The Literary Context of Maria Edgeworth's Jason Quirk

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THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF MARIA EDGEWORTH’S JASON QUIRK

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According to Terry Eagleton’s reading of Castle Rackrent, “if an ironic reading of [Thady] Quirk’s servility is plausible, then the hegemony which failed in his case was a Gaelic one; and there seems little reason to suspect that an Anglo-Irish project would fare any better.” Certainly, while Edgeworth repeatedly offers a sympathetic portrayal of the Anglo-Irish gentry, her Irish tales are full of their failure to maintain well-managed estates while retaining the loyalty of their tenants. Her solution then is the creation of a new race of native Irish citizens, trained by the enlightened Anglo-Irish in order to secure an harmonious relationship between the two groups while leaving the Anglo-Irish some measure of control over the future of the nation, whatever the long term effects of the Union are. By applying historical analysis, a study of literary trends, and Edgeworth’s own templates of good and bad agents and landowners found in her Irish novels, I hope to contextualize some of the ambiguities surrounding Castle Rackrent’s Jason Quirk and the issues of class, religion, estate management, and Irish identity that are so crucial to Edgeworth’s Irish writings.

The following thesis breaks out in three parts. In Part One, “Jason Quirk: Middleman?” I argue that the ambiguous Jason Quirk from Castle Rackrent does not conform to the definitions of “middleman” offered by Kevin Whelan and Maria Edgeworth but instead is an early representative of an Anglicized emergent Catholic middleclass and a starting point for Edgeworth’s use of the land agent as a mediator of the class and religious tensions exacerbated by the prospect of the Union and Catholic emancipation. In Part Two, “Improvements: Community and Union,” I expand on Jason Quirk’s potential for becoming a model land agent by focusing on the theme of estate development in other Romantic novels, first comparing Jane Austen’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s treatment of paternalism and patronage to Edgeworth’s critique of indiscriminate charity and her use of the land agent to promote social improvements of the lower class, and then comparing Sir Walter Scott’s allegory for class and community in The Bride of Lammermoor with Edgeworth’s treatment of absenteeism’s effect on Irish society and the divisiveness of religion in the years surrounding the Union, with land agents acting as intermediaries between Anglo-Irish landowners and their lower-class
tenanty. In Part Three, “Gaelic Tradition: Language, Humor, and National Identity,” I argue that Edgeworth uses humorous portrayals of peasants, with their quaint (read ignorant) use of the Irish idiom, and the laudable figure of the Good Agent, typically doubling as a benevolent schoolmaster in her Irish novels, to promote an educational program that aims to secure the success of the Union and preserve Anglo-Irish authority by undermining the Irish language and Gaelic traditions in favor of creating a new homogenized Irish identity.
INTRODUCTION

The critical reception of Maria Edgeworth’s Irish tales is peppered with accusations of a didacticism that overshadows fiction technique and artistic merit. There is an undeniable trend towards the apologue in her work, yet it is not always immediately clear what solution Edgeworth is promoting to the moral, social, and political problems she showcases in her tales. She advances liberal ideas about education, calling for schools with both Catholic and Protestant pupils in accordance with the United Irish view of Catholic emancipation, yet her novels seem to vilify Catholics who challenge the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Her treatment of the Irish “idiom” varies between celebratory and patronizing, and the use of Gaelic language and tradition is negligible. Her opinions about the Union as represented in the Irish tales are ambivalent at best. How is it that someone who is so clearly promoting an agenda seems to be of so many different minds to the modern reader?

Most critics agree that the richness of Maria Edgeworth’s fiction comes from her humorous and linguistically robust portrayal of peasants, whom she refers to as “the lower Irish.” However, characters such as Castle Rackrent’s Thady Quirk, Ennui’s Ellinore O’Donoghoe, Joe Kelly, and Christy O’Donoghoe, and handfuls of other colorful, colloquial characters are not representative of Edgeworth’s “ideal Irish” in the years surrounding the Act of Union of 1801. Though these figures are ambitious in their own ways and improvements on the stock ingratiating and ignorant Irish servant made popular in Restoration drama by characters such as Teague in Sir Robert Howard’s The Committee, none of them can be considered role models for a society making the slow transition from being the colonized to being part of a growing empire. Thady of Castle Rackrent and Ellinore of Ennui negotiate the collapse of the old Tory aristocratic order with outward faithfulness and subtle displays of self-interest in preserving family bonds, but though they have relatively happy endings in a potentially destructive shift of power, it is the generation that follows them that Edgeworth really concentrates on. Reactionary rebels like Joe Kelly in Ennui have no place in the coming Union and are dealt with in the existing legal system. Christy O’Donoghoe, despite strong demonstrations of morality, is emasculated and fails, principally because of his lack of education. The upper-class
characters, the four generations of Rackrents and Lord Glenthorn in *Ennui*, flounder in their aristocracy. Instead of re-educating true aristocrats or arbitrarily promoting peasants, Maria Edgeworth localizes the model for a new Irish identity within the United Kingdom in a set of characters whom she pejoratively labels “middle men,” but who are more frequently called “land agents.” The “good” agents represent a broader class of people, members of a meritocracy that values loyalty where earned, honesty in business, and education, while the “bad” agents represent a critique of absenteeism and the faults of the estate system. With the ability to mediate between the upper and lower classes, these agents are in a rare position for social mobility, even to the rank of landowner, and Edgeworth’s treatment of them in *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1809), and *The Absentee* (1812) shows that a landowner’s place in society is not guaranteed, but must be earned. By examining the cast of land agents in these texts, one can see how Edgeworth uses education, loyalty, issues of class and national identity, and language to put forth a representative model for the new Irish citizen while still clinging to the legitimacy of the Anglo-Irish gentry as the true voice of Ireland.

There is a tradition in scholarship to look at marriage plots as allegories for the domestic union between England, Scotland, and Ireland, and although marriage plots do have nationalistic and socio-political connotations in Edgeworth’s Irish tales, most of the didactic material is grounded in the land itself, which is why an analysis of the stewards of this land is so vital. In the later Irish tales, such as *Ennui* and *The Absentee*, Edgeworth pits representative characters against each other. Two There is a clear “good agent” and “bad agent” in both of these texts, offering templates for the proper management of an Irish estate. The first of the Irish tales, *Castle Rackrent*, is a different story at first glance. Critics have often set this novella apart from the rest of the Edgeworth canon, citing the use of idiomatic narration and the subversion of the characteristic didactic streak as distinguishing marks. The preface to this “Hibernian Tale taken from facts and from the manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782” challenges readers to decipher the truth from the potentially unreliable narration, since “the ignorant may have their prejudices as well as the learned cannot be disputed” (62). The readers having been charged with this responsibility of discretion, perhaps it is fitting that there is no overt didactic binary in this text. Certainly, the tale of four generations of the Rackrent family
features landowners with clear shortcomings in their management of the estate, which suggests an antithesis of sorts, but there is no immediately recognizable role model in the vein of *Ennui*’s M’Leod, the Scottish land agent. Instead, the only agent named in the text is Thady Quirk’s son, Jason, and Edgeworth’s representation of him encompasses nearly all of her ambivalent treatments of the Catholic question, the legitimacy of the Anglo-Irish landowner, the merits of the parliamentary Union, and the Irish national identity.

According to Terry Eagleton’s reading of *Castle Rackrent*, “if an ironic reading of [Thady] Quirk’s servility is plausible, then the hegemony which failed in his case was a Gaelic one; and there seems little reason to suspect that an Anglo-Irish project would fare any better.”

Certainly, while Edgeworth repeatedly offers a sympathetic portrayal of the Anglo-Irish gentry, her Irish tales are full of their failure to maintain well-managed estates while retaining the loyalty of their tenants. Her solution then is the creation of a new race of native Irish citizens, trained by the enlightened Anglo-Irish in order to secure an harmonious relationship between the two groups while leaving the Anglo-Irish some measure of control over the future of the nation, whatever the long term effects of the Union are. By applying historical analysis, a study of literary trends, and Edgeworth’s own templates of good and bad agents and landowners found in her Irish novels, I hope to contextualize some of the ambiguities surrounding *Castle Rackrent*’s Jason Quirk and the issues of class, religion, estate management, and Irish identity that are so crucial to Edgeworth’s Irish writings.

The following discussion breaks out in three parts. In Part One, “Jason Quirk: Middleman?” I argue that the ambiguous Jason Quirk from *Castle Rackrent* does not conform to the definitions of “middleman” offered by Kevin Whelan and Maria Edgeworth but instead is an early representative of an Anglicized emergent Catholic middleclass and a starting point for Edgeworth’s use of the land agent as a mediator of the class and religious tensions exacerbated by the prospect of the Union and Catholic emancipation. In Part Two, “Improvements: Community and Union,” I expand on Jason Quirk’s potential for becoming a model land agent by focusing on the theme of estate development in other Romantic novels, first comparing Jane Austen’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s treatment of paternalism and patronage to Edgeworth’s critique of indiscriminate charity and her use of the land agent to promote social improvements of
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CHAPTER 1
JASON QUIRK: MIDDLEMAN?

In “An Underground Gentry?” Kevin Whelan describes a system in which the Catholic aristocracy deprived of lands under the penal codes became an underground gentry of influential middlemen who worked on estates that once belonged to their family and who were still powerful within the community. Later, between 1760 and 1840, “a second category of middleman emerged – the large-scale speculator in leases who appeared when economic prospects were buoyant but while rents still lagged behind the market value. In these conditions, cash-strapped landlords welcomed lease speculators who could pay a high entry fine. These mercenary middlemen, once in possession, were anxious to maximize profits from their investments as quickly as possible” (25). These are the journeymen gentlemen seen in Edgeworth’s works and defined in one of her footnotes in Castle Rackrent:

There was a class of men termed middle men in Ireland, who took large farms on long leases from gentlemen of landed property, and let the land again in small portions to the poor, as under-tenants, at exorbitant rents. The head landlord, as he was called, seldom saw his under-tenants; but if he could not get the middle man to pay him his rent punctually, he went to his land, and drove the land for his rent, that is to say, he sent his steward or bailiff, or driver, to the land to seize the cattle, hay, corn, flax, oats, or potatoes, belonging to the under-tenants, and proceeded to sell these for his rents: it sometimes happened that these unfortunate tenants paid their rent twice over, once to the middle man, and once to the head landlord.

The characteristics of a middle man were, servility to his superiors, and tyranny towards his inferiors: the poor detested this race of beings. In speaking to them, however, they always used the most abject language, and the most humble tone and posture – “Please your honour; and please your honour's honour” they knew must
These middlemen often worked as agents at multiple estates and were themselves absentees of a sort, residing in Dublin and setting the land to under-agents, as is seen in *The Absentee*. Nicholas Garraghty, or Old Nick, keeps house in Dublin and only visits the Clonbrony estate when it is time to collect the rents and renew the leases, leaving the day-to-day concerns of the estate to his brother, Dennis, and “where there’s no jantleman over these under-agents, as here, they do as they please; and when they have set the land they get rasonable from the head landlords, to poor cratures at a rackrent” (136).

Before an argument can be made about the merits of Jason Quirk as agent and landlord presumptive, it is first necessary to clarify the terms involved in estate management, as there seems to be some confusion in scholarship about the functions of stewards, agents, and middlemen. Edgeworth herself is guilty of contributing to this ambiguity by having Lord Colambre claim that an agent in Ireland is the same as a steward in England. Yet Thady Quirk is described as the Rackrents’ steward, Jason Quirk as their agent, and an unnamed agent as a middleman, suggesting that those latter two terms are, at the least, neither mutually exclusive nor inclusive. Edgeworth’s use of “agent” seems to almost always refer to land agents, who are involved in the finances of the entire estate, whereas stewards such as Thady are restricted to the management of the main household’s bookkeeping. The responsibilities a steward was charged with varied from employer to employer, often determined by their own situation in life and the location of the estates to which they were attached. Regardless, “since the vast majority of English men and women were either landlords or tenants (and some were both), and since stewards were the vital link between them, stewards as a group could not fail to be of great significance to the effective working of English society and the English economy.” The same must be said for Ireland.

*Castle Rackrent* has often been viewed as a lesson to Anglo-Irish landowners, advising them against the many vices exhibited by the Rackrents, such as drunkenness,
carelessness with funds, and absenteeism. This is complicated by the fact that while the landowners in *Ennui* and *The Absentee* are explicitly identified as Anglo-Irish and implicitly Protestant, “the family of the Rackrents is [...] one of the most ancient in the kingdom” (66).

Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent was cousin-german to him, and had a fine estate of his own, only never a gate upon it, it being his maxim that a car was the best gate. Poor gentleman! he lost a fine hunter and his life, at last, by it, all in one day's hunt. But I ought to bless that day, for the estate came straight into the family, upon one condition, which Sir Patrick O'Shaughlin at the time took sadly to heart, they say, but thought better of it afterwards, seeing how large a stake depended upon it, that he should, by act of parliament, take and bear the surname and arms of Rackrent. Edgeworth’s emphasis has often been overlooked in the analysis of Thady Quirk’s loyalty. This passage, which prefaces the story of Sir Patrick, the first of four final Rackrents, details how Sir Patrick came to own the estate which includes Castle Rackrent. This passage is preceded by a vow of sorts from Thady, who claims “as I have lived so will I die, true and loyal to the family” (66). The question is, when the “Editor” (whom Butler presumes to be Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Maria’s father) writes in the Preface that Thady’s “partiality to the family, in which he was bred and born, must be obvious to the reader,” which family is he referring to? (62)

Thady’s account of the history of the Rackrents is told from the perspective of the O’Shaughlin line, the old, i.e. legitimate, Irish family. It is possible that Tallyhoo Rackrent was Anglo-Irish and Sir Patrick’s acquisition of the estate in some way signifies the recuperation of Anglo-Irish estates by the original Catholic owners. If this is the case, the entire narrative could be read as a justification of the Ascendancy rather than a condemnation of its shortcomings. Sir Patrick forfeits his Catholic heritage in order to inherit the estate and the subsequent Rackrents are presumably raised in the Church of Ireland or, as is possible in the case of Sir Condy, who is from a “remote branch” of the family, convert prior to inheritance. This Protestant line of the “old family” only lasts for Thady’s lifetime and could signify the insecurity over the staying power of Protestant
landowners, but if this is the case, the transfer of the Rackrent estate into Jason Quirk’s hands is problematic in terms of a satisfactory resolution to Edgeworth’s didactic concerns.

In a testament to the ambiguity of Edgeworth’s text, the critical response to Jason Quirk in *Castle Rackrent* has been varied. According to Marilyn Butler, Jason was not representative of “the new commercial ethos...because Jason made his fortune as agent to the estate, through the carelessness of the absentee Sir Kit: he was the parasite of the old system, not the herald of the new”.

Iain Topliss thinks Jason will ultimately belong to the improving class of landlords, a way to recover the Rackrent estate from the degeneracy of the original landowners. While both positions show that Edgeworth has offered a clear pattern of behavior for landowners to avoid should they want to keep their lands, what is less obvious is the future of these lands once the Rackrents lose their claim to them, or even the identity of the new landlord.

It would be easy to see Jason Quirk as a villainous figure in a plot driven by the question of the legitimacy and future of Anglo-Irish landowning families, such as the Edgeworths, in the years immediately preceding the Union. He is native Irish, he has risen from the lower classes, and he is coded Catholic. But if we trust Edgeworth’s, and Thady’s, knowledge of the historical context of the narrative and take the 1782 date stamp from the subtitle as genuine, Jason would have had to convert just as Sir Patrick did in order to practice law, let alone purchase the Rackrent estate. For readers familiar with Maria Edgeworth’s biography, seeing the year 1782 as an ending point for *Castle Rackrent* would bring up an interesting question of narrative authority. Born in Oxfordshire and educated in England until she was 14, Edgeworth did not permanently settle in Ireland until 1782 and therefore could not have witnessed any of these actions firsthand, instead relying on the testimony of Thady Quirk, modeled after the mannerisms and speech patterns of John Langan, the Edgeworths’ steward, for what is billed as an historical narrative taken from facts. This enforced distance between Maria Edgeworth and her own text at once removes her from that class of biased biographers, whose “talents [...] are often fatal to his reader,” by locating the events of *Castle Rackrent* firmly in the past, “tales of other times,” and establishes her as an interloper whose own
authoritative voice on events is in some way less legitimate than that of a non-hyphenated Irishman (62-3).

For all this, it cannot be assumed that her readers were familiar with the personal significance of 1782, but there was a widely recognizable political significance to that year. In 1782, the Irish parliament was granted some measure of independence, even though politicians in London still retained power of influence, and two acts were passed which relieved some of the restrictions stemming from Queen Anne’s penal codes and subsequent legislative measures restricting Catholic rights.\(^{14}\) The Irish Popery laws were enforced to a varying degree in the Eighteenth Century until finally being formally repealed, but their legacy “comprised one of the most persistent legislative efforts ever undertaken by a western European state to change a people” and were “designed to transform Ireland into a Protestant and loyal country in one or two generations.”\(^ {15}\) Restrictions extended to education, land ownership, voting rights, and even to the professions. These acts of 1782, which “allowed catholics to acquire lands (except in parliamentary boroughs) on the same terms as protestants [and] freed catholic education from its legislative constraints,” along with the “act of parliament” which compelled Sir Patrick to convert to the Church of Ireland, provide a crucial historical framework to the analysis of the core characters of Castle Rackrent.\(^ {16}\)

It wasn’t until 1792, ten years after the supposed conclusion of Castle Rackrent, that Catholics were allowed to practice law, so Jason Quirk must have converted in order to become an attorney and landowner. According to Power:

\[
\text{it is apparent that conversion helped maintain the catholic propertied interest and that converts were not fully absorbed into the established order in church and state. Indeed converts came to constitute a hybrid group in Irish society. In this capacity [...] converts became a group through which many of the differences based on religion in Irish society were mediated.}^{17}\]

So if conformity to the Church of Ireland was only nominal, the shift in power at the book’s conclusion cannot be seen as Anglo-Irish to Irish and should not be seen as Protestant to Catholic, but rather as collapse of established gentry and the rise of the Catholic middle class. Despite textual evidence that Sir Tallyhoo Rackrent was an
Anglo-Irish Protestant, the impetus of the narrative is located almost entirely with a Catholic family. That Sir Tallyhoo’s estate fell into Catholic hands is not reason enough to view *Castle Rackrent* as a horror story for the Anglo-Irish gentry, at least not one that features a Catholic uprising. Rather, the lesson is intended for *any* landowner and deals with the management of a large estate and the treatment of tenants thereon.

If, then, there is not an overt Protestant-Catholic power struggle, and the question of true religion is never addressed, we must turn again to Jason’s rise to power and look at issues of group and national identity, education, and class, some of those “differences based on religion” which converts mediated. Marilyn Butler claims that Jason cannot be a role model for the new economy, yet he does represent certain traits that the Edgeworths found appealing. For one, unlike Joe Kelly, the United Irishman rebel in *Ennui* who was a real physical threat to the Anglo-Irish gentry, Jason’s transition to power was nonviolent. For another, Jason, like the Earl of Glenthorn in *Ennui* and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, put himself through an education in law before becoming a landlord. In many ways, *Ennui* reads like an educational tract for Anglo-Irish landlords, and it stands to reason then that *Castle Rackrent*, also concerned in the everyday workings of a large Irish estate, should contain a clear model for the ideal landowner, or at the very least the ideal tenant. Yet the Rackreants are, for the most part, unsympathetic figures. Sir Condy has an affective and pathetic end, reminiscent of Scott’s nostalgic portrayal of the crumbling aristocracy, but unlike the other Irish tales, a good agent or a good landlord is not readily apparent. What we are offered instead is the downfall of a Catholic aristocratic family and the making of a Catholic middleman cum landlord in Jason Quirk.

While the middleman, or bad agent, is defined in *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and templates for both the good and bad agent are described in *Ennui* (1809), it isn’t until *The Absentee* (1812) that an explicit definition of a good agent is offered:

> 'Why, he is the man that will encourage the improving tenant; and show no favour or affection, but justice, which comes even to all, and does best for all at the long run; and, residing always in the country, like Mr. Burke, and understanding country business, and going about continually amongst the tenantry, he knows when to
press for the rent, and when to leave the money to lay out upon the land; and, according as they would want it, can give a tenant a help or a check properly. Then no duty-work called for, no presents, nor glove money, nor sealing money even, taken or offered; no underhand hints about proposals, when land would be out of lease, but a considerable preference, if deserved, to the old tenant, and if not, a fair advertisement, and the best offer and tenant accepted; no screwing of the land to the highest penny, just to please the head landlord for the minute, and ruin him at the end, by the tenant’s racking the land, and running off with the year’s rent; nor no bargains to his own relations or friends did Mr. Burke ever give or grant, but all fair between landlord and tenant; and that’s the thing that will last; and that’s what I call the good agent.18

This definition, offered by the innkeeper at the town owned by Lord Clonbrony and named for his son and the book’s hero, Lord Colambre, has the expected desire for fair treatment of tenants and, more interestingly, touches on the concept of improvements and of loyalty to the “old tenant.”

Given the ambiguity over the merits of Jason Quirk in Castle Rackrent, it is profitable to extrapolate from the definition Edgeworth continued to develop in her subsequent Irish writings in order to distinguish his character as an agent and ultimately as a landlord. For Edgeworth, loyalty often comes to the question of group identity, be it a matter of nationality or rank, and surfaces in instances of master/servant role-reversals, the deliberate attempt to conceal identity, or the various losses and gains of fortune that leave a member of the gentry at the brink of bankruptcy or have agents and tradesman aspiring to the rank of gentleman. In Castle Rackrent, Jason is often accused by his father of going against the feudal spirit and failing to exhibit fealty to the family:

Now I could not bear to hear Jason giving out after this manner against the family, and twenty people standing by in the street. Ever since he had lived at the lodge of his own, he looked down, howsoever, upon poor old Thady, and was grown quite a great
gentleman, and had none of his relations near him: no wonder he was no kinder to poor Sir Condy than to his own kith or kin.¹⁹

Yet Jason’s loyalty to his own class and to Thady may be the issue here, especially given recent arguments that Thady himself is not, as he vowed at the start, “true and loyal to the family” (66). Certainly, Thady had a hand in elevating Jason to his position, participating in some insider trading with Sir Kit’s agent, when “the agent gave [him] a hint, and [he] spoke a good word for [Thady’s] son, and gave out in the country that nobody need bid against [them]” (74). Thady has no compunction of a member of his “rank” trying to better themselves financially and socially.

It is possible that Thady would draw the line for social climbing at explicitly harming the Rackrents, but he has his own culpability in that family’s downfall, repeatedly refusing to speak up when the Rackrents were setting themselves to financial ruin and concealing his knowledge that Jason is making plans to force Sir Condy into settling his accounts and forfeiting the estate, saying “Well, I did not know what to think; it was hard to be talking ill of my own, and I could not but grieve for my poor master's fine estate, all torn by these vultures of the law; so I said nothing, but just looked on to see how it would all end” (100). Miraculously, he only finds his voice when he sees his own son is in danger:

‘Oh, Jason! Jason! how will you stand to this in the face of the county and all who know you?’ says I; ‘and what will people think and say, when they see you living here in Castle Rackrent, and the lawful owner turned out of the seat of his ancestors, without a cabin to put his head into, or so much as a potatoe to eat? ’ Jason, whilst I was saying this, and a great deal more, made me signs, and winks, and frowns; but I took no heed; for I was grieved and sick at heart for my poor master, and couldn't but speak. 109

The concern here is not for the reaction of Sir Condy Rackrent to Jason’s move into the Big House, but rather for the reception he will have from the tenants and people of the lower ranks. Suspicious winks aside, it is obvious that Thady is invested in Jason’s success as the new owner of the Rackrent lands and he is right to be concerned about this
transfer of power. According to Kevin Whelan, economic changes following the relaxing of land laws eventually hurt Catholic solidarity, with anger and sometimes violence directed at “land-grabbers”:

In the early nineteenth century the older middleman system was contrasted with the new type which had emerged during the Napoleonic boom. In Wexford it was claimed that ‘the middlemen of the present day are them selves but low farmers, a set of harpies who spread misery and oppression on the unhappy creatures who are compelled to live under them’, while a Cork observer stigmatised them in 1816 as ‘a multitude of upstart gentry without manners or education, oppressive to the poor.’

Although Jason is educated, he is also fighting against the stigma of middlemen who are viewed as “journeymen gentlemen.” The appeal of tradition only extends so far and, with little evidence as to what kind of landlord Jason would become to them, the people of the town react in accordance with Thady’s prophecy:

So is Jason Quirk a good agent by Edgeworth’s definition, and will he be a good landlord? Though there is little evidence offered, it is telling. While Sir Condy Rackrent was letting debts pile up as he was campaigning for a seat in the Parliament and absconding to Dublin to avoid his creditors, ‘there was all the servants’ wages, since I don’t know when, coming due to them, and sums advanced for them by my son Jason for clothes, and boots, and whips, and odd moneys for sundries expended by them in
journeys to town and elsewhere” (106). Even though Sir Condy rightly observes that Jason does “nothing for nothing,” Jason has an interest in keeping the household in order and the servants happy (117). More important are his actions upon receiving his first piece of property:

[Sir Condy] gave my son a bargain of some acres, which fell out of lease, at a reasonable rent. Jason set the land, as soon as his lease was sealed, to under-tenants, to make the rent, and got two hundred a-year profit rent; which was little enough considering his long agency. He bought the land at twelve years’ purchase two years afterwards, when Sir Condy was pushed for money on an execution, and was at the same time allowed for his improvements thereon.22

Although the fact that Jason set the land to under-tenants in order “to make the rent” technically places him in the role of the middleman, who by definition rents a large farm from a landowner and sublets it to small farmers and cottagers, there is little evidence to support the secondary characteristics of middlemen provided by Edgeworth’s description in *Castle Rackrent.*

The affective outcry from the mob upon hearing the news that Jason Quirk is to become the new landlord could speak to a history of exploitation in his earlier career as a middleman, but it is just as likely a display of the emotional ties to the “old aristocracy” which the Rackrents defined themselves by. Only Sir Condy can calm the crowd by paving the way for Jason, and it is fitting that Edgeworth gives Condy the same death as Sir Patrick Rackrent, showing that Condy is a tie to this cyclical past best severed if improvements are to be made. Indeed, the key word in the passage above is “improvements,” a vital component to a successful landlord and one that sets Jason apart from middlemen who let their greed lead the estates to ruin. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, many large estates, particularly ones that relied on agriculture, were home to financially-strapped small farmers and destitute cottagers. Population explosions and the emergence of a modern market economy, coupled with the enclosure of common lands, left many without work. The growing trend of absenteeism in Ireland was accompanied by fewer long-term leases. This, of course, gave opportunities for the middlemen and
corrupt agents to rack rents and let the lands go to waste, but it also supported tenants who, due to the unstable tenure of their leases, had little to no vested interest in the upkeep of their farms, let alone improvements.

Several novels of this period address the economic and social concerns surrounding the state of the estate. Edgeworth’s use of land agents as agents of reform is unique in that she allows middleclass professionals to take the initiative to promote improvements, both to the land itself and to the education, or indoctrination, of the tenantry, rather than relying on the landed gentry to display a fawning sense of charity. Yet her contemporaries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott, deal with similar issues, such as the gentry’s responsibilities to their tenantry and to future generations. By examining these texts, one can contextualize Edgeworth’s templates for good and bad agents, landowners, and tenants, and thereby understand more fully the importance of figures like Jason Quirk and the other agents on her Irish novels.
CHAPTER 2

IMPROVEMENT: COMMUNITY AND UNION

In her position as first her father’s assistant and then her brother’s, in effect Maria Edgeworth acted as agent on the family’s estate and was in an interesting position of power, especially when her experience with management of the land was needed upon her father’s death. Subsequently, the “good agents” in her Irish novels often promoted her own ideas about the politics, economics, and education on large estates. Although she and her father had what might be called liberal political leanings, especially in the area of Catholic emancipation, often being suspected United Irish, Edgeworth could not rightly be aligned with the Jacobin movement, but her texts did feature threatened aristocracy. Distinct from the novels of her English contemporaries, the issue of enclosure was not prevalent in Edgeworth’s Irish tales, yet her position on the matter can be seen in the characterization of White Connal in *Ormond* (1817), who turned “grazier” and enclosed his lands for grazing in order to make a profit raising sheep. While Edgeworth sees that this in itself is good for the country, Connal is vilified for failing to address the social fallout that accompanied the dispossession of people dependant on the land. More often, Edgeworth’s concern rested with the social and economic concerns of the vestigial feudal system in the time of Union rather than enclosure and commentary on agricultural practices, and a perceived responsibility to “sell” the Irish image to the other two kingdoms post-Union involved appealing to an Anglo-Irish audience to make “improvements” to estates fallen to disrepair after years of absenteeism and mismanagement by middlemen.

Both Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth had specific ideas about what “improvements” of both the land and ultimately of the lower classes living on it encompassed, but before dealing with them it is beneficial to look at this issue in the broader literary context of the Gothic in the Romantic novel. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818) feature Gothic elements that serve both as a mockery of the genre and a critique of the horrors of real, “common” life. Though Austen and Wollstonecraft poke fun at the gothic castle as a locale for hauntings and murders, such castles are there in
both hers and Austen’s books, lingering in the background, or perhaps lying in ruins. Once the place where paintings came alive, where bodies were buried and secret passages led to salvation, in *Northanger Abbey, Mary, a Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, the castle has become the manor house, a setting for the brutalities of class and social struggles, specifically in the effects of inheritance and enclosure on romantic relationships and charity.

Before she even sees Northanger Abbey, Austen’s Catherine Morland gets caught up in the Gothic possibilities of the place. “Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun.” Though Henry Tilney plays with Catherine’s propensity to be swept up in literary flights of fancy, creating a tale for her of “all the horrors that a building such as ‘what one reads about’ may produce,” (107) the abbey itself, with its “elegance of modern taste,” (110) proves disappointing to a mind craving skeletons in the wardrobes, entombed corpses of murdered wives. Nevertheless, Catherine finds something to be disturbed by: the “self-satisfaction” with which General Tilney displays the opulence of the grounds of Northanger Abbey (122). Coming off of a traditional Gothic setting, the castle with its feudal system and ignorant peasant-class servants, Austen’s new take on Gothicism located in a country manor contains marginalized farmers pushed to the margins of the narrative focus by enclosure.

While General Tilney refers to the enclosure of his property, his business with his surveyor, and his plans to improve on the gardens as a means of impressing Catherine with his wealth, the power he wields over his tenants takes a more serious turn in the way he flippantly refers to a cottage as an “object” and commands that “the cottage remains” (147). Although his decision is apparently an aesthetic one, prompted by Catherine’s approval of the picturesque cottage on Henry’s land, it also demonstrates a lack of concern for the inhabitants of the cottage who have already suffered economic losses with the enclosure of what once was considered public lands. The power that she seemingly has to influence such decisions “recalled all Catherine’s consciousness” but it is likely that her anxiety has just as much to do with the acknowledgement that she has any rights in dictating what occurs in the Tilney household and a broader discomfort with
the opulence and disregard for economy on the General’s part than it does with the realization that she might marry into a class that so casually mistreats the less fortunate.

In Wollstonecraft’s *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, the aftermath of enclosure has an interesting effect on the idea of charity. She introduces Mary’s father as a wealthy man who occasionally “visit[ed] some of his pretty tenants” and observed “their ruddy glow of health” (1). This connotation of the dehumanizing and exploitation, if not actual rape, of female tenants is presented in contrast with Mary’s charitable relationship with them, as she “denied herself every childish gratification, in order to relieve the necessities of the inhabitants” (10). Although in both novels Wollstonecraft promotes this Burkeian idea of charity as a means of making oneself feel good, she also acknowledges a responsibility, civic and Christian, for wealthy landowners to assist the poor tenants displaced by enclosure. Villains in these two books are men who ignore this responsibility. In *Mary*, Ann’s family is plagued by a landlord who “threatened to seize the stock that still remained, and turn them out, if they did not very shortly discharge the arrears,” (14). Likewise, George Venables in *The Wrongs of Woman* only “paid enough in conscience to the poor,” (118). Following the example of his father, whose first action as owner of a sprawling estate was to raise the rents of the houses he now controlled, George does not accept the notion that the nation’s wealthy have any responsibility, legal or moral, to aid the poor beyond compulsory donations and patronage of local parishes (132). Austen’s General Tilney demonstrates his “patronage” to Catherine by explaining that his less wealthy neighbors “have half a buck from Northanger twice a year; and I dine with them whenever I can” (144). Just as he is eager to show off his charitable nature, he shows no compunction about taking advantage of his position in the community by imposing on his neighbors and likely demanding the same rich spreads that he expects of his son, Henry.

It is this failure of the wealthy class that leads to the Jacobin tensions in Wollstonecraft’s, and to a lesser extant Austen’s, novels. Though written before the French Revolution, in hindsight one of the most resonant images in *Mary* is that of the ruins of an old mansion house. “Some tattered shreds of rich hangings still remained, covered with cobwebs and filth…and a spacious gallery was rendered dark by the broken windows being blocked up” (50). It might be expected that a Jacobin supporter would
romanticize the downfall of the aristocratic class, but this image of a mansion laid to waste is not a celebratory one. Granted, the building is now a shelter for indigent squatters, but Wollstonecraft depicts these representatives of the impoverished class as pathetic creatures, “some were fighting, and others crying for food” (50). The collapse of the wealthy landowners has done nothing to help these people, and the loss of what little subsistence they were once allowed has resulted in “putrid fever, the consequence of dirt and want” (51). The symbol of a ruined edifice can be seen in *The Wrongs of Woman* as well. From her “mansion of despair”, Maria has a view of “a huge pile of buildings, that, after having been suffered, for half a century, to fall to decay, had undergone some clumsy repairs, merely to render it habitable” (76-7). Written almost a decade after the revolution, *Northanger Abbey* contains its own ruins, the renovations of which will divert money from a displaced class that sorely needs it. This cycle of ruination and regeneration into something decidedly less may be emblematic of both the British Empire and of the Jacobin movement, which tore down an aristocratic class only to raise a new generation of exploitative wealthy men. This same cycle plagues the estates in Edgeworth’s fiction, with succeeding generations of Rackrents doomed to repeat their forefathers’ failures, with landowners falling to ruin or simply abandoning their responsibilities to middlemen who only exacerbate and exploit, and where only the promise of improvements distinguishing heroic agents and prospective landowners from their predecessors.

Edgeworth’s treatment of the Irish tenantry in her plan for improvements vacillates between genuine charity and dehumanizing patronage. She condemns false charity in *Castle Rackrent*, where Lady Rackrent “had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return,” turning a school, the most prized institute in Edgeworth’s fiction, into a sight for slave labor (69). More often though she speaks against indiscriminate charity and *Ennui* features several lessons chastising Lord Glenthorn for “attempting too much.” Lord Glenthorn’s idea of improvements included remodeling Ellinor’s cottage but “what [he] had called conveniences were to her encumberances: she had not been used to them” (199). He reacts to her treatment of his renovations and “reproached Ellinor with being a savage, an Irishwoman, and an
ungrateful fool,” resolving to cease his attempts at “improvements” (200). Once he takes the time to deliberate, he observes “so easily is the humanity of the rich and great disgusted and discouraged! as if any people could be civilized in a moment, and at the word of command of ignorant pride or despotic benevolence” (201) but still his sense of charity and civil responsibility is only fueled by a desire to show up his agent, M’Leod (217). Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s insistence that an effective landlord have some level of dialogue with his tenantry rather than relying on an agent translates into M’Leod’s advice on how to go about improving the estate responsibly:

My wife and I went among them, and talked to them in their cottages, and took an interest in their concerns, and did not want to have everything our own way; and when they saw that, they began to consider which way was best, so by degrees we led where we could not have driven; and raised in them, by little and little, a taste for conveniences and comforts [...] Perhaps it was best for them and for us, that we were not rich; for we could not do too much at a time, and were never tempted to begin grand schemes that we could not finish.  

M’Leod, heralded as a model agent in *Ennui*, advises against monetary gifts, long leases, and raised wages, suggesting that the poor tenantry could easily take advantage of their landlords and that catering to them too much will only encourage a latent tendency towards laziness and dishonesty. “Pity for one class of beings sometimes makes us cruel to others. I am told that there are some Indian Brahmins so very compassionate, that they hire beggars to let fleas feed upon them: I doubt whether it might not be better to let the fleas starve” (189-90). The most extreme example of this fear of overindulgence is seen in *Ormond*, where Lady Annaly hopes Harry Ormond does “not mean to make [Moriarty] miserable and good for nothing, by supporting him in idleness” (26). This comment comes days after Ormond “accidentally” shot Moriarty in a fit of drunken rage.

An even harsher view of charity and improvements is provided in *The Absentee*:

Lord and Lady Killpatrick, who had lived always for the fashionable world, had taken little pains to improve the condition
of their tenants; the few attempts they had made were injudicious. They had built ornamented, picturesque cottages, within view of their demesne; and favourite followers of the family, people with half a century's habit of indolence and dirt, were promoted to these fine dwellings. The consequences were such as Lady Dashfort delighted to point out; everything let to go to ruin for the want of a moment's care, or pulled to pieces for the sake of the most trifling surreptitious profit; the people most assisted always appearing proportionally wretched and discontented. No one could, with more ease and more knowledge of her ground, than Lady Dashfort, do the dishonours of a country. In every cabin that she entered, by the first glance of her eye at the head, kerchiefed in no comely guise, or by the drawn-down corners of the mouth, or by the bit of a broken pipe, which in Ireland never characterizes stout labour, or by the first sound of the voice, the drawling accent on 'your honour,' or, 'my lady,' she could distinguish the proper objects of her charitable designs, that is to say, those of the old uneducated race, whom no one can help, because they will never help themselves. To these she constantly addressed herself, making them give, in all their despairing tones, a history of their complaints and grievances; then asking them questions, aptly contrived to expose their habits of self-contradiction, their servility and flattery one moment, and their litigious and encroaching spirit the next: thus giving Lord Colambre the most unfavourable idea of the disposition and character of the lower class of the Irish people.

A class of beggars, supposedly those people who cannot help themselves, often populates the estates in Edgeworth’s Irish tales, and absentee landlords, upon returning home, are besieged by requests for longer leases, extensions on rent, and other appeals for charity. The repeated image of a renovated cottage being torn apart reads as humorous but serves as a warning for landlords against giving too much. Oddly, it falls into the same category
as tipping domestics and giving servants cast-off clothes, an inappropriate encouragement of the poor living in a manner best left to someone of more elevated rank and class.

Maria Edgeworth’s critique of middlemen and negligent landowners was often used as a platform for her ideas about economics, civic and social responsibility, class division, and union, and this platform was built upon a somewhat unstable landscape; Ireland itself was in the process of being redefined by lawmakers and citizens alike in the years surrounding the Union. Edgeworth’s Irish tales, didactic as they are, are full of the social concerns that came with the Union and with the prospect of Catholic emancipation. While the exploitation of the poorer tenants is one obvious fault of these mercenary middlemen that pepper her texts, another real concern was the treatment of the land itself. Absentee landlords “abandon their tenantry to oppression, and their property to ruin” and the corrupt agents overseeing the property preferred tenants who could afford higher rents to those who were skilled in improving the land (156). A recurring theme in Edgeworth’s tales about absentee landlords is the deterioration of the land (often manifesting itself in the deplorable state of the roads) and of the structures built upon it, including the castle or manor house when the family has abandoned Ireland for London society. In Castle Rackrent, Sir Condy explains to his wife that “the back road is too narrow for a carriage, and the great piers have tumbled down across the front approach; so there’s no driving the right way, by reason of the ruins” (90). The Absentee, perhaps the most didactic of the Irish tales, uses the familiar good agent / bad agent template and provides an example of an “improving” landlord in Mr. Burke, agent for the small Colambre property, while the main Clonbrony estate and the bordering village, Nugent’s town, is neglected by the middleman Nicholas Garraghty. “This town consisted of one row of miserable huts, sunk beneath the side of the road, the mud walls crooked in every direction; some of them opening in wide cracks, or zigzag fissures, from top to bottom, as if there had just been an earthquake,” and is inhabited by “squalid children, with scarcely rags to cover them” and “pale women, with long, black, or yellow locks – men with countenances and figures bereft of hope and energy” (140).

Finally, there is the Big House itself. Though only Ennui’s Glenthorn Castle comes to complete physical ruin, destroyed by decadence, drunkenness and ultimately by fire, the estate houses in The Absentee and Castle Rackrent are invariably shown in states
of decay, corruption, and abandonment. Clonbrony Castle “was a fine castle, spacious 
park; but all about it, from the broken piers at the great entrance, to the mossy gravel and 
loose steps at the hall-door, had an air of desertion and melancholy. Walks overgrown, 
shrubberies wild, plantations run up into bare poles; fine trees cut down, and lying on the 
ground in lots to be sold” and Lord Colambre witnesses the theft of his father’s venison 
by the castle’s cooks for Nick Garraghty’s meal (The Absentee 161). When Sir Condy 
Rackrent flees to Dublin, avoiding bill collectors, Thady is left haunting the halls of an 
abandoned castle:

There was then a great silence in Castle Rackrent, and I went 
moping from room to room, hearing the doors clap for want of 
right locks, and the wind through the broken windows, that the 
glazier never would come to mend, and the rain coming through 
the roof and best ceilings all over the house for want of the slater, 
whose bill was not paid, besides our having no slates or shingles 
for that part of the old building which was shingled and burnt when 
the chimney took fire, and had been open to the weather ever 
since.32

Hollingworth claims that these scenes of physical degeneration in Castle Rackrent 
“encourage a reading of the text as an allegory of social decline, and a warning. The 
connection drawn between political intrigue and social deterioration reflects Edgeworth 
[sic] misgivings at the jobbery and corruption surrounding the Union” (79). There is a 
definite element of the Gothic to these ruins in that they can be read as physical 
manifestations of the deterioration of paternalism, and Edgeworth’s use of ruins in her 
regional and national novels is one that may be illuminated by a comparison to another 
novelist’s use of the Gothic in a historical allegory for class and national identity.

In a compelling analysis of the development of the national tale and the historical 
 novel as genres, Katie Trumpener writes that:

[...] for a brief moment at the beginning of the nineteenth century 
(as Edinburgh becomes a major center for novelistic publishing 
and reviewing) the intense mutual influence of Scottish and Irish
novelists on each other and on novel-readers of both nations begins
to constitute something like a trans-peripheral Irish-Scottish public
sphere.\textsuperscript{33}

Maria Edgeworth looked to Scotland and its Enlightenment writers for instruction on how
to negotiate national identity and socio-political change in the years surrounding the
Union, while Sir Walter Scott, perhaps the most successful national novelist, owed a debt
to Maria Edgeworth’s pioneering effort in that genre, a debt which he acknowledged in
the postscript to \textit{Waverly} in 1814 after reading \textit{The Absentee}.\textsuperscript{34} Scott, who was writing
all throughout the Napoleonic wars, chose the early 1700s as the timeframe for \textit{The Bride
of Lammermoor}. In 1707, Scotland joined England and Wales to form Great Britain, and
the decades before and after saw many violent rebellions in Scotland between political
factions pro- and anti-union, and pro- and anti-Stuart. With Scott nostalgic for the “glory
days” of Scotland it is of little wonder that the most pervasive gothic trope in this novel is
ostracism.

The figure of the estate agent or middleman is central to the parallel between
Scott’s use of ostracism and Edgeworth’s treatment of class and national boundaries,
representing a link between landowner and tenant while simultaneously fostering a
segregation between the absentee landed gentry and their tenants. When Richard Lovell
Edgeworth returned to Ireland to live on his estate, “he eliminated the agent, or
middleman. He ran the estate himself,” with the assistance of Maria Edgeworth, “which
meant getting to know each individual tenant and the quality of his holding”.\textsuperscript{35} Although
this direct relationship between landlord and tenant is crucial to Maria Edgeworth’s
portrayal of a successful estate, Kevin Whelan observes that:

\begin{quote}
the elimination of the Protestant middleman interest removed an
influential buffer between Catholic tenant and Protestant landlord,
strengthened the Catholic interest and homogenized the population
in a way which allowed it to be more effectively penetrated by
mass mobilization techniques, such as those perfected in the
O’Connellite campaign.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}
The removal of an intermediary between the Anglo-Irish gentry and the Catholic majority living off of their estates reinforced the obvious class boundaries and huge gaps in the distribution of wealth in rural Ireland, where the yeomanry was practically nonexistent, tenants on poorly managed estates lived in abject poverty, and the people with real wealth and political influence lacked the expertise to implement real improvements on the land, having relied on these opportunistic middlemen. Edgeworth’s Irish writings feature an escalating concern with the proper education of landowners, reflecting a growing insecurity about Anglo-Irish legitimacy. Absenteeism in her stories acts as a form of gothic ostracism that makes a community vulnerable to physical ruin.

A common theme in gothic fiction, ostracism, in either the form of social shunning or a physical exile from the community, is typically symbolized by hidden chambers, prison cells, and most commonly, the isolated castle. In *The Bride of Lammermoor*, Scott appropriates the image of a castle as not only a location of exile, as Ravenswood is forced from the large estate Castle of Ravenswood to the abandoned tower Wolf’s Crag after the political upheaval in which his father is tried for treason and stripped of his title and lands, but also as a symbol for decaying aristocracy and Tory values. Wolf’s Crag is a clichéd “lonely and sea-beaten tower,” in a “black domain of wild pasture-land” and is surrounded by quick sand and bog (26). There is something inevitable about the downfall of this tower and its inhabitants:

> The peasant, who shows the ruins of the tower, which still crown the beetling cliff and behold the war of the waves, though no more tenanted save by the sea-mew and cormorant, even yet affirms, that on this fatal night the Master of Ravenswood, by the bitter exclamations of despair, evoked some evil fiend, under whose malignant influence the future tissue of incidents was woven.37

Already in the progression of the novel, readers are introduced to a figure of isolation so common that its presence nearly renders later uses of gothic tropes, such as the prophecy, redundant. The United Kingdom and the rest of Europe are littered with the ruins of castles, physical and almost quotidian reminders of not only chivalric glory days of romance, but also of the fickleness and destructive power of political allegiances and history.
Scott contrasts the true gothic tower of Wolf’s Crag, in which the disposed Edgar Ravenswood lives, with the renovations that William Ashton does at the Castle of Ravenswood when he moves in. Gothicism, at the height of its popularity in early 19th century Britain, had become a mark of fashion for a prosperous middle class that was trying to lay claim to an “old money” feel, but in the previous century, when *The Bride of Lammermoor* takes place, Ashton was quick to disassociate himself from the aristocratic tastes of the Ravenswoods, removing paintings of their clan from the castle and replacing them with pictures of lawyers, with “pinched, peevish, puritanical set of features terminating in a hungry, reddish, peaked beard, forming on the whole a countenance, in the expression of which the hypocrite seemed to contend with the miser and the knave” (191). All traces of Ravenswood are being removed from his ancestral seat as he is pushed to the fringes of the community, and though Scott himself was a lawyer, like Ashton, this is the one novel where his ambivalence about the loss of high romance and aristocratic values in the face of rationality, litigation and the rise of the professional class really shines through. He further promotes Ravenswood’s cause by allowing the character a limited form of rehabilitation during his ostracism. Ravenswood is forced into closer company with the servant class, and several times throughout the novel he exhibits benevolence to the peasantry not typically associated with the aristocracy in progressive High Romantic literature. In contrast, Ashton’s zeal to secure authority over the community be exhibiting materialistic class markers is countered by his ignorance of his own tenantry and his attempts to win their loyalty by offering superficial improvements are met with an aloofness similar to the reaction to *Ennui*’s Glenthorn and his attempts to anglicize Ellinor’s cottage. This ambivalence in Scott’s writing about tradition and progress is symptomatic of his Burkean view of the French Revolution, which was justified by its participants as being a rational reaction to oppression, but ignored the affective attachment of the servant class to the aristocratic order.

While Scott uses Ravenswood’s ostracism as a symptom of a dying class and an impetus for attempting a compromise between the aristocracy and a progressive middle which, in this novel alone out of his vast compendium, is never fully realized, *The Bride of Lammermoor*’s title character is also the subject of ostracism, a result of the tensions of a marriage plot. Scott’s novels characteristically end in a marriage that symbolizes a
compromise between political parties, classes, or nations. The union of marriage often represents the union of Scotland with England and Wales in 1707 or, after The Act of Union in 1801, the creation of the United Kingdom as Ireland joined the nation, and while these marriages may not always be “happy,” Scott shows them to be necessary for the success and survival of both parties. It is significant, then, that *The Bride of Lammermoor*, his most gothic novel, does not have this resolution. Lucy Ashton is tormented by her mother into breaking her engagement with Edgar Ravenswood, who could have given her an old and respected name, in favor of Bucklaw, who actually had money. Far from a union of compromise, both the lawyer and the aristocrat die in this gothic novel, leaving no hope for reconciliation between the old and new order.

Edwin Muir claims that Scott “lived in a community which was not a community, and set himself to carry on a tradition which was not a tradition, and the result was that his work was an exact reflection of his predicament...A people who lose their nationality create a legend to take its place.” When looking at Maria Edgeworth’s treatment of the Union in her Irish tales, you are inevitably struck by the level of ambivalence on the issue, both within her texts and within the body of scholarship surrounding her work. One thing seems clear though: after 1801, Maria Edgeworth ultimately created a legend in which the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy became representative of legitimate Irish identity while the need for the Irish to be educated and *civilized* became the legitimizing rationale for the Union.

As Whelan notes, “at a stroke, the Union converted Catholics from an 80 per cent majority in Ireland to being at best a 20 per cent minority in the United Kingdom” (139). Although the Union pushed Catholics into a minority position within the United Kingdom and Catholic emancipation was not a packaged deal with the union as had been hoped for, it was on the horizon and the loss of an Anglo-Irish Protestant controlled independent parliament broke the grip of the Anglo-Irish gentry’s monopoly on the control of Ireland.

Despite her best efforts to put forward a model of an ideal landowner/tenant, or Anglo-Irish/Catholic, relationship in her Irish tales, Edgeworth’s ambivalence about the Union and her legitimacy as a representative for Irish national identity based on her position within the Anglo-Irish gentry often leads to ambiguous conclusions in her
novels. *Castle Rackrent* ends with confusion as to who will actually retain claim to the Rackrent estate, Sir Condy’s widow or Jason Quirk (121). Edgeworth, like Scott, often relies on marriages symbolic of union, so Jason Quirk’s refusal to marry Judy M’Quirk, a Catholic Irish cottager, at the conclusion of *Castle Rackrent* can be read as a failure of union, but given Edgeworth’s emphasis on the value of the hybridization of English and Irish influences in all aspects of estate life, Jason’s refusal of Sir Condy Rackrent’s cast-off mistress may be nothing more than perpetuation of the gap between classes and the ultimate reformation of a former Catholic, Jason Quirk. *Ennui*’s happy ending is dependant on the forfeiture of Glenthorn Castle by the true Anglo-Irish landowner to a man of Catholic origins but raised in the manner of a gentlemen and on a contrived marriage to the legal Anglo-Irish heir in order to legitimize this transfer of authority. *The Absentee* features the happy return of Anglo-Irish absenteees to the Irish estate but undermines the union of improving landlords and grateful Catholic tenants by stripping Grace Nugent, the heroine, of her Catholic heritage and reclaiming her proper Anglo-Irish roots in the ultimate act of erasing accusations of illegitimacy. Robert Tracy postulates that “Grace Nugent’s parentage is explored and her legitimacy established in such a way as to suggest her relationship to the old Catholic owners of the estates and to deny that relationship” (11). Marilyn Butler explains that Grace “shares her name with an Irish popular song” called “Gracey Nugent”, linking her to the tradition of the *aisling*, a vision poem that was a traditional Catholic medium and often featured the female personification of Ireland. This Catholic heritage, recognizable to readers familiar with both the song and the translation of it in Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), is subsumed by Colambre’s discovery that Grace is not an illegitimate child but rather an Anglo-Irish heiress.

Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and his daughter Maria, favored the Union for economic reasons and hoped Catholic emancipation would follow. They hoped that free trade between Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom would be a catalyst towards the development of a modern economic infrastructure in Ireland. Although they were not formally affiliated with the United Irish movement and distanced themselves from its members following the disastrous rebellion of 1798, they did fall in line with their view of Catholic emancipation:
In particular, the exclusion of Catholics guaranteed the unrepresentative nature of Irish government. In the United Irish analysis, a small privileged handful could thereby run the country in their own corrupt and self-serving interest, facilitated and copperfastened in so doing by the English connection which propped up this same unnatural handful to ensure that English policies could be smoothly implemented in Ireland.\(^{42}\)

Yet Richard Lovell Edgeworth voted against proposed measures for emancipation prior to the Union, believing “that the Bill ought not to be passed if ‘the real voice of the country particularly of those who possess the property of the Kingdom is against it.’”\(^{43}\) These people he was placating were the Protestant middlemen who controlled large amounts of land in County Longford and who were unwilling to give up parliamentary supremacy to the English or the Catholics. This disparity between conscience and action may have contributed to Maria Edgeworth’s ambiguous handling of the issues of Union and Catholic emancipation.

Although *Castle Rackrent* was composed several years before the Union, it was published in 1800, when the Union seemed an inevitable resolution to the tensions raised by the 1798 rebellion. Given the stop date of 1782, Thady rightly makes no mention of the Union, but *Castle Rackrent* is framed by notes from the Editor, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and the postscript, composed shortly before publication, offers this analysis of the probable union between Ireland and Great Britain:

> There is a time when individuals can bear to be rallied for their past follies and absurdities, after they have acquired new habits and a new consciousness. Nations, as well as individuals, gradually lose attachment to their identity, and the present generation is amused, rather than offended, by the ridicule that is thrown upon its ancestors.

> Probably we shall soon have it in our power, in a hundred instances, to verify the truth of these observations.
When Ireland loses her identity by an union with Great Britain, she will look back, with a smile of good-humoured complacency, on the Sir Kits and Sir Condys of her former existence.⁴⁴

Although this passage puts forward a complacency about the impending loss of identity post-Union, it must be taken with a grain of salt. It is undermined by the insistence on this false distancing between the Edgeworths’ role as Anglo-Irish landowners and the likes of Sir Condy Rackrent, a representative of the incompetent cash-strapped gentleman far from extinct in rural Ireland.

As for the Union, *The Absentee*, explicitly a post-Union text, has such a focus on opportunistic middlemen corrupting the legal system and widening the distance between the elite and the lower classes, on laughably pathetic representations of the “*nouveaux riches,*”⁴⁵ on villainous tradesmen (characterized in the same manner as middlemen, those journeyman gentlemen) who aspire to rise above their station, that the influence on Scott’s historical novels is an obvious one. But while Scott recognizes that change is inevitable, no matter how destructive, and is nostalgic for the loss of certain values and hopeful for a happy union of modern influences, Edgeworth attempts to sublimate controversy and disruptive political and social changes by locating them in some untouchable past in *Castle Rackrent* and by advocating some sort of *tabula rasa* as a solution to the complex issues of nationality and class forced upon her by the Union, striving to create “a race of [her] own training” with novels about education in form and function.⁴⁶

At stake here is Anglo-Irish authority in the face of a burgeoning focus on nationalism. “In Ireland cultural nationalism tended to become implicated with Catholicism, an inevitable intersection because Catholicism could represent itself as the traditional, customary and therefore ‘national’ religion of the Irish, and the principal repository of a distinctive Irish nationhood” (Whelan 55). After the Union, Maria Edgeworth struggled against this loss of identity by becoming more insistent on Catholic emancipation, emphasizing the use of education in an effort to homogenize the nation, while stepping up the didacticism in her novels in order to assert her authority as a legitimate Irish voice.⁴⁷ In an 1807 review of John Carr’s *A Stranger in Ireland*, co-written by her father, Edgeworth recognizes that:
The union has certainly created a demand for a statistical, economical, moral and political view of Ireland, with a clear explanation of the causes which have, for nearly three centuries, impeded its progress in civilization; and a statement of such remedies as sound policy and practical humanity suggest for its improvement.\textsuperscript{48}

Edgeworth had shown a reluctance to be seen as a novelist in the past, preferring to make her reputation on educational tracts and the like, but in this review and in the Irish novels post-Union she seems to have accepted her role as a writer of national tales.

In this review, she tries to distance herself from the very real exploitative and divisive history of the Anglo-Irish gentry, instructing that “the appellations of orangemen and croppies should never be heard: Protestant ascendancy should never be talked of; nor should the term an honest man be used exclusively to designate a Protestant” (342). At the same time, she attempts to downplay the potential threat to Protestant landed interest should Catholics be granted emancipation. “The fear of a Catholic interest in a British parliament is absurd. The Catholic gentry in Ireland, or property sufficient to become members of the senate, are few, compared with the Protestants; and what is of more consequence, their interests are the same as those of the Protestants” (341). The assessment of numbers here is accurate. According to Kathleen Murphy, “after a century under the penal code, by 1778 Catholics owned only five percent of the total land in Ireland” (232).\textsuperscript{49} It is ironic that she uses the fact that Catholic landowners are in the minority in order to allay fears of Catholic emancipation when repealing the restrictions against them would potentially reverse the roles between Catholics and Protestants as landholders. In order to negotiate this possible threat, Edgeworth uses history and progress to suppress the Gaelic tradition and manipulate the long term effects of colonialism into a rationale for the reinvention of national identity under Anglo-Irish terms. Sir Walter Scott’s Edgar Ravenswood dies on the boundary between his gothic castle and the seat of the new authority, swallowed by his land because he tried to resolve the conflicts of power, status, class and religion with violence. Edgeworth critiques the voluntary ostracism of absenteeism, having her native Irish characters treat returning landlords with the reverence reserved for the Wild Geese, but at the same time she
reinforces the boundaries between them by relying on intermediary agents to manage the land and to develop the infrastructure that will indoctrinate the lower classes with a belief in the values of their Anglo-Irish landlords.
CHAPTER 3
GAELIC TRADITION: LANGUAGE, HUMOR AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Due to the structure of Thady Quirk’s narrative in *Castle Rackrent*, we are unable to determine the full nature of the improvements Jason Quirk plans to implement on the estate, but Edgeworth’s subsequent Irish novels, particularly *Ennui* and *The Absentee*, make clear that one vital function of a good agent is as the headmaster or patron of a local school. Instead of this indiscriminate charity, M’Leod in *Ennui* is a proponent of education as a means of improving the condition of the poor. Indeed, he argues that nothing “effectual can be done, till they have a better education” (192). At M’Leod’s school they “make no difference between protestants and catholics; we always have admitted both into our school” and in return for a promise not to “interfere with their religious opinions, the priests are glad to let us instruct the catholic children in all other points, which they plainly see must advance their temporal interests” (216). The same principles are applied in Mrs. Burke’s school in *The Absentee* and unless Sir Condy Rackrent was raised in the Catholic faith and later converted, he attended a similar school that admitted both Catholics and Protestants, “a little grammar-school with many others, and my son amongst the rest, who was in his class, and not a little useful to him in his book learning, which he acknowledged with gratitude ever after” (CR 85). There is an emphasis that proselytism should be avoided in favor of creating an atmosphere in which Catholic and Protestant children can interact as equals, fighting against the ignorance of Ormond’s Mrs. M’Crule’s attempts to shut down a school that admitted Catholics by claiming that “the errors of popery are wonderfully infectious” (170). This is in direct contrast with the agenda promoted by Primate Boulter who, in 1730, proposed a system of charter schools for the education and conversion of Catholics:

‘I can assure you,’ says he, ‘the Pa pists are here so numerous, that it highly concerns us, in point of interest, as well as out of concern for the salvation of these poor creatures, who are our fellow-subjects, to try all possible means to bring them and theirs over to the knowledge of the true religion ; and one of the most likely methods we can think of is, if possible, instructing and converting
the young generation; for instead of converting those that are adult,
we are daily losing many of our meaner people, who go off to Popery. 50

It is little wonder that Maria Edgeworth was concerned about the conditions of the hedge-school system, which she called “ditch-schools.”51 In 1829, Thomas Wyse published his Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland, which included a summary of report on the state of charter schools in the late eighteenth century:

Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, Inspector-General of Prisons, who, in the years 1786 and 1787, had visited twenty-eight Charter schools [...] found the children in them puny, and not in that state of health, in which children generally are; they were in general filthy, and ill clothed...the diet was insufficient for the support of their delicate frames; their instruction was very much neglected; in general the children had the itch, and other eruptive disorders. lxxix

This description calls to mind the state of Nugent’s town in Ennui, and is an indictment against Anglo-Irish landlords failing in their responsibility to their tenants.

While reforming the educational system available to Catholics was a necessity, Maria Edgeworth’s focus on moral upbringing has strong colonialist undertones. That M’Leod has any interest at all in “improving” the poor of Ireland with education sets him in the “good agent” category, pit against Ennui’s Irish agent, Mr. Hardcastle, who was “bred amongst” the lower Irish but felt no compunction in displacing poor tenants from their homes and advised Lord Glenthorn to “keep the Irish common people ignorant, and you keep ‘em quiet” (193). In contrast, M’Leod, in keeping with his ideas of charity in which it is better to teach people to improve themselves than to keep them in a state of dependence, shows an interest in teaching children not only practical trades but more importantly manners and morality in his scheme to create “a race of our own training” (216).

In her efforts to describe the new ideal Irish identity, this race of her own training, Maria Edgeworth shows little interest in preserving even a semblance of Gaelic tradition, instead promoting a system that will homogenize the nation under Protestant supervision.
“It will be no easy task to breed up children to have totally different habits and principles from their parents, without destroying that filial and parental affection, which is the great bond of society, and without which no national education can be fundamentally good or permanent.” This apprehension about straining the relationship between parent and child is alleviated by the changeling story line in *Ennui*, in which Lord Glenthorn is bred up to the rank of a landed gentleman. Upon discovering his origins as the son of poor *Irish* Ellinor, he lives up to those bonds of “filial and parental affection” in his loyalty to both her and his foster brother Christy O’Donoghoe, the true heir to the Glenthorn estate, while the suspected threat from his true brother, Owen, as a suspected member of the United Irishmen rebel contingency which threatened Glenthorn’s safety and supremacy is proved false (272). Similarly, while Thady Quirk claims a strain on his relationship with his son Jason following his actions against the Rackrent family, something he blames on the fact that “he had been studying the law, and had made himself Attorney Quirk,” he proves his continued parental affection by trying to keep Jason safe from the anger of the townspeople (106).

What is left then is the Protestant aim to improve the Irish people by means of a reinventing moral upbringing. The Protestant authority over the training of the Irish included educating people in the position of power about the management of estates, matters of morality, and even the state of Ireland as a nation and the Irish as a people. In *Ennui* Lord Glenthorn is tutored by M’Leod on issues pertinent to his position as a landlord and during his brief loss of title Glenthorn is guided to the study of law and the practice of self-improvement by scholarship by Lord Y, whom Edgeworth modeled after Lord Charlemont, one of the men responsible for the creation of the Ascendancy Parliament (Butler 248). *Ormond*’s title character actually makes a list of all his faults: he is too passionate, drinks too much, is indiscriminate in his dealings with the opposite sex, and is susceptible to flattery (28). That these faults are put down to a failure of his guardian to properly educate him, while allowing him too much access to wealth, indicates that this is the natural state of the Irishman and must be corrected by proper moral upbringing.

Edgeworth shows no concern that this reinvention of “lower” Irish character is in the hands of a Scot in *Ennui*, and as she favors representative characters, so it is
worthwhile to analyze her treatment of the most prominent Scottish character in *Castle Rackrent* and *Ennui*, especially considering the fact that Ireland, last to join the United Kingdom, may have looked towards Scotland as an example for the transition from colonized to equal member of a larger, and more powerful, community. Certainly, Edgeworth was influenced by Scottish Enlightenment writers such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith in her ideas about politics, economics, and education.\(^5^3\) The appearance of the Scottish influence is negligible in the pre-Union text. The only Scottish character mentioned in *Castle Rackrent* is Sir Murtagh’s wife, whom Thady suspects has “Scotch blood in her veins” (68). Thady paints her as an overly strict, and tight-fisted, woman and religious zealot, running “a school for poor children” which is, in reality, a workhouse (69). The only other references to Scotland are when characters are looking for a location to marry without consent, threatening paternal bonds and rules for inheritance.

In the post-union *Ennui*, however, Scotland fares much better, at least in terms of Edgeworth’s agenda. Glenthorn confesses to having thought “all Scotchmen were crafty” and characterizes M’Leod as being typically stern, but two scenes break character, and stereotype, in important ways. The first is when Glenthorn insults M’Leod’s integrity. Flustered, the man starts “speaking in a broader Scotch accent,” saying “I should knock my equal down for putting to me” (259). In colonial and post-colonial texts, loss of cultural identity is a key issue, and Edgeworth’s emphasis on education, through M’Leod’s lectures, had, up to this point, suppressed outward manifestations of his cultural heritage. This “slip” into non-standard English (for Edgeworth has failed to capture Scots in this passage and instead relies on tonal translations of accent) has a curious affect of showing language as something to be conquered by education, while at the same time distancing M’Leod’s language from the “ignorant” speech of the poor Irish. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan suggests that this slip is indicative of the “insufficiency of educational reform alone” and that “it is only with the foreclosure of such Celtic identity that national character can be safely contained” (159)\(^5^4\). While Edgeworth emphasizes “doon,” just as she emphasizes most distinctly Irish phrases by either italicizing them in text or glossing them in notes, the rest of M’Leod’s break from standard English is not pointed out for special attention, and Glenthorn claims he “like[s]
[M’Leod] the better for this warmth” (259). To Glenthorn, the slip into “broader Scotch” is indicative of strong feeling, not of quaint ignorance. This strong feeling returns later in the novel when M’Leod says goodbye to the displaced Lord Glenthorn as “the tears stood in his eyes” (286-7). This emotional response is set against the character of the faithful, fawning, Irish servant. Here, loyalty has nothing to do with blind service or an intransigent belief in intractable boundaries between classes. It is something to do with earned respect through honorable actions, which is a lesson that allows Glenthorn to make himself a powerful citizen in the new homogenized kingdom.

While her treatment of permeable class boundaries and national identities promotes a strong, educated Irish middle-class that is aware of its origins and is unwilling to be a middleman between England and the Irish poor, Maria Edgeworth walks a fine line between patronizing the servant and peasant classes of Ireland and providing a critical and ironic treatment of other representations of the Irish in her use of language, stereotypes, and humorous tales of cultural differences that could be read as Irish ignorance. Castle Rackrent’s Jason Quirk is undeniably opportunistic, displaying none of the cloying loyalty to the Big House family. What makes him less sympathetic than his father, Thady? Both stand to benefit from the shift in power. Both come from the same class, same religion. Yet Thady has the brogue on his side, a touch of comedy that readers find entertaining. He’s at once an unreliable narrator and implicitly trusted simply because his motives appear quite obvious. Jason has education on his side and though this will lead him to become a more effective landowner it strips him of the quaint ignorance Edgeworth attaches to the Irish idiom. Ignorance itself is something that Thady equates with innocence, which speaks to Edgeworth’s views on how language contributes to the perception of narrative authority.

Maria Edgeworth claims that Thady Quirk is uneducated but while it is likely that he has had no formal training due to his status, his knowledge of the business of the estate and his familiarity with the law prove his intelligence. His purported ignorance then is linked almost solely to his use of the Irish idiom and, occasionally, his use of Irish bulls, which become a reflection on both class and national identity in Edgeworth’s works. The issue of narrative authority is addressed in the preface to Castle Rackrent:
That the ignorant may have their prejudices as well as the learned cannot be disputed; but we see and despise vulgar errors: we never bow to the authority of him who has no great name to sanction his absurdities. The partiality which blinds a biographer to the defects of his hero, in proportion as it is gross, ceases to be dangerous; but if it be concealed by the appearance of candour, which men of great abilities best know how to assume, it endangers our judgment sometimes, and sometimes our morals.  

Shortly before the publication of *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth attached a glossary, fearing that her English audience, and perhaps her educated Anglo-Irish audience, would have difficulty understanding common Irish idioms. Although this has been seen as an attempt to empiricize or historicize the idiomatic Irish, it reinforces the idea that Thady’s narrative is simplistic, straightforward and honest as long as you have the proper key. The undermining of the Irish language as a legitimate aspect of national identity and the complete absence of Gaelic culture help reduce Thady’s speech to a comedic tone.

Brian Hollingworth postulates, “it is reasonable to argue that Edgeworth, like most of the ‘plantation’ Irish, regarded Ireland as an estate rather than a country, a backward people rather than a nation” (44). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the intersection of Edgeworth’s ideas for education and her use of Irish brogue as an indicator of humor. The “quirkiness” of Thady’s narrative is illuminated in Edgeworth’s *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), an examination prompted by a letter by Jonathan Swift of the “laughable confusion of ideas” often attributed to the Irish (74). *Irish Bulls* at times points at dialect as some quaint aspect of local color that needs to be appreciated, yet Maria Edgeworth’s use of brogue (typically denoted by an emphasis of non-standard English with italics) in the Irish novels is often restricted to the lower classes or, in the case of Lady Clonbrony in *The Absentee*, people trying and failing to “pass” as English. The only time the use of non-standard English is praised in *Ennui* is when M’Leod lapses into broad Scots, and even then it is noted not as a strength of national character but as a proof against the stereotype of the Scot as being cold and reserved. Whatever her intent, Edgeworth’s relegation of dialect to an emotional outburst reinforces the idea that, under reasonable circumstances, language can and ought to be tamed by education. Pointing
out that this education was not always readily available to the lower class (Catholic) characters who speak in dialect may be part of her agenda for educational reform, but using dialect in her Irish Tales as a signifier of both ignorance and comedy and restricting that use to peasantry and domestic servants plays into the history of the Irish manservant in Restoration drama. Edgeworth and her biographers and critics have admitted to the obscured origins of the term “bull” defined as a ludicrous manifest contradiction in terms. According to the OED, “bull” in this sense is often accompanied by the “epithet Irish” but it was not always so. Still, there is a possibility that the Irish bull carries the connotation of Catholicism, or at least the papacy, as demonstrated by John Milton. “Whereas the Papist boasts himself to be a Roman Catholick, it is a meer contradiction, one of the Popes Bulls.” Unfortunately, much of the “local color” of Edgeworth’s Irish peasants and working class characters is based on a lack of formal education, and the barring of Catholics from the classroom leads to an ignorance that Edgeworth both deplores and stereotypes.

In the conclusion of *Irish Bulls*, Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth supposedly discard their “tone of irony” to “explicitly declare [their] opinion, that the Irish are an ingenious, generous people, that the bulls and blunders of which they are accused are often imputable to their neighbours, or that they are justifiable by ancient precedents, or that they are produced by their habits of using figurative and witty language” (157). It is a weakness that Edgeworth consistently relies on stock characters as representatives of a people and she is content to casually dismiss an entire Gaelic history as a persistent and harmful retardant while she sums up an entire nation and language in one sentence. Although she hints that the root of the concept of bulls as being uniquely Irish is really the failure of the English, or John Bull, to understand them, it is disturbing that her ultimate solution to the fundamental disunity between England and Ireland is a list of reliable histories and tour guides of Ireland to give the English an “accurate” picture and a complete overhaul of the education system and eradication of the dependence on Gaelic tradition to give the Irish the respect of the English. Perhaps the only throwback to this tradition is surviving in the microcosm of the Black Islands in *Ormond*, where King Corny and his servants exhibit a homeopathic view towards medicine that is portrayed as Gaelic primitivism, and the book concludes with Ormond planning to do “a great deal of
good, by carrying on his old friend’s improvements, and by farther civilizing the people of the Islands” who conveniently submit to this Anglo-Irish hegemony in the spirit of feudal loyalty (254).

When all else fails, Edgeworth falls back on the idea of innate wit and good humor which in the past contributed to the familiar “Irish buffoon.” Perhaps more disturbing then, given this treatment of Irish humor, is the threat of class violence and national rebellion she attaches to it in *Ennui*, “supplied by that half-witted Irishman, Joe Kelly, who had ingratiated himself with [Lord Glenthorn] by a mixture of drollery and simplicity, and by suffering himself to be continually [his] laughing-stock” (244). That this man, one of the few characters in Edgeworth’s Irish writings who is intentionally funny, turns out to be a United Irish rebel merely reinforces the idea that true, and safe, humor is best when it is a product of “ignorance” and slips of the tongue rather than intelligent wit.

Where active attempts to transgress class boundaries, such as Jason’s rise to power and the domestic servant Mrs. Petito attempting to adopt the fashions of a gentlewoman in *Ennui*, are reacted to with resentment and suspicion by the other characters, perhaps the most amusing passages in Edgeworth’s Irish tales not directly linked to Irish colloquialisms involve the attempts of *Ennui*’s Lady Clonbrony to deny her Irishness and her constant failure to mask her accent. Her English acquaintance Mrs. Dareville mocks this failure, “and you cawnt conceive the peens she teeks to talk of the téebles and cheers, and to thank Q, and with so much téeste to speak pure English” (2). Lady Clonbrony’s repeated reminder to family and friends that she is “an Henglishwoman bawn” is a point of both amusement and derision (15). Ironically, Edgeworth unconsciously aligns herself with the unsympathetic Dareville by using artful impersonation of accent as a means of humor while simultaneously recalling her own attempt to distance herself from the Irish in the conclusion of *Irish Bulls* when she and her father remind us that they “were neither born nor bred in Ireland” in her description of Lady Clonbrony, a character whose social aspirations are at odds with what she sees as a burden, her Irish heritage (152). Jason Quirk never attempts to deny his Irishness, and because he is never associated with the Irish idiom and is granted access to an improving Anglo-Irish education he can be taken seriously as a member of the new race that
M’Leod proposes in Ennui. While there is a degree of threat to the Anglo-Irish gentry with this development of a unified Irish identity, it does establish a level of Irish autonomy from England that the Ascendancy feared lost after the dissolution of their independent parliament with the Act of Union.
CONCLUSION

Maria Edgeworth created her Irish national tales at a time when the idea of nationhood was fluid and the idea of Ireland was at the center of a sectarian violence that would ultimately continue for centuries. These tales struggle with the inevitability of change: the Union, the shift of power between Protestants and Catholics, the creation of a modern economy – all of these changes wrought social, political, and economical upheavals. Straddling a thin line between pragmatism and nostalgia, Edgeworth presents us with ambiguous and ambivalent stories full of humor, colorful language, didacticism, and rich, round characters. Amongst these characters, the good agent stands as the poster child for the new Irish race. Educated in a mixed school, interested in improving the land and people, and conscious of the need to plan for the future rather than cling to the past, these agents bridge the gaps between classes, religions, and nationalities in order to bring stability to the country. Yet in her struggles to maintain Anglo-Irish legitimacy within the idea of national identity, Edgeworth uses her agents to promote an education system that suppresses “lower Irish” culture and ideas of charity and civic responsibility that reinforce the disparity of wealth and power between the landed gentry and their tenants.
REFERENCES

1 In “The Didacticism of Edgeworth’s Castle Rackrent” Gerry H. Brookes writes that, “while the story lacks the explicit moralizing of many of Edgeworth’s works, Castle Rackrent is implicitly and forcefully didactic, and its success lies in the unique harmony Edgeworth achieved among intention, subject matter, and form” (593). Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, Vol. 17, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn 1977): 593-605.

2 In “Commerce and Character in Maria Edgeworth” Teresa Michals observes that “Edgeworth insists that each of her characters not only stands for a class of persons but also, more specifically, stands with a family; it is only as the representative of this larger group that an individual can be trusted, by other characters or by the reader” (5). Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 49, No. 1 (June 1994): 1-20.

3 Brookes claims that “Castle Rackrent is often preferred among Maria Edgeworth’s works because it seems a creation free of her usual didacticism, a slice of Irish life presented without comment” (593).

4 This is the subtitle to Castle Rackrent. All page citations for Castle Rackrent and Ennui are taking from the collected paperback edition of these two novels edited by Marilyn Butler, unless otherwise noted (London: Penguin, 1992).


7 Castle Rackrent, 73.

8 In Edgeworth’s The Absentee, “Lord Colambre was surprised to find that his father's agent resided in Dublin: he had been used to see agents, or stewards, as they are called in England, live in the country, and usually on the estate of which they have the management” (81-82). Subsequent references to The Absentee are taken from the edition by Heidi Thomson and Kim Walker (London: Penguin, 1999).

10 *Castle Rackrent*, 66.

11 The italics in quotations throughout are Edgeworth’s unless otherwise noted.

12 Marilyn Butler’s *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 357. Similarly, Brookes claims that “Jason is not a paragon of business virtues set against the wastefulness of his former masters, but he has a kind of managerial cunning which they lack and to which they render themselves victims. He is selfish and self-aggrandizing, a wholly unattractive figure” (596).


14 According to Kit Kincade’s “A Whillaluh for Ireland: *Castle Rackrent* and Edgeworth’s Influence on Sir Walter Scott” in *An Uncomfortable Authority*, edited by Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske, “it was in that year that the British parliament repealed the Declaratory Act, thereby restoring Irish legislative sovereignty and causing a short-lived period of political independence under the parliamentary leadership of Henry Grattan” (255). (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004): 250-269.


19 *Castle Rackrent*, 100.

21 *Castle Rackrent*, 110.

22 *Castle Rackrent*, 87.

23 Maria Edgeworth’s *Ormond*, published in 1817, was the last of her Irish novels. Because the plot is more concerned with the reformation of a gentleman, is set in France for a good portion, and does not feature any named agent, it is not discussed in detail in this study. All page numbers refer to the edition found in Vol. 8 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth*, edited by Claire Connolly (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999).


26 Excerpts are taken from the joint edition of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976).

27 In Edmund Burke’s *Thoughts and Details* he writes that “without all doubt, charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty upon all Christians, next in order after the payments of debts, full as strong, and by nature made infinitely more delightful to us.”

28 *Ennui*, 215.

29 *The Absentee*, 104.

30 For an analysis of Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s ideas about draining the bogs on his estate and developing the land, see Brian Hollingworth’s *Maria Edgeworth’s Irish Writing* (New York: St. Marin’s, 1997). He argues that, “when comparing Ireland with England, to the Edgeworths nothing symbolized Irish backwardness more clearly than the Irish bog” (84).

31 *The Absentee* also shows a preoccupation with the state of the roads as symbolic of the decay brought on by absenteeism and mismanaged estates.

32 *Castle Rackrent*, 99.

34 Butler, 394.

35 Butler, 85.

36 *Tree of Liberty*, 52.


39 Kevin Whelan, *Tree of Liberty*.


41 Butler, 181.

42 Whelan, 60.

43 Butler, 182.

44 *Castle Rackrent*, 63.

45 *The Absentee*, 80. Maria Edgeworth is the first to use this term for the upwardly mobile middle class.

46 *Ennui*, 216.


53 Butler, 76.


55 In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* Terry Eagleton writes that Thady’s “loquacity is a kind of artlessness, an unstauchable excess of speech; but it is also, so we may suspect, the rhetorical strategy of the ‘lower Irish’, disarming authority by its rumbustious spontaneity and wrapping unpalatable truths in its endless parataxis” (London: Verso, 1995), 162.

56 “‘And what is a barrack-room, pray, my dear?’ were the first words I ever heard out of my lady's lips. ‘No matter, my dear!’ said he, and went on talking to me, ashamed like I should witness her ignorance. To be sure, to hear her talk one might have taken her for an innocent, for it was, ‘what's this, Sir Kit? and what's that, Sir Kit?’ all the way we went” (77).

57 *Castle Rackrent*, 62.

58 For the publication history of *Castle Rackrent*, see Marilyn Butler’s *Maria Edgeworth, A Literary Biography*, chapter 8.

59 For an interesting reading on the significance of a servant narrator, see Robert Tracy’s “‘The Cracked Lookingglass of a Servant’: Inventing the Colonial Novel,” *Rereading Texts, Rethinking Critical Presuppositions: Essays in Honour of H. M. Daleski*, edited by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Leona Toker, and Shuli Barzilai (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 1997): 197-212. In the framework of post-colonial studies, Tracy claims that Thady’s story “relies on the ambiguities of spoken narrative and on the ambiguities of the master/servant (for which read also colonist/colonized) relationship or dependency.” For
an alternative reading, see Bruce Robbins’s *The Servant’s Hand* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986). In his chapter on “Exposition: The Servant as Narrator” he suggests that “controversies over the ‘reliability’ of narrators can be taken as proof of the aura of legitimacy that provocatively surrounds them” (92).

Edgeworth’s treatment of the Irish language is often contrasted with Sydney Owenson’s embrace of Gaelic in her national tales, such as *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806). Often hailed as the first national tale, this novel includes several examples of Gaelic, both in the text and in the accompanying editorial notes, and promotes the education of the English hero in Gaelic in order to bolster the Union between England and Ireland.

In *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790*, Seamus Deane writes that “Edgeworth believed that Ireland was backward, unenlightened, poor, ill led, even romantic, not because it was a colonial culture, but because it was Ireland” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 32.


“The vein of whimsical humor that tends to surround [servants] is in part perhaps a tribute to the notion that here is one category of prosperous, undeserving poor for whom it is unnecessary to feel sorry” (Robbins 16).
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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