

A Note on Maria Edgeworth and Ursula Bethell

Heidi Thomson

Readers familiar with eighteenth-century English literature may recognise the reference to “the experience of Rosamund and her Purple Jar!” in the first section of Ursula Bethell’s “By the River Ashley.” It is from a popular story by the Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849), Jane Austen’s favourite novelist and a pioneer in children’s literature, a genre which does not get properly developed until the middle of Queen Victoria’s reign. “The Purple Jar” appeared in *The Parent’s Assistant* (1796) and reappeared in *Rosamond* (1801). In addition to Frank, Harry and Lucy, Rosamond is one of Edgeworth’s favourite heroines: she is impetuous, independent and resourceful.

The story is a particularly revealing touchstone for the experience of the children by the river Ashley. Rosamund, who should really spend her pocket money on a new pair of shoes, is enchanted by a wonderful purple jar which is prominently displayed in a chemist’s window. She is allowed by her mother to spend her pennies on the jar, which leads to a double disappointment. As soon as the coloured water (appropriately alluded to in the Bethell poem as “the water of illusion”) has been let out of the jar, the jar loses its magic entirely. In addition, her father will not take her out, because she does not have appropriate shoes. Bethell’s poem softens the experience by offering some consolation for the loss of the bright, “best colours”: “But there were still good shapes and good smooth feel.”

Edgeworth’s stories are exceptional in their time for their emphasis on the actual experience of children and for not being overtly prescriptive, and the first section of Bethell’s poem clearly celebrates children’s immediate experiences too. Like Ursula Bethell, Maria Edgeworth was closely involved with the education of children, mostly her own twenty-one siblings (her father married four times). Considering the tremendous success of Edgeworth’s children’s stories which remained in print well into the 1930s, Ursula Bethell may well have been inspired by, or even used, these stories while teaching in London around the turn of the century.

WORK CITED

Bethell, Ursula. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Vincent O'Sullivan. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997.

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