Appendix 5.21: from *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820)

Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817), educational writer and engineer, was a friend of ED and fellow Lunar Society member. His best-known work, *Practical Education* (1798), co-written with his daughter Maria Edgeworth, emphasizes learning through doing experiments. Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) is best known for her novels including *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *Belinda* (1802). The family lived at times in Ireland on the family estate at Edgeworthstown in County Longford, and at times in England.

Selections copied from *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun by Himself and Concluded by his Daughter, Maria Edgeworth*. Volume 2. London: R. Hunter, and Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1820.

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TO DR. DARWIN.

"*Edgeworth-Town*, 1790.

"IT is sometimes, my dear Doctor, a very difficult task for a man to know what to say, when he reads a work written by a friend. His honesty and his affection are often cruelly at variance; and he must either appear a vile flatterer, or an unkind friend.

This is not the difficulty I feel. I am rather in the ridiculous situation of Lightfoot, in the Fairy Tales,[1] who was obliged to tie his legs to restrain his speed.

I have felt such continued, such increasing admiration in reading the "Loves of the Plants," that I dare not express my enthusiasm, lest you should suspect me of that tendency to exaggeration, with which you used to charge me. I may, however, without wounding your delicacy, say, that it has silenced for ever the complaints of poets, who lament that Homer, Milton, Shakespeare, and a few classics, had left nothing new to describe, and that elegant imitation of imitations was all that could be expected in modern poetry. I have seen nobody since it has been published, except my own family; and amongst my domestic critics, who are not readily pleased, I hear nothing but praise and congratulation.

To have my name in a note[2] is, in my opinion, to have it immortal; and, as Mrs. E.[3] says,

> "If it's allow'd to poets to divine,
> "One half of round eternity is mine."[4]

"I rejoice at all events, my dear Doctor, that I sent you the progressive hygrometer, before I saw your book; as you will impute my sending it somewhat less to vanity, and somewhat more to kindness.

Montgolfier,[5] Lina,[6] and Gossypia,[7] are perfectly new in their ideas. Montgolfier is sublime:—you have not let him strike his head against the stars like Horace;[8] but have

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made respectful planets to recede, to give him place. I would rather have your praise, were I Montgolfier, or Howard,[9] than all the inscriptions or statues of inscribers and academicians.

"My daughter says, that the manner, in which you mention your friends in your poem, shews as much generosity, as your descriptions shew genius.

"But I will stop.——

"I read the description of the Ballet of Medea[10] to my sisters, and to eight or ten of my own family. It seized such hold of my imagination, that my blood thrilled back through my veins, and my hair broke the cementing of the

friseur,[11] to gain the attitude of horror. The ghost in Hamlet, by the by, only raised the unconstrained locks of an ill-combed Dane. To force nature through the obstructions of art, is quite another thing.

"My dear Doctor, I will make this fulsome letter a little more palatable by a few verbal criticisms. I know you do not disdain the labour of correcting your poetry:—Maria says, that, even with the help of genii, man can do nothing without some labour; for Aladdin's lamp required to be rubbed quite bright, before the genius obeyed.

"I remark, that the *quantity* of Landau, b. 1, l. 344, is unusual.—B. 1., l. 159, I believe the axle of a weathercock is usually fixed. If I go farther, don't say, *ne sutor*[12]—. L. 165—I don't like Moore of Moore Hall. It is associated with burlesque. I object to l. 290, the vegetable lamb, ending the line. * * * * * * * *

"If you encourage me, I will give you all my ill-natured remarks on the other cantoes.

"Pray, Doctor, flatter me so far as to remember, that the first lines I saw of this poem excited my enthusiasm; and that whilst I sleep, or curse, over many other descriptive poems, I shout applause, when I hear yours.

[…]

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"P.S. I have just read *Papyra*,[13] and would I had more, on which to praise her! […]

DR. DARWIN IN ANSWER.

Derby, 1790.

"Your last letter is very flattering to me indeed. It was your early approbation, that contributed to encourage me to go on with the poem. The first part is longer than the second, and two of my critical friends think it will be more popular.

"I wish it were possible for me, to shew you the MS. for your criticisms; but I dare not trust it, especially as I have sold it. I am obliged by your criticisms on the Loves of the Plants. I alluded to Moore of Moore Hall, on purpose to give a little air of burlesque, to shelter myself under. For the same purpose the proem was written:—to '*the festoon of ribbon*,' in the preface,[14] I think you helped me.

"*Landau, Chaos, Vegetable Lamb,* were all felt to be

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objectionable, but not easily mended. I am glad of any criticisms, and if I can *easily* mend them, I do.

"I intend to write no more verses, but to try a medico-philosophical work next, called Zoonomia.

[…]

I am glad to have it recorded, under Dr. Darwin's own hand, that my father's approbation of the first lines he saw of the Botanic Garden encouraged the author to finish it. With as much sincerity as he gave praise, my father blamed and opposed whatever he thought was faulty in his friend's poem. Dr. Darwin had formed a false theory, that *poetry is painting to the eye*; this led him to confine his attention to the language of description, or to the representation of that, which would produce good effect in picture. To this one mis-

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taken opinion he sacrificed the more lasting, and more extensive fame, which he might have insured by exercising the powers he possessed of rousing the passions, and pleasing the imagination.

When my father found, that it was in vain to combat a favourite false principle, he endeavoured to find a subject, which should at once suit his friend's theory, and his genius. He urged him to write a "Cabinet of Gems." The ancient gems would have afforded a subject eminently suited to

his descriptive powers; admitting all his elegance and ingenuity of allusion and simile; employing his classical learning, and bringing into play the passions and imagination; with all of ancient history and tragedy, and all of modern poetry, which would have afforded ample range, and rich materials, for creative fancy. The description of Medea, and of some of the labors of Hercules, &c., which he has introduced into his Botanic Garden, shew how admirably he would have succeeded, had he pursued this plan: and I cannot help regretting, that the suggestions of his friend could not prevail upon him, to quit for nobler objects his vegetable loves. He has, however, done all, that was possible for

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ingenuity and exquisite versification to accomplish, in embellishing a fantastic subject.

My father differed from most critics in one particular. When his advice was not followed, he was not angry; and whenever it was afterward proved, that he was right, and that his friend was wrong, he never triumphed in his own opinion, but made the best of things as they were, instead of shewing how much better they might have been, if his counsel had been taken. It is evident from his letter to Dr. Darwin, that no one could enjoy more sincerely, than he did, the first burst of applause, with which the public received the Botanic Garden:—and when the fashion changed, when Darwin's poetry was cried down, as violently as it had been cried up, my father was its steady and zealous defender.

I have sometimes seen him, when its merits have been questioned, offer to open the Botanic Garden at a venture, a dangerous hazard for any work, and to read aloud from the first passage that might occur. His quick eye selected the best lines in the page, and those to which, in reading, he could give contrast and variety. Thus obviating the chief objections to which it

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is exposed; the sameness of versification and description. As a critic and judge, he would have admitted these defects; as an advocate and friend, he knew how to conceal them. It was his opinion, that any clouds which have obscured Darwin's genius will pass away, and that it will shine out again, the admiration of posterity. I have heard him predict, that in future times some critic will arise, who shall rediscover the "Botanic Garden," and build his fame upon this discovery.

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[1] Lightfoot appears in "Fortunio," a story in Madame d'Aulnoy's *Les contes des fées* (1697). He ties his legs so as not to outrun stags and hares when he is hunting.

[2] *LOTP* III:131n, pl. 107.

[3] Elizabeth Sneyd (1753–1797), the third of Edgeworth's four wives. His first wife, Anna Maria Elers (1743–1773), was Maria's mother.

[4] The closing lines of *Ovid's Metamorphoses, in Fifteen Books, Translated by the Most Eminent Hands* (1717). Of the several translators involved, the one most often named is John Dryden (1631–1700).

[5] *LOTP* II:25–66.

[6] *LOTP* II:67–84.

[7] *LOTP* II:85–104.

[8] Horace, (65–8 BCE), Roman writer. *Odes* 1.1.35, "sublimi feriam sidera vertice" [I shall soar aloft and strike the stars with my head] (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).
[9] *LOTP* II:438–72.
[10] Two passages in *LOTP* depict Medea: I: 383–92 and III:135–78. From his description, Edgeworth likely means the passage from Canto III.
[11] Hairdresser.
[12] *Ne sutor ultra crepidam*, Latin version of the saying, "Let the cobbler stick to his last." It comes from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* [Natural History]. The artist Apelles was criticized by a shoemaker for incorrectly depicting sandals; Apelles fixed the mistake but then the shoemaker went on to criticize the figure's leg, prompting Apelles to say, "ne supra crepidam sutor iudicaret" [a shoemaker in his criticism must not go beyond the sandal] (35: 85, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library).
[13] *LOTP* II:105–54.
[14] *LOTP*, Proem.