

Writing Competition Maria Edgeworth Literary Festival 2021

Entrants are required to select one of these two Edgeworth letters and write their entry based on the contents using the prompts supplied. A video workshop by author and Creative Writer Laura Mc Kenna is also available at www.mariaedgeworthcentre.com

This year the festival committee are delighted to announce a collaboration with a new initiative 'Digital Edgeworth Network: University College Cork and University of Oxford, in collaboration with the National Library of Ireland and Bodleian Libraries' This is a very prestigious collaboration and is funded by UKRI-AHRC and the Irish Research Council under the 'UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Network Call' (grant numbers AH/V002287/1 and IRC/voo2287/1)

Digital Edgeworth Network: Competition Prompts

Frances Edgeworth née Beaufort to Honora Edgeworth

(National Library of Ireland, MS 10166 10) Abbreviated.

CONTEXT

In 1802, a Peace Treaty was finally declared between Britain and France, which had been at war since 1793. At last, Maria Edgeworth's father was able to pay a visit of several months to Paris, accompanied by his fourth wife, Frances (he had been widowed 3 times), his daughter, Maria, and her half-sister Charlotte. They travelled by ship and by coach. In this letter, Frances Edgeworth writes from Paris to her stepdaughter Honora, who was twelve at the time. 'Little Fanny' (aged 4) and 'poor little quiet Harriet' (aged 2), referred to in the letter, are Frances Edgeworth's young daughters, Honora's half sisters.

January 10, 1803

My dear Honora

Though I have not written to you since I left home I have often thought of you and always with pleasure because you were very good and very well when I saw you last and by all the accounts we have had since you continue equally so. You must feel very happy when you reflect that it is in your power to contribute to the amusement of your kind Aunts during the absence of your father and your sisters. We have seen many agreeable people and many learned men – and many machines and establishments that have given us pleasure in the seeing – and have added much to our stock of knowledge and will enable us to add to yours when we return – and not withstanding all these entertaining things at Paris we all wish much to return home, even Charlotte who is so young that ~~many~~ most things are new to her and who has so much merit that every one is pleased with her. When you see new persons and places my dear little girl I hope you will preserve the same coolness that she does, and judge impartially of the various merits of what you see and hear, and keep your mind from being dazzled, and then you will be more fully sensible of the merit of your old friends and of your own home, and you will daily find new motives for your attachment to your Aunt Charlotte and of gratitude to her for all her goodness to you. Maria has written such long and entertaining letters that I am afraid you will think Paris much more charming than it is, but you must recollect that one always chooses the most amusing subjects that can be found for our letters when we wish to give pleasure to our friends at a distance, and that Maria knows how to do so better than most people. I am much obliged to you for your attentions to little Fanny and I send her a kiss for each cheek. And kiss poor little quiet Harriet's forehead and chin. Teach her to say Aunt Charlotte, as well Aunt May – and to say Mamma quite plain & papa better still, for you know that she is papa's little protégée. Can you read this French word? Your Aunt will tell you what it means. I am afraid I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you for many weeks, but I hope that we shall all meet before spring that we may see the leaves when they first appear and put our gardens in order together.

Adieu my dear Honora believe me
your most affectionate F Edgeworth

Travel letter

Introduction: Consider the letter that Frances writes to Honora. Unlike Maria, who must have written in praise of Paris, Frances writes a rather muted letter, with little description and includes a little 'lesson' for Honora about keeping a level head in the presence of new things/people and reserving judgement. Perhaps she's trying not make Honora feel like she's missing out on the fun of travel. She also encourages Honora to look forward to things they will do together in Spring.

Write a letter from any destination real or imagined.

- You could be one of the people mentioned in this letter. Honora, writing back to Frances; Maria, "who always chooses the most amusing subjects"; or young Charlotte who gives the impression of 'coolness'.
- Or write a contemporary version of this letter; how would you, as Frances, convey the same information? Is Maria constantly on her phone sending back photos etc.
- Or pick an entirely new fictional letter from any destination, real or imagined in any time you choose. Think of the mood of the writer and how it might influence his/her description of the place. Is the letter written in anger? with enthusiasm? in sadness/loneliness? In fear or anxiety? Can you get across the story behind the writer's trip to this place in your letter? How might you try to settle the worries of those still at home?

Second Letter

2) Maria Edgeworth to Frances Edgeworth née Beaufort

(Bodleian Library, Oxford MS. Eng. Let. c. 696 fol.164r-167v)

Abbreviated.

CONTEXT

By 1819, when Maria Edgeworth wrote this letter, her father had died, and she was a celebrated novelist. She therefore took responsibility for her sisters whenever they travelled abroad. In this letter, she writes from Hampstead, London, to her stepmother, Frances (her father's fourth wife, who was younger than her). The letter describes her worries for the health of her sister Fanny, who was 20. Her worries are as much for her sister's emotional state as her physical health: Fanny has received an offer of marriage (from 'LW', Lestock Wilson, who was a friend of the family) and has evidently experienced a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty about whether or not she should accept the offer. Interestingly, Fanny finally accepted Wilson's marriage proposal ten years later, in 1829.

Hampstead

April 1st 1819

My dearest mother

How very fortunate we were in coming here yesterday for my dear Fanny's sake particularly. She had been at a French play the night before we left Town and caught cold. She had a headache the next morning & as soon as she had drank tea here she went to bed. She was so hot & feverish in the night and coughed so much that I sent for Dr Holland –and settled that it would be so disagreeable to F to mention all the circumstances to him that we should only state a cold. However when Dr H came he took me out to talk & asked every possible question – this F does not know – I am rather glad now the disagreeable moment is over that he is not prescribing on half knowledge. He gave her the night before last two doses of antimony – advised a blister on her chest if the pain continued.

Her mind has been too much harassed. It was very painful to her to give LW so much pain as she has been forced to give him. We breakfasted in Harley St. the morning before we came here & she had a long conference with him in the front drawing room. He was very anxious to come here during this week. Fanny thought it better that he should not. He shewed great emotion; I believe cried bitterly. But she suffered much. It was settled however handsomely & told me he was quite convinced that Fanny is left to her own inclinations & her own unbiased judgment.

He followed me downstairs & trembling & pale as milk took my hands and faltered out – "Though I know I am not to take anything for encouragement — yet I cannot help thanking you for your good nature to me."

I do pity him exceedingly – and esteem him too: he has by his own conduct raised himself high in my opinion. I wish him all good. But I cannot wish that Fanny's happiness should be sacrificed to him. Indeed the irreparable loss of his own happiness would be the inevitable consequence of such a vain sacrifice on her part. She declares to me that she feels no love for him, that she has repeatedly told him so. Still he hopes on. Since he has had fair trial I think now the refusal should for his sake & hers be decisive & that as soon as it has

been given we should quit London & its neighborhood. When we are out of the reach of poor L W's hopes we shall be I trust more at ease.

Seeing how much Fanny's health suffered from the struggle of her mind & the pain of giving pain or of indecision I resolved to cut & run as quickly as possible. She said the other day "I am quite afraid of being touched by the feelings of the moment, of pity for him & being led to sacrifice my happiness & his" – and another time she said

"I know I shall be teized into marrying this man at last"

You talk my dearest mother of your own indecision – But if you could know the agony of indecision I have been in these last days you would feel yourself quite resolute compared with me. Every change I saw in Fanny made me fear that I was mistaking her mind and doing wrong either by him or by her – you know how contradictory & inconsistent the human heart is in certain circumstances. Sometimes F would say

"But I am giving up so much – such a noble generous character – I am sure I never shall be loved so much by anybody else –"

Then why refuse him – This ground gone over & over again in every possible light alternately frightened and reassured me and at last – that is at the moment I feel convinced that I see & that she sees to the bottom of her own heart – and that there is no love lurking there – Her esteem for him has been increased by his conduct latterly – by his integrity, generosity & wonderful power over himself – But the love, has completely vanished.

Maria Edgeworth

Decision Letter

Introduction: Consider the letter that Maria writes to Frances. She describes how ill Fanny has become and her difficulty deciding whether to accept an offer of marriage from LW —“her mind too much harassed”. And it seems that Frances has already confided “her own indecision”. Does she mean about Fanny accepting the proposal? Or perhaps she was talking about her own indecision when it came to marrying Maria’s father.

Write a fictional letter regarding an important decision.

- You could be one of the people mentioned in this letter. You could be Fanny herself writing to a friend about all the upset and indecision; or perhaps you are the unfortunate LW who wants to marry her, but has been turned down — how might he feel, what's he really thinking; or maybe you are Fanny's best friend who knows something about LW and wants to advise her. Perhaps you are the doctor who was sensitive to her distress or on the other hand not a bit sympathetic. Or her stepmother. Does she want Fanny to marry him? Why?
- Or write a contemporary version of this letter using references to today's world.
- Or write an entirely new fictional letter regarding an important decision; perhaps you are advising someone as Maria has done; or maybe you are looking for help about something really important, letting the reader know what has happened/ what is at stake.
- Or consider the letter and its mention of illness and treatment and write a fictional letter about this in Maria Edgeworth's time. What kind of treatment might be used?