

Article

Attention, Please! Maria Edgeworth's Educational Short Fiction as Literary Experiments with Attention

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Abstract

In her aim to establish education as a scientifically grounded discipline—conceived as “an experimental science” in her non-fictional treatise *Practical Education* (1798)—Maria Edgeworth pioneered the integration of literary attention into educational practice. This paper examines her use of different short prose forms as a means of cultivating attentional capacities in young children and adolescents, while simultaneously providing educators with adaptable tools for designing exercises targeted to varying levels of attentiveness. Through close analysis of two narratives, “The Purple Jar” and “The Good French Governess”, we argue that Edgeworth’s short stories and tales experiment with various degrees of (narrative) complexity to foster the development of two key attentional habits, the transition of thought and the abstraction of attention, both essential for navigating everyday environments. Our findings suggest that Edgeworth’s literary experiments not only contribute to our understanding of attentional affordances of different short fiction forms and help advance knowledge about literature and cognition; they also underscore the pedagogical potential of “attention narratives” in educational contexts.

Keywords: attention; educational science; literature; experiment; attention narratives; cognitive load; attention fatigue; moral tale; short story; Maria Edgeworth



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1. Introduction

In *Practical Education*, Maria Edgeworth advocates for approaching education as “an experiment science”: “to make any progress in the art of education, it must be patiently reduced to an experimental science” as they “rely entirely upon practice and experience” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. v). The 1798 pedagogical text cowritten with her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth,¹ and described as “exemplary of the progressive thought of its day” (Richardson 1994, p. 7), was part of a growing interest in children’s—especially young women’s—education at the end of the 18th century. Maria Edgeworth, however, was not only interested in advancing education and educational *science*: she was first and foremost a writer of fiction—with an educational agenda, creating her own literary “laboratory” to test some of the approaches proposed in her non-fictional work.

Throughout her writings, one of her pronounced objectives is “cultivating the power of attention” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 78). This is reinforced by a separate chapter, “On Attention”, which is the third chapter of *Practical Education*, following chapters on “Toys” and “Tasks”. In the latter, she underscores that “[t]o fix the attention of children [...] must be our first object in the early cultivation of the understanding” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 57).

As we will argue, Edgeworth's theories about educational practice build on her 'literary experiments' on attention. These experiments do not only explore different modes of attention as well as techniques to improve readers' attention management skills: they also investigate the attentional affordances of both the short story and the tale. As we will show in this paper, Edgeworth's stories and tales are designed as "attention narratives".

We define "attention narratives" as narratives that foreground aspects of attention, while, at the same time, unveiling, enacting, and reflecting upon (stylistic and narrative) techniques of attention and attention management (see [Baumbach 2019](#), pp. 42–43). These techniques include foregrounding and "attention-capturing" ([Emmott et al. 2006](#), p. 14) devices, including, as proposed by Catherine Emmott et al., deixis, defamiliarisation, alliteration, italics, fragmentation, and repetition. Considering that attention has been conceptualised as primarily relating to sight, attention narratives tend to provoke strong visual images, emphasising processes of perception or fascination elicited by attractors. As Peter Stockwell proposes, "an attractor is a figural, trajector element that claims most readerly attention on the basis of, among other factors, agency, topicality, human-scale, brightness, size, noisiness, danger, and so on" ([Stockwell 2014](#), p. 24). Attention narratives might include characters that exhibit attentional excess or excessive distraction and often include passages of attentional release, which offer some room for mind wandering and can be used as a technique to intensify attention-salient passages that follow.

Edgeworth's short stories and tales can be read as "attention narratives" insofar as they examine various techniques of attention and explore the potential of different forms of short prose fiction to enhance readers' attentional capacities and attention management skills. As we will propose, Edgeworth is one of the forerunners in the field of "literary attention". Not only is her literary work deeply invested in strategies of attention and their application, Edgeworth also repeatedly engages in theorising attention and attention mechanisms in her non-fictional treatise.

2. Towards Educational Science: Edgeworth, Attention, and the Experiment

Connecting to anxieties about inattention and distraction that were deemed a threat to moral order in the 18th century, Edgeworth recognises attention as a limited cognitive resource. As she argues in the chapter on "Toys", "fatiguing their [children's] attention" ([Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798](#), p. 18) is to be avoided at all costs. For gaining, retaining, and managing children's attention, the authors propose several strategies that foreground the importance of brevity and the pleasure of understanding in the communication of knowledge: "Excite a child to attend in earnest for a short time, his mind will be less fatigued, and his understanding more improved, than if he had exerted but half the energy twice as long" ([Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798](#), p. 54). For Edgeworth, attention is the key to (the advancement of) learning, which can be fostered by positive experiences, such as gratification connected with understanding. As she resumes at the end of her chapter on "Tasks": "If the pupil be paid for the labour of listening by the pleasure of understanding what is said, he will attend, whether it be to his playfellow, or to his tutor, to conversation or to books." ([Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798](#), p. 73). This remark, which includes the idea that attention is "paid", suggests strong awareness of 'the economy of attention' that regulates children's (and readers') capacity to focus and that impacted her own literary production and growth as a writer.

Existing research on the Edgeworths has recognised the importance of the "experiment" in their approach (e.g., [Narain 1998](#); [Douthwaite 1997](#); [Watts 2007](#); [Howard 2014](#); [Toal 2014](#); [Sagal 2022](#)). While critics have highlighted the close connection between literature and education in their writings (e.g., [Armstrong 2020](#), p. 136), approaching Maria Edgeworth's fictional work as literary experiments with cognition, which illustrate, negoti-

ate, and practice different modes of attention and attention management in the context of educational practice is a new field of enquiry, which we will delineate in this paper. The art of attention is what connects education and the experiment. As Edgeworth argues, both education and the experiment require “attention to minute circumstances” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 30).

In her development of an attention theory, Edgeworth draws on earlier writings on education, attention, and the experimental lexicon she encountered through her father—particularly in the context of “late eighteenth-century gatherings of intellectuals and movers and shakers who called themselves the Lunar Society of Birmingham” (Chandler 2011, p. 88), including Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley, and Thomas Percival. The group’s ideas were “circulated widely in their books and papers [...] their shared method was ‘experiment,’ and their shared goal ‘improvement’” (Chandler 2011, pp. 89–90). *Practical Education* includes references to some of their writings, particularly in the “Toys” chapter, to underscore the notion of educational *science* and highlight the Horatian formula of *prodesse et delectare*, e.g., “in Priestley’s and Percival’s works, there may be found a variety of simple experiments which require no great apparatus, and which will at once amuse and instruct.” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 28). These “simple experiments” involve the demonstration of specific phenomena: “the repulsion and attraction of oil and water” or the “blowing of soap bubbles” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, pp. 28, 31). The experiments suggested in this chapter are designed to help children “acquire habits of observation” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 28), which includes the ability to attend closely to specific phenomena (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 448). Though not akin to the rigidity of modern experimental practices and methodologies, Edgeworth’s own approach builds upon the “history of the experiments [...] in which observations of minute facts have led to great discoveries” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 31).

Edgeworth presents two forms of “literary experiments”, in that she uses short fiction (a) as proof of a concept, that is as a demonstrative tool for a known hypothesis, and (b) as an ongoing investigation. In doing so, she differs from a modern understanding of experimental methodology, especially concerning the explicit collection of results.

The two narratives we discuss in this paper—“The Purple Jar”, a short story from her short story collection *The Parent’s Assistant, or: Stories for Children* (Edgeworth 1796) and “The Good French Governess”, a tale from her collection of *Moral Tales* (Edgeworth 1801a)—illustrate these two different forms of experimenting with cognition, using literary texts. In fact, these collections of short stories and tales, respectively, frame her “parental guidebook” (Killick 2008, p. 80), which is *Practical Education*. While *The Parent’s Assistant* has been described as “the accompanying story collection” (Killick 2008, p. 80), *Moral Tales*, as stated in its preface, was composed “to illustrate the opinions delivered in ‘Practical Education’” (Edgeworth 1801a, p. xi).

Both her short stories and tales offer “short and active exertions” (Edgeworth 1801a, p. vii) required to draw and train children’s attention (according to Edgeworth) and introduce the benefit of literary attention for education. While “The Purple Jar”, first published in 1796 and republished in later collections of children’s literature, demonstrates the need to train attention through abstraction, “The Good French Governess” showcases various forms of attention management and development in practice.

“The Purple Jar”, which predates the other text, is part of an ongoing and active experiment with attention management tools and different target age groups as readers. Though there are no explicit results, there is an implied success in the story’s continued republication (particularly in collected works on children’s literature) as well as Edgeworth’s later continuation of the main character (*Rosamond: A Sequel to Early Lesson*). The second narrative, “The Good French Governess”, is a tale that serves as a “simple experiment”

akin to the ones presented in the chapter on “Toys”. The narrative showcases attention development in children across different age groups.

At the end of her chapter “On Attention”, she stresses the importance of “future experiments” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 117), reinforcing her approach to pedagogy and education as “an experimental science” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. v) while opening up the field for future research and providing the foundations for empirical reading studies in contemporary educational science.

3. Attention as Transition of Thought and Abstraction: How to Train an Essential Faculty of the Mind

Throughout the treatise on *Practical Education*, the Edgeworths conceptualise attention as essential to cognition: “Attention we consider as the faculty of the mind which is essential to the cultivation of all its other powers.” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 714). While not the first to discuss attention in a pedagogical context, they are the first to identify it as “essential” to accessing and developing the mind’s “other powers”, suggesting that all major cognitive faculties—sense, imagination, memory, and understanding—have their foundation in attention. None of the texts the treatise is in direct dialogue with and make repeated references to—from Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), John Locke’s ([1693] 1889) *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1762), to Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia, or the Laws of Organic Life* (1794)—make a similar claim.

The preface to her influential *Moral Tales*, written by Edgeworth’s father, underscores the fundamental role of attention, emphasising that “[s]teady untired attention is what alone produces excellence” (Edgeworth 1801a, p. vi). To reinforce this statement, he refers to an authority in the sciences, establishing a pronounced scientific framework for *Practical Education*: “Sir Isaac Newton, with as much truth as modesty, attributed to this faculty those discoveries in science which brought the heavens within the grasp of man, and weighed the earth in a balance.” (Edgeworth 1801a, pp. vi–vii). While Maria Edgeworth seems to be standing on the shoulders of giants who have embraced the important role of attention in the sciences, she has pioneered practical attention studies, insofar as she is the first to devise literary experiments that put her own theories about attention, literature, and education to the test.

These experiments build on the notion that as a “habit” or “habits” attention can be trained through continuous exercise—a notion that resonates with Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, “which promises to teach productive habits by associating studious behaviour with play and reward” (Howard 2014, p. 298). Edgeworth echoes:

By kind patience, and well-timed, distinct, and above all, by short lessons, a young child may be initiated in the mysteries of learning, and in the first principles of knowledge, without fatigue, or punishment, or tears. No matter how little be learned in a given time, provided the pupil be not disgusted; provided the wish to improve be excited, and the habits of attention be acquired. (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 714)

As neuroscientific studies have confirmed, habits of attention are not entirely hard-wired but can be learned, as attention networks, particularly the faculties of executive control, orienting, and alerting, continue to develop until adolescence (Boen et al. 2021). Even though Edgeworth does not specify the length of the “short lessons” she proposes, her tales and short stories offer such “lessons”, insofar as their brevity helps counter the threat of fatigue, which is a key challenge in cultivating the habit of attention. Edgeworth’s awareness of possible cognitive overload that needs to be avoided, which she mentions in *Practical Education*, connects to what came to be known as “cognitive load theory”

(Sweller et al. 2019, p. 261), which builds on current knowledge about human cognitive architecture to advance the field of practical education. Cognitive load theory acknowledges the limited capacity of our working memory to process new information and emphasises the need to improve learning tasks and environments by reducing the processing information that is not directly relevant to the learning goal, as well as by enhancing the skills that help children manage cognitive load. Similar notions can already be found in Rousseau's *Emile*: "Let us save his brain all attention that is too laborious" (Rousseau [1762] 1893, p. 116).² Edgeworth, however, in her frequent references to Rousseau, departs from such a narrow philosophy. Rather than "save" attention, she proposes methods to strengthen it, acknowledging that sustained attention is "laborious".

It is Erasmus Darwin, another of her intertexts, who offers a solution. As stated in *Zoonomia* (Darwin 1794, p. 24): "The fatigue that follows a continued attention of the mind to one object is relieved by changing the subject of our thoughts; as the continued movement of one limb is relieved by moving another in its stead". As suggested by Darwin, the faculties of the mind can be improved by training—similar to a muscle that can be strengthened by exercise. It is from here that Edgeworth develops her theory as one that relies on the notion of embodied cognition and proposes two habits of attention which are at the core of education: "transition of thought" and "abstraction".

According to Edgeworth, "transition of thought", which can be defined as "the power of turning attention quickly from one subject, or one employment to another" is a "habit" sometimes associated with the idea of a genius but might in fact "depend[] entirely upon practice" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, pp. 109–10). Something very similar is claimed for the "habit of abstracting the attention", which is also deemed to "depend[] entirely upon practice" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 106) but denotes "the power of withdrawing the attention from all external objects, and concentrating it upon some particular set of ideas" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 105). This understanding of "abstraction" differs from current approaches in cognitive science, which define "abstraction" as "the process that, supported by sensitivity to statistical regularities in our environment (e.g., regularities across sensory input and our motor responses to that input), allows us to form and store (or, in exemplar/retrieval-based models, allows us to compute at retrieval) semantic information gleaned across our experiences" (Yee 2019, p. 1257). There are, however, also some overlaps, insofar as abstraction, as proposed by Edgeworth, can be conceived of as a form of deep attention that is "necessary to the successful labour of the understanding" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 107). This claim resonates with the notion that abstraction is central to the organisation and memorisation of information, and thus central to the ability of learning.

While the "general command of abstract attention" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 109) relates to the demand for which "[s]teady untired attention is what alone produces excellence" (Edgeworth 1801a, p. vi) expressed in the "Preface" to *Moral Tales*, the focus on the necessary combination of abstraction and transition of attention suggests that the goal is not only to train the art of attentional focus, but "to improve versatility of mind" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 111) through continuous exercise that helps enhance habits of attention and attention management skills. To train these habits, Edgeworth argues, exercises should be tailored to the different capacities of attention that are observable in children.

Referencing Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*, Edgeworth argues that "bird-witted" children who are "not sufficiently apt to abstract their attention" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 20), for instance, should be given a solitary board to train them to "fix their attention solely upon the figure and the pegs before them" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 20). While Bacon proposes mathematics as a remedy, Edgeworth's approach

has a lower threshold, being based on the idea that, even though such small measures will not cause “any great or permanent effects”, “the combination of a number of apparent trifles is not to be neglected in education” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 20).

Reading or listening to stories is no trifle, but these activities correspond with Edgeworth’s low-threshold approach that aims to instruct parents, educators, and young readers in ways to devise attention exercises and strategies for managing attention. As suggested by the examples she offers for “the exercise of attention” and “improv[ing] versatility of mind” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 111), imagination, wit, and humour counter attention fatigue: “When we are tired of thinking upon one subject, we can attend to another; when our memory is fatigued, the exercise of the imagination entertains us; and when we are weary of reasoning, we can amuse ourselves with wit and humour.” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 111).

Her narratives, such as “The Little Dog Trusty or The Liar and the Boy of Truth”, “Lazy Lawrence”, or “The Purple Jar”, offer such short, delightful entertainments, which allow a transition from learning in the traditional sense and offer some attention release by transporting readers into different storyworlds, which can be considered an act of (controlled) mind wandering. What seems to be designed for enabling the “transition of thought”, however, turns out to be exercises in sustained attention and ultimately exercises in techniques needed for abstracting attention. After all, reading short fiction, a short story in particular, requires “withdrawing the attention from all external objects, and concentrating it upon some particular set of ideas” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 105), i.e., those presented as part of a storyworld, for a limited duration without overstraining readers’ working memory.

4. Educational Short Fiction as Attention Narratives

For her literary experiments on attention, Edgeworth seems to favour short stories and tales over letters.³ She begins her career, however, with the publication of *Letters for Literary Ladies* (Edgeworth 1795), which connects to previous works that use letters to convey educational principles, such as George Gregory’s *The Elements of a Polite Education: Carefully Selected from the Letters of the Late Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield to his Son* (Gregory 1774). As highlighted in Stanhope’s letters, children need to be taught the art of sustained attention: “steady and undissipated attention to one object is a sure mark of a superior genius” whereas “hurry, bustle, and agitation, are the never-failing symptoms of a weak and frivolous mind” (Gregory 1774, p. 81). At the same time, a certain flexibility of attention is required to allow children to avoid “laziness of mind”, which is inattention, and enable them with the skill to “command [...] attention immediately from one thing to another, as occasion requires” (Gregory 1774, p. 26). Both aspects are taken up by Edgeworth, however, in a different form.

Following her theory of attention outlined in *Practical Education*, tales and short stories in particular were the literary forms of choice for Edgeworth. Her principle of the attention economy of words—“All supernumerary words should be avoided in cultivating the powers of attention” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 78)—corresponds with early definitions of short prose, and connects with what E.A. Poe will later refer to as “unity of effect”: “In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.” (Poe 1842, p. 298). As Poe suggests, “this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting” (Poe 1842, p. 299). Composed for “the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal” (Poe 1842, p. 298), these principles, which were presented in response to the second volume of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), resonate with the form and objectives of Edgeworth’s

stories and tales. Edgeworth's narratives, however, are not only composed to draw and keep readers' attention: they are designed as "attention narratives", which put her theory of attention in education to the test.

Edgeworth's progression from the short story to the tale enables her to experiment with different short fiction forms and their attentional affordances. The shift can further be explained by her aim to cover different stages of attentional development—from childhood to late adolescents—as well as by her considerations of "labour" that is associated with sustained attention, but as she argues, is also required for learning. While the first tales by Edgeworth are short and episodic, relating to earlier short stories, her later tales tend to be longer and also more complex than her short stories, requiring different techniques of attention management to alleviate the "pain" associated with the potentially laborious task of engaging in a narrative and avoiding interruptions.

Even though the short story seems to have been the starting point of her experiments with attention narratives, it is not brevity (or rather not brevity alone) that attracts and sustains attention. Instead, as indicated by individual stories as well as by *The Parent's Assistant* and *Moral Tales* as collections of short prose narratives, it is the dynamics between attentional focus and attentional release that manages readers' attention, conveys knowledge, and fosters learning.

As we will show in the following, concentrating on "The Purple Jar" from *The Parent's Assistant* and "The Good French Governess" from *Moral Tales*, Edgeworth's tales and stories explore the different affordances (but also similar challenges) of the short story form and the tale, and present a range of strategies to enhance attention and management skills required to successfully navigate daily environments.

5. Exercising Attention with a Short Story: The Case of "The Purple Jar"

It is hardly a coincidence that the preface to *The Parent's Assistant, or: Stories for Children* reiterates Edgeworth's approach to "the science of education" (Edgeworth 1796, p. v) and stresses the difficulty of writing for children considering "with what ease and rapidity the early associations of ideas are formed, on which the future taste, character, and happiness depend" (Edgeworth 1796, p. iv). As is evident from the preface, Edgeworth designed these stories to affirm education's "proper station in experimental philosophy" (Edgeworth 1796, p. v).

The Parent's Assistant is tailored to children and designed "as a collection of experiments upon a subject which has been hitherto treated theoretically" (Edgeworth 1796, vi), building on theories about different degrees of attentional development in children. According to Thomas Reid, whose *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Men* (Reid [1785] 1786) have shaped the design of Edgeworth's narratives (Edgeworth 1796, p. vi), at the age of two or three, children can follow speech (especially the speech of older children) and enact some degree of abstraction (Reid [1785] 1786, p. 71). The two opening stories, "Orange Man" and "Trusty", connect to this idea. They are composed in such "perfect simplicity of expression" that they "may appear insipid and ludicrous" (Edgeworth 1796, p. vii). At the same time, however, as claimed by Edgeworth, they ensure that children will not only be able to parse them, but also "be rewarded for the trouble of decyphering every word" (Edgeworth 1796, p. vii). Furthermore, as we will show in the following, stylistic simplicity does not necessarily draw and bind attention, but often tends to belie the complex design of these "attention narratives".

The most notable and most popular short story of the collection, which has been reused and reprinted twice in other collections by her, is "The Purple Jar". Originally published in the first edition of *The Parent's Assistant* (see Carpenter and Prichard 1984, p. 163; Douglas 2023, p. 98), "The Purple Jar" was reshuffled into *Early Lessons* (1801) and later into collected

works on Rosamond: *Rosamond, A Sequel to Early Lessons* (Edgeworth 1821), which affirms the appeal of the character of Rosamond with young readers. Considering that *The Parent's Assistant* contains stories designed for children who cannot yet read or are newer to reading (with the preface being “addressed to parents”) (Edgeworth 1796, p. iii), Edgeworth seems to have tested the appeal of “The Purple Jar” particularly to younger children, before targeting a slightly older readership again by including it into *Rosamond*.

“The Purple Jar” enacts what Edgeworth describes as “two of the most difficult exercises of the mind”, which are “[a]bstraction and transition” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 105). In *Practical Education*, the former is conceptualised as “the power of withdrawing the attention from all external objects, and concentrating it upon some particular set of ideas” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 105), a task that, according to Edgeworth should be the “general command” in education (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 109). Abstract attention connects with what today is referred to as “deep attention”, “characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods [...], ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged” (Hayles 2007, p. 187). “Transition of thought”, on the other hand, is defined as “the power of turning attention quickly from one subject, or one employment, to another” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, pp. 109–10), a cognitive habit that indicates “versatility of mind” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 110), which can also be achieved by training. As stated in *Practical Education*, it is not the aim, however, to “require any such rapid daily transitions in the exercise of attention” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 111). Instead, transition shall be taught as a way to create moments of cognitive relief that counter attention fatigue. Referring to Darwin (1794, p. 24), Edgeworth speculates about ways of translating existing knowledge about fatigue into other modes of sensual perception:

If we could exactly discover how to arrange mental employments so as to induce actions in the antagonist faculties of the mind, we might relieve it from fatigue in the same manner as the eye is relieved by change of colour. By pursuing this idea, might we not hope to cultivate the general power of attention to a degree of perfection hitherto unknown? (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 112)

Even though Edgeworth claims that “we are not at present provided with a sufficient number of facts to apply our theory to practice” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 112), she experiments with different ways of engaging and modulating attention, using the short fiction form—“The Purple Jar” is a case in point.

The narrative tells the story of Rosamond, a seven-year-old girl, who is overwhelmed by the sight of the many beautiful objects she sees in shop windows in the city of London and begs her mother to buy some of them. When she suddenly notices a hole in one of her shoes, her attention is redirected to a more pressing need that guides them to a shoemaker’s shop. However, when her mother asks her to decide whether to get new shoes or “the purple jar” that caught her attention at a chemist’s shop, Rosamond opts for the jar only to eventually discover that she has made the wrong choice. Realising that her object of desire is a rather ordinary jar and that she is confined to the house, as her shoes fall apart, Rosamond confesses, “how I wish, that I had chosen the shoes—they would have been of so much more use to me than that jar: however, I am sure—no, not quite sure—but, I hope, I shall be wiser another time.” (Edgeworth 1815, pp. 16–17).

Targeted at young readers, the language is simple, the plot straightforward, the moral obvious. The (linguistic) simplicity of this story, however, belies its complexity as an attention narrative. The title identifies the “the purple jar” as a key attractor. The term “jar”, however, does not re-appear until Rosamond’s mother demands a decision from her daughter, whose mind is caught up in cognitive dispersion: “Well, which would you rather have, that jar, or a pair of shoes?” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 8). Initially, the desired object is subsumed under a seemingly objectless array of beautiful colours: ““Oh, mother!

oh!', cried she [Rosamond], pulling her mother's hand. 'Look! Look! blue, green, red, yellow, and purple! Oh, mamma, what beautiful things!'" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 4). The ambivalent nature of the "purple jar", which is reinforced by images that were added to later publications of the story, which show a tall vase (Lucas 1905, p. 65) or a jar of jam (Edgeworth 1801b, p. 1), ensures that attention to this object is maintained, and raises questions about its "use", which are reinforced by the mother's recurrent question, "What use would they be [...]?" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 4).

Rosamond's immediate, unfiltered, and uncontrolled response to visual stimuli and her ignorance about the use of the objects she encounters while walking the streets of London are highlighted at the outset of the narrative: "she saw a great variety of different sorts of things, of which she did not know the use, or even the names" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 1). The little girl is unprepared for the abundance of visual stimuli that "caught Rosamond's eye" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 2). Her ignorance, which might be explained by lack of experience, makes her susceptible to strong visual stimuli, which captivate her attention while—due to their rapid succession—preventing any critical reflection on the use of these objects. The latter would require abstraction—a technique that Rosamond will acquire in the course of the narrative.

As suggested at the outset of the narrative, Rosamond seems unaccustomed with "mental labour" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 113), specifically, the practice of focused attention. While walking and passing several shops, her attention wanders until it is arrested by the strong visual stimuli provided by a variety of colourful jars, of which the purple is deemed the most desirable (Edgeworth 1815, p. 1).

Rosamond's intense fascination with the "purple jar", which persists even after she has left the chemist's shop, is interrupted by a sudden pain she feels due to a hole and a stone in her shoe. The pain briefly refocuses her attention to the shoemaker's shop, while connecting to the pain Edgeworth associates with close attention (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 83), which children seek to alleviate by a quick, yet uncontrolled transition of attention to other stimuli. When her mother cautions her to first examine an object "more attentively" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 7) to determine whether she favours one over another, this call for more sustained attention is disregarded by the child who reaffirms that she is "quite sure [she] should like the flower-pot" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 8) whereupon her mother buys the jar instead of the shoes.

The (mis)identification of the colourful jar(s) as "flower-pot[s]" is derived from a suggestion made by Rosamond who proposes this potential use to her mother: "You might put flowers in them" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 4). As it turns out, however, her judgement was clouded by her failure to examine the object "more attentively". When the desired jar arrives, Rosamond discovers that it is filled with a dark liquid emitting an unpleasant odour—the true source of its purple hue.

Stylistically, a certain fascination with the mysterious object is sustained at the beginning of the narrative through repetition—initially with some variation, insofar as repetition of the term "jar" is delayed and the term is substituted by other expressions such as "vase" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 5)—until it is demystified as "a plain white glass jar" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 13).⁴ Rosamond's reaction is presented in a "'single item' mini-paragraph", i.e., a paragraph containing a single sentence, which Emmott et al. identify as an "attention-controlling device" (Emmott et al. 2006, p. 3): "Little Rosamond burst into tears" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 13). Thereafter, Rosamond begins to see things more clearly and understand the value and "use" of examining a desired object "more attentively" (Edgeworth 1815, p. 7). According to Edgeworth's own principles of education, "punishment" and "tears", just like "fatigue", shall be avoided in such "short lessons" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 608), and her readers are, of course, spared these negative experiences. Following the colour

imagery used in this narrative, the focus eventually returns to Rosamond who “coloured and retired” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 16), states, “I hope, I shall be wiser another time” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 17). Confined indoors by the consequence of her poor choice—namely, the lack of wearable shoes—Rosamond emerges from this story more thoughtful, refined, and focused.

To make mental labour pleasurable, Edgeworth proposes to employ “small, certain, regularly recurring motives” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 86). The narrative offers such motives through the repetition (with variation) of both the image of the jar and the mention of “use”, which re-occurs ten times, inscribing itself into readers’ working memory. Rosamond’s immediate response to visual attraction suggests a heightened attention to surfaces as well as a quick but unfiltered transition between different objects that point to an overstimulation of the senses. What is further suggested here is that lack of knowledge and training in attention inhibits attention management and a transition of attention that is beneficial, voluntary, controlled—a habit that can be acquired through practice and repetition, which also reinforces the need for collections of stories that offer a series of “short lessons” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 608).

The ending of the narrative promises mobility through the prospect of new shoes that will terminate a period of confinement caused through the lack of shoes and the lack of abstracted attention. Unsurprisingly, this passage differs from the rest of the narrative in style. Whereas before, readers’ attention is drawn and kept through the immediacy and accessibility of spoken speech, repetition, and short sentences, “the difficulties and distresses” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 15) of Rosamond’s experiences as her shoes become unwalkable are narrated in a paragraph consisting of long sentences. Before the presentation of the moral, which should stick with readers and is reiterated as part of a dialogue between Rosamond and her mother, the narrative offers a short passage of attentional release. Contrary to Rosamond, who is confined to the house, suffering from her misapprehension of the jar, readers’ minds are invited to wander and experience some cognitive release before the moral of the story is presented. Rosamond’s regret not to have chosen the shoes and her promise to “be wiser another time” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 17) suggest some progress towards “abstraction”, which would enable her to examine possible objects of desire more attentively and to avoid errors in judgement in the future.

And yet, Rosamond concedes that she is “sure—no, not quite sure—but I hope, I shall be wiser another time” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 17). The qualification of the degree of her determination is foregrounded through dashes that decelerate reading speed, suggesting that “Rosamond’s [and also the readers’] disappointment [does] not end here” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 15): even though the narrative, which centred on a captivating visual image that was eventually decoupled from the strong fascination of the senses, offers a concise lesson on how to progress from (uncontrolled to controlled) transition to abstraction, further training is required to fully implement this practice as habit—and Edgeworth’s short fiction offers such training. “The Purple Jar” is the first one of Edgeworth’s “Rosamond-stories”, a series of stories that centre on this character, some of which refer to the decision in “The Purple Jar” as “a silly choice” (Edgeworth 1815, p. 27). In “The Two Plums”, however, Rosamond announces to her mother to “look at them [the two plums] a little nearer”, based on her disappointment with the purple jar (Edgeworth 1815, p. 23).

While presented in a realist manner, “The Purple Jar” borrows elements from the fairy tale. These include the wish that, however, is not granted by her mother; the fascination with a specific object; and the important function of shoes. As such, the narrative evokes familiar schemata that facilitate cognitive processing while allowing Edgeworth to reform these “tales” into “attention narratives” of a different kind. For, as she claims in *Practical Education*:

[i]t is not necessary to make every thing marvellous and magical to fix the attention of young people: if they are properly educated, they will find more amusement in discovering, or in searching for the cause of the effects which they see, than in blind admiration of the juggler's tricks. (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 28)

Attuned to fairy tales, readers' expectations might be disappointed, as the story's closure offers merely the prospect of a happy ending and rather calls for more refined attention management skills, which would spare them—similar to Rosamond (who, if familiar with fairy tales, should have made a better choice)—from disappointment. Edgeworth, however, manages to present both, the short story and the tale, as successful tools for self-learning attention management strategies.

The link to the tale foreshadows Edgeworth's experiments with the tale as a literary form that seems more demanding and more laborious, in terms of managing readers' attention, but, if drafted carefully, also manages to avoid fatigue. With these longer short fiction narratives, Edgeworth seems to follow up on an idea that she had already expressed in *Practical Education* but had not yet pursued in a literary form: "that attention long continued is laborious, but that without this labour nothing excellent can be accomplished." (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 54).

To a greater extent than *The Parent's Assistant*, her tales emphasise the need to balance the pain of attention and the pleasure of information and knowledge as "attention narratives" that, due to their greater length and complexity (prompted by an older target group whose attention skills are more advanced), include several passages of attention release in-between more attention-grabbing passages to avoid overstimulation and to prevent readers from zoning out.

6. "The Good French Governess" as a Meta-Attention Narrative

If "The Purple Jar" is, as we argue, an attention narrative, then "The Good French Governess", the final tale in *Moral Tales* (in the first edition), is an attention narrative on attention narratives. As the preface declares, it is a "lesson, to teach the art of giving lessons." (Edgeworth 1801a, p. x). This playful nod to the tale's self-conscious engagement with pedagogical practice attunes readers to the meta-narrative on attention that follows. "The Good French Governess" balances a narrative focus on children's attention while simultaneously carefully managing readers' attention. Unlike in "The Purple Jar", however, here these efforts of guiding readers' focus are made explicit: "Our readers must have remarked" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 285) and "We hope our readers have observed that [...]" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 293). In encouraging a moment of pause and reflection, these asides to the reader complement the narrative's primary focus: the education of the entire Harcourt family. "Mrs. Harcourt was a widow, who [...] had good abilities, but [...] she had not time to cultivate her understanding, or to attend to the education of her family", a matter she remedies "by procuring for her daughters a fashionable governess and expensive masters." (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, pp. 271–72).

The tale follows the governess' educational approaches towards Mrs. Harcourt, as well as her children—"three daughters and a son; Isabella, Matilda, Favoretta, and Herbert"—and provides an exploration into the differing techniques required to cultivate an "understanding" in different individuals (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 272)⁵. In each of the Harcourt children, Edgeworth provides case studies on attentional habits, from Isabella whose "memory had been too much cultivated" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 272) to Herbert's resistance to education as "a little surly rebel" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 273). These case studies build on Edgeworth's statement in *Practical Education* that "[w]hatever is connected with pain or pleasure commands our attention; but to make this general observation

useful in education, we must examine what degrees of stimulus are necessary for different pupils, and in different circumstances.” (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 85). It is here then, in “The Good French Governess”, that Edgeworth experiments with the “degrees of stimulus” required, cultivating the cognitive powers of both her characters and her readers. In involving the readers in several case studies that illustrate children’s different cognitive engagement with the world around them, Edgeworth successfully balances the readers’ transition and abstraction habits. While the continuous shift between the children and their, at times, humorous endeavours to enhance their attentional habits prevents fatigue, it is through the governess that we are able to attend abstractly to her pedagogical practices.

Considering Edgeworth’s use of the tale itself, “The Good French Governess” includes a number of stylistic attention-controlling features while embracing several passages of cognitive relief, encouraging an ebb-and-flow of attentional intensity. The introductory expository prose on the background of the attention manager of the narrative, the governess—Madame de Rosier—challenges readers immediately. It is through this character that we are guided through this experimental attention narrative, and we tend to trust the governess given her experience: “if you had made as many experiments upon children as I have” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 301). The tale begins with rather lengthy expository paragraphs (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, pp. 272–74), which might strain readers’ attention. To counteract possible fatigue, lengthy prose then gives way to staccato dialogue (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 274) that gains traction, as first lessons in attention management are enacted (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 275). Once attention is rekindled, readers are again challenged with longer sections of non-dialogic prose (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, pp. 283, 286, 290–91, 301–2, 318–20), which, however, are followed by more vivid sections of dialogue. Bouncing between each child’s development, the governess’ tale offers controlled transitions of attention, which help manage readers’ attention and offer sufficient points of connection for readers of different ages, who can recognise themselves in the older or in the younger children of the Harcourt family.

The tale is framed by references to the governess’ son, who represents a generation well-trained in attention management. In the beginning, readers are told that the governess, who is “[a]mong the sufferers during the bloody reign of Robespierre” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 271) was separated from her son, “a promising young man about fourteen” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 271). The end sees her reuniting with her son, bringing the narrative full circle: “The mother, restored to her son, in a moment felt herself invigorated—and forgetful of her fatigue” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 333). Their separation and his recounting of it in particular offers a final challenge to readers’ attention, a challenge they are primed to receive: ““You shall hear my voice then, my dear mother,” said her son, ‘for at least half an hour, if that will not tire you. I have a long story to tell you’” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 333). In the long dialogue that follows, Edgeworth channels the inherent orality of tales as a historical form: “hear my voice”. As dialogue breaks with each new paragraph and quotation marks indicate his continued speech, readers recall the speaker’s relationship to the governess. The allusion to the tale’s opening sentences tests readers’ working memory while offering a frame to the attention exercises presented in this narrative.

In the final part of the tale, the governess’ son recalls an educational success story: “when my employers perceived my education had not been neglected, and that I had some knowledge of literature, their confidence in my abilities increased.” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 336). Left with this success story, readers are reminded in the end that the governess’ “plan of education which had been traced out remained yet unfinished” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 342), particularly in the case of the two older children. In the “unfinished” state of their education, a handover takes place as Mrs. Harcourt takes

over: “You have taught me your value, and now you are going to leave me.” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 342). By presenting education and the training of habits of attention as an ongoing endeavour in this passing over to another figure, Edgeworth advocates for readers to continue their engagement with education. One such possible engagement is offered in this cyclic structure of the tale, which encourages a return to the beginning. In doing so, a new kind of engagement is offered in the opportunity to reflect on the lessons in attention habits presented in this narrative—an option most relevant to the older, pedagogically interested readership.

In the case of the older two children, Isabella and Matilda, the solution to their education is in redirecting their attentional habits to develop their cognitive abilities. Isabella, despite having a miraculous memory, “only remembered these things to repeat in conversation.” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 277). It is from here that the governess cultivates a cognitive understanding in her pupil, encouraging her to consider the context of her remembered facts:

“[...] I could have told them when the first printing-press was established in Westminster Abbey—in 1494.”

“And paper was made in England?”

“Have you forgot so soon?—in 1587.”

“It is well worth remarking,” said Madame de Rosier, “that literature in England must have at that time made but a very slow progress, since a hundred years had elapsed between the establishing of your printing-press and the making of your white paper. I allow these are not useless facts.”

“*That* never struck me before,” said Isabella, ingenuously; “I only remembered these things to repeat in conversation.” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 277)

This passage includes a variety of “attention-capturing” devices, aimed at both character and reader. In Isabella’s repetition of (seen earlier in the dialogue) what she deems “useless facts”, Edgeworth’s governess encourages pattern recognition. The importance of “use” builds on “The Purple Jar”, yet here, “use” is suggested to not always be apparent. This defence of the “useless” is debatably a further meta-fictional reference: narratives do not have an imperative “use” and might be deemed “useless knowledge”. Their value lies in their reflective quality that encourages us to make connections, just as Isabella does above, and in their cognitive design, which is strengthened by Edgeworth’s use of fiction as attention narratives. It is this careful suggestion of connecting and correlating information that the governess is interested in developing within Isabella. It is not the method (Isabella’s recollective powers) that emerges as the problem in her case, but the motivation: “only remembered these things to repeat”. Likewise, in Isabella’s italicised response—“*That* never”—Edgeworth draws attention to this point of realisation in the child’s education.

However, as indicated by the sub-heading of *Moral Tales*, “for young people”, with the preface’s clarification “for young people of a more advanced age” (Edgeworth 1801a, p. vi), it is not only Isabella’s education that Edgeworth is concerned with but also the one of the “implied reader” (Booth [1961] 1983, p. 422). The ambiguity afforded in directing the collection at those of a “more advanced age” allows for a range of abilities and therefore requires a range of approaches and techniques to attend to their differing capacities of attention and attention management. One of these such approaches is the integration of facts (as above) as well as intertextual references. Again in reference to Isabella’s education further in the narrative, allusions and references are made including but not limited to “A Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 323), Dr. Gregory’s “A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 322), “an essay of Hume’s” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, pp. 324–25), and “Hogarth’s print” (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 325).

These references, mentioned within a three-page space, cater to a range of readers' abilities: for those who recognise these references, there is a potential increase in cognitive load. This ensures that more advanced readers (i.e., educators, parents) are offered enough stimulation to keep up their attention based on this additional layer of complexity. For adolescent readers, these references are not vital for their understanding of the text and may be skipped without increasing cognitive load. This also applies to references to Rousseau's *Emile*, which offers an additional but optional layer of stimulation more advanced, adult readers can engage in.

Coping with the challenges of intertextuality is an issue that is also addressed within the narrative as Matilda makes the active choice to engage with these references. Readers are encouraged to mirror Matilda's thirst for an education akin to her sister's: "Tell me, however, what she was at my age, and what sort of things she used to do and say, and what books she read, and how she [. . .]" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 278). In her employment of polysyndeton—"and"—Edgeworth depicts a pupil interested in continuous cognitive development without the attentional habit to sustain it. In the juxtaposition with her older sister and her miraculous memory, Matilda has been assumed by others as Isabella's inferior, an opinion the governess opposes: "if Matilda were *no* genius, it must have been the fault of her education." (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 272). Here we see an example of Edgeworth's engagement with another "attention-capturing device", as previously discussed: italics (see Emmott et al. 2006, p. 14). This emphasis on cognition is reiterated in Matilda's education: "[w]ithout fatiguing Matilda's attention by long exercises in the common rules, she gave her questions which obliged her to *think*, and which excited her to reason and to invent" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 292). Again, the emphasis placed on a single word, "*think*", directs readers' attention, encouraging them to follow the instruction of this imperative.

Instructing the younger two pupils, Madame de Rosier must simplify her lessons: "At first she found it difficult to fix the attention of the boisterous Herbert, and the capricious Favoretta" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 286). These adjectives connote the instability of uncontrolled transitional attention—"boisterous" and "capricious"—manifested in the youngest children of the Harcourt family. Like the use of "ingenuously" for Isabella, these adjectives help to expand the readers' vocabulary. In the use of this more challenging language than seen in "The Purple Jar", readers are set apart from the younger two children who are learning to read within the space of the narrative. By depicting this range of ages, she advances the philosophy of *Practical Education* "[i]n teaching new terms, or new ideas, we must not produce a number at once" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 78). Like the use of intertextuality previously discussed, in this advancement, Edgeworth designs "The Good French Governess" as an attention experiment, which integrates "new terms", assuming a stronger attentional habit than seen in "The Purple Jar". In enacting these "*change of measures*" (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 311), Edgeworth challenges readers' attention, provoking the continuation of abstraction despite the increased cognitive load. These "short lessons" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 714) contribute to the pursuit of a "durable" attentional habit:

It is easy to make children happy for one evening, with new toys and new employments; but the difficulty is to continue the pleasure of occupation, after it has lost its novelty; the charm of novelty cannot be durable, but the power of habit may well supply its place. (Edgeworth [1801] 1810, p. 285)

"The Good French Governess" is positioned as the final tale in the first edition, then in subsequent editions, as the penultimate tale. In its finality then, within the collection, it is catering to a readership already well-trained in attention based on previous tales, but also familiar with the basic pattern of her tales. Designed as a meta-narrative on attention and attention management itself, it concludes Edgeworth's experiments with attention

narrative while seeking to “continue the pleasure of occupation”. This is done through this presentation of variety, an aspect previously discussed in relation to “The Purple Jar”. Whereas in the latter, variety concerned the use of different terms to refer to the object in focus, the “jar”, variety in “The Good French Governess” is induced on several levels—by the character shifts and the corresponding shift between different attention habits—and the lessons in attention management devised accordingly. In this tale, the variety provides an opportunity to create a “durable” habit of attention, one that needs continuous training, wherefore *Moral Tales* and especially “The Good French Governess” emerge as an attention narrative of use to older readers, educators, and parents alike.

7. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated Maria Edgeworth’s sustained engagement with short prose forms as a means of exploring modes of literary attention and developing strategies for cultivating attentional discipline in children and adolescents. Her use of literary experimentation to illustrate the pedagogical value of narratives designed as ‘short lessons’ on attention emerges from her broader engagement with Enlightenment discourses on the experiment and serves her overarching aim of advancing education as a scientifically grounded discipline. As we have argued, Edgeworth emerges as a forerunner in the field of literary attention pioneering practical literary attention studies within educational science. Her fictional and non-fictional writings introduce a novel approach to attentional training, devising narratives that support the development of attentional capacity and management in young readers, while simultaneously equipping educators with tools for addressing varying levels of attentiveness in pedagogical contexts.

In reviewing her theory of attention, particularly as articulated in her non-fiction treatise *Practical Education*, we have shown that Edgeworth conceptualises attention as an “essential faculty of the mind.” Two key attentional habits are central to her framework—“transition” and “abstraction”—which she identifies as fundamental for cognitive flexibility and adaptive engagement with one’s environment. These habits, according to Edgeworth, can be cultivated through “short lessons” grounded in the Horatian principle of *delectare et prodesse*.

As we have suggested, Edgeworth’s *The Parent’s Assistant* and *Moral Tales* constitute a repertoire of “attention narratives”—stories that both deploy attention-attracting devices and engage in a meta-reflection on attentional processes. These narratives prompt readers to consider how attention is drawn, directed, manipulated, and ultimately refined or regulated. To illustrate the affordances of the short fiction form in this context, we focused on two case studies: “The Purple Jar” and “The Good French Governess.” These texts exemplify Edgeworth’s nuanced strategies of attention management, highlighting her contribution to both literary form and educational theory through an experimental pedagogical lens.

In our analysis of these narratives, we argue that “The Purple Jar” exemplifies the progression from uncontrolled to controlled transitions of thought, alongside an emergent capacity for the abstraction of attention. “The Good French Governess”, by contrast, presents a more complex and cognitively demanding narrative. This is due in part to its intended audience—older adolescents and educators—and in part to the distinctive affordances of the tale form as compared to the short story. The tale operates as a meta-attention narrative: a narrative about attention narratives. Reflecting the formal challenges of sustaining readerly engagement inherent in the tale genre, it displays heightened narrative complexity through its intricate character configurations, elaborate plot structure, and sustained reflection on various techniques of attention management. This complexity results in increased cognitive load, which, as our analysis demonstrates, is mitigated through a

deliberate alternation between segments that demand heightened attention and those that permit cognitive release.

As our discussion of both case studies illustrates, Edgeworth's theory of attention and her literary experimentation reveal a sophisticated understanding of the pedagogical potential of attention narratives. Her work represents a formative step in what might be termed "practical literary attention studies", foregrounding the role of fiction in cultivating attentional capacities.

Further research is warranted to extend this analysis beyond the short fiction corpus by examining Edgeworth's longer fictional works, particularly her novels. Such inquiry may yield a more comprehensive understanding of the scope of her literary experiments, her sustained engagement with contemporary theories of selective perception, cognition and educational psychology, and her role as a precursor to contemporary reading comprehension studies.

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Notes

- ¹ In our discussion of *Practical Education*, we refer to "the Edgeworths" if we are referring to both R. L. Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth, who collaboratively wrote the preface. The authors of the individual chapters are specified in the preface, which states that "[a]ll that relates to the art of teaching to read on the chapter on Tasks, the chapters on Grammar and Classical Literature, Geography, Chronology, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Mechanics, were written by Mr. Edgeworth, and the rest of the book by Miss Edgeworth." (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. ix–x).
- ² Rousseau is a prominent intertext in Edgeworths' educational writings. Yet, as argued by Marilyn Butler in her biography of Maria Edgeworth, "the Edgeworths' work in education, founded during the critical years 1777–80, is often misunderstood by those not fundamentally interested in it, because it is easily confused with his [Richard Edgeworth] earlier dabbling with the ideas of Rousseau" (Butler 1972, p. 59). Instead, as Butler concedes, "the breakdown of the experiment with Richard, and Edgeworth's growing preference for Lunar practicality, had turned his attention to an entirely different educational approach" (Butler 1972, p. 59). That is, the treatment of education as an "experimental science" (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. v).
- ³ This paper focuses on the correlation between short fiction and attention management for Edgeworth's pedagogical writing. Further research is warranted into Edgeworth's fiction, including her novels, in relation to attention. Our distinction of Edgeworth's short prose into "short stories" and "tales" follows her use of the term "stories" vs. "tales", as also apparent in the respective collections of short narratives—*The Parent's Assistant* or *Stories for Children* and *Moral Tales*. While the modern Irish short story is generally regarded to have emerged at the end of the 19th century and the 19th century tale "could mean anything from a brief sketch, anecdote or fable to a novella or even a three-volume novel" (Ingman 2010, p. 16), Edgeworth's "stories" show a narrative intensity and tightness in structure that make her one of the forerunners of "the Irish short story [that] had yet to stabilize as a genre" (Ingman 2010, p. 16).
- ⁴ This slight variation connects to Edgeworth's principle of variety, as explained in *Practical Education*, "[v]ariety, to a certain degree certainly relieves the mind but then the objects which are varied must not all be entirely new. Novelty and variety, joined fatigue the mind." (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798, p. 78).

- ⁵ A further discussion of Edgeworth's representations of gender, age, and class within attention narratives is warranted, particularly within *Moral Tales*.

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