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## The Mild Irish Girl: Domesticating the National Tale

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# The Mild Irish Girl: Domesticating the National Tale

## INTRODUCTION

[Sydney Owenson's sentiments are] mischievous in tendency, and profligate in principle; licentious and irreverent in the highest degree . . . If . . . she could be persuaded to exchange her idle raptures for common sense, practice a little self-denial, and gather a few precepts of humility, from an old-fashioned book, which, although it does not seem to have lately fallen in her way, may yet, we think, be found in some corner of her study; she might then hope to prove, not indeed a good writer of novels, but a useful friend, a faithful wife, a tender mother, and a respectable and happy mistress of a family.<sup>1</sup>

IN HIS DISMISSAL of Lady Morgan's novel *Woman: Or Ida of Athens* (1809), a novel advocating the cause of liberty in Greece, John Wilson Croker invokes some central terms of the debate in Britain over a cause much closer to home: the "Irish question." The Anglo-Irish Croker's attack invests the political values of Morgan's position with a distinctly sexual charge. His frequent comments on Morgan's books over the next twenty years retain a primary focus, also noticeable here, on the themes of sexual anarchy and gender. In later reviews he increases his causticity and drops his ironic suggestions that she might become an acceptably domestic wife and mother (though not indeed a good writer!), asserting that her social ideals and class pretensions are the

1. John Wilson Croker, Review of *Ida of Athens*, *Quarterly Review* 1 (1809), 52.

ravings of an “audacious worm.” In all of his commentary on Morgan and her work, including *Ida of Athens*, her travel books *France* and *Italy*, and her national tales, Croker equates the political and social vision she expresses with socio-sexual impropriety, and attributes her egalitarian “promiscuity” to a root cause: Gaelic Irish antidomesticity.

The reason Croker troubled himself to respond so vehemently and over such a long period of time to an “audacious worm” was, however, only nominally precipitated by the appearance of *Ida of Athens*, a novel then regarded as minor and now largely forgotten. Croker was responding rather to the enormous popularity and influence of the ideals expressed in Morgan’s first novel, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806).<sup>2</sup> In it, Morgan created a powerful heroine who embodied Irish nationhood and who, through her union with the English hero, represented a reimagined distribution of power between Britain and Ireland, as well as between men and women. It was Morgan’s refashioning of these relationships that caused Croker and other more noteworthy writers like Maria Edgeworth to respond, each in his or her own way opposing a reworked union based upon new types of partnerships.

It is clear that *The Wild Irish Girl* had a tremendous, if unintentionally negative, impact on subsequent developments in British literature and politics. Its influence can be traced in the historical romances of Walter Scott and beyond, as well as in the political debates over issues such as Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Act of Union in Ireland, and social and urban reform in Britain. Moreover, Irishness became a crucial term in the elaboration of an idealized British national culture. Croker’s reviews of works by Lady Morgan, and her responses to them, were contributions to a dialogue on union engaged by many of Britain’s most influential commentators throughout much of the nineteenth century, including Maria Edgeworth, James Kay Shuttleworth, George Cornwall Lewis, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. My focus here will be to examine the beginnings of what I argue was a long-standing debate by closely investigating the crucially different representations of Irish womanhood in two novels that construct imagined unionist identities: Morgan’s *The Wild Irish Girl* and Maria Edgeworth’s *The Absentee*.

2. Owenson, Sydney (Lady Morgan), *The Wild Irish Girl* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999). Hereafter cited as *Wild Irish Girl*.

Croker's characterization of Lady Morgan as sexually and politically deviant adheres to a consistent pattern in the British writing of Irishness. *The Wild Irish Girl* offers a useful starting point for examining this pattern, for reasons that will be discussed below. Any discussion of the British writing of Ireland, however, must recognize the impact and influence of Edgeworth's foundational *Castle Rackrent*, which inaugurated the Irish national tale tradition. *Rackrent*'s significance lies in its encapsulation of the public history of Ireland (or at least an Ascendancy version of it) in the private history of the Rackrent family. Written in the aftermath of the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland, in which the interests of both Anglo-Irish political élites and the Irish Catholic majority were subordinated (the Union was enacted to simultaneously contain Napoleonic aggression and Irish republicanism), *Rackrent* is the story of a Big House in decline. Thady Quirk's "personal" memoir, which Thomas Flanagan in his influential reading describes as an elegy for the Protestant nation,<sup>3</sup> pessimistically encodes the disintegration of Anglo-Irish society as an effect of union. The family's extortionary style of landlordism, known as rack-renting, brings ruin to the tenants, while the family's wastefulness brings ruin upon themselves; both groups are then exploited by a rapacious (and Catholic) middle class. Submerged within the text, moreover, is a thoroughgoing antidomesticity. The only marriages represented in the text are failures—and childless at that. The wives are greedy and the men, in the absence of any well-regulated women, are recklessly improvident. The gentry's disorderliness engenders a similar disorder in the lower classes. Edgeworth will revisit these Burkean themes in more refined detail in later novels, and in so doing will engage Morgan's novels and their depictions of powerful women who exert a positive influence on society through their actions in the public sphere.

Morgan (at this time still known as Sydney Owenson) adopts many of the devices used in *Rackrent* in elaborating her progressive social vision in *The Wild Irish Girl*, and in the process transforms the national tale both generically and ideologically. She reimagines union as the comic resolution to her narrative, encoded in the egalitarian marriage of the English hero and the Gaelic Irish heroine. She also argues for a

3. Thomas Flanagan, *The Irish Novelists 1800–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 69–79.

reappraisal of the colonial past, and a transformation of the political dispensation in the future. The hitherto subjected Gaelic Irish are given a “beautiful voice” in her inclusive social vision, newly empowered politically, and embodied in her heroine, Glorvina. The partners in the reimagined union share power and responsibility equally.

The social implications of these representations have been largely ignored or in some cases misinterpreted by modern feminist literary historians. Julie Anne Miller, for example, argues that both Edgeworth and Morgan offer “an inadvertent critique” of union by expressing “anxiety about the repressive power dynamics within the institution of marriage,” and that “Edgeworth’s and Owenson’s novels of union expose the way colonial control is secured and obscured through the privatization of power relations in marriage.”<sup>4</sup> Such an appraisal ignores fundamental differences in the social and political visions they express, differences of which critics such as Croker were acutely aware. While Morgan does indeed expose the ways in which power relations are secured in marriage, it is anything but inadvertent: she consciously seeks to transform them. In one of the many innovations for which she was one of the most influential (and in some cases reviled) authors of her time, Morgan invokes Shakespeare’s second history tetralogy, a group of works that Scott later celebrates as the model of national historical fiction. Her purpose is to expose the overturning and subsequent reinscription of normative gender roles, which the *Henriad* utilizes as a means of reinforcing the hierarchical social, political, and colonial order. Against this ideological model, Morgan juxtaposes the radically altered relationship of Horatio and Glorvina. (The *Henriad* is invoked in the dialogue surrounding the “Irish question” throughout the century, not only in Edgeworth’s *Ormond* in 1816 but as late as 1870 in Trollope’s *An Eye for an Eye*.)

Edgeworth, on the other hand, seeks to obscure and reinscribe normative gender ideals and valorize a repressive social and political system. She directly engages Morgan’s educational, gender, and political philosophy in her Irish novels published subsequently to Morgan’s *The*

4. Julie Anne Miller, “Acts of Union: Family Violence and National Courtship in Maria Edgeworth’s *The Absentee* and Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*,” in Kathryn Kirkpatrick, ed., *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 14–15.

*Wild Irish Girl* for precisely this purpose. In these works she seeks to contain the radical themes Morgan engages through her own elaboration of Burkean ideals, in which the political and social structures of the nation are modeled on and derive their authority from the sanctified domestic, patriarchal family.

*The Wild Irish Girl* thus establishes new and crucial terms in a debate with profound and wide-ranging implications. Morgan's reimagination of social, political, and gender hierarchies engendered a dialogue whose ideological ramifications can best be understood by placing a central focus upon the representations of idealized femininity within it. A number of important critics read Morgan's heroines not as positive and powerful figures, instead seeing them as deviant. Edgeworth's Irish novels after *Rackrent* offer a prescription for the gradual assimilation of two distinct cultures through the device of the allegorical marriage; however, the two cultures assimilated in Edgeworth's novels are not the English and Gaelic Irish who are united in *The Wild Irish Girl*, but the (metropolitan, imperial) British and the Anglo-Irish, whose roots are unmistakably English. Edgeworth presents alternative examples of properly domesticated and largely voiceless Anglo-Irish heroines, and in her final Irish novel, *Ormond*, paints a picture of a Gaelic Irish antidomesticity characterized by mothers breeding their children to a life of vice and crime (a stereotype that persisted throughout much of the century and found its way into Parliamentary and Royal Commission reports of the 1830s and '40s).<sup>5</sup> There is thus a strong line of demar-

5. Edgeworth's strategy of depicting Irish moral contagion as arising from unregulated desire in *Ormond*, which Morgan refutes in *Florence McCarthy*, was later implemented in the 1830s by various social and urban reformers in arguments made before several Parliamentary and Royal Commissions, including one that led to the formation of the national police force. Ironically, the authors of these reports and witnesses before the committees made the same linkage between physical and moral disease as did Lady Morgan in *Florence McCarthy* (Edgeworth did not). However, the causes Lady Morgan ascribes them to—squalor, filth, and deprivation resulting largely from colonial policy—are not subscribed to in the reports. The authors instead, like Edgeworth had in *Ormond*, characterized Irish criminality as an effect of a moral contagion (now linked to the physical contagion the Irish were also described as carriers of), and argued that it threatened to infect the English working class, and from there the entire British society. Edgeworth and Morgan's dialogue may thus be argued to have had an influence on policies affecting the rule of Ireland and the treatment of Irish immigrants in Victorian Britain.

cation separating the projects of Owenson and Edgeworth, who “mark their political differences from one another,” in Katie Trumpener’s phrase, “precisely in the way they order and recombine the same generic repertoire.”<sup>6</sup> I shall demonstrate here how Edgeworth domesticates the heroine’s role in the marriage plot of *The Absentee* in order to reinstate a social hierarchy that also elides “Gaelic” and “Catholic” from “Irishness.”

### THE WILD IRISH GIRL: OWENSON

In *The Wild Irish Girl*, the language, religion, and traditions of the Gaelic Irish, embodied in the heroine Glorvina, wholly seduce the English adventurer Horatio. Revolutionary movements such as the Society of United Irishmen are acknowledged—but are ascribed to a misguided patriotism recuperable through the reversal of injurious colonial policies. The plot of Owenson’s novel directly addresses issues of colonial guilt and reparation. Horatio frequently expresses regret that his ancestor murdered Glorvina’s family and dispossessed them of their land during the Cromwellian wars. The resolution of the Oedipal conflict between Horatio and his father, who had been promised Glorvina in marriage, points toward a restoration of the inheritance. Beyond this restoration, the allegorical marriage suggests a transformation of the colonial settlement from one largely characterized by absenteeism, mutual ignorance, and hostility to a relationship of mutual responsibility and equal rights shared by settler and native, with the blessing of the “parent” society of the colonist. Just as important, Owenson’s two lovers also seek the blessing and assimilate the values and traditions of the parent society of the colonized or dispossessed, represented in the person of the dying Prince (Glorvina’s father). Furthermore, and crucial to Owenson’s vision, the new cultural and political dispensation is embodied in a transformation of ancien régime sexual arrangements.

Owenson’s treatment of Roman Catholicism highlights the ways in which *The Wild Irish Girl* seeks to recuperate native culture in the eyes of the colonists. Religious difference was seen as one of the primary

6. Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 688.

obstacles hindering Irish assimilation into a unified British nation. Owenson, however, portrays the Catholicism strongly associated with the Gaelic Irish not as a dark force motivating a hostile, primitive, alien people, but as a positive, if picturesque, precursor to the more enlightened Protestantism of the Established Church. Ina Ferris has argued that “all the energies [of *The Wild Irish Girl*] are drawn to the same point: the vindication of Gaelic culture as the origin of the nation, the repository of the true ‘ancient Irish’ character.”<sup>7</sup> Horatio’s hero, Horatio, is the second son of an English earl sent to Ireland by his father to study law as atonement for some unspecified sins of his youth. Horatio finds Catholicism, as he does the Irish language, landscape, and customs, seductive: “What a religion is this! . . . How seducingly it speaks to the senses . . . What a captivating, what a *picturesque* faith! Who would not become its proselyte, were it not for the stern opposition of reason—the cold suggestion of philosophy!”<sup>8</sup> Horatio here asserts the aesthetic appeal of Gaelic Irish culture, using terms that move from the erotic (Catholicism “seducingly speaks to the senses”) to a more polite, aesthetic containment (“picturesque”). Roman Catholicism, in this figuration, becomes a kind of ruin on the cultural landscape which Horatio at this point reads in a way that Katie Trumpener has characterized as “aesthetiquarian: the more ruins, the more beautiful.”<sup>9</sup> Jaded by the excesses of a prodigal youth in English society at home and on the Continent, he is at first merely anxious to relieve his *ennui* by touring the countryside. By examining the ruins more closely under the tutelage of Glorvina, however, Horatio (presumably along with the implied English reader) moves beyond a merely touristic understanding of Gaelic culture.

Prejudiced at the outset, Horatio begins to understand Catholicism as an earlier cultural stage of British Protestantism, analogous to the pagan religions and traditions that have been superseded by Christianity and modern Western culture. When his long conversation with the local priest, whose learning and charity are emphasized, is inter-

7. Ina Ferris, “Writing on the Border: The National Tale, Female Writing, and the Public Sphere” in Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright, eds., *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 96.

8. *Wild Irish Girl*, 50 (original emphasis).

9. Trumpener, “National Character, Nationalist Plots: National Tale and Historical Novel in the Age of *Waverley*, 1806–1830,” *English Literary History* 60 (1993), 701.



rupted by a peasant—whose needs the priest immediately breaks off to administer—Horatio muses: “As I rode along reflecting on the wondrous influence of superstition . . . I could not help dwelling on the strong analogy which in so many instances appears between the vulgar errors of this country and that of the ancient as well as modern Greeks.”<sup>10</sup> The novel suggests that with the assimilation of the English and Irish cultures, Roman Catholicism will be superseded peacefully, in the natural course of events. Horatio is surprised and delighted to hear Glorvina describe some of the peasants’ religious beliefs as “ignorant prejudices” and assert that Catholics adhere to their religion for social, not spiritual and doctrinal, reasons:

Of the many who are inheritors of *our* persuasion, *all* are not devoted to its errors, or influenced by its superstitions. If its professors are coalesced, it is in the sympathy of their destinies, not in the dogmas of their belief. If they are allied, it is by the tie of temporal interest, not by the bond of speculative opinion; they are united as *men*, not as sectaries; and once incorporated in the great mass of general society . . . their affections, like their privileges, will be in common . . . they will forget they had ever been the *individual* adherents of an alienated body.<sup>11</sup>

Glorvina argues here that the extension to the Gaelic Irish of the political and social privileges enjoyed by other British subjects will remove the causes of sectarian division between Irish and British. Owenson’s point that church affiliation is mainly a symbol of cultural identity seems at the very least an attempt to complicate the overheated dialogue concerning religion and transform it into something beyond partisan name-calling (although the references to ignorance and superstition clearly indicate her own religious allegiance).<sup>12</sup> Glorvina’s theology (she doesn’t convert from Roman Catholicism) is left suspended. When Horatio asks her outright whether she does not “receive

10. *Wild Irish Girl*, 130.

11. *Ibid.*, 187–88 (original emphasis).

12. Owenson’s observation that a professed allegiance to religion is often the way in which members of social groups assert cultural identity also seems ahead of its time. Priests and others working with Irish immigrants in Great Britain make similar observations in Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, a ground-breaking sociological work that first appeared as a series of articles in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849–50.

all the doctrines of [her] church as infallible,” she does not directly reply. Horatio informs the reader in a narratorial aside that “in a few words she convinced me that on the subject of religion, as upon every other, her strong mind discovered itself to be an emanation of that divine intelligence, which her pure soul worships ‘in spirit and in truth’.”<sup>13</sup> The novel evades the fact of actual religious conversion, but while it implies a gradual erosion of adherence to the Catholic faith, this is brought about by reforms in the secular realm (i.e. social, economic, and political) with which the novel is primarily concerned.

Owenson’s portrayal of Catholicism indicates that *The Wild Irish Girl* represents a dynamic Ireland at a moment of historical transition, which is further reflected in the narrative’s movement between generic registers. Katie Trumpener argues that fictional historiography underwent a generic change shortly after the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl*, from the premodern National Tale (which in her formulation Owenson’s text epitomizes) to the modern historical novel, inaugurated by Walter Scott’s *Waverley*. This seems too schematic a distinction in the case of *The Wild Irish Girl*. Trumpener argues that historical stages are represented in the National Tales as “geographical,” while in the historical novel they are represented as “temporal.” She locates the action of *The Wild Irish Girl* purely within what Mikhail Bakhtin has identified as the adventure-time chronotope, which for Trumpener situates Owenson’s work securely in the genre of the National Tale:

The national tale before *Waverley* maps developmental stages topographically, as adjacent worlds in which characters move and then choose between. . . . In contrast, the historical novel . . . finds its focus in the way one developmental stage collapses to make room for the next and cultures are transformed under the pressure of historical events.<sup>14</sup>

Trumpener’s clear-cut distinction between historical stages is, however, problematic in the case of *The Wild Irish Girl*. In the first place, in Bakhtin’s analysis, characters residing in the adventure time chronotope do not undergo any development or change—they emerge from

13. *Wild Irish Girl*, 187.

14. Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 141.

the adventure exactly the same (psychologically or morally) as they entered it. This is clearly not the case with Horatio; Glorvina's eventual acceptance of the conqueror's heir also represents development. Owenson's portrayal of Catholicism as a precursor to modern religion, analogous to Greek paganism, also suggests historic, and therefore generic, transition. In other words, the events that take place in *The Wild Irish Girl* do not take place "outside history." While Ireland is largely represented in the Romantic register in *The Wild Irish Girl*, as the sublime landscapes and heightened sensibilities of the protagonists suggest, its suspension in adventure time is clearly attributed to dynamic material and cultural causes, which are furthermore transformed with the comic resolution—Horatio and Glorvina's union, situated in historical time. Trumpener's formulation, then, must be adapted to account more accurately for Owenson's novel. To encourage a reappraisal of the colonial past, Owenson represents an Ireland suspended in adventure time in order to emphasize the effects of that past, and includes copious footnotes and anecdotal historical evidence in the work to document the presumed causes. She thus argues in *The Wild Irish Girl* that the stasis and stagnation pervading Irish economic, political, and social life are produced by an alienating and repressive colonial policy that can and should be replaced by an equal and inclusive union. Horatio and Glorvina's union represents a moral and psychological breakthrough for each partner, particularly Horatio, whose development continues throughout the novel in historical time. Owenson implies that Ireland will enter a new developmental stage at the commencement of such a union.

But if indeed *The Wild Irish Girl* points to the eventual predominance of Anglicized beliefs and customs, is Owenson, like Edgeworth, engaging in a project of Anglo-Irish cultural hegemony? Liz Bellamy asserts that "[*The Wild Irish Girl*']s unproblematic union of Ireland with England provided an allegorical celebration of political union while it suppressed the hegemonic implications of the latter act."<sup>15</sup> This is true to a certain extent, but while the allegorical marriage is pointed to in *The Wild Irish Girl*, it never actually takes place—in other words, union

15. Liz Bellamy, "Regionalism and Nationalism: Maria Edgeworth, Walter Scott, and the Definition of Britishness," in K.D.M. Snell, ed., *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63.

is suggested, but not represented. Clearly, some very specific transformations must precede any “true” union.

Owenson’s idealized transformation extends to, indeed hinges upon, the realm of gender relations. The significance of this fact has not received adequate recognition from modern feminist literary historians (although it was perceived by some contemporary readers such as Croker and, as will be seen below, Edgeworth). Perhaps because Owenson’s heroines have long been recognized as thinly veiled embodiments of herself, they have sometimes been dismissed as arguing not for the empowerment of women, but for the aggrandizement of Sydney Owenson.<sup>16</sup> However, these characters are not merely self-serving projections of an idealized Lady Morgan. The heroines of Owenson’s Irish novels all play a crucial role in the expression of her social and political vision (and in *Florence McCarthy*, Morgan’s response to Edgeworth’s *Ormond*, the heroine exerts more authority than the male hero). Through Glorvina, *The Wild Irish Girl* argues for increased equality both between Britain and Ireland and between women and men.

In effect, the novel offers a displaced cultural solution in its transformed gender relations. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the allegorical Glorvina’s character is her agency. Her profound learning argues for a much more equal partnership than those typical of contemporary marriages, in fiction or in real life (although Owenson’s own marriage a few years later to Sir Charles Morgan reflected the ideals she expressed in her fiction). Far from being subservient to Horatio, Glorvina schools him in Irish language, culture, botany, and history, while he teaches her painting. Her imparting of this great learning and her active role in administering her aging father’s estates help seduce Horatio. As Joseph Lew points out, “scenes of language learning and seduction assume prominent positions in the plot and are often intertwined.”<sup>17</sup> Horatio, the English adventurer, has been traveling in “Con-

16. Terry Eagleton sums up the response: “[Owenson’s] exuberant self-fashioning as the wild Irish girl, with its excess and extravagant narcissism . . . the critics . . . view as grotesquely pretentious.” But Eagleton does not acknowledge any further importance to this expanded imagining of female roles than it serving as “a highly calculated critique of a certain species of male realism and rationality.” See Eagleton, “Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel,” in Wolfgang Zack and Henry Kosok, eds., *Literary Inter-relations: Ireland, Egypt and the Far East* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987), 140.

17. Joseph W. Lew, “Sydney Owenson and the Fate of Empire,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 39 (1990), 45.

naught, which [Horatio] is told is the classic ground of Ireland.”<sup>18</sup> The sublime landscape, and even more the sympathetic, intelligent, and hitherto misrepresented people of Ireland (as he concludes) begin to seduce the reluctant visitor. As he wishes to prolong his stay, he adopts a fictitious identity, not however for the purpose of indulging passively in an idyll, but for what he sees as tending to the “mutual advantage” of himself and the natives of the castle and surrounding area:

Already deep in adventure, a thousand seducing reasons were suggested by my newly awakened heart, to go on with the romance, and to secure for my future residence in the castle, that interest, which, if known to be the son of Lord M——, I must have eventually forfeited . . . The imposition was at least innocent, and might tend to future and mutual advantage, and after the ideal assumption of a thousand fictitious characters, I at last fixed on that of . . . [the] self-nominated *Henry Mortimer*.<sup>19</sup>

The interest Horatio would forfeit is not Glorvina’s, but that of her father, who implacably hates the conquering English who dispossessed his family. When Horatio asserts that the continued strengthening of affection and interest between himself, the legal holder of the property, and the Prince, who considers himself (as do most of the local people) the legitimate heir to it, will be mutually beneficial, he points to the improvements that must come from reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> Some of these anticipated benefits, suggested throughout the text and in footnotes, include a relaxing of the Penal Laws; restrictive colonial policies that impede Gaelic Irish learning and participation in politics, agriculture, and commerce; as well as a reduction of the continued hostility between English and Irish. In other words, Horatio contemplates an active and positive engagement with the local populace. He renounces the role intended for him, that of absentee landlord like his father, and imagines a close relationship with Ireland and the Irish in the manner

18. *Wild Irish Girl*, 17.

19. *Ibid.* (original emphasis).

20. Robert Tracy argues (in “Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan”) that the novels of both Owenson and Edgeworth didactically urged the establishment of long-lasting social order in Ireland through the ruling classes’ securing the consent of the Irish people in addition to the protection of British law. See Tracy, “Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan: Legality versus Legitimacy,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 40:1 (June 1985), 1–22.

of the Prince and his Milesian ancestors: “I raised my eyes to the Castle of Inismore and sighed, and almost wished that I had been born the Lord of these beautiful ruins . . . the adored Chieftain of these affectionate and natural people.”<sup>21</sup> Horatio’s “almost wished” vision becomes his ultimately achieved reality over the course of the novel, as Glorvina’s intellectual and spiritual charms seduce Horatio and spur him into active self-improvement.

Horatio’s seduction and ultimate attainment of a selfhood that makes him worthy to take the place of the Prince in the affections of Glorvina and the Irish people represent a significant break from literary tradition on Owenson’s part. In traditional representations, from the Dido episode in *The Aeneid* to the Wales of *Henry IV Part 1*, a colonial adventurer’s seduction characteristically has clearly negative effects. Against these prototypes, Owenson portrays the attraction of her hero (who, echoing Shakespeare’s characters from the *Henriad*, assumes the name Henry Mortimer) as a process that leads to his intellectual and moral growth. Thus *The Wild Irish Girl* foregrounds a topos long familiar in Western literature that thematizes the overturning of normative gender roles, but reverses the connotations usually attached to it.<sup>22</sup> Patricia Parker describes the destructive valence associated with the overturning of normative gender roles:

The sense of . . . sexual contest (between Verdant and the Enchantress) . . . evokes a recall not only of Mars and Venus but of a whole series of subject males and dominating female figures, from Hercules and Omphale to Samson reclining in the lap of that Delilah who deprives him of his strength.<sup>23</sup>

The implications of this topos in *The Wild Irish Girl* become clear when Owenson’s novel is examined in relation to the prototypes. In *The Aeneid*, for example, the gods intervene and Aeneas must leave

21. *Wild Irish Girl*, 52. *The Wild Irish Girl* frequently mentions that the Prince, like many Gaelic Irish nobles, also traced his ancestry to conquerors—the sons of Mileseus, who according to legend arrived in Ireland from Spain in the 11th century.

22. Stephen Greenblatt has demonstrated the colonial significance of this trope in his discussion of the Bower of Bliss episode in Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*. See Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

23. Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987), 57.

Dido because she is diverting him from his colonial mission, while in *1 Henry IV* Mortimer is seduced by the Celtic Glendower's daughter and thus fails to come to the aid of Hotspur. The *Henriad* is of particular interest here, not least in light of the subsequent influence of Owenson's use of it. Scott canonically invoked the *Henry IV* plays as a model for historical fiction, citing *2 Henry IV* on the title page of *Waverley*. Moreover, Scott took from Shakespeare the notion that civil war was the event through which history and the nation become visible. He did this some dozen years after Owenson's national tale utilized the *Henriad* to reformulate the types of partnerships which characterized her imagined community under the union. Scott acknowledged his debt to Maria Edgeworth in the "Postscript, which should have been a Preface" to *Waverley*, and many critics have commented on Edgeworth's influence on Scott since. Connections between Owenson and Scott, on the other hand, have rarely been made. However, Ina Ferris takes note of some important parallels: "Scott . . . may playfully recall Morgan's Glorvina in the introductory chapter of *Waverley* . . . but his own harp-playing Flora and the journey structure of the novel have strong affinities with Morgan's popular tale."<sup>24</sup> Still another point of contact between *Waverley* and *The Wild Irish Girl* are the ways in which both novels make use of the *Henriad*. The significance of Owenson's invocation of Shakespeare's second history tetralogy is great not only for its probable influence on Scott—as well as writers such as Edgeworth and Trollope. Recognition of just how she reworks its gender themes provides a key insight into her cultural project.

A short scene in *1 Henry IV* and the comic ending of *Henry V* together provide a model of the complete reversal of normative hierarchies and their subsequent reinscription. These diametrically opposed representations serve as a thematic frame upon which the ideology of the *Henriad* rests. In the first of these episodes, the rebel leader Mortimer provides a contrast to Prince Hal, "the mirror for all Christian kings," by allowing himself to be seduced in his Welsh "bower" by the daughter of Owen Glendower, a seduction that appears to rely on his failure to speak her language. In the bower with his Welsh wife,

24. Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 123.

Mortimer fumes impotently: "This is the deadly spite that angers me— / My wife can speak no English, and I no Welsh."<sup>25</sup> (191–92). He is still seduced, however, and in the midst of preparations for war, Mortimer allows his wife (through her father's translation) to persuade him to cast aside all duty:

*Glendower:*

She bids you on the wanton rushes lay you down . . .  
and she will sing the song that pleaseth you  
And on your eyelids crown the god of sleep,  
Charming your blood with pleasing heaviness,  
Making such difference 'twixt wake and sleep  
As is the difference betwixt day and night

*Mortimer:*

With all my heart I'll sit and hear her sing.<sup>26</sup>

The imagery in Glendower's speech thematizes the leveling of differences in this scene; it records the blurring of the boundaries between wake and sleep produced by the Welsh woman's song, and the erasure of the difference between night and day in the hour of the dawn. This imagery also reinforces the erasure of the gender hierarchy upon which the social order is based—that which Hal forcefully reinscribes in the scene of his wooing. In the comic ending of *Henry V*, it will be remembered, Hal masters his wife by means of "Englishing" her—that is, imposing his language on his victim of conquest. Henry completes his cultural conquest by forcing Kate to violate the customs of France and kiss him, thus repeating a familiar English pattern of extirpating the language and customs of conquered peoples.<sup>27</sup> It is

25. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part I* (New York: Signet, 1986), 3.1.191–92.

26. *Ibid.*, 213, 215–19, 222.

27. For a useful discussion of the intersection of language, gender and cultural conquest in this scene, see Michael Neill, "Broken English and Broken Irish: Nation, Language, and the Optic Power in Shakespeare's Histories," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45:1 (Spring 1994), 20–49. Henry's limited ability to speak French is even foregrounded in the last act of *Henry V*, a detail which suggests its unimportance to a king who boasts that he is "so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language" (1 *Henry IV*, 2.4.17–19).



clear, however, that while Shakespeare suggests linguistic community or commonalty in this scene and a leveling of differences, the power relationship remains vertical and hierarchical, with England and English on top.

Parallels between Owenson's hero and Shakespeare's Mortimer are evident in the manner in which Horatio meets Glorvina. As he gazes on the ruins of the Castle of Inismore, the last remaining portion of Glorvina's patrimony that has not been appropriated by Horatio's ancestor, Horatio is seduced by the singing of the harp-playing daughter of the Celtic chief with the "beautiful voice."<sup>28</sup> In Owenson's re-imagining of the scene, however, he climbs the wall of the castle in order to seek out a relationship that will challenge him on many levels throughout the novel: "Directed by the witching strain . . . I climbed, with some difficulty, the ruins of a parapet wall . . . [which gave] me, when I stood on it, a perfect view of the interior of the apartment."<sup>29</sup> Although Glorvina is here the object of his gaze, Horatio falls from his vantage point on the parapet and requires Glorvina's medical care to restore him to health in a symbolic leveling of hierarchies. Owenson thus argues a middle way between Shakespeare's Mortimer and Hal—that is, between capitulating, or "going native" (and with it completely renouncing dutiful nation-building), and conquest and subjection. Glorvina becomes Horatio's partner and equal, not his colonial subject.

Like the great learning that makes her so effective in the public sphere and so thoroughly seduces Horatio, Glorvina's sympathy and nurturing, two qualities that the novel foregrounds, have been cultivated not through the development of her piety and domesticity, but by the development of her intellect. Father John, who has been largely responsible for her upbringing, explains the philosophical rationale behind such an education:

I only threw within [Glorvina's] power of acquisition, that which could tend to render her a rational, and consequently a benevolent being; for I have always conceived an informed, intelligent, and enlightened mind, to be the best security for a good heart; although the many who mistake talent for intellect, and unfortunately too often find the former united to

28. The literal translation of "Glorvina" from the Irish.

29. *Wild Irish Girl*, 52.

vice, are led to suppose that the heart loses in goodness what the mind acquires in strength.<sup>30</sup>

This expression of educational philosophy, obviously endorsed by the novel, aligns Owenson with the radical views of Mary Wollstonecraft, who likewise argued that the neglect of girls' intellectual development had negative consequences for their moral development. Many conduct books and novels, including those of Maria Edgeworth, suggested that the development of piety and domesticity was the best means of ensuring female virtue. Other books on girls' education stressed the attainment of "accomplishments" that were chiefly designed to attract a husband. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that the failure to develop intellectual strength in girls weakens women's morality: "[T]he minds of women are enfeebled . . . [and] books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same [negative] tendency as more frivolous productions . . . Weak, artificial beings . . . undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society."<sup>31</sup>

Glorvina has been thoroughly educated in what were at the time considered masculine studies: the natural sciences (including botany, a subject in which she impressively lectures Horatio, and the practice of medicine), history, philosophy, and classical languages. The result is a spiritual and moral strength clearly superior to anything Horatio has yet encountered. Her elevated intellect and spirit are repeatedly asserted to be the qualities that seduced him. At the same time the novel recognizes that the resulting new equality for women will be unsettling, but nevertheless may still be embraced by people with traditional attitudes. A peasant informs Horatio that even the local people who are devoted to Glorvina fear her: "[E]very mother's soul of us love her better nor the Prince [her father]; aye, by my conscience, and fear her too; for well may they fear her, on the score of her great learning."<sup>32</sup> Glorvina, unlike many traditional "heroines," is not merely passed as a possession from one male to the next. She clearly shares power in the rule of her people, first with her father, and on her marriage with Hor-

30. Ibid., 79.

31. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 1992), 80–81.

32. *Wild Irish Girl*, 41.

atio. The social and cultural implications of Owenson's reconfigured gender partnership seem worthy of more recognition than modern critics have allowed.

#### THE MILD IRISH GIRL: MARIA EDGEWORTH

As many commentators have noted, the relationship between Horatio and Glorvina, which develops into love and a true union of equal partners, allegorizes the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland. The metaphorical implications of the union of these two characters, in which the female character is so expansively conceptualized, suggests a far more complex and interdependent relationship than the kind envisioned in the works of a more influential writer of Irish national tales—Maria Edgeworth.<sup>33</sup> The influence of *The Wild Irish Girl* on Edgeworth's subsequent Irish novels is palpable. But for Edgeworth, Owenson's re-imagining of traditional gender relationships represents an unwanted radical overturning of the social order. Furthermore, the Gaelic culture and tradition embodied by Glorvina and celebrated in *The Wild Irish Girl* are too suffused with dangerous and radical content, much of which directly invokes the violent (and ongoing) conflicts between the two cultures. Edgeworth therefore seeks to reclaim in subsequent novels the public and the political issues Owenson had so "deftly taken from her and placed in their colonial context,"<sup>34</sup> and to translate them once again into private and domestic equivalents, there to tame them.

In stark contrast to Owenson's Glorvina, Edgeworth's Irish heroines are divested of almost all agency beyond that of reproducing the patriarchal social order. This accords well with other influential, conservative constructions of Anglo-Irish cultural identity. In undoubtedly the most famous example, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke articulates a social order modeled on and rooted in the domesticity of the patriarchal family, which he invests with an inviolable sanctity:

33. Edgeworth was certainly more influential with contemporary critics, including Scott, Jeffrey, Croker, et al. Modern commentators have almost unanimously agreed with only minor qualifications (for one such example, see Ina Ferris noted above).

34. Lew, "Sydney Owenson and the Fate of Empire," 41.

We have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood, binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties, adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections, keeping inseparable and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities our state, our hearths, our sepulchers, and our altars.<sup>35</sup>

In an important article Diedre Lynch has argued that Burke's "matrocentric[ally] inflect[ed] statecraft . . . aimed to homogenize the public and private meanings carried in the words 'home' and 'domestic' . . . and to make home life underwrite the authority of administrative institutions." Lynch asserts that women writers of the early nineteenth century also "[e]ngaged in just such rewritings (re-inscriptions of relations), produc[ing] plots that disarticulated 'mother' and 'country'."<sup>36</sup> Here she echoes Gary Kelly's argument that "throughout anti-Jacobin fiction there is a tendency not only to reduce large political and public issues to their everyday, domestic, commonplace consequences in individual domestic experience (a tendency found in Burke's *Reflections* and fully developed in the Romantic historical novels), but also to actually translate the political and public issues into private and domestic equivalents."<sup>37</sup>

The gender plot of *The Absentee* is an example of such rewriting and translation. Furthermore, Edgeworth exhibits a significant preoccupation with what Lynch describes as the Burkean themes of "migrant maternity, disinheritance, and sexual improprieties."<sup>38</sup> In order to validate Anglo-Irish cultural and political hegemony, she appropriates and rewrites a series of familiar genres, including that of the comically structured Owensonian national tale and the traditional Irish *aisling*. The *aisling* is an eighteenth-century poetic genre, derived from earlier forms, that depicts Ireland as a mythologized female, and in which cultural and Jacobin political objectives often interact.<sup>39</sup> Grace Nugent,

35. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 30.

36. Diedre Lynch, "Nationalizing Women and Domesticating Fiction: Edmund Burke and the Genres of Englishness," *Wordsworth Circle* 25 (Winter 1994), 45-46.

37. Gary Kelly, "Jane Austen and the English Novelists of the 1790s," in *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 289.

38. Lynch, "Nationalizing Women," 46.

39. The representation of Ireland as a woman was derived from popular folk traditions, and continued in other genres in addition to the *aisling*. The most famous

heroine of *The Absentee*, takes her name from the subject of an *aisling* written by the bard Carolan.<sup>40</sup> Owenson's heroine Glorvina sings a translation of "Gracey Nugent" in *The Wild Irish Girl*; significantly, Edgeworth merely alludes to Carolan's song and thus attempts to defuse its radicalism. Meanwhile, she seeks to appropriate the metaphorical value of the heroine of "Gracey Nugent," an *aisling* which "shares with others of its genre remnants of older Gaelic beliefs and social structures to which the image of a woman who embodied the land and whose espousal conferred sovereignty was essential."<sup>41</sup>

Edgeworth empties out not only any radicalism from the figure of Grace Nugent, but Irishness itself.<sup>42</sup> As W. J. McCormack and Kim Walker point out in their introduction to Edgeworth's novel, Grace's name strongly associates her with Irishness to the initiated reader: "She is one of an attainted family, celebrated in the folk tradition of a displaced and depressed nobility. Her name is inscribed in popular song, the theme of which she reenacts in the novel." They go on to argue that "this is a Union which seeks to suggest a transcending of differences political, aesthetic, and ontological."<sup>43</sup> However, it might be more accurate to say that the novel appropriates the *aisling's* theme, and that the union it depicts elides, rather than transcends, the differences McCormack and Walker detail in their essay.

instance is perhaps Swift's *The Story of an Injured Lady*, which depicts Ireland as a woman who is cruelly thrown over by her lover (England) for another woman (Scotland), and was written around the time of the 1707 Union of Scotland and England (but not published until 1746). Vestiges of the tradition can be traced throughout the nineteenth century, as in *Punch* cartoon representations of a suffering Hibernia being rescued by Britannia from the horrors of the famine, for instance. For a definitive study of iconographic representations of Ireland, see L.P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996). This tradition might profitably be compared with that of the "Bower of Bliss."

40. For a brief but useful discussion of the *aisling* tradition, see C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 16-25. An appendix to the Oxford's World Classics edition of *The Absentee* includes a discussion of the appearance of the *aisling* "Grace Nugent" in both *The Wild Irish Girl* and *The Absentee*, and also alludes to the Jacobin undertones of the piece.

41. C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation*, 20.

42. As Robert Tracy notes in "Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan," Grace's parents are actually English (Tracy, 13).

43. W.J. McCormack and Kim Walker, "Introduction," in Maria Edgeworth, *The Absentee*, ed. W.J. McCormack and Kim Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiv. Hereafter cited as *The Absentee*.

In a long coda to the novel, the hero establishes the legitimacy of Grace's uncertain origins, because, as the narrator informs us, the hero "Lord Colambre had the greatest dread of marrying any woman whose mother had conducted herself ill."<sup>44</sup> In tracing Grace's ancestry, Colambre discovers that her father, who was killed in the service of the Austrian army, was an Englishman named Reynolds. Grace's mother also was English. The mother's maiden name, St. Omar, suggests the name St. Omer, site of the English Jesuit college in France where, because of the Penal Laws, Irish priests were trained before the establishment of Maynooth College in 1795. Grace's family then, though English, has submerged associations with France, Jacobite counterrevolution, and Roman Catholicism. But these connections are only hinted at. Edgeworth displaces these public and social concerns onto the private (reputed) sexual improprieties of Grace's mother, which the establishment of Grace's legitimacy puts to rest. Grace's grandfather has disinherited his granddaughter because he is unaware that his son had legally married Grace's mother. The novel repeatedly insists that only a girl raised by a mother who inculcates a proper sense of gender and social duties can be considered marriageable, as when Count O'Halloran warns Colambre that "[i]n marrying, a man does not, to be sure, marry his wife's mother; and yet a prudent man, when he begins to think of the daughter, would look sharp at the mother; ay, and back to the grandmother too, and along the whole line of female ancestry."<sup>45</sup> Colambre enthusiastically concurs. Grace's attractiveness to the hero, in sharp contrast to Glorvina's, is firmly located not in her accomplishments or learning or even in her beauty, but in her purity and domesticity, qualities purportedly ensured by her maternal lineage.

The long digression establishing Grace's parentage—fully a fifth of the novel is devoted to it—culminates with an avowal of the mother's virtue:

When she was told of the . . . suspicions, the disgrace, to which her mother had been subjected for so many years . . . that mother . . . who had, with such care, instilled into the mind of her daughter the principles of virtue and religion; that mother whom Grace had always seen the

44. *The Absentee*, 112.

45. *Ibid.*, 222.

example of every virtue she taught . . . Grace could only express . . . astonishment, pathos, indignation.<sup>46</sup>

But her indignation quickly turns to an acceptance of Colambre's suspicion as just: "Grace sighed, and acknowledged that, in prudence, [her presumed illegitimacy] ought to have been an *invincible* obstacle [to his marrying her]—she admired the firmness of his decision, the honor with which he had acted towards her."<sup>47</sup>

Marilyn Butler has argued that the Grace plot links *The Absentee* with a more explicitly didactic work Edgeworth wrote with her father, *Professional Education* (1809). One of the main themes in *Professional Education* is that early education is an extremely powerful factor in determining character. According to Butler, the connection between the main plot of *The Absentee* (which chronicles the corrupting influence the desertion of the gentry has on the peasantry) and the Grace plot is only comprehensible in this context:

[Colambre] knows that as a small child Grace was brought up by her mother. If it is true that this mother was unchaste, the dominant influence on Grace's early education was a corrupt one. Colambre's refusal to overlook this fact is another attempt by Maria to prove that environment and early education determine character.<sup>48</sup>

Butler's efforts to connect the drawn-out narrative concerning Grace's marriageability to Edgeworth's preoccupation with environment and education are persuasive. Even more significant, however, is the fact that the inculcation of virtue is the only aspect of Grace's education touched upon in *The Absentee*. The philosophical rationale behind Grace's education thus stands in sharp contrast to that evidenced in *The Wild Irish Girl*. Glorvina offers long disquisitions on philology, botany, medicine, history, etc., but Grace is an intellectual cipher, a trait she shares with the heroines of Edgeworth's other Irish novels.

In her influential *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong "links the history of British fiction to the empowering of the middle

46. Ibid., 256.

47. Ibid., 257 (original emphasis).

48. Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 332–33.

classes in England through the dissemination of a new female ideal,”<sup>49</sup> that is, an idealized virtue and domesticity. The Grace plot in *The Absentee* offers a classic illustration of Armstrong’s argument, with one important difference: the class empowered is an exclusionary Anglo-Irish gentry. Edgeworth’s fears of socio-sexual impropriety are furthermore resolved by what Mary Jean Corbett calls “the replotting of Irish and Anglo-Irish families on an English ideal.”<sup>50</sup> Corbett traces this ideal to “Burke’s primary metaphors for political society [which are] heavily dependent on the aristocratic idiom of the landed estate and patrilineal succession.”<sup>51</sup> In such a scheme adulterous women are always potentially subversive of the social, political, and imperial order, because among other things men could never be absolutely certain of the paternity of a woman’s child. Stated in positive terms, women “act as the unacknowledged ground for familial, economic, and political legitimacy.”<sup>52</sup> But as Ronald Paulson points out in referring to the famous scene in Marie Antoinette’s boudoir in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke also opposes “a vigorous (‘active’), unprincipled, rootless masculine sexuality, unleashed and irrepressible, against a gentle aristocratic family, patriarchal and based upon bonds of love.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, both male and female sexuality must be policed by a responsible masculine hegemony that regulates domesticity. Conversely, if this authority and example do not emanate from the top ranks of society, corruption and licentiousness of the sort traditionally associated with a diseased aristocracy will infect the entire social body. In *Reflections*, Burke ascribes political and social chaos and the laxity of French morals to the overthrow of the paternal authority that polices both male and female desire: “France, when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the license of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners . . . and has extended through all ranks of life . . . all the

49. Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

50. Mary Jean Corbett, “Public Affections and Familial Politics: Burke, Edgeworth, and the ‘Common Naturalization’ of Great Britain,” *English Literary History* 61 (1994), 878.

51. *Ibid.*, 878.

52. *Ibid.*, 880.

53. Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 64.



unhappy corruptions that were usually the disease of wealth and power.”<sup>54</sup> The licentiousness that Burke would regulate includes both uncontained female sexual excess and unprincipled, rootless masculine ambition, avarice, and sexuality.

Colambre’s renunciation of his own father’s absenteeism and prodigality as well as Grace’s carefully vetted marriageability thus suit them in Edgeworth’s Burkean vision to rule over a docile and grateful Gaelic peasantry, who along with the rest of Gaelic Ireland, in Edgeworth’s formulation represent the children of union, not equal partners in it. The new society is still rigidly compartmentalized, and all types of economic, social, and political opportunities are inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of Ireland’s population, most of whom are Catholics. As such they are barred by custom, law, and circumstance from obtaining the type of domesticating education Grace received or from gaining entrée into the social milieu in which the property owners of Colambre’s class belong. Edgeworth, in contrast to Owenson, does not see fit to address these inequities. Nor do any other groups outside the Ascendancy merit consideration as participating as useful, productive, or even legitimate segments of society in Edgeworth’s post-union social body. The Gaelic Irish members of the newly emergent commercial class depicted in *The Absentee*, such as Mrs. Rafferty, are depicted as vulgar and grasping and beneath Colambre’s (and Edgeworth’s) contempt.<sup>55</sup>

Edgeworth’s restricted social norms are also evidenced by the gender ideals elaborated by other characters in *The Absentee*, and these patterns provide a striking contrast to the inclusive and expansive roles imagined in *The Wild Irish Girl*. Female agency in *The Absentee* is portrayed as unnatural and perverted. Lady Dashfort, with her oft-referred-to “masculine boldness,” characterizes the type of sexually and socially transgressing mother Colambre fears Grace had. And Lady Dashfort’s daughter Isabella restores the topos of the enchantress to disrepute. Colambre, seemingly just on the point of being seduced (emotionally) by Isabella, is horrified to overhear her avow that “to

54. Burke, 33.

55. This pattern is consistent throughout Edgeworth’s Irish novels, and moreover the hated class of middlemen, a distinct stratum of Anglo-Irish society from that occupied by Colambre and Grace, invariably in Edgeworth’s fiction turn out to be recanting Gaelic Catholics, from Jason Quirk in *Castle Rackrent* to Ulick O’Shane in *Ormond*.

purchase the pleasure of making [a rival] feel the pangs of jealousy for one hour, look, I would this moment lay down this finger and let it be cut off.”<sup>56</sup> The lesson for Colambre is that Isabella’s seductiveness is monstrous. The possibility of the seductiveness of a Gaelic Irishwoman (or Gaelic Ireland in any form) is never entertained in the novel.

But of course Colambre does not allow himself to be seduced by either Isabella or Grace. Rather, he makes a calculated decision, first to renounce the apparently unsuitable Grace, then to possess her, “happy in the hope of winning the whole heart of the woman he loved, and whose esteem, he knew, he possessed and deserved; happy in developing every day, every hour, fresh charms in his destined bride.”<sup>57</sup> Her charms, or “accomplishments” of the type satirized by Austen and denounced by Wolstonecraft, will be “developed” in her by Colambre—it is his agency, not hers. Nor is Grace responsible, beyond reproducing suitably domesticated and socially regulated Anglo-Irish male heirs, for accomplishing any of the serious masculine work of nation-building. Her contribution will be her charms, and presumably keeping herself pure so as not to taint his progeny. Just as the criticism of Croker equates the political and social vision Owenson expresses with socio-sexual impropriety, Edgeworth’s Irish novels also seek to contain forces that might bring real change to the society in which she lives. This impulse remained dominant among many British (and Irish) unionists throughout the long nineteenth century.

### INFLUENCE OF THE EDGEWORTH–OWENSON DIALOGUE

The terms of the dialogue engendered by *The Wild Irish Girl* had a significant impact on later and influential statements on union by various British commentators, including two of the most popular and highly regarded novelists of the nineteenth century, Thackeray and Trollope. One of the more important themes addressed in later stages of the dialogue between Morgan and Edgeworth was the conceptualization of antidomesticity as a type of moral contagion, and the characterization of Gaelic Irishness (by Edgeworth) as a medium by which it is engendered and spread. In her final “Irish” novel, *Ormond* (1816), Edge-

56. *The Absentee*, 126.

57. *Ibid.*, 260.

worth, following Burke, portrays this moral contagion as the product of the authority and example of a diseased gentry class (significantly embodied in her fiction by a Gaelic Irishman who repudiates Catholicism for the sake of material gain). Aside from this rather significant departure, however, Edgeworth revisits in *Ormond* some territory familiar from her previous Irish novels. Her hero, Harry Ormond, after some youthful indiscretions that are characterized as largely a product of his faulty education at the hands of the Gaelic Irish “King” Corny O’Shane (and the undisciplined reading of novels, including *Tom Jones*), conforms to a disciplined male sexuality as a result of his social and political education under the guidance of the Anglo-Irish Annalys. His education continues the long series of events in the novel that portray domesticity as the underpinning of the social order. *Ormond* imagines an autonomous Ireland within the larger British social body ruled by a benevolently paternalistic Anglo-Irish Ascendancy that is in “harmonious alignment” with the mostly Catholic, mostly peasant (and thoroughly infantilized) Gaelic majority. Anne Mellor has persuasively demonstrated that in Edgeworth’s novels the vision of a larger social reconciliation is “troped . . . as the marriage of the Anglo-Irish [hero] with the Irish [heroine] . . . [and] the happy bourgeois family becomes the model for colonizer-colonized relationships.”<sup>58</sup> Mellor is correct with regard to the domestic ideal evident here, but as we have previously demonstrated in case of the Anglo-Irish Grace Nugent, the colonized Gaelic Irish are not figured even as the (unequal) partners of the union. As in *The Absentee*, the comic resolution of *Ormond* is a marriage between two members of the Ascendancy, with the Gaelic Irish figured as their dependants. This quasi parent-child relationship, of unmistakable significance by its repetition in Edgeworth’s final two Irish novels, betrays the fundamental disparity of power in her imagined union.

In direct response to this novel, Lady Morgan addresses the motif of moral contagion in *Florence McCarthy* (1817) and refutes it by attributing Ireland’s social woes, as well as the spread of contagious physical disease, to the material conditions produced by British colonial policy. (She also creates a thinly disguised character based on Croker himself who represents the class of corrupt official middlemen who often

58. Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 80.

manipulate the owners for their own ends—which are to wield the real political and economic power to their own material benefit and the further suffering of the Irish peasantry.) Her heroine in this novel is even more powerful than Glorvina, actively administering her own estates and exerting a moral and political influence over the peasantry which the hero, a nobleman with both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish roots, cannot match. This novel argues much more forcefully for an Irish autonomy within the union of the type for which Edgeworth's novels are famous, but insists on a reappraisal of the colonial past, and a reordering of political, social, and gender relationships in the future—all with the full inclusion of the Gaelic Irish, a point sorely absent from Edgeworth's vision.

Edgeworth's theme of moral contagion is picked up in the emerging discourses of social science, where authorities such as James Kay (later Sir James Kay Shuttleworth) and George Cornewall Lewis directly and persistently equate Irish antidomesticity with physical and moral contagion. In the domains of political and social reform, these commentators utilize the motif of antidomestic Irish mothers breeding their children to a life of crime to argue—in the reports of various government commissions of the 1830s charged with effecting social and urban reform—for either the quarantining or expulsion of Irish immigrants from Britain's rapidly industrializing cities. The reports of these committees suggest that Irish antidomesticity threatens to infect the English working classes, with whom Irish immigrants are in close contact in their poor urban neighborhoods, and by extension the rest of British society, in ever-widening circles.

The consistency with which these themes appear in other works of nineteenth-century nonfiction, particularly the literary journals of the period and articles in the popular press, is quite remarkable. It is not that these depictions remain static; they shifted with the needs of contemporary political and social contexts. This can be seen in Croker's evolving criticism of Morgan, where he develops a characterization of Morgan as licentious and Jacobin (the latter being a term with a strong emotional charge in the political context of that time and used by Croker to dismiss her nuanced political positions wholesale). Despite its inaccuracy in reference to Morgan's politics, the term "Jacobin" is still applied to her even by sympathetic modern critics, a fact which belies a failure to carefully consider the exact nature of her arguments and

fully appreciate why they were regarded as so dangerous by Croker, and were dialogized throughout much of the century in constructions of British cultural nationalism.

Morgan's arguments were dialogized in works by William Makepeace Thackeray, for example, where the figure of the Irish woman again plays a crucial role. Thackeray's journalism often concerned itself with Irish politics and literature, and one of his chief complaints against romance recalls Croker's objection to Lady Morgan's "dangerous" sentiments. He charged that the radical themes often expressed in romance cannot be contained by the gesture toward social harmony in the comic ending. For Thackeray, a contagious antidomesticity is a product of social class, but it becomes apparent that Irishness is a marker of the class that produces it. Early in his career he attributed the unassimilability of the Irish to their premodernity, and asserted in reviews and in his fiction that this cultural primitivism was a product of British colonial policy. His views were transformed over time, however, in large part owing to developments in Irish republicanism which he characterized as at best intransigence. In his fiction, the novels *Barry Lyndon* (1843) and *Pendennis* (1848) notably engage the national tale tradition and its representations of gender ideals in constructing a normative, and increasingly anti-unionist, British cultural nationalism. The hero of *Barry Lyndon* is depicted as unassimilable into British metropolitan society essentially because he is premodern, a fact which Thackeray attributes in this novel and in his *Irish Sketch Book* (1842) to the social structure resulting from British colonial policy that has kept Ireland in a state resembling that of premodern European nations. But also present in this novel is a thoroughgoing Irish antidomesticity: Barry acquires his aversion to working for a living from his mother, who also inculcates his snobbish, social-climbing manners. In *Pendennis*, Thackeray represents Irish inadmissability to the now dominant British middle class as a product of ethnicity: the Irish "weren't made" to inhabit the same sphere as that to which his hero, Pen, belongs. Thackeray constructs in *Pendennis* an ideal in the English hero's mother against which the model of Mrs. Barry may be measured, and in the marriage plot portrays an antidomestic Irish woman against which the English heroine Pen finally marries irre-

sistibly draws comparison. The chief attribute of this heroine, like those of Edgeworth, is her domesticity and purity, inculcated under the tutelage of Helen Pendennis, Pen's mother. Helen's objections to the sexually deviant and social-climbing Irishwoman Emily Costigan also echo Croker's disapproval of Lady Morgan's own marriage, since older women from the lower social classes seeking unsuitable marriages are potentially disruptive of the social order.

In the Irish novels of Anthony Trollope we can see an increased pessimism regarding the possibilities of Irish assimilation into the British nation. In contrast to Thackeray, however, Trollope attributes much of the responsibility for the deteriorating prospects of a successful union to the British. He too reprises the formal and ideological strategies of Morgan's national tale, but rewrites the comic resolution in order to condemn British colonial policy. The marriage plot becomes a seduction plot in these works. In his first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* (1847), Trollope characterizes the problems of assimilation he represents as remediable. *An Eye for an Eye* (1879), on the other hand, represents a full-circle return to the pessimism and irony of *Castle Rackrent*. The death of the hero represents the end of the corrupt colonial enterprise. But the confinement of Mrs. O'Hara, an embodiment of Irish nationalism, in "a private asylum in the West of England" represents the insuperable alienation and forceful suppression of a large segment of the Irish population, a circumstance Trollope denied in *The Macdermots*. Thus the marriage plot structure utilized by the liberal unionist Lady Morgan to express great hope for a future in which Britain and Ireland are united provides the liberal unionist Trollope a fitting means by which to record the death of those hopes: "Indeed, there is no one left . . . by whom such a hope could be cherished."<sup>59</sup>

59. Anthony Trollope, *An Eye for an Eye* (London: Penguin, 1993), 1.