for loving him — Has he, or has he not a new attachment? — His jargon cannot be meant to deceive — for he is honesty itself — No — t'is all Babelhausen's contrivance — Force himself to love another — Stay — Mrs Fangle talked of some German Princess — An Illuminée — Can it be this German woman? (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 365).

Technically, Caroline is an important character in *Whim for Whim* for two reasons. Firstly, in comparison with other characters, Caroline is one who has most asides opening her heart to the audience. Like Lady Delacour, Caroline realizes the superficiality of the world: «Grave! — Oh Sir this is no time to look grave — You hear the masquerade has begun (*aside as she goes out*) How painful to wear the mask of gaiety with an aching heart» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 372). She is courted by the Count, as Mrs. Fangle is:

CAR. (*aside*). I am convinced he knows of Mrs Fangle's loss of fortune, though how he has learnt the secret I cannot divine — but perhaps we shall unmask him yet — (*aloud*) And I will explain myself candidly to Count Babelhausen as soon as he has convinced me of the truth of what he hinted just now (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 373).

Secondly, Caroline is very active. Linguistically very witty, Caroline is not only able to interact with many characters on stage, but she also adapts her discourse to each one and faces the course of events with determination. Her sympathy with Quaco when he states he has not taken the diamonds deserves the black man's praise: «Next to massa Opal I love her [Caroline] de best in de world» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 366) and Caroline then resolves to take action courageously:

CAR. What a villain is this Felix — (*aside*) Yet Opal thinks him a man of genius and integrity — Opal! Opal! How easily are you duped by the appearance of virtue — But why am I thinking of Opal now? Some thing must be done immediately to arrest Felix — (*aloud*) Follow me Quaco — (*aside*) I'll consult my guardian — he has some sense — At present I have none — (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 367).

In Edgeworth's play, Mrs. Fangle never introspects; she does not examine her life on stage. Though Mrs. Fangle is an unconventional woman like Lady Delacour and in a number of instances she is reminiscent of her, the protagonist in *Whim for Whim* lacks Lady Delacour's dynamism and appeal. Mrs. Fangle does not reveal her past as Lady Delacour does at the beginning of *Belinda*. In *Whim for Whim* there is no introspection and no self-parody as in *Belinda*, hinging on Belinda Portman's entrance into the world by the hand of socialite Lady Delacour, a frustrated mother, who will finally be restored to her family. Mrs. Fangle was somehow training for the future and its impact can be felt on Edgeworth's later fiction like *Helen* or *Lconora*. On the contrary, Caroline poetically examines her amorous life with Sir Morden when she feels jealous of Opal's attentions to a «foreign princess»:

SIR M. Here's a fair trial now — if she [Mrs. Fangle] is what I think of what I thought her a woman of sense under all her follies — if she is what I think or thought her a woman of real feeling under the appearance of thoughtlessness, she will give up her whim to a man, who is really attached to her — What do you think Caroline?

CAR (*sighing*). That even people of the best sense Sir, and the best hearts are sometimes strangely run away by their own whims (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 372).

Not having a profession features as a handicap for the lovers' happiness and professional development features prominently in the Edgeworths writings. Sir Mordent would never consent to Opal and Caroline's marriage and Caroline agrees on this point. Unable to see the Count's through, Sir Mordent says he would be forever obliged to the Count if he could settle Opal's head and he envisions the Count as a man of the old school, as revealed in what Sir Mordent tells to the audience and to the Count himself:

SIR M. (*aside*) He can't be a rascal – He's quite of the old school – (*aloud*) I am ashamed my carelessness should have occasioned so much trouble – The buckle is a trifle but I value it as a family bauble – (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 323).

SIR M. (*aside*). God bless me I have been mistaken – He is certainly no adventurer – He has the order of the red eagle – he must be somebody – (*aloud*) Eight pounds, charged with a cross red – Oval blue – J'aime l'honneur qui vient par la vertu – A fine motto, in the true old chivalry stile – Good old times – Good old times – I am glad to see any remains of them in modern days (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 323).

Sir Mordent is not aware of the Count's duplicity and later on he hears the Count deny being an Illuminatus: «Who is in earnest in these things, when the effervescence of the first age is passed, unless he be a fool or a knave» (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 324). The Count provokes so many doubts in Sir Mordent, whose soliloquy moves from the possibility of being cheated to his idealization of Mrs. Fangle:

<He has returned my long diamonds buckle – he is certainly no adventurer> [*lightly crossed out*] – This Count is indeed a dangerous man – polite – nobly born – well connected – well informed – I hope he is not my rival – often at Mrs. Fangle – < I don't like that for if once she is taken with a new lover there is no chance for an old one > [*lightly crossed out*] – Charming bewitching whimsical creature! – with the learning of a batchelor [sic] of arts, the enthusiasm of a girl of fifteen, and the airs of a woman of fashion, she has wit and beauty enough to drive a man mad – Besides she's the best herald in England – I'll go, and see

her immediately — Felix! — Felix! — my hat, cane, and gloves — Felix — <now I'll lay a wager> that fellow's not to be found — Whisk — the instant my back's turned he's off — Nobody knows where — But Mrs Fangle recommended him I'll bear it as long as I can (Edgeworth, 2003, pags. 324-5).

As afore mentioned, disguise and masks are paramount in *Whim for Whim* and just as Mrs. Fangle wanted to attract the Count through disguise, Caroline resorts to disguise to recover Opal's attention. During the masquerade *raisonnée*, she appears dressed up as Aspasia and Opal as a slave. The young man is so passionately in love with her that he desperately needs to see her eyes. The Count thinks Aspasia is really Mlle. Fanfarlouche. Identity shift reveals the Count's villainy to Opal, who immediately asks Caroline to forgive his folly at the realization of the Count's authentic nature:

OPAL. (*clapping his hands*). Heavens! What do I hear! What a scene of villainy! What a dupe I have been! (*stamping then turns suddenly to Caroline*) — And I have been exposing myself to Caroline all this time! But the Count! My Illuminatus dirigens! Villain of villains! And is this the great work! Is this the end of Illumination — And was it for this I was on the point of sacrificing all my hopes of happiness — Oh Caroline — can you ever forgive my folly? (Edgeworth, 2003, pag. 383).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Edgeworth's play deserves attention because it portraits on stage the New Woman in fashion at that time and because Mrs. Fangle and Caroline announced more elaborate female characters in Edgeworth's fiction. I have shown that instead of being built on opposites *Whim for Whim* is built on parallelisms: a rational character, like Caroline, turns out to be more passionate than she seems and passionate Mrs. Fangle finally adopts a rational approach and is reconciled with her role as a mother. Edgeworth does not embrace a radical critique of woman's position: she condemns absent mothers and far-fetched ideas if not grounded in reality and she denounces the use of woman as a patriarchal pawn,

too. As Mrs. Fangle said about the woman of fashion, it takes courage to be a woman.

With Mrs. Fangle, Edgeworth focuses on the middle-aged intellectual lady who lives in a world of her own and is isolated from real life problems. In the end, the lady is taught a lesson and redeemed of her flaws. However, a good deal of skepticism is filtered through the figure of the learned woman. In *Whim for Whim*, Mrs. Fangle is not really obsessed with becoming independent and sexually liberated through knowledge: Illuminatism simply becomes an appealing theory bringing her closer to Count Babelhausen at the cost of neglecting her maternal duties. Mrs. Fangle announces many frustrated mothers in *Belinda*, *Helen* and Edgeworth's collections of tales. Edgeworth makes a parody of sectarianism and certain attitudes associated with feminism: the neglect of children and the real world and the lack of practicability and common sense.

Mrs. Fangle's jewels represent female reasoning powers, which are temporarily lost and finally recovered. The attachment to the Count deprives Mrs. Fangle of her family's authentic affection. In *Whim for Whim*, the heroine helps the hero see what is happening around. Edgeworth punishes mercenary marriages and those who only seek women's fortunes. However, values like honour and women's reputation prevail and the interpretation of such values, as they are treated in the play, suggests a rather conservative interpretation of this play which is really a study of shame and intolerance at various levels: the main characters have no scruples about sacrificing the happiness of others, and comedy facilitates that they finally feel repentant for their actions—in fact, Mrs. Fangle's embrace of maternity at the end is not very convincing. *Whim for Whim* transcends the personal dimension: it not only gives us an idea about the way in which Edgeworth envisioned her early career, but it also helps us to understand her approach to eighteenth-century society.

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## 5. NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Fernández (2017).
- <sup>2</sup> About the reasons for Edgeworth's absence from Irish theatre, see Luppi (2019).
- <sup>3</sup> The meaning and importance of names in *Whim for Whim* is explained by Eger (2003, pp. 281-2).
- <sup>4</sup> For a thorough analysis, see Fernández (2012).
- <sup>5</sup> See Siobhán Marie Kilfeather (2003).
- <sup>6</sup> Georgiana Cavendish or the Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806) was a charismatic socialite and a fashion icon of her time. She gathered around her a large salon of literary and political figures. She became a political activist as the first woman to make active and influential front line appearances on the political scene. Catherine Macaulay (1731-91) was a radical political thinker and a historian who wrote the masterpiece *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line (1763-85)*.
- <sup>7</sup> Felicity A. Nussbaum explains that Amazons developed their talents at martial arts and dressed in military custom: «the women of necessity evolved a government by and for women because they have been deserted, marooned or widowed» (1984, p. 44).
- <sup>8</sup> «Vibrantiuncle» is taken from David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749). «Milo-like» is used by Mrs. Fanfarlouche and it refers to the Greek athlete Milo of Crotona (see Eger's notes 39 and 45 to *Whim for Whim*, 2003, pags. 387-8).
- <sup>9</sup> The edition of the play includes the parts that Maria crossed out.

- <sup>10</sup> This character alludes to Samuel Richardson's homonymous novel (1753) closely related to *Whim for Whim*. In Richardson, aristocrat Sir Charles prevents the marriage of Harriet Byron and libertine Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. There is a mask ball too and Sir Charles feels honor bound to Lady Clementina della Porretta, an Italian noble woman. Finally, Lady Clementina refuses to marry him and Sir Charles and Harriet can get married.
- <sup>11</sup> On this aspect, see Mark Rothery and Henry French (2012) and Randolph Trumbach, (1978).
- <sup>12</sup> On this aspect, see Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin (2009) and Michael Young and Johan Muller (2016).
- <sup>13</sup> On Richard Lovell Edgeworth's educational experiments with his eldest son, see Butler, 1972, pags. 37-8.
- <sup>14</sup> However, scholars and reviewers complained about her lack of appeal. For McWhorter, she looks quite insipid (1971, pag. 190). *The Quarterly Review* already labeled her as uncomfortable: «The heroine is one of those 'faultless monsters' that would be so delightful in real life, where they unluckily never appear, and that are quite unsupportable in a novel, where we continually meet with them» (Smith, 1814, pag. 16).