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“Still Blundering into Sense”
Maria Edgeworth,
her context,
her legacy



BIBLIOTECA DI STUDI DI FILOLOGIA MODERNA

ISSN 2420-8361 (ONLINE)

– 50 –

DIPARTIMENTO DI FORMAZIONE, LINGUE, INTERCULTURA, PSICOLOGIA
Università degli Studi di Firenze

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BIBLIOTECA DI STUDI DI FILOLOGIA MODERNA

Collana Open Access fondata nel 2004
dal Dipartimento di Filologia Moderna dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze

Direttore

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(<https://www.forlilpsi.uni.fi.it/vp-289-laboratorio-editoriale-open-access-ricerca-formazione-e-produzione.html>)
Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia
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“STILL BLUNDERING INTO SENSE”
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Fiorenzo Fantaccini and Raffaella Leproni

with the contributions of

C. de Petris, I. Campbell Ross, S. Manly,
E. Ní Chuilleanáin, L. Azara, E. Cotta Ramusino,
M.A. Stefanelli, M. Gammaitoni, F. Luppi, C.M. Fernández Rodríguez,
A. Douglas, V. Popova, A. Mori, R. Leproni,
Edgeworth Society

FIRENZE UNIVERSITY PRESS

2019

“Still Blundering into Sense”. Maria Edgeworth, her context, her legacy / edited by Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Raffella Leproni ; with the contributions of C. de Petris, I. Campbell Ross, S. Manly, E. Ní Chuilleanáin, L. Azara, E. Cotta Ramusino, M.A. Stefanelli, M. Gammaitoni, F. Luppi, C.M. Fernández Rodríguez, A. Douglas, V. Popova, A. Mori, R. Leproni, Edgeworth Society. – Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2019 (Biblioteca di Studi di Filologia Moderna ; 50)

<https://www.fupress.com/isbn/9788864539713>

ISSN 2420-8361 (online)

ISBN 978-88-6453-971-3 (online PDF)

I prodotti editoriali di Biblioteca di Studi di Filologia Moderna: Collana, Riviste e Laboratorio vengono promossi dal Coordinamento editoriale del Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze e pubblicati, con il contributo del Dipartimento, ai sensi dell'accordo di collaborazione stipulato con la Firenze University Press l'8 maggio 2006 e successivamente aggiornato (Protocollo d'intesa e Convenzione, 10 febbraio 2009 e 19 febbraio 2015). Il Laboratorio (<<http://www.lilsi.unifi.it/vp-82-laboratorio-editoriale-open-access-ricerca-formazione-e-produzione.html>>, <laboa@lilsi.unifi.it>) promuove lo sviluppo dell'editoria open access, svolge ricerca interdisciplinare nel campo, adotta le applicazioni alla didattica e all'orientamento professionale degli studenti e dottorandi dell'area umanistica, fornisce servizi alla ricerca, formazione e progettazione. Per conto del Coordinamento, il Laboratorio editoriale Open Access provvede al processo del doppio referaggio anonimo e agli aspetti giuridico-editoriali, cura i workflow redazionali e l'editing, collabora alla diffusione.

Editing e impaginazione: Arianna Antonielli (capored.), con Margherita Barbagli, Alessia Gentile, Sara Lo Piano, Gianmarco Porro, Arianna Trabalzini (tirocinanti).

We wish to thank the Embassy of Ireland in Rome, most especially His Excellency the Ambassador Colm Ó Floinn and the Cultural Attaché Darragh Higgins; the EFACIS (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies), and in particular the former President Seán Crosson and the EFACIS Project Director Hedwig Schwall, for their support in the realization of this project; the Edgeworth Society for the permission granted to publish the photographs included in Carla de Petris' essay; the National Portrait Gallery, London, for permission to use two illustrations in Carla de Petris' contribution; Dr Lydia Ferguson and the Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, for granting permission to use the three images in Aileen Douglas' essay.

Progetto grafico di Alberto Pizarro Fernández, Pagina Maestra snc.

Certificazione scientifica delle Opere

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Pubblicato da Firenze University Press

Firenze University Press

Università degli Studi di Firenze

via Cittadella, 7, 50144 Firenze, Italy

www.fupress.com

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
INTRODUCTION <i>Fiorenzo Fantaccini, Raffaella Leproni</i>	IX
MARIA EDGEWORTH: "PORTRAIT OF A LADY" <i>Carla de Petris</i>	1
MARIA EDGEWORTH IN CONTEXT	
MARIA EDGEWORTH AND THE CULTURE OF IMPROVEMENT <i>Ian Campbell Ross</i>	29
MARIA EDGEWORTH AS POLITICAL THINKER: GOVERNMENT, REBELLION, REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT <i>Susan Manly</i>	47
DOMESTIC SECRETS IN MARIA EDGEWORTH'S NOVELS AND TALES <i>Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin</i>	61
WOMEN, CONTEMPORARIES, LEGACY	
WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN THE EIGHTEENTH AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY <i>Liliosa Azara</i>	81
MARIA EDGEWORTH AND HER LEGACY: THE CASE OF ELIZABETH BOWEN <i>Elena Cotta Ramusino</i>	109
EDGEWORTH THROUGH THE LENS OF FULLER <i>Maria Anita Stefanelli</i>	125

MARIA EDGEWORTH AND MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: THEIR
CONTEXT AT THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY 141
Milena Gammaitoni

ABSENT DESPITE SIMILARITIES: MARIA EDGEWORTH AND
THE IRISH STAGE 157
Fabio Luppi

MANOEUVRING (1809) AND *THE ABSENTEE* (1812) REVISITED:
MARIA EDGEWORTH'S *INTRIGANTES* AND JANE AUSTEN'S
LADY SUSAN 179
Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez

EDUCATION AND HERITAGE

MARIA EDGEWORTH: CONVERSATIONS IN THE "NEW
WORLD" OF CHILDREN 205
Aileen Douglas

GENDER AND EDUCATION: MARIA EDGEWORTH'S *EARLY*
LESSONS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS 223
Violeta Popova

MARIA EDGEWORTH IN THE PRACTICE OF EDUCATION:
A GREAT WRITER AND A MODERN TEACHER 239
Amelia Mori

EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE, DISPOSITION: FROM *THE*
PARENT'S ASSISTANT TO HARRINGTON 247
Raffaella Leproni

APPENDIX

EDGEWORTHSTOWN: THE LANDSCAPE FROM WHERE
MARIA EDGEWORTH DREW HER INSPIRATION 287
Edgeworth Society

CONTRIBUTORS 295

INDEX OF NAMES 299

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to express their deep gratitude to

the Embassy of Ireland in Rome, most especially His Excellency the Ambassador Colm Ó Floinn and the Cultural Attaché Darragh Higgins; the EFACIS (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies), and in particular the former President Seán Crosson and the EFACIS Project Director Hedwig Schwall, for their support in the realization of this project; the Edgeworth Society for the permission granted to publish the photographs included in Carla de Petris' essay; the National Portrait Gallery, London, for permission to use two illustrations in Carla de Petris' contribution; Dr Lydia Ferguson and the Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, for granting permission to use the three images in Aileen Douglas' essay. Our gratitude also goes to the students and trainees of the LabOA/Open Access Publishing Workshop of the Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI), of the University of Florence, for their invaluable cooperation in the editorial workflow. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the contribution made by Alessia Gentile and Sara Lo Piano. Last but not least, our unreserved thanks for her scrupulous competence to Arianna Antonielli, our indefatigable managing editor, a model of patience and courtesy. Last but not least, the editors owe a debt of gratitude to Beatrice Töttösy, General Editor of "Biblioteca di Studi di Filologia Moderna" and Director of LabOA, for accepting the book in the BSFM Series, and to the Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology (FORLILPSI) for the financial support in publishing this volume.

INTRODUCTION

Fiorenzo Fantaccini and Raffaella Leproni

After 250 years, Maria Edgeworth still proves to be a formidable author(ess); she was a pivotal figure at her time, and her works, branching into many different disciplines – some of which have probably developed starting from her very contribution – inspired her contemporaries and still appeal to scholars dealing with a great variety of human sciences, so much so that her work “resists easy categorization” (Nash 2006, xv). As Aileen Douglas cleverly points out, though, “as an educationalist, writer of children’s stories and novelist, Edgeworth had a conspicuously long and successful career; today, her works appear on the curricula of courses in Irish Studies, Women’s Studies, Children’s Literature and Romanticism. Yet, while Edgeworth’s range of endeavour is noted, its significance remains underappreciated” (2007, 581). This lack of acknowledgement of Edgeworth’s role in the foundation and development of modern thinking has only partially been re-addressed; in recent years, numerous studies have underlined Edgeworth’s significance in both her contemporary and our contemporary literary, cultural, scientific and educational panorama. The majority of her works, however, are not generally considered as a well-established part of the canon – except for her “regional novels” -, apparently being labelled as minor productions.

This collection of international contributions, as well as celebrating Maria Edgeworth’s 250th anniversary, proposes some further investigation on two fundamental aspects of her thought and legacy, still little examined in depth: her interest in the education of the young (and of the adults supposed to educate them) in an empirical perspective, explicitly scientific, open to different religious confessions and addressed to all social classes; and the urge for a wider and shared tolerance for alterity. The various essays in the collection offer some insight on the multi-layered relationships between the universe of education and its relationship with the development of knowledge, literature – particularly children’s literature – and pedagogy, as well as between women’s emancipation and the development of both individual and social identity. Their common ground is a dialogic perspective aiming to connect areas of scholarship, which the academia generally classifies into separate research fields.

The “*Portrait of a Lady*” drawn by Carla de Petris introduces Maria Edgeworth to the reader providing a thorough account of her as a real person: not only the writer, the authoress, the educator, but also the woman of her times, and beyond. The place she lived in, what people thought of her, what she thought of the real people of her everyday life. de Petris visited Edgeworthstown and collected photographs, paintings and drawings that she uses “to present a portrait of Maria Edgeworth, the historical, geographical and social context within which she lived and the cultural impact of her long life” (*infra*, 1), highlighting the “foregrounding aspects and traits of Maria Edgeworth’s character, of the places where she lived and ended her long life, along with a description of the socio-cultural and historical context in which she developed her intellectual commitment as a writer and pedagogue” (*infra*, 1).

The first section of the book, “**Maria Edgeworth in Context**”, collects three essays offering some inspiring perspectives on the role of thought and literature in the mechanisms of power balancing the multi-faceted context Edgeworth contributed to build. At the dawn of the XIX century, history was at a turning point for Ireland: the years that led to the Act of Union (which came into effect on January 1, 1801), as well as those which followed it, were ebullient of animated debate on the many questions concerning the changes that such a resolution would and could bring. Changes (some saw even some opportunity) that would not affect only the higher spheres of the central power, but above all the everyday life of citizens, who were now called to develop a sense of belonging and participation into a new vision of their country, which was still unclear. In this context, Edgeworth – English by birth and fortune - wrote in defence of Irish identity, formulating her vision in terms of respect rather than tolerance, thus pushing herself a little ahead of the Enlightened ideas brought by the French and the American Revolution only a few years before.

Ian Campbell Ross’s essay is concerned with the many social, political and national implications of the untranslatable idea of “improvement”, a word which significantly shifts “colour and meaning” through time. His essay skilfully underlines how the concept of a “gradual and cumulative betterment” informs Edgeworth’s whole production, and remarks how the “patriotic, socially aware, and outwardly altruistic desire by both Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell, to ‘improve’ Ireland can only be fully understood in the context of a centuries-long attempt by England to Anglicize, as well as rule, the neighbouring island” (*infra*, 29).

The relationship of Maria Edgeworth’s *Practical Education* (1798) to her political philosophy in the 1790s and beyond is explored in Susan Manly’s contribution. Maria’s reading of the most influential thinkers of her time all around Europe, and in particular of Beccaria, gave literary

and philosophical shape to her “personal experiences of and reflections on political and social conflict in late eighteenth-century Ireland: a conflict that she and her father saw as the consequence of unrepresentative government, unjust laws, and the misrepresentation of the people” – the very people Edgeworth “saw, heard, talked to”, and of which circumstances she “obtained full knowledge” (*infra*, 48).

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s essay delves into the distribution of space and its role in the circulation of secrets in some of Edgeworth’s narrative. In the long eighteenth century, the need for a distinction between public and private and the consequent emergence of domesticity become a crucial instance of the modern division of knowledge. Edgeworth’s secrets are part of the life of narrative, and do not aim at long-standing puzzlement in the reader: they “do not create suspense but reveal character”, being “connected with the layout of a household, orderly or otherwise, and with the exploitation of spaces as they reflect the distribution of resources”. The relation of masters and servants, “the anxieties created (on both sides) by closeness to, or distance from, the centre of power”, the “concern for a proper degree of privacy with the orderly, ‘English’ ... manner of inhabiting a dwelling” (*infra*, 75) bring the reader along the corridors of Maria’s narrative mansion, as well as along the paths of the building of a new, self-aware subjectivity.

The second section, “**Women, contemporaries, legacy**”, aims at exploring the impact of Edgeworth’s personality and works on other women engaged in cultural production, considering the social acceptance they encountered, and tracing similarities and differences in the development of their view, especially concerning the new status of women following the Enlightenment debate.

Liliosa Azara traces a brief outline of the history of the female condition in the western world during the eighteenth century, noting the role and type of culture which fostered the separation between the public and private spheres of life. Azara’s research postulates that “the silence of women within the latter ambit should act as a guarantee of the solidity of the patriarchal structures upon which society was founded” (*infra*, 81), and historical events failed to provide a space where women might be the protagonists of collective action, in a new dimension favouring the construction of female identity. The cornerstone of the female form of “dissidence” some exceptional women like Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges and George Sand were able to carry forward, was, emblematically, the public use of their intellect.

Elena Cotta Ramusino explores some consequences of the diffusion of Edgeworth’s regional novels. Analysing Bowen’s “dialogue with the concerns posed by the genre” of the *Big House* Novel, focussing on her autobiographical production and on the part Edgeworth’s influence played

on it, Cotta Ramusino highlights how Bowen reveals her social anxieties resulting in an “impending sense of disappearance of her class” (*infra*, 110), and in the exploration of her own “hyphenated” Anglo-Irish identity.

Maria Anita Stefanelli skilfully tracks down the influence of Edgeworth on Margaret Fuller, who mentioned Maria in her *Memoirs*, her letters, and her proto-feminist essay, “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” “making various references to Edgeworth’s usefulness and practicality”, sketching remarkable similarities and divergences in their opinions. Though living on the two opposite sides of the Ocean and belonging to a different generation, “they undoubtedly shared a love of learning and a rejection of prejudice. They had their own intellectual pursuits, and played a role in the social, educational, and cultural life of their own nations as well as those abroad” (*infra*, 127), in pursuing a freer society.

In her contribution Milena Gammaitoni revives a widely discussed topic such as “the lack of an egalitarian education between men and women” between the XVIII and XIX centuries (and beyond), offering some hints on how Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth “clarified and criticized, in different tones and modalities, the social dynamics of which they were witnesses” (*infra*, 141). In particular, Gammaitoni chooses *Belinda* – that Mitzi Myers claimed to be the “best and most misread” novel of the 1790s – as a most interesting literary output to investigate the controversial relationship which linked the two authors¹.

Fabio Luppi deals with the multifaceted implications of the word “absence” in relation to Maria Edgeworth’s dramas. Contemporary and later criticism seems to have paid very little attention to Edgeworth’s theatrical attempts, if not neglected them completely “within the misrecognition of her much more important literary production in the last centuries”. Even such writers as “the champions of the Celtic revival and of the Irish theatre”, W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, who might have had an interest in recovering Edgeworth’s example, did not consider her works. According to Luppi, “the lack of attention on Edgeworth’s dramatic works with the misrecognition of her position in the Irish literary world sadly mirrors the fate of other Irish women playwrights of the twentieth century, such as ‘the two ladies’ of the Abbey Theatre, Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy” (*infra*, 158).

In her essay Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez analyses the striking coincidences between Edgeworth’s heroine in *Manoeuvring* and *Lady Susan*, but also examines how the Anglo-Irish author went further and originally adapted her first *manoeuvrer* to a new context in one of her

¹ See Myers (2000) where she challenges some earlier feminist assumptions about the novel, also questioning the perspective by which *Belinda* is “coercively domestic” (104), or that Harriot Freke can be read as queer.

most famous Irish tales published in 1812, just around the time Austen revised *Lady Susan*, which comes to be a reworking of Edgeworth's stories. Fernández Rodríguez also examines the narrative technique employed by Edgeworth and the development of the Edgeworthian type that Austen would make popular with *Lady Susan* herself.

The final section deals with “**Education and heritage**”. Maria, like her father, firmly believed in the value and the role of education in the growth of citizens and nations. In over forty years of career, she developed a remarkable breadth of genders, topics and contents, which, facing the need for education at all stages, link the social and cultural context she lived in with questions of religious, national, social and gender identity in terms of citizenship and respect. Her wide-range analysis of the human being, conveyed into texts of various genres and scope that reached a vast and diversified reading public², meant to contribute to the formation of a critical spirit, both individual and collective, fostering the knowledge of one's own role in the world. The idea is not only modern, but it also represents one of the most urgent issues of our contemporary educational goals.

Aileen Douglas identifies Maria Edgeworth's ability to create “credible child protagonists with distinctive voices”, whom the reader can follow in their process of growing through different stories, as her most distinctive contribution to the development of children's literature. Her collections of short stories for children shape “a world of conversation in which adults listen to children, and juvenile readers hear their peers speak” (*infra*, 205) – a best practice to suggest to all parents and educators. The references Edgeworth makes to books she deemed “useful, or entertaining books for children” (*infra*, 281) by other writers, also, while offering food for thought to her contemporaries, provide us with a deep and well-reasoned insight into the range of children's literature at the time.

In her essay Violeta Popova compares the project on shaping education means and purposes according to the different gender of children that Edgeworth proposes in her stories, with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). Maria and her father's belief in the value of “the cultivation of understanding” and on the role of scientific subjects in positively influencing women's domestic life, enabling women to be “both agreeable and happy” (*infra*, 228), is at the basis of many exemplary characters Edgeworth sketched (especially in *Early Lessons*) on the subject. Her stories and views caught on with many imitators, across different social classes; so much so that they even influenced a young Queen Victoria.

² According to W. J. McCormack (2004), she was “the most commercially successful novelist of her age”; see also Meaney, O'Dowd Whelan (2013, 71).

Amelia Mori's contribution demonstrates how Maria Edgeworth's stories are still alive and up-to-date in many respects, as they have been serving as experimental authentic materials in teaching English as a second language in Italian Primary Schools for the last ten years. Different projects have been carried out in Primary and Pre-School classes using "The Purple Jar" and "The Little Merchants", among others, to introduce English through storytelling and CLIL activities. Their great educational value, as well as their moral intent, "are still relevant to our pupils" (*infra*, 239), while the style and structure of the tales allow teachers to foster a communicative approach and peer-coaching in the classroom, providing useful resources that every teacher can rely on.

Raffaella Leproni's analysis concerns Edgeworth's conception of education as a science, a "strategy for processing information through experience". Leproni provides a variety of evidence of how Maria's writings centre on "identity, citizenship, and morality; ideas that she (and her father) deem necessary to achieve some degree of happiness in both private and social life" (*infra*, 280). Texts designed for children are at the core of the Edgeworths' educational project, as they believe that "children derive their first impressions of the world from the narrations they receive, mostly from the books they read or have read to them, as well as [...] from the example they receive from adults, whether through direct comparison or reading" (*infra*, 264). Their attentive social analysis also allowed them to understand the urge for "enhancing the precarious situation of schooling in Ireland" scaffolding "the development of a new method of teacher training" (*infra*, 253). In her texts, in fact, Maria often questions the role of institutions and authority on the subject, maintaining the pivotal importance of a life-long perspective in making knowledge a useful experience for the development of individuals into active, happy citizens.

In the Appendix, the Edgeworth Society (Edgeworthstown) kindly offered their contribution with a historical overview on *Edgeworthstown: The Landscape from Where Maria Edgeworth drew her Inspiration*, describing the vicissitudes of the territory that hosted Maria and her family, as well as the many people who played a part in preserving Edgeworth's heritage and legacy.

In the collective feeling, memory is not static but cyclic. The research for recovering identity goes through the re-discovering of the rites and actions of social tradition. We hope that this collection will not only bring back a memory of Edgeworth's work and achievements, but also and above all function as a flywheel to inspire new scholars, students, and (curious) readers on experimenting new strategies on the good old paths. After all, education – as Maria stated repeatedly – *is* a science, so once we develop an interest in it, we must bear its consequences with good humour.

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MARIA EDGEWORTH: “PORTRAIT OF A LADY”

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Abstract:

Using visual material – photographs, paintings and drawings – collected by the author of the present article during her stay in Edgeworthstown, the idea is to present a portrait of Maria Edgeworth, the historical, geographical and social context within which she lived and the cultural impact of her long life.

Keywords: Edgeworthstown, Maria Edgeworth, Richard Lovell Edgeworth

Maria Edgeworth [Figure 1], the Anglo-Irish writer and educator who first coined the definition *Science of Education*, and who, thanks to the stories she wrote for various developmental age-groups – from infancy to adolescence – to her theoretical texts and to her novels, was famous during the whole of the nineteenth century, only to be suddenly and unexpectedly forgotten not only abroad but in her own country, due most probably to that anti-English and anti-Ascendancy sentiment which prevailed in Ireland during most of the twentieth century. Only now have scholars, especially those of the English-speaking countries, begun to rediscover this writer and her works.

On this occasion – which for the very first time sees Italy bring together in a sole volume contributions regarding the works of Maria Edgeworth by Italian and foreign scholars written to honour the 250th anniversary of her birth – it appears opportune to provide a portrait of this authoress against the historical and social background to which she belonged. Availing myself of visual material like photographs, paintings and drawings, I would like to offer those who will read the essays included here, data capable of foregrounding aspects and traits of Maria Edgeworth’s character, of the places where she lived and ended her long life, along with a description of the socio-cultural and historical context in which she developed her intellectual commitment as a writer and pedagogue.



Fig. 1 – *Maria Edgeworth* (1807), by John Downman.
Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

To outline this portrait and provide visual documentation capable of highlighting it, in the summer of 2017 a tour was organized to Edgeworthstown or Mostrim (from the Irish place name *Meathas Troim*, which some translate as “frontier of the elder tree” others as “fertile ridge”) in County Longford, where the family, besides the name, has left behind important traces of its presence there along with Edgeworthstown Rectory [Figure 2] which hosts the Edgeworth Society whose mission is to preserve and foster the memory not only of the Edgeworth family, but also that of some illustrious visitors like Oliver Goldsmith, who resided here to study, and Isola¹, the only sister of Oscar Wilde, who died here of meningitis, on the 23rd February 1857, while staying with her aunt and her uncle, the Reverend William Noble, and who is buried here in the little local cemetery [Figure 3].

¹Isola Francesca Emily Wilde was named thus by way of tribute to Iseult [Isolde] of Ireland, protagonist of the famous Celtic legend, wife of Mark of Cornwall and lover of the Cornish knight, Sir Tristan. Isola shared the name Francesca with her mother the nationalist poetess “Speranza”; Emily was the name of her maternal aunt. According to Oscar, Isola lit up their lives like “a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home” (Fitzsimons 2015, <<https://womens-museumofireland.ie/articles/isola-wilde--2>>, 10/2019).



Fig. 2 – Edgeworthstown Rectory , Edgeworth Society Office.
Photo by Carla de Petris. Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). *Poems. I.*

“Requiescat”

TREAD lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone
She is at rest.

Peace, Peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life’s buried here,
Heap earth upon it.



Fig. 3 – Grave of Isola Wilde (1857-1867). Photo by Carla de Petris

The original gravestone, which had deteriorated over time, was replaced in 2011 by a modern one on which the first verses of her brother’s poem “Requi-

escat" (1881) are engraved. Oscar was so devoted to the memory of his only sister, taken from him at only ten years of age, that he kept a lock of her hair in a small embroidered satin purse until his own death. He dedicated one of his most beautiful poems to her, a poem which Yeats included in an anthology. Recently, in Philadelphia, a notebook was found containing the various versions of the poem Wilde continued to write for the rest of his life. This strong, almost incestuous bond between Oscar and his sister throws new light upon the complex personality of this Irish author.

To discuss the historical context in which Maria Edgeworth lived and worked we need to examine Ireland's five-centuries-old colonisation. The process, known as the *Elizabethan Reconquest of Ireland*, begun in the sixteenth century under Henry VIII, was continued during the long reign of his daughter Elizabeth I. We also need to grasp the semantic nucleus of another term which will appear frequently here: *Protestant Ascendancy* or more specifically *Anglo-Irish Ascendancy*. This expression is used to define the social class to which Maria Edgeworth and her father Richard Lovell belonged and whose shortcomings they criticised, while assuming full responsibility for the role their status imposed upon them not only in theory but also in practice. The literal meaning of *Protestant Ascendancy* is "Protestant supremacy or dominion" and refers to the social class which was hegemonic in Ireland between the sixteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth centuries from a political, economic and social point of view and which was happy and proud to call itself the Protestant Nation. This numerical minority included landlords of immense estates of English origin, the clergy of the Anglican Church – Church of Ireland or Church of England – and the professions, politics and public life, all inaccessible to entire sectors of the population, first of all Roman Catholics, but also members of some non-Anglican Protestant churches like the Presbyterians, Methodists and Quakers, as well as non-Christians, that is, Jews and atheists. Not only, but the majority of poor Irish Anglicans were also socially and politically marginalised, as were their mainland British social peers, as voting was based on property and income, a minimum of 40 shilling freehold, until the *Reform Acts* (1832-1928) extended the franchise. The estates upon which the power of the Anglican minority rested were lands some of which had been seized from their legitimate Irish Catholic owners, first by Henry VIII after his breach with Rome, later by his daughter Elizabeth at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and later and massively, in a succession of seventeenth-century confiscations. These lands were either donated in exchange for military or political service or simply sold to "loyal" English Protestants, hence the terms "Anglo-Irish", "Protestant Ascendancy" and "Protestant Nation".

In 1619, in compliance with this policy, King James I/VI granted 600 acres of Irish land in the County of Longford – seized from the Roman Catholic Irish O'Farrells – to Sir Francis and Lady Jane Edgeworth in the area which still bears the family's name [Figure 4].



Fig. 4 – *Sir Francis and Lady Jane Edgeworth.*

Reproductions of original paintings in Edgeworth Society Office, Edgeworthstown Rectory.
 Photo by Carla de Petris. Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

An interesting personage links the Edgeworth family to the troubled season of the French Revolution that is, the Jesuit Abbé Edgeworth de Firmont (1745-1807), contemporary of Richard Lovell's, born in Edgeworthstown, the son of a Protestant clergyman who converted to Roman Catholicism, moved to France and was destined to hear Louis XVI's last confession and administer the last rites to him on the scaffold [Figure 5].



Fig. 5 – *Abbé Edgeworth de Firmont, Jesuit.*

Reproduction in Edgeworth Society Office, Edgeworthstown Rectory.
 Photo by Carla de Petris. Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

Inspired by the American and French Revolutions the privileged Anglo-Irish Protestant class began to seek redress from the mother country with regard, in particular, to England's economic policies which harmed the local economy as denounced in the famous *Drapier's Letters* (1724-1725) by Jonathan Swift. The *Irish Patriot Party*, founded by Henry Grattan in the 1770s sought forms of local autonomy from the "sister isle" (as the Scottish writer Walter Scott ironically called Britain), managed to obtain a Constitution which permitted the institution of an autonomous parliament in Dublin, known as "Grattan's Parliament", which was allowed to address a limited number of local issues and proved of such little avail that the radical movement of the United Irishmen, which brought together Catholics and Protestants and which, led by the Anglicans like Henry Joy McCracken and Theobald Wolfe Tone with the support of Revolutionary France, rose out and was beaten in 1798 after a few memorable though fleeting military victories. The poorly equipped armed insurrection of 1798 bid for independence caused England to retaliate politically by proclaiming and enforcing the *Act of Union*, which proclaimed the incorporation of Ireland into the United Kingdom from the 1st January 1801 and the administration of Ireland directly from Westminster. This meant applying to Ireland what Britain had failed to impose upon the American colonies, that is, "endogenous colonialism", as it was aptly defined by Brian Friel, the country's greatest twentieth-century playwright. The abolition of Grattan's Parliament caused the decline of Dublin and the consequent transfer of many Anglo-Irish landowners to England, known as "absentee landlords", whose Irish properties were expected to finance their long sojourns, often permanent residence in London at London prices, which meant raising the rents of their tenants to such a degree as to bring them to destitution. These strangulation rents were known as "rack rents". This brusque turn of political events was to inspire the Irish lawyer Daniel O'Connell leader of the Roman Catholic majority of the Irish population to campaign for the Repeal of the Union after he had successfully pushed Roman Catholic Emancipation through the Parliament of Westminster in 1829. Elected by his co-religionists to represent them in Westminster O'Connell had fought for and obtained Catholic Emancipation not only for Ireland but also for the whole of the United Kingdom, including England, where a minority of Catholics had remained faithful to Rome from the time of the Henrician reformation. His bid for the Repeal of the Union failed and Ireland remained a part of the United Kingdom until 1922.

Catholic Emancipation had been obtained thanks to the fears of the British Establishment that the Kingdom's Dissenters and disgruntled labourers might resort to armed revolt as the Irish Catholics had done in 1798 and the French Population had done during the Revolution. At that time, in Ireland, the 40 shilling freehold voters in certain county constituencies had engaged in a revolt against the traditional political dictation of their landlords and in July 1828 O'Connell himself soundly defeated the sitting MP

William Vesey Fitzgerald in the Clare by-election. The prospect of further clamorous Catholic victories and fears of an armed Roman Catholic crusade persuaded Wellington and Peel, urged by Richard Colley Wellesley, brother of Wellington and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1822 to 1828, to advise George IV to grant Catholic Emancipation.

The Irish situation was further complicated by the Great Irish Potato Famine which decimated the country's population in the 1840s, led to waves of emigration to North America and bestowed a nationalistic stamp on the Irish *revanchist* movement against British domination. The new-born feeling of Irish nationality and original cultural identity which ensued – by a strange quirk of historical destiny – took place just when the use of the ancient Irish Gaelic language began to yield to English, something deemed necessary to favour the emigration of Irish men and women to English-speaking countries, a tendency eloquently portrayed by the above-mentioned Brian Friel in his play *Translations* (1980).

It took one hundred and twenty years more of struggles to see at least a part of the island become an independent republic of strong Catholic derivation, where many of the Anglo-Irish felt themselves marginalised. The glorious past of this part of the population is represented by Irish-born politicians like Grattan, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, one of the unfortunate leaders of the United Irishmen along with Wolfe Tone. Even Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was born in Ireland, as were scientists like Molyneux and Hamilton, philosophers like Berkeley and Burke, eighteenth-century writers like Swift, Sterne and Sheridan and more recent authors like Bram Stoker, Synge, Wilde, Shaw and Bowen and radical exponents of modernity such as Beckett and O'Casey.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the *Celtic Revival* movement was founded by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, both members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and may be seen as representing a line of continuity between the era of Grattan and that "terrible beauty" of the 1916 Easter Rising, headed by Pearse. The illusory vision was soon swept away in 1919 by the civil war of the early 1920s which witnessed the destruction of many of the homes of the *Ascendancy* as well as the insurgence of a feeling of revulsion towards the *Anglo-Irish* cultural tradition leading to that *damnatio memoriae* which also affected Maria Edgeworth and placed her and her writings in the shade.

As already mentioned above, Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his daughter Maria held prominent positions within the Ascendancy of their time. Richard was a member of Grattan's Parliament from 1798 until its abolition by the *Act of Union* of 1800.

It is by no way surprising that in 2011 an ex-Taoiseach [Prime Minister] of the Irish Republic, Garret Fitzgerald, declared with some regret, that "in Ireland a strong civic sense did exist – but mainly amongst Protestants and especially Anglicans" (Fitzgerald 2011, 14).

In what did this “strong civic sense” consist? The answer is to be found in that individual responsibility which is the basis of the Protestant ethic and which can be traced back as far as Luther. It is a value which is dulled even annulled in Catholics, thanks to the sacrament of Confession, which Lutheranism renounced along with a number of the other sacraments. As we might put it today, this Protestant form of responsibility “smacked” of paternalism, although in many ways it became a salient trait of the character of a ruling class which never entered the miserable hovels of the local population, did not speak the language of their tenants while mocking the erroneous use of the English language which was full of constructions and expressions mirroring their native Irish Gaelic. This language was both mocked and portrayed in the writings of the period, like the novels which Maria Edgeworth set in Ireland – *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *The Absentee* (1812) and *Ormond* (1817); it is reported too in her *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802).

The complex relationship between the young Maria and the new country to which her father brought her from her native England, when he decided to move there with his wife and children to manage his estates directly, appears clear in a letter she wrote to Fanny Robinson in August 1782:

The Irish are perhaps the laziest civilized nation on the face of the Earth; to prevent a moment's present trouble they will bring on themselves real misfortunes ... They live in a hut whose mudbuilt walls can scarcely support their weather-beaten roofs: you may see the children playing before the cabins sans shoes sans stockings sans every thing – The father of the family, on a fine summer's day standing in the sunshine at his door while his house is ready to fall upon his head and is supported only by two or three props of wood; perhaps out of charity you go up to him and tell him he had much better set about repairing his house, – he would answer you 'Oh (pronounced Ho) faith Honey when it falls it will be time enough to think of picking it up' ... To conclude their character, the Irish are remarkably hospitable to strangers; friendly & charitable to each other; apropos, about charity, I must observe to you that the charity of the higher class of people in Ireland is one of the greatest checks to industry it encourages idleness amongst the Poor & increases the numbers, or rather, the swarms of Beggars, which infest the streets of Dublin. Let the rich raise the wages of labour, the rewards of industry, that would be true charity. (Quoted in Butler 1972, 90)

In the same letter she mentioned the “strange” English the Irish spoke and the Gaelic they continued to speak in private:

The lower class of Irish are extremely eloquent, they have a volubility, a fluency, & a facility of delivery which is really surprising ... The Irish language is now almost gone into disuse, the class of people all speak English except in their quarrels with each other, then unable to give vent to their rage in

any but their own they have recourse to that and they throw it out with a rapidity and vehemence which I can give you no idea of ... (*Ibidem*, 91)

It is obvious that the title "Portrait of a Lady" refers to the title of the novel by Henry James. His "lady" – Isabel Archer – a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers, at the end of the novel returns to her unhappy marriage because she assumes responsibility for the fact of having chosen "that rogue", Gilbert Osmond. This act resembles that of Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, who married Kitty Pakenham, when his passion and the girl's beauty had long faded, to honour the promise he had made ten years previously, a choice which condemned both himself and poor Kitty to a life of conjugal unhappiness which received some consolation thanks to numerous letters from and meetings with her friend Maria Edgeworth [Figure 6].



Fig. 6 – Pakenham Hall Castle or Tullynally Castle, Castlepollard (Co. Westmeath).
Photo by Carla de Petris

Maria Edgeworth never made the mistake of marrying and maintained a constant and profoundly negative view of matrimony which she put into writing in *Belinda* (1801) and *Helen* (1834), novels denouncing the role of women belonging to the so-called *bon ton* of the period.

A Swedish scientist, Abraham Edelcrantz [Figure 7] was the only man ever to propose to Maria during one of the Edgeworth family's stays in Paris. Maria refused him and justified this refusal in a letter to her favourite aunt saying that, first of all, she did not believe herself – given her physical appearance – capable of arousing love in anyone, secondly, that she had no desire to leave her family to go and live at court in a place as remote as Sweden. The Swede who shared interests in the field of telegraphics with Richard Lovell – who probably approved the idea of mar-

riage between his daughter and his associate – was later made a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science and director of the Royal Swedish Telegraphic Company.



Fig. 7 – Abraham Niclas (Clewberg) Edelcrantz (1847), Unknown Author. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Some scholars of the Edgeworth epistolary sustain that for the rest of her life Maria retained some degree of regret for her decision and a positive memory of her Swedish suitor. Her thoughts, on their first meeting, may have resembled those expressed by Belinda: “What a treasure, to meet with any thing a new heart – all hearts, nowadays, are secondhand at best” (Edgeworth 1836, 16).

This resistance of hers against a loveless marriage, more or less engineered by a parent, the outcome of a fleeting fancy or worse still, dictated by social convention, appears again in *Belinda*:

First loves are not necessarily more foolish than others; but chances are certainly against them. Proximity of time or place, a variety of accidental circumstances more than the essential merits of the object, often produce what is called first love. From poetry or romance, young people usually form their early ideas of love before they have actually felt the passion; and the image they have in their own minds of the beau ideal is cast upon the first object they afterward behold. This, if I may be allowed the expression is Cupid’s *Fata Morgana*. Deluded mortals are in ecstasy whilst the illusion lasts, and in despair when it vanishes. (*Ibidem*, 25)

For this reason what we propose here is really a “portrait of a young unmarried lady” who showed great interest in the scientific and technological discoveries and inventions of her era, like photography, for example [Figure

8]. Maria was one of the very first people in England to pose for a daguerreotype portrait. There are some pictures of her by the London photographer Richard Beard (1801-1885). She was very enthusiastic about this new invention and had already posed for several other kinds of calotypes. What fascinated her about photography was probably the faithful likeness of the subject portrayed, the distinct aesthetic that this new technology introduced with its sharp focus and forensic attention to detail. Writing about stories and novels, she said she often suspected that [her style] might have been too "Flemish", too faithful to minute detail, though she never ceased to be inspired by the reality of individuals as she observed them in their everyday lives. She confessed being horrified by Füssli's "irrational" portrayals.



Fig. 8 – *Maria Edgeworth*, by Richard Beard (1841).
© National Portrait Gallery, London

She lived a life, a very long one for those times, of intense work, engaged in the scrupulous administration of the family's property conducted on the basis of what she had been taught by her father, in writing with an eye on profit (she was the best paid writer of her day, something exception-

al, seeing that she was a woman) on money she might invest in favour of her unfortunate “compatriots” (as Walter Scott called them), overcoming religious division but without any irrational, romantic flights of fancy. In fact, Marilyn Butler, a descendant of the Edgeworths, tells us in her epoch-making and very well documented biography:

At the time of the Famine, for example, we find her approving a regulation that barley for sowing should be doled out only to those who could produce a receipt for the last half year’s rent. (Butler 1972, 87)

Accompanying her father on his travels she was able to meet some of the greatest talents of her time. However, given Robert Lovell’s particular interests, these acquaintances of his were numbered mainly among those who animated the great season of Britain’s Enlightenment and, who, for reasons of history or character were almost all opposed to the nascent romantic trends of the period.

Wordsworth, who went to see her, she deemed verbose, full of himself and admits barely paying him the polite attention dictated by good manners, because, as she writes in a letter justifying her behaviour, she was recovering from an illness at the time:

He is sensible – but has an abundance, a superfluity of words – and he talks too much like a book & like one of his own books – neither prose nor poetry – He seems as if he had been too much accustomed to be listened to and that he had learned to listen to himself. (*Ibidem*, 443)

The Edgeworths met Byron briefly in London in 1813, who in his *Notes for October 1821* when he was about to read Edgeworth’s *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq.* (1820), wrote rather brutally:

Old Edgeworth, the fourth or fifth Mrs. Edgeworth and *the* Miss Edgeworth were in London, 1813. Miss Edgeworth liked, Mrs. Edgeworth not disliked, old Edgeworth a bore – the worst of bores – a boisterous Bore. I met them in society once at a breakfast of Sir H.D.’s ... (Quoted in Inglis-Jones 1959, 103)

Of Maria’s literary works we have several opinions expressed by her contemporaries and non – from Jane Austen to Ivan Turgenev, which shall be referred to in the present volume. We wish to recall only the close friendship linking Maria and Sir Walter Scott, who, in one of his letters refers to her as “The Great Maria”. This bond was strengthened by their reciprocal visits to Edgeworthstown and Abbotsford and by a highly interesting exchange of letters published over time in journals and collections. We are told that Scott made Maria gift of a round carved table by Pietro Della Valle from Livorno with scagliola representations of Piazza

dei Miracoli, Pisa, of a printed copy of the score of “St. Patrick’s Day in the morning”, of the preface to *Waverley* (1814) which praised the Irish writer and of a letter addressed to Maria Edgeworth by William Mcbean, a merchant operating in Livorno with the banker Anthony Lefroy, a close acquaintance of the Edgeworths, also resident in Livorno. This “exotic gift” which sought to foreground the international reputation of the recipient of the table, was sold by the heirs in the 1950s and a photo of which belongs to the Edgeworth Society’s collection.

The fact that Enlightenment ideas on education inspired her appears evident in all her works as a theorist and as a narrator whereby moral education is meant a natural pathway to happiness without religious dogmas (Edgeworth was criticized because she never spoke of religion), with no concession to deceptive romantic dreams and devoid of punitive intent (her young characters learn from life without any need for punishment). We might sum up her beliefs as “Good is good”. For the two Edgeworths, father and daughter, education imparted with love – today we would say with indulgence – was the ultimate responsibility of theirs as the leading class.

The Edgeworths left tangible testimony of their pedagogical commitment to their village. The National School founded in 1840 [Figure 9] still stands, but before that and at his expense, Richard Lovell had founded a school open to all strata of society both Protestant and Catholic, a project in which his daughter played an active role. Maria also contributed to the financial upkeep of these scholastic institutions with income from some of her works.



Fig. 9 – Edgeworthstown National School A.D. 1840. Photos by Carla de Petris

The great conceptual and intellectual openness of the two Edgeworths, especially of Maria – seen in retrospect – is extremely ambiguous because even if our author observes her Irish “countrymen”, with ironic affection, de-

scribing their defects with sympathy. She always looks down on them from a position of privilege, of “uncomfortable authority”, as the title of a recent collection of essays on her recites. Uncomfortable authority also because it was the product of an age suspended between Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Let us now take a look at the countryside where Maria and the huge Edgeworth family lived.

County Longford lies in the very heart of Ireland where three of the island’s four provinces, Leinster, Ulster and Connacht, meet. The county, part of the rolling central plane, is crossed by Ireland’s longest river, the Shannon, and is studded by lakes and waterways of various sizes, situated along the east-west highway, an ideal position at a time when people travelled by coach and carriage. An Italian called Carlo Bianconi (1786-1875), from a place called Tregolo, then in the province of Como, today called Costa Masnaga in the province of Lecco, emigrated to Ireland in 1802 crossing over from England. Given the intolerance then shown towards continentals due to the Napoleonic Wars, Carlo anglicised his first name as “Charles”. He worked in Dublin as a printer first for a fellow-citizen called Andrea Faroni then he went out on his own. Having moved to Clonmel in Co. Tipperary, he set up the first system of public transport the country ever knew – the so-called “Bianconi’s carriages” – which cost one penny farthing a mile with posting stations all over the country. The building which hosted one of these stations is still visible in Edgeworthstown [Figure 10].



Fig. 10 – Bianconi’s Inn, Edgeworthstown. Photo by Carla de Petris

Naturally, well-to-do families like the Edgeworths, even more so their aristocratic neighbours the Pakenhams, travelled availing themselves of carriages of their own bearing their *coats-of-arms* [Figure 11].



Fig. 11 – Pakenham family's private information for travelling, Tullynally Castle, Castlepollard (Co. Westmeath). Photo by Carla de Petris



Fig. 12 – Pakenham family’s private coach, Tullyally Castle, Castlepollard (Co. Westmeath). Photo by Carla de Petris



Fig. 13 – Pakenham family’s coat-of-arms, Tullyally Castle, Castlepollard (Co. Westmeath). Photo by Carla de Petris

We can still find traces of this opulence. Today Tullynally Castle, also known as Pakenham Hall, near Castlepollard in Co. Westmeath is Ireland's largest privately owned stately home. It is the residence of Thomas Francis Pakenham, Eighth Earl of Longford and his wife Valerie, members of a very old *Anglo-Irish Ascendancy* family. The Earl besides being a famous arborist, is also the brother of the writer Antonia Fraser, former wife of British playwright Harold Pinter. It is interesting to note that Lord Longford has his estates and lives in Co. Westmeath, not in Co. Longford!

The village of Edgeworthstown, as it appeared years ago in a drawing [Figure 14] by a visitor and a copy of which belongs to the Edgeworth Society, consisted in buildings arranged on two opposite sides of the main street visibly portraying the social barriers of the period: on one side we see the multi-storey homes in brick and stone of the middle class, on the other, those miserable thatched hovels of the labourers which shocked Maria when she arrived in Ireland for the first time.

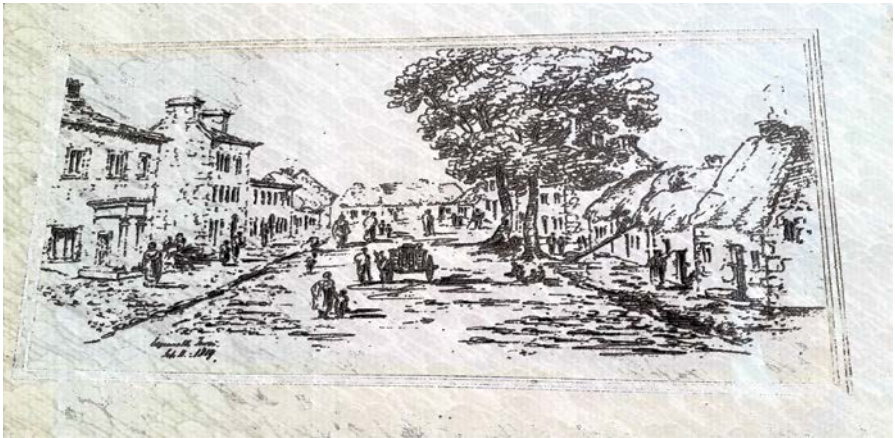


Fig. 14 – Copy of sketch by unknown in Edgeworth Society Office, Edgeworthstown Rectory. Photo by Carla de Petris. Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

St. Mary's Church, [Figure 15] the local Roman Catholic church, an imposing building in neo-Gothic style was built in 1868 on land made available by Richard Lovell Edgeworth, a century before that, when, as a member of Grattan's Parliament, he favoured Catholic Emancipation, something he did not live to see.



Fig. 15 – St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Edgeworthstown.
Photo by Carla de Petris

Significantly this church faces the Gate Lodge leading up to Edgeworthstown House [Figure 16].



Fig. 16 – Edgeworthstown House. Photo by Carla de Petris.
Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

Compared to other Big Houses belonging to other Anglo-Irish families that of the Edgeworths was of modest proportions though Richard Lovell added a neo-classical colonnade as was the fashion at the time. Today, the house is a nursing home and contains none of the original furnishings. One can only imagine the environment in which Richard Edgeworth lived with his various wives and numerous children of whom Maria was the eldest. Marilyn Butler is of great help here because she gives us a description of the house as it was in 1864 on the basis of what a nephew wrote about it at the time:

... with its big rooms lined with books, its workshop, its clocks, its large maps on the walls, its innumerable ingenious mechanical devices, [the house] bore unmistakably the character of its master through several generations. From the central hall hung with family pictures, adorned with stuffed birds and foreign "curiosities", opened on one side the dining-room and library. Drawing-room there never was in that house; the family room was the library, where all the family read and drew and worked together round the long centre table, with Maria's little desk-table in a corner. (Butler 1972, 82)

Miss Maria worked in the house's library seated at a small desk, always surrounded by a bevy of noisy, more or less industrious, siblings. Her powers of concentration must have been extraordinary indeed.

As stated before, the hub of this universe was the *pater familias*, Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) [Figure 17].



Fig. 17 – *Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1812), by A. Cardon.
Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

He had four wives: Anna Maria Elers, Maria's mother (marriage 1763, death 1773), Honora Sneyd (marriage 1773, death 1780), Elizabeth Sneyd (marriage 1780, death 1797), Frances Anne Beaufort (marriage 1798, death 1865). His second wife, a strong, cultured woman, with her husband and eldest step-daughter, took care of the children's education, an issue treated in the writings of the two Edgeworths. We are told that 19 of the 22 children mentioned by the biographers survived early infancy but that as many as 12 of Maria's 18 living siblings pre-deceased her.

Richard's fourth wife, Frances Ann Beaufort (1769-1865), two years younger than Maria, outlived both her husband and Maria, with whom she had a solid friendly relationship and about whom she wrote *Memoir of Maria Edgeworth*, published by her children in 1867, and from which many other biographies have drawn inspiration and data.

Richard Lovell Edgeworth was an inventor in the field of mechanics, he took a keen interest in pedagogy and was strongly influenced by Rousseau. He fostered professional education and, despite the contributions to the text made by his daughter, he is acknowledged as the author of *Essays on Professional Education* (1809). Up until his death he inspired and collaborated with his daughter, also acting, it seems, as a severe and interfering censor of her works. He charged Maria with the task of completing his memoirs published in 1820 as *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Esq. Begun by Himself, and Concluded by his Daughter, Maria Edgeworth*.

From these memoirs we obtain a precise picture of the efforts made by father and daughter alike, animated by a commendable sense of duty, to manage the family estate, abandoned and neglected by previous generations of absentee Edgeworths resident in England who took no interest at all in the property on which their welfare depended or in the money paid by their tenants which were collected by middlemen who were often greedy and dishonest:

From the day of the family's return the tenants flocked on to the lawn in front of the house, thanking Edgeworth for continuing their leases with profuse declarations of loyalty, or pleading and arguing with him if his decision had gone against them. (Butler 1972, 88)

Richard Lovell was not only a careful "landlord and magistrate" he was much more. At the time, technological developments were making great strides. The interest he took in scientific and technical matters led him to devise a number of practical solutions that he applied in his own home. He invented rudimentary kinds of distance communication, antecedents of the telegraph, suspensions for coaches permitting U-turns without capsizing, building techniques that today we might call prefabricated. In fact, he added a steel and slate spire to the church in 1811, which had to be demolished in 1935 for reasons of safety. A rough, anonymous drawing of the project is still on display in the atrium of the church [Figure 18].

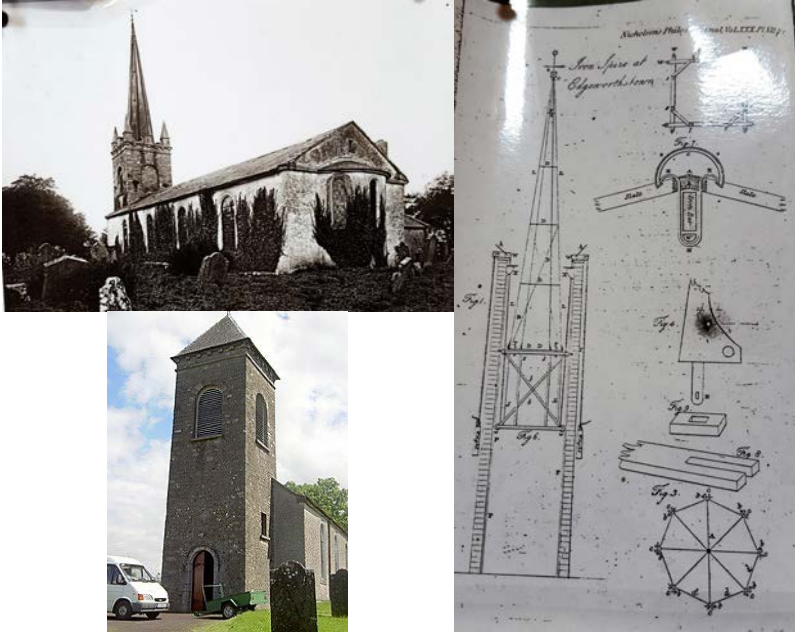


Fig. 18 – St John’s Church, Edgeworthstown. Anonymous drawing.
Photos by Carla de Petris

In a glass case inside St. John’s Church we find the only things belonging to Maria Edgeworth which remain, tender reliques of a time gone by [Figure 19] where even the layout of the pews in church denoted the social separation existing between the landlord’s family and other members of the local Anglican community; the same is true of the family vault in the church graveyard which is enclosed by a railing [Figure 20].



Fig. 19 – Maria Edgeworth’s glove and little cotton purse with initials,
St. John’s Church, Edgeworthstown. Photos by Carla de Petris



Fig. 20 – The Edgeworth family’s church benches and the family vault, Edgeworthstown. Photos by Carla de Petris

To conclude our “portrait of a young unmarried lady” we cannot but mention that almost pathological bond she had with her father.

A watercolour by Adam Buck dated 1787, portrays it iconically. The picture is *The Edgeworth Family* [Figure 21]. Maria, extreme left, stands opposite her father, whose third wife sits beside him, an infant in her arms, with eight other children clustered round her. It is interesting to note how the father, engaged in explaining a scientific text, is turned towards Maria, who is following attentively with a smile that seems to denote complicity. In the book *Their Fathers’ Daughters* Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace speaks rightly of “*Patriarchal complicity*” (see 1991). Butler quotes directly from P.H. Newby’s 1950 biography to provide an opinion regarding this father-daughter relationship which it is useful to cite here:

Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s influence over his daughter was not, as has sometimes been imagined, the superficial one of censor, ... the trouble lay deeper. Edgeworth’s crime was not so much that he was a rather pompous and opinionated utilitarian but that he so conducted himself as to cause his daughter to love him uncritically and therefore adopt his opinions on literature and life unquestionably. (Butler 1972, 7)



Fig. 21 – *The Edgeworth Family* (1787), by Adam Buck.
Estate of Michael Butler, © National Portrait Gallery, London

On the 6th of February 1816 Richard Lovell dictated his last will and testament to Maria [Figure 22].

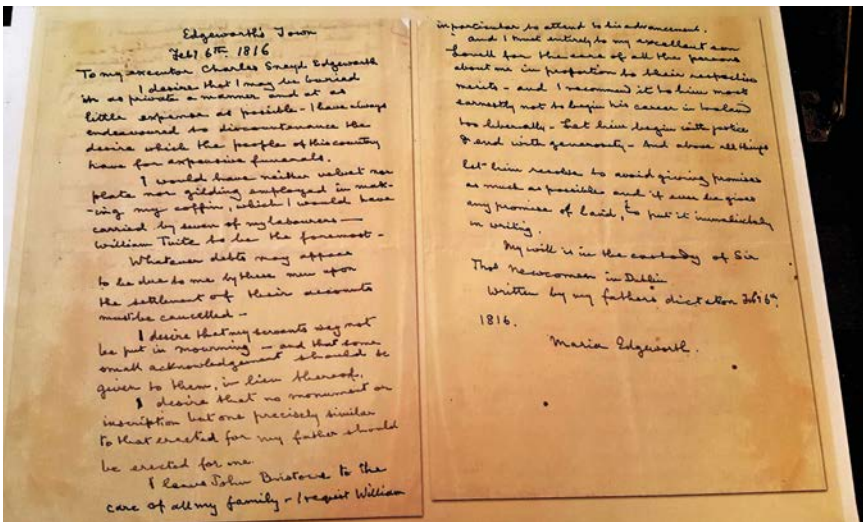


Fig. 22 – Robert Lovell Edgeworth’s Will dictated to his daughter Maria on February 6th, 1816. Reproduction in Edgeworth Society Office, Edgeworthstown.
Photo by Carla de Petris. Courtesy of The Edgeworth Society

In this document Edgeworth requests a headstone in his memory as simple as that of his father Robert, and a funeral without pomp “like the people of this country prefer”. These instructions are proof of the enlightened conviction that he was responsible for those who depended on him, that is, for his labourers and servants:

I would have neither velvet nor plate nor gilding employed in the making of my coffin which I would have carried by seven of my labourers ... Whatever debts may appear to be due by these men upon the settlement of their accounts must be cancelled. I desire that my servants may not be put in mourning – and that some small acknowledgement should be given to these in lieu thereof. (See Fig. 22)

Richard Lovell Edgeworth died on the morning of the 13th of June 1817. His decease had such an impact on Maria to lead scholars to divide her literary production into two periods – one before and one after her father’s death – the latter of which ended with the novel *Helen* full of topics we may consider proto-feminist.

A few weeks before her own death in May 1849 Maria Edgeworth re-asserted her love for Ireland, her adopted country, in a few lines of poetry where she outlines, with great lucidity, the country’s strengths and weaknesses, emphasising, in particular, that “reckless Irish humour”, that flash of intelligence “still blundering into sense” which only a few decades later would generate Oscar Wilde’s aphorisms and paradoxes, like that “sad improvidence” destined to mark his life:

Ireland, with all thy faults, thy follies too,
I love thee still; still with candid eye must view
Thy wit too quick, *still blundering into sense*;
Thy reckless humour; sad improvidence;
And even what sober judges follies call –
I, looking at the heart, forget them all.
(Edgeworth 2018 [1895], vol. II, 214; italics are mine)

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MARIA EDGEWORTH IN CONTEXT

MARIA EDGEWORTH AND THE CULTURE OF IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract:

The importance of “improvement” in the fictional and educational writings of Maria Edgeworth has often been noted. Usually understood primarily, or exclusively, as “self-improvement”, the concept has much wider social, political, and national implications. Drawing on the work of historians of “improvement”, this essay argues that this untranslatable term should be understood to denote, in the words of Paul Slack, “gradual, piecemeal, but cumulative betterment”. It proceeds to suggest that the patriotic, socially aware, and outwardly altruistic desire by both Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell, to “improve” Ireland can only be fully understood in the context of a centuries-long attempt by England to Anglicize, as well as rule, the neighbouring island.

Keywords: Edgeworth, education, England, improvement, Ireland

In her edition of Richard Lovell’s *Memoirs* (1820), Maria Edgeworth published a letter her father had written in the year 1815. Aged 71, he quoted some lines of poetry that, he wrote, now “occur to him continually”:

[At length to age all gently sinking down,
Look back with transport on a life well-spent;]
In which no hour flew unimprov’d away,
In which some generous deed distinguish’d every day.
(Richard Lovell Edgeworth to Sneyd Edgeworth, 30 May [18]15;
Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, [439])¹

That Lovell Edgeworth should, towards the end of his life, have emphasized the importance of improvement will not surprise readers of his work, or his daughter’s. Improvement, along with such related terms as “improve” or “improving”, recurs frequently in the work of both, in fiction

¹ The lines, of which Edgeworth quotes only the last two, are from Robert Lowth’s “The Choice of Hercules” (1743).

and non-fiction alike. That improvement was central to her father's sense of self is still more apparent in a handwritten memorandum Maria Edgeworth included in the *Memoirs*:

In the year 1782, I returned to Ireland, with a firm determination to dedicate the remainder of my life to the improvement of my estate, and to the education of my children; and farther, with the sincere hope of contributing to the melioration of the inhabitants of the country, from which I drew my subsistence. (1820, vol. II, 1)

Here, in a single sentence, we find that combination of the impulse towards individual and social improvement that recurs so often in the work of both father and daughter, expressed in terms of agricultural improvement, moral and intellectual improvement through education and the national improvement of Ireland itself.

By the time Richard Lovell returned to Ireland, "improvement" had long been a term familiar to eighteenth-century men and women. The English historian J.H. Plumb thought it "the most over-used word of eighteenth-century England" disliking it because, as he wrote, the word applied to everything: "landscapes, gardens, agriculture, science, manufacture, music, art, literature, instruction both secular and religious" (1982, 332). More recently, the Irish historian Ian McBride has described "improvement" as one "of the great buzzwords of the eighteenth century" while arguing that the word had very different implications in England and Ireland. In England, it might stand for the "extension of metropolitan manners into the provinces" but in Ireland it could indicate, in much less benign fashion, English desire to erase "the 'barbarism' of an alien people" (2009, 6).

If, as Plumb suggests, "improvement" could apply to anything perhaps the term means nothing. If it is as negative as McBride implies, one might wonder why the Edgeworths – and very many earlier civic-minded Irish writers of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries – were so fond of the idea, and so insistent on the desirability of the "improvement" not only of their estates, their houses, their tenants, their fictional characters, or their nation, but even of themselves.

Both as a word and a concept – an ideology – "improvement" has a long and complex history and one that intersects with England's long and troubled relationship with Ireland. Of writers who have recently dedicated particular attention to the notion of "improvement" the most thorough and incisive has been Paul Slack who has done so in two books – *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (1999) and *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (2015)².

² See also Tarlow 2007 and Barnard 2008 and, for still wider considerations of "improvement", see Drayton 2000 and Houston 2008.

As a word, “improvement” has its origins in the fifteenth century. Its meaning then was simple: to make a profit from land³. “Improvement”, in other words, was about individual enrichment. In the course of the sixteenth century, “improvement” came to refer to the various methods of making land still more profitable through agricultural innovation. The land in question, though, might not be solely that of individual proprietors but that of *all* landowners in England, adding to the wealth of the country and so aligning self-interest with the national interest. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, “improvement” had begun to be used metaphorically, and in many different ways: in relation, for example, to both morality and religion, so that Bishop Joseph Hall could write of the “improvement of Christianity” (1606, 4) and Francis Bacon the “improvement of virtue” (1638, 130)⁴. Of such verbal changes, Slack argues that the process:

... is a good example of the ways in which words often change their colour and meaning through metaphorical extension, so that initially neutral or descriptive terms of narrow application come to confer approval on disparate things, and in this case give coherence to a host of apparently unrelated phenomena. (2015, 5)

The sense of approval and coherence applied to apparently quite different activities – mental as well as physical – is what led J.H. Plumb to describe “improvement” as the most over-used word in eighteenth-century England. And in the writings of Richard Lovell and Maria Edgeworth, moral, religious, educational, agricultural, mechanical and many other fields of endeavour are all open to “improvement”.

Certain meanings and defining characteristics are nevertheless inherent in “improvement” – and in ways that have particular significance when considering the writings of Maria Edgeworth. First, “improvement” is a word that is uniquely English: that is, it has no exact equivalent in any other European language. This may, on the face of it, seem counter-intuitive. The enormous difficulties encountered by makers of dictionaries and by translators as to how to render the term “improvement” in different languages in the seventeenth century suggest otherwise (*ibidem*, 4-8). Here, we might approach the question in a slightly different way by noting that “improvement” – as a concept – does not correspond to “miglioramento”, “miglioria” or “progresso”, though each of those words may contribute to an understanding of the uses of “improvement” in different contexts. In

³ For the etymology and shifting meanings of the word, see *OED* (3rd ed., 2015) “improvement”, *n*.

⁴ Joseph Hall wrote of divine meditation as the “best improvement of Christianitie” (1606, 4), while Francis Bacon argued that “the improvement of Vertue by increasing daily in *goodnesse... doth prolong life*” (1638, 130).

English, “improvement” differs from “progress” – itself a centrally important Enlightenment concept – because the achievement of “progress” can be attempted in different ways, not least, in an eighteenth-century context, by revolution, as in the French Revolution of 1789 or the subsequent failed republican revolution in Ireland, the 1798 Rebellion, that forms a backdrop to Lord Glenthorn’s story in *Ennui* (1809; see Spadafora 1990, esp. 408-411). “Improvement”, by contrast, is the very antithesis of revolution since the term implies, in the helpful gloss provided by Paul Slack, “gradual, piecemeal, but cumulative betterment” (2015, 1).

In the work of eighteenth-century Irish writers, the importance of gradual and cumulative betterment is constantly emphasized. Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) declares on its title-page that it is written for the “Universal Improvement of Mankind” but we need to remember that Swift’s name appears nowhere in that text which is supposedly written by a crazed hack-writer, scribbling away in a garret, his madness indicated by his grandiose intention to effect “universal improvement”. A century later, there is an echo of that craziness in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801), when Mrs. Freke, asked how she would improve the state of society, proffers her solution “to improve the world”. Her solution, says her interrogator, Mr. Percival, dryly, “would doubtless be a great improvement” though he adds “but you would not overturn society to attain it, would you?” (1993, 217). Of course Harriot Freke would do exactly that, to the consternation of Mr. Percival – and Maria Edgeworth. A more restrained but similar expression of the same idea occurs in an Irish context in *Ennui*, when the despairing Lord Glenthorn decides that “it was in vain to attempt to improve and civilize such people as the Irish” before recognizing that

... in the impatience of my zeal for improvement ... [I] expected to do the work of two hundred years in a few months: and because I could not accelerate the progress of refinement in this miraculous manner, I was out of humour with myself and with a whole nation. (Edgeworth 1992, 200-201)

For Maria Edgeworth, Glenthorn is right to recognize that the “improvement” of Ireland must be understood as a process both gradual and piecemeal: a point quickly reinforced by her in the agent M’Leod’s account of the education of the poor children in the schoolhouse he has built, which begins by introducing “very slight improvements” as a means of encouragement⁵. The national improvement of Ireland was a process

⁵ See Edgeworth 1992, ch. X. That the education of the Irish should proceed gradually, and only within certain limits, was an idea shared by Maria Edgeworth and her father; of the latter, Maria wrote in *Memoirs*, that “He did not wish for the people any other education, but what might afford them a knowledge of their duty, what would

that had begun, in both Glenthorn's and Edgeworth's chronology, in the sixteenth century. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth – and having defeated several rebellions by the native Irish from the 1550s to 1570s – English administrators in Ireland turned their attentions to how they might civilize the country's "barbarous" inhabitants. They initially sought the aid of Italians. Lodowick Bryskett's *A Discourse of Civill Life* (written in the mid-1580s and published in 1606) offers a version of three Italian Renaissance treatises: Giambattista Giralaldi's "Tre dialoghi della vita civile", from *De gli Hecatommithi* (1565), Alessandro Piccolomini's *Della institutione morale* (1560) and Stefano Guazzo's *La civil conversazione* (1574), in the form of a narrative of the meeting of the author with a group of English administrators in a cottage he has just built outside of Dublin, in "this barbarous countrie of Ireland" (Bryskett 1606, 3, 5-6 *et seq.*). Among those present was the poet Edmund Spenser. Spenser is best remembered today as author of the greatest English epic poem of the sixteenth century, *The Faerie Queene* (1590). Much influenced by Spenser's knowledge of the Italian epic poets Ariosto and Tasso, *The Faerie Queene* is also an imperial poem concerned, especially but not exclusively in Book V, with English rule in Ireland⁶. Spenser, who held a number of positions in the English administration in Ireland, and lived in Kilcolman Castle, close to Doneraile, in Co. Cork for many years, was also the author of *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (written in 1596 and published in 1633), a generally hostile account of the native Irish, their language and customs, but one whose influence was long-lasting⁷. The very first of the notes Maria Edgeworth appended to *Castle Rackrent* (1800), explaining why and how Thady Quirk wears his greatcoat as though it were a cloak, refers the reader directly to Spenser's work, written over two centuries earlier (2).

Elizabethan attempts to bring Ireland to submission under the English crown were founded in military conquest and a series of plantations, whereby English-born immigrants were granted tracts of land – seized from their Irish owners – in which they were to practice agricultural improvement, following English models. It was at this time, in the 1580s, that the Edgeworth family first settled in Ireland. The aim of the planta-

make them virtuous and loyal. He was sensible that such a change must be owing to gradual operation [emphasis added]" (1820, vol. II, 226). For Maria Edgeworth's possible contribution to Richard Lovell Edgeworth's 1799 Education Bill, unsuccessfully presented to the Irish House of Commons on 28 March 1799, the main draft of which – National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS 22472 (1) – is in Maria Edgeworth's hand (see Wharton 2017).

⁶For differently focussed readings of the importance of Ireland to *The Faerie Queene*, see, for instance, *Irish University Review* (1996), *passim*; Canny 1999, 110-126; McCabe 2002; Herron 2016 [2007].

⁷See, for example, Hadfield 1997, esp. chs. 1-3; Canny 2001, ch. 1; Brink 2014.

tions was not only to make the planters and the country more productive and more prosperous but to set an example of civil life that the native Irish would wish to emulate both for its economic benefits and its moral authority. Post-Reformation English attempts to bring Ireland under submission also involved systematic attempts to convert the native population from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, under the Established Church. It would not prove an easy endeavour.

The perceived difficulties of effecting improvement in early-seventeenth century Ireland are indicated in many texts of the period. In *A Direction for the Plantation in Ulster* (1610), Thomas Blenerhasset wrote:

I doe verily beleeeue it would be to small auaile, and not the best way to secure themselues with their goods, and that wilde country to the Crowne of England; for although there be no apparant enemy, nor any visible maine force, yet the wood-kerne [Irish guerilla foot-soldiers] and many other (who now haue put on the smiling countenance of contentment) doe threaten eueryhoure, if oportunitie of time and place doth serue, to burne and steale whatsoeuer: and besides them there be two, the chief supporters of al their insolencie, the inaccessible woods, & the not passible bogs: which to subject to our desires is not easie, and that not performed, it is not possible to make a profitable improument, no not by any meanes in any place. (n.p.)

In England, agricultural improvement continued apace during the seventeenth century, alongside early attempts to survey the country. So, while no one in 1600 knew what were the size, national income, or population of England, all of these had been calculated and were widely known a century later. In Ireland – still largely an Irish-speaking country with much of its territory outside of the effective control of the English state – the situation was more complicated. In 1641, a rebellion that began as attempt by the Gaelic, Catholic aristocracy to seize back power and land from English administrators and settlers turned into a bloody conflict that lasted some eleven years. The number of Protestants killed is now believed to be around four thousand – approximately the same number of Catholics died – but the 1641 massacres would long remain vivid and, in terms of the number of those killed, greatly exaggerated in the Protestant settler imagination (figures exceeding 300,000 were cited, and believed, in the later-seventeenth century)⁸.

It was in 1641 that members of the Edgeworth family were first introduced to the realities of life as English settlers in Ireland. In his *Memoirs*, Richard Lovell Edgeworth recounts the experience of the wife and infant child of Capt. John Edgeworth at the hands of insurgents –

⁸ For the origin of the vastly inflated figure of English Protestants killed, see Clarke 2013, 42.

while Wentworth also had his belongings seized by the Catholic O'Farrell family, who claimed that they were owed this property as rent arrears: a way of asserting that the lands in County Longford now farmed by Edgeworth had never been rightfully his but had been illegally confiscated (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. I, 7-9; Canny 2001, 503-505).

This is not the time or place to rehearse the history of seventeenth-century Ireland but it's worth noting that following the victory of the Protestant King William III over the Catholic James II at the end of the war of 1689-1691, Ireland suffered no major disturbances for over a century. Members of King James's army were allowed to leave Ireland for the continent of Europe under the terms of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 and English settlers, old and new, began to enjoy a period of social, religious, and economic supremacy, aided by a series of penal laws that put severe limitations on the political and religious freedoms, and the property-owning rights, of Roman Catholics.

Despite this, however, the settlers of English heritage who dominated the country – the “Anglo-Irish” as they are sometimes called – soon found their interests differing from those of England itself. The result was both an assertion of political rights against English interference and a desire to “improve” Ireland. The eighteenth-century culture of improvement manifested itself both in practice and in print, in a series of concerns that would still be of vital importance in the Ireland to which Richard Lovell Edgeworth returned in 1782.

One of the principal concerns on the part of Irish Protestant “patriots” was absenteeism. The “improvement” of the land could not be achieved, it was argued, by improved agricultural techniques alone but required the residence on their estates of exemplary landowners, giving examples of appropriate moral and economic conduct. In the 1720s, during which decade Jonathan Swift wrote his most famous Irish pamphlets, including *A Modest Proposal* (1729), he was joined by many civic-minded writers who proffered suggestions for the “improvement” of the country. Among the best known were Arthur Dobbs, a Scottish administrator – Surveyor-General for Ireland and a member of the Irish parliament – author of *An Essay on the Trade and Improvement of Ireland*, whose first part appeared in 1729, and Thomas Prior who, in the same year, published the first edition of his *List of the Absentees of Ireland*, a work that attempted to shame those who lived out of the country, leaving their estates to the uncertain mercies of agents and middle-men, while living on the rents their lands brought them, and which continued, in updated form until 1783⁹.

If men like Dobbs and Prior were not complacent in their view of the difficulties of “improving” Ireland, Swift was still less so. It was, again, in the 1720s that he wrote

⁹ Editions of the work appeared in 1729, 1730, 1745, 1767, 1769 and 1783.

I cannot see how this kingdom is at any height of improvement, while four parts in five of the plantations for thirty years past have been real disimprovements ... But, notwithstanding all these mortifications, I suppose there is no well-wisher to his country without a little hope ... (1723, 6)

Attempts at improvement continued throughout the following decades. But the Ireland Maria Edgeworth saw when she arrived with her father in 1782 was by no means one that pleased her. It is striking that her most famous novel is not a story of improvement but of disimprovement. *Castle Rackrent's* account of the declining fortune of the Rackrent family is both the history of a failure founded in fact and a warning to like-minded readers of what can happen if improvements are disregarded, as when the Rackrents' estates fall into the hands of Jason Quirk, the Catholic agent son of the steward Thady Quirk¹⁰.

Castle Rackrent, as its title-page proclaims, is an "Hibernian Tale", taken from "the Manners of the Irish Squires before 1782". 1782 was both the year in which the Irish parliament gained the legislative independence it had been seeking for almost a century and the year the Edgeworths settled on their estates in County Longford. The Ireland they found was not only full of Protestant patriot pride at their newly acquired rights but a country characterized by a culture of improvement.

As we have seen, for J.H. Plumb "improvement" was a term used of "landscapes, gardens, agriculture, science, manufacture, music, art, literature, instruction both secular and religious" (1982, 332). And while his formulation implies a widespread lack of discernment, the Edgeworths – father and daughter – were soon to contribute to virtually all of these varied activities, which are first addressed in *Practical Education* (1798) and which reappear, with varying degrees of importance, throughout the stories and novels of Maria Edgeworth.

Despite the broad use of "improvement" in the eighteenth century, the term is particularly associated with agricultural improvement, the improvement of the landed estate and, by extension, of the country itself. In Ireland, as elsewhere, however, "improvement" meant not simply a progressive restructuring of the landscape "for social and economic as well as aesthetic ends", but also, by extension, "restructuring the conduct of those who lived in, worked in, and looked upon it" (Daniels, Seymour 1990, 487). The most notable, and symbolically important of such schemes was the clearance of the same feature of the "unimproved"

¹⁰Landowning readers forced to abandon their estates during the 1798 Rising would have had additional reasons to consider the dangers of neglecting their lands and their tenants. The Edgeworths themselves fled to the perceived safety of the town Longford where Richard Lovell Edgeworth was almost lynched by a Protestant mob who suspected him of sympathizing with the rebels.

Irish landscape that had worried Blenerhasset at the beginning of the seventeenth century: bogs.

For late-eighteenth century Ireland, and especially the Edgeworth family, the key text relating to agricultural improvement was the *Tour of Ireland* (1780) by the English agronomist Arthur Young. For Young, as for many earlier and later writers, bogs were the most visible indication of the backwardness of Ireland. On one occasion, Young observed countryside where

... as you advance towards the mountains, cultivation gradually declines ... The waste is exceedingly improvable ... it is bog ... I was the more attentive to this bog, because it appeared to me to be one of the most improveable I had seen, and the size of it makes it an object worth the attention of some spirited improver. (1780, vol. I, 240-241)¹¹

In his *Tour*, Young insisted on the need for improvement by means of the reclamation of land for agricultural use and by introducing new agricultural techniques designed to make that reclaimed land more productive. He also insisted on the importance of accumulating factual information about Ireland, in terms of quantification, enumeration, and all kinds of scientific knowledge. Such emphasis on systematic search for hard facts – “matters of fact”, “certain knowledge” – about Ireland places Young in a direct line from the improvers of late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. Early attempts at similar surveys of Ireland, achieved by census, recording of the country’s commerce and by measurement and mapping, were made in sixteenth- and particularly seventeenth-century Ireland. The Down Survey of 1656-1658 by the founder of political arithmetic, Sir William Petty, was a formidable achievement but the work had not been undertaken without risk¹². In the late-sixteenth century, the native Irish had beheaded a surveyor in the north of Ireland because, as they said, “they would not have their country discovered” and when William Petty was surveying Wicklow in 1655, eight men working with him were similarly killed (Smyth 2006, 54-55). When Richard Lovell Edgeworth undertook his own survey of the county of Longford in the early-nineteenth century, he did not run such immediate physical danger but he encountered problems of his own. The survey he undertook of County Longford, where Edgeworthstown is situated, could not be published for

¹¹ For Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s bog reclamation, see Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 300-314, 473-483. An illuminating discussion of the bog and Maria Edgeworth’s fictional treatment of the Irish landscape is to be found in Trumpener 1997, 37-66.

¹² For Sir William Petty and the Down Survey, see <<http://downsurvey.tcd.ie>> (10/2019).

want of an accurate map of the county and this took so long in coming that he was forced to acknowledge that the information his survey contained had gone out of date. All the same, Richard Lovell was in no doubt what the survey would show when published:

How much the whole county has been improved by large plantations, by buildings, and by better modes of agriculture, will then appear, and a judgment may thence be formed of the rate of general improvement. (1820, vol. II, 367)

Glossing this passage in *Memoirs*, Maria Edgeworth comments that:

Especially within the last twenty years, his tenantry, and the whole face of his estate, strikingly improved in appearance, and essentially in reality ... and what is of better promise ... for the progress of improvement, much of what has been done has been effected, not by the landlord, but by the tenants. Even some of the poorest have exerted themselves, to make small additions and improvements in their habitations. (*Ibidem*, 368-369)

This optimistic reading understands contemporary improvement to be the result of gradual collective activity by both landlords and tenants, in respect of land management, productivity and housing. It likewise echoes the view of Jonathan Swift, expressed many decades earlier, that “*few Politicians, with all their Schemes, are half so useful Members of a Common-wealth, as an honest Farmer; who, by skilfully draining, fencing, manuring, and planting, hath increased the intrinsic Value of a Piece of Land, and thereby done a perpetual Service to his Country*” (1742, vol. VI, 124)¹³.

If it could not be rushed, however, national “improvement” seemed to reach its apogee in the Ordnance Survey that began in 1824. This was a remarkable achievement in cartography. A century earlier, Robert Howard, Bishop of Elphin, declared Ireland to be the least improved country in Europe¹⁴. When the Survey was completed in 1846, Ireland was, if not the most improved, then certainly the most thoroughly mapped country in the world. It was also a country that on paper had been entirely

¹³ See also Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s remark: “I think it was Swift, who, when he was asked what the Irish nation needed most for its improvement, replied, ‘to learn that two and two are four’” (1820, vol. II, 464). Swift’s sentiments here find a celebrated echo in the words of the King of Brobdingnag to Gulliver: “he gave it for his Opinion, that whoever could make two Ears of Corn, or two Blades of Grass to grow upon a spot of Ground, where only one grew before, would deserve better of Mankind, and do more essential Service to his Country, than the whole Race of Politicians put together” (1726, vol II, 129).

¹⁴ Sermon on Matthew 25, v. 29, NLI, MS 7238, quoted in Barnard 2008, 35-36.

Anglicized, with mapmakers finding, or inventing, English equivalents for Irish-language place-names¹⁵.

The improvement of Ireland perceived by Richard Lovell Edgeworth in the second decade of the nineteenth century was certainly in contrast to the situation he and his daughter found when they first arrived in Edgeworthstown. Then, they recognized how fortunate they were to have polite, cultured neighbours, such as the aristocratic families of Lord Longford and the Earl of Granard, relatively close by. Maria Edgeworth remembered, however, that while the residence of Lord Longford, offered “a delightful domestic society ... Pakenham Hall was twelve miles distant from us, in the adjoining county of Westmeath. There was a vast Serbonian bog between us ...” (1820, vol. II, 11)¹⁶.

The proximity of good neighbours was of particular importance to a landowner such as Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who had returned to Ireland with the declared intention of residing on his estate and assisting personally in the improvement of the country. And, as Maria Edgeworth wrote, “My father began, where all improvements should begin, at home” (*ibidem*, 5). By residing on his estate and improving his own home and lands, Richard Lovell was intending to set an example both to his tenants and his fellow landowners¹⁷.

“In every case where the tenant had improved the land”, wrote Maria Edgeworth of her father, “or even where he had been industrious, though unsuccessful, his *tenant’s right*, as it is called, was admitted” (*ibidem*, 17); that is, the tenant would not be displaced in favour of other prospective tenants, as was often done elsewhere, simply in the hope of making the land more profitable still for the landowner in the short term. Such behaviour was, on the part of Richard Lovell, part of a larger scheme of improvement for he believed that:

... whatever any one proprietor *can* do, he ought to attempt; because, however small the actual benefit, his example may influence others; and the junction of many individuals may be of beneficial consequence, either in resisting prejudice, or in giving effect to judicious benevolence. (*Ibidem*, 19)

¹⁵ It was the Ordnance Survey that informs Brian Friel’s play *Translations* (1980); for the play’s Italian translation, see Friel 1980, trans. by de Petris 1996.

¹⁶ In his *Tour*, Arthur Young noted of the bog belonging to Lord Longford that some of it, drained a decade or so earlier, was “tolerably dry” but that the rest “so wet, that a beast can scarcely venture upon it with safety” (1780, vol. I, 62).

¹⁷ Though a strong believer in the need for a conservative, traditionally ordered – that is, hierarchical, society – Richard Lovell Edgeworth was, by the standards of the day, a notably liberal proprietor: one highly respected for his integrity, his industry, and his religious tolerance; as Maria Edgeworth noted in her edition of her father’s *Memoirs*, his tenants “soon discovered, that Mr. Edgeworth leaned neither to Protestant nor Catholic, to Presbyterian nor Methodist” (1820, vol. II, 36-37).

As a woman, Maria Edgeworth was unusual in being encouraged to understand and participate in the business of estate management by her father, who she notes “allowed me during many years to assist him in copying his letters of business, and in receiving his rents” (*ibidem*, 15). It is the improving behaviour of responsible landowners, epitomized by that of her father, that Maria Edgeworth is concerned to describe and praise in her Irish fictions. So, we have the (ultimately) exemplary figures of Glenthorn in *Ennui* (1809), Colambre in *The Absentee* (1812) or Harry Ormond in *Ormond* (1817).

Maria Edgeworth also engaged with the culture of improvement in which she was raised in one very particular way. In his *Tour in Ireland*, Arthur Young acknowledged that the political arithmetic that concerned him required serious industry and intellectual effort. It would not, he wrote, appeal to those who avoided “*l’ennuye*” by reading novels¹⁸. This comment perhaps tells us more about Young himself than about the increasing value ascribed to the novel as a form in the eighteenth century. Certainly, eighteenth-century Ireland is not devoid of examples of “improving” novels; we might think of William Chaigneau’s *The History of Jack Connor* (1752), whose hero returns to an Ireland he had earlier been forced to leave, morally reformed and ready to contribute to the improvement of the country through responsible estate management; or Henry Brooke’s *The Fool of Quality* (1765-1770), which describes the education of its hero in great detail and in terms endorsed by Brooke himself; or Elizabeth Sheridan’s *The Triumph of Prudence over Passion* (1781), which describes the desire for national improvement, through patriotic political action involving women as well as men, in the years immediately preceding the return of the Edgeworths to Ireland in 1782¹⁹.

In this context, it is striking that in Maria Edgeworth’s *Ennui*, Colambre’s own boredom and dissatisfaction – his “ennui” – is attributed not to a taste for (supposedly frivolous) novel reading but rather to gambling and gourmandizing. For all her admiration for Young, expressed most memorably in her statement in *Castle Rackrent* that “Mr. Young’s picture of Ireland, in his tour through that country, was the first faithful portrait of its inhabitants” (1800, 181). Edgeworth was her own woman in resisting Young’s condescension towards the novel as form and her father’s own uncertainties as to the propriety of his daughter’s publishing.

¹⁸ Young’s specific example of a novel – Samuel Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-1754), the longest novel in English – is itself worthy of notice as an indication of changing attitudes to what constitutes industry or intellectual effort on the part of readers.

¹⁹ See Ross, “Introduction”, in Chaigneau 2013, 11-32; Markey 2011, 115-132, esp. 117-121; Douglas and Ross, “Introduction”, in Sheridan 2017, 9-27.

As Aileen Douglas has recently noted in her *Work in Hand: Script, Print, and Writing, 1680-1840* (2017), Edgeworth declined to offer biographical information about herself – “As a woman my life, wholly domestic, can offer nothing of interest to the public” – yet while asserting her own domesticity, along with that of her heroines, she was “also a keenly professional writer”, whose professed domesticity did not – in Douglas’s words – “preclude sustained authorship of a serious kind, manifested in the range of her publications and the subjects she addressed” (153-154).

In this context, it’s again worth paying particular attention of the exact wording of the subtitle of *Castle Rackrent*: “An Hibernian Tale taken from the facts and manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782”. Facts are as important to Edgeworth – though in a very different way – as they were to Arthur Young. Marilyn Butler referred to Edgeworth’s “almost pedantic interest in documentation from real life” that reveals itself in a “profusion of detail—facts about customs, dress, above all idioms of speech, [giving] an entirely new richness to the portrait of society” (1972, 394-395). In *Bardic Nationalism* (1997), Katie Trumpener suggested that Edgeworth’s Irish fictions – among which we might single out *Ennui*, *The Absentee*, and *Ormond*, as well as *Castle Rackrent* – might well be read as “didactic stories built around certain kinds of expository set pieces (whether political dialogues or landscape description), which convey information about the state of the country and occasional meditations on ways of seeing” (303-304, n. 11).

Trumpener, however, does not call the novels and novellas I have just mentioned “Irish fictions” but rather “British national fiction”. We might argue about the justness of the term but Trumpener points to one further aspect of Maria Edgeworth’s relationship to the culture of improvement in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. As Paul Slack has argued, from the seventeenth century onwards, “improvement” both as word and notion “became a fundamental part of the [English] national culture, governing how the English saw themselves and the condition of the nation to which they belong, and their expectations of how it might alter in the future” (2015, 1).

“Improvement” was a crucial element of Maria Edgeworth’s culture and one tightly bound up with her vision of Ireland’s future. *Castle Rackrent* was published in the year that saw the passing of the Act of Union that would come into force in 1801. At the end of her preface to that novel, Edgeworth wrote: “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 Kitts and Sir Condys of her former existence” (xi).

It was over three decades later and after having become the most admired portrayer of Irish life in fiction that she famously wrote:

It is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in the book of fiction—Realities are too strong, party passion too violent, to bear to see, or care to

look at their faces in a looking glass.—The people would only break the glass, & curse the fool who held a mirror up to Nature ... (Maria Edgeworth to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, 19 February 1834; Edgeworth 2018, 335)

By 1834, when those words were written, Edgeworth had suffered the death of her father; lived through the Rockite disturbances of the early 1820s; taken full control of the Edgeworth estate; and seen the introduction of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Catholic Emancipation was a cause both she and her father had long supported but instead of helping to reconcile the Roman Catholic population to the new polity of Great Britain and Ireland, it seemed to have had no effect. Under Daniel O’Connell, the “Liberator”, there was now a movement to secure the repeal of the Act of Union (see Geoghegan 2010, ch. II). At the same time, the hope of improving, by personal example, estate management in general that had brought Richard Lovell Edgeworth back to Ireland half a century seemed to have been disappointed.

Henry D. Inglis, author of *A Journey throughout Ireland, during the Spring, Summer, and Autumn of 1834* (1834), wrote of Co. Longford, where the Edgeworths had their estate, that:

The resident landlords of the county of Longford, are, with few exceptions an unimproving race; and I regretted to find, that betwixt them and the lower orders, there was not the best understanding ... I have generally found the landowners extremely ignorant of the real condition of the poor. (Vol. II, 342)

The Sir Kitts and Sir Condys of the nineteenth century, in other words, showed no more sense of social responsibility than those of the preceding century and were certainly not looked on with “good-humoured complacency”²⁰.

In the first volume of his *History of England*, published in the year of Maria Edgeworth’s death, the Whig historian Lord Macaulay wrote that

²⁰ Inglis also noted that “much bad feeling existed, owing to a difference of religious belief” in the county, doubtless a source of sorrow to the educationalist Maria Edgeworth. Throughout much of the eighteenth century particularly with the foundation of the Charter Schools in the 1730s, the instruction of Roman Catholic children went along with the design of converting them to Protestantism; in *Memoirs*, Maria Edgeworth wrote of her father’s contribution to reducing religious tensions in Ireland by helping to reverse this policy: “above all the great point gained was the assurance from this Commission [the 1811 commission on education], composed of many dignitaries of the Church, with the highest at their head [i.e. the Anglican Archbishop of Armagh] that the system of proselytism is abandoned, and that it is their wish to proceed in the most liberal manner towards the Catholics of Ireland, in the further improvement of the education of the people” (vol. II, 307). For the Charter Schools, see Milne 1997.

“the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement” (1849, vol. I, 3; see also Briggs 1959, esp. 1-4). But Macaulay’s country was not Edgeworth’s country, which in the 1830s was scarred by stagnation in manufacturing, declining agricultural employment, and inadequate diet for the majority of the population. Attempts to ameliorate these conditions by means of a continuing culture of improvement did not end, of course, with Edgeworth’s inability to write on contemporary Ireland in fiction²¹. The fiction of improvement itself continued as a feature of Irish literary life until itself opposed by the values of the Irish Revival, as epitomized by Yeats’ idealization of the Irish peasant (see O’Connell 2006). Yet in 1834 and despite centuries of England’s gradual, piecemeal attempts to reshape Ireland in its own image, the culture of improvement appeared to that most improving of novelists, Maria Edgeworth, if not to have failed entirely then most certainly to have faltered.

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²¹ For an important account of Maria Edgeworth’s later views, including her belief that the Great Hunger of 1845-1847 would help cement the relationship between Ireland and England, see Kelleher 2006, 59.

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MARIA EDGEWORTH AS POLITICAL THINKER: GOVERNMENT, REBELLION, REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT

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Abstract:

This essay explores the relationship of Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education*, published in August 1798, to her political philosophy in the 1790s and beyond. Edgeworth's ideas about government, rebellion, rewards and punishment drew on her extensive reading of French *philosophes*, Scottish, French, German and Italian enlightenment thinkers, and British radicals and reformists. Here I focus on one of those influences: Cesare Beccaria's *Dei delitti e delle pene* [*On Crimes and Punishments*] (1764). Edgeworth's preoccupation with good versus bad government in *Practical Education* is placed within the context of her personal experiences of and reflections on political and social conflict in late eighteenth-century Ireland: a conflict that she and her father saw as the consequence of unrepresentative government, unjust laws, and the misrepresentation of the people.

Keywords: Beccaria, education, government, punishment, rebellion

In this essay, I explore how Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education*, published in August 1798, relates to the evolution of her political philosophy. Edgeworth's ideas about government, rebellion, rewards and punishment drew on her extensive reading of French *philosophes*, Scottish, French, German and Italian enlightenment thinkers, and British radicals and reformists. But it is important to situate her preoccupation with good versus bad government in *Practical Education* within the context of her personal experiences of and reflections on political and social conflict in late eighteenth-century Ireland: a conflict that she and her father saw as the consequence of unrepresentative government, unjust laws, and the misrepresentation of the people. As a fourteen-year-old girl, studying Adam Smith on political economy, William Blackstone on English law, and seventeenth-century British republican philosophy and history, Maria Edgeworth combined her reading with her own observations of life on her father's estate to arrive at an assessment of the people among whom she had begun to make her home, and to sketch her first analysis of what

held Ireland back from becoming a prosperous industrial and agricultural economy and a thriving, unified society. Writing to her school-friend, Fanny Robinson, in 1782, Edgeworth identified “indolence” stemming from ruling-class political and economic mismanagement as Ireland’s central problem, specifically the low wages with which the wealthy rewarded the work of the poor, so that they were taught to associate industrious effort with oppression. The solution, Edgeworth felt, was clear: “Let the rich raise the wages of labour, the rewards of industry” (letter from Maria Edgeworth to Fanny Robinson (copy), n.d. [August 1782], quoted in Butler 1972, 90-91). Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s own responses to the problems created by bad government in Ireland echo this analysis and the solution that Maria Edgeworth offered. As the landlord of an estate at Edgeworthstown, near Longford, in the 1780s, Richard Lovell Edgeworth saw himself as attempting to lay the foundations for an improved relationship and better, more direct communication between himself and his tenants. Describing her father’s reforms in 1820, Maria Edgeworth writes that on his return to his Irish estate in 1782, he dismissed his land agent and

... became individually acquainted with his tenantry – saw, heard, talked to them, and obtained full knowledge of their circumstances ... This sort of power to encourage and reward, in the hands of the landlord, is advantageous in Ireland. It acts as a motive for exertion ... without creating any servile habits, or leaving the improving tenant insecure as to the fair reward of his industry. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 17, 26-27)

Richard Lovell Edgeworth hoped that this more responsive form of government might mitigate the inequities of the laws that applied to the Irish Catholic majority. Reforming tenancy agreements in an effort to abolish what he saw as something “nearly approaching to slavery” (the requirement, enforced on many Irish estates, that tenants must labour as and when required without payment) was part of this effort to review the principles of legislation at a local level (*ibidem*, 29). Although he was hopeful in the early 1780s about the possibility of political reform and increased rights, which he thought would give rise to a rural labouring class who would diffuse industry and prosperity throughout Ireland, by the 1790s Richard Lovell Edgeworth felt alienated from others in the Protestant aristocracy because of their indifference to the greatest possible happiness of society as a whole, commenting to his friend Erasmus Darwin in September 1794 that

... the people here are altogether better than in England. The higher classes are far worse; the middling classes far inferior to yours ... ; but the peasants ... are ... of the strongest powers, both of body and mind. ... A good government may make this a great country, because the raw material is good

and simple. (Letter from Richard Lovell Edgeworth to Erasmus Darwin, September 1794; Edgeworth R.L, Edgeworth 1820, vol. II, 156)

Maria Edgeworth first mentions working on *Practical Education* in a letter of May-June 1794¹. The period of its composition, probably beginning slightly earlier than spring 1794, and completed in late 1797 or early 1798, coincides with widespread and growing unrest and political conflict both at home in Ireland and abroad, accompanied by much debate about what reforms were necessary to prevent violent revolution. While Maria Edgeworth was gathering the materials and writing the first chapters of *Practical Education*, she and other members of the Edgeworth household, led by Richard Lovell Edgeworth, were also preoccupied with finding solutions to the unstable political situation, both locally and further afield. Looking back on this period in 1797 in her father's *Letter to the Earl of Charlemont, on the Tellograph, and on the Defence of Ireland*, Maria Edgeworth discusses his response to the news in 1792 that disturbances had broken out near his estate in Edgeworthstown. He had at once resolved to return from an extended stay in England, and to put his "talents and acquirements" to the "common cause" (1797, 3)². He therefore set about creating work to set up a telegraphic system in the Edgeworthstown area, employing numerous tradesmen and labourers, and claimed that this had succeeded in preventing local outbreaks of violent insurgency: "in the dreadful scenes which afterwards occurred, I have the satisfaction to say no tenant on my estate was ever convicted or ever accused – nor has a defender been found, even amongst my workmen". The telegraph project, he felt, was a means of averting violence without sinking into "inaction" (*ibidem*, 3-4). Richard Lovell Edgeworth's idea was that "speedy intelligence" would transform the Irish government's communication with its people, enabling the "eye of government" to "see the whole country like a map before it"; if this rapid and clear system of communication could then be extended to link Ireland with Britain, "its energy must be increased beyond the limits of ordinary speculation", and an "incalculable source of advantage would be opened to both kingdoms" (*ibidem*, 7). Not only the job creation that accompanied building such a system, but the system itself, could thus boost Irish prosperity and with it, security. The plan was not taken up by the Irish government.

¹ At this stage of its composition, *Practical Education* is always referred to as "Toys and Tasks", as in this letter (Edgeworth Papers, National Library of Ireland [NLI], MS 10, 166/7, 112).

² Although the author named on the title-page of the *Letter* is Richard Lovell Edgeworth, it was in fact written by Maria Edgeworth, using "solid materials" (i.e. documentary evidence) provided by her father. See NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10, 166/7, 125, letter from Maria Edgeworth to Mrs Ruxton, 11 April 1795.

But beyond his estate and his means of doing anything directly to alleviate tensions, Richard Lovell Edgeworth felt that bad government was making a difficult situation worse. In April 1795 he wrote of his tenants' fears of violent unrest and their loss of hope for the future: "The inhabitants of the smallest farms crowd into this town & abandon their homes ... despondency prevails amongst them & unless some effectual means are devised industry will be neglected" (letter to George Forbes 6th Earl of Granard, 10 April 1795; NLI Edgeworth Papers MS 10, 166/7, 121). Other letters throughout April 1795 evoke this strained atmosphere and sense of imminent conflict – sporadic attacks by rebels, the raising of militia to put down insurgents. Through all of this, Richard clashed with other local gentlemen whose approach to containing unrest was more belligerent. He was fundamentally opposed to the idea of seeking to contain, through forcible means, discontents that might be addressed using more constructive strategies. We can see evidence of this attitude in a letter of 28 November 1795, in which he criticised the British Prime Minister William Pitt's Gagging Acts, designed to force the British reform movement into silence, as "violent remedies" likely to injure a healthy constitution. This over-reaction on the part of the British government, driven by a "fear of popular disturbances", whether "felt or feigned", ran the risk, Richard thought, of "produc[ing] the very consequences which they are solicitous to prevent". Such draconian "penal laws" were bound to fail as a deterrent, because they were irrational and did nothing to supply "internal motives" for the obedience of the British people to their laws (letter to Daniel Beaufort, 28 November 1795; NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10, 166/7, 135). As Maria Edgeworth commented in a letter of February 1796 that reflected on the "persecution & disturbances" in other parts of Ireland, her father's methods were better calculated to succeed in quelling popular disturbances, because he was judged by those he governed, based on their own observations, to be fair and impartial: "He is beloved & what is better respected by the lower Classes of People in this County, because he has neither skreened the guilty or oppressed the Innocent of any party or persuasion" (letter from Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 27 February 1796; NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10, 166/7, 144).

Questions of bad versus good government, and of the irrationality of excessive penal laws versus the means by which enlightened and constructive laws might supply "internal motives" for peaceful cooperation were, then, very much on the Edgeworths' minds as *Practical Education* was being written. In fact, we can say that *Practical Education* is in essence a theory of just government and a vision of the future society – improving, inventive, busy, freely communicative, well governed – that the Edgeworths wanted to help create. As a book, it is preoccupied with challenging the idea of the utility of tyrannical or absolute rule, and with the effects of just and unjust authority on the minds of those

who are governed – whether those are children, the future citizens with which the book is primarily concerned, or the British and Irish nations. Maria Edgeworth addresses these problems directly in the chapter on “Rewards and Punishments”, the most sustained and explicit expression of the political philosophy that motivates and informs *Practical Education*. In a footnote on the opening page of this chapter, Edgeworth credits a number of “benevolent and enlightened authors”, among them Voltaire and Cesare Beccaria, with having helped her clarify the analogies between what she calls “the legislation of men”, and “the government of children” (Edgeworth M., Edgeworth R.L. 2003 [1798], vol. XI, 133, 142). She uses the legal and political philosophy of these “enlightened authors”, especially Beccaria’s *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764), “On Crimes and Punishments”, as the basis of her consideration of how to discipline children and guide them towards the development of a rational sense of right and wrong. Beccaria’s influence was important for those late eighteenth-century writers who wished to think about the role of bad government and unjust laws in the creation of criminality and rebellion. He is, for instance, a source for William Godwin’s analysis of rewards and punishment in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) (Marshall 1984, 83). For Edgeworth, too, Beccaria is a formative influence on the theory of government that she presents in *Practical Education*.

Beccaria begins his introduction by reflecting on the injustice of laws that benefit only the powerful few, which, he argues, were founded on a neglect of rational and clear-eyed observation of human nature, one that would be capable of bringing “the actions of many men under a single gaze” and of evaluating laws “from the point of view of whether or not they conduce to the *greatest happiness shared among the greater number*” (Beccaria 1995 [1766], 7)³. He was convinced that the only just law, and the only justifiable punishments, were those that kept in view the preservation of social bonds and the ideas of present and future public benefit, as opposed to those laws and punishments motivated by a desire for vengeance. Attacking “the all too free rein that has been given to misdirected force” by the politically powerful, which he sees as entrenching and legitimising “atrociousness”, Beccaria argues against the use of “prodigal and useless severity, to punish crimes unproven or illusory” (*ibidem*, 8). Those who govern tyrannically, who make unjust use of superior power, Beccaria goes on, should be regarded as criminals, because of their failure to prioritise “public well-being” over “the usurpations of individuals” (*ibidem*, 10):

³The emphasis is Beccaria’s.

... attacks on citizens' security and freedom are among the greatest crimes, and into this class fall not only the murders and thefts practised by common people, but also those of the nobility and magistrates, [who destroy] the subjects' faith in the ideas of justice and duty, and replac[e] it with the notion that might is right. (*Ibidem*, 25)

It is noticeable here that Beccaria is deeply interested in the effects of unjust government, the unjust use of superior power, on the *minds* of those who are governed: the corrupt and negligent behaviour of rulers has repercussions for the ways in which their subjects think about right and wrong, and about their relationship to the state. What Beccaria is describing is a miseducation with fatal consequences for the public good. In particular, Beccaria criticises tyrannical governments who seek to discipline their people through "barbaric and useless tortures" and public spectacles of capital punishment, again because these teach inhumanity and thus encourage criminality:

The times and places in which the penalties have been fiercest have been those of the bloodiest and most inhuman actions. Because the same brutal spirit which guided the hand of the lawgiver, also moved the parricide's and the assassin's. (*Ibidem*, 63)

Indeed, Beccaria argues, the "crimes" that are punished in bloody and cruel spectacles of torture and public death are often the direct consequence of a "poverty, either willed or tolerated by the laws, which have always favoured the few and abused the masses" (*ibidem*, 64-65). In other words, injustice breeds inhumanity; bad government instructs rebels to rise up against the law. In place of these severe penal laws, Beccaria recommends mild and lenient punishments, designed to be recognised as rational and proportionate by those who are governed, and thus to create compliance, rather than to enforce obedience. As much as possible, Beccaria advises, laws should grant citizens a sense of freedom, since those who feel themselves to be free and treated fairly tend to "ponder the sciences and the interests of the nation, they envisage and aspire to great things" (*ibidem*, 104).

Beccaria's ante-penultimate chapter proposes education as the means by which social order should be managed, rather than by complex, obscure and unintelligible legislation. He explicitly links education with government, and with a proper focus on increasing "public happiness". A "truly useful" education, he suggests, is one that stimulates the critical faculties,

... encourages virtue by the easy path of the feelings, and diverts men away from evil by the infallible method of alerting them to the necessary ill consequences it brings, rather than by the uncertain method of ordering them what to do, which gains only a feigned and fleeting obedience. (*Ibidem*, 110)

It is in itself a form of legislation, but one that nurtures what Richard Lovell Edgeworth in 1795 had called the “internal motives”, that is to say the *minds* of its people, and seeks to reward them rather than to impose order via coercive and painful punishments.

Maria Edgeworth’s emphasis on the importance of just, rational and moderate government of children, and her insistence on the wider repercussions of this early experience of government, are clearly inspired by Beccaria’s treatise. Like Beccaria, she begins her discussion of rewards and punishment by rejecting the idea of punishment as vengeance or expiation:

We now distinctly understand, that the greatest possible happiness of the whole society must be the ultimate object of all just legislation; that the partial evil of punishment is consequently to be tolerated by the wise and humane legislator, only so far as it is proved to be necessary for the general good. When a crime has been committed, it cannot be undone by all the art, or all the power of man; by vengeance the most sanguinary, or remorse the most painful. The past is irrevocable; all that remains is to provide for the future. (Edgeworth M., Edgeworth R.L. 2003, vol. XI, 133)

There is an echo here of William Godwin’s stipulation in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that punishment should only ever be founded on a “dispassionate calculation of the future” (1985 [1793], 636)⁴, in addition to the Beccarian resonances of Edgeworth’s attention to “the greatest possible happiness” and “the general good”, recalling the emphasis in *Dei delitti e delle pene* on the importance of cultivating “public happiness”. For Edgeworth, the only just and effective laws are those that are recognised by the governed as rational and intelligible; those that look to future development rather than dwelling on the wrongs of the past. Children may initially have to be governed through an enforced obedience to their superiors, since when very young they can only understand “right” to mean “permitted” and “wrong” to mean “prohibited”. But to extend this kind of “implicit submission to our authority” into later life is, Edgeworth warns, “a dangerous as well as an unjust system”. Such a tyrannical government is exercised in the hope of establishing an idea of adult infallibility in the mind of the child; but the irrationality of such government is likely to produce a “sentiment of hatred towards us, instead of aversion to the forbidden action”. Instead, Edgeworth counsels that children should “by reading and by conversation ... acquire more enlarged notions of right and wrong”, so that their compliance is based on “the conviction of their understandings” (Edgeworth M., Edgeworth R.L. 2003, vol. XI, 136).

Severe and painful punishment is, as in Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* and Godwin’s *Political Justice*, frowned upon by Edgeworth: she

⁴ In Book VII, “On Crimes and Punishments”, chapter I.

denounces immoderate and humiliating punishment as “*the abrupt, brutal resource of ignorance ... to cure the effects of former negligence*” (*ibidem*, 148). In other words, just as Beccaria also suggests, harsh penalties are a sign of faults in government, and indicate the reform needed in the minds of those in positions of power over others, rather than proving that the governed are inherently criminal. Wrongdoing or rebellion against established laws is, Edgeworth asserts, the consequence not of a bad nature, but of bad education, and she shudders at the thought of the public punishment of “a fellow-creature, whose ignorance precluded him from virtue, and whose neglected or depraved education prepared him, by inevitable degrees, for vice and all its miseries” (*ibidem*, 134). Strongly influenced by David Hume and his theory that identity is circumstantial, that man is “a bundle of habits”, Edgeworth insists that human character is formed by experience rather than being a matter of innate essence. If this is the case, it is crucial that those who are governed, whether children or citizens, should never feel that they are “chain[ed] to their dead faults” (*ibidem*, 139).

One of the anecdotes that Edgeworth recounts in support of this reformed system of government in *Practical Education* is worthy of notice for its application of Beccarian political philosophy to the education of a child. Introducing the anecdote, Edgeworth makes a claim for the independent moral agency of children, asserting their capacity to understand “general principles of rational morality” and to apply these principles “to their own conduct” (*ibidem*, 146). Her example is an incident involving her younger half-brother, Charles Sneyd:

June 16th, 1796. S — (nine years old) had lost his pencil; his father said to him, “I wish to give you another pencil, but I am afraid I should do you harm if I did, you would not take care of your things if you did not feel some inconvenience when you lose them.” The boy’s lips moved as if he were saying to himself, “I understand this, this is just.” His father guessed that these were the thoughts that were passing in his mind, and asked whether he interpreted rightly the motion of the lips. “Yes”, said S —, “that was exactly what I was thinking.” “Then,” said his father, “I will give you a bit of my own pencil this instant; all I want is to make the necessary impression upon your mind; that is all the use of punishment; you know we do not want to torment you”. (*Ibidem*)

In line with Beccaria’s political philosophy, Sneyd’s punishment is rational and proportionate, “alerts” the child to “the necessary ill-consequences” of his carelessness, and encourages him to reflect on his own feelings of right or wrong, justice or injustice (Beccaria 1995, 110). Rather than tormenting the child with a “general odium [that] oppresses or dispirits”, as Edgeworth puts it, his father treats him with “good sense and benevolence”. He is given an explanation of “the nature of the human mind”, and “the history of [his] own mind” is laid open to him, as intu-

ited by the father, an interpretation that Sneyd confirms as authentically representing his own thoughts (Edgeworth M., Edgeworth R.L. 2003, vol. XI, 145). Freed from “indistinct superstitious fears” about having a “bad nature”, the child is enabled to place his own faults in perspective, to put them behind him, and to feel the pleasure both of being esteemed, and being worthy of self-esteem (*ibidem*, 146). This process conforms very closely to Beccaria’s sketch of the “truly useful” education that might prevent wrongdoing, in place of penal laws. Edgeworth’s system in “Rewards and Punishments” is similarly one that stimulates the mind and “encourages virtue by the easy path of the feelings”, “rather than by the uncertain method of ordering them what to do, which gains only a feigned and fleeting obedience” (Beccaria 1995, 110).

Since children are “in a continual state of progression”, Edgeworth considers it a mistake to discourage their moral growth by enforcing “distrust of themselves” through an over-emphasis on shame for past misdemeanours. Instead she advises that adults should “diminish temptations to do wrong”, a course of action that she considers more “humane” than “multiplying restraints and punishments” (Edgeworth M., Edgeworth R.L. 2003, vol. XI, 139-140). Again, this suggests that those in positions of power need to pay more attention to systemic reform, to creating just and reasonable legislation, rather than seeking to limit the liberty of those in their power. In addition, Edgeworth urges that children should not be ruled by fear, which “extinguish[es] that vigorous spirit, that independent energy of soul, which is essential to all the active and manly virtues”: she values these republican virtues over the “crouching hypocrisy” that she thinks is produced by “absolute” government (*ibidem*, 143). Crucially, she emphasises that the “hope and possibility of recovering esteem must always be kept alive. Those who are excluded from hope are necessarily excluded from virtue” (*ibidem*, 145). Like Beccaria, then, Edgeworth links the ideas of a rational, intelligible, enlightened and humane system of government to the possibility of aspiration and of genuine public as well as individual benefit: “Courage, generosity, industry, perseverance, all the magic of talents, all the powers of genius, all the virtues that appear spontaneous in great minds, spring from hope” (*ibidem*, 149).

Edgeworth’s theory of education – which is at the same time a theory of government and legislation – was published in the midst of the 1798 United Irishmen uprising, at a moment when the claims to legitimacy of the government of Ireland and the injustices perpetrated by an administration hostile to the interests of the majority of its subjects were being confronted through massive popular insurrection⁵. Edgeworth’s discus-

⁵ The success of *Practical Education* is mentioned in two letters that Richard Lovell Edgeworth wrote to his friend Daniel Beaufort in September 1798, alongside his account of the uprising. See NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10, 166/7, 197, 198.

sion of the rational basis of authority and obedience, and about how to foster active virtue rather than “crouching hypocrisy”, was thus still more urgent. The dislike of vengeful punishment and the thoughtful and compassionate analysis of rebellion and resistance to authority in *Practical Education* are echoed in the response of Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Maria Edgeworth to the uprising and to its violent suppression, as it was experienced by them in and around Edgeworthstown. It was a response that was, once again, resistant to the predominating spirit of revenge that drove others of the Edgeworths’ social rank and position.

In some ways the experiences of the Edgeworths during and just after the uprising may have brought them closer to those of their own tenants and of the “lower Irish”: they discovered how it felt to be suspected as enemies of the government. Having assembled local troops drawn from both Catholics and Protestants among his tenants, and having long argued for Catholic emancipation, Richard Lovell Edgeworth was, at the height of the panic induced by French invasion and rebel actions in 1798, almost lynched in Longford town, suspected of being a rebel himself, and of having “illuminated” the town jail for the benefit of the French invaders. A letter written by Maria Edgeworth in early September 1798 gives an account of the attempt on her father’s life:

In one word there is a violent Orange party at Longford & they see all things with an Orange-jaundiced eye – and because my father was not an orange man they concluded he must be a rebel – Their enlarged minds being only capable of conceiving that there can be these two classes of human beings in the world – My father admitted orange men & Roman Catholics indiscriminately into his corps & this was his crime. (Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 9 September 1798; NLI Edgeworth Papers, MS 10, 166/7, 195)

Returning to Edgeworthstown as soon as possible after this incident, the Edgeworths found their house and grounds completely undamaged; in fact, it had been defended against attack by some of the rebels themselves, as a second letter later in September 1798 describes:

One Ferrall who headed the Rebels at Granard & on their attack on this town saved Georges life & absolutely prevented his companions from touching any thing of my fathers – because as he said Mr. E. never oppressed the poor – this Ferrall fought m[ost] desperately – both his wrists were cut off, he rec.d 8 shots & he continued to the last gasp encouraging his men to fight. (Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 9 September 1798; *ibidem*, 196)

Maria Edgeworth reflected on the irony of this in terms of the reputation it reinforced of the Edgeworth family as allies of the rebels: “The safety of the house had nearly been our ruin, for probably my fathers [*sic*] enemies in Long-

ford could not conceive that any man's house should be spared, ... unless he was a rebel" (Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 9 September 1798; *ibidem*, 195).

In the wake of the uprising, the Edgeworths showed themselves to be implacably opposed to revenge punishments, whether meted out by government or by Orange mobs. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, for instance, denounced the unregulated violence by what Maria Edgeworth termed "legal & illegal oppressors" (Maria Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 2 October 1798; *ibidem*, 200) in sarcastic terms: "The Orange men soidisant go about here shooting all sorts of innocent people to prove that they have no cause for alarm" (Richard Lovell Edgeworth to Daniel Beaufort, 22 September 1798; *ibidem*, 197). One of Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth's responses to the violent and vengeful government repression of the rebels was to write *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802): a trenchant exposé of the prejudices against the Irish lower classes, and a coded attack on the Protestant Ascendancy's response to the uprising. While indicting the irrationality and illegitimacy of anti-Catholic propaganda and institutionalized oppression, *Irish Bulls* looked to the development of commerce and manufacturing in Ireland, notably through strengthening trade between Britain and Ireland, as a preventative for future conflict.

But the Edgeworths' other main response was to begin to think about how to create a "truly useful" education: a system of mass education, driven by a vision of a non-sectarian Irish future of prosperity and peace. This shared vision shines through in a number of manuscripts and letters from 1799-1800: the post-1798 period when the Edgeworths were trying to see a way forward that would avoid entrenching existing ideological battle-lines – as they felt the vengeful mood and actions of the Protestant Ascendancy must do – but would unite the country.

An essay fragment in Maria Edgeworth's handwriting in one of her notebooks, "On the Education of the Poor" (c. 1799-1800), is an example of the commitment that she felt to an education that she believed would bring happiness to her fellow-creatures, and social cohesion with it. Towards the beginning of the essay, she expresses anger about the divisions between the rich and the poor in Ireland, between "one set of beings [who] revel in prodigal luxury" while the "naked wretch ... drudges & struggles on thro his whole existence without any other idea or possibility of pleasure but that of brutal intoxication" (Bodleian Library [BL], MS. Eng.misc.e. 1461, 5).

In place of this division, the essay seeks to discover a means to "render all classes of society equally happy": to create lasting public benefit (*ibidem*, 6). Attacking the kind of politics that looks only to the material wealth of a nation to judge its prosperity, regardless of the possibility that this wealth is "collected into the possession of a few to whom it secures the most splendid luxuries", the essay ends by calling for a consideration of measures to "encrease the pleasurable mental feelings of the poor" (*ibi-*

dem, 97, 73-74). Edgeworth insists that popular education will not lead to sedition, because it offers an opportunity to impart “those habits which render men good subjects, & useful members of society ... A shoemaker does not want the Latin grammar of the schoolmaster” (*ibidem*, 12). The essay broadly suggests that any attempt by those in power to rule using “mental coercion” will fail, and that the free and rapid circulation of information and intelligence through increased literacy is a social good: “Facts speak for themselves & provided the whole truth be known, a just conclusion will be formed by the mass of a nation” (*ibidem*, 54, 58). In other words, justice and social order can only be established only through enlightened education and a political culture in which debate and enquiry are not the preserve of an elite, but accessible by the majority of the people. Although at various points in the essay, Edgeworth argues that social “destination” (*ibidem*, 12) should be kept in view when designing popular education, a more utopian note is sounded in her description of recommended reading in the schools for the poor: “Histories of men of perseverance & ingenuity who born in a low rank of life have raised themselves by their talents & exertions” (*ibidem*, 64). For Edgeworth, such “talents & exertions” rightly give rise to the possibility that “a man who can read & write may make his way to the first offices of the state” (*ibidem*, 51-52). This is, above all, a hopeful vision, and a vision of how to encourage a nation to feel hopeful about its future.

Edgeworthian education encoded ideas about the social and political future that enlightened government could create in co-operation with the rational compliance of an enlightened people. The “internal motives” that Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth focus on in their analysis of what makes and maintains a stable social order could perhaps be mistaken for an internalization of ruling-class ideology. Yet this seems an inadequate summary of what Edgeworthian educational and legislative theory is about. Maria Edgeworth’s interest seems rather in reforming those who govern, challenging the powerful to reflect on their provocation of rebellion, a direct consequence of their negligence and destructive use of coercion. Instead, Edgeworth calls for those who are governed to be granted an interiority, an individuality – in short, a right to their own happiness.

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DOMESTIC SECRETS IN MARIA EDGEWORTH'S NOVELS AND TALES

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Abstract:

Several critical moments in Maria Edgeworth's fictions are constructed around small personal spaces such as boudoirs, cabinets and closets. Her treatment reflects some contemporary suspicions about the use of women's private spaces, while she also makes use of their narrative potential. They may contain secrets which are revealed in the course of the narrative, and they evoke other preoccupations, with privacy, and with the control of space. They are often accessible to privileged servants, a class Edgeworth regards with suspicion. The article examines several of her tales for young people and adults, and the marked difference between the treatment of personal spaces and enclosures in her Irish, as opposed to her English-centred fiction; in Ireland houses are more open, hospitable, but disorderly, while private spaces can also become prisons. Meanwhile, her letters show that in the daily life of upper-class families in Ireland personal spaces are valued and respected.

Keywords: Boudoirs, Domestic Architecture, Maria Edgeworth, Secrets, Servants

When Richard Lovell Edgeworth was on the point of marrying his fourth wife, Frances Beaufort, in May 1798, his daughter Maria wrote to her future stepmother about the preparations: "The little boudoir looks as if it intends to be pretty. This is the only room in the house which my father allows to be finished as he wishes your taste should finish the rest". Less than a year later the two women were in Dublin together and called on Lord Charlemont in the fine city mansion that is now the Municipal Gallery. Maria wrote to her younger brother about a "massive passage" and a "most magnificent room" where their host came to greet them, and out of which he then "took us into a little little [*sic*] room which is his sanctum, as retired as if it had been 100 miles from any room", and showed them some of the prize objects in his famous collection (Edgeworth 2018, 52, 64).

Such small retired spaces as the boudoir and the cabinet are often invoked as evidence of a growing desire for privacy in well-off homes. In the case of women's closets, boudoirs or dressing-rooms, they might also be suspected of providing room for unsupervised transgressive behaviour (see Lilley 1994, 193-198).

Maria Edgeworth's references to the "little" rooms in large houses however show them as scenes of calm thoughtfulness, as a husband devotes special care to a personal room for his bride and a host courteously invites and entertains guests. They are private, with a designated occupant, but they are also part of the orderly functioning of the larger unit of the house, and they are linked to a wider society. They are joined by a variety of other domestic spaces, several of which are much more mundane. As well as retreats for the family and salons for genteel visitors there are rooms where produce or utensils are stored, food is prepared and servants perform basic tasks.

If, in these letters of Maria's, Edgeworthstown and Charlemont House show the distribution of space functioning happily, the potential of household spaces as sites of concealment and corruption appears regularly in her fictions. My object here is to look at the role of secrets in their relation with domestic architecture, in her novels and children's stories. It may be necessary first of all to distinguish her treatments from those of some of her more sensational contemporaries, since although she sometimes alludes to the Gothic mode of fiction it is generally in order to emphasise the gulf between such sensational writing and her own practice.

Secrets are part of the life of narrative, particularly of romance. In early modern fiction the reader's implied contract with the author lays down that if a secret is mentioned, or someone behaves mysteriously, the secret must be told, the behaviour must be explained... *later*. That "later" is the origin of suspense, and of suspicion, effects which are shared between the reader and the characters in the story. From Sir Charles Grandison's scruples delaying him from proposing to Harriet, to the visions in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or the mysterious monk who appears in the Osbaldistone library in *Rob Roy* (1817), to Jane Fairfax's behaviour in *Emma* (1815), a natural or supernatural cause must appear before the last page; and it is most often a natural one. Edgeworth has several narrative devices which may initially seem to belong with these examples, as they have explanations which belong to romance: the problems surrounding the legitimacy of Grace Nugent in *The Absentee* (1812), the discovery in *Patronage* (1814) of Lord Oldborough's son, the entanglement of Clarence Hervey with Virginia in *Belinda* and the reappearance of her father, which in turn is comically (and briefly) reproduced in the "Spanish lady" subplot in *Manoeuvring* (1809). The difference is that in several of these cases, in particular the reunions of parents and children, the revelation is not preceded by any suspense-creating mystification but bursts on the reader with the same unprepared surprise as on the characters; the most striking example of this approach being the secret of the hero's identity in *Ennui* (1809)¹. In Edgeworth's novels as in romance, mysteries are frequently

¹ See Murphy 2004, especially 33-35 on Edgeworth's "harnessing" of romance.

dissipated by the discovery of a document or a picture, or simply by a direct statement, generally though not always at a late stage in the narrative. The true parentage, race and religion of the heroine of *Harrington* is a striking example of the refusal of suspense, as it has not been preceded by any hints to arouse our curiosity. In fact, it hardly deserves to be called a solution, since it is tacked on to a story which aims to combat racial and religious prejudices, and supplies a denouement which may well be seen as validating them.

However, the secrets I intend to discuss in the first part of this essay are of a different kind. They do not create suspense but reveal character, and they are not generally left to puzzle the reader for long. They are connected with the layout of a household, orderly or otherwise, and with the exploitation of spaces as they reflect the distribution of resources. Their interest is closely connected with the relation of masters and servants and the anxieties created (on both sides) by closeness to, or distance from, the centre of power. I want to start with one of Edgeworth's stories for children for a number of reasons: one is the way that, here, she avoids the creation of suspense through mystery. In a relatively short piece, secrets are soon dissipated. And its domestic setting is very relevant to my theme.

In "The False Key" in *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) two boys are taken in to the service of Mrs Churchill in her big London house. Franklin has been a pupil of her brother who philanthropically educates poor children; this boy is the son of "a man of infamous character" but is honest and upright. Felix is her cook's nephew. The house is managed by Mrs Pomfret who is prejudiced against Franklin because of his parentage and exploits her proximity to her mistress. It is a physical proximity, as with many of the important servant characters in Edgeworth's fiction; it is mentioned that she is the one who helps her employer to undress:

Mrs. Pomfret was a woman so fond of power, and so jealous of favour, that she would have quarrelled with an angel who had got so near her mistress without her introduction. She smothered her displeasure, however, till night; when, as she attended her mistress' toilette, she could not refrain from expressing her sentiments... [Later] Mrs. Pomfret hastened to report all that had passed to the cook, like a favourite minister, proud to display the extent of her *secret* influence. (Edgeworth 1796, 107-108)

As the story develops it emerges that the housekeeper is not the only one among the upper servants who is anxious to protect their status, and more particularly their control over a particular space Franklin falls foul of both the butler and the cook because he does not collude with their misbehaviour; he does not lie to cover the butler's absence from his post (he has slipped out to the alehouse) and the language, arch but significant, in which the sequel is discussed emphasises the potential for secret activity in the pantry:

From this time forward Felix alone was privileged to enter the butler's pantry. Felix became the favourite of Corkscrew; and, though Franklin by no means sought to pry into the mysteries of their private conferences, nor ever entered without knocking at the door, yet it was his fate once to be sent of a message at an unlucky time; and, as the door was half open, he could not avoid seeing Felix drinking a bumper of red liquor, which he could not help suspecting to be wine; and, as the decanter, which usually went upstairs after dinner, was at this time in the butler's grasp, without any stopper in it, he was involuntarily forced to suspect they were drinking his mistress' wine. (*Ibidem*, 113-114)

This pantry is the butler's fiefdom. The rise of "function-specific rooms" in the eighteenth century has been discussed in relation to bedrooms and boudoirs, to which we shall presently turn (see Lilley 1994, 193-194), but other spaces in large houses, pantries and dairies, had long been separated out for their function and as the responsibility of particular upper servants. The cook complains to the housekeeper that Franklin has been spying on her management of food:

Ma'am, will you be pleased to forbid him my dairy? [F]or here he comes prying and spying about; and how, ma'am, am I to answer for my butter and cream, or anything at all? I'm sure it's what I can't pretend to, unless you do me the justice to forbid him my places. (Edgeworth 1796, 117)

In fact it is she who has been secretly sending food out of the house. Her "my" is not quite a claim to ownership, but it is a claim to control, and it is one that Edgeworth is very alert to, especially in her writing for the young. In *Continuation of Early Lessons* (1815) she imagines the education of Frank who is introduced to practical as well as academic subjects by watching gardeners, thatchers, a cook and other workers at their tasks. (He is also occasionally cautioned against copying their manners.) When he is shown how candles are made by the family cook, Edgeworth calls attention to the cook's idiom by italicising her "my": "the wick of *my* candle [must] be in the middle" and "it is to hinder *my* tallow from burning" (Edgeworth 1816, 55, 56). The delegation that necessarily happens in big houses leads to blurring: servants forget that control does not equal ownership, that everything belongs to the masters.

Secrets, closed doors, forbidden pantry and dairy, are attempts to close off the spaces where control is exerted. The body too, and its clothing, can be a place of illicit concealment. Franklin's rival Felix is caught with a smuggled cargo in his pocket as his mistress's dog identifies it by the smell:

Manchon leaped up again, and began smelling near the fatal pocket in a most alarming manner... he had now got his head into Felix's pocket, and would not be quiet till he had drawn from thence, rustling out of its brown paper, half a cold turkey, which had been missing since morning. 'My [my italics] cold turkey, as I'm alive!' exclaimed the housekeeper, darting upon it with horror and amazement. (Edgeworth 1796, 146)

The story of Franklin is aptly titled “The False Key”, since the story is concerned with control of enclosures. The drunken butler has a false key made to admit a gang of housebreakers (the household’s silver utensils are also kept in the butler’s pantry) and is caught and justly punished. Franklin has spotted a bit of wax sticking to the key and warns his mistress; the housekeeper is made aware of their plan to waylay the thieves, and “stalk[s] about the house like one possessed with a secret” (*ibidem*, 59). However we can observe that the author is avoiding the development of suspense. Mrs Pomfret has already seen through Felix and begun to appreciate Franklin by this stage in the story.

In Edgeworth’s most famous fiction, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), keys re-surface, as do private rooms and closed spaces, however situated in an Irish culture whose normal standard is a loose openness. In a memorable episode the body reappears as a place of concealment while privacy suddenly transforms into incarceration. Again, the control of the food in the household is made an issue, with customary privilege – a wife’s usual function of deciding on menus, a cook’s control of the kitchen – in conflict with the realities of male upper-class power. Sir Kit Rackrent has married a Jewish bride, intending to despoil her of the jewels which are her personal property – over which by custom he had no rights². His manservant informs the narrator, the steward Thady Quirke: “...and she has thousands of English pounds concealed in diamonds about her, which she as good as promised to give up to my master before he married, but now she won’t part with any of them...” (Edgeworth 1968 [1800], 18).

She has indeed a diamond cross in “her bosom” (*ibidem*, 21). Her husband’s revenge is summed up in his curt order, “Thady, buy me a pig”. The lady is now tormented by the presence of pork at every meal. She invokes her customary authority over the women servants, but when Sir Kit threatens the cook with losing her job the servant recognises who has the real power. The lady then tries another traditional female ploy: she sulks, in “her own room” which becomes her prison, all rapidly narrated in a single sentence:

And from that day forward always sausages, or bacon, or pig meat in some shape or other, went up to table; upon which my lady shut herself up in her own room, and my master said she might stay there, with an oath: and to make sure of her, he turned the key in the door, and kept it ever after in his pocket. (*Ibidem*, 18)

Her husband keeps up a pretence that she is not a prisoner, and his neighbours are too afraid of his duelling prowess to question his story.

² See OED 3rd ed. (2005), entry for “Paraphernalia”.

Her treatment then is an open secret, fronted by an elaborate charade when he has guests:

He sent out always a servant with his compliments to my Lady Rackrent, and the company was drinking her ladyship's health, and begged to know if there was anything at table he might send her, and the man came back, after the sham errand, with my Lady Rackrent's compliments... (*Ibidem*, 19)

But when he is killed in a duel her imprisonment is ended and:

We got the key out of his pocket the first thing we did, and my son Jason ran to unlock the barrack-room, where my lady had been shut up for seven years, to acquaint her with the fatal accident... all the gentlemen within twenty miles of us came in a body, as it were, to set my lady at liberty, and to protest against her confinement, which they now for the first time understood was against her own consent. (*Ibidem*, 22)

Castle Rackrent is the opposite of the orderly English houses we encountered in the juvenile fictions. Here family secrets cannot be kept, but a private room can become a prison because the husband keeps the key on his person. An important conversation between the successor to Sir Kit, Sir Condy, and his wife, is reported because Thady Quirke hears it, "the door having no lock, and the bolt spoilt". When this couple are away spending all their money in Dublin, "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" (*ibidem*, 40, 43).

Sir Condy's improvidence leads to his wife returning to her family when he loses his estate. A different treatment of marital disorder and of the peculiarities of enclosed space in Ireland will be examined when we discuss *Ennui*, but I want first to look at examples of boudoirs and closets in Edgeworth's fictions where the action takes place in England. In *Belinda* (1801), her next novel, set in London, the body as a locus of secrecy, and the private room, get their most elaborate treatment. Belinda Portman is a guest in the house of the fashionable Lady Delacour, who is at odds with her dissipated husband, and whose behaviour, especially around a locked room called alternately "boudoir" and "cabinet", suggests that she has a secret. The truth behind the secret is revealed early on, and the interest of the narrative changes to the dilemma of Belinda as an unwilling confidante – she knows that Lady Delacour is suffering from what she thinks (wrongly as it turns out) to be a fatal breast cancer, and cannot persuade her to tell her husband, or, at first, to consult a reputable physician. Instead Lady Delacour depends on a "quack" and on the discretion of her waiting maid who thus controls her. (The same scenario, a young unmarried woman unwillingly burdened with a married friend's secret, appears in the late novel *Helen*).

When Belinda and her hostess set out for a fancy-dress ball, the maid Marriott insists that Lady Delacour should wear the costume of the tragic muse, leaving the comic muse for Belinda. Lady Delacour defeats her plan by arranging that they should change costumes at a friend's house (thus, perhaps, situating her relationship with her waiting maid at a crossroads between tragedy and comedy), and then decides to reveal her secret to Belinda, in a scene which highlights the maid's attempt to control her mistress through dress (and undressing), and the importance of domestic architecture:

Not a word more passed till they got home. Lady Delacour hurried up stairs, bidding Belinda follow her to her dressing-room. Marriott was lighting the six wax candles on the dressing-table. – 'As I live, they have changed dresses after all', said Marriott to herself, as she fixed her eyes upon Lady Delacour and Miss Portman. 'I'll be burnt if I don't make my lady remember this'. 'Marriott, you need not wait; I'll ring when I want you', said Lady Delacour; and taking one of the candles from the table, she passed on hastily with Miss Portman through her dressing-room, through her bedchamber, and to the door of the mysterious cabinet. 'Marriot, the key of this door', cried she impatiently, after she had in vain attempted to open it. 'Heavenly graciousness!' cried Marriott; 'is my lady out of her senses?'. (Edgeworth 2003 [1801], vol. II, 27)

The two ladies' progress has taken them from the liminal space of the dressing-room (to which favoured outsiders are admitted) to progressively more intimate rooms. The lady's maid keeps the key of the "mysterious cabinet" in her pocket and cannot believe that her mistress is about to reveal her secret to Belinda. What ensues is *almost* a physical struggle around the key, the door, and the room's contents:

'The key – the key – quick, the key,' repeated Lady Delacour, in a peremptory tone, she seized it as soon as Marriott drew it from her pocket, and unlocked the door. 'Had not I best put *the things* to rights, my lady?' said Marriott catching fast hold of the opening door ... Lady Delacour shut and locked the door. The room was rather dark, as there was no light in it, except what came from the candle, which Lady Delacour held in her hand, and which burned but dimly. – Belinda, as she looked round, saw nothing but a confusion of linen rags – vials, some empty, some full and she perceived that there was a strong smell of medicines. (*Ibidem*, vol. II, 27-28)

The dim room, the figure holding the candle, the lady's maid's evident anxiety, point to an impending revelation. We are on the edge of the Gothic, in a scene reminiscent of Coleridge's almost-contemporary "Christabel", the revelation of a body's secret deformity, juxtaposed with rich apparel, in a dimly-lit chamber accessed in defiance of a contrary force (in the case of Christabel by two women treading softly to avoid waking

Christabel's father). What Christabel sees when Geraldine undresses is left so vague as to have puzzled the generations of readers and critics, but its effect is to impose on Christabel a spell which obliges her to keep a secret. In *Belinda* the same obligation, without the witchcraft, is imposed, but the circumlocution is briefer³. Lady Delacour wipes away her make-up:

Her eyes were sunk, her cheeks hollow – no trace of youth or beauty remained on her death-like countenance, which formed a horrid contrast with her gay fantastic dress. ‘You are shocked, Belinda,’ said she, ‘but as yet you have seen nothing – look here,–’ and baring one half of her bosom, she revealed a hideous spectacle. (*Ibidem*, 28)

In a succeeding episode the struggle around the door does become physical, and masculine force is exerted. Lady Delacour meets with a road accident and is brought home injured and in great pain, but her only thought is to avoid being seen by anyone who might discover the condition of her breast, or enter the boudoir where she keeps her medicines. She wants to be alone with Belinda and Marriott but her husband unfortunately turns up. (Clarence Hervey, who has brought her home, is an admirer of Lady Delacour's who is in the process of transferring his allegiance to Belinda):

‘What's all this?’ cried Lord Delacour, staggering into the room: he was much intoxicated ... as soon as he / heard Clarence Hervey's voice, he insisted upon going up to *his wife's* dressing room. It was a very unusual thing, but ... he forced his way into the room.
 ‘What's all this? – Colonel Lawless!’ said he addressing himself to Clarence Hervey, whom, in the confusion of his mind, he mistook for the colonel, the first object of his jealousy. ‘Colonel Lawless,’ cried his lordship, ‘you are a villain.– I always knew it.’ (*Ibidem*, 99)

Now, Colonel Lawless is dead, and Lord Delacour should know this, as he shot him in a duel over Lady Delacour. Unfortunately, in spite of his drunken confusion he recognises that something is being concealed in the inner room; he is “following [Marriott] to the door to the boudoir, where she was going for some drops” and she makes matters worse by barring the door. His jealousy is exacerbated, and his property rights in his own house are asserted. However, the women succeed in preventing him from violating the inner room; women's privacy still has some rights when it is invoked by a guest – over whom the master of the house has no rights – rather than a wife.

³ For a discussion of this parallel and its psychological overtones see Kowaleski-Wallace 1991, 127.

'O my lord, you can't come in, I assure you, my lord, there's nothing here, my lord, nothing of the sort,' said Marriott, setting her back against the door. – Her terror and embarrassment instantly recalled all the jealous suspicions of Lord Delacour. 'Woman!' cried he, 'I will see whom you have in this room! – You have some one concealed there, and I will go in.' – Then with brutal oaths he dragged Marriott / from the door, and snatched the key from her struggling hand.

Lady Delacour started up, and gave a scream of agony. 'My lord! – Lord Delacour,' cried Belinda, springing forward, 'hear me.'

Lord Delacour stopped short. – 'Tell me then,' cried Lord Delacour, 'is not a lover of lady Delacour's concealed there?' 'No! – No! – No!' answered Belinda. 'Then a lover of miss Portman's,' said lord Delacour – 'Gad! We have hit it now, I believe.'

'Believe whatever you please, my lord,' said Belinda hastily – 'but give me the key.' (*Ibidem*, 100)

Lady Delacour's agitation has made it necessary for Belinda to hazard her own good name: she has promised to protect her hostess's secret. Her almost-lover Clarence is suspicious that she really has a man concealed in the boudoir, but his suspense is not allowed to last, as Belinda sensibly persuades Lady Delacour to send for a reliable friend, a doctor, gets him to treat Lady Delacour's injuries, and shows him what the boudoir actually contains. Dr X – comments to Belinda that he hopes to counter the servants' spreading rumours by agreeing to inspect the boudoir, and goes on to observe that "a romance called the Mysterious Boudoir, of nine volumes at least, might be written on this subject". He later reports to Clarence, in similar comic mockery of Gothic suspense, that he knows what the boudoir contains, that there is no question of Belinda's hiding a lover there, "and whilst I live, and whilst she lives, we can neither of us ever tell you the cause of the mystery" (*ibidem*, 103-104).

The distrust of intimate servants and the anxiety created by servants' knowledge of their masters' household affairs, treated at length in *Belinda*, recurs in other fictions of Edgeworth's, especially in their relation with children. In *Practical Education* (1798), she had already suggested that servants had a corrupting influence, and gone so far as to suggest that parents, perhaps assisted by a governess of their own class, should forbid all conversation between children and household servants. This subject brings her back to domestic architecture; children should have playrooms for rainy weather

apart from the rest of the family, they need not be cooped up in an ill-contrived house, where servants are perpetually in their way... Children's rooms should not be passage rooms for servants; they should, on the contrary, be so situated, that servants cannot easily have access to them, and cannot, on any pretence of business get the habit of frequenting them. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, 124-129, 131)

In *The Good French Governess* which appeared in 1801, the same year as *Belinda*, the subject of harmful influence is developed to a climactic scene involving a dressing-room and an inner closet beyond it. A lady's maid, Grace, sets out to ingratiate herself with a young child, Favoretta, by allowing her to stay up late, listening to her chat with another lady's maid, in her mistress, Mrs Harcourt's dressing-room. When the French governess returns unexpectedly early from a dinner-party she comes into the dressing-room and sits down to write a letter; the child has been hidden in a closet at her approach, and told to stay quiet. The company in the dressing-room is then augmented by the mistress and her older daughters, and Favoretta remains hidden until someone remarks that they hear a noise. At this the frightened child climbs out of a window on to the "leads", the flat part of the roof. The governess instructs the maid: "Hear me", said Madame de Rosier, 'or you are undone – go into the closet without making any bustle – call Favoretta, gently; she will not be frightened, when she hears only your voice". Favoretta is saved from a possible fatal fall, but Grace knows the next morning that her days in the house are numbered when she is not called to help with her mistress's toilette: "If my mistress can get up and dress herself without me, it's all over with me", said Grace" (Edgeworth 1802, vol. III, 84-85, 87). In due course she is fired (the same morning), while the governess, an aristocratic refugee from the French Revolution, is presently restored to her estates and her son, and leaves Mrs Harcourt in her newly-discovered independence to educate her own children without hired help.

The incident of a child climbing out on a roof comes from Edgeworth's own childhood; at six, she had got on a roof in Dublin through a window, and was spotted by a passer-by who alerted the servant who should presumably have been looking after her. The maid got her to come back into the upper room and she was told she might have been killed (see Butler 1972, 46-47)⁴. Its use in a moral narrative adds the details – possibly a fictional embellishment, or perhaps from Maria Edgeworth's own recollection – of the privacy of the closet, the role of the maid as temptress but also as rescuer, and the emphasis on the mistress's dependence for intimate service on the maid. The passage in *The Good French Governess* then illuminates the unease created around servants who occupy an intermediate position between parents and children, and around spaces that, like a dressing-room, are neither public nor entirely private and which may conceal more private, and more dangerous, spaces beyond. The scene, combining the threat of catastrophe with the need for presence of mind, replicates several features of the scene with Lord Delacour

⁴A less confined scene reminiscent of the Dublin incident, where a child is disoriented by new experiences, makes its point the lasting effect on the child rather than the servant's motives; it opens her 1817 novel *Harrington*; see Edgeworth 1999, vol. III 167.

quoted above from *Belinda*, although the linking element in *The Good French Governess* is not a bodily secret, but the servant's anxiety about her influence over her mistress.

As we have already seen, there is an evident dissimilarity between the approach to domestic space in the tales set in Ireland and those with English settings. In general (though there are many exceptions) the English narratives move towards the reintegration of the family unit or the setting up of new, presumably harmonious domestic relations – in other words towards marriages, reconciliations and reassertions of kinship. This can come about in a number of ways, which include the opening up of spaces which isolate family members from one another. The reconciliation of Lord and Lady Delacour happens when she shows him what the mysterious boudoir actually contains; in *The Good French Governess*, before the departure of the devious maid, the child Favoretta sleeps in a closet within the maid's bedroom; this arrangement (which mirrors the closet where she is hidden in the episode I have quoted) will no longer obtain after Grace has gone.

However, privacy remains important. The comparatively chaotic arrangements of houses in Ireland are illustrated in the passages already quoted from *Castle Rackrent*, but these also showed that in Ireland (and the locking up of a wife in that novel was based on a true story) a house that seems excessively open, without room for privacy, contains spaces that can suddenly transform to prison cells. The generic contrast between Irish and other scenes appears in a number of novels, and is central to *Ennui* (1809), where an Irish woman travels to England and a man brought up in England moves in the other direction. *Ennui* is built around the most romantic of secrets, an identity taken away in infancy. The sole possessor of this secret has been a family employee, her service being of an even more intimate kind than those discussed above, as a wet-nurse (she is in fact the hero's natural mother, having switched her fosterling for her own child, but that is not discovered until late in the novel). But there are many types of secret in this work and their deployment is worth discussing. One difference from the tales we have seen so far is that more of the narrative takes place in outdoor spaces, but outdoor spaces too are shown to be potential traps and to harbour secrets. The major secret is in fact on the outside, forcing itself in on the domestic realm. The process happens gradually, because its possessor is for long not minded to divulge it, and is content with a limited influence.

The first-person narrator of *Ennui* is a jaded aristocrat, Lord Glenthorn, who has married for money and whose life in England is a series of attempts to escape from his depression through fashionable amusements. He fails, and is, at the moment he meets his nurse/mother, who has come from Ireland to see him, on the point of suicide: "I resolved to shoot myself at the close of the day. I put a pistol into my pocket, and stole out towards the

evening". But his move towards the outside is what saves him; he meets with a groom with a present of a horse and rides to the exit of his property, where he has an accident; the description of the event externalises the stress of emerging from his private realm into one where he will begin to discover the truths that have been kept from him:

The horse was saddled and bridled; the groom held the stirrup, and up I got. The fellow told me *the private gate was locked*, and I turned as he pointed to go through the grand entrance. At the *outside*, of the gate sat upon the ground, huddled in a great red cloak, an old woman, who started up and sprang forwards the moment she saw me, stretching out her arms and her cloak with one and the same motion. (Edgeworth 1809, 28-29; italics are mine)

The woman declares herself as Ellinor, his nurse from Ireland. Her appearance and insistence on speaking to him frightens the horse, he falls and is knocked unconscious. Ellinor is already apparently a threat, although her appearance has saved him from suicide; she is called "an old Irish witch" by the English servants, but she is devoted to the hero, and this ambiguity about her character and role continues throughout the novel.

In the aftermath of his fall Glenthorn hears his servants discussing him and his "factotum" Captain Crawley, as they think he is dead:

'What a fool that Crawley made of my lord!' said the steward.

'What a fool my lord made of himself', said the footman, 'to be ruled, and let all his people be ruled, by such an upstart!'. (*Ibidem*, 31)

The sequence of events, a traumatic moment followed by a discovery, is to be repeated later. During his recovery, which is due to Ellinor's care, he learns the secret hinted at above – that Crawley and his wife are having an affair and plan to elope. He sets out to remonstrate with his wife, and hopes to persuade her to change her mind. He finds her in her dressing-room. This scene in an English mansion is tightly confined; within the semi-private room there are private trunks and drawers and keys to be pocketed: the arrival of the husband in his wife's room (like Lord Delacour's in *Belinda*) is a shock to the inmates almost equal to that of the arrival of Ellinor:

I opened the private door of her dressing-room suddenly – the room was in great disorder – her woman was upon her knees packing a trunk: Lady Glenthorn was standing at a table, with a parcel of open letters before her, and a diamond necklace in her hand. She started at the sight of me as if she had beheld a ghost: the maid screamed, and ran to a door at the farther end of the room, to make her escape, but that was bolted. Lady Glenthorn... reddened all over, and thrust the letters into her table-drawer. Her woman, at the same instant, snatched a casket of jewels, swept up in her arms a heap of clothes, and huddled them all together into the half-packed trunk.

'Leave the room', said I to her sternly. She locked the trunk, pocketed the key, and obeyed. (*Ibidem*, 47)

The layout of the house is specified; the apartments of husband and wife are at opposite ends, a fact which has no doubt facilitated the adulterous affair. The whole episode, from the encounter with Ellinor at the gate to the scene between husband and wife, moves into progressively tighter physical and mental spaces; the private door of the dressing-room is approached by a "back-stairs", and the confrontation between the couple is dominated by both parties' wish to keep what has happened secret. Glenthorn offers to refrain from publicly punishing Crawley: "To preserve your reputation, I refrain, upon these conditions, from making my contempt of him public"; while his lady fears that "Crawley will betray me; he will tell it to Mrs. Mattocks: so whichever way I turn, I am undone" (*ibidem*, 47-48).

Lord Glenthorn fails in his attempt to persuade his wife to stay with him; she goes off with Crawley and ends up abandoned by him and dying in destitution. Like so many of Edgeworth's narrative elements this subplot is based on a true story; Emma Vernon, married to the Earl of Exeter, eloped with her lover William Sneyd after her husband had offered a reconciliation – and Sneyd, a clergyman, was the brother of Richard Lovell Edgeworth's second and third wives (see Butler 1972, 106)⁵.

Glenthorn after his divorce decides to visit his estates in Ireland, and he encounters a place where there is none of the apparent order of his English mansion; Gothic stereotypes surface. When he reaches his ancestral home it is both impressive and ruinous; he passes "over the broken bridge and under the massive gate" to be greeted by "a multitude of servants and dependants". His bedroom is "so like a room in a haunted castle that if I had not been too much fatigued ... I should certainly have thought of Mrs Radcliffe" (Edgeworth 1809, 82).

This room, unlike those in the English mansion, is permeable. Ellinor appears first thing in the morning, and her later appearances drive the plot onward. She is disturbance incarnate, as is shown when Glenthorn's attempts to rehouse her show domestic architecture, even on a modest scale, descending into chaos. He has a new cottage built for her but the work is badly done, "Ellinor [is] forced to make a bedroom of the parlour, and then of the kitchen" because the roof leaks when the slates fall off and are not replaced (*ibidem*, 130). Enclosures in Ireland, then, do not all promise order or privacy. And some, as in Castle Rackrent, may really be prisons – there is a minor episode where Glenthorn and a lady are locked in a garden temple for a joke (*ibidem*, 213), and a more serious one, of which more presently.

Glenthorn's interest in his Irish responsibilities gradually if intermittently improves his depression, and he is stimulated especially when a plot is revealed by Ellinor, of a secret group of the 1798 revolutionaries,

⁵ In fact Sneyd died before Emma, and she remarried.

the United Irishmen, to kidnap him. They meet in a cave by the seashore, open to the sea but also entered by a trapdoor above, where they are ultimately caught by Glenthorn and the forces of order, so that another apparently open space becomes a scene of capture. Glenthorn has found out that his own manservant is their ringleader and reacts by locking him up, once again in a private domestic space, a closet, before going on to arrest the other conspirators:

[I] sent Kelly to look for some things in what was called *the strong closet* – a closet with a stout door and iron-barred windows, out of which no mortal could make his escape. Whilst he was busy searching in a drawer, I shut the door upon him, locked it, and put the key into my pocket ... The servants thought it was some jest, and I passed on with my loaded pistols in my pocket. (*Ibidem*, 284-285, 287)

It is this resolute act, this successful confining of the servant with a secret intention, and the capture of the rebels which follows, which lead to the revelation of Ellinor's secret of having switched the babies. She has been wrongly informed that one of her sons was among the captured United Irishmen, and when Glenthorn refuses to let him escape she tells him in her fury that this son is his natural brother; for the third time, we have her appearance introducing the discovery of a secret. Her role as revealer of secrets and disrupter of families leads to Glenthorn's expulsion, for the second time, from his home. He gives up the earldom to his foster-brother, who is even more unhappy than the unconscious usurper had been, and goes off to study for a professional career in the law. Now that all secrets are out he no longer has occasion for strong closets or their keys, having lost his place in his own house. He has to learn how to cope with the necessities of life, and how to go to bed without the assistance of a servant: "I once caught myself saying of myself, 'That careless blockhead has forgot my nightcap'. For some time I was liable to make odd blunders about my own identity" (*ibidem*, 346). However, the conclusion of the novel shows him introduced, in his new identity, to an urbane Dublin society which he learns to negotiate under the patronage of the benevolent Lord Y–.

His previous house, like many another Gothic pile with secrets, ends up being destroyed. The former Christy O'Donoghue writes to the former Glenthorn describing how it was set alight accidentally by his drunken son who perished in the fire:

All above and about me was flame and smoke... and not a sarvant that was in his right rason... There's no use in describing all – the short of it is, there's nothing remaining of the castle but the stones. (*Ibidem*, 415)

But the chaotic scene gives way to the restoration of a different social order. The hero acquires a third identity by his marriage to the heiress to

whom the Glenthorn estate descends (he changes his name to hers). The romance notion of a "true" identity, as a secret from the past working its way out of concealment, is exploded, as the Gothic castle with its spooky chambers and its prison-closet is reduced to rubble. Presumably the connection between servants and secrets will be dissolved as a new architecture will rise in its place. The hero's identity remains a work in progress; he says, tentatively, "I flatter myself, that I shall not relapse into indolence", in his final paragraph, concluding "the example of Lord Y— convinces me that a man may at once be rich and noble, and active and happy" (*ibidem*, 416).

Lord Y— is Lord Charlemont (see Butler 1792, 248). Edgeworth pays a compliment to the memory of her father's friend, the cultivated politician who had entertained her stepmother and herself just before she became a celebrated writer. His influence on Glenthorn/O'Donoghue parallels Edgeworth's ideal of an Ireland capable of being developed into a rational and civilised society without losing the native warmth of its people.

The later Irish-based *Ormond* (1817) revisits this theme while taking a fairly benign approach to Irish disorder. The household of the warm hearted and mainly admirable King Corny, like the Gaelic Catholic society that surrounds it, is hospitable, traditional and barely manageable, as is seen in both trivial incidents and crucial moments in the plot. When the hero Harry Ormond is an inmate he reads *Tom Jones*, finding the first volume in a sewing basket, the second in "the apple room". The open house, carousing and revelry at Corny's wake, which horrify him, are absolutely appropriate to that house and neighbourhood, as is the genuine public grief at his funeral (Edgeworth 1999 [1817,] vol. VIII, 50, 116).

Edgeworth contrasts the functioning generosity of Corny's house with the hero's earlier abode with the ambitious Sir Ulick O'Shane, his guardian. It appears orderly under the management of his English wife, but it is in fact a scene of conflict. In the first chapter, Lady O'Shane in her dislike of Harry orders the gates to be locked by an English servant when he is out late, while her husband tells an Irish servant to leave them open. The English servant sees to it that the gates are locked "and the keys brought to her ladyship, who put them immediately into her work-table". So Ormond's first appearance in the novel is at a window; at "a peremptory tap on the glass behind her; [Lady O'Shane] turned, and saw young Ormond, pale as death, and stained with blood having drunkenly shot a man in a quarrel and now crying for the gate to be unlocked so that the wound can be treated in the house" (*ibidem*, 14). Harry's passionate folly and quick repentance belong with the open gate, the meanness of his guardian's wife (who objects to the reception of the wounded man) with the locked gate and the stashed keys.

But once the story leaves Ireland ideas about privacy and the reasonable use of locked rooms reappear, as does the suggestion that one can have too much separateness. As in the letter to Frances Beaufort, Edgeworth can be seen to identify a concern for a proper degree of privacy with the

orderly, “English” (including in this case upper-class Irish) manner of inhabiting a dwelling. When Ormond visits a childhood friend, now (unhappily) married in Paris, he is told by her aunt about the advantages of French domestic architecture, where:

You see, Monsieur et Madame with their own staircases, their own passages, their own doors in and out, and all separate for the people of Monsieur, and the women of Madame, and here through this little door you go into the apartments of Madame. (*Ibidem*, 199)

When he is invited to enter the boudoir he stops “respectfully” in case she is dressing, but is urged onward, and finds on entering that:

[Dora] was in an inner apartment; and Ormond, the instant after he entered this room with Mademoiselle, heard a quick step, which he knew was Dora’s, running to bolt the door of the inner room – he was glad that she had not quite got rid of her English prejudices. (*Ibidem*, 199)

The author’s agreed success in this novel includes her ability to exploit open and closed spaces for the revelation of psychological states. Privacy remains important in *Ormond*, though secrets are not a driving force in the novel.

Identity in these novels is constituted by social position, but to a large degree validated by control over domestic space. High social position involves interaction with servants on an intimate level and this in turn leads it would seem to the demarcation of particular spaces whether for guilty secrecy or innocent privacy, or simply for special functions. Boudoirs, dressing-rooms and cabinets, like dairies and pantries, may be scenes of orderly activity, in a well-regulated household where room is made for privacy, and this remains valuable and demands respect even when there is no secret.

The protection of women’s private space and the concession of that space by the males of a family are of particular concern in Maria Edgeworth’s world. In a dysfunctional family the need for secrecy, for locks and keys, grows to the point where private rooms become zones of conflict. In her own life, as we access it from her *Letters*, such rooms are scenes of happy activity from the “little dressing-room at Clifton” outside Bristol where she and her cousin Sophy Ruxton “hammered” attempts at dramatic writing, to the dressing-room in Edgeworthstown where her stepmother sat reading until interrupted by labour pains, retiring to bed to produce “another little brother” after two hours. The intimacy of the relationships depicted, and experienced, in her life and letters, is ideally policed by respect for privacy. In her first letter to Frances, she reassured the future stepmother that “you need not, dear Miss Beaufort, fence yourself round with very strong palings in this family where all have been early accustomed to mind their boundaries” (Edgeworth 2018, 149,

154, 52-53). It is in the entanglements of her fiction that we discover how physical boundaries can become barriers and can create secret hiding-places, traps or prisons.

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WOMEN, CONTEMPORARIES, LEGACY

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN THE EIGHTEENTH AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract:

This paper aims at outlining the history of the female condition in the western world during the XVIII century, analysing the type of culture that generated separation between the public and private spheres of life, which postulated the silence of women within the latter ambit as a guarantee of the solidity of patriarchal structures as a social basis. The social system, built in the name of an alleged natural order of things assuming the inexorable superiority of males, was marked by representations and perceptions of women as subaltern or antagonists, legitimising the use of psychological and physical violence by men within marriage, a phenomenon which continues even today. Despite the constraints and the dependence imposed by the civil code, several women rebelled against their families, fathers or husbands. Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges and George Sand, are emblems of a female form of "dissidence" based on what women were forbidden to avail themselves of, that is, their intellect.

Keywords: dissidence, education, feminist literary theory, western women's rights, women's history

This paper draws inspiration from an article written by the Italian journalist Giovanni Russo and published in *Corriere della Sera*, in 1964, the provocative title of which was "Come mettere gli uomini con le spalle al muro" (How to get men's backs up against the wall). It relaunched many of the ideas posited by an anonymous Venetian lady in 1797 who went as far as to sustain the superiority of females (see Russo 1964). The basic point was that Eve, having been created after Adam, occupied a higher position on the evolutionary hierarchical scale than Adam!

Russo held that women were well aware that men might be classified as reactionaries or progressives, conservatives or revolutionaries, but, that, when it came to the other sex, they laid their ideological differences aside, and, in Italy at least, agreed in assigning a subaltern role to females. This was an old story, an ancient polemic which might change in form as

custom and society changed, but not in substance. Was this a constant aspect of the male psyche?¹

This article was informed by a theory advanced by an anonymous Venetian woman, published in 1797, who wove a refined, erudite thesis against the macho prejudices of the Italian males of her era. Her essay also provided an eloquent sample of feminine psychology veined with a lively sense of humour. The writer, whose name we wish we knew and who was undoubtedly a brilliant member of Venetian society, by using the same philosophical and historical arguments upon which they based their theoretical and political speculations against them, turned the tables on the Italian Jacobins who, when it came to the question of the freedom of women, proved rather conservative. That way she put their backs up against the wall.

They all agreed, in theory, that women should enjoy the same human rights as men; but how and when this emancipation should take place remained a matter of lively discussion. Subordination to their fathers' authority when choosing a husband was condemned, prostitution was deprecated, divorce auspicated, but the role of woman remained locked within the confines of the family. Many women, enflamed by the principles of the French Revolution, invoked full equality and showed that they knew how to avail themselves, like any male writer, of history and dialectics.

The anonymous Venetian lady's writing bears testimony to how women were capable of exploiting the theses of the Illuminists and making Italian republicans aware of the contradictions into which they had fallen:

Men are entrusted with legislation and government, they are magistrates, they run embassies, tribunals, the army; in short, the voices of men resound everywhere and females are never mentioned except for matrimonial or quasi-matrimonial purposes regarding men. So, gentlemen, adopters of the new system, you attend only to your own interests and the happiness of the male sex. So, either you do not consider women as individuals belonging to the human race or think only of making one half of it happy. We, dear brothers, demand being considered equal to men in all areas of public interest to universal reform.²

¹ This question is inspired by a chapter in the anthology of Italian Jacobin writers, the second volume of which was published in a collection of Italian writers issued by Laterza. See "La causa delle donne. Discorso agl'Italiani della cittadina", in Cantimori, De Felice 1964, 557-559.

² "Agli uomini affidate la legislazione, agli uomini i governi e le magistrature, le ambasciate, i tribunali, gli eserciti, dappertutto, insomma, risuonano gli uomini e le femmine non si sentono mai nominare che per il solo uso matrimoniale o quasi matrimoniale, relativo agli uomini. Dunque voi altri, signori adottatori del nuovo sistema non pensate che ai vostri vantaggi e alla felicità del vostro sesso mascolino; dunque o non tenete le donne per individui del genere umano o pensate a felicitar di contesto una

Not content with merely sustaining the equality of the sexes, she went a step further and actually claimed that women were superior to men. These “boastful men” who flaunt the superiority of man over woman should learn, she pointed out, that their superiority is not due to nature, but to guilt. Woman was created after man, therefore she is more perfect than him:

This argument, which may appear strange to you – she writes – is clear to us when following the physical order of the creation of the world. First water and the land were created, then the trees and all other vegetation; by nature vegetation is more perfect than earth or water. First came vegetation and after that, the beasts; it is evident that beasts are more perfect than vegetation. First beasts were given life and after them man; and as you are all well aware, oh reasonable philosophers, man is superior to the beast. First, man was created and after him woman. So, Italian logicians, all you need to do now is reach the legitimate conclusion.³

This must have been a moment of sheer delight. One can imagine the mischievous smile on the writer’s face, as, amusing herself, she took pleasure in providing these demonstrations to “reasonable philosophers” and “Italian logicians”. Her discourse continued on strictly rational bases:

You men must admit, if you do not want to deserve the title of miserable sophists, that, created after the beasts, you are less distant from their wild state than those of us who, created after man, enjoy a purer and more perfect form of humanity.⁴

The conclusion of this syllogism was foreseeable:

sola metà. Noi, fratelli carissimi – proclama l’autrice del discorso – pretendiamo di essere considerate al pari degli uomini in tutti i pubblici interessi della universale riforma” (quoted in Cantimori, De Felice 1964, 462). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

³ “Questo argomento che sarà forse per sembrarvi strano - si legge nel discorso - vien dettato a noi dallo stesso ordine fisico della creazione del mondo. Prima furono create le acque e la terra e dopo di esse gli alberi e tutti gli altri vegetabili, ed i vegetabili per natura sono più perfetti della terra e dell’acqua. Prima esisterono i vegetabili e dopo di essi, tutte le bestie ed è certo che le bestie sono più perfette dei vegetabili. Prima ebbero vita le bestie e dopo di esse l’uomo; e voi ben sapete, o filosofi ragionevoli, quanto sia l’uomo più perfetto della bestia. Prima finalmente fu creato l’uomo e poi la donna: inferitene voi, o logici italiani, la conseguenza legittima” (*ibidem*, 459).

⁴ “Voi uomini dovete ammettere se non volete il meritato titolo di miserabili sofisti che, creati dopo le bestie siete meno lontani dalla loro selvatichezza e noi altre create dopo l’uomo abbiamo purgata e perfetta l’umanità” (*ibidem*, 460).

human nature had been neither fulfilled nor was it happy until woman was created. We are different by sex but similar and equal by nature. If there is some kind of inequality between us, the advantage is all ours.⁵

Given this premise, it was easy for this Venetian lady to demonstrate that women had a true and natural right to take part in all public affairs. Fearing the objections that the exercise of these rights might be impeded by domestic concerns, the anonymous writer observed that this was “a rather lame excuse” and that it was no longer the time for “similar impartiality”. Furthermore, not all women were married. “Maidens and widows are a considerable part of the population and this population will be even greater if you add all the married women who are separated from their husbands or disgusted with them”⁶.

The writer concluded with a warning to all men who continued hypocritically to refuse to consider women as equals, stating:

If, then, you do not want to bow to reason; if you want your sweet words of freedom and equality to ring out to deceive us, supporting incoherently, at one and the same time, the complete tyranny of men over women, we know, in this case, that, as our power is known to the world at large, you too know what our commands, our sighs, our behaviour, our condescension can achieve, with us you can destroy all the enemies of equality, without us you will never destroy them. (*Ibidem*, 464)⁷

The position of this anonymous Venetian lady might be considered an answer to one of the first letters contained in Maria Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies* published in 1795 (see Edgeworth 1795a and 1795b), that is, her *Letter from a Gentleman*, where the Anglo-Irish authoress insisted on the pedagogical elements she used to outline the female characters peopling her novels, informed by philosophical arguments reflecting those expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Émile* in 1762.

⁵ “La natura umana non fu compiuta né felice persino che non fu creata la donna, siamo differenti per sesso ma simili e eguali per natura. Se vi è tra di noi un qualche genere di disuguaglianza, il vantaggio è tutto nostro” (*ibidem*, 461).

⁶ “Le fanciulle e le vedove formano un popolo innumerabile e più innumerabile ancora vi riuscirà se vi porrete accanto tutte le maritate che o separate sono dai loro mariti o disgustate di loro” (*ibidem*, 463).

⁷ “Che se poi non vorrete piegarvi alla ragione; se vorrete far risuonare ad inganno nostro le dolci parole di libertà ed eguaglianza, sostenendo nel tempo stesso, con incoerenza, l'intera tirannia degli uomini sopra le donne, sappiamo in tal caso che, essendo la nostra potenza nota a tutto il mondo e noto assai a voi medesimi quanto possano i nostri comandi, i nostri sospiri, il nostro contegno, la nostra condescendenza, siccome con noi distruggereste tutti i nemici della eguaglianza, senza di noi non li distruggerete giammai” (*ibidem*, 464).

Rousseau had sanctioned the constitutional, moral and intellectual weakness of women, giving rise to a prejudice that marked the life pathway of some of the women of letters of his time. According to Rousseau, women remained perennially in a developmental stage of infancy, unable to look beyond the domestic sphere and, therefore, unable to practice the “exact sciences” by virtue of a naturally inherited inclination. Women’s only book, he held, was the world, meaning that women were related only to the concrete so that the female soul could not engage in speculative activities, meaning that female intelligence was incapable of theorisation. *Émile* posited that the science suited to women was knowledge of men and their feelings, those of their spouses in particular. Women had no history, or rather, they were endowed with one consisting only in their ability to attract:

To please (men), be useful to them, make them love and respect them, educate them as children, take care of them as adults, advise them, console them, make their lives pleasant and sweet, these are the duties of women of every age, and what they need to be taught from childhood. (Rousseau 1782-1789, 170)⁸

In the *Letter from a Gentleman* the fictional writer addressed a friend on the occasion of the birth of a daughter, illustrating his position regarding her education, aware that this was no gift of fate on a par with health, beauty and wealth, but the outcome, rather, of a pedagogical process which could not but take into account the essential virtues which connotated the female character. The two imaginary interlocutors had a totally different view of the female intellect; the recipient of the letter upheld the rights of women and the equality of the sexes resulting from them, while the addresser maintained, on the basis of his knowledge of nature, that human kind was characterised by the inferiority of females, as is the case with all other living beings. To cultivate the female intellect excessively to the detriment of other faculties, might well give rise to cognitive deformities no less disgusting than certain physical ones. On the other hand, women were acknowledged as having the same natural abilities as men, but, that if one looked at the position they occupied in society, at the domestic functions they performed, at the pleasure they took in unruliness and dissipation, together with the interest they showed for frivolous literature, one realised that they would not have enough time to cultivate their intellectual abilities, undertake and complete a course of studies. Just as there were no female authorities in the field of science,

⁸ “Leur plaisir, leur être utiles, se faire aimer & honorer d’eux, les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, les conseiller, les consoler, leur rendre la vie agréable & douce: voilà les devoirs des femmes dans tous les temps, & ce qu’on doit leur apprendre dès leur enfance” (Rousseau 1762, 16).

women were equally unsuited to the exercise of politics, so it was possible to hold that in the long history of Man from the Emperor Augustus to King Louis XIV, the influence, the freedom and the power of women had always been at the root of the political and moral decline of empires (see Edgeworth 1795a, 1-43).

If then, one took a look at the literary ladies who lived in the society of the time, one could not deny that some of them had a clear propensity for literature and were admired by the reading public for their talent. However, at the same time, their moral frailty induced them to exalt the vanity aroused by admiration to the detriment of their discretion and reputation. And so, just like men, women literati, endowed with inferior intellectual strength, fell victim to personal attack which violated their private lives making them the object of scandal, and, even when their morality was irreproachable, they became the target of envy and were required pay tribute to censorship.

It was generally acknowledged – stated this imaginary gentleman – that literary ladies had no sincere friendships and were unlucky in love because men did not like well-educated women, capable of achieving success in areas that were the prerogative of males. Above all men did not like women capable of expressing strength and opposing the established natural order, which required women to be intellectually and physically “infirm”. The letter ends with a warning to the father of this newborn daughter, who, according to his friend, risked wasting his time and energy in educating a daughter obliged to live in a kind of society unaccustomed to and untrained in gender equality, a society which would take a long time to change its view of women, a social order convinced, in the name of the natural inclination of women, that their education should be inspired by values of friendship, love, feminine virtues, fulfilment of duty and consensus flowing directly from unexceptionable morality (see Edgeworth 1795a, 42-43).

The reasons why the discourse of the above-mentioned Venetian lady, a true invective against philosophical theories, beginning with Rousseau, translated into juridical precepts codifying female subalternity, was published again in 1964, resided undoubtedly in the fact that in the 1960s Italy was on the brink of significant change, was beginning to deal with new conquests, considerable ambiguities and old prejudices affecting relationships between the sexes.

It is emblematic, actually, that it was in 1964 too, that another national daily newspaper, *Paese Sera*, published a long, eloquent, disturbing article entitled: “Gli uxoricidi silenziosi: la uccidono dentro lasciandola viva fuori. Come ammazzare la moglie” (Silent wife-killers: killing her inside while leaving her alive outside. How to kill your wife)⁹, at a time when, in

⁹The half title recites: “Rapporti a senso unico: lei deve essere infermiera, favorita, ammiratrice e parafulmine. Lui il domatore, il seduttore, la mente” (One-way relation-

Italy, honour killing (that is, the murder of one's wife legitimised by one or more articles of the Penal Code) was legal though public opinion was beginning to consider this kind of legal homicide a mistake as it created more problems than it solved; in particular it meant having to replace the victim of the uxoricide with a domestic servant to look after the house, a more costly business than marriage. A more convenient and efficacious solution was the so-called "secret or silent uxoricide", achieved by killing one's wife in spirit while allowing her body to live to perform its wifely duties. The initial seeds of this kind of murderous practice, so widespread in Italian society, were sown during the couple's engagement to come to full bloom during their honeymoon and the months that followed. This first phase consisted in encirclement, isolation and siege, a strategy aimed at imposing unconditional surrender, with the fiancé or the newly-wed husband doing all in his power to interrupt all previous communication between his fiancée or wife and the outside world, inducing the woman, forcing her to be more exact, to give up her old friends, renounce going to the cinema on her own, avoid all contact with members of the opposite sex, shut herself up in the conjugal "nest" and devote herself to nothing else while abandoning any "foolish" idea of working outside the home, something that might be contemplated only in cases of dire necessity. In other words, she was to exist for her husband alone.

The author of the article in question, Enzo Rava, a famous Roman crime reporter of the 1950s and 1960s, held that the first phase of this kind of uxoricide, not necessarily intentional or premeditated, might be considered not homicide but manslaughter (the coin womanslaughter, might be more appropriate). The potential killer was probably convinced that by scorching the earth around his wife he was simply showing how much he loved her.

The second phase of silent uxoricide Rava held was slower and more complex. It consisted in an infinite series of behaviours on the part of the man—akin to those of a "prison warden"—used to assert his intellectual superiority over the victim, convincing her of his geniality, an idea to which she would fall an easy prey because unable to make comparisons with the outside world. He convinced her that without him she would be lost and gradually turned love into a one-directional sentiment where only she loved and sacrificed herself, becoming nurse (women bore pain more easily than men), comforter (men worked a lot and needed to be consoled when they came home), ever-available mistress (men, because of their nature, were not prone to renunciation), systematic admirer (men needed to be admired), lightning conductor (the working man was nervous, so his wife had to make allowances for this and put up with his moods).

ships: she has to be nurse, mistress, admirer and lightning conductor. He the tamer, the seducer, the mind).

At this point, the man, believing his wife to have become rather boring and, as he was heroic and a hunter by nature, could not be satisfied with this sole conquest, be content with the boring atmosphere that reigned at home. He did not think he was cheating on his wife, he simply began asking himself whether “I would still be capable of seducing another woman”. He did not necessarily try to do so, however, the woman, his wife, who has now been vanquished, or more precisely razed to the ground, no longer interested him. At this psychological point, the silent uxoricide entered the final phase. He did not need to tell his wife that he had tired of her because she was aware of that herself. When she realised she has been “strangled”, she reacted at times, sought a way out. She protested, she accused and nagged her husband, in other words, she made herself absolutely annoying. He told his friends that all women were hysterical. The advantage of silent over material uxoricide lay in the fact that a symbolically killed wife continued to carry out her household chores and perform all her other conjugal duties. She did not complain that her husband neglected her, if he vented all his ill-humour on her, if he sought more fascinating topics and sources of conversation elsewhere. After all, a man had the right to live, meaning that he was entitled to pursue interests other than those regarding his job, have friends that were not necessarily colleagues, nourish feelings other than those dictated by gratitude or lukewarm affection alone. Man did not live on bread alone because life is beautiful and full of opportunities. But to live with a corpse shut up in a house? One more reason for living life outside of the home. If by chance the odd Italian husband felt remorse for having sapped his wife of her passion for life, her curiosity about the world; if he had prevented her from caring for herself so that she aged in quickly, he found justification in the fact that he had loved her and turned her into a doll for himself alone. Making an object, a thing of one’s wife: that was the perfect uxoricide, accomplished with absolute love and perfect unawareness.

In Italy in the 1960s, the Law (art. 581 of the Penal Code) permitted a man to go unpunished for beating his wife if he found her flagrantly committing adultery. The sentence for killing her in similar circumstances was light (art. 587 of the Penal Code regarding Honour Killing). An article published at the time in *Il Mondo* magazine headed “Rassegnate agli schiaffi” (Resigned to beatings) by journalist Anna Garofalo, renowned for her defence of a secular, democratic state, denounced the dramatic situation of Italian women obliged to “resign themselves to beatings”, put up with the physical and moral violence meted out by their husbands whom they had chosen or who had been imposed on them, without the strength or the possibility of defending themselves. The Italian press carried regular reports of veritable violations of “human rights” which were unbelievable and columns dedicated to women published letters regarding marriage between girls from northern Italian regions and young internal

immigrants from southern Italy. By way of example, Garofalo reported the case of a fiancée from a northern Italian city whose family strongly opposed her marriage to a young immigrant from the south, who wrote to the newspaper asking for advice. Should she marry him? Should she leave him? The paper opted for an impartial stance and published letters from readers expressing two opposite positions, one positive, the other negative. The negative letter's "no" was so loud, the contents so grave, that it is worth quoting here:

To that girl who wants to marry a southerner I say: do not marry him! To do so I went against my parents' wishes and now I am a slave. I live with my mother-in-law and two unmarried sisters-in-law, all of them subject to my husband, supervised, always at home. Only my mother-in-law goes out shopping and locks the door. My husband allows me out twice a week and never alone. My mother-in-law makes a report about me and my two sisters-in-law to my husband every evening and if there is anything wrong, that spells trouble. My husband beats me and his sisters with a leather strap he keeps for the purpose, makes us count the lashes he decides to give us according to what we have done wrong. We have to lift our dresses so that he can hit us on the thighs, but over our stockings, so that the signs the lashing leave on our skin will not be visible. If we do not stay still while he is whipping us he increases the dose. This happens two or three times a month and the marks left last several days. (Garofalo 1964c, 14thJune)¹⁰

In that same period, every time the new judicial year was inaugurated the general attorneys announced, with some acrimony, that "unfortunately separations between married couples are on the increase". One asks what the reasons for this increased intolerance may have been; this unknown form of rebellion which reached its peak, often passed under the radar of justice because *de facto* separations were actually much more numerous than *de jure* ones. The answer is difficult because it presupposes a lengthy in-depth social investigation capable of revealing the economic, psychological and cultural causes underlying failed marriages, above all, the imponderable intimate motives that even those directly involved

¹⁰ "A quella ragazza che vuole sposare un meridionale dico: non lo sposi! Per farlo sono andata contro il volere dei miei ed ora sono una schiava. Vivo con la suocera e due cognate nubili, tutte sottoposte a mio marito, sorvegliate, sempre in casa. A fare la spesa esce soltanto mia suocera e chiude la porta a chiave. Mio marito mi fa uscire due volte la settimana e mai da sola. Mia suocera riferisce a mio marito ogni sera su di me e sulle mie cognate e se c'è qualcosa che non va sono guai. Mio marito picchia me e le sue sorelle con una striscia di cuoio che tiene apposta per questo caso, ci fa contare le sferzate che stabilisce di darci a seconda delle colpe. Dobbiamo alzare i vestiti e ci dà le cinghiate sulle cosce, sopra le calze, dove non c'è niente sulla pelle e se non rimaniamo ferme mentre ci frusta aumenta la dose. Questo succede spesso, due o tre volte al mese e i segni durano diversi giorni".

fail to perceive clearly and which frequently escape investigation too (see Garofalo 1964b, 16th May).

The year 1964 was a positive one from the point of view of female emancipation in Italy. Equal pay for equal work was legally granted to men and women working in the commercial field (something that had already been applied in industry and banking). This was a right already sanctioned by article 37 of the Italian Constitution and it may seem strange that it took sixteen years for it to be applied effectively. But Italian women were used to being patient and knew that every one of their conquests required a long wait. The newspapers back then printed the photograph of a nineteen-year-old girl in a merchant navy uniform boarding a ship. A Venetian, she was the first Italian woman to be licensed as a fully-fledged merchant sea captain. Before her, other girls, though qualified, had not been allowed to wear that uniform and work with a merchant navy crew because, although article 51 of the Italian Constitution guaranteed equal access to men and women to public and political office¹¹, the article had not been applied. Article 51 sanctions female emancipation and is based on equality between men and women, as per Article 3 of the same Constitution – to which echoes the words of Teresa Mattei, secretary of the Presidency of the Constituent Assembly who, at the age of twenty-five referred that “no democratic development, no substantial progress can take place within the life of a people unless accompanied by full female emancipation”¹².

In April 1964, the Congress of the International Federation of Women Jurists was held in Bologna with the ample participation of the Italian section. Among the issues discussed were those regarding illegitimate children and conjugal patrimonial relations, also in cases of separation. Equal rights for men and women within the family were also demanded especially as far as parental authority and adultery were concerned.

In August that same year, under the aegis of the United Nations, the International Women’s Alliance representing forty nations, including Italy, met in Trieste. The topic was *Women and Human Rights*. At this meeting,

¹¹ See Garofalo 1965, 2nd January. The half title of this article recites: “1964 was one of fervent activity and registered more than one success for the Italian women’s associations that, free of old-fashioned suffragettism, demand only respect of the constitution” (“Il 1964 ha registrato una fervida attività e più di un successo delle associazioni femminili italiane che, libere dal vecchio suffragettismo, chiedono solo il rispetto della costituzione”).

¹² Teresa Mattei, with amazing foresight demanded “that no ambiguity exist, in any article or part of the Constitution, providing a foothold to those seeking to prevent and restrain this pathway to women’s liberation” (“che nessuna ambiguità sussista, in nessun articolo e in nessuna parte della Carta costituzionale, che sia facile appiglio a chi volesse ancora impedire e frenare alle donne questo cammino liberatore”, <<https://www.nascitacostituzione.it/01principi/003/index.htm?art003-024.htm&2>>, 10/2019). See Leone 2013, 19.

the fact that delegates from countries which had only recently attained independence manifested considerable commitment to the inclusion of women in the structures of modern society, was of great significance.

Women lawyers, in Italy, numbered about two thousand, counting only those with a practice of their own and were self-employed as civil and penal lawyers and not including the thousands of women with a degree in law who had chosen to act as notaries, teachers of juridical subjects and pursued careers in administration. Only fifteen years had passed since woman lawyer Zara Algardi published a book entitled *La donna e la toga* (1949; *Woman and the gown*), for the Giuffrè publishing house, treating the topic of a profession then open to very few women. She presented the law as a profession demanding not only a sense of justice, but intuition, balance, courage and even physical resistance. Despite many objective impediments and many more generated by die-hard prejudice, Zara Algardi wrote that:

wherever there is a battle to be won, justice to be affirmed, freedom to be conquered, there is a useful need for the word of women jurists. Wherever progress and peace are in jeopardy women jurists must have their say.¹³

Finally, eight women came to wear the judge's toga, passing – with 178 men out of a total of 800 candidates – the public competition for the judiciary. These were the daughters of a new era not always aware, maybe, of how hard women older than themselves, in the name of pure principle and for no personal gain, had fought for seventeen years so that no profession, occupation or elective office might be barred to women, but be accessible as the Constitution provided.

But how much road has had to be covered to reach female emancipation? Has something always acted as an impediment because of male representation of the feminine? It is necessary to take a plunge into the past, amid philosophical elaborations and political practices that, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theorised and codified female subalternity on the basis of presumed laws of nature.

The Venetian lady quoted above wrote a few years after the beginning of the French Revolution, which, it had been believed, would mark a decisive moment in the transformation of the history of women, although there were two converging, opposite schools of thought on the issue. One held that the revolution did not change the female condition at all, the

¹³ “dovunque ci sia una battaglia da vincere, una giustizia da affermare, una libertà da conquistare ivi è utile e necessaria la parola della donna giurista. Dovunque il progresso e la pace siano in pericolo ivi la donna giurista deve dire la sua parola” (quoted in Garofalo 1964a, 21st February).

other, on the contrary, that the changes it did bring about were negative in character. The French Revolution provided an unprecedented occasion to review relationships between the sexes because it brought the issue of women up and made it a focal point of the political investigation of society. What emerged was a new question regarding the role of women within the institutions which could no longer relegate them to the domestic sphere. This represented a moment in history when western civilisation discovered that women had a place within the apparatuses of the State. These revolutionary reflections concerning the place of women within the institutions did not necessarily give rise to revolutionary solutions. This is what Elisabeth Sledziewski held in her “Rivoluzione e rapporto tra i sessi” (Revolution and relations between the sexes) sustaining that the “French turnaround” provoked in those who first raised the subversive issue, a reaction rather than an answer, leading therefore, to reactionary discourse regarding women, whereas, on the contrary, innovation was what one would have expected. The author highlighted the audacity of the French Revolution and at the same time its historical abdication which translated into a refusal to face the problem of the relationship between the sexes, even though the Revolution itself had put the question on its agenda. According to contemporary and more recent detractors, the Revolution was responsible for allowing vice to penetrate the folds of the social order, by emancipating women. The writer Louis de Bonald, theorist of the principle of monarchy, accused the revolutionaries of destroying the so-called “society according to nature”, where woman was subject and man was power¹⁴.

The liberal Anglo-Irish writer and philosopher Edmund Burke, a Whig at Westminster from 1765 on, strongly opposed and criticised the Revolution. In 1796, he wrote that the Revolution was “a system of manners, the most licentious, prostitute and abandoned that ever has been known and at the same time the most coarse, rude, savage and ferocious” (Burke 1796, 39) that one could possibly imagine, a system which, above all, emancipated women, weakening matrimonial bonds and flaunting the immutable laws of the sexual division of roles to the point where even London’s prostitutes, who trade in infamy, would deem them shameful. The system adopted by the French Revolution he believed subverted the principles of civilisation, it “brought forth five or six hundred drunken women calling at the bar of the Assembly for the blood of their own children” (*ibidem*) and debased matrimony to the level of a civil contract and facilitated divorce. Indignant, Burke continued that “with the Jacobins of France, vague intercourse is without reproach, marriage is reduced to the vilest concubinage” (*ibidem*, 44) and ranted against “a kind of profligate equity in giving to women the same licentious power” (*ibidem*, 42).

¹⁴ See Bonald 1843, esp. Tome 2, Livre 1.

The adversaries of the French Revolution believed it was the only *ré-gime* which had ever dared, thanks to a political ruling, to re-examine the hierarchy of the sexes and, in a totally imprudent manner, had opened up unlimited credit to women. Burke wrote that

The reason they assigned was as infamous as the act, declaring that women had been too long under the tyranny of parents and of husbands. It is not necessary to observe upon the horrible consequences of taking one half of the species wholly out of the guardianship and protection of the other. (*Ibidem*, 44)

The Revolution acknowledged the civil personality of women which the *Ancien Régime* had denied and proclaimed them fully fledged human beings capable of enjoying and exercising their rights.

It was in the following that the substantial difference between the pre- and post-revolutionary periods resided: granting women independence and the status of citizens. If we examine the discourse regarding women in the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century, we find them present on the domestic, economic, intellectual, public, conflictual and even ludic scenes of society. Indispensable because of the functions they performed, their presence was also revealed in events that created, transformed or lacerated society.

It seemed, therefore, that women were essential to the preservation of the order of the universe: but it was in this that the paradox resided. This reiterated discourse on women and their nature was veined by the need to contain it, by the not so covert desire to make their presence a sort of absence, or, at least, a discreet presence, confined within the limits of well-defined perimeters.

From the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries on, the debate on women was very lively. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century there was talk of the “women’s *querelle*” or “the war of the sexes”. There are texts, images and archives which lead us to the heart of the conflict: women were considered malicious, imperfect, creatures of excess and diabolical mystery, deadly and world wise. They were also said to be sweet and submissive, but soon, in the various accounts, their cruelty and unrestrained sexuality seem to prevail.

In France, Marie de Gournay, in 1622, opposed detractors of the female sex and published *Égalité des hommes et des femmes* (The equality of men and women) railing against the artificial definitions of female physiology used as a pretext for every kind of alienation.

During the second half of that century, *les Précieuses* make their voices heard. These women belonged to an extraordinary experience begun in France by Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet who opened her salon, her “blue room”, up to liberal conversations with female friends of hers aged between twenty and thirty, who, thanks to these encounters, remained friends for the rest of their lives. They addressed each other as

“ma précieuse” (my precious) and during their meetings spoke about the strong appreciation, admiration and trust existing between them, experimenting a form of mutual exchange where each one was “sovereign” with respect to the others. Together they created a laboratory of knowledge of life in the world with a view to directing by strength of words alone what happened at the court in Paris, in political life in France, availing themselves of the pleasure and authenticity of free conversation. *Les Précieuses* discussed the foundations of a new civilisation of relationships, refined their way of expressing their thinking, of judging the behaviour and decisions of the government. The men allowed to frequent them were requested to adopt a language devoid of asperity and to practise “gallantry”, “love from a distance”, that is, without sexual implications. These genial women showed how it was possible to set up a new social and symbolic order, infusing relationships with joy and honesty, subjective truth and reciprocal respect, spiritual affinity and a sense of beauty instead of vulgarity, greed, cruelty and cunning.

In her book *Sovrane. L'autorità femminile al governo* (2013; *Sovereigns. The government of female authority*), Annarosa Buttarelli states that *les Précieuses* ruled from their own homes using the authority and wisdom of relationships. Theirs was a movement which spread from France to inform the whole of Europe during the 1650s and 1660s, bringing about profound general changes in custom, life style, language, education and in the representation of sentiment, starting from awareness of how precious being a woman was.

Certainly, if we examine the participation of women in social life, we see that their everyday lives were constantly exposed to limitations imposed by how they were represented (their bodies, their desire for education, their fate), and that they were not free, and how they came up inevitably against a set of norms that confined them to a collective ambit which rigorously restricted their role. Women experienced a twofold constraint: that of their sex and that imposed by the social group to which they belonged. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on, women took part in “politics”, even if the term cannot be taken to mean what it does today.

As regards the education of girls, society advanced slowly, taking tiny steps forward, suspended between necessity and diffidence with knowledge dispensed with avarice, so as not to permit the female intellect to rival that of men.

The images and the iconographic representations that emerge from the illustrations contained in popular books and in the works of famous painters, presented women as ornaments with all their flaws and beauty. The iconographer, Françoise Borin, assembled images of women she deemed of greatest significance, drawing from a series of works of art

whose authors were for the most part men, proof also of the fact that very few women of the period she examined had access to the visual arts as a medium through which to express themselves. The sequence of images Borin presented sought to provide an account of the symbolic representation of woman over two centuries: the female body and its specificity. The collection was completed with images of women's heads as portrayed by men, expressing the dilemma existing between nature and culture. From this, the division of sexual roles, its perils and unrest. Finally, we have attempts by women to express themselves autonomously as painters, writers, mystics, acting as subversives attempting to escape from the prison to which they had been coercively confined. At the end of this journey, the dilemma which appeared on the eve of the Revolution and which the following centuries were called upon to solve, raised its head: that of women demanding political power.

The issue of the projection of the female image brings us to a further ineluctable topic regarding the history of the condition of women: forms of dissent of which women willingly availed themselves in order to escape the reality and the weight of discourse regarding women. Not all women have the same chances, as room for transgression varied considerably according to their social milieu.

The luckiest among them, women belonging to the upper classes, had a way all their own of escaping the reclusion imposed on them by their social role and claiming intellectual participation in the world of philosophical, scientific and political thinking. Obviously, by exposing themselves in this manner, they were considered dissidents and some of them, in particular journalists, were made to pay dearly for it.

Journalism was the brainchild of the eighteenth century and from the onset women played a minor, though by no means insignificant part in the periodical press, something which made them immediately aware of their ability to influence public opinion. In 1759, the publication of the *Journal des dames* (Women's journal) appeared and continued to be issued for two decades as a periodical by women for women, making it the longest-lasting paper of its kind in Europe prior to the French Revolution.

Here we shall examine the English situation in particular, where women journalists risked and put up with being spied on, harassed and persecuted by government authorities, even sent to prison. These women had always aroused suspicion because of their behaviour and their unorthodox profession. An emblematic case is that of Mary de la Rivière Manley, whose *The Female Tatler* appeared in 1709 and which she signed with a pseudonym. A fervent Tory, her satirical journal attacked the leaders of the Whigs then in power, denouncing their intrigues and scandals. She was arrested for libel and reduced to silence. After her release, she succeeded Jonathan Swift, who shared her political sympathies and encouraged her to write pamphlets, as editor of *The Examiner*. Despised by many and

accused of being endowed with “mere feminine intelligence”, she risked being sued for “defamation” because she believed that by writing what she thought, she might help save her country from corruption. After the death of the last Stuart Monarch, Queen Anne, and the rise to power of the Whigs, de la Rivière Manley devoted her literary talents to writing about love, stating that politics was not a topic suited to women. This repudiation of hers and change of subject-matter were part of the strategy she was obliged to adopt in order to earn her living as a writer, seeing that her political adversaries, the Whigs, came to power with the Hanoverians and continued in government for most of the following forty years. This tactical use of self-annulment was one of the few means women with intellectual ambitions could avail themselves of to overcome similar situations.

In 1721, Ann Dodd was the principal distributor of the opposition newspaper *The London Journal*. In matters of politics and religion she was a radical. Frequently prosecuted by the authorities, she was extremely able when it came to being let off. She complained of being sick, claimed that her large family depended on her or even that she ignored the contents of the newspapers she sold. In actual fact she knew perfectly well what they contained, believing that freedom and knowledge went hand in hand and that readers of both sexes should be informed of facts concerning their rulers so as to be able to pass independent judgment.

Later, in 1737, Mary Wortley Montagu, a Whig supporter began publishing a weekly political paper called *The Nonsense of Common Sense*. An aristocrat who believed it was disgraceful to engage in a profession that earned one money, she wrote anonymously. She is particularly famous for having brought knowledge of anti-smallpox vaccination into Europe from Turkey. With great satisfaction she kept track of the spread of this medical practice and was convinced of the influential social role women might play. She was a friend of the pioneer of feminism, Mary Astell, championed a college for women and used her newspaper to fight for female education, attacking frivolity and dissipation while introducing a feminist message into politics, spreading the idea of the importance of educated women, active in the world¹⁵.

Maybe the most renowned of the female journalists was Eliza Haywood because her periodical *The Female Spectator* was successful also in other European countries and because in the transatlantic colonies it achieved immense popularity, above all in New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

¹⁵ See the chapter “‘Faction and Nonsense’: the rivalry between *Common Sense* and the *Nonsense of Common Sense*”, in Italia 2005, 93-109.

Due to a change in the English political climate with the Whigs dominating parliament completely, the debate between the two traditional parties died down and journalism became less political in tone and content.

After Charlotte Lennox, the Scoto-Irish novelist and good friend of Samuel Johnson's who, in 1760 launched *The Lady's Museum* (see Dorn 1992; Sagal 2015), a journal where brain and beauty were perfectly compatible, British lady journalists seem to vanish from the scene.

There remained, however, male journalists but their "magazines for women" proved to be of far less interest to women with intellectual ambitions than previous papers, also because they treated intellectual women with irony and exalted fashion. These male journals for females were an expression of the banalisation of femininity which Mary Wollstonecraft was to deplore in the eighteenth century.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, considered by international historiography the manifesto of feminism. It is a response to the *Rapport sur l'instruction publique* (Report of public education) presented by Talleyrand to the French Constituent Assembly in 1791 which assertively claimed that women should renounce the exercise of their rights and public functions. If "in abstract, it might seem impossible to explain" how in the name of liberty and equality, "half of humanity is excluded from participation in government of any kind" and the women who took an active part in the revolution are now deprived of their civil rights, "the question changes – in Talleyrand's opinion – when posed in terms of another order of ideas, the natural order" (De Talleyrand-Périgord 1791, 119). The natural order he referred to was the pre-established order believed in by nearly all revolutionaries including the Jacobins who were favourable to confining women to the domestic domain alone. Mary Wollstonecraft's echoed, above all the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (Declaration of the rights of women and of the female citizen) published by Olympe de Gouges in 1791 when she interrogated men:

Man, are you capable of being just? It is a woman who asks you this question. You will not deprive her of this right at least. Tell me? What grants you the supreme right to oppress my sex? Your strength? your wits? Look at the creator in all his wisdom: browse nature in all its grandeur, nature with which you seem to want to make comparisons and tell me, if you have the courage, the sample it provides of this tyrannical power. Go back to the animals, consult the elements, study the plants, and finally look at all the modifications of organized matter; search, investigate and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature. Everywhere you will find them mixed, everywhere they cooperate to contribute as a harmonious whole to the creation of this immortal masterpiece. Only man has made a principle of an exception. Bizarre, blind, puffed-up with science, degenerate, in this enlightened and sagacious century, in the most stupid ignorance, he seeks like a despot to wield power over a sex that has been endowed with all

intellectual faculties and claims enjoyment of the revolution and the right to equality, to say nothing more.¹⁶

One had to wait until 1936, in particular for the *Complément à la Déclaration des droit de l'homme* (Supplement to the Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen) drawn up by the Ligue des droits de l'homme (League for Human Rights), to witness the statement that “The rights of the human being regarded all regardless of sex, race, national, religion or opinion”¹⁷.

Yet, already in 1791, de Gouges’ *Declaration* recited:

Women are born free and have the same right as Men. Social distinctions can be founded on common interests alone. ... the aim of every political association is the conservation of the natural and inalienable rights of Women and Men: these rights are freedom, property, safety and above all resistance against oppression.¹⁸

When Mary Wollstonecraft’s book was published in 1792, it met with the bitter criticism of conservatives, also because the audacious and sagacious reflections championed by the authoress were characterised by an enormous force of persuasion.

¹⁶ “Homme, es-tu capable d’être juste ? C’est une femme qui t’en fait la question ; tu ne lui ôteras pas du moins ce droit. Dis-moi ? Qui t’a donné le souverain empire d’opprimer mon sexe ? Ta force ? Tes talents ? Observe le créateur dans sa sagesse ; parcours la nature dans toute sa grandeur, dont tu sembles vouloir te rapprocher, et donne-moi, si tu l’oses, l’exemple de cet empire tyrannique. Remonte aux animaux, consulte les éléments, étudie les végétaux, jette enfin un coup d’œil sur toutes les modifications de la matière organisée ; et rends-toi à l’évidence quand je t’en offre les moyens ; cherche, fouille et distingue, si tu peux, les sexes dans l’administration de la nature. Partout tu les trouveras confondus, partout ils coopèrent avec un ensemble harmonieux à ce chef-d’œuvre immortel. L’homme seul s’est fagoté un principe de cette exception. Bizarre, aveugle, boursoufflé de sciences et dégénéré, dans ce siècle de lumières et de sagacité, dans l’ignorance la plus crasse, il veut commander en despote sur un sexe qui a reçu toutes les facultés intellectuelles ; il prétend jouir de la Révolution, et réclamer ses droits à l’égalité, pour ne rien dire de plus” (de Gouges 1791, 5, <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64848397/f6.texteImage>>, 10/2019).

¹⁷ “Les droits de l’être humain s’entendent sans distinction de sexe, de race, de nation, de religion ou d’opinions” (<<https://www.ldh-france.org/1936-COMPLEMENT-DE-LA-LDH-A-LA/>>, 10/2019).

¹⁸ “La Femme naît libre et demeure égale à l’homme en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l’utilité commune ... Le but de toute association politique est la conservation des droits naturels et imprescriptibles de la Femme et de l’Homme : ces droits sont la liberté, la propriété, la sûreté et surtout la résistance à l’oppression” (de Gouges 1791, 7, <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65307813/f253.image.texteImage>>, 10/2019).

Certainly the female question was no novelty either in England or France. In 1676, Poullain de la Barre's *De l'égalité des deux sexes*¹⁹ (1673), was translated in London as *The Woman as Good as the Man, or, the Equality of Both Sexes*²⁰. The above-mentioned Mary Astell and Mary Wortley Montagu, who lived between the second half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries, had already refuted the idea that disparity between the sexes was *natural*, ordained by God, therefore inexorable.

Mary Wollstonecraft's is one of the first voices raised with energy to insist on the fact that the emancipation of women was indispensable for the improvement and regeneration of society. She held that it was important that men understand that the elevation of women was in the interest of the whole of humanity. If half of mankind was in a situation of abjection, the whole of humanity would be affected negatively:

So it is my affection for the whole human race that makes my pen speed along to support what I believe to be the cause of virtue, and leads me to long to see woman's place in the world enable her to advance the progress of the glorious principles that give a substance to morality, rather than holding them back. (Wollstonecraft 2017, 1)²¹

Wollstonecraft was certainly a dissident, a woman swimming against the current in an oppressively misogynistic environment, an unconventional intellectual whom Virginia Woolf, in the pages dedicated to her in *The Common Reader*, portrayed as a woman with bright eyes and a pungent tongue, with revolution in her veins and, for this reason, destined to lead a stormy life. The life of Wollstonecraft was stormy indeed, because, a staunch supporter of women's rights and a tenacious enemy of all forms of iniquitous despotism and oppression, she fought against the numerous and varied inequities of the century in which she lived.

She was an expression of a moment in history when the tension between the female condition and female literary production on the one hand, and a patriarchal society on the other, came to a dramatic head.

The presence of women on the literary scene at the time may be seen as an attempt to emerge from a state of invisibility, from that zone of transparency which took their presence for granted in a restricted role deemed adequate. This kind of confinement or intellectual and social banishment was dictated by the historical impossibility to accept the feminine as an

¹⁹ The original by F.P. de la Barre, *De l'égalité des deux sexes. Discours physique et moral, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés*, was made available by Gallica: <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k82363t/f2.image.texte>> (10/2019).

²⁰ The English-language edition was published by N. Brooks in 1677.

²¹ Retrievable at <<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/wollstonecraft1792.pdf>> (10/2019).

entity in its own right, as a part of the macrocosm where conflicting elements constituted a nucleus, the structural basis of the whole of mankind.

To this conceptual framework belongs the *Answer to the Letter from a Gentleman* used by Maria Edgeworth to recuperate the value of “literary ladies” then more numerous than they had even been previously, to such an extent that they had formed a new social nucleus with its own well-defined prerogatives. This historical evolution of the feminine countered the risk that women might distance themselves from their own gender in search of “dangerous” forms of association with males. Ignorance was not “the best security for female virtue” (Edgeworth 1795, 23), “... those who depend merely on the force of habit and of prejudice alone, expose themselves to perpetual danger” we read in the answer to the gentleman (*ibidem*, 60-61).

In controversy with what Rousseau claimed in *Émile*, Wollstonecraft stated that the condition of subordination in which women found themselves had nothing to do with the *natural order*: it was, rather, the result of artificial diversification of the educational systems reserved for males and females, that accustomed the ones and the others to think that women were “naturally” different from men (and inferior to them). A good education, similar for both, would make women no less rational than men. But it was simply a wish: the reality in which woman lived was peopled by young women, a prey to educational models that made fragile, sentimental and emotional beings of them: “The instruction that women have received, with help from the constitution of civil society, has only tended to turn them into insignificant objects of desire, mere propagators of fools!” (Wollstonecraft 2017, 6). And, she continued:

Women, subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and taught to look for happiness only in love, refine on sensual feelings and adopt metaphysical notions about love that lead them to neglect shamefully the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these lofty refinements they plunge into actual vice. ... Contending, therefore, that the sexual distinction, which men have so warmly insisted on, is arbitrary, I have dwelt on an observation, that several sensible men, with whom I have conversed on the subject, allowed to be well founded; and it is simply this, that the little chastity to be found among men, and consequent disregard of modesty, tend to degrade both sexes; ... From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed. (*Ibidem*, 101, 106)

For this reason the first aim of a new educational system for women should be that of restoring their rational control of themselves.

In line with Wollstonecraft is one of the most significant passages of Maria Edgeworth’s answer to the imaginary gentleman:

You fear that the minds of women should be enlarged and cultivated, lest their power in society and their liberty should consequently increase. Ob-

serve that the word *liberty*, applied to the female sex, conveys alarming ideas to our minds, because we do not stay to define the term; we have a confused notion that it implies want of reserve, want of delicacy; boldness of manners, or of conduct; in short, liberty to do wrong. Those who understand the real interests of society, who clearly see the connexion between virtue and happiness, must know that *the liberty to do wrong* is synonymous with *the liberty to make themselves miserable*. ...I shall early cultivate my daughter's judgment, to prevent her from being wilful or positive; I shall leave her to choose for herself in all those trifles upon which the happiness of childhood depends; and I shall gradually teach her to reflect upon the consequences of her actions, to compare and judge of her feelings, and to compute the morn and evening to her day. (Edgeworth 1795b, 69)

Later, nineteenth-century culture, as demonstrated by Mario Praz (1930) in a masterly analysis of nineteenth-century Europe's most disturbing characters, while indulging in the cult of respectability and virtue, appreciated stories and images which exalted pain, devastation and suffering. Sadism and aggressiveness pervade these representations. The erotic imaginary is rife with ideas of the absolute passivity of women, which makes them appear more like helpless creatures at the mercy of brutal male desire.

Another way used to emphasise female inferiority consisted in portraying them as sick or mad with unrequited love for a man. The Lady of Shalot and Ophelia became fashionable females in Victorian times, and were portrayed in many pictures including those splendid exercises in style like John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1852), and John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalot* (1888), both of which may be viewed at the Tate Gallery, London. As to Millais's *Ophelia*, critic Bram Dijkstra in his *Idols of Perversity* (1986) stated that in the late nineteenth century Ophelia, although not one of the main characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602), was considered the epitome of a woman mad with love who, immolating herself, demonstrated her total veneration for her beloved who abandoned her driving her to insanity and to adorning herself with flowers while entrusting her body to the current destined to become her watery grave. By thus fulfilling her womanly duties, Ophelia corresponded perfectly to the most exalted of dreams which males entertained regarding female submission.

Mary Wollstonecraft's own life was marked by unfortunate events, which induced her to attempt suicide twice: first in London due to an affair with a married man, the painter Heinrich Füssli. Later, in Paris, in 1792, when, after falling in love with Gilbert Imlay and having had a daughter with him, she was left by him for another woman. Finally, when she was happily married to the radical thinker William Godwin with whom she had another daughter born in 1797 who was to bear her name (Mary Godwin, later Shelley) she died from an infection contracted during childbirth.

The following year, Godwin decided to honour his wife's memory by publishing *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) where he provided an uncensored account of her love stories, her illegitimate pregnancy and her suicide attempts. The book obtained a response totally contrary to what Godwin had hoped for: it clashed with the principles of respectability, sullied Wollstonecraft's reputation in the eyes of a large section of contemporary public opinion, male and female alike, and immediately curtailed the circulation of the ideas contained in *Vindication* and in Wollstonecraft's other writings.

Matters changed during the decades that followed. A number of upper-middle-class women found ways of engaging in professional or semi-professional activities subtracting them from the gilded cages of bourgeois domesticity. The first of these professions was nursing, typically associated with notions of charity and philanthropy, and for some time now considered suited to ladies of the *élite*, which approval fostered its diffusion and acceptability²².

Other women followed the pathway indicated by Mary Wollstonecraft and became writers. As this activity was still considered unsuited to ladies, many published anonymously as did Jane Austen, or using male pennames, like Aurore Dupin who wrote as George Sand. There were also cases where women polemically questioned the established order of the sexes by wearing male attire, as did the German Louise Aston and George Sand herself. In a critical note on George Sand Jules Janin writes:

Who is he or rather who is she? Man or woman, angel or demon, paradox or truth? What an enigma this man! What a phenomenon this woman! What attractive object of our sympathies and our terrors is this being of a thousand different passions, this woman or rather this man and this woman? (Janin 1851, 21st May)

Transvestism or cross-dressing, in this case, was accompanied by a free, independent life style as brilliantly illustrated by Laura Schettini in *Il gioco delle parti* (2011; Role parts). She argues that cross-dressing became the symbol of social change in a rapidly changing reality where ancient structures were crumbling, so that it became for some the emblem of the evils that modernity brought with it, for others the expression of new models and lifestyles. During the whole of the nineteenth century, transvestism, forbidden by law as disturbing behaviour, as an expression of sexual deviance or worse still of usurpation of male privilege, was considered a suspect

²²The nineteenth-century working woman was observed, described and documented with unprecedented attention, as contemporaries discussed the appropriateness, morality and even the legality of salaried activities for women. See the essay by Scott 2007, 355-385. She is co-author with Di Louise (1987) of *Women, Work and Family*.

practice, an illicit form of sexual transgression suggestive of sexual excess or sodomy²³. In caricatures of the period, petulant wives and aggressive women were portrayed as viragos with masculine features trying to don trousers and the noun “Georgesandism” entered the English, French, German and Russian languages to condemn women who dared emulate the French writer’s transgressive behaviour.

Louise Aston and George Sand were both protagonists, to some degree, of the great European Revolution of 1848. Louise Aston was expelled by the Prussian government for the active part she took in the Berlin uprising of 1848 while George Sand, at the time of the Parisian insurrection drew close to political radicalism and socialism, but when offered a seat in the national Constituent Assembly she refused. Both women were submerged by heaps of bitter criticism and mocked by satirical vignettes. One harshly eloquent example was an 1842 lithograph called *Miroir drolatique* (Facetious mirror) by Alcide Lorentz portraying George Sand in male attire. The object of the drawing was derision of her political position represented as slogans on floating sheets of paper; it also jeered at her aspect. The principle which Sand sought to affirm, as the caption recited, was that “genius” has “no sex”.

This was a sign that something was changing since the time when Mary Wollstonecraft was so cruelly discredited for her anti-conformist behaviour.

George Sand fought tenaciously for women’s rights. She did so in her novels, her autobiographical writings, her plays, her articles, but above all in her correspondence which consists of twenty thousand letters filling twenty-six volumes²⁴. In a letter addressed to the Central Revolutionary Committee of 1848 she pointed out how, in her opinion, marriage was legalised subjection of women to men which impeded the normal development of her sensitivity, intelligence and spirit. Through marriage a woman escaped the tutelage of her father only to be submitted to another, often more tyrannical version, that of her husband.

According to the Napoleonic Code woman was a *mineur* (minor) without any authority over herself or her children, nor was she entitled to undertake any initiative. Sand was not asking the Committee to extend the franchise to women or any other kind of political participative right, but recognition of the elementary rights of which marriage deprived her. From 1837 she vindicated the right of women to divorce as an extreme solution more urgent than the reform of the institution of matrimony itself. The Napoleonic Code foresaw adultery was a crime which only women could be accused of and although they were not sentenced to imprisonment, they were obliged to return to the conjugal home to be cruelly punished for dishonouring their husbands who, day after day, in the presence of their

²³ For dangerous sexual behaviour see Walkowitz 2007, 405-440.

²⁴ George Sand’s relationship with power is described in an essay by Anceau (2015).

children, could reproach them for the offense committed²⁵.

Sand was deeply convinced that since women were denied their rights even within the family circle, which was their ordinary environment and seeing that they were denied higher education, that before claiming political rights such as suffrage, the concrete obstacles which prevented them from having an impact on society and politics needed to be removed first. The most extraordinarily aspect that made Sand a pioneer of *gender mainstreaming* resides in the fact of having conceived the idea that gender equality did not coincide with either identity or similarity between the sexes. Women, she postulated, were constitutionally and psychologically different from men, therefore, they had different roles to perform, without however being relegated to a position of subalternity, which different orders legitimised by law.

She did not exclude that one day, maybe, women might take part in political life, but first, she believed, matrimonial legislation needed to be reformed, as marriage was the institution in which women expressed their essential function, the one which made them superior to men, that is, maternity. How can a woman guarantee her own political independence – Sand asks – if she continues to remain under the tutelage of her husband and depend on?

Seventy years previously, Mary Wollstonecraft had reached similar realistic and innovative conclusions. If we look closely, this affirmation was a form of sublime love where physical desire marries intellectual passion, where men and women are not simply bodies that meet, may still have its *raison d'être*.

She did not deny the right and the duty to love, but claimed the intellectual dignity of passion, to the point of sustaining that marriage, as conceived by the society to which she belonged, was nothing but a form of “legalised prostitution”.

I would like to conclude by saying that those Italian women of the 1960s, victims of the distortions caused by marriage as a place of physical, psychological and financial oppression (effectively defined as “life imprisonment”), might have claimed the freedoms and rights sanctioned by the Italian Constitution with greater awareness, had they read the works of eighteenth-century pioneers of feminism like Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth and George Sand.

²⁵ George Sand (1862) dealt with the issue also in “Lettres à Marcie”, in *Souvenirs et impressions littéraires* (<<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65307813/f253.image.texteImage>>, 10/2019).

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MARIA EDGEWORTH AND HER LEGACY: THE CASE OF ELIZABETH BOWEN

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Abstract:

With *Castle Rackrent* (1800) Maria Edgeworth established the rules of the Big House novel narrating with humour the story of the decline and ruin of the eponymous Anglo-Irish family. Born at the end of the century opened by *Castle Rackrent*, Elizabeth Bowen repeatedly explored the same issues. She did so in two novels and in her non-fictional prose, the area of her work investigated here. This essay aims to explore Bowen's dialogue with the concerns posed by the genre, by the impending sense of disappearance of her class, and her exploration of her own Anglo-Irish identity. Her 1940 essay "The Big House" (1940), *Bowen's Court* (1942), "Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood" (1942), and *The Shelbourne: A Centre in Dublin Life for More than a Century* (1951) investigate the same issues. *A Time in Rome* (1960) also offers meditations on the belatedness of the Anglo-Irish even when reflecting on Roman history.

Keywords: Anglo-Ireland, Bowen, Decline, Edgeworth, The Big House

1. A matter of definition

This essay focusses on the legacy of Maria Edgeworth and how her influence can be seen in the work of an author who came almost a century and a half later and who, in the different areas of her production, has repeatedly explored some of the topics developed by Maria Edgeworth.

When *Castle Rackrent* came out, in January 1800, it was published anonymously – the author's name appeared on the cover only in the 1801 third edition – and apparently "to very little critical notice" (Butler 1992, 1), even if "in April of the same year the Edgeworths were told that George III was amused by it; in 1805, that it was a favourite of Pitt, the Prime Minister" (*ibidem*). Apparently, the king's pleasure was due to what he recognised as further knowledge the novel offered him on the Irish, but, as Susan B. Egenolf specifies, it "surely derived from Edgeworth's hu-

morous depiction of the Irish people, who had recently appeared in much more horrific narratives” (2005, 846), that is, an enjoyable and reassuring portrait in the wake of the 1798 rebellion and the bleak narratives of the events offered by Loyalist pamphlets¹.

Castle Rackrent has been the object of many definitions: it is considered “the first regional novel” (Watson 1964, vii), and, as Karl Lubbers glosses, it “was to prove seminal in the development of the English regional novel, but it also became the prototype of Irish Big-House fiction” (Lubbers 1992, 21). Miranda Burgess insists on the former, underlining that “it is more accurately described as the first Irish regional novel, taking up the land, people and problems of Ireland as primary matters of discussion” (2006, 45). Even if the definition “national tale” first appeared in 1806, in the title of Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806), *Castle Rackrent* falls under this category, that of “the earliest Irish novels centrally concerned with definitions and descriptions of Ireland” (*ibidem*, 39), a category “often used to differentiate one kind of fictional writing about the past from the historical novel proper and now quite broadly applied to early nineteenth-century Irish fiction”² (Connolly 2012, 3).

What appealed to readers was the representation of the Irish as embodied both by the narrator, Thady Quirk, and the subsequent masters of Castle Rackrent. The novelty was acknowledged by Walter Scott, who recognized that the publication of *Castle Rackrent* changed the representation of “occasional regional types [which] [‘o]ccupied the drama and the novel’ before Maria Edgeworth” (Watson 1964, vii). He pointed to Maria Edgeworth as an example and inspiration, as he wrote in the Postscript to *Waverley* (1814) where he admitted that he hoped “in some distant degree to emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth” (*ibidem*). In the Postscript Scott “warmly acknowledged Edgeworth’s Irish tales as the model for his own portrayal of Scotland on the big historical stage: ‘she may be truly said to have done more towards completing the Union [of Ireland with Britain, 1800] than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up’” (Butler 1992, 3).

¹ Susan B. Egenolf explains that immediately after the 1798 rebellion, “the British reading public was introduced to a chillingly brutal Irish character by those loyal to the British King” (Egenolf 2005, 845). She lists many of these pamphlets and specifies that “[m]ore than twenty rebellion narratives or accounts were published in the years immediately following the rebellion. Almost all of these narratives were published in Dublin and London and went quickly through several editions ... Rebellion narratives were published throughout the nineteenth century” (Egenolf 2005, 863, note 5).

² As Claire Connolly clarifies, Katie Trumpener’s “thesis that ‘the emergence of the national tale out of the novels of the 1790s and the subsequent emergence of the historical novel out of the national tale can be plotted quite precisely, book by book, through the 1810s’ has been widely accepted” (2012, 4).

In her “Introduction” to the Penguin Classics edition of *Castle Rackrent and Ennui*, Butler registers Scott’s admiration but also its subsequent reduction, as “near the end of his life he distances himself from ... Edgeworth by suggesting that he works on a bigger scale” (*ibidem*). What should be kept in mind, though, Butler underlines, is that “Scott’s ‘big’ topics – social change, national identity, English hegemony – feature first in Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*” (*ibidem*).

In *Castle Rackrent* Edgeworth sets the narrated events in the past, a past which is defined in the subtitle, *An Hibernian Tale taken from the facts and from the manners of the Irish squires before the year 1782*. The year *quo ante* she sets the events of her tale, 1782, was the year of the Constitutional Reform that granted an increased legislative freedom to the Irish Parliament before it was closed in the same 1800 when *Castle Rackrent* came out. Her choice of distancing the events narrated to a period before that year seems to suggest a discontinuity between them and the events of the present of writing, although *Castle Rackrent* could be interpreted rather “as a precursor of future Ascendancy crisis, not simply of past disorder” (Kreilkamp 2006, 62). As a matter of fact, as Burgess points out, “[t]o read [Edgeworth’s subsequent novels] in sequence is to observe an ironic denial of social improvement in the years since 1782. This irony raises questions about the utility of legislative autonomy ... as a cure for Ireland’s ills. It also implies that ills are an intrinsic condition of Ireland” (2006, 47).

2. The “Big House” novel

Castle Rackrent is the progenitor of the “Big House” novel, as the issues explored by Maria Edgeworth in this work have characterised the genre, which has prospered till the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

In his 1964 “Introduction” to the novel George Watson claimed that “*Rackrent* is a novel of optimism: it is about a bad old day that is dead and gone, however much may remain to be done. Maria’s literary career belongs to this world of confident Protestant leadership” (Watson 1964, x). More than optimism, though, the Big House novel expresses the anxieties of the Anglo Irish, or of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The term was actually coined in the last decade of the eighteenth century as an expression of the reaction of Irish Protestants to a rising Catholic bourgeoisie and impending social changes³. *Castle Rackrent* “establishes the conventions

³ For a discussion of the rise of the phrase and of the “Protestant Ascendancy” itself, see the section “The Birth of Ascendancy”, 49-93, in the chapter “Edmund Burke and the Imagination of History”, in McCormack 1994.

of an enduring literary genre: the neglected house as symbol of family and class degeneration, the improvident landlord alienated from his duties, the native Irish usurper of the Ascendancy estate” (Kreilkamp 2006, 62). Actually, Maria Edgeworth is one among a number of subsequent novelists who write from within the big house and its demesne walls. McCormack investigates this point when he observes that there is “no reference to ‘the Big House’” in *Castle Rackrent*, and wonders why in “the inaugurating ... text in an ‘Anglo-Irish tradition of ‘Big House’ fiction’, the familiar compound phrase itself goes missing” (McCormack 1992, 43). The answer he gives is indeed motivated by the narrator’s position: “*Castle Rackrent* is narrated from within, narrated by a steward to which the status of family and household is familiarly a matter of pride. Thus we could conclude that Thady Quirk does not need to utter the phrase, ‘the Big House’” (*ibidem*) because he writes from within its walls. Vera Kreilkamp points out that the genre “flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of precipitous Ascendancy collapse under the assault of new land laws and emerging nationalism”⁴ (2006, 61). She acknowledges that “[a]lthough a conservative rural ideology surfaces in many of the works [belonging to the genre], most Anglo-Irish big house novels are far from elegiac, typically directing considerable irony toward an improvident class of social and economic losers ... [It] is, for the most part, a fiercely self-lacerating genre” (*ibidem*).

Marilyn Butler indicates in “the ruin of the estate” (1992, 8) the “‘true’ theme” of *Castle Rackrent*, as well as of the genre of Big House novels, in which “the neglected house” and estate become symbols of the decay of family and class, and in which the total inadequacy of the landlord is exposed, as it not only puts at risk the survival of the estate, but also its inheritance within the family to the advantage, as in *Castle Rackrent*, of “the native Irish usurper of the Ascendancy estate” (Kreilkamp 2006, 62), Jason Quirk whose “appetite for the Rackrent property, a nightmare of class displacement haunting the first major big house novel, would be anxiously negotiated throughout the nineteenth century” (*ibidem*, 64).

3. A new century

If the century was, metaphorically, opened by *Castle Rackrent*, it was closed in 1899 by the birth of Elizabeth Bowen, an Anglo-Irish writer who,

⁴ Lubbers reminds his readers that “a series of Land Acts converted a country of tenants into an island of peasant proprietors. The Wyndham Act, passed in 1903, which encouraged the landlords to sell their estates, was so successful that little more than a decade later landlordism had largely become a thing of the past” (1992, 17).

as the hyphen in the definition illustrates, spent her life between Ireland and England (although she also travelled extensively on the Continent and to the United States) and divided her affections between the two countries. Indeed, according to Victoria Glendinning, she used to say that the Anglo-Irish “were really only at home in mid-crossing between Holyhead and Dun Laoghaire” (quoted in Glendinning 1977, 11). An only child and heir to the family Big House which was so crucial to her, Elizabeth Bowen repeatedly explored the features of Anglo-Irish identity as well as the characteristics and significance of the Big House.

Indeed, throughout her career Bowen took up and unravelled the main elements of the Big House novel that appear in *Castle Rackrent*. She did so both in her fiction and in her non-fictional writing: among her novels, *The Last September*, published in 1929 and *A World of Love*, 1955, fall into the category of Big House novels, but she also either focussed her non-fictional writings on Anglo-Irish heritage or interspersed them with reflections on these issues. This essay will investigate her exploration of these topics in some of the essays and reviews she wrote and in her non-fictional volumes.

4. “*The Big House*”

Big Houses flourished in the eighteenth century⁵ as an example of the Anglo-Irish hold on the land as well as of their permanence. As Vera Kreilkamp claims, “Ireland’s architectural flowering during the eighteenth century suggests the eagerness of a newly secure Anglo-Irish oligarchy to display its wealth and power – and indeed its permanence – through a classically inflected building programme” (Kreilkamp 2006, 60)⁶.

Both symbols and testimonies of the Anglo-Irish, Big Houses and buildings in general are a key element related to the identity of this class, and it is their very permanence which is always at risk in the genre of the Big House novel.

⁵ In “Setting and Ideology: with Reference to the Fiction of Maria Edgeworth”, W.J. McCormack claims that “the late eighteenth century saw a proliferation of house building in Ireland, an aspect of economic activity which was extended into the two or even three decades of the following century. To remark that this period also witnessed the emergence of the Irish novel is to suggest no simple causal explanation, but rather to indicate as briefly as possible that one is dealing with a very complex and extensive period of cultural change” (1992, 37-38).

⁶ Although she also specifies that “... even in its grandest and most rationalised eighteenth-century form – the wide-spreading Palladian edifice with a centre block joined to subordinate wings – rural big houses adapted themselves to local needs. In Ireland, the wings of a Palladian mansion were as likely to be occupied by offices and farm buildings as reception rooms” (Kreilkamp 2006, 60).

In 1940 Elizabeth Bowen was invited by Sean O’Faolain to write an essay on the Big House for *The Bell*, the journal he had founded to “counterbalance the oppressive cultural insularity and xenophobia of Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s” (Bowen 2011 [1940], 8). He had invited her to “speak up, as it were, for the marginalised, antagonistic Anglo-Irish of post-independence Ireland”, and she “seized this opportunity to argue for a valid place for the Anglo-Irish in contemporary Ireland” (*ibidem*). In the essay, entitled “The Big House”, published in October 1940⁷, Bowen explains some of the characteristics of Big Houses, starting from linguistic definitions: “[t]he paradox of these Big Houses is that often they are not big at all”⁸ (*ibidem*, 48) and are defined big only in Ireland – “in England they would be ‘country houses’, no more” – then wonders on the provenance of the adjective, big, asking herself whether it was chosen because they are high in a “country of otherwise low buildings” or rather “with a slight inflection – that of hostility, irony?” (*ibidem*). In addition to the reflection on the use of the adjective “big”, she also points out another linguistic difference between Ireland and England in the term “lawn”: “[o]n each side [of the avenue leading up to the house] lie those tree-studded grass spaces we Anglo-Irish call lawns and English people puzzle us by speaking of as ‘the park’” (*ibidem*, 47)⁹.

5. *A spellbound island*

Bowen insists on the living nature of big houses, on their solitude, on their spell: “[e]ach house seems to live under its own spell” (*ibidem*), a spell related to the solitude of the Big House, to its “somehow hypnotic stare” (*ibidem*, 48), but also to the presence of ghosts of the past: “[t]he indefinite ghosts of the past, of the dead who lived here and pursued this same routine of life in these walls add something, a sort of order, a reason for living, to every minute and hour” (*ibidem*). The isolation of Big Houses contributes to this spell: loneliness is their first characterising feature

⁷ The essay by Elizabeth Bowen entitled “The Big House” was first published in *The Bell* in October 1940. It was subsequently reprinted in the volume by Elizabeth Bowen *Collected Impressions* (1950), then in *The Mulberry Tree. The Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (1986) and finally in the volume edited by Eibhear Walshe, entitled *Elizabeth Bowen’s Selected Irish Writings* (2011).

⁸ W.J. McCormack quotes Maurice Craig’s *Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size* (1976) and points out “how relatively small was the typical domicile subsequently identified with the notion of ‘The Big House’” (1992, 35).

⁹ In *Bowen’s Court* she would return to this linguistic distinction: “[i]t must be said that in Ireland a ‘lawn’ does not mean turf subjected to fine mowing; it means that grass expanse that in England is called a park. English people also say ‘park’ where we say ‘demesne’” (20-21).

in her description, although she specifies that “their size, like their loneliness, is an effect rather than a reality” (*ibidem*).

In *Bowen’s Court* Bowen expands on these features which for her define the Big House, writing that “[e]ach of these family homes, with its stables and farm and gardens deep in trees at the end of long avenues, is an island – and, like an island, a world” (1999a [1942], 19). She insists on the role of the past for the Anglo-Irish – “I know of no house (no house that has not changed hands) in which, while the present seems to be there forever, the past is not pervadingly felt” (*ibidem*) – and on the isolation of Big Houses:

Each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something very much more lasting than the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin. It is possible that Anglo-Irish people, like only children, do not know how much they miss. Their existences, like those of only children, are singular, independent and secretive. Life in these house-islands has a frame of its own. (*Ibidem*, 20)

In the 1940 essay Bowen highlights the major features of the Big House: from the architectural characteristics, to the innate solitude; from the living presence of the past – “the ghosts”, as she calls them – to the economics of the enterprise. While keeping in mind that “the idea of power was mostly vested in property” (1999a, 455) she reminds her readers that the construction and maintenance of the Big House, often in the Palladian mode, the planting of the demesnes, the hospitality typical of these places, “[a]ll this cost money: many of these genial builders died badly in debt and left their families saddled with mansions that they could ill afford” (2011, 49), and so Bowen puts forward the economic issue, relating the struggle to “keep the estate anything like solvent, or, in the last issue, to hold creditors off” (*ibidem*). The decadence of the estate is impending and to be fought against, although at times the enterprise may seem pointless as well as difficult to understand: “[w]hy fight to maintain life in a draughty barrack, in a demesne shorn of most of its other land, a demesne in which we can hardly keep down the thistles, far from neighbours, golf links, tennis clubs, cinemas, buses, railways, shops?” (*ibidem*, 50).

After illustrating the main features of the Big House, its faults as well as its virtues, Bowen closes the essay on the hopeful note that the Big House and the world outside it might meet: “[t]he big house has much to learn ... But it has also much to give” (*ibidem*, 51) and that barriers between the two might be destroyed by an act of will: “[b]ut it must be seen that a barrier has two sides” (*ibidem*, 52) are the final words of the essay.

This piece, whose composition was temporally coterminous to the early writing of *Bowen’s Court*, which was begun in the “early summer of 1939” (Bowen 1999a, 453), anticipates many thematic as well as linguistic elements and wordings that would be expanded in that volume a couple of years later.

However, even before this essay, in a 1939 review of Joseph Hone's *The Moores of Moore Hall* (1939), which traces the history of the Moore family, Bowen draws attention to the centrality of the estate in the future of the family: "George Moore the First created more than a house. By building Moore Hall, and by buying much land around it, he saddled his descendants with that something between a *raison d'être* and a predicament – an Irish estate" (Bowen 2011, 44). As Eibhear Walshe illustrates in his "Introduction" to *Elizabeth Bowen's Selected Irish Writings*, "the bulk of her Irish-themed reviews [in the thirties] concentrate on her own Anglo-Irish heritage or her interest in Dublin or in the sweep of Irish history" (*ibidem*, 7). Still, it should be remembered that these topics – her Anglo-Irish identity and its constitutive features – would remain central to her non-fictional writing over the years.

6. Bowen's Court, The Shelbourne and Seven Winters

Buildings are also the protagonists of *Bowen's Court*, which is the history of her family Big House, of her family, and her deflected autobiography, and of *The Shelbourne*, the history of the Shelbourne hotel, "that icon of Ascendancy tradition", in Eibhear Walshe's words (*ibidem*, 19). Even if they are very different texts, both centre on a building, a building, moreover, which is inherently central to Anglo-Irish identity: the former her own family Big House, the latter the Dublin hotel for the Ascendancy. *The Shelbourne*, 1951, does not present the dramatic fate of the Big House, or anything tragic: Bowen praises the idea behind it, the management, the building and the environment it gave life to. It is a celebration of the Anglo-Irish class, but the narrative of the history of the hotel cannot avoid recalling, at times, the impending decadence of the class it was built for, through the elements that characterise the Big House and *the Big House novel*: "[o]h, the first evenings when we have come to Town – away from the leaks in our roofs, the ghosts on our stairs, the dark dripping woods, the silent mountains behind them! Like music sounds Dublin traffic, rattling over the cobbles!..." (Bowen 2001 [1951], 19, emphasis added). These words echo – as to contents, words, and emotional charge – a sentence in her review of *The Moores of Moore Hall*: "The debts, the debts, the roof, the tenants, the drains, the trees..." (Bowen 2011, 45). Depleted patrimonies and the economic difficulties in keeping Big Houses are an essential part of the scene. "Those who so merrily couched, ... had demons of worry couched on their Shelbourne bedposts, waiting to leer at them in the small hours" (Bowen 2001, 102). The volume also records the burning of Big Houses: "[m]any of those big, lonely, treed-about country houses, from which, generation after generation, the owners had set out on their trips

to Dublin, now became blackened shells with wind whistling through them” (*ibidem*, 136).

Seven Winters is a very short autobiographical piece which is a counterpart to *Bowen’s Court* and recalls Elizabeth Bowen’s first seven winters in Dublin, as she spent the summer seasons at Bowen’s Court. It is set in young Bowen’s winter scene: her Dublin home and environment, while Bowen’s Court remains in the background. Bowen only hints at problems related to the family Big House when she introduces her father, who chose a profession instead of running the family estate, thus unleashing his own father’s anger, who considered him “a new kind of absentee” (Bowen 1999b [1942], 467). As a retaliation, her grandfather decided to sell part of the estate – an action which heavily affected the economic future of Bowen’s Court: “[i]n fact, if not the destruction the headlong decline of Bowen’s Court seems to have been implicit in Robert’s will” (Bowen 1999a, 376).

7. Property and dispossession

The very long *Bowen’s Court*, a volume of slightly more than four hundred and fifty pages, is the history of the family Big House, situated in County Cork and finished in 1776 and of the Bowen family. The founder of her family branch, Henry Bowen, originally “ap Owen”, left Wales to go to Ireland following Oliver Cromwell and received “the County Cork lands. He was the first of our Bowens to die in Ireland, he was the founder of the Bowen’s Court family, so from now on I shall call him Henry I” (*ibidem*, 36). The introduction of Henry I foregrounds the injustice of the position obtained by her family and by the Anglo-Irish, of which she is fully aware. If Bowen acknowledges past injustices, she also sustains the function of her class, as for instance in the essay “The Big House”:

After an era of greed, roughness and panic; after an era of camping in charred or desolate ruins (as my Cromwellian ancestors did certainly), these new settlers who had been imposed on Ireland began to wish to add something to life. The security that they had, by the eighteenth century, however ignobly gained, they did not use quite ignobly. They began to feel, and exert, the European idea – to seek what was humanistic, classic and disciplined. (Bowen 2011, 48-49)

Bowen often returns to this point: “[f]or these people – my family and their associates – the idea of power was mostly vested in property (property having been acquired by use or misuse of power in the first place)” (Bowen 1999a, 455). Whenever she deals with this issue she acknowledges that the Anglo-Irish standing and their estate derive from an act of dispossession, and warns: “We have everything to dread from the dispossessed” (*ibidem*).

Apart from and in addition to being the history of the family Big House, *Bowen's Court* is also Elizabeth Bowen's autobiography, or, as Taura Napier perceptively defined, her "deflected autobiography", a "useful theoretical model that has particular resonance for the self-narratives of Irish women ... , a narrative mode in which the protagonist is ever present yet not apparently central, where the author resists being identified as the heroine of her work" (Napier 2007, 70). Her self-narrative is deflected upon *Bowen's Court*, the survey of its estate, and the history of her family, which is older than the house – the typical features of Anglo-Irish autobiographical discourse. The history she writes is, as Bowen admits, "[t]he version that most appeals to me" (Bowen 1999a, 67). Narrating this history is "the means by which she delineates her autobiographical speaker" (Grubgeld 2004, 36). The history of her family is, for her, "a metonym for her private and present moment. 'I am ruled', she affirms, 'by a continuity that I cannot see'" (*ibidem*). The instability and dangers of the period in which she wrote it, the war years, certainly favoured autobiographical writing, the action of recollecting one's (and one family's in this case) past.

The idea of writing about one's family and its residence is inscribed in Anglo-Irish tradition – the "family myth" (Bowen 2011, 46), both as a burden and a strength, is a constitutive feature of the Anglo-Irish character – and her family Big House becomes the site of her autobiographical discourse. *Bowen's Court*, though, is more than a homage to a genre, because the family estate was more than simply a place to Elizabeth Bowen: during her whole life it continued to represent "her haven, a quiet 'green retreat' ... a space conducive to creation which embodied a vision of 'peace at its most ecstatic'" (Napier 2007, 79; Napier quotes Bowen 1999a, 457). In the "Afterword", which she wrote in 1963 for the second edition of this work, she acknowledges that the fact of writing about *Bowen's Court* during the war years might have emphasised its positive qualities for her: "I suppose that everyone, fighting or just enduring, carried within him one private image, one peaceful scene. Mine was *Bowen's Court*. War made me that image out of a house built of anxious history" (*ibidem*). Paradoxically, she was "writing (as though it were everlasting) about a home during a time when all homes were threatened and hundreds of thousands of them were being wiped out" (*ibidem*, 454).

Bowen's Court embodies the major features of the Big House: like most big houses, which "were built throughout the eighteenth or in the early nineteenth century" (*ibidem*, 18), it was finished in 1776, and is "a high bare Italianate house" (*ibidem*, 21); it is, like "[e]ach of these family homes, ... an island – and, like an island, a world" (*ibidem*, 19); "the isolation is innate" (*ibidem*, 20); it is surrounded by emptiness, which "gives depth to the silence, quality to the light" (*ibidem*, 21).

The first chapter is entitled "*Bowen's Court*", the second "*Colonel Bowen and the Hawk*": it recounts the story of the founder of the Cork

Bowen branch who fought for Cromwell and obtained the land thanks, as the family legend has it, to the flight of his hawk¹⁰. The other chapters are named after men's names: the successive family inheritors of the Big House, eight titles listing a succession of Johns, Henries and Roberts. Interestingly, and in line with Bowen's defacing attitude, the last chapter does not bear her name. From the second edition, published in 1964, the book is closed by an "Afterword".

The first chapter opens with a slow zooming-in on the region: the author describes, in the present tense, the detailed topography of the area, the colour of its light, and stresses the emptiness of the region – "the prevailing impression is, emptiness" (*ibidem*, 3) – and its "airy silence" (*ibidem*). But it is "not lack of people that makes the country seem empty. It is an inherent emptiness of its own" (*ibidem*, 5). Geography is intertwined with history, and Bowen also underlines the presence of ruins: "Kilcolman keep, a torn-open ruin" (*ibidem*, 7), where Spenser lived, "was burnt by the Irish in his absence" (*ibidem*); "Bridgetown Abbey, burned and desolated by Cromwell's men" (*ibidem*); "a ruined barrack ... a ruined fever hospital" (*ibidem*, 13); "they extend now, acres of ruins" (*ibidem*, 11); "[i]t will have been seen that this is a country of ruins. ... ruins feature the landscape ... enduring ruins" (*ibidem*, 15). However, she also adds that "[n]ot all these are ruins of wars: where there has not been violence there has been abandonment" (*ibidem*, 16).

The family demesne is introduced only after several pages and the house a few pages later, after a reflection on the nature of Big Houses: "[i]nside and about the house and in the demesne woods you feel transfixed by the surrounding emptiness; it gives depth to the silence, quality to the light" (*ibidem*, 21).

8. The "Afterword"

The "Afterword" gives *Bowen's Court* a surprising twist, as it takes up the idea of emptiness, as the above quotation shows, which Bowen has dwelt upon in *Bowen's Court* to develop it into the concept of presence.

Bowen creates an illusion of presence – the presence of the house – in the text to reverse it at the end: the book opens with a zoom-in, a geographical description of the area and then, once on the target, of the garden, the avenue, the lawns, and then and only then, of the building, its physical characteristics, the disposition of the rooms and windows. The verb tense of the first chapter, entitled "Bowen's Court", is the present indicative.

¹⁰ To make up for killing one of Colonel Bowen's hawks, Cromwell "then proposed to give Bowen as much Irish land as the second hawk could fly over before it came down, Bowen to choose the spot from which to let off the bird" (Bowen 1999a, 68).

Towards the end of the first chapter Bowen rounds up some of the features of *Bowen's Court* as Big House; her skilful use of verb tenses and deictics contribute to create the “effect” – as Bowen would have called it – of existence:

[t]his is Bowen's Court as the past has left it – an isolated, partly unfinished house, grandly conceived and plainly and strongly built. ... Larger in manner than in actual size ... *Imposed on seized land, built in the rulers' ruling tradition*, the house is, all the same, of the local rock ... So far, it has withstood burnings and wars. (*Ibidem*, 31, emphasis added)

She explains that “I have shown the setting and the plan, and described the house ... at the start because *I want Bowen's Court to be taken as existing*, and to be seen as clearly as possible” (*ibidem*, 32, emphasis added).

It is only at the end of the “Afterword” that Bowen reveals that “the house has gone” (*ibidem*, 457). Bowen's Court survived the Irish Civil War, when around two hundred Big Houses were burned down, it survived wartime, but it did not survive much longer: “The house, having played its part, has come to an end. It will not, after all, celebrate its two hundredth birthday – of that, it has fallen short by some thirteen years” (*ibidem*). Her explanation of the reasons of the end of Bowen's Court recalls, in altered conditions, the much dreaded loss of the Ascendancy Big House, even if in her case it was not due to over-spending on horses or gambling or inefficient management of the estate: when her husband died, Bowen found it increasingly difficult to maintain the place only through her writing, and an eleven-line paragraph gives an account of seven years of anxieties, strain and fatigue: “[f]or seven years I tried to do what was impossible. I was loth to realise how impossible it was” (*ibidem*, 458). It is the culmination of “the quarrels, the lost law-suits, the father-and-son conflicts, the spasm of *folie de grandeur*” (*ibidem*) of the Bowens over the centuries, but she is the last of the line, and even if she is not guilty of squandering money, she is the one who has to give up. She sold the house to a neighbour who, briefly afterwards, “decided that there was nothing for it but to demolish the house entirely. So that was done” (*ibidem*, 459). At the end of the “Afterword” Bowen takes up again the topic of the ruins, which she had emphasised in the first chapter, and excludes her Big House from their number: “[i]t was a clean end. Bowen's Court never lived to be a ruin” (*ibidem*). She concludes her examination of Bowen's Court resuming the spellbound atmosphere she had insisted on as inherent in Big Houses: “[t]here is a sort of perpetuity about livingness, and it is part of the character of Bowen's Court to be, in sometimes its silent way, very much alive” (*ibidem*).

9. *An Anglo-Irish in Rome*

A *Time in Rome* was conceived after the death of Elizabeth Bowen's husband, Alan Cameron, an extremely difficult period when she also had to face the economic difficulties of maintaining Bowen's Court on her own. Bowen started to think of writing a book about Rome in 1953 when she was invited there by the British Council. This was meant to be a sort of "therapy: something she could immerse herself in when anxieties made invention difficult" (Glendinning 1977, 213). She was back in Rome repeatedly, spending months or just a few days there; her last visit before the publication of the book was in late 1959, when she was invited as "writer in residence" at the American Academy. The volume finally came out in 1960, that is, seven years after the original project, and was definitely not based on a three months' visit as its opening paragraph and other textual evidence would seem to suggest¹¹.

Although apparently having nothing to do with the topics under examination, *A Time in Rome* is extremely relevant to them, mainly as regards the anxieties as to decadence, economic difficulties, impending loss of the estate.

Published in 1960, it offers interesting examples of such reflections. It is a volume which is difficult to define, something midway between a guide-book and a book of impressions on the city. Focussed as it is on Rome, it still offers meditations on Bowen's predicament. This volume was conceived and took shape between the death of her husband in 1952 and her sale of Bowen's Court in 1959, those extremely difficult years in which she overworked in order to maintain the family Big House. Actually, Bowen considered *A Time in Rome* a decisive economical support to the survival of Bowen's Court. Here, discussing topics seemingly very far from Anglo-Ireland, she describes the worries of the Roman *pater familias* in terms that offer an insight on her Anglo-Irish heritage, with its characteristic incumbent fear of dispossession, and its threat to family honour:

¹¹ Bowen gives a detailed temporal setting of her arrival in Rome, leaving out the year: "[t]he hour was half past four, the day Tuesday, the month February" (Bowen 2010 [1960], 3). Bowen returns to this fictitious temporality elsewhere in the book: "The February, March, and April I was there, winter was like spring, spring like summer... pavements gave off what (to me, coming from the Atlantic) was almost a Mediterranean glare" (*ibidem*, 144). Later she returns to this "effect": "I must not give the impression that I remained, for going on three months, locked in an interesting hush" (*ibidem*, 238, emphasis added). Victoria Glendinning has explicitly remarked that "*A Time in Rome* reads as if it were the fruit of one single visit between February and Easter", but she has clarified that this is not the case (1977, 213).

“the more concrete danger of dispossession – seizure of home and property ... to be dispossessed is horrible” (Bowen 2010 [1960], 114-115). These words echo fears she knew well, and which obsessed her in those years. One sees much of Bowen in the words she uses, words that evoke the responsibility of feeling the last of a line and the awareness of one’s own inability of perpetuating the family tradition: “[s]eeing in his mind’s eye, as he lay in the dark, the faces of his still blameless children, the *pater familias* must have asked himself which would be the one to grow up to sell the fort, and in what manner, and how soon?” (*ibidem*, 112-113). It is difficult to think that she was not thinking of herself.

A century and a half after Edgeworth’s novel, the fate of the Big House still seems inescapable.

In this essay I have tried to analyse how the major conventions of the Big House novel set forth by Maria Edgeworth in *Castle Rackrent* return in Elizabeth Bowen’s non fictional prose whenever she reflects on the Big House or recalls her Anglo-Irish heritage. Bowen’s awareness of the economic difficulties, of the signs of decadence, the “ruin of the estate” in the form of its impending decline and the decline of her class, amplified by her awareness of being the last of a family line, prevent her from adopting the humorous perspective which dominates *Castle Rackrent*. Her writings are haunted by these preoccupations, which no smile can dispel, but which her Anglo-Irish education has taught her not to show as too emotionally charged.

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EDGEWORTH THROUGH THE LENS OF FULLER

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Abstract:

Like many nineteenth century American girls, Margaret Fuller – editor, conversationalist, political journalist, and essayist – was acquainted with Maria Edgeworth’s work from childhood. The Anglo-Irish writer’s name crops up in her *Memoirs*, her letters, and her proto-feminist essay, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, making various references to Edgeworth’s usefulness and practicality. This paper explores the lives and work of these two women writers, showing the impact of the elder on the younger, and the similarities and divergences in their opinions. It shows how Fuller’s considerations regarding Edgeworth’s achievements might have been more informed had she not lost sight of the full arc of Edgeworth’s literary career.

Keywords: Bluestocking, cosmopolitanism, Margaret Fuller, Maria Edgeworth, usefulness

“There is nothing of the Bluestocking about her”, announced F.V. Barry in the introduction to *Chosen Letters*, his thirties’ edition of Maria Edgeworth’s correspondence (Edgeworth 1931, 12). A few years later, one reviewer considered it “courteous” of *The Athenaeum*, the foremost literary weekly, to take any notice of the “American blue-stocking” Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), who had condemned herself in the eyes of most respectable English readers by asserting in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, “Let women be sea-captains if they will!” (Barbour 1936, 619)¹. Perhaps there was nothing of the bluestocking about Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849); then again, perhaps there was, and there was, also, something of the bluestocking about Margaret Fuller if we open up the word to the various shifts in meaning that it acquired over the years, decades, and centuries². In *Bluestockings Now!* a remapping of the “Bluestocking

¹ Barbour refers to “Reviews”, *The Athenaeum* (19 December 1846), 999, 1287.

² If Fuller was not technically a Bluestocking, she was well aware of the kind of work carried out in Britain and Ireland by the group of intellectual women who gathered in the Salons of London and Dublin, whose major hostesses were, respectively, Elizabeth

Heavens” is proposed with regard to its specific position in society: it was “an informal, emergent network, arising out of the relationship of individuals interacting on the basis of shared interests” (Heller D., Heller S. 2016, 34). As opinion leaders, the Bluestocking community functioned “as a permeable membrane, as it were, between smaller personal networks and the total network of society in which they were embedded” (*ibidem*, 44) – a society that included, at least in Edgeworth’s early adolescence, the colonies across the ocean. Anti-slavery campaigns, abolitionist legislation and campaigns for female emancipation provided the main impulses; an interplay of class and gender, on the one hand, and work and learning, on the other, continued over the centuries and through to modern times³. Bluestockings thus adapted and remodelled knowledge, and negotiated the results for themselves and the community at large. In spite of the loose way in which some authors refer to eighteenth century intellectual women based on the negative connotation that the word “bluestocking” acquired in the following century, it is a fact that many women from various countries and of different languages managed to share many progressive ideas although they did not often join to popularize them⁴. This was thanks to the physical mobility of many of them, the circulation of printed matter, and their various exchanges with other feminist pioneers who endorsed, in the same period, “a life of the mind” (Eger, Peltz 2008, 16). Women such as Hannah More, Elizabeth Carter, Harriet Martineau, Jane Marcet, Mary Somerville, Lydia Maria Child, Mary Shelley and, notwithstanding Fuller’s reservations as to her personal history, Mary Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, were all well-known personally, or through their

Montague and Elizabeth Vesey. Elizabeth Carter - “English translator, poet, and editor” (Fuller 1994, 228) – was often a guest at London, and is mentioned in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* among those women who could use what they had learned “if they can once get a platform on which to stand” (Fuller 1994, 28). Her good friend, Irish Elizabeth Vesey, on the other hand, was the dedicatee of the poem “The Bas Bleu”, on whose author, Hannah More, Fuller wrote in *Western Messenger* (Von Mehren 1994, 13), and to whose coterie she spoke of “the most daring passages in Goethe’s *Faust*” in Providence (Marshall 2013, 115). Edgeworth and Vesey, both of whom lived in Ireland, may have known of each other, although I have not found any trace of them meeting. For an appreciation of More’s poem see Haslett 2010.

³ For a wider panorama of women’s political engagement in Europe in the eighteenth century, see Green 2014; for a study of women’s involvement in religion and national identity in Britain, see Major 2012 and Richardson 2013; for a collection on Margaret Fuller’s work, see Bailey 2013.

⁴ It is a pity, for example, that Anna Laetitia Barbauld did not accept Edgeworth’s suggestion that a literary magazine with contributions of literary women on literary work by women could be produced, claiming that “different sentiments and different connections separate them much more than the joint interest on their sex would unite them” (McCarthy 2008, 360); the time was not yet ripe.

work, by both Edgeworth and Fuller. Whether they belonged to some community of scholarly women or not, they undoubtedly shared a love of learning and a rejection of prejudice. They had their own intellectual pursuits, and played a role in the social, educational, and cultural life of their own nations as well as those abroad.

In this paper, I will look at Fuller's involvement with Edgeworth through the filter of the elder writer's life and work, focusing on their similar or divergent experiences, and their commitment to a freer society. An account of their active lives, and their different ways of being active, follows with the aim of showing how their respective intellectual careers had transnational repercussions and impacted on the people and the individuals of other countries.

As a preamble, two stanzas from Emily Dickinson's "Poem 80" serve to illustrate the dual response that human nature can evince from a subject: either rationality or emotionality can prevail in his/her mind according to the time (and the momentary circumstances) of its occurrence. Here is how an event, in the form of an unexpected dramatic tableau that suddenly appears to the onlooker, occurs on the page:

Our lives are Swiss—
 So Still—so Cool—
 Till some odd afternoon
 The Alps neglect their Curtains
 And we look farther on!

Italy stands the other side!
 While like a guard between—
 The Solemn Alps —
 The Siren Alps
 Forever intervene!
 (Dickinson 1930, 55-56)

Alluring, but simultaneously forewarning, "The Siren Alps" come between the cold and predictable existence of the Swiss stage and the unexpected scenery on the other – Italian – side. Rigorous and controlling principles provide protection and safety, while affective states of consciousness lead to exuberance, novelty, and release from ties. The mythical sea creatures' beguiling songs are warnings against turning one's eyes to some different and unforeseen direction in order to see better. To "look farther on" is, indeed, to learn, to discover, to be rid of constraints; yet, patriarchy (the *guard!*) is in place to punish *any* violation (they *intervene!*), thus causing internal conflict and frustration. "Italy" seems to retreat dangerously out of reach, but the temptation to find personal liberty is irresistible.

The two women discussed in the present paper share, in their different ways, the impulse to resist imposition and, by rejecting the precepts of

paternal authority, to “look farther on”, and, eventually, undertake their road to consolidate a strong personal resolve.

Both Edgeworth and Fuller were, like Dickinson, daughters of very strict fathers. Edward Dickinson was of stern Puritan stock, “A remote, powerful, and grim patriarch”, to quote Sandra Gilbert (Gilbert, Gubar 2000 [1979], 597), whose “contemporaries found severe and unyielding. He took his role as head of his family very seriously, and at home his decisions and his word were law”⁵. Of Richard Lovell Edgeworth there are, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, hints at an “overbearing egotism”, the “outright coercion” of his daughter, and “his profound indifference” to more than one of his twenty-two children by four wives (Gilbert, Gubar 2000, 147)⁶. As to the austere and unbendingly principled Timothy Fuller, his words in a letter to his wife when his daughter was less than four years of age, “My love to the little Sarah Margaret. I love her if she’s a good girl & learns to read” (Matteson 2012, 16), place him among those for whom love springs from selfishness (as well as a good dose of vanity)⁷. The little girl would unquestionably prove worthy of her father’s affection when, on New Year’s Day 1815, he would proclaim that Margaret (not yet five years old), could read and understand “in a very great degree”, the stories in Maria Edgeworth’s *Parent’s Assistant*, and could read tolerably from “any common book” (*ibidem*, 16). In her stories she privileged themes from everyday life, presenting psychological portraits of girls and boys from different social classes who, more often than not, would have to reckon with whatever money they had in their pockets. An opponent of fairy tales containing fantastic creatures and improbable events, Edgeworth was a supporter of realism in children’s literature. Like her father, who co-authored the first version of the book with her (1798), she was convinced of the experiential role of episodes the child would live through at home, and of the valuable contribution of family life to the child’s education (Douglas 2017, 93). That parents were the most important teachers would certainly match Mister Fuller’s belief in himself as the best guide for Sara

⁵The quote is from the “Emily Dickinson Museum”, <<https://www.emilydickinson-museum.org/edward-dickinson-1803-1874-father/>> (10/2019).

⁶Richard Lovell and Maria, however, were both involved in the education of the children born from Richard Lovell’s four marriages - twenty-two in all (Douglas 2017, 93).

⁷Another version of the quotation from Timothy Fuller’s letter, reads: “My dear love to my dear Sarah Margaret. She must be good natured & learn to read, & loving when desired” (Fuller 1852, 14-15). In the first chapter of his book, Matteson points out that Timothy’s attitude – as Maria’s brother Arthur would reveal in the process of editing his older sister’s writings after her death – was a consequence of the educational canons of his time, and that his daughter responded with gratefulness to her devoted father’s considering her a prodigy (*ibidem*, 20-22).

Margaret (as she was called at home). If the restriction was that the exercise a parent would submit would have to be suited to the child's ability, there was hardly any topic presented by the father that the daughter would not be able to respond to.

From infancy this American daughter of a strong believer in education in the classics from early childhood, was "put at once under discipline of considerable severity" (Fuller 1852, 1015), the result of this being a tempestuous start to her studies as a schoolchild⁸:

Thus I had tasks given me, as many and various as the hours would allow, and on subjects beyond my age; with the additional disadvantage of reciting to him in the evening, after he returned from his office. As he was subject to many interruptions, I was often kept up till very late; and as he was a severe teacher, both from his habits of mind and his ambition for me, my feelings were kept on the stretch till the recitations were over. Thus frequently, I was sent to bed several hours too late, with nerves unnaturally stimulated. The consequence was a premature development of the brain, that made me a 'youthful prodigy' by day, and by night a victim of spectral illusions, nightmare, and somnambulism, which at the time prevented the harmonious development of my bodily powers and checked my growth, while, later, they induced continual headache, weakness and nervous affections, of all kinds. (*Ibidem*, 1016)

One result of such strict discipline was that, aged 10, Margaret had the audacity to write back to her father, who had prohibited her from reading everything except historical novels: "I wish I could be wiser, but that person is illiberal who condemns Scotts and Edgeworths novels" (Fuller 1994, 245)⁹. Indeed, Margaret was a wise child, but still only 10 years old.

Usefulness resonated with Edgeworth whenever she addressed young children, but also teen-agers. "Why should the mind be filled with fantastic visions, instead of *useful* knowledge? Why should so much *useful* time be lost?", she rhetorically asks in the preface to a new edition of *The Parent's Assistant* twenty years after the original edition (Edgeworth 1815 [1800], XI). The reiteration of the word *useful* stresses the importance of practicality for the adolescent mind. Across the ocean Margaret, who at

⁸ In 1815 Timothy taught Margaret Latin, logic, rhetoric, and a little Greek; a year later she began memorizing Virgil (Fuller 1994, 34).

⁹ I am following the suggestion Dickinson deduces from a note to *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, where she quotes from a letter dated December 1820. The quotation from the letter gives the impression that Margaret has been prohibited from reading Scott and Edgeworth (i.e. historical novelists). This appears to be in contrast to what is written immediately above, and suggests that Fuller's father only wanted her to read historical novels. In any case, I align with the idea of Mr. Fuller giving directions towards Margaret's reading.

high school has become a total bookworm, questioned her teacher as to Edgeworth's worth:

Cambridge, May 14, 1826 – I am studying Madame de Stael, Epictetus, Milton, Racine, and Castilian ballads, with great delight. There's an assemblage for you. Now tell me, had you rather be the brilliant De Stael or the useful Edgeworth – though De Stael is useful too, but it is on the grand scale, on liberalizing, regenerating principles, and has not the immediate practical success that Edgeworth has. I met with a parallel the other day between Byron and Rousseau, and had a mind to send it to you, it was so excellent. (Fuller 1852, 1055)

While Margaret is studying the French authoress, there is no mention of her having maintained her acquaintance with the Anglo-Irish writer. To sixteen-year-old Margaret, the almost 60-year-old Miss Edgeworth may well have seemed to belong to another world. The query the pupil puts to her teacher focuses on a choice between “liberalizing, regenerating principles” and “usefulness”: it seems evident that she hopes that her addressee would opt for the former.

In 1809 Maria and Richard Lovell published *Essays on Professional Education*, which argue that lessons should be the same for both boys and girls. Equal opportunities for women was definitely Edgeworth's intent. Her concept of usefulness, started with her early grappling with children's literature, was also alive in her, or her father's, contributions to the development of an educational theory that aimed at awakening a consciousness in the young individual through the economic content of stories contextualized within experiences created by adults in cooperation with the child. After Richard Lovell's death, thanks to her entrepreneurial skills, Maria could finally turn theory into practice. She succeeded him as the manager of the Edgeworthstown estate with all its servants and tenants, and took on the everyday business that sound management required. As a member of the Ascendancy, she absorbed both English and Scottish philosophical speculations formulated in the seminal work of Adam Smith, David Hume, and the liberal political theorist Joseph Priestley, an acquaintance of her father. Furthermore, long before young Fuller's own questioning, she expressed her reaction to tyranny in an open letter to her American correspondent Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, in which she defended Lord Byron's engagement in “the Greek Cause” for independence, and drew an analogy between the Greeks and the Irish Catholics, both oppressed nations¹⁰.

¹⁰ Lazarus' resentment expressed in a letter to Edgeworth was caused by the Anglo-Irish novelist's alleged anti-Semitism; this, however, initiated a lifelong friendly correspondence between the two women. *Harrington* was the fruit of Edgeworth's reconciliation with her American correspondent.

Thus, in spite of rejecting the “radical leveling” of Edmund Burke¹¹, “her ideas amount[ed] to leveling nonetheless” (Nash 2017, 7-8).

At that early stage, Fuller could not have known that Edgeworth’s competence in economics had made her distinguished enough to correspond with the leading writers of economics of the day, and earn the respect of political economists in exclusive London circles. Nor did she know how extensive her influence was on social theorists such as Marcet and Martineau herself, whom Fuller would meet and befriend in 1846 while in Europe¹², where the British journalist was the first female foreign correspondent for *New York Daily Tribune* (Henderson 1995, 40). Fuller had not yet experienced either the financial chaos that would follow her father’s death nine years later, forcing her to seek outside employment, or the stress at being unpaid by Emerson for editing *The Dial*¹³. She had not yet dreamt of working on the *New York Daily Tribune*. By that time, Fuller was ready to visit Thomas Carlyle and Giuseppe Mazzini in London, travel to Paris to meet several celebrated figures (George Sand among them), and leave for Italy for a new phase in her life. Edgeworth, who had earned a reputation among political economists such as David Ricardo, Thomas Robert Malthus and Jane Marcet (Henderson 1995, 22)¹⁴, became an honorary member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1837 as literary advisor to its President, the mathematician William Rowan Hamilton.

To return to Fuller’s concern with de Staël’s revitalizing spirit, fully evidenced in the latter’s novel, *Corinne ou l’Italie* (1807), where the “Italy” of the title is one and the same with the “poetic genius and sensibility” personified by Corinne (Barolini 1994). Indeed, three works come to mind which, or of which, Fuller may have read, and been attracted to. The theoretical essay *De la littérature* (1800) calls for the political and religious ideas in various national literatures to be examined in order to reach, one day, a synthesis of order and freedom that can be wisely, and politically, combined with republican ethics and independence. The aforementioned

¹¹ Edmund Burke expressed his ideas on “radical leveling” in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

¹² Harriet Martineau, in her *Autobiography*, would criticize Fuller and her “adult pupils”, adding that while they were occupied in refined talk, “the liberties of the republic were running out as fast as they could go” (2007 [1877], 378).

¹³ *The Dial* was the Transcendentalists’ new literary journal founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Fuller 1994, 35).

¹⁴ With Ricardo she had discussed the merits of the potato as the staple for the Irish poor in the wake of a minor famine in Ireland in 1822 (see Ó Gráda 2015, 6). She later deepened her interest in the national and transnational policies that, eventually, caused An Gorta Mór (The Great Famine); she was ready to work for the relief of the famine-stricken Irish peasants.

Corinne ou l'Italie focuses on the limits that society imposes on women of genius, whose brilliance and artistic qualities have a better chance of developing in the countries of the “Midi” than in a ratiocinative, circumspect, and cold *Mittel*-European society. The controversial essay *De l'Allemagne* (1813), which suffered censorship under Napoleon, is the most radical of the three, and claims different literary modes for the various post-revolutionary social systems. Fuller, whose republicanism would lead her to side with Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini against the Pope's temporal power, would re-read de Staël, or read her more intensely, a few months later, having met another fighter of oppression, and partisan of social reform, Lydia Maria Child, to whom she would be tied intellectually and personally for many years¹⁵. In an entry in her *Memoirs* we read:

Cambridge, Jan. 10, 1827. – As to my studies, I am engrossed in reading the elder Italian poets, beginning with Berni, from whom I shall proceed to Pulci and Politian. I read very critically. Miss Francis¹ [Child] and I think of reading Locke, as introductory to a course of English metaphysics, and then De Stael on Locke's system. Allow me to introduce this lady to you as a most interesting woman, in my opinion. She is a natural person, – a most rare thing in this age of cant and pretension. Her conversation is charming, – she brings all her powers to bear upon it; her style is varied, and she has a very pleasant and spirited way of thinking. I should judge, too, that she possesses peculiar purity of mind. (Fuller 1852, 1056)

As the future author of *Memoirs of Madame de Staël*, and editor of the bimonthly magazine *Juvenile Miscellany* (1826), Child, who was Fuller's companion in this period and had become vital for her to progress in her readings, might have stood herself as a model for her younger friend to appropriate. From the pages of *Juvenile Miscellany* she proclaimed the need to introduce adolescents to such American issues as the intense extreme life of the prairies, poverty, class conflict, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery. In short, she expressed that sense of freedom, both political and moral, which one finds in de Staël's life and writings. What is surprising, and what Fuller probably never knew, is de Staël's own view of Edgeworth, expressed in a letter to Étienne Dumont (the sophisticated correspondent of these two learned European women), which led her to observe that Edgeworth had lost herself after *Castle Rackrent*, and never

¹⁵ Child crusaded against slavery and racism, religious bigotry, and fought for women's rights, the urban poor, and Native Americans. She worked in several literary genres, such as historical fiction, the short story, children's literature, the domestic advice book, women's history, antislavery fiction, journalism, and the literature of aging. She studied John Locke's philosophy with Fuller. For further information on Child, see Karcher 1997.

found herself again¹⁶. De Staël's words, "elle se perd dans votre triste utilité", echo, in a somewhat uncomplimentary way, young Fuller's judgment (Barry 1931, 11); a judgment that was to be modified a few years later.

Fuller took up teaching after her father's death (1835) in order to support herself and help the family. Her increased independence of thought led her to replace a one-directional educational process (teacher to pupil) that she had been subject to, with a two-way methodology where the teacher "guides but cannot, nor wishes to, totally control" (Scacchi 2007, 81). In 1839 she started her Boston Conversations, university-level seminars for women, rooted in significant women's traditions. Among these was the European literary Salon of Madame de Staël and, possibly, those cultured bluestocking gatherings that also welcomed male participation in England and in Ireland (the latter, attended by Edgeworth, were mostly those of salon hostess Lady Moira) as well as the New England women's academies and reading groups. With the exception of de Staël, all of these were English speaking societies dating back to the mid-eighteenth century¹⁷. The Conversations were "an organized and systematic form of mutual interpretation": each friend of the society, their leader suggested, "advanced the interpretation of the other", and, in the case of "her encounters with classes or cultures different from her own", "mutuality" allowed her to discern the "law" of the other's being (Chevigny 2007, 103). There is some evidence here that Richard Lovell's and Maria's argument for the integration of adults' and children's lives in *Practical Education* may have developed alongside this idea of integrating women of different cultural levels in the salon experience.

Attaining independence of character was a vital goal for the women who joined the Conversations (Child was also among their numbers). Fuller's involvement in the process of self-fashioning (the origins of which can be traced back to the female models she asked her teacher to identify in the 1826 entry quoted above) was undoubtedly a consequence of her coming into contact with a variety of personae with different ideas and beliefs. Her appropriations, then, must have proved useful as a means of interpreting different identities and negotiating different selves with the goal of cultivating independence. In an essay on women's intellectual development before the American Civil War, Kelley points out the difference in the legacies of Edgeworth and de Staël – the former honoured by

¹⁶ Maria and Richard Lovell were in London in 1813, and were supposed to meet Madame de Staël, but the meeting did not take place.

¹⁷ Although information about her "Conversations" are scanty, Fuller mentioned, among the learned women, Elizabeth Carter (Fuller 1994, 28), who attended of the London salons of Elizabeth Montague and Elizabeth Vesey, the latter also a hostess of Bluestocking gatherings in Ireland. Here Lady Moira hosted, among her learned ladies guests, Maria Edgeworth.

several American institutions named after her in contrast to the radicalness of the latter. She states:

In de Staël and Edgeworth she [Fuller] had discovered alternative personas, both of whom she later made her own. When Fuller the transcendentalist invested literature and the arts with the power to transform America, she adopted a strategy like the one she had identified in de Staël. She also acted on that grand scale, on those liberalizing, regenerating principles. Simultaneously, Fuller the supporter of antebellum America's most controversial reforms sounded a more specific note, insisting on the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women. Here she hoped for the more immediate, more practical success that she had associated with Edgeworth. (Kelley 2002, 66)

As a matter of fact, in spite of her supposed cautious attitude towards the anti-slavery movement, Fuller was supportive of the abolition of slavery just as she was for the republican cause in Italy (Kearns 1964, 127). How could she have not been in favour of abolitionism being a close friend of Child, with whom she studied, and shared sophisticated discussions and conversations?

As regards Edgeworth, the slavery issue was largely seen through her Anglo-Irish perspective of the role of women in political life and society. This is found in her fiction: in her novel *Madame de Fleury* (1809), for example, she writes:

Without meddling with politics, in which no amiable or sensible woman can wish to interfere, the influence of ladies in the higher ranks of life may always be exerted with perfect propriety, and with essential advantage to the public, in conciliating the inferior classes of society, explaining to them their duties and interests, and impressing upon the minds of children of the poor sentiments of just subordination and honest independence. (Edgeworth 1809, ch. VII, 245)

An enlightened member of the ruling class, in *Belinda* she first conceived an inter-racial marriage between an English farm girl and a black slave from the American continent who becomes the servant of a West-Indian Creole in England. Upon her father's request, however, she replaced the black slave with a white servant: "My father says that gentlemen have horrors upon this subject, and would draw conclusions very unfavorable to a female writer who appear to recommend such unions: as I do not understand the subject, I trust to his better judgment" (Kirkpatrick 1993, 342-343).

Miscegenation, evidently, did not work in Anglo-Irish society, since the "unnatural" quality of the union at a time when scientists were still struggling to come up with apposite interpretations of genetics, made it impossible for the ruling class to exercise their control over such scientific "mysteries". According to Carla de Petris, who explored this issue at a conference some time ago, "the idea that an inter-racial marriage portrayed by a woman writer is particularly offensive to 'gentlemen' readers,

points to an interesting web of gender, race and power issues"¹⁸. In her *Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), Edgeworth resorts to Voltaire to lay on the table the question of the subjugation of one people to another: "The superiority which the whites have over the negroes", she quotes from the *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, "corresponds to the English over the Irish in terms of 'genius, wealth, and arms'" (Mellor 1993, 79)¹⁹. She, then ironically concludes that there is no specificity for an "Irish bull" with respect to an English one, thus negating the validity of any such noun phrase. In the didactic tale, "The Grateful Negro", two slave owners are contrasted: West-Indian Mr. Jefferies, a champion of barbarous methods whereby slaves are exploited, and benevolent Mr. Edwards, an abolitionist at heart, but who thinks that emancipation would make things worse for the slaves. In the story it is possible for the white slave owner to earn his slave's trust and gratitude, while Mr. Jefferies' slaves revolt and he makes considerable losses before going back to England "to live in obscurity and indigence" (*ibidem*, 210). In a way, the white slave owner is the counterpart of the empowered Anglo-Irish person who controls, assists, and teaches the unempowered.

As shown above, Edgeworth's dealings with slavery were still involved, at least in part, with the promotion of practicality and responsibility as "inculcated by her enlightened father" (Fernández Rodríguez 2009, 11). Fuller's inclusion of her among those women who preached "a better care of the sex", and who had possibly provided *useful* "hints", persists in her later essay, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*²⁰, where she writes:

Among these [those for "a better care of the sex"] may be mentioned Miss Edgeworth, who although restrained by the habits of her age and country, and belonging more to the eighteenth than the nineteenth century, has done excellently as far as she goes. She had a horror of sentimentalism, and the love of notoriety, and saw how likely women, in the early stages of culture, were to aim at these. Therefore she bent her efforts to recommending domestic life. But the methods she recommends are such as will fit a character for any position to which it might be called. She taught a contempt

¹⁸ "Women; Servants and West Indians in Edgeworth's *Belinda*", International Conference on "Ireland in the Nineteenth-Century English and Irish Novel" (Rome, March 12-13, 2010, Università Roma Tre and The Pontifical Irish College, Rome).

¹⁹ In a later edition of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire removed the offensive expression, and replaced it with: "The nearly savage state in which Ireland was when she was conquered, her superstition, the oppression exercised by the English, the religious fanaticism which divides the Irish into two hostile nations, such were the causes which have held down this people in depression and weakness. Religious hatreds are appeased, and this country has recovered her liberty. The Irish no longer yield to the English, either in industry or in information" (Edgeworth 2005 [1857]).

²⁰ This is the 1845 expanded version of "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men; Woman versus Women" (1843).

of falsehood, no less in its most graceful than in its meanest apparitions; the cultivation of a clear, independent judgment, and adherence to its dictates; habits of various and liberal study and employment, and a capacity for friendship. Her standard of character is the same for both sexes. Truth, honor, enlightened benevolence, and aspiration after knowledge. Of poetry she knows nothing, and her religion consists in honor and loyalty to obligations once assumed, in short, in "the great idea of duty which holds us upright". Her whole tendency is practical. (Fuller 1994, 85-86)

Declaring Edgeworth a writer "belonging more to the eighteenth than the nineteenth century", when her best mature writing dates to the period between 1800 and 1834, is distinctly unfair²¹. In that period, there was little supervision by Edgeworth's father of her works of fiction, and none, of course, after his death in 1817. Like Edgeworth, Fuller did not abstain from publicizing her own auspices for a better society in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*:

Yet, then and only then, will mankind be ripe for this, when inner and outer freedom for woman as much as for men shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession. As the friend of the negro assumes that one man cannot by right, hold another in bondage, so should the friend of woman assume that man cannot by right lay even well-meant restrictions on woman. If the negro be a soul, if the woman be a soul, apparelled in flesh, to one Master only are they accountable. There is but one law for souls, and, if there is to be an interpreter of it, he must come not as man, or son of man, but as son of God. (*Ibidem*, 20)

Woman in the Nineteenth Century is a genealogical account of 19th-century woman that explores the cultural, mythological, literary, and even religious aspects of her development. While ranging across the centuries in pursuit of "what is for them [women] the liberty of law", Fuller positions herself in a transitional process of becoming. In accord with the Emersonian notion of nature in flux, she believed that "everything was in motion, nothing was permanent, everything provisional"; her own self, then, was believed to be "unfolding and advancing into shape after shape" (Schöpp 2007, 33). As Fuller lists various men and women in their descent from antiquity down to her own times, she metamorphosizes into a number of different "M" selves: Mariana (in her work *Summer on the Lakes* in 1843), Miranda, Minerva, Muse, Margaret, and Mary, the Madonna. The self is

²¹ Her works *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Belinda* (1801), *Leonora* (1806) and *Ennui* (1809) were published before Fuller was born; *Patronage* (1814), *Harrington* (1817), and *Ormond* (1817), when Margaret was a child; *Helen* (1834), nine years before the publication of "The Great Lawsuit" (*The Dial*, July 1843, modified and expanded in 1845 as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*) and *Summer on the Lakes* in 1843.

in transit through several transformative stages to the point where rebirth occurs for Fuller as a new political self at the time of the Roman Republic. As a consequence of her involvement in the Roman cause, she radicalizes her views, and calls for profound social reform in order to empower all those who are denied opportunities to fulfill their own potential, and cannot therefore count on a philosophy of self-reliance. Miranda is the prototype of the creature who has learned much from her wizard father; she has become an atypical learned lady and speaks her father's language that is not known by other women. Like Prospero, Timothy has isolated his daughter, who has no mother (the father has usurped her place and imposed his native language – a *father* tongue for a woman who speaks the language of men). Various characters represent different aspects of her personality.

Edgeworth, on the other hand, did not experience shifts in personality in transformative stages. Instead she revealed aspects of an intellectual search that turned out to be imbued with ambiguity. In her complex plots she created various social characters, occasionally carried over from one book to another, to whom she attributed features or convictions that might change over time. This emerges from her correspondence. In particular, a good opinion of positive developments made in all fields across the ocean is given in a 1835 letter, where she glorifies America: "Civil, commercial, military, literary and scientific – what a range! And what a new and higher order and progress of ideas open to imagination, not merely 'Visions of glory' " (MacDonald 1977; also in Fernández Rodríguez 2009, 11). And in *Harrington*, London society is seen as the negative counterpart to American society since – as Fernández Rodríguez points out – "For Edgeworth, cultural bias towards the Americans exists for the mere fact that they represent alterity or strangeness" (*ibidem*, 16). The Edgeworth-Lazarus relationship originated in an admission on the writer's part of political in-correctness, and led the former, with the latter's help, to adopt a cosmopolitan perspective, free from the biases that her being a member of the Ascendancy, and her bond with the local Irish people might have made her subject to. In *Orlandino* (published in 1848, while Fuller was pregnant with a child that she left with a nurse in Rieti not long after his birth in order to tend the wounded at the Fatebenefratelli hospital in Rome), Edgeworth attempts to convince the Irish who, like the Americans, had been subjugated to the British, that the USA could provide a mirror for them to look at themselves (*ibidem*, 17). Edgeworth's literary success overseas, as well as her renewed efforts to show her fellow citizens how regeneration can occur in a new country, not only attracted American aid for the victims of the famine, but also turned a region which was previously to be avoided into an "urgent and desired reality" (*ibidem*, 18).

To return to the mode of self-fashioning in the nineteenth century, in one instance, perhaps, the two women writers had the same model of

self in mind. Edgeworth's novel *Patronage* opens with a storm and a shipwreck. As in *The Tempest*, if we place the singular with the plural, there are fathers and daughters; there is insularity and there is also cosmopolitanism encompassing the danger, as Cass puts it, "of cultural proximity" (*ibidem*, 67). There is paternal authority, but not necessarily paternal control; there are daughters, one of whom, Caroline Percy, embodies steadfastness and cool headedness, and as a translator she is able to comment on Voltaire in the original. She thus wins the heart of Count Altenberg. Caroline as Miranda? Not Miranda as Edgeworth herself, but the brilliant Caroline that Edgeworth created, and maybe even imagined as an improved model of her own self.

So maybe Edgeworth was not only *useful*, after all.

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MARIA EDGEWORTH AND MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: THEIR CONTEXT AT THE ORIGINS OF SOCIOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

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Abstract:

Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth should rightly be acknowledged among the precursors of sociology and pedagogy, as they both clarified and criticized, in different tones and modalities, the social dynamics of which they were witnesses, and which influenced the lack of an egalitarian education between men and women. Wollstonecraft wrote extensively to spread consciousness on women's rights, as she was a careful observer of English daily life and of the French Revolution. Edgeworth, on the other hand, devoted herself mainly to the education of the new generations, her approach anticipating suggestions and strategies of social psychology. Though living in different social environments, both thinkers struggled to get more freedom for women, in civil and political life.

Keywords: Maria Edgeworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, pedagogy, sociology

It is *time* to effect a *revolution* in female manners,
time to restore to them their lost dignity,
and make them, as a part of the human species,
labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.
(Wollstonecraft 1792, 47)

1. *Two destinies, two parallel lives: Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth*

Almost a decade separates the birth of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759) and that of Maria Edgeworth (1768), with the latter outliving the former by fifty years. Both use different literary genres to develop and spread their ideas: non-fiction, novels, translations, the result of the observation of everyday life. In particular, Edgeworth, according to Raffaella Leproni, devoted herself to the *moral tale*, a style typical of the aristocratic environment in which she lived, but in her case characterized by emancipationist challenges; she spent most of her life on the family estate in Edgeworthstown, Longford

County (see Leproni 2015, 16). Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, was born in Spitalfields, in East London. Second born of six children, she spent her childhood on a farm in the English countryside and because of the little attention her mother gave her, she played in the open air as much as her brothers and received an education she herself defined as unconventional. While standard education consisted of the reading of prayers, Mary practised by writing letters on letters¹.

Maria Edgeworth lived with her large aristocratic family of origin and therefore under constant paternal control, which, although liberal, influenced her education and set down its limits. Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, had already left her family to live in London working as a lady-in-waiting², convinced that that a woman who was in need of a bridal shower to get married did not have to feel ashamed of it, but should rather work to earn her own living in search of self-assertion, and freedom. She believed that the possibilities for a middle-class woman were limited to becoming a housekeeper, a wardrobe mistress, a maid or a dressmaker.

It is interesting to note how their two lives experienced similar studies, paths, and social interests, despite their different characters and milieu. Mary Wollstonecraft had accumulated a sum that allowed her, after a few years, to open a women's school in Newington Green, together with her three sisters and a friend. Maria Edgeworth took care of the education of her 21 brothers and sisters and also ran a small school for the children of the tenants of the family estate. At that time, opening a school in England was very simple, no special qualifications were required and teaching was one of the few ways allowed for women to earn some money independently.

Within a short time, Wollstonecraft's school already had about twenty students who were taught to read, write, paint and embroider. Living and working in Newington Green proved decisive for Mary's intellectual development: in this community, there was a large group of Dissenters³, (pedagogues, philosophers and reformists); the minister of

¹ Women learned reading only by reading prayers, they rarely learned to write.

² The possibility of working, for a single woman of a medium-low class, was in the domestic service (from maid to governess) and in the factories, with very low pay. It was the only means of accumulating a dowry and getting married. A married woman possessed nothing of her own, could not enter into contracts or claim rights over her children. Only in 1923 did the English courts allow a woman to divorce her husband for adultery, even though the divorce law for adultery was passed in 1850.

³ The Dissenters were members of a Protestant religious body but different from the Church of England. The term applied to Calvinists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Unitarians. The group residing in Newington Green was made up of the Rational Dissenters, that is, those who followed John Locke's ideas about human perfectibility, rejecting the idea of original sin and eternal damnation.

the Church, Richard Price, was a friend of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and de Condorcet. Among the Dissenters Mary certainly knew the works of James Burgh, in particular his pedagogical thoughts (*Thoughts on Education*), according to which the author advocated an equal education for males and females. Maria Edgeworth was moving in an equally stimulating cultural environment, which allowed her to meet some of the greatest thinkers in the philosophical, educational and cultural fields. After starting her studies in London, at the age of thirteen she was sent by her father to complete her education with a close friend of his, Thomas Day, who belonged to the “notable members” of the Lunar Society, a “very accomplished and erudite circle” (Schofield 1957, 408), which counted among its members Erasmus Darwin, Matthew Boulton, Benjamin Franklin, and William Small.

The life and work of Wollstonecraft in Newington Green stopped in front of the sudden illness of her friend Fanny. In the midst of many difficulties Mary decided to introduce herself to the famous publisher Johnson, the same publisher of Edgeworth, who commissioned her to write a book of pedagogy, paying an advance of £10. With some of this money, in 1787 Mary published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with reflections on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*⁴, which rightfully placed her in the debate of the time, begun in France by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Mary believed in Locke’s empiricism, by which the mind would be a tabula rasa, and for this reason the environment in which the individual is formed and the education he or she receives, play a fundamental role.

The book consists of a series of essays on the education, as well as on the moral and intellectual development of young women, almost like a manual of behaviour that gives advice on female education, addressed in particular to the emerging middle class. Although questions of morality and etiquette prevail, it contains basic instructions for the education of girls, as far as the care of newborn babies.

“They are – Wollstonecraft wrote – the first of a new species”. The two most read books by young women were *Sermons* and *The Legate of a father to his daughters*, as well as history, philosophy, the classical languages being too arduous, botany and biology proscribed and scandalous. Apart from dancing and the exercise of deportment, young women did not practice

⁴ British behavioural manuals published in the 18th century derive from the ancient literary tradition of religious advice and precepts. In the second half of the century there was a considerable development of such publications, which also included Wollstonecraft’s book, which however had a modest success: it obtained only one review and was reprinted only once, apart from the publication of some extracts in popular magazines of the time. It was re-released in the seventies of the twentieth century, on the wave of feminist development in Europe and of the interest in the history of this movement.

any gymnastics, no physical effort, no competition, no outdoor play. The result was a weak and frail angel, whose virtues exasperated in vices “forced into a cage like the plumed breed, smoothing their feathers, moving with ridiculous majesty from one roost to another” (Wollstonecraft 1787, 58).

The author had carefully observed the pupils of her school and wanted to provide them with new ideas on the education of women who, in her opinion, did not have inferior qualities in learning compared to men. One of her famous aphorisms says: “Who has made man the exclusive judge, if women partake with him the gift of reason?” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 103). She thought that everything began with education, that the reason for the subjugation of women was to be found in ignorance and in the condition of exclusion from the civitas (de Condorcet 1795, 74).

Even Maria Edgeworth began her pedagogical commitment by devoting her first books to the education of young girls a short while after the first publication of Wollstonecraft: *Practical Education* (1798), a pioneering text in the field of education, written together with her father, followed *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and *The Parent's Assistant* (1796). In these writings, she developed an educational system conceived equally for men and women at different stages of life, based on the conviction, revolutionary for the time, that women possessed rational abilities like men.

As Raffaella Leproni writes, we find ourselves at a historical-social passage that will change the perception of childhood compared to adulthood, of which Edgeworth is an example:

In the passage between the 18th and 19th centuries, however, with the advent of the Enlightenment theories and their widespread diffusion in Europe, we see the first signs of contradiction within the coded system that regulates the passage of the individual from the child's age to adulthood. The main reason for this destabilization lies in the elaboration and diffusion of the new empirical theories on education, which bring to the fore the fundamental educational role of women as mothers and first educators of their children. At the same time, many women of the most well-to-do classes are maturing their decision to self-educate themselves, searching for a new definition of their individual identity and social role through cognitive exploration. In this perspective, it is significant that the historical roots of the relationship between women's rights and education are linked to the right to freedom and independence of the colonized peoples, of which Ireland is a paradigmatic example, as the first laboratory of British colonialism.⁵

⁵ “Nel passaggio tra '700 e '800 tuttavia, con l'avvento delle teorie illuministe e la loro dibattuta diffusione in Europa, accanto ai nuovi assetti della vita sociale e politica si manifestano, soprattutto in Inghilterra, i primi segni di contraddizione all'interno del sistema codificato che regola il passaggio dell'individuo dall'età infantile a quella adulta. La ragione principale di questa destabilizzazione risiede nella elaborazione e diffusione delle nuove teorie empiriche sull'educazione, che portano alla ribalta il fondamentale

In 1787 Wollstonecraft began to collaborate with the magazine *Analytical Review* and to attend the intellectual circle of the publisher Joseph Johnson, which included William Blake, Thomas Paine, Joseph Priestley and the painter Heinrich Fuseli. Thanks to the activity in Johnson's magazine, Mary learnt about (sometimes at first hand) the most advanced intellectual positions of the century: she read and translated articles by the great Enlightenment thinkers – Holbach, Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot and Rousseau –, who had a great influence on her development.

Empirical experience and a moral ethical commitment – ideas lying at the heart of the Enlightenment – are at the core of Edgeworth's works: the protagonists of her stories, that she defined moral tales, enhance

Reason as the fundamental ability to improve, thus reiterating both in the exemplar form of the novel and in *exemplum* provided in tales, the theory of the perfectibility of the human being, both male and female, supported by Wollstonecraft.⁶

Wollstonecraft on the other hand gives voice to the full and direct rebellion against the customs of the time; for her Reason is a means for the vindication of the rights and freedom denied to girls and women. When she received an offer from her publisher and friend Joseph Johnson to write the novel *Mary. A Fiction* (1788), which was followed by the writing of the book *Maria: Or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), she seized the opportunity to criticize marriage as a patriarchal institution determining detrimental effects on women. Her novels will have a particular importance in the history of feminist literature, for their groundbreaking assertion that women of different social backgrounds may have the same interests when women's rights are in question.

Edgeworth's style, less direct though irrepressible, shares nonetheless the same values as the Enlightenment, putting Reason at the core of her pedagogical system, while excluding:

ruolo educativo delle donne in quanto madri e prime educatrici dei figli. Parallelamente, molte donne delle classi più agiate maturano la decisione di auto-educarsi, ricercando nell'esplorazione conoscitiva una nuova definizione della propria identità individuale e del proprio ruolo sociale. In questa prospettiva, è significativo che le radici storiche del rapporto tra i diritti delle donne e l'educazione si leghino al diritto alla libertà e all'indipendenza dei popoli colonizzati, di cui l'Irlanda è esempio paradigmatico, in quanto primo laboratorio del colonialismo britannico" (Leproni 2015, 14; unless otherwise stated, English translations are by Edmondo Grassi, revised by Raffaella Leproni).

⁶ "La Ragione come la capacità fondamentale per migliorarsi, ribadendo perciò sia nella forma esemplare del romanzo sia in quella di *exemplum* della novella la teoria della perfettibilità dell'essere umano, sia maschio sia femmina, sostenuta da Wollstonecraft" (Leproni 2015, 16).

any religious matrix as the foundation of education (which led to the attacks of religious fundamentalism of the time, in particular by the Baptist preacher Robert Hall, who denounced her books as ‘irreligious’, because without attacking or ranting against religion, she made it seem pointless to show cases of perfect virtue achieved without it) – preferring the indications – still current – of social psychology, to the point that her texts depict a sort of ‘anatomy’ of the contemporary society.⁷

In Edgeworth, the intellectual use of language emerges, moving between literary and popular, transforming the most typical forms of speech into popular texts, to create new perspectives in literary genres still undergoing consolidation – that is, the regional novel for adults and the moral novel for children, up to the idea of the national novel to promote the awareness of Irish identity.

In 1788 Wollstonecraft had published *Original Stories from Real Life*, a book dedicated to children to educate them about morality through stories and examples of practical life: how to treat animals, the importance of charity, respect for the poor, goodwill. Her literary style is discontinuous, not fluent, aggressive – the result of self-taught revolutionary.

It is a fact that the history of ideas, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, is a story focused on, and written by men, when instead, since the 1700s and even more in the 1900s, many scholars emerge and propose original views of women’s “social action”.

2. *The French Revolution and the Women Rights*

There are no traces of correspondence between Maria Edgeworth and Mary Wollstonecraft, but the influence that Wollstonecraft had on the young Edgeworth seems evident⁸, as regrettably her aristocratic

⁷ “[Il suo ragionamento esclude] la matrice religiosa come fondamento dell’educazione (cosa che le procurò gli attacchi del fondamentalismo religioso dell’epoca, in particolare da parte del predicatore battista Robert Hall, che denunciò i suoi libri come ‘irreligiosi’, perché senza attaccare o inveire contro la religione, la faceva apparire del tutto inutile mostrando casi di perfetta virtù raggiunti senza di essa) bensì secondo le indicazioni – tuttora attuali – della psicologia sociale, al punto che i suoi testi mettono in scena una sorta di “anatomia” della società a lei contemporanea” (Leproni 2015, 16).

⁸ “*A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in early 1792. Maria Edgeworth probably read it while she was staying with her father in Clifton sometime that same year. Her first response to it is to be found in *Letters for Literary Ladies*, published in 1795, but well-advanced in manuscript by February, 1794. It is true that Maria Edgeworth never makes any direct reference to Mary Wollstonecraft’s book, but the circumstantial evidence for her having known it and for having begun *Letters for Literary Ladies* as a result of reading it is very strong. The Edgeworths certainly knew

distancing from the rebellious soul of the first English feminism embodied in Wollstonecraft. Following the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs* (1879), which recounts the life of Mary Wollstonecraft, her behaviour became unacceptable for the respectable bourgeoisie and high society, and she was publicly reprimanded. Maria Edgeworth took this distortion of her revolutionary figure as a model, representing it in the caricature and "bizarre" character of Harriet Freke, in the novel *Belinda*⁹:

Harriot Freke (motto: 'Fun and Freke together, Huzza!') is so obviously an unfavourable portrait of a partisan for the rights of women that it is not surprising that many critics should argue that she exemplifies a more general distaste on the part of Maria Edgeworth for late-eighteenth-century feminism. The proposition is self-evidently logical and attractive. Mrs Freke, to be found in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* of 1801, spends most of her time in men's clothing, for example. She does her best, consonant with her creator's scruples about the danger of making vice look too interesting or attractive, to unsettle the polite world in which she moves. She scares the wits out of a

of Mary Wollstonecraft's writings on education as the *Letters* make clear, and to some extent Maria's first stories for children are based upon Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life*. While the Edgeworths were living in Clifton in 1792, Edgeworth himself visited his old friend Erasmus Darwin in Lichfield. By February 1792 Anna Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield' as she was known and a close friend of both Edgeworth and Darwin, had read *A Vindication* and was praising it to her friends. It was on Darwin's suggestion that Maria published *Letters for Literary Ladies* with Joseph Johnson, the publisher of *A Vindication* (among other radical books and pamphlets). Back in Clifton one of Edgeworth's daughters, Anna Maria, was to become engaged to Thomas Beddoes who in 1792, as a result of his reading of *A Vindication*, had published a poetical *Letter to a Lady on the Subject of Education* (which he had insisted should be set up by a female compositor). Apart from such circumstantial evidence, there are references throughout *Letters to Literary Ladies* to the phrase 'rights of woman', and a great deal of direct reference and borrowing from *A Vindication*" (see Toppliss 1981, 15).

⁹ "Belinda is about a girl launched into society by a match-making aunt. She comes into the world, 'as well-advertised as Packwood's razor-strops.' What is interesting about her is that she is not presented as an ingénue (as some critics have suggested), but as a woman whose understanding is yet to be developed. Although she is 'disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity' we are made aware that this is merely an habitual virtue. 'Her character', says the narrator, 'was yet to be developed by circumstances,' 'her mind had never been roused to reflection, she had in general acted but as a puppet in the hands of others... Her being tossed into the perilous sea of fashionable life with no better guide than the witty, unprincipled Lady Delacour is a test of her virtue, not in the sense of whether she can withstand assaults upon it, but whether her understanding can confirm her principles. What Maria Edgeworth values is independence of character — of the kind that can resist not only the advice offered by agreeable, if less trustworthy friends like Lady Delacour, but even well-intentioned advice given by the exemplary characters, such as the members of the Percival family. Indeed, it is the Percivals who press her to marry the wrong man, and they have to eat their words" (see Edgeworth in Toppliss 1981, 23).

black servant by appearing before him at night dressed as an obeah woman, she attempts to involve her friend Lady Delacour in an adulterous relationship with one Captain Lawless, she encourages the same Lady Delacour to fight a duel with another woman over an affair of honour, and worst of all, perhaps, she bluffs her way into the House of Commons, again dressed as a man, in order to hear Sheridan make a speech. (For this she collects a wager of fifty guineas). That she is intended as a representative of the rights of women movement there can be no doubt. A chapter entitled *Rights of Woman*, offers an encounter, crucial to the novel, between Mrs Freke and the rational, benevolent, R.L. Edgeworth-like Mr Percival. Mrs Freke surprises the males in the company by bearing down on them with the intention of shaking their hands ('Hail fellow, well met!' she cries), and she loses no time in alarming the ladies present as well. Virtue ? — 'all virtue is hypocrisy !'. Shame ? — 'the causes of the vices of women !'. Female delicacy ? — 'this delicacy enslaves the poor, delicate dears !'. 'I hate slavery', she concludes, 'Vive la liberté ! ... I am a champion for the Rights of Women !'. (Edgeworth in Topliss 1981, 13)

In 1789 Wollstonecraft followed with great passion the outbreak of the French Revolution; among the Dissenters, Richard Price gave a speech in which he described the Revolution as the beginning of a progress that would involve the whole of Europe, where the people would obtain the right to elect their representatives. Edmund Burke refuted Price's ideas, publishing in 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, siding against natural law. In turn, Mary Wollstonecraft reacted to Burke's writing by reaffirming the natural and inviolable right of every individual. In a very short time she wrote her first political book: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in which she attacks the noble privileges in defence of the republican regime and joins the chorus of the defenders of the Revolution – among whom is Thomas Paine with his *Rights of Man* – against the opposing side of conservative and reactionary opponents. Being an Enlightenment thinker, she believes in progress and mocks Burke for his attachment to old customs and ancient traditions: if indeed one had always remained faithful to the most ancient traditions, consequently one should still be favourable even to the ancient system of slavery. She contrasts the exaltation of feudal values made by Burke with the bourgeois image of the idyllic country life, in which each family leads its existence on a farm, satisfying its needs with a simple and honest work. This vision of society seems to her the expression of sincere feelings, against the fictitious feelings on which Burke's reactionary vision is based.

In 1792 Wollstonecraft published a second volume on the issue of human rights dedicated to women, written in just 15 days, today considered one of the first writings of feminist philosophy: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft declared that "the most salutary effects tending to improve mankind might be expected from a REVOLUTION in female manners" (Wollstonecraft 1792, 105).

At the same time, though, she recognised the existence, in her day, of many superficial women – not because of their innate deficiency of spirit, but precisely because of the exclusion from a correct education to which they were subject. She affirms that women must be educated to the extent of their position in society, specifying that all women are essential to the nation in which they live, as they educate their children and are – or could be – the “companions” of their husbands and not simply brides. Instead of considering women as a sort of ornament of society and a market object on the occasion of marriage, they are, as human beings, holders of the same fundamental rights recognized to men. On these issues Wollstonecraft criticizes the positions of James Fordyce, John Gregory, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, because they deny that women have the right to education. In particular Rousseau, in the *Émile* (1762) argued that women should be educated in order to please man; Wollstonecraft refutes the role of Sophie in the *Émile*, in which an independent woman was not conceived, but

a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude, the corner stones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience [...] What nonsense. (Wollstonecraft 1792, 30)

According to Wollstonecraft the moral character of women, as well as that of men, develops only through hard intellectual work, and long hours of study require a robust physical constitution. In the novel *Maria: Or, the Wrongs of Woman* she had already condemned the dissipated existence of the aristocrats, unaware of the role of mothers as a vehicle of morality and development. She hoped for a system of national education, mixed schools in which everyone, regardless of their social position, must receive basic education; only after, the most gifted will continue their academic studies while others will learn a trade. Men, this time supported by the theories of Rousseau, are fundamentally good; the poor are not the result of a condition of nature, nor poverty ennobles the soul; rather, man is brutal when the economic system is inflexible.

The attention of Wollstonecraft is now focused mainly on investigating the origin and dynamics of the inferiority of the social condition of women; even before claiming their legal and political rights, in her view, we must recognize women’s right to a childhood in which the body and the mind are formed to be strong and not in the grip of fragility and softness:

Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around in its gilt cage it only seeks to adorn its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits that engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women,

confined to one pursuit and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their view beyond the triumph of the hour. But if their understanding were emancipated from the slavery to which the pride and sensuality of man and their short sighted desire ... has subjected them, we would probably read of their weaknesses with surprise.

It is obviously true that when women obtain power by unjust means they lose the rank appropriate to their having reason, and become either abject slaves or capricious tyrants. In acquiring power, they lose all simplicity, all dignity of mind, and act as we see men act when they have been exalted by the same wrong means. It is time to bring about a revolution in female manners, time to restore their lost dignity to them and to make them, as a part of the human species, work to reform the world by reforming themselves. (Wollstonecraft 1792, 81-83)

The book was successful; it was reprinted for the second time and translated into French, German and had an American edition.

In her writings, Wollstonecraft proposes a new view of the female body; she criticises the ways it was reproduced in the iconography of the time, as a fragile, helpless, ornate, delicate body, because at that time women were actually prevented from developing physical strength: they could not run in the garden or do gymnastics, let alone exercise their minds on rationality. It is therefore evident that not only painting and plastic arts, but also literature and music did nothing but reflect their weaknesses. But Wollstonecraft's thought impresses for its modernity and relevance for present times:

To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion. (*Ibidem*, 93)

Today, writes Eva Cantarella (2010, 9), such women are an exception, or at least a small minority, but knowing that past forces us to wonder how and why, after centuries, in radically different contexts, archaic aspects of the relationship between sexes can resurface (disguised as modernity), transmitted by the media system that implicitly and subtly proposes them as a model.

This is why Wollstonecraft was called by intellectuals as a *philosophical snake, hyena in skirts, shameless slut*¹⁰.

¹⁰ The first two definitions were given by the famous English scholar and politician, Horace Walpole (see Johnson 2002, 1-6). For further reference, see Mgamis 2017, 35-40; and Lister 2017, <<https://inews.co.uk/essentials/someone-sent-photo-work-heading-slag-history-slut-shaming/>> (10/2019).

Contemporary intellectuals and aristocratic women could not but ignore or boycott her, responding: “our culture must remain hidden and useless to the world as gold in a mine” (Kramnick 1975, 43). It happened when Montesquieu claimed that: “Women have never demanded equality because they already enjoy so many other natural advantages, that equality of power is always an empire for them” (*ibidem*) while across the Channel Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift believed that an educated woman was a better company for her husband. On the other hand, there were thinkers such as Locke, who wanted an education that would allow mothers to be the first teachers of their children, and Condorcet, who in 1790 published an article entitled “*Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité*”.

The female issue in England had been opened by various intellectuals, including Jeremy Bentham, who denounced the unjust condition of the civil and juridical inferiority of women. In France Condorcet had proposed universal suffrage, albeit with some censorship limitations.

Wollstonecraft did not think that the *Vindication* would produce a real and immediate change, as “there’s no point in waiting for this to change—not while hereditary power chokes the affections and nips reason in the bud” (1792, 38). She hoped, however, in the driving force of middle-class women, because the wealthiest, though most educated, were locked in a tradition that discouraged reasoning and rebellion:

It is the plague-carrying purple of royalty that makes the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding until men of good sense doubt whether the expansion of intellect will bring more happiness or more misery ... Educated in slavish dependence and weakened by luxury and sloth, where can we find men who will stand up and assert the rights of man, or claim the privilege of moral beings, who should have only one road to excellence? Slavery to monarchs and ministers, whose deadly grasp stops the progress of the human mind, is not yet abolished and won’t be for a long time. (*Ibidem*, 12, 31)

In the same year that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published, Johnson suggested that Wollstonecraft live for several weeks in France to closely follow the events of the Revolution. Sure of being able to witness the affirmation of freedom and progress, the stay in Paris was instead a great disappointment, because of the continuous violence along the streets of the city. From the window of the house where she lived, she saw Louis XVI going to his trial. She was so shocked that she wrote a letter to her friend publisher Johnson.

When France declared war on England in February 1793, Mary Wollstonecraft found herself in a very difficult situation; the tragic period of the Terror began: Marie Antoinette and Robespierre were sentenced to death and it was decided that the English people in France had to be

expelled. Wollstonecraft did not immediately leave France, and found another accommodation in the countryside near Paris, in Neuilly-sur-Seine. Meanwhile, Helen Maria Williams was imprisoned and Olympe de Gouges sentenced to death because she had opposed the execution of Louis XVI and dared to attack Robespierre.

In *An Historical and Moral View on the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effects it has produced in Europe*,

through an often painful analysis Wollstonecraft identifies among the causes of the excesses of the revolution not only the centuries of tyranny that have curbed the moral progress of the French people, but also a constructivist rationalism that inevitably led France from a form of tyranny to a 'else'. Wollstonecraft was faced with the impossibility of reconciling the theory and the horrors he witnessed. The initial enthusiasm, the trust in the perfectibility of the human race, broke before the harsh reality of Terror.¹¹

Her stay in France made her rethink the Puritan attitude on relationships between men and women; in 1792 divorce was introduced, marriage had become a civil contract and many couples lived together without being married.

After living in France for a long time, Mary returned to London in 1796 and discovered that she was a neighbour of the philosopher William Godwin, her future partner in life. Godwin was firmly against marriage, he considered it an artificial, useless link, he writes: "two outstanding personalities can not live harmoniously under one roof"¹². Until Mary got pregnant, they lived in the same street, but in two separate apartments, they married only near the birth of their only daughter: the future novelist Mary Shelley¹³.

¹¹ "attraverso un'analisi spesso dolorosa la Wollstonecraft individua tra le cause degli eccessi della rivoluzione non solo i secoli di tirannia che hanno frenato il progresso morale del popolo francese, ma anche un razionalismo costruttivista che fatalmente ha condotto la Francia da una forma di tirannia ad un'altra. La Wollstonecraft si trovò di fronte all'impossibilità di conciliare la teoria e gli orrori a cui assisteva. L'entusiasmo iniziale, la fiducia nella perfettibilità del genere umano si infransero dinanzi alla dura realtà del Terrore" (Modugno Crocetta 2002, 45).

¹² "due personalità spiccate non possono vivere armoniosamente sotto un unico tetto" (*ibidem*, 94).

¹³ Mary Shelley remembered her mother in the following terms: "Mary Wollstonecraft was one of those people who appear in a generation perhaps only once and who present themselves to humanity so brilliantly, that even people of divergent ideas can not escape their charm. Her genius was unchallenged: she had been raised in the school of misery and, because she had known the sufferings of the poor and the oppressed, in her heart she always harbored the ardent desire to reduce these sufferings. Her solid intelligence, her indomitable character, her sensitivity and lively sympathy permeate all her writings of great strength and truth; or. ed.: "M. W. era uno de esos seres que apareceu quizá sólo una vez en cada generación y que ofrecen a la humanidad un resplandor al que no

There is clearly a watershed between Wollstonecraft¹⁴ and Edgeworth¹⁵; even though they shared ideals of freedom and equality for women, and both were interested in pedagogy, Edgeworth focussed her writing mainly on moral issues, because of her social class, of the patriarchal control system which informed her environment and her family, and of the strong link with the Irish national identity she and her father had developed.

It is therefore true that often what divides the majority of people involved in similar causes is marked by destinies of birth, social classes (Weber) and habitus (Bourdieu), and all that may preclude or allow certain attitudes, choices, behaviours, public statements, private silences. The protection of aristocratic private life, of inherited privilege, of social habits not only prevents solidarity between women alike for ideas, but leads one to ridicule and banish the other, who despite everything was her teacher, her textbook of her youth, I dare to say formative, to the spirit of freedom and equality.

We owe a lot, in any case, to both.

puede sustraerse ninguna divergencia de opinión. Su genio era innegable. Había sido educada en la escuela de la adversidad y, conociendo los sufrimientos de los pobres y los oprimidos, alimentó en su alma el ardiente deseo de disminuir tales sufrimientos. Su sólida inteligencia, su carácter intrépido, su sensibilidad y su viva simpatía impregnaron todos sus escritos de una gran fuerza y verdad” (Charo 1977, 15).

¹⁴ “The works of Mary Wollstonecraft were hardly read throughout the nineteenth century because her criticisms suggest that no woman who has respect for herself would read her writings. It was re-evaluated for the first time by George Eliot, who in 1885 dedicated an essay to the role and rights of women. Afterwards, Millicent Garret Fawcett, a suffragette then president of the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, writing the introduction of the *Rights of Woman* published on the centenary of their first edition, re-evaluated the memory of Wollstonecraft presenting it as the first fighter for the right to vote for women. In the 20th century Virginia Woolf and Emma Goldman turned to the biography of Mary Wollstonecraft celebrating the relevance of ideas and the practice of life. In the 21st century, her works inspired Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Somali politician and critic of traditional African and Islamic oppression of African women and western notions of women's liberation from all forms of oppression (see Marah 2013, 31-36); Hirsi Ali cites *Rights of Woman* in her autobiography *Infidel*, writing that she was inspired by “Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneering feminist thinker who told women they had the same ability to reason as men did and deserved the same rights” (Hirsi Ali 2007, 295).

¹⁵ Jane Austen probably admired Maria Edgeworth more than any contemporary or near-contemporary novelist. It is evident that she immediately saw the potential of Maria Edgeworth's portraits of both sentimental and sensible women, except that in her subtler hands such figures are presented in a far more naturalistic manner.

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ABSENT DESPITE SIMILARITIES:
MARIA EDGEWORTH AND THE IRISH STAGE

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Abstract:

This paper addresses the issue of “absence” in relation to the dramatic works of Maria Edgeworth. Indeed, until relatively recently, the absence of interest in Edgeworth’s plays was even more pronounced than the lack of recognition of her other more important literary works. The playwrights of the Abbey Theatre (W.B. Yeats, Padraic Colum, Lennox Robinson, Augusta Gregory and J.M. Synge) also neglected her work, notwithstanding its possible affinities with their own. The final part of the essay establishes a parallel between this lack of recognition and the fate of other Irish women playwrights of the twentieth century (Augusta Gregory, Teresa Deevy, Christine Pakenham).

Keywords: Abbey Theatre, Drama, Maria Edgeworth, W.B. Yeats

Maria Edgeworth was a celebrated novelist while she was alive. She enjoyed even greater popularity than Jane Austen, and made more money from the publication (and sale) of her works than most, if not all, of her contemporaries¹. In death, however, she was almost forgotten and only relatively recently has she been rediscovered. In the literary panorama, she had slipped from a predominant “presence” to a neglected “absence”. While *Castle Rackrent* (1800), her best-known novel, was read and quoted even after her fame had declined, her other works experienced a far different fate. Her plays – little known even when published, and never staged in public – soon disappeared into complete oblivion. It is well known that Sheridan rejected the plays Edgeworth wrote for Drury Lane (including her earlier play, *Whim for Whim*, 1798), on the grounds that the company did not have enough Irish actors to play the Irish characters convincingly, and that they were unlikely to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain (who effectively censored dramatic works). This absence from the official stage forced Edgeworth to confine her activities as

¹ “She was the most commercially successful novelist of her age” (McCormack, quoted in Meaney, O’Dowd, Whelan 2013, 71).

a playwright to amateur domestic productions. Such domesticity, along with a certain timidity in promoting the plays, is also apparent in even the way in which her 1817 collection, *Comic Dramas*, is presented. In his preface to the collection, Richard Lovell Edgeworth emphasizes that his daughter's plays are somewhat lacking: they are minor works, a "failure," even if "made with real humility" (Edgeworth 1817, vii). He indirectly applauds the decision that there would be no "venturing on the stage" (*ibidem*), maintaining² that *Comic Dramas* "were intended for the closet, & not for the stage" (Slade 1937, 165). Given such premises, it is evident that the fate of Edgeworth's plays was sealed, and that she was doomed to be a "disappointed playwright"³.

The present paper addresses the various implications of "absence" in relation to Edgeworth's dramas. The title itself references the absence of interest in her works for the theatre, framing this within the general lack of recognition that even her more important literary works received until relatively recently. It also questions why writers – including champions of the Celtic revival and the Irish theatre such as W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory – who might have had an interest in reviving Edgeworth's fortunes, actually neglected her works. The word "absence" also echoes the title of an important novel by Edgeworth, *The Absentee* (1812), an overt reference to the absence of the Ascendancy. This highlights the failings of British tenants who eschewed their responsibilities in the management of their Irish estates leaving their properties in the hands of dishonest agents who often oppressed the peasants. Formally, however, the novel can also be seen as one of Edgeworth's works that privilege specifically *dramatic* features. In this sense, a further absence can be detected here in the substitution of literary genre: in fact both *The Absentee* and *Patronage* (1814) were originally conceived as plays before they were radically rewritten as novels. Finally, the lack of attention paid to Edgeworth's dramatic works, along with the lack of recognition of her position in the history of Irish literature, sadly mirrors the fate of other Irish women playwrights of the twentieth century, such as "the two ladies"⁴ of the Abbey Theatre, Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy in addition to many other minor figures.

² In a letter to Elizabeth Inchbald, dated 21 May 1817.

³ Significantly, this is how Edgeworth describes herself in a letter to Miss Sneyd dated March 1803, when she writes of attending a performance at the Covent Garden Theatre, noting the contrast between "the elegance of the French theatre and the grossièreté of the English" (Edgeworth 1894, 141).

⁴ See Roche (2015, 150) who defines Teresa Deevy as "the second lady of the Abbey", Lady Gregory being the first.

1. *Absence from the stage or escaping the Irish stage*

Edgeworth's plays were famously rejected by Drury Lane. As an Anglo-Irish writer, she might have tried to have her plays performed in Ireland, but she apparently did not attempt to put her own works on the Irish stage. As Fernández Rodríguez (2012, 35-36) points out, in the early years of the nineteenth century the theatre was flourishing in Dublin (and in Ireland in general): proof of this was that Dublin was home to *The Theatrical Magazine* (see Fernández-Rodríguez 2012, 36). Why then, was Edgeworth not interested in the Irish stage? In this regard, she was an absentee herself, intending her plays for Drury Lane, but not for Dublin or other Irish public theatres. As Fernández Rodríguez rightly points out, however, theatre at that time could be seen as dangerous for the reputation of a lady⁵. She also explains that drama for Edgeworth might have been construed as an attempt to deconstruct authority in a male-dominated world, and especially in a colonized society: "Drama might have appeared to her [Edgeworth] as a subaltern site, a space in the Irish colonial past which was capable of bringing into being new, non-English states of culture and practice through acts which subverted and estranged the dominant cultural script" (*ibidem*, 36). In this light, she probably felt that her plays befitted the English rather than the Irish stage.

Yet, even if this were true, it is still not clear why Edgeworth did not opt for Irish public venues. This absence deserves further explanation, possibly with an eye to historical contingencies. In fact, at the turn of the century, and after Emmet's insurrection, plays and public theatrical productions could be seen as politically inflammatory. The Royal Theatre had to close twice: first, due to martial law, in 1796, and then again in 1803. Both the Crow Street Theatre and the newly built Theatre Royal in Hawkins Street (that opened in January 1821) were often viewed as political arenas. Indeed, the Crow Street Theatre was wrecked in a riot in 1814, there was further civil unrest in 1819, and rioting and disturbances occurred throughout the 1820s (Connolly 2006, 429-430). The most famous theatre disorders of the period occurred in 1822. Known as the Bottle Riot, this involved Orangemen and Catholic supporters of Irish emancipation: "the Bottle Riot revealed Irish theatre as a very public space in which a socially and politically heterogeneous public staged political and cultural confrontation" (Fitzpatrick Dean 2004, 23-24). In 1829 a second theatre opened in Dublin: the Adelphi. This was supposed to meet the city's need for different venues for its socially and political-

⁵ Although she mentions many other women writers and dramatists such as Hannah More, Hannah Cowley, Charlotte Lennox, Frances Sheridan, Eliza Haywood, Susanna Centlivre, Delarivière Manley, Aphra Behn, Kitty Clive, and Dorothea Ceesia.

ly variegated audiences. Nevertheless, the possibility of – and the need for – an Irish National Theatre was felt “as early as the *Familiar Epistles* pamphlet war of 1804-1805 ... There were demands for Irish material on Irish stages” (Morash 2002, 82).

For a woman with conservative, albeit enlightened, views⁶, such overt political connotations and controversial overtones were probably off-putting, and hence Edgeworth’s decision to distance herself from the Dublin theatre scene. While her plays were not suitable for the London stage, Dublin did not suit her own position and purposes.

2. The *Absentee* and dramatic art

A first direct reference to absence in Edgeworth’s dramatic work appears in her novel, *The Absentee*⁷, originally intended as a play for Drury Lane. Having been rejected⁸, it was radically rewritten and published as a novel. It was also hastily written, almost in an attempt to escape her father’s obsessive presence, and this perhaps explains why it retains traces of its theatre origins.

An initial important characteristic that might be attributed to its original form is the high occurrence of dialogues – it is impossible to tell if this is a mere remnant of the theatre draft, but the tone of the whole novel is clearly set by the many conversations that characterize every chapter. The opening passage is exemplary: a long conversation between Lady Langdale, Mrs. Dareville and Colonel Heathcock. They are mocking Lady Clonbrony, Lord Clonbrony’s wife, and the absentee of the title, who, although the owner of large estates in Ireland, prefers to live in London.

⁶ The political currents in 1820s Ireland alarmed her. She did not look favourably upon the rise of Daniel O’Connell and the politicization of much of the Catholic clergy. She started to realize that an organized Catholic opposition was now undermining the Ascendancy and her own idea of an enlightened ruling class governing subaltern tenants. In 1834 she wrote in a famous letter to Michael Pakenham Edgeworth: “it is impossible to draw Ireland as she now is in a book of fiction – realities are too strong, party passions too violent, to bear to see, or care to look at their faces in the looking-glass” (Edgeworth 1894, 202).

⁷ I will not refer here to the title and the plot of the novel, or to the implications of the story upon which the novel is based.

⁸ As Edgeworth wrote in a letter: “Sheridan has answered as you and I foresaw he must; that in the present state of this country and with the strong prejudices that prevail in England he is sure the Lord Chamberlain would not license [the play] *The Absentee* [and that] even if he did the audience would not (so inveterate, says he, are their prepossessions) sympathise in a picture of the distresses of the lower Irish – Besides there would be an impossibility of finding actors and actresses who would even decently speak the Irish dialect for so many Irish characters” (Fernández Rodríguez 2014, 54).

Lady Clonbrony is an Irishwoman who wants to be accepted in fashionable London circles and is ridiculed for her attempt to conform to the conventions of London life and, above all, for trying to conceal her Irish accent:

- ‘... Poor Lady Clonbrony works so hard, and pays so high, to get into certain circles.’
- ‘If you knew all she endures, to look, speak, breathe like an Englishwoman, you would pity her ...’
- ‘Yes, and you CAWN’T conceive the PEENS she TEEKES to talk of the TEEBLES and CHEERS, and to thank Q, and with so much TEESTE, to speak pure English ...’
- ‘Pure cockney, you mean ...’ (Edgeworth 2017a [1812], 5)

This exchange is revealing as – while discussing Lady Clonbrony’s social position, her Irish origins and the social conventions of British life – the characters focus on language and class distinctions, showing their own prejudice against the Irish. After this brief unflattering portrait, Edgeworth herself describes Lady Clonbrony. The narrator mentions how the character exaggerates her attempts to sound English, almost becoming a caricature:

A strong Hibernian accent she had, with infinite difficulty, changed into an English tone. Mistaking reverse of wrong for right, she caricatured the English pronunciation; and the extraordinary precision of her London phraseology betrayed her not to be a Londoner ... (*Ibidem*, 8)

Moreover, Edgeworth provides a precise description of the phonetic peculiarities of the character’s Hiberno-English vernacular:

Not aware of her real danger, Lady Clonbrony was, on the opposite side, in continual apprehension every time she opened her lips, lest some treacherous a or e, some strong r, some puzzling aspirate or non-aspirate, some unguarded note, interrogative, or expostulatory, should betray her to be an Irishwoman. (*Ibidem*)

In her novels, Edgeworth reproduces both the accents of Irish characters and of would-be Londoners, mirroring the shallow and fashionable life of the capital and the marked linguistic features of Irish-English. Her concern with linguistic accuracy also influenced her views on children’s education. Edgeworth thought that books for children should be written respecting correct English usage, and that the correct acquisition of language was central to education:

... instructing children in grammar by conversation, is not only practicable, but perfectly easy ... the minds of children are adapted to this species of knowledge. During life we learn with eagerness whatever is congenial with

our present pursuits, and the acquisition of language is one of the most earnest occupation of childhood. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1825, 255)

Indeed, in the preface to *Castle Rackrent* she felt the need to defend her deliberate choice of reproducing a regional dialect (though she eventually referred to her decision to depict a regional accent in negative terms, defining it “local and temporary” and as an “example of Irish manners rather than a feature of a rooted and living community”, cf. Hollingworth 1997, 7-13). Reproducing the vernacular adds to the lifelike quality of the text, establishing a specific context:

For the information of the ignorant English reader, a few notes have been subjoined by the editor, and he had once in contemplation to translate the language of Thady [the narrator] into plain English; but Thady’s idiom is incapable of translation, and, besides, the authenticity of his story would have been more exposed to doubt if it were not told in his own characteristic manner. (Edgeworth 2008, 4)

Not only is the vernacular important; dialogue in general – and the more spontaneous the better – represent a key point in understanding the different traits of a character’s true self. Edgeworth was fully aware of how crucial it was to exploit dialogue in order to reveal her characters:

We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. (*Ibidem*)

In a letter she also said that Thady was the only character in the novel that was drawn from real life. He was a steward and Edgeworth had been immediately struck by the way he spoke:

I became so acquainted with it, that I could think and speak in it without effort; so that when, for mere amusement, without any idea of publishing, I began to write a family history as Thady would tell it, he seemed to stand beside me and dictate; and I wrote as fast as my pen could go.⁹ (Letter to Mr. Stirk, 6 September 1834, quoted in Cronin 1980, 26)

While we can surmise that the presence of so much dialogue in *The Absentee* is due to its having originally being written as a play, heavy reliance on dialogue is also a typical expedient of many other novelists. Both Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen¹⁰ were masters in reporting dialogue,

⁹In *Memoir*, 1867, iii, 152 (quoted in Cronin 1980, 26).

¹⁰Babb (1962) finds the real dramatic action of the novels in Austen’s dialogue, and he shows how she reveals personal traits through the speech of her characters.

and while this might not indicate a theatrical predisposition, it at least displays a highly dramatic approach to prose writing¹¹. Unfortunately, the absence of the original draft – the play – of *The Absentee* renders all comments on this point pure conjecture. Robinson (2012) does, however, put forward the idea that Edgeworth's *Belinda* should be considered a theatrical novel. She argues that Edgeworth exploited many theatrical elements in *Belinda* in order to provide the reader with a more realistic image of society¹². Robinson quotes from a letter Edgeworth sent to the celebrated actress, novelist, and playwright, Elizabeth Inchbald:

... I have just been reading, for the third – I believe for the fourth time – the 'Simple Story'. Its effect upon my feelings was as powerful as at the first reading; I never read *any* novel ... that affected me so strongly, or that so completely possessed me with the belief in the *real* existence of all the people it represents ... I believed all to be *real*, and was affected as I should be by the *real scenes* as if they had passed before my eyes. (14 January 1810, quoted in Robinson 2012, 146)

In Robinson's view, the theatrical was an essential element for Edgeworth as it contributed to the construction of an overall realistic image of the world¹³. I fully concur with Robinson, and further argue that such theatricality is a constant in many of Edgeworth's novels. It can be seen in various guises in *The Absentee*, where perhaps it is even more apparent given the nature of the novel's original form.

Furthermore, what can also be found in *The Absentee* is a reflection on the nature of theatre itself. As Garside and O'Brien (2015, 519-521) remark – significantly entitling a part of their history of British novel “novelizing the theatre” – *The Absentee* portrays how the theatre was an important social space, and how society itself assumed theatrical features. This had become a common trope for many different novels of manners, among which those of Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth¹⁴. Garside and O'Brien rightly point out that Edgeworth included a scene set in a theatre in three of her novels: *The Absentee*, *Castle Rackrent* and *Patronage*. This suggests that the writer felt the importance of materializing in her work public places that still had an important social function in late Georgian society. In

¹¹ Moreover, it should be remembered that *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) was also a revision of an earlier dramatic version (cf. Babb 1962, 112).

¹² “Edgeworth draws upon dramatic performance to lend her novel [*Belinda*] a realistic air” (Robinson 2012, 146).

¹³ While modern critics have argued that theatricality entails artificiality with the effect of distancing the novels from an apparent naturalism and realism.

¹⁴ “*The Absentee* also indicates how fully assimilated as well as how structural to the novel of manners this trope had become” (Garside, O'Brien 2015, 521).

this sense, the original form of *The Absentee* (and of *Patronage*) might have also comprised interesting meta-theatrical features.

3. *Edgeworth's absence from the Abbey Theatre: neglected coincidences?*

Although Edgeworth's plays had problems being staged in public at the time they were written, we should also ask why the directors of the Irish National Theatre (and of The Abbey Theatre) never considered staging her plays a century later. A new theatre in search of Irish works might have made good use of an illustrious antecedent who had depicted Irish life and characters, often using the vernacular, and who had provided a lively image of Irish peasant society.

The issue of language and the use of a Hiberno-English vernacular was crucial to the playwrights of the Abbey Theatre. Synge famously advocated the need to be faithful to a specific dialect, writing in the introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907):

I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin. (Synge 2008, 67)

This statement echoes Edgeworth's aforementioned comments on the language she adopted for Thady, the narrator in *Castle Rackrent*. Both Edgeworth and Synge express the idea of reproducing a manner of speech as it is heard, and being able to imitate a dialect they are familiar with. In this respect, the other writer who paved the way for subsequent playwrights of the Abbey Theatre was Lady Augusta Gregory. Synge acknowledged his debt to Gregory when he wrote that her *Cuchulain of Muirthemme* (1902) was part of his daily bread (quoted in Murray 2000 [1997], 44). Gregory's use of the "Kiltartan dialect" sprang from her earlier interest in Douglas Hyde's translations of folk stories from Irish into dialect form (*ibidem*, 43-44), and her plays are based on three specific linguistic expedients: simplicity, a wealth of images, idioms and proverbs, and distinctive syntax (*ibidem*, 44-45).

Similarly, a group of realist playwrights¹⁵ tried to reproduce the Irish vernacular as they heard it, remaining faithful to a given signifier – they all used the dialects and slang spoken in the rural areas where they had been born and raised. Their provincial origins sometimes made them critical of Synge's and

¹⁵ Such as Padraic Colum, Thomas Cornelius Murray, George Fitzmaurice, Lennox Robinson, George Shiels, St. John Ervine, Theresa Deevy and many others.

Gregory's use of dialect: while considering the two directors of the Abbey Theatre as leaders and examples to be followed, they also perceived a difference between Synge's and Gregory's artificial reconstructions of speech and their own natural use of spoken language. As T.C. Murray said – mocking Synge's use of the notes he made while on the Aran Islands and in his travels to the West of Ireland – the realists, unlike Synge, did not need to consult notebooks in order to reproduce regional dialects. In this instance, T.C. Murray was referring to Synge and Padraic Colum; the former had heard Irish dialects, but was not a part of the society he depicted, while the latter was naturally familiar with the speech of Irish country people (cf. De Giacomo 2003, 33). Colum himself was aware of his own "privileged" position when he compared his style to that of Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory:

The truth of the matter is that I was the only one of the lot that knew what the real country speech sounded like. I wouldn't want to say a word against Synge's language, which is exquisite, very fine, but has no more to do with how people actually spoke than Oscar Wilde's dialogue in his comedies has to do with how people spoke in London drawing rooms in the eighteen-nineties. (Quoted in Owens, Radner 1990, 82)

All these attempts to reproduce spoken language, the token of a received, ancient oral tradition, meant being faithful to a given cultural and familial legacy. However, as we have seen, there were distinctions to be made even among the playwrights of the Abbey Theatre. If Colum and Murray saw Gregory's and Synge's use of vernacular as artificial constructs, the Hiberno-English Edgeworth adopted in her novel would probably have been judged with the same severity. The fact is that while the Edgeworths with their *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802) study and criticize the problem of stereotyping and "stage Irishism" for the first time, Maria also reveals that she has a much more conventional position in relation to the proper use of what may be defined as standard English¹⁶. According to Croghan, this position accounts for her having been "unjustly neglected"¹⁷:

In *Castle Rackrent* and *The Rose, Thistle and Shamrock*, Edgeworth uses the phrase 'plain English' for, what she considers, the authentic code, and any alternative can be considered a symbol of 'non-authenticity'. So Thady, the principal character of *Castle Rackrent*, is said by the author to speak in his 'vernacular idiom', and Edgeworth would similarly depict Irish characters in her other writings by this tactic of linguistic marking.

¹⁶ For a more detailed investigation into the distinction between Hiberno-English and a brogue-write, and thus Edgeworth's use of the Irish language, see Croghan 1990, 29-34 and Croghan 1993.

¹⁷ Croghan probably uses the expression "unjustly neglected" ironically, holding that there were specific reasons why she was dismissed by many Irish writers.

Maria Edgeworth did not have a Somerville and Ross competence in Hiberno-English, but she was a linguist and stylist of great ability, and it would be far-fetched to claim she did not realise in some way that she was marking for deviancy when she wrote, for example, the pseudo-naturalistic language which is used by Irish characters who were not rogues or comic figures such as the Widow Larkin in *The Rose, Thistle and Shamrock*, and Thady in her novel *Castle Rackrent*. (Croghan 1993, 205-206)

Thus, even if most of the big fish of the Abbey Theatre, and especially its directors, seemed to ignore the existence of Edgeworth's dramatic works, *Castle Rackrent* might well have been a model that was controversial and, in some respects, not entirely acceptable for the purposes of the new theatre. Colum commented on *Castle Rackrent*, saying that "one can read it in an hour. Then one knows why the whole force of England could not break the Irish people"¹⁸. Apart from this reference, however, there are few points in common between Colum and Edgeworth other than the fact that they were both from County Longford, and wrote books for children. Colum never mentioned Edgeworth's plays, and he never went beyond this one instance of appreciation.

Hollingsworth's comments on the language used in *Castle Rackrent* provide us with a clue as to why Edgeworth was ignored. He observes that her novel had stressed certain class distinctions through the contrast between Thady's vernacular language and the voice of the writer in the guise of editor. This stylistic choice, as well as opting for a narrator whose personality is often shallow in order to allow the characters to emerge more vividly, risks presenting the narrator himself, as well as the world he represents, in a negative light. This means that rather than democratizing the use of dialect, *The Absentee*, *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, *Castle Rackrent*, *Ennui* (1809) and *Ormond* (1817) tend to be critical of the use of the Irish vernacular, associating it with disorder and unreliability, and the corruption of a pure language. The vernacular, however "engaging it may be, is the language of indiscipline. It is the language of the morally incompetent" (cf. Hollingsworth 1997, 120). Ascribing this as the reason for Edgeworth's absence from the Abbey Theatre is probably going too far. Yet, underlying political implications must have had something to do with her absence from the Irish stage. Politically, Edgeworth's position was unacceptable to the Abbey playwrights. *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*, which the Abbey playwrights might well have read, were pro-Unionist, and her play *The Rose, Thistle and Shamrock* (1817) was even more so; the title itself neatly expresses her allegiances.

¹⁸ Colum quoted in: <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-19th-cent-biographies/maria-edgeworth>>, in <<https://biography.yourdictionary.com/maria-edgeworth>> and in <<http://visitlongford.ie/maria-edgeworth/>> (19/2019). Colum also compared Edgeworth very unfavourably with Ivan Turgenev in an article for the *British Review* (see Colum 1915).

Nevertheless, Edgeworth advocated an Irish renaissance based on the combined effort of both Catholics and Protestants, and she harshly criticised members of the Ascendancy who did not attend to their duties¹⁹. In her view, the Ascendancy was the leading social class in Ireland, maintaining a constant, industrious presence aimed at the social, economic and cultural improvement of the island. The plot expedient Edgeworth uses to show the importance of a common British-Irish accord is marriage. This symbolized the need to form a single nation – and with it, the implicit need for not just integration but assimilation – based on the alliance between native and settler cultures. In the twentieth century both Lennox Robinson (*The Big House*, 1926 and *Killycreggs in Twilight*, 1937) and St. John Ervine (*Mixed Marriage*, 1911) depicted marriages between Catholics and Protestants, but with a difference. For the former it was the final attempt of the Ascendancy to come to terms with the new Catholic ruling class, while for the latter it was an attempt to resolve old controversies between the Protestant and the Catholic working class in Belfast. In both cases, and in contrast to Edgeworth, there is no happy ending. Moreover, the abdication of the Ascendancy in playing a leading role in this new Ireland was a common concern for W.B. Yeats (cf. his play *Purgatory*, 1938) and for Lennox Robinson (in the aforementioned plays)²⁰. These similarities did not suffice, however, for the Abbey playwrights to see Edgeworth as a possible source of inspiration.

¹⁹ Susan Manly succinctly accounts for Maria's father's political position in describing his daughter's research into the *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820): "It's ... important ... to absorb what she [Maria] has to say about the family's experiences during the 1798 rebellion, and in particular, her father's reactions to the turmoil and to the work of improving Ireland's political and social fortunes. She gives us a dramatic account of the Edgeworth family's narrow escape from being blown up in a gunpowder accident during the 1798 uprising, and of RLE's brush with death a few days later, assaulted by an Orange lynch-mob, who suspected him of having 'illuminated' Longford gaol for the benefit of the French invaders. RLE subsequently spoke and voted against Union with Britain in the Irish House of Commons – despite his conviction that Union would weaken the aristocratic monopoly on power, strengthen commercial and manufacturing enterprise in Ireland, and eventually lead to Catholic emancipation, which he had proposed as an important element of political reform in 1782" (2014; <<https://standrewsrarebooks.wordpress.com/2014/03/14/highlights-from-the-reading-room-memoirs-of-richard-lovell-edgeworth/>>, 10/2019).

²⁰ *Castle Rackrent* "provided a finely satiric rendering of a class in terminal decline, destroyed by their own fecklessness and irresponsibility as much as by the social competition of an upstart middleclass. This is a recurrent feature of the literary treatments of the Big House from Edgeworth's time down to the novels and plays of Yeats's own: Somerville and Ross's *The Big House of Inver* (1925), Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929)" (Greene 1999, 174).

4. W.B. Yeats and Maria Edgeworth

It is necessary to add a few more words regarding W.B. Yeats's opinion of "Miss Edgeworth". Yeats acknowledges Edgeworth's importance in his articles, reviews and introductions, and as early as 1891 he mentions her name when compiling a list of authors to be included in the reading rooms set up by the Ireland League. Among other books, Yeats suggests "three or four of the Irish stories of Miss Edgeworth" (2004, 148); similarly, when compiling a list of the best Irish books in 1895, the first title in the novel section is *Castle Rackrent*²¹ (*ibidem*, 288). In the 1908 issue of *Samhain* Yeats describes *Castle Rackrent* as a unique, inspired moment in early nineteenth century Irish literature²², and later, in his 1910 famous essay *J.M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time*, he also mentions Edgeworth as the only writer before Synge who could "change a man's thought about the world or stir his moral nature" (Yeats 2007, 233)²³.

If the aforementioned quotations contain only brief allusions to Edgeworth, there are two longer passages worth citing. In both cases the writer is compared to William Carleton²⁴, who is, according to Yeats, a more complete narrator than Edgeworth. In his 1895 article entitled "Irish National Literature", Yeats refers to Thady Quirk as a character capable of representing a tradition that was the "expression of ... dominant moods, that which was embodied in the customs of the poor, their wakes, their hedge-schools, their factions, their weddings, their habits of thought and feeling ... Miss Edgeworth had called for a moment this ancient life in the mournful humour of Thady Quirk ..." (Yeats 2004, 267). Yeats concludes that Edgeworth can be considered the most important writer to depict Irish life before Carleton started writing.

²¹ Significantly, this is the only book by Edgeworth included in the list.

²² "The Irish novelists of the nineteenth century, who established themselves ... upon various English writers, without, except at rare moments – *Castle Rackrent* was, it may be, the most inspired of those moments – attaining to personality, have filled the popular mind with images of character, with forms of construction, with a criticism of life, which are all so many arguments to prove that some play that has arisen out of a fresh vision is unlike every Irish thing" (Yeats 2003, 117).

²³ The whole passage reads: "In no modern writer that had written of Irish life before him [Synge], except it may be Miss Edgeworth in *Castle Rackrent*, was there anything to change a man's thought about the world or stir his moral nature, for they but play with pictures, persons and events, that whether well or ill observed are but an amusement for the mind where it escapes from meditation ...".

²⁴ For Yeats's views on Carleton, see Foster's essay "Yeats, Carleton and the Irish Nineteenth Century", in Foster 2002, 113-126.

In March 1896 (in *The Bookman*) Yeats wrote a long article on Carleton – and again mentions Edgeworth. In this instance his comments are not so positive. For Yeats, Carleton

... had no predecessors, for Miss Edgeworth wrote by preference of that section of Irish society which is, as are the upper classes everywhere, the least national of all, and was, as the upper classes have seldom been anywhere, ashamed of even the little it had of national circumstance and character. (Yeats 2004, 312)

The problem with Edgeworth is that she belonged to a social class incapable of understanding the poor peasants or the working classes, even though they are portrayed as being directly linked to the upper classes. Thus, even the narrator in *Castle Rackrent* cannot be representative of Irish life, because:

When she [Miss Edgeworth] did take a man out of the Gaelic world and put into his mouth the immortal *Memoirs of the Rackrent Family*, it was a poor man living in great men's houses, and not a poor man at his hearth and among his children. She could not have done otherwise, for she was born and bred among persons who knew nothing of the land where they were born, and she had no generations of historians, Gaelic scholars²⁵, and folklorists, behind her, from whom to draw the symbols of her art. (Yeats 2004, 298-299)²⁶

Before stressing these negative aspects, Yeats had been less severe in his criticism of Edgeworth. In the 1891 introduction to *Representative Irish Tales* – a collection of Irish tales he edited – he starts by praising her:

The one serious novelist coming from the upper classes in Ireland, and the most finished and famous produced by any class there, is undoubtedly Miss Edgeworth. Her first novel, *Castle Rackrent*, is one of the most inspired chronicles written in English. (Yeats 1989, 32-33)

In the same introduction Yeats goes on to provide a detailed account of the merits of Edgeworth's literary work, recognising that she was the first writer to depict Irish life without derogatory or comic intent. Yet even here there is a negative edge. Yeats adds that the image of Irish life that emerges from Edgeworth's works fails to reproduce a truthful reality, indulging too often in romantic, poetic, and idealized descriptions:

²⁵ Gaelic scholars were educated Irish bards, scholars who schooled their pupils in a body of classical learning as well as Irish history and law in addition to the complex craft of bardic poetry.

²⁶ The last two articles mentioned above (dated 1895 and 1896) were conflated into a new article for the American press a few months later.

One finds no undue love for the buffoon, rich or poor, no trace of class feeling, unless, indeed, it be that the old peasant who tells the story is a little decorative, like a peasant figure in the background of an old-fashioned autumn landscape painting. An unreal light of poetry shines round him, a too tender lustre of faithfulness and innocence. The virtues, also, that she gives him are those a poor man may show his superior, not those of poor man dealing with poor man. She has made him supremely poetical, however, because in her love for him there was nothing of the half contemptuous affection that Croker and Lover felt for their personages. On the other hand, he has not the reality of Carleton's men and women. He stands in the charming twilight of illusion and half-knowledge. (*Ibidem*, 32)

Nevertheless, Yeats also accounts for Edgeworth's qualities. When dealing with her own social class, she offered an insightful and critical social analysis of the problems and deficiencies affecting the Ascendancy, especially in *The Absentee*²⁷:

When writing of people of her own class she saw everything about them as it really was. She constantly satirised their recklessness, their love for all things English, their oppression of and contempt for their own country. The Irish ladies in *The Absentee* who seek laboriously after an English accent, might have lived today. Her novels give, indeed, systematically the mean and vulgar side of all that gay life celebrated by Lever. (*Ibidem*)

These longer passages are significant in that they deal with various issues that were crucial for Yeats in his role in the emergence of the Celtic Twilight and in the foundation of the Irish National Theatre. They regard the aforementioned place of the Ascendancy in Ireland, the idea of authenticity and the depiction of a traditional past, and the importance of class distinctions with the subsequent choice to depict one social class in the plays of the Abbey. As for Edgeworth representing an idealized romantic past, Yeats's criticism is deserved and certainly hits the mark, even though the same comment might also apply to many Yeatsian poems and plays with their idealization of Irish people²⁸ and of a glorious Celtic twilight. The ability to depict different social classes, and also to describe the upper classes, was pivotal for the Irish theatre Yeats proposed. He insisted on the need to depict Irish peasants and the lower classes: the middle-class-

²⁷ That Yeats viewed *The Absentee* as an important novel from a historical point of view is confirmed by Foster (2003, 448) who reports that Yeats considered Liam O'Flaherty's *The Puritan* (1932) "as important in the history of Irish fiction as Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee*". This implies that the latter occupied a noteworthy position in the history of Irish literature.

²⁸ See his desire to revive an ancient glorious (invented) Irish past and tradition, his mythologies, the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), and his idealized images of first Sligo and then Lady Gregory's estate.

es were similar throughout Europe and could not be representative of any specific culture; the bourgeoisie was not national, and thus could not represent “Irishry”²⁹. This might have been a further reason for excluding Edgeworth from the Abbey Theatre.

However, one wonders whether Yeats and the other playwrights of the Abbey Theatre ever read any of Edgeworth’s plays. In the passages quoted above, Yeats mentions *Castle Rackrent* and *The Absentee*, and, without citing any specific titles, he refers to Edgeworth’s tales. It is likely that her minor works were overlooked, if not completely ignored. Yet, the opinions given about her novels are revelatory enough as to why also her plays, had they been known, would not have been taken into consideration by that generation of playwrights.

5. *Woman dramatists: a common fate of exclusion, difficulties, and lack of recognition*

Along with the similarities between Edgeworth and the playwrights of the Abbey Theatre, a further connection merits investigation: the fate of many other women playwrights, such as Lady Augusta Gregory, Constance Markievicz, Teresa Deevy, Mary Manning, Dorothy Macardle, Eva Gore-Booth, Alice Milligan, Suzanne Rouviere Day, Geraldine Cummins, and Christine Longford. Each of these women has at times been dismissed and/or ignored, despite playing an important part in the history of Irish literature.

Lady Augusta Gregory provides an eminent, initial example of this. As seen, both Edgeworth and Gregory shared a deep concern for the use of the vernacular. However, there are several biographical similarities that render their experiences paradigmatic. Like Edgeworth, Lady Gregory belonged to the socially privileged Protestant land-owning class in Ireland. Gregory had read Edgeworth’s works (cf. Rempfort 2018, 8) and shared her interest in methods for running the Big House and family estates, trying to learn from earlier moves for social reform, and improving the lot of the tenant. As a woman in a family of landowners of the Protestant Ascendancy³⁰ Gregory had to carve out a distinct role for herself, a difficult task for an Irish woman born and bred, and “immersed in the very culture she opposed” (Murray 2000, 41). A member of the colonial Ascendancy and

²⁹ “The life of the drawing-room, the life represented in most plays of the ordinary theatre of today ... differs very little all over the world, and has ... little to do with the national spirit” (Yeats 2003, 108).

³⁰ She was born at Roxborough as Isabella Augusta Persse into an ancient (and staunchly Protestant) Galway family.

an ardent unionist by birth and marriage, she eventually – slowly and following a complicated route – became an Irish nationalist. On the other hand, Edgeworth never really opposed the political convictions of her own class, despite criticizing the failings of the Ascendancy.

Both Edgeworth and Gregory had to deal with an awkward male presence in their lives. Gregory's husband was a widower with an estate at Coole Park, and in many ways he belonged to another generation, as George Moore recollects in *Hail and Farewell: Vale* (1911): "He [Sir William] wore the Lord Palmerston³¹ air, it was the air of that generation" (Moore quoted in Mikhail 1977, 9). Sir William died in 1892. Gregory edited her husband's autobiography, published in 1894, and, significantly, decided to prepare selections from Sir William Gregory's grandfather's correspondence for publication as *Mr Gregory's Letter-Box 1813-1830* (1898). These two editorial projects can be seen to be interconnected, and reveal that Lady Gregory considered Sir William – thirty-five years her senior – more of a father than a husband. Edgeworth also worked on the autobiography of a close relative (her father). *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth* (1820) is made up of two distinct parts, the first being by Richard Lovell Edgeworth himself, and a second written by his daughter.

Both Gregory and Edgeworth suffered from being excluded, a plight shared by many other women writers in a patriarchal society. As an artist, Augusta Gregory suffered a cultural exclusion similar to the political exclusion of her own class, the Ascendancy. She co-authored *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) with Yeats – a play commonly and mistakenly attributed to Yeats alone. On the earliest surviving draft, Gregory added in the margins of the passages she had written: "All this mine alone" (Greene 1999, 64), which is maybe symptomatic of her distress at the lack of personal recognition (cf. Leeney 2010). In certain ways, this situation mirrors Edgeworth's position with respect to her father (I am referring to the book *Essays on Professional Education* (1809) to which she contributed, but for which she received no textual acknowledgement). It is also important to remember that Edgeworth published *Castle Rackrent* anonymously and without her father's supervision, as if she wanted to avoid paternal censorship (Richard Lovell Edgeworth criticized the amount of time she wasted on fictional works).

One final similarity between these two women concerns the subsequent fame of their works. After the great success she had in her own lifetime, Edgeworth was neglected for many years; similarly, Gregory's plays often proved successful when staged, but she attracted little attention from

³¹ Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) was a Whig-Liberal statesman. His long career made him a distinguished and popular politician, "a permanent embodiment of British nationalism" (Mikhail 1976, 12).

modern critics (compared to Yeats and Synge). Significantly, several critics have seen Gregory as something of a monument, and have thus often neglected her³² or underestimated her importance. This situation continued up to the 1980s (Murphy 2008, 121-122). Like Edgeworth, she too has only been reassessed relatively recently.

Similarly, Teresa Deevy – the second Lady of the Abbey (cf. Roche 2015, 150) – disappeared from the canon of contemporary Irish drama. From a middle-class Catholic family in Waterford, she was the last of thirteen children, and her father – a farmer turned draper – died when she was only three. She was educated at an Ursuline convent, but while studying to become a teacher at UCD, she contracted Ménière's disease and was forced to interrupt her studies. She continued at University College Cork and then went to London to learn lip-reading. Back in Ireland, she found her family in financial difficulties and it was then that she started writing for the theatre. From 1930 to 1939 six of her plays were staged at the Abbey Theatre, although her later plays attracted less attention and were not accepted. As Ernest Blythe and the representatives of the Abbey Theatre turned her down, she wrote her next works for the radio. Such rejection may echo what happened with the plays Edgeworth wrote for Drury Lane. Deevy's famous play, *Katie Roche* (1936), with its female protagonist, is perhaps exemplary of the condition of many Irish female playwrights – often neglected until recent years – and of how women were represented on the Irish stage. This absence of women playwrights/writers from critical discussion is an old problem, and the fall-out from women's attacks on the *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1990) is exemplary of this trend. Only recently has this situation changed, with renewed interest in the women playwrights of the twentieth century and in Edgeworth herself³³.

6. From a long absence to a modern presence

One final interesting similarity between Edgeworth and other neglected female dramatists can be found in the career of Lady Longford, who wrote eighteen plays for the theatre – as well as various adaptations – between 1931 and 1960. Like Edgeworth, Christine Pakenham (née Trew), Countess of Longford, was born in England (in 1900). She studied Classics at Oxford where she met (and eventually married) Edward Pakenham,

³² Cathy Leeney mentions that Lady Gregory's qualities might also have contributed to her neglect on the part of critics: "her modesty, self-deprecation and dedication to others, or to ideals larger than herself" (Leeney 2010, 21).

³³ Cf. recent ground-breaking studies such as Sihra 2007, Kurdi 2010, Leeney 2010.

the elder son of the Earl of Longford³⁴. The couple moved to Ireland and divided their time between Dublin and Pakenham Hall in Castlepollard (Co. Westmeath). The Longfords worked with Edwards-Mac Liammóir at the Gate Theatre from 1931 to 1936 where Edward became Chairman of the Board and its main financial backer. Following a disagreement with Edwards-Mac Liammóir in 1936, the couple founded Longford Productions which produced 151 plays at the Gate Theatre during its 24-years existence, and formed the Longford Players. The Players spent the summer months at the Gate Theatre and the winter months touring the country³⁵. While on tour, Edward would sell programmes and Christine looked after the box office. The Longfords had the credit of taking quality theatre to the whole of Ireland as well as encouraging an interest in amateur dramatics. They were enthusiastic supporters of Irish language and culture and frequent visitors to Gaelic cultural events (they even learned to speak Irish).

To a certain extent Christine Pakenham's life is similar to Edgeworth's. Born in England, she was interested in Irish affairs and contributed to the intellectual development of the community she lived in. She too had an awkward male presence at her side. A talented woman, Christine decided to subordinate her own individuality to that of her eccentric husband, supporting him in his enterprises and projects (cf. Cowell 1988). Like many other playwrights, her works have been neglected and only recently has a commemorative bronze bust of her been unveiled in the foyer of the Gate Theatre³⁶.

Christine Longford brings the present list of absences and neglected similarities to a suitable conclusion, in the hope that any such tendency favouring selective forgetfulness is now a thing of the past. In 1938 Longford wrote an adaptation of Edgeworth's *The Absentee* for the theatre. It premiered at the Gate Theatre³⁷, and toured Ireland in Longford Production's second Irish tour. It is noticeable that having mentioned the humour and wit in the play, the programme notes written by the director (Peter Powell) contain an interesting detail regarding the importance of

³⁴ Significantly, the ancestors of the Pakenhams were close to the Edgeworths: in fact, Edgeworthstown House once formed the centre of the cultured Edgeworth circle which included the Pakenhams, Earls of Longford and the Lefroys, Chief Justices of Ireland. The two families had intermarried in the early 18th century and this special relationship apparently never faded; incidentally another descendant of the Pakenhams, Valerie Pakenham, has recently revived this strong affinity, editing a selection of Edgeworth's letters (Edgeworth 2017b).

³⁵ While Edwards-Mac Liammóir's company spent their summer months touring and the winter months at the Gate Theatre.

³⁶ On November 20th, 2015.

³⁷ Only in 2001 was an adaptation of *Castle Rackrent* produced by Johnny Hanrahan, a founder member and Artistic Director of Meridian Theatre Company, Cork.

the costumes “designed by Christine Longford and executed by Eileen Long and P.J. Bourke, hats by Nancy Beckh”. Meaney, O’Dowd, Whelan (2013, 72) assume that such an emphasis on specific details means that women in provincial Ireland made up a large part of the audience and that companies were well-aware of this fact. Thus, in 1938, a brilliant, intelligent woman playwright returned Edgeworth’s novel to its original form, reacting for the first time against a cultural amnesia that for various reasons had also affected national movements in search of potential traditions. Unfortunately, it took many years to attain substantial recognition, and reverse the selective neglect that once characterized both theatre and academia.

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MANOEUVRING (1809) AND THE ABSENTEE (1812) REVISITED:
MARIA EDGEWORTH'S INTRIGANTES
AND JANE AUSTEN'S LADY SUSAN¹

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Abstract:

Lady Susan (1871) is still one of Jane Austen's most enigmatic works. Posthumously published, this short epistolary novel depicts a manipulating widow who aims to marry off her weak-willed daughter. The present work insists on the striking coincidences between Edgeworth's heroine in *Manoeuvring* and *Lady Susan* (1809), but it also examines how the Anglo-Irish author went further and originally adapted her first *manoeuvrer* to a new context in one of her most famous Irish tales published in 1812. An examination of the narrative technique employed by Edgeworth and of the development of the Edgeworthian type that Austen would make popular with *Lady Susan* herself also casts more light on Edgeworth's particular approach to woman in pre-Victorian Britain.

Keywords: Anglo-Irish literature, gender studies, Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, nineteenth century

1. Introduction

Intriguing *Lady Susan* in Jane Austen's homonymous novel is one of the most seductive widows in British fiction at the turn of the nineteenth century. Her predecessors have been traced in other female authors, like the Anglo-Irish Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849). In 1991 Jan Fergus associated *Lady Susan* with Edgeworth's *Leonora* (1806), while for Marilyn Butler – Edgeworth's biographer –, *Lady Susan* is “a full-scale pastiche and a merger” (Austen 2008, xlix) of *Leonora* and *Manoeuvring* (first published in *Tales of Fashionable Life*, 1809):

¹ This essay is part of the outcome of the University of A Coruña research network “Rede de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade III” ED431D2017/17.

both tales [*Lady Susan* and *Manoeuvring*] feature the manipulative attempts of a young widow to marry off her modest daughter to a foolish but wealthy man, and her eventual decision to marry the man herself. (Austen 2008, xlix)

but Austen left didacticism apart and transformed adultery and passion into romantic black comedy. In the admirable introduction to *Lady Susan*, prepared by Janet Todd and Linda Bree, it is stated that the work was written between 1793 and 1794; it was finally polished between 1810 and 1812 and it survived in a fair copy made years later (*ibidem*). Austen may certainly have had *Manoeuvring* in mind when she composed *Lady Susan*. However, the publication of Edgeworth's second series of *Tales of Fashionable Life* including *The Absentee* – where the English *intrigante* is adapted to the Irish context – points to a more complex relationship since scholars refer to Caroline Austen, the author's niece, who considered *Lady Susan* a “betweenity”; that is, a work “when the nonsense was passing away, and before her [Austen's] wonderful talent had found it's [sic] proper channel” in date of composition, tone, and genre: “[i]t has a skill, sophistication, realism, and length that set it apart from the juvenile works, together with a subject matter that separates it from the later published novels” (Bree *et al.* 2013, 24). Besides, Butler argues that Austen borrowed from Edgeworth for all the six novels except *Pride and Prejudice* (1813):

Many of the techniques that Jane Austen later used so successfully—the subtly revealing dialogue, the intelligent principal characters, the relation between the intelligence of those characters and the continuously analytical narrative tone—were all to be found first in Maria Edgeworth. (1972, 328)

The influence of other female authors on Austen represents an ever-fascinating area in nineteenth-century studies (see Fernández Rodríguez 2016, 2017), and it is particularly interesting when we deal with Frances Burney and Edgeworth, who have been traditionally considered as the “mothers of the novel” (Spender 1986, 270) and whose interaction with Austen's work cannot be ignored. The Anglo-Irish author has been repeatedly associated with Austen since the latter paid homage to her in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). In this novel a lady says that she only reads novels if:

It is only Cecilia, or Camilla or Belinda, or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (Austen 1990, 22)

Curiously, Edgeworth has been an uncomfortable guest in gender studies for many reasons. Firstly, she has been charged of being a non-feminist author. George Watson called her “the least feminine of female novelists”

in his introduction to *Castle Rackrent* (1800) (1964, x). Additionally, Edgeworth scholar Patrick Murray argued that in Edgeworth's first work there is no heroine (1971, 50), and other commentators also followed that line (Kelly 1981; Douthwaite 1997) until this statement was revised first by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984) and later by Ann Owens Weekes (1990). Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace (1991), Catherine Gallagher (1994) and Audrey Bilger (1998) inaugurated a new trend consisting in decentering the focus from Edgeworth's foster country and bringing this author closer to the reading public and scholars as a writer who was not just a folklorist but an intellectual concerned with woman. Thus, the former maintains that in Edgeworth's writings on women's education

There is much that seems reasonable and even enlightened, much that seems notable to a feminist point of view ... Edgeworth seems to have been extremely aware of the kinds of limitations patriarchy had placed on women, and she seems consciously to have struggled against patriarchal constraint. (Kowaleski-Wallace 1991, 99)

and Caroline Gonda dismantles the myth of Maria as her father's mouthpiece since it has been "a way of denying her agency, power and responsibility, a kind of infantilization" (1996, 237). Secondly, the latest research, and even the work of her biographer, hinges on Edgeworth's connection with Ireland (Kilfeather 1989; Connolly 1995; O'Gallchoir 1998 and 2005). Now on the 250th anniversary of Edgeworth's birth, her corpus shows that she was much more than the hand giving fictional form to her father's pedagogical ideas: Edgeworth exposed the contradictions of patriarchal ideology in an admirable way and the Irish setting cannot be ignored.

In this paper I argue that Austen consciously reworked Edgeworth's *intrigantes*. I analyse one character in Edgeworth's *The Absentee* as a contemporary portrait of the literary type embodied by the most famous Lady Susan, who was based on Mrs. Beaumont and on the next Edgeworthian *intrigante*. These narratives are part of *Tales of Fashionable Life*, two successful series including *Ennui*, *Almeria*, *Madame de Fleury*, *The Dun* and *Manoeuvring* in the first series (1809); and *Vivian*, *Émilie de Coulanges* and *The Absentee* in the second (1812). After an examination of Mrs. Beaumont's main traits, I turn attention to Lady Dashfort in a place that Edgeworth knew very well, her foster country. Finally, I examine Austen's version by contrasting it with Edgeworth's characters.

2. *The erring female politician*

Considered by Butler as one of Edgeworth's most feminine tales (1972, 210), *Manoeuvring* is an orphan book from the point of view of literary

criticism since it has been largely ignored by the Edgeworth studies. It seems that Maria's family supervised the composition of *Manoeuvring* more closely than *The Absentee*, which was conceived to be a play. Richard Lovell Edgeworth generally gave Maria the main idea and some details about the work and he helped as a proof reader. Only *Castle Rackrent*, *Leonora* and *Helen* escaped parental control (*ibidem*, 285). *Manoeuvring* was praised by Maria's aunt and uncle while *The Absentee* was "the less studied less criticised less corrected and more rapidly written" than any other that Maria published (Letter from Mrs. Frances Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, 22 June 1812, quoted in Walker 1999, x, xiii). The narrative deals with Mrs. Beaumont, a widow who is extremely anxious to advance the worldly interests of her children, Edward and Amelia, through lies and stratagems. When the story begins, Mr. Palmer, a wealthy family friend coming from Jamaica, is going to visit Beaumont Park in order to arrange the family's affairs before Edward's coming of age. The gentleman hates artifice and titles and can leave his fortune to either the Beaumonts or the Walsinghams since he is equally related to both families. Aware of Mrs. Beaumont's potential, Mr. Walsingham defines his own family in opposition to Mrs. Beaumont: "Our whole souls are laid open: there is no management, no 'intrigue de cabinet', no 'esprit de la ligue'" (Edgeworth 1893, 7-8).

One of the main differences between Edgeworth and Austen is that the former introduces a fallible protagonist. There is not an easy road to the fulfillment of Mrs. Beaumont's objectives which are seconded by deception and persuasion, a key word in Austen's lexicon. The lady basically wants to concentrate the Hunter fortune and puts her children off marrying any Walsingham. She persuades Amelia that Captain Walsingham, Mr. Walsingham's ward, does not really care for her and she obtains the promise that Edward will not propose to Miss Walsingham. Besides, she feigns disapproving the match between Amelia and Sir John in order to make Mr. Palmer believe that rank is not important for her, as she explains to Sir John later on the "necessity of [her] seeming" (*ibidem*, 63). Mrs. Beaumont also makes several mistakes that reveal her true character. She regrets wasting "a quantity of contrivance and manoeuvring" (*ibidem*, 48). Her shortcomings show the contradictory position of woman in eighteenth-century society, when women were obsessed with pleasing others but they were also criticized if they wanted to control their own lives. Mrs. Beaumont is not always successful, and she chooses indirection and hypocrisy as her weapons to fight against a society that curtails her movements. Her enemy is at home since, at one point, her son Edward Beaumont wonders about her real feelings if he goes away: "how do I know, that when I go away, you may not be as glad as to get rid of me as you were to get away from these Duttons?" (*ibidem*, 67). Edward detaches from his mother and questions her policies by suggesting that the women who are

the most ambitious to govern are not always the most capable of deciding. He hints at the value of two paramount Edgeworthian virtues – education and openness – and at the direct consequences of lying: social and personal unhappiness. Mrs. Beaumont belongs to the list of frustrated mothers in Edgeworth’s fiction. This category includes Lady Delacour (*Belinda*, 1801), Mrs. Falconer (*Patronage*, 1814), Lady Mary Vivian (*Vivian*) and Lady Davenant (*Helen*, 1834). The author had already sketched the type in the unpublished comedy *Whim for Whim* (1798) and later in Lady Delacour, Edgeworth’s most brilliant and unrivalled antiheroine. Mrs. Beaumont’s children have been overprotected so far and look at the world through their mother’s lenses, but the narrator explains that in time they will become independent and then “confidence in the parent must be destroyed forever” (Edgeworth 1893, 3). Mr. Walsingham, the voice of reason, maintains that by being more passionate than rational, Mrs. Beaumont puts a lot of pressure on Edward and Amelia, and, facing her opposition to show Edward’s debts, Mr. Palmer declares:

a youth who finds himself encumbered with debts on coming to his estates is apt to think of freeing himself by marrying a fortune instead of a woman; now instead of freeing a man, this fetters him for life. (*Ibidem*, 107-108)

The Edgeworths wrote extensively on the interdependence of the private and public realm, and their educational concern which was the focus of *Professional Education* (1809) is most visibly revealed here.

Both Kowaleski-Wallace and Bilger argue that the insertion of unconventional female characters in Edgeworth’s works positions her as a feminist writer. For Kowaleski-Wallace, Lady Dashfort is “a force that defies rational mediation” (1991, 104); for Audrey Bilger, she is a female trickster (1998, 108-109). But there is also a narrative detail that cannot be skipped. Edgeworth has been systematically accused of being bluntly didactic. In *Manoeuvring* didacticism is blended with irony in the narrator’s constant parody of Mrs. Beaumont through metaphors related to the theatre which give the reader the clue to the lady’s false proceedings. The narrator coins “a Beaumont” for a lie (Edgeworth 1893, 7) and anticipates that, if she wants to manipulate Sir John Hunter, it would be necessary “to give fresh explanations and instructions to Sir John Hunter, through his sister, with the new parts that he and she were to act in this domestic drama” (*ibidem*, 49). At being discovered by Mr. Palmer, she feels “vexed, that even this transient light had been let in upon her real character” (*ibidem*, 68), and, when she shows Sir John Hunter’s letter to Mr. Palmer, she reveals that she has already realized that there would be a wedding soon since “those who stand by always see more than the players” (*ibidem*, 146). Military vocabulary is also used, so the narrator refers to Mrs. Beaumont’s “whole united plan of operation” (*ibidem*, 59), and she represses her feelings towards the relationship between Miss Hunter and

Edward: “[s]he had drawn up her forces for battle in an order which this unexpectedly decisive moment of the enemy discomfited” (*ibidem*, 23).

From the point of view of narrative technique, *Manoeuvring* contains some memorable scenes, for example when the encounter between Amelia, Mr. Palmer and Mrs. Beaumont is seen from the girl’s point of view:

Knowing every symptom of suppressed emotion in her mother’s countenance, she was quite terrified, by indications which passed unnoticed by Mr. Palmer. As her mother approached, Amelia hid her face in her hands for a moment, but gaining courage from the consciousness of integrity, and from a determination to act openly, she looked up. (*Ibidem*, 110-111)

Once Mrs. Beaumont has been discovered before patriarchy represented by Mr. Palmer, she feels vexed and lacks self-confidence, unlike Lady Susan. The reader has access to Mrs. Beaumont’s psyche through a focalization revealing her apprehensions:

She plainly saw that he now suspected her dislike to the Walsinghams, and her aversion to the double union with that family: she saw that the slightest circumstance in her conduct, which confirmed his suspicions, would not only utterly ruin her in his opinion, but might induce him to alter the part in his will which left her sole possessor of his fortune during her life. Bad as her affairs were at this moment, she knew that they might still be worse. (*Ibidem*, 115)

Austen excelled in showing a character’s interiority, but in Edgeworth’s *Manoeuvring* this type of introspection counteracting didacticism does not abound, so Edgeworth’s approach to femininity and women’s agency in patriarchy is diluted and filtered through the narrator’s ironic discourse instead of being presented in clear-cut terms. Therefore, the female protagonist is referred to as not feminine since she is possessed not only of that “address, which is the peculiar glory of our female politicians, but also of that masculine quality, which the greatest, wisest, of mankind has pronounced to be the first, second, and third requisite for business—Boldness – boldness – boldness” (*ibidem*, 116). The reader finds it difficult to accept that Mrs. Beaumont manipulates her femininity and blackmails her children with the excuse that she loves them and that she self-portrays as a sentimental woman who is ruled by her heart. The lady goes on further to make a distinction between men’s and women’s courtship: “all this is play to you, but death to us” (*ibidem*, 29). The victim of her own deception, Mrs. Beaumont’s feminine vanity prevails when she imagines that she has seduced Sir John. Mrs. Beaumont enjoys her own energetic duplicity, and the style becomes parodically poetic as she feels beloved:

... yet, she was gratified by feeling that she possessed so great a share of those charms which age cannot wither; of that substantial power, to which men do not merely feign in poetical sport to submit, or to which they are

slaves only for a honey-moon, but to which they do homage to the latest hour of life, with unabating, with increasing devotion. (*Ibidem*, 138-139)

At the end of the story poetic justice works, and the legal heiress regains the position that Mrs. Beaumont wanted to usurp. Edgeworth's protagonist sees how all her manoeuvres have finally failed. It is discovered that an English lady who was reported dead, was helped by Captain Walsingham to escape from a Catholic convent and arrive on board with an English packet entitled to the Wigram estate. Mrs. Beaumont, now Lady Hunter, will never become a countess since she has married a liar and a spendthrift: a mistake that the next *intrigante* in this study will not make, though she will be equally frustrated in her dreams of glory.

3. *Knowing the Irish*

Edgeworth's fiction is marked by the Janus-faced nature of Anglo-Irish literature: based on the English tradition, it has developed as distinctively rooted in Ireland. Thus, the Dashforts are related to both the Irish and the English tales within Edgeworth's *oeuvre*, and, in the former, woman is closely related to politics. For Butler, who traced the inspiration of Edgeworth's characters in Irish history, women

have a part in a narrative itself more significantly political than the tales set in England, and because their symbolic roles (again, a feature unique to her writing on Ireland) have to do directly or implicitly with national consciousness. (1992, 50; see also Fernández Rodríguez 2008, 309-319)

Lady Dashfort resembles Geraldine Fitzgerald in *Ennui* in that both in *Ennui* and *The Absentee* the protagonists are fascinated by these illustrators of Ireland. Despite coincidences, Edgeworth's tales differ in two aspects. First, in *Ennui* Geraldine Fitzgerald is not English, but Irish, and her surname is charged with cultural connotations in Ireland (Butler 1992, 43, 50-53; Myers 1995, 6; Hollingworth 1997, 122-147). Secondly, she takes advantage of Lord Glenthorne's lack of first-hand knowledge of Ireland to make him reflect about the manipulation of culture and to warn him about the need to protect the country from foreign corruption (Fernández Rodríguez 2008, 312-313). If in *Ennui* Geraldine introduces the possibility to improve Ireland, in *The Absentee* Lady Dashfort wants to move the country backwards. Regarding the tales set in England, though researchers have associated Mrs. Beaumont with Jane Austen's protagonist in *Lady Susan*, there are reasons not to restrict the scope of analysis. Edith Birkhead points out that both Lady Susan and Mrs. Beaumont use hypocrisy and false virtue to seduce men who become their prey, a con-

duct which was condemned by James Fordyce, and that they also aim to go beyond her gender and behave like a man (1928, 110-111), like Lady Delacour and Harriet Freke in Edgeworth's *Belinda*. However, Mrs. Beaumont is English; she makes many mistakes which bring her closer to Austen's matrons in other novels – for instance, Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*; and, though a liar, she is too clumsy and not as ill-willed as the Dashforts, who are certainly as Machiavellian as Lady Susan.

The Absentee deals with the Clonbronies, a family of Irish absentees who have an extravagant life in London and do not care at all about their estates in Ireland. The Clonbronies are not aware that the people around find them ridiculous and really despise them. Only Lord Colambre, the English-educated heir, realises that his father is indebted and his mother is laughed at by high-class ladies. The tale also includes Lord Colambre's love story with his cousin, Grace Nugent, who is associated with Irish Catholicism and national consciousness. In spite of the suspicions of her illegitimacy, Grace finally gets married to Lord Colambre. The hero decides to travel to Ireland incognito and observes the state of the Clonbronies' affairs. Eventually, the agents' proceedings are brought to light and Lord Colambre achieves his parents' return to Ireland.

From the linguistic point of view, Edgeworth displaces many traits of the narrator's discourse in *Manoeuvring* to Lady Dashfort herself. Her worldliness is expressed through the French expressions, clichés and proverbs that she uses to show her wit all the time. No wonder that in the review of *The Quarterly Review* Lady Dashfort was called an amazon and her daughter Isabel a siren (Croker 1812, 339), and that *The Edinburgh Review* praised the former as a character (Jeffrey 1812, 114). Edgeworth mixes economic vocabulary with a mythological or supernatural aura. If Lady Isabel looks like a siren to Colambre, her mother is assimilated to a witch or a being who is able to reveal more than anybody else about Ireland. Mrs. Beaumont's plainness evolves to magnetic attraction in *The Absentee*, and Lord Colambre is as enticed by Lady Dashfort as Reginald is by Lady Susan, so Edgeworth's second manoeuvrer soon begins to manipulate the hero who even finds her conversation pleasing, "and though he could never esteem or feel in the least interested about her, he began to allow that she could be agreeable" (Edgeworth 1994, 140). Not coincidentally Edgeworth's ideal of masculinity has been branded the "bourgeois aristocrat" (Beesemyer 1999, 87) and Megan A. Woodworth distinguishes between Austen who confined her hero to the aristocracy, and Edgeworth who believes in professionalisation and the improvement of the land (2011). Like Mrs. Beaumont, Lady Dashfort is directly introduced by Captain Bowles and Sir James Brooke's conversation when they see her barouche. The Dashforts represent English conquerors of the least desirable kind as Julian Moynahan points out: "Isabel and her mother are a very old type indeed, for English rogues and adventurers had found

Ireland fair game from the earliest years of the Conquest” (1995, 36), and both Lady Dashfort’s detachment from Ireland and her eagerness to steal the country from her riches are clearly stated. Lord Colambre is also warned about Lady Dashfort’s malignity. If she sets her heart on him, he will be helpless, and her ill-will is known everywhere:

I would rather see all the toads and serpents, and venomous reptiles, that St. Patrick carried off in his bag, come back to this island, than these two *dashers*. Why, they would bite half the women and girls in the kingdom with the rage for mischief, before half the husbands and fathers could turn their heads about. And, once bit, there’s no cure in nature or art. (Edgeworth 1994, 134)

More specifically, Sir James Brooke points out that the Dashforts would enjoy making Lord Colambre break his engagement and breaking Grace Nugent’s heart and that both ladies know men’s weakness: “there’s a way to every man’s heart, which no man in his own case is aware of, but which every woman knows right well, and none better than these ladies—by his vanity” (*ibidem*, 136).

The Dashforts are simultaneously respected and rejected in Ireland. On the one hand, they set the fashion and represent a model to imitate: “The bon-mots of the mother were everywhere repeated; the dress and air of the daughter everywhere imitated” (*ibidem*, 140). On the other hand, the Irish cannot accept that they imagine themselves above the thunder of vulgar censure. Like Edgeworth herself, Lady Dashfort loves imitating people and boasts of mastering fourteen different brogues. The comic denigration of Irish speech is reprehensible and part of Lady Dashfort’s lack of moral principle, which is reinforced with her pretension: “I know them [the Irish]; I have the key, or the picklock to their minds” (*ibidem*, 142). A mixture between a politician and a witch, Lady Dashfort declares that she can control the Irish: “Her rank was so high that none could dare to call her vulgar; what would have been ... ‘Now see what follies I can lead these fools into. Hear the nonsense I can make them repeat as wit’ ” (*ibidem*, 140). She symbolizes English superiority and arrogance, somebody who stands for an imperialistic project and for standardization, and an attitude that Edgeworth always condemned (Fernández Rodríguez 2013a, 2013b). According to Lady Dashfort, the Irish are barbarians and those unwilling to accept rules should step aside: “are not we the civilized English, come to teach them manners and fashions? Whoever does not conform, and swear allegiance too, we shall keep out of the English pale?” (Edgeworth 1994, 140). She is such a manipulator of Ireland that the “squireens” are portrayed to Lord Colambre as stupid and the Kirkpatricks represent an “old uneducated Irish race whom no one can help, because they will never help themselves” (*ibidem*, 147). Her prepossession and cold blood

reach the point that she prides herself of her social role. On a visit to some Irish cabins with Lord Colambre, Lady Dashfort carefully selects a certain image of Ireland:

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. (*Ibidem*)

Contrary to Lady Dashforts' expectations, her misrepresentations arouse Lord Colambre's interest in his country. Blackmailing the hero becomes part of Lady Dashfort's strategy, so she tells a friend: "I delight in seeing people begin with me as they do with olives, making all manner of horrid faces and silly protestations that they will never touch an olive again as long as they live" (*ibidem*, 141).

Some of Lady Dashfort's statements may be seen as feminist manifestoes, but the idea that governs her is too simple and just a reformulation of Mrs. Beaumont's impression that courtship is a game for men and a serious issue for women: "women have not always the liberty of choice, and therefore they can't be expected to have always the power of refusal" (*ibidem*, 261). Those who know her are aware that her wit depends merely on unexpectedness and that it cannot be associated with a lady. According to Lady Dashfort, a woman with no character is useless: "... sweetness cloy. You never heard of anybody living on marmalade, do you?" (*ibidem*, 141).

Lady Dashfort and Isabel resemble each other and are never individualized, as it happens in Austen's novella. The former wants to make Lord Colambre hate his country and marry Lady Isabel, who is a widow now. Lady Dashfort dominates her daughter and makes sure that Lady Isabel does not come to their Irish tour. Instead of an individual with a mind of herself, Lady Isabel is instrumental to Lady Dashfort. Her entrance at Mrs. Raffarty's creates sensation and increases the contrast between the mother's masculine boldness and the daughter's soft sentimentality. Lady Isabel is not given a voice, but she disapproves of her mother's manners and is embarrassed by Lady Dashfort's efforts "to drag her forward, and to fix upon her the attention of gentlemen" (*ibidem*, 138). Feeling entitled to do as she pleases with her daughter, the mother does her utmost to attract the attention of those present to Lady Isabel. The narrator mockingly adds that Lady Isabel suffered exquisitely and naturally this "persecution" (*ibidem*) since the Dashforts act according to a plot. The mother's strategy consists, once more, in persuasion, and, when her manoeuvres fail, she tells her daughter to settle her mind to marry loathsome Heathcock, the heir to a large estate.

By making the Irish and Ireland ridiculous and contemptible to Lord Colambre, Lady Dashfort wants to turn the gentleman into an absentee prior to her ultimate plan of marrying him to her daughter. Unfortunately, and like Mrs. Beaumont, Lady Dashfort and her daughter reveal their true selves when they sanction immoral behavior. Lady Dashfort does not condemn that an official introduces his lover as his wife while Lord Colambre disapproves of that attitude. Lady Isabel also makes a mistake and explains to another lady that she only flirted with a gentleman to plague his wife and “to purchase the pleasure of making her feel the pangs of jealousy for one hour, look, I would this moment lay down this finger and let it be cut off” (*ibidem*, 161). Therefore, Lord Colambre changes his view of Lady Isabel and sees “the beauty of a fiend” (*ibidem*). Intrigued by Lady Dashfort’s spiteful remarks on Grace’s illegitimacy, he writes to his mother, who promptly confirms that Miss St. Omer had an affair with Captain Reynolds, and that she brought an infant to England with her before she remarried Nugent who adopted the child. Lord Colambre is drowned in a sea of doubts until he discovers that Captain Reynolds and Grace’s mother were privately married. Though old Reynolds acknowledged the marriage in his deathbed, Lady Dashfort manoeuvred, so that the marriage certificate was not brought to light.

Lady Dashfort’s ambition is centered on the Reynolds’ properties, and, when she wants Lady Isabel to marry Heathcock, another problem appears since Grace Nugent’s legitimacy takes place shortly before the wedding. Afraid that the gentleman might “be off!” (*ibidem*, 259), Lady Dashfort asks Sir James and Lord Colambre to shut up about old Reynolds or “the best part of his bride (her fortune, her *expectations*) [would be] lowered in value or in prospect” (*ibidem*, 260). Lady Dashfort also confesses to the hero: “I know your thoughts, and I could moralise as well as you, if I did not prefer laughing—you are right enough; and so am I, and so is Isabel; we are all right” (*ibidem*, 261). Just as it happens to Mrs. Beaumont, Lady Dashfort’s dreams of glory dwindle to domestic bitterness and invisibility. Edgeworth rounds off her tale with a piece of moral advice in a man’s mouth, so, when the Dashforts are gone, Sir James expresses his indignation and antipathy

to those who return the hospitality they received from a warm-hearted people, by publicly setting the example of elegant sentimental hypocrisy, or daring disregard of decorum, by privately endeavouring to destroy the domestic peace of families, on which, at last, public as well as private virtue and happiness depend. (*Ibidem*, 262)

Opposing Edgeworth, Austen introduces a fascinating portrait of the *intrigante* and places Lady Susan in such a position in the story that she still constitutes one of Austen’s most complex and challenging female characters.

4. *Jane Austen's Cruising Shark*

Lady Susan has never been a favourite of Austen scholars. It has been comparatively less analyzed than other works, and even landmark feminist critics, such as Claudia Johnson (1988) and Margaret Kirkham (1997) have not dealt with it. Since the novel was posthumously published in 1871, scholars have been equally divided on whether to condemn Lady Susan's conduct or to praise her as an example of woman's liberation from patriarchy. In the first case, it was stated that it was "most probable that Miss Austen would have refused to publish, even if desired, so cold a picture, above all of a woman and a mother" (Johnson 1927, 110), and R.H. Hutton already described Lady Susan as "feline-velvet-pawed, cruel, false [and] licentious" (1871, 891). Supporters of Lady Susan have more recently focused on woman's dominion in the novel: Austen's protagonist "allows herself to expose her longing for what neither she nor any narrator can ever have: absolute love and trust, absolute credibility based not on how well she makes her case but on faith beyond reason" (Wallace 1995, 11). Austen depicts a young widow, Lady Susan Vernon, who becomes an uncomfortable guest at her brother and sister-in-law's residence at Churchill. The character was inspired on Austen's cousin, Eliza de Feuillide (1761-1813), who became Comtesse de Feuillide after her marriage to a wealthy French Army Captain, Jean-François Capot de Feuillide. Eliza came back to England with her mother in 1790, after the beginning of the French Revolution. Her husband, who was loyal to the French monarchy, was arrested for conspiracy against the Republic and guillotined in 1794. An incurable flirt in London, Eliza participated in the theatricals at Steventon and formed a close relation with Austen, and especially with her brother Henry, whom she married in 1797. In the literary tradition, Lady Susan is also related to the unscrupulous widow in Restoration drama and the works of playwrights like William Wycherley, George Etherege, William Congreve, Eliza Haywood, Delarivier Manly and Aphra Behn (Austen 2008, li-liv; *Southam* 1964, 147).

In *Lady Susan*, the family becomes a metonymy of the state and country life is peaceful at Churchill until the arrival of an unwelcomed visitor is announced, as it happens in Edgeworth's tales. Though Catherine has been sufficiently cautioned against Lady Susan's pernicious influence by Reginald himself, the widow finally manages to engage the gentleman's affection. According to Mr. De Courcy, Reginald's father, Lady Susan's danger is comparable to a contagious disease:

the most accomplished coquette in England ... she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable. (2008, 8)

Reginald gives Catherine details of Lady Susan's abhorrent behaviour at Langford, and then Mr. Smith accuses her "of having made Mr. Manwaring & a young Man engaged to Miss Manwaring distractedly in love with her" (*ibidem*, 20). Nevertheless, Reginald soon condones her conduct and attributes Lady Susan's faults to her neglected education and early marriage: "Her power over him must now be boundless, as she has entirely effaced all his former ill-opinion, and persuaded him not merely to forget but to justify her *conduct*" (*ibidem*). Austen's character proves to be a mistress of persuasion seconded by her looks, but she is morally far from the Angel in the House of nineteenth-century literature. Though she is not very young, she still preserves her beauty and possesses "an uncommon union of Symmetry, Brilliancy and Grace" (*ibidem*, 11). No matter how insistently Sir Reginald warns his son against Lady Susan's neglect of her husband, her encouragement of other men, her extravagance and dissipation; he cannot fight against his son's devotion to Lady Susan. A new character is born in Reginald's imagination; Lady Susan features as the perfect mother and a male-created fantasy:

Her prudence & economy are exemplary, her regard for Mr. Vernon equal even to *his* deserts; & her wish of obtaining my sister's good opinion merits a better return than it has received. As a Mother she is unexceptionable; her solid affection for her Child is shown by placing her in hands where her Education will be properly attended to; but because she has not the blind & weak partiality of most Mothers, she is accused of wanting Maternal Tenderness. Every person of Sense, however, will know how to value & commend her well-directed affection, & will join me in wishing that Frederica Vernon may prove more worthy than she has yet done of her Mother's tender care. (*ibidem*, 26-27)

Lady Susan's goals are as ambitious as the fascination of her person. Apart from the desire to marry off well, Lady Susan's actions are motivated by revenge, which does not exist in neither of Edgeworth's characters. Though after her husband's death, she has little money of her own, Lady Susan gives the impression of being rich to be socially accepted. For Susan Allen Ford (2005), Lady Susan explores the business and politics of the personal and Austen is interested in the economic and social conditions to which women are subject. On the one hand, she has a socioeconomic goal since Lady Susan and her husband had to sell Vernon Castle when Charles was going to marry Miss De Courcy and Lady Susan could not endure "that [her] Husband's Dignity should be lessened by his younger brother's having possession of the Family Estate" (Austen 2008, 10). By interfering in the sale, Lady Susan deprived Charles Vernon's young son of his birthright (Barchas 2012, 48-49). On the other hand, Lady Susan's aristocratic libertinism reminds Madame de Merteuil in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Colleen A. Sheehan maintains that "[i]n the character

of Lady Susan, Austen develops the themes of sexual exploitation and the moral subversion of society, mirroring the stratagems and objectives of Laclos's characters, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil" (2004; see also Soya 2003). Other critics have focused on the reader: Lady Susan's strength lies in her uncontradicted contempt for a mediocre world which is inwardly the subject of an undisguised scorn to which the reader cannot oppose, so (s)he admired Lady Susan's courage, wit and dash (Gard 1994, 35-36). Finally, LeRoy W. Smith calls Lady Susan a "cruising shark" and states that, by assuming male values and denigrating femaleness, she attempts to turn masculine morality to her own advantage and to acquire the sexual and social power that it embodies. If she becomes masculine, it is because she needs to survive and succeed (1983, 52-53). A sexual predator who celebrates her sexuality, Lady Susan has no limits; she is an adventuress eager to humiliate Reginald and Catherine, as she reveals to her correspondent and confidante Mrs. Alicia Johnson:

I have made him sensible of my power, & can now enjoy the pleasure of triumphing over a Mind prepared to dislike me, & prejudiced against all my past actions ... I see plainly that she [his sister] is uneasy at my progress in the good opinion of her Brother, & conclude that nothing will be wanting on her part to counteract me;—but having once made him doubt the justice of her opinion of me, I think I may defy her. (Austen 2008, 18)

Aware that Mr. De Courcy would definitely prefer a woman of fortune as his daughter-in-law, Lady Susan blackmails Reginald by claiming to custom and respect: she argues that she does not want to divide a son from his parents and that she will have to face the indelicacy of so early a second marriage. Reginald realizes her personality much later, when Mr. Manwaring's wife arrives at Churchill in pursuit of her husband, who has visited Lady Susan in London and has been watched at her door. This suffices to say farewell to a woman incapable to feel real love:

the spell is removed ... You know how I have loved you; you can intimately judge of my present feelings, but I am not so weak as to find indulgence in describing them to a woman who will glory in having excited their anguish, but whose affection they have never been able to gain. (*Ibidem*, 68)

By never acknowledging defeat, Lady Susan rules over her emotions and is the manipulator of a very peculiar set, with the enemy on her side. In fact, Michael Kramp puts some blame on the males in *Lady Susan*: they lack intelligence and social stability. Charles is dominated by his wife and Reginald scarcely knows his own mind (Kramp 2018, 69-71). Austen's and Edgeworth's works expose the crisis of patriarchy at turn of the nineteenth century: parental authority does not count and, to give effect to their wishes, women manipulate men or each other.

There are two arguments to condemn Lady Susan's behavior and one is her sexual freedom. Still, at the same time that certain attitudes would be unacceptable for early nineteenth-century readers, there is a feminist interpretation of *Lady Susan*, according to which the protagonist can be seen as a victim of the Vernons. For Mary Poovey, Catherine understands Lady Susan's art and matches it with machinations of her own (1984, 29). Catherine hates her and Lady Susan hates Churchill because she realizes that she is surrounded by enemies. Reginald does not take Lady Susan seriously: for him, she just wants to "enjoy for a short time" (Austen 2008, 25). The novella exposes the two fatal paradoxes of female conduct. A woman cannot behave as she feels and cannot say what she feels. For Mary Poovey, propriety demands indirection and thus effectively distorts the desires it seemed to accommodate. Desire is driven into artful wiles and stratagems that are socially destructive and personally debilitating: "to acknowledge feeling is to court isolation and the hollow victory of having successfully repressed desire" (*ibidem*, 177). Lady Susan is aware of her sexuality, which was a taboo in pre-Victorian England. A very sexual woman, she prefers "the tender & liberal spirit of Manwaring" (*ibidem*, 30) to Reginald. She also describes "the real pleasure his sight afforded me" (*ibidem*, 63) and contrasts Manwaring with Reginald to the disadvantage of the latter. In Austen's work, women are irremissibly condemned by a patriarchal order that sees the perfect woman as a being completely deprived of sexual desire.

In *Manoeuvring* and *The Absentee* the irony and detachment of third person narrator helps Edgeworth to disassociate from the female characters while in *Lady Susan* the epistolary technique is preferred and constitutes one of Austen's greatest achievements. There would be no story without Mrs. Johnson; Lady Susan needs her to chronicle her movements and motivations, and, though Alicia cautions her on the danger of her proceeding, Lady Susan's resolution continues unabated. Proud of her eloquence and of her proficiency in *politesse*, Lady Susan is also aware of the social power of her words: "Consideration & Esteem as surely follow command of Language, as Admiration waits on Beauty" (*ibidem*, 30). Mary Waldron – who maintains that Austen never wanted to overturn traditional moral conventions and mocked trendy radical ideas – argues that *Lady Susan* is the key to understand why Austen abandoned the composition of her novella *Catherine* (c. 1792): she realized the great possibilities of free indirect speech for the manipulation of the reader's attention and allegiances (1999, 25). On the contrary, Deborah Kaplan sees the suitability of epistolarity since both *Lady Susan* and *The Watsons* (1871) dismantle the comic courtship plot and render female alliances more important than heterosexual relationships. Kaplan considers epistolarity as central in Austen's reversal because it is a politically effective form and it is interpreted as implying some resentment towards women's depend-

ence on men (1992, 157, 166). Thus Austen left the epistolary form and for some reason turned to the third person narrator after the parenthesis of *Lady Susan*.

As we will see, the relationship with the daughter in *Lady Susan* is much more problematic than in Edgeworth's *The Absentee*. For critics, Lady Susan's despise for maternity is the second objection to her as a woman. According to Barbara J. Horwitz, in *Lady Susan* Austen could be parodying eighteenth-century educational manuals popularized by John Gregory, Jane West and Hannah More (1987, 84). Frederica refused Sir James, and Lady Susan cannot forgive her most immediate blood relations: "Frederica, who was born to be the torment of my life, chose to set herself so violently against the match that I thought it better to lay aside the scheme for the present" (Austen 2008, 5). Catherine has been called the "detector" of the pretensions of Lady Susan because she transcends her adversary in level of perception and the disparity between appearance and reality is pointed out by Lady Susan's sister-in-law by featuring Frederica as a shy and unhappy girl:

I never saw a face less indicative of any evil disposition than her's ... I am led to believe as heretofore that the former [Lady Susan] has no real Love for her daughter, & has never done her justice or treated her affectionately. (*Ibidem*, 32)

Hurting Frederica is useless according to Catherine because that means abusing of a daughter. Mother and daughter begin to compete for Reginald's affection and Lady Susan's indignation arises since she considers Frederica's affection as improper and offensive to her:

Where [is] the resentment which true Love would have dictated against the person defaming me—that person, too, a Chit, a Child, without Talent or Education, whom he had been always taught to despise? (*Ibidem*, 44)

The type of anxiety that Lady Susan feels for Frederica is not related to parental affection. The girl is brought up by strangers, either in boarding schools or with governesses, as many girls of the upper class (see Poovey 1984, 177). Lady Susan neither believes in education: "it is throwing time away" (Austen 2008, 13), so Frederica only learns the necessary accomplishments to make her a marriageable daughter: "to be Mistress of French, Italian, German, Music, Singing, Drawing &c. will gain a Woman some applause, but will not add one Lover to her list" (*ibidem*). Seduction is more useful to women and in *Lady Susan* mothers become sexual exploiters who usurp the patriarchal position and want to decide their daughters' fate. Lady Susan censors Frederica's feelings because she affords "the most reasonable hope of her being ridiculed and despised by every Man who sees her"

(*ibidem*, 19). Facing this point of view is Catherine's. Lady Susan's sister-in-law thinks that Frederica cannot be sacrificed. In opposition to Amelia and Lady Isabel, the girl expresses her fears in writing, and she would prefer the social degradation of becoming a working woman to marry Sir James. Finally, the Vernons place Frederica under their care and Lady Susan marries Sir James three weeks after that. A third-person narrator unexpectedly takes the reins of the story at the end and leaves the narrative open both regarding Frederica's relationship with Reginald and Lady Susan's own happiness:

Whether Lady Susan was or was not happy in her second Choice — I do not see how it can ever be ascertained; for who would take her assurance of it on either side of the question? — The World must judge from Probabilities; she had nothing against her, but her Husband & her Conscience. (*Ibidem*, 77)

5. Conclusion

Both Lady Susan and Lady Dashfort destroy the patriarchal family and domestic stability, and the differences between Austen's and Edgeworth's manoeuvres confirm individual merit. Austen saw the comic potentialities of Mrs. Beaumont and created a very personal version of the *intrigante* by choosing the epistolary novel with multiple correspondents. At the same time that Austen was perfecting Edgeworth's character, the Anglo-Irish writer was engendering a widow inspired on Mrs. Beaumont and curiously resembling Austen's Lady Susan. Edgeworth's intellectual depth does not appear in *Lady Susan*, neither her concern with education and professional life. In *Manoeuvring* Edgeworth wants to show how family life is affected by the *intrigante's* actions; in *The Absentee* she focuses on her effects on a love relationship which Austen retakes in *Lady Susan*.

Behind their fascinating looks, the three ladies are extremely selfish. They simply try to make a success out of a failure by getting married to less appealing suitors. Mrs. Beaumont, Lady Susan and Lady Dashfort aim to maintain and improve their social position no matter whom or what they have to sacrifice. They face the criticism of male characters who voice patriarchal opinion and warn the male protagonists against the ladies' malignity. Due to Edgeworth's educational vein, the hero in *The Absentee* is a *deus absconditus* who sees events with a certain detachment: he experiences a *bildung* to maturity while Austen's male protagonist simply cannot forgive Lady Susan's duplicity and immediately puts an end to the relationship.

Though all these ladies victimize their daughters, there is another significant divergence regarding Austen. Lady Susan has no male obstacles

to her plans while Mrs. Beaumont has two children and his son sees her through. Mother and daughter are not seen as independent in Edgeworth, and Austen depicts Frederica's suffering in the hands of her mother, which will become prominent in Edgeworth's *Helen*. In Edgeworth, Lady Isabel is her mother's accomplice, but poetic justice works and the reward that the former gets is unappealing. However, Frederica rebels against Lady Susan, who blackmails, mistreats and undervalues her daughter because she does not know her. Lady Susan is in all regards a woman of pleasure, far from Edgeworth's more conservative fiction.

Austen and Edgeworth handle the ending of these *intrigantes* differently. In Edgeworth's there is an evolution from Mrs. Beaumont, who is mocked by the narrative voice openly, to Lady Dashfort, who is just a secondary character and an obstacle to Lord Colambre's happiness. Austen depicts a female protagonist who is free and more independent than Edgeworth's because the epistolary form of *Lady Susan* does not allow for preaching, not even for parody. In *Lady Susan* the English author is far from the patriarchal tutelage that is represented in Edgeworth through irony, though Austen obviously discovered the enormous potential of irony to erode patriarchy thanks to Edgeworth, a point which cannot be skipped in a study of the Anglo-Irish author's feminism. Austen knew what she wanted to avoid from Edgeworth's tales and *Lady Susan* certainly tracks Austen's progress to her subsequent masterpieces. She presents an admirably resolute, elegant and beautiful protagonist and takes that protagonist more seriously than Edgeworth, which allows for a feminist reading with an exception: Lady Susan's subversion makes no allowances for a daughter who becomes her rival, which cannot be approved by nineteenth-century society, as Austen knew. Edgeworth's greatness consists in giving her manoeuvrer a political meaning which is intimately linked to Ireland and the Irish while Austen restricts the *intrigante's* movements to the private realm and masterfully leaves her fate open to the reader's judgment.

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EDUCATION AND HERITAGE

MARIA EDGEWORTH:
CONVERSATIONS IN THE
“NEW WORLD” OF CHILDREN

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Abstract:

The “new world” of children in the latter part of the eighteenth century is often understood as an element in the “birth of a consumer society”. Maria Edgeworth’s most distinctive contributions to the development of children’s literature are her creation of credible child protagonists with distinctive voices, and the way in which she allows her child protagonists to grow. While reading is prominent in Edgeworth’s writings for children, and books are ubiquitous and significant throughout her fiction, her “new world” of children is not fundamentally a world of things. Rather, it is as a world of conversation in which adults listen to children, and juvenile readers hear their peers speak. Edgeworth minimizes the commercial aspects of her publications for children by presenting them as an extension of a domestic sphere.

Keywords: books, children, consumerism, education, Maria Edgeworth, toys

It was the historian J.H. Plumb who first described what he called a “New World” of children in eighteenth century England. While Plumb considered some of the fundamental changes that brought this world into being – among them improvements in life expectancy and changing attitudes to human nature – his primary interest was on the general commercialization of eighteenth-century England and the birth of a consumer society, and so he focused on the proliferation of educational establishments and the books and toys designed specifically for children which became, over the course of the century, increasingly available. In the thirty odd years since Plumb published his essay our knowledge of this “new world” has been greatly amplified. In the academy Children’s Literature has emerged as a distinct field of study. In addition, scholars of the late-eighteenth century have increased appreciation of the considerable importance of women writers as innovators in the period when books for

children and young people were first produced¹. In this group of women writers Maria Edgeworth is a prominent figure. Edgeworth was an educationalist as well as a writer of fiction and her stories for children are full of books and thematically concerned with reading in a detailed and particular way. Most of the action of her fiction for children takes place in the exemplary space of the home and its environs. We learn what child characters are thinking in the many conversations between children and adults that are given an important place – as are conversations between children. The innovative representation of children’s voices in fiction is a significant part of Edgeworth’s achievement. While Edgeworth was a very successful commercial writer for children, her works also tended to minimize the book as commercial object, instead representing her publications as an extension of family life and the domestic sphere.

Books about children, written for children, appear first in English in the later eighteenth century. In a preface he wrote for his daughter’s *Continuation of Early Lessons in Two Volumes* (1814), Richard Lovell Edgeworth, recalled as the only reading material specifically written for children when he was a boy “Newbery’s little books and Mrs. Teachum” (Edgeworth, vol. I, xiii). John Newbery, the publisher to whom Richard Lovell Edgeworth refers, is commonly credited with producing the first book specifically designed for children: *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly* (1744), initially sold with a ball for boys and a pincushion for girls. Newbery went on to publish an extensive, varied, and successful list of children’s books. Edgeworth’s second reference, to Mrs. Teachum, is to the schoolmistress in Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess or the Little Female Academy* (1749). As its title suggests, Fielding’s novel is set in a school for girls, and built around the stories the young girls tell each other of their lives and experiences. By the early-nineteenth century and in contrast to the limited resources of Richard Lovell’s own childhood, every year now saw “something new, and something good, for the supply of juvenile libraries”. Moreover, even given such plenty, there was “still an increasing demand” (Edgeworth 1814, vol. I, xiii).

Maria Edgeworth wrote extensively for both adults as well as children, and is known especially for the several novels, beginning with *Castle Rackrent* (1801), with Irish settings. Her career as a writer of works for children began in 1796 with *The Parent’s Assistant, or stories for children*. Her publications for children span over three decades, these works being regularly reprinted in her own lifetime, and enjoying considerable popularity to the end of the nineteenth century. A significant, and novel,

¹ On the late-eighteenth century emergence of children’s literature see Grenby 2011; on the particular prominence of women writers see Myers 1986, 1989; Clarke 1997; Paul 2011.

feature of Edgeworth's writing for children is that her best-known child characters – Harry, Lucy, Rosamond, and Frank – each appeared in several works that were published decades apart. Harry and Lucy are five and six respectively in *Early Lessons* (1801); 24 years later, when their adventures conclude, they are eight and nine. When we first meet Frank he is six. In the final work in which he appears, *Frank: A Sequel* (1822), he is eleven and about to set off to boarding school. Rosamond, who appears first in *The Parent's Assistant*, is seven in that work; when *Rosamond: A Sequel to Early Lessons* (1821) begins she is eleven, and the book takes her to age fourteen, an age when "girls are considered neither quite as children, nor quite as women" (vol. I, 74).

Of the four child protagonists, Frank and Rosamond are more developed fictional characters, and not just because we accompany them to the cusp of adolescence. As Mitzi Myers and other scholars have emphasized, Rosamond – impetuous, affectionate, quick-witted, and responsive to beauty – is Edgeworth's most credible and attractive child character (Myers 1988). She is also the most autobiographical character to appear in all of Edgeworth's fiction, even including the writer's many novels for adult readers. The stories involving Harry and Lucy are rather different. Begun in the 1770's by Edgeworth's father and his second wife Honora, the series was "the very first attempt to give any correct elementary knowledge or taste for science in a narrative suited to the comprehension of children" (Edgeworth 1825, vol. I, viii). Fundamentally concerned with imparting knowledge about mechanical processes and the physical world, these stories are less concerned with character and plot².

Not written *for* children but directly concerned with them and articulating many of the ideas and attitudes that find expression in Maria Edgeworth's fiction is *Practical Education*, a work she co-authored with her father and published in 1798. The Edgeworth family was a large one: in all, Richard Lovell Edgeworth had 22 children, the majority of whom received most of their education at home. In presenting *Practical Education* to their readers, the Edgeworths described it as a contribution to "experimental science"; its claims to authority as an educational treatise derived from the authors' observations of the daily, domestic lives of the family. Their work as educators went beyond the home to include the foundation of a school for their tenants and was, along with the reforming landlordism of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, part of an extensive enlightenment programme of

² Maria Edgeworth collaborated with her father on later Harry and Lucy stories, and continued the series after his death, but that Richard Lovell Edgeworth was the dominant force is indicated by Maria's correspondence: "about 101 pages of scientific matter was left to me by my father to make into a new volume of Harry and Lucy" (Pakenham 2018, 169).

improvement, in which, as Tom Dunne has argued, the estate itself became a “moral school” (1991, 95)³.

Just as educational theory should be derived from observation of real children, so also should any stories or books produced for child readers be based on observation and knowledge of their lives. Addressing parents in a preface he wrote for his daughter’s *The Parent’s Assistant*, Richard Lovell Edgeworth acknowledged that while it might seem a “very easy task” to write for children this was emphatically not the case:

Those only who have been interested in the education of a family, who have patiently followed children through the first processes of reasoning, who have daily watched over their thoughts and feelings: those only, who know with what ease and rapidity the early associations of ideas are formed, on which the future taste, character, and happiness depend, can feel the dangers and difficulties of such an undertaking. (Edgeworth 1796, iv)

The Edgeworths advanced a mode of education based on optimistic and rational views of childhood and of human nature. Deeply embedded in *Practical Education* is the belief that human vice is not innate but rather the product of a false education. Human beings are essentially malleable, to be shaped for good or ill: “Falsehood, caprice, obstinacy, revenge, and all the train of vices... are the consequences of mistake or neglected education” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, vol. I, 323). These beliefs might place considerable demands on adults responsible for the young during that period when “future taste, character, and happiness” were formed, but, in attempting to provide a good education, such adults should always be guided by the children in their care, and by the pupil’s own inclinations and curiosity. Rejecting corporal punishment and rote learning, the Edgeworths emphasised that learning should be enjoyable, and “the child is always the best judge of what is suited to his present capacity” (*ibidem*, vol. I, 343). The process of education began in the child’s observation of what was going on around him or her, either in the home or in its environs. Observation stimulated a child’s curiosity, and this curiosity could be channelled, and a thirst for knowledge directed, through conversation and dialogue either with adults or with older children: “We have found from experience, that an early knowledge of the first principles of science may be given in conversation, and may be insensibly acquired from the usual incidents of life” (*ibidem*, vol. I, vi). Conversation, often between parents and children, but also between siblings, is prominent in Edgeworth’s fiction. Edgeworth’s “fascination with actual children’s voices” was the basis for one of her most significant contributions to a “new world” of

³ For a critical view of the educational ideology of the Edgeworths in a colonial context see Deane 1999.

children in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries: in her fiction we hear the voices of children as they express curiosity, bewilderment, likes, dislikes, and judgements (Myers 1994, 60).

The many and assorted books for children that Maria Edgeworth produced contributed substantially to a new world of commodities, but consumerism, especially where children were concerned, could also occasion adverse criticism in her writings. *Practical Education* included chapters devoted to material objects such as toys and books, as well as on personal qualities including sympathy and obedience, and on different areas of knowledge, for example, chemistry, and geometry. Significantly, the increased consumerism of late-eighteenth century society is an early topic of consideration, with the very first chapter offering a robust rejection of the fashionable toys with which genteel late eighteenth-century children were increasingly provided. The glaring colours and gilding of such toys might please a child briefly but, once admired, expensive baby houses and coaches and six –miniaturized versions of adult objects of display–offered little further amusement and became a pile of useless lumber. Rather, children required toys that exercised “their senses or their imagination, their imitative, and inventive powers” (*ibidem*, vol. I, 2)⁴. Edgeworth’s fiction for children abounds with objects that children touch, explore, and deploy. Construction is a particularly favourite occupation, with Frank and his companion Mary making a brick replica of Kenilworth Castle indoors and reconstructing Robinson Crusoe’s bower in the garden (Edgeworth 1822, vol. I, 1-6; vol. I, 52-53). Many episodes in the fiction do involve children’s fascination with material objects and the desire to possess and use them. Frank is very keen to handle a telescope being used by an engineer visiting the family home (*ibidem*, vol. I, 269-272); Godfrey is “seized with an ardent desire” to own a microscope of his own and agrees to take on tasks assigned by his father in order to acquire it (Edgeworth 1814, vol. II, 96); and Rosamond is mad with impatience to view the objects in an India cabinet of curiosities, including corals, a nautilus shell, and a stuffed humming bird (*ibidem*, vol. I, 229-230). Notably, the things Edgeworth’s fictional children most wish to enjoy, and those which give them most pleasure, are not toys specifically fabricated for them, but instruments and curiosities. In one of the *Moral Tales for Young People* (1802), Madame Rosier, an enlightened and sensible French gentlewoman in exile, obliged to earn her living as a governess, takes her new charges to a “rational toy-shop” (vol. I, 18). Although the children are initially disappointed not to find the dolls and coaches that they expect,

⁴ The “first hint” for the chapter on toys came from the scientist and physician Thomas Beddoes, who during the 1790’s developed plans for the manufacture of rational toys. He married Maria Edgeworth’s sister Anna in 1796. As Teresa Michals discusses, some of the manufactured toys available in this period, such as microscopes and construction kits, were not simply decorative but were in fact marketed on pedagogic grounds (2008).

they gradually become attracted to items such as looms and basket-making equipment and go home happy with their new possessions. In fact, it is one of the “rational toys” chosen on this visit that leads directly to the story’s happy resolution. A microscope catches the eye of the youngest girl. Subsequently, this useful object allows for the deciphering of a signature, the discovery of which eventually leads to the Madame Rosier’s reunion with her son.

In contrast to the reservations the Edgeworths expressed about commercial toys, the discussion in *Practical Education* of books published specifically for children is generally positive, consisting mainly of recommendations. Leading the list of approved books are those of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, whose *Lessons for Children* first appeared in 1778-1779: “The first books which are now usually put into the hands of a child are Mrs. Barbauld’s Lessons; they are by far the best books of the kind that have ever appeared” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, vol. I, 317). Not by chance did the Edgeworths draw attention to the act of placing Barbauld’s books in the hands of children. Intended for children aged 2-3, the volumes were very deliberately designed to fit into small hands, being little squares of 10x10cm [Figure 1].

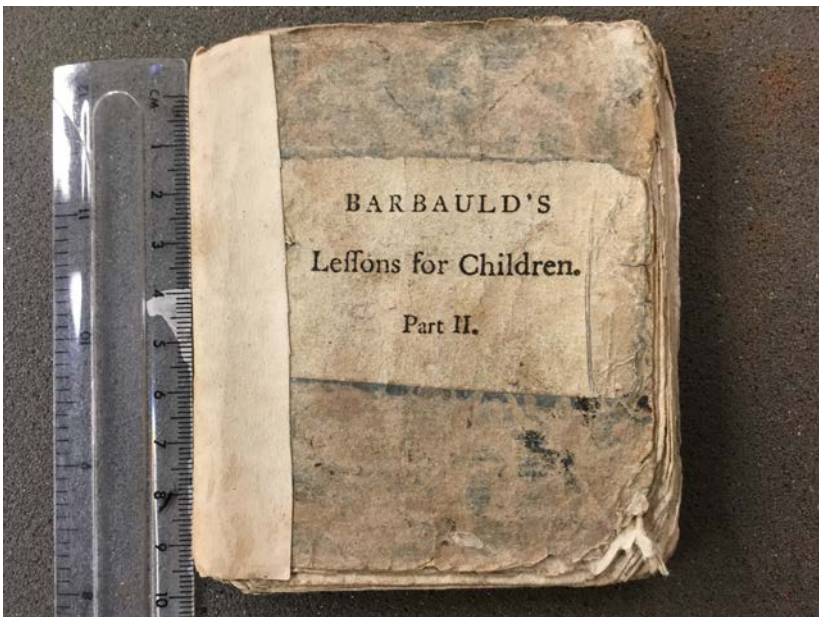


Fig. 1 – Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Lessons for Children*, Part 2 (1797), OLS POL 283 no 2. By permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Just as the size of the little books matched their small readers, so too were additional material features of the volumes suited to the child's physical development. In the "Advertisement", Barbauld wrote that the eye of a child and a learner eye could not catch ill formed or obscure words and that the "great defect" in books professedly written for children was want of "clear and large type, and large spaces" (1797-1803, vol. I, np). To remedy this defect, *Lessons for Children* has large type and there is plenty of space [Figure 2].

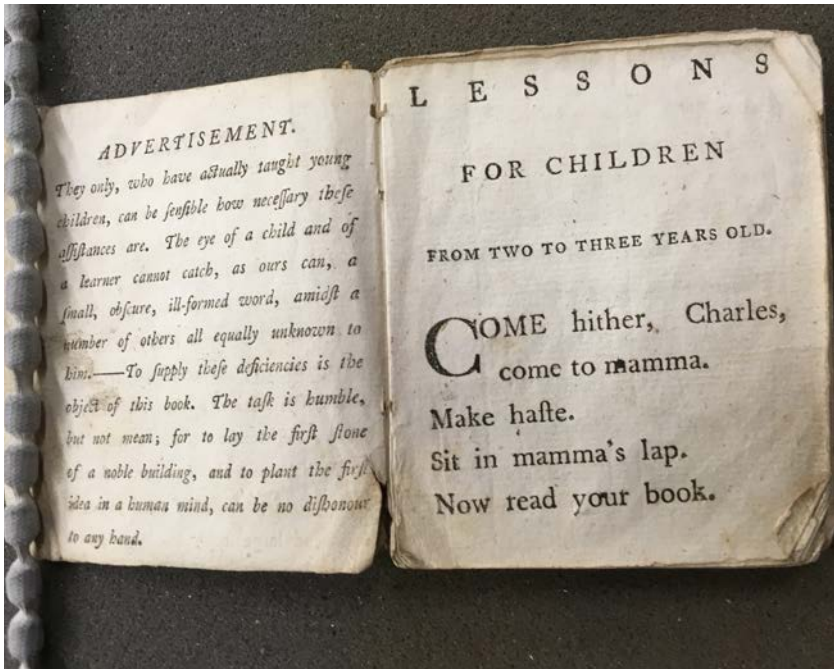


Fig. 2 – Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Lessons for Children*, Part 1 (1803), OLS POL 283 no 2. By permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Edgeworth, when she herself published works for very young children, followed Barbauld's innovations. In December 1800 she wrote to her cousin Sophy Ruxton: "The first two parts of 'Early Lessons', containing Harry and Lucy, two wee-wee volumes, have just come over to us" (Hare 1897, vol. I, 175). Eventually, *Early Lessons* would have ten parts in all, the first editions being produced, like Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (1778), in small format [Figure 3].

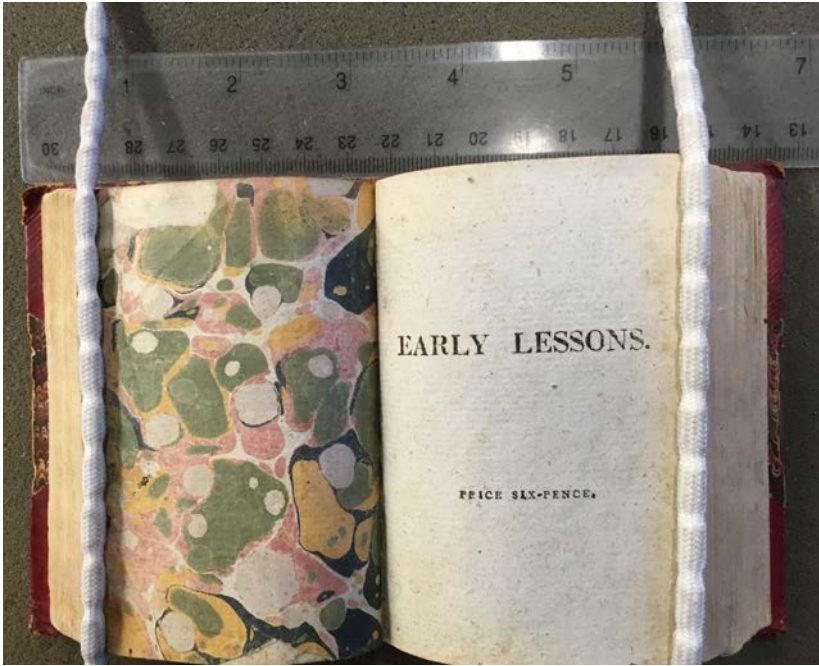


Fig. 3 – Maria Edgeworth, *Early Lessons* (1809), OLS POL 6031.
By permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

All of Edgeworth’s works for children incorporate ideas of gradual learning and are explicit about the age to which a volume is best suited. At the outset of some stories child readers are explicitly addressed, in ways they themselves can understand, as to the suitability of the fiction at hand for them. So, in *Early Lessons*, any potential reader can check if he or she is one of the “Little children, who know the sounds of all letters, can read words, and can understand what is told in this book” (Edgeworth 1809, vol. I, 1). Such addresses are not concerned solely with language use and technical reading ability but also with the development of the child’s moral sense. At the start of “The Little Dog Trusty; or The Liar and the Boy of Truth”, little children are warned that this story is not for them: “Very, very little children must not read this story, for they cannot understand it; they will not know what is meant by a liar, and a boy of truth” (Edgeworth 1796, vol. I, 1). In contrast, children who understand what is meant by the words “I have done it” or “I have not” may read the story, for they “can understand it” (*ibidem*, vol. I, 13). Alongside direct addresses to potential readers embedded within the tales, Edgeworth’s fictions sometimes come accompanied with prefaces to parents, either by

Edgeworth herself or by her father, designating the age for which a work is appropriate. In one such preface, Richard Lovell Edgeworth gave detailed advice on the proper order in which the parts of *Early Lessons* should be read (Edgeworth 1814, vol. I, x). A "Preface" to *Rosamond, A Sequel to Early Lessons* specified that the volume took Rosamond's history from age eleven to fourteen, and entreated that the book "may not be read at an earlier age than ten years old" (Edgeworth 1821, vol. I, iv).

Ultimately, it was up to the child reader to decide on whether a volume would be pursued or not. In Edgeworth's stories children pick up books, and then lay them aside if they are too advanced or difficult. A common trope in her fiction is to have a child reader exclaim that a book previously found onerous or disliked, is now discovered to be enjoyable and satisfying. So, seven-year-old Frank recalls how "last year" he did not understand parts of Barbauld's *Evenings at Home* (1796), and Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783-1789), but that now he is older he likes them very much (Edgeworth 1814, vol. I, 45). That a child should always understand what was being read, and should never be forced to continue with a book that was beyond his or her capability, were ideas fundamental to Edgeworth's pedagogy. Edgeworth's child characters do not just "read": they read specific books and at specific times, and because of this we can begin to see through the lens of Edgeworth's writing the creation of a tradition or corpus of children's literature. When Godfrey wishes to make amends to his little sister for being an overbearing older brother, he describes his gift of "a nice *wee-wee* history of England and France... I can tell you they are bound in red morocco, and not much larger than mamma's little red pocket almanac; and they have prints – a great many prints" (*ibidem*, vol. II, 45). A footnote in the text here cites "Pictures of England, designed by Alfred Mills, printed for J. Harris" (*ibidem*)⁵. More often, however, the reading of these works is dramatized, with the responses of the child reader being incorporated into Edgeworth's story. It is not surprising that Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* is a common point of reference. Not only was this one of the first works of fiction featuring a child protagonist and written for a child reader, but Day had initially begun the story intending it as a contribution to the Harry and Lucy series projected by Richard and Honora Edgeworth. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Evenings at Home: or, the juvenile budget opened, consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces for the instruction and amusement of young persons* is often cited, while Harry and Lucy not only read her *Hymns in*

⁵ Like the first editions of *Early Lessons*, Alfred Mills' *Pictures of English History: in Miniature* (1809) was indeed a tiny volume, measuring only 67x55 mm.

Prose for Children (1781) with their mother, but talk with her about their favourite passages (1814, vol. II, 145)⁶.

The same children, when excitedly anticipating a trip to a neighbouring town for their first sighting of a live elephant, enjoy consulting elephant lore and anecdotes in Priscilla Wakefield's *Instinct Displayed, in a Collection of Well-Authenticated Facts, Exemplifying the Extraordinary Sagacity of Various Species of the Animal Creation* (1811). Ten-year-old Frank struggles with astronomy and with gaining an understanding of the seasons, and his efforts are aided by Jeremiah Joyce's *Scientific Dialogues for the Instruction and Entertainment of Young People* (1821). Episodes featuring how Edgeworth's child readers use and respond to books sometimes rehearse elements of the content of the book at hand, and this may include drawing attention to the importance of prints and of non-textual elements. The "Preface" to *Continuation of Early Lessons* recommends Sarah Trimmer's "well known volumes" of Greek, Roman, and English history (1814, vol. I, xx): Trimmer's *A Description of a Set of Prints of Roman History: Contained in a Set of Easy Lessons* was first published in 1789. When Lucy expresses her desire to read her brother's Roman history, it is Trimmer's "little history of Rome, with sixty-four prints in it" that her mother gives her (1814, vol. II, 145). When Frank's mother gives him a copy of *Book of Trades* (1804), a work that describes processes such as glass-blowing, shoe-making, and print-making, she says she knows he will not understand all of the contents right away, but that he will be "entertained by looking over the prints of the men and women, at work at their different trades" (*ibidem*, vol. I, 46)⁷. Jeremiah Joyce's work of popular science, mentioned above, provides an interesting example of the intertextuality in books of fiction and instruction written for children at this time. Not only was part of Joyce's *Dialogues* dedicated to the Edgeworths, but the work also carried on its title page an epigraph from *Practical Education*. The epigraph Joyce chooses is one that goes to the very heart of the Edgeworths' educational enterprise, directing the attention of the reader to the importance of conversation: "Conversation, with the habit of explaining the meaning of words, and the structure of common domestic implements, to children, is the sure and effectual method of preparing the mind for the requirement of science" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, 455).

⁶ The Edgeworths, in common with their contemporaries, attribute *Evenings at Home* to Barbauld exclusively; in fact, the work was a collaboration with her brother, the physician and writer John Aiken (1747-1822) who wrote all but fourteen of the entries.

⁷ The *Book of Trades* was a commercial success for the publisher Benjamin Tarbet, going into several editions; see Paul 2011, 85-86.

References within books written for children, to other books designed for this audience, helped to create a sense that books for children constituted a very specific form of publication.

Despite the variety of books for children that were increasingly available, not all children's reading was of this kind. In his study *The Child Reader, 1700-1840*, M.O. Grenby notes that by the early-nineteenth century "a literature specifically for children had become securely established" (2011, 137). He cautions, however, that even many privileged children had no access to such books, and continued to use books designed chiefly for adults, either predominantly or exclusively (*ibidem*, 187). When Maria Edgeworth and her father wrote the chapter "On Books" in *Practical Education*, they clearly envisaged a schoolroom in which many books would not have been designed especially for children. This being the case, parents and educators had to be alert regarding the materials they placed in their children's hands. In this regard, the Edgeworths praise the methods of an unnamed mother – Honora Edgeworth, Richard Lovell Edgeworth's second wife – who never gave a book to a child without examining it herself, and who took decisive action on what she found:

We have several books before us marked by her pencil, and volumes which, having undergone some necessary operations by her scissors, would in their mutilated state shock the sensibility of a nice librarian. But shall the education of a family be sacrificed to the beauty of a page, or even to the binding of a book? Few books can safely be given to children without the previous use of the pen, the pencil, and the scissors. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, vol. I, 322)

Unlike "nice librarians" most interested in protecting the material book, in the interests of education the Edgeworths favoured a very robust approach in which books might not only be marked and "mutilated" but also dismantled.

As we have seen, Edgeworth's works for children freely recommend and praise, and show children using, and engaging with, books specially written for them. At the same time her stories – especially the sequels in which the protagonists are older and more confident readers, show the children reading and using an extensive range of literature. Some items, such as the *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) that enthralled Frank, are fairly predictable given their popularity and widespread availability, but others are expensive and lavishly illustrated works to which relatively few homes would have access. For example, in the *Continuation of Early Lessons*, the children view, among other works, Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*. First published in 1665, *Micrographia* was a highly significant scientific publication, containing striking copperplate engravings of insects as seen through the microscope. In 1799, nearly a hundred and fifty years after the work's initial publication, the catalogue of William Baynes lists the volume as costing 18s.

In the ninth part of *Early Lessons*, Frank's father gives his six-year-old son a valuable reward for curing himself of the bad habit of fiddling with his buttons. This is the engraver Thomas Bewick's esteemed *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790) with its "very pretty prints". Frank's father completes the gift of this highly attractive, interesting, and expensive book with an inscription: "This book was given to Frank, October the 27th, 1798, by his father, as a mark of his father's approbation for his having, at six years old, cured himself of a foolish habit" (Edgeworth 1818, vol. I, 129). Frank's delight in his new possession, the book's arousal of his curiosity, and his parents' satisfaction of that curiosity in conversation, provide an exemplary micro-history of childhood reading along the Edgeworthian model. At six, Frank's capacity to engage with the book is real but limited. While he enjoys the excellent prints, "Frank could not read all the words; for he was not used to read writing: but his mother read it to him" (*ibidem*). Frank's mother also tells him, according to pedagogic principles dear to the Edgeworths, that he should only read what he can and what entertains him. Frank continues to enjoy his book and one day when mother and child are out for a walk a conversation ensues. Bewick's *History*, with its many outstanding plates of wonderful and (to English eyes) relatively unknown animals, has incited in Frank curiosity as to where the information and knowledge on display in such books comes from:

'Mamma, how did the person who wrote about animals, in my book that my father gave me, find out all that he knew?'

'Partly from reading other books, and partly from observing animals himself.'

'But, mamma,' said Frank, 'how did the people, who wrote the other books, know all the things that are told in them?'

'By observing,' said his mother – 'Different people, in different places, observed different animals, and wrote the histories of those animals.'

'I am very glad that they did. – Did they ever make mistakes, mamma?'

'Yes, I believe that they did make a great many mistakes.'

'Then every thing that is in books, is not true, is it?'

'No.'

'I am sorry for that – But how shall I know what is true, and what is not true, in books, mamma?'

'You cannot always find out what is true, and what is not true, in books, till you have more knowledge, my dear.'

'And how shall I get more knowledge, mamma?'

'By observing whatever you see, and hear, and feel; by reading; and trying experiments.'

'Experiments, mamma! ... I did not know, that such a little boy as I am, could try experiments.' (Edgeworth 1818, vol. I, 198-199)

Frank's parents, themselves characters in a book, give their child volumes that will delight and instruct. Frank's engagement with books

is, however, completed in conversations that draw attention to the limits of book learning, and teach him that what is read in books should also be referred back to knowledge of the world derived from direct experience.

Conversations such as that represented between Frank and his mother are one way in which Edgeworth's fiction for children contains the commercial object of the purchased book within the frame of its domestic consumption. For Edgeworth, books written for children were not only to be read but should ideally generate further conversations and observation within the home. Alongside other writers for children, Edgeworth also emphasizes the origins of these publications in the home, drawing attention to the domestic life the stories enjoyed before assuming printed form. "This little publication was made for a particular child, but the public is welcome to the use of it", states Barbauld of her *Lessons for Children*. Statements of this kind have a number of implications. Most obviously, they point to the fact that the story has already enjoyed success, and proved itself, with at least one reader. Additionally, by drawing attention to the affective and familial relationships that initially inspired the book, they make its commercial aspect seem an afterthought. In 1801, Maria Edgeworth dedicated a part of *Early Lessons*, "to my little brother William". In dedicating the *Continuation of Early Lessons* to her brother Francis Beaufort Edgeworth (child of Frances Edgeworth, Richard's fourth wife), Edgeworth recalled that earlier dedication:

I now dedicate this Continuation of Early Lessons to you, my dear little brother Francis. You are now four years old; just the age your brother was, when Frank was written for him, and read to him. He could not then read; and you cannot now read. But the time will come, when you will be able to read; and then, I hope, you will receive pleasure from what I am at this instant writing; and I am sure that you will feel pleasure in reading Harry and Lucy, because, in this book, you will recollect all those experiments, which your father tried for you, and which you then understood. (Edgeworth 1814, vol. I, iii-iv)

In their publications for children, Barbauld and Edgeworth both drew on their domestic experience for authority and validation. Even as their books contributed to a new commercial world of children, these authors minimized that commercial sphere, represented it as a mere conduit or corridor to the other homes in which their stories would be read and used. Their primary focus was on the domestic space in which their works had been engendered, and the projected domestic spaces in which they would be consumed. In all of this there was, as the Edgeworths themselves acknowledged, a dash of idealization. The scenes of domestic education represented in the fiction, especially in the Harry and Lucy stories, were in some respects to be understood as exemplary. To the objection that: "these children never had a moment's respite, and that the poor father and mother had never any thing to do, or never did any thing but attend to

these children, answer their questions, and provide for their instruction or amusement”, the authors responded that instructive fiction of the Harry and Lucy kind made particular demands. As authors, they had to bring into a “small compass, in a reasonable number of pages, a certain portion of knowledge,” but parents using the books were not required to imitate such intensity and there was no need for “doing all this in any given time” (*ibidem*, vol. II, 108-109).

Edgeworth’s juvenile fiction is set in a world of privilege. While her child characters are regularly, and sometimes painfully, made aware that they cannot have anything they want (Rosamond in “The Purple Jar” being the most famous example), these children enjoy many and varied possessions, and have access to many kinds of books and prints. They may occasionally be told by busy parents that the present is not the right time for a conversation, but adult concern and time is lavished upon them. At the same time, the stories – and their child characters – do recognize that not all children belong to gentry households and that some children participate in the new commercialism as producers. Edgeworth’s stories for children are also explicit about matters of class and occasionally confront her child characters with childhood experiences very different from their own.

As a writer, Maria Edgeworth was highly aware of class and the acquisition of literacy. Not only were illiteracy rates high in early-nineteenth century England, with many children receiving only rudimentary education for brief periods, but also many children of the ages of Edgeworth’s child characters, even the youngest, were actively involved in the world of labour. The working lives of young children, and the processes of learning to read and write, are central to many of Edgeworth’s stories for adults such as “The White Pigeon” and “Lame Jarvas” in *Popular Tales* (1804) (see Douglas 2017, 156-164). Notably, several of the Rosamond tales involve the protagonist’s recognition both of child labour and of the difficulty with which some children access the written word. In one story, the family visits “a cotton Manufactory” where they observe the men, women, and children at work, and Rosamond exclaims at the “numbers of children passing through this great yard” (Edgeworth 1814, vol. I, 274). When a young girl of twelve or so interests the family, they are told the story of her gratitude towards a clergyman “who gave up several hours of his time, every week, to instruct the children in this manufactory” (*ibidem*, vol. I, 275). The story (which meets with the approbation of all present) is of how, when the clergyman was leaving the area, Ellen worked extra hours not only on her own behalf, but also on behalf of younger children unable to work more, so as to subscribe to a leaving gift. In another story, a gentlewoman is teaching “a poor little girl, who had been constantly employed in a manufactory, to read” (*ibidem*, vol. II, 2). When questioned as to whether she knows what a bee is, the little

girl says that it is like a cow. Rosamond and her family puzzle over this strange answer until the father explains that "Some children – particularly some of the poorer class – are taught their letters in *picture books*, as they call them; where, to each letter of the alphabet, a little *picture... is joined*" (*ibidem*, vol. II, 5). Were a "B" to be illustrated by a bull, the young girl's answer that a "B" is very like a cow becomes comprehensible. Slightly leaden as it is (and the puzzle goes on for several pages), this anecdote places class differences and issues of labour and literacy at the heart of the story. In *Rosamond, A Sequel to Early Lessons*, the heroine thoughtlessly repeats some gossip that inadvertently causes Bessy Bell, a blameless young servant, to lose her place. As part reparation, eleven-year-old Rosamond spends an hour every morning "hearing this child read, seeing her work, and attending to all she had learned" (Edgeworth 1821, vol. I, 72). Edgeworth's stories accept child labour as part of English commercial society, but they also suggest the importance of reading for all, even for those children "constantly employed" in factory work. As they enjoy this new children's literature, one of the fruits of "the birth of a consumer society", her child readers are reminded of those children whose roles as producers of goods in English factories make their relationship with reading and books tenuous in the extreme.

Maria Edgeworth's stories for children are innovative in the way the voices of her memorable child characters ring out. Her notable contribution to the development of a literature for children was rewarded during her lifetime by considerable financial success. Her stories are full of specific books and dramatise how they might be used and enjoyed. In the end, however, her stories stress what cannot be bought: conversation between members of a household. Her children's books were objects to be bought in the market place, but they are represented not in commercial terms but as an extension of domestic space. In this way they not only claim a new kind of authority for domestic life, but they also augment and complicate conceptions of the public sphere.

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GENDER AND EDUCATION: MARIA EDGEWORTH'S *EARLY LESSONS* FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

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Abstract:

According to Maria Edgeworth, children's education requires a different approach depending on their gender. This essay investigates to what extent this is true in Maria Edgeworth's production for children since she often compares and juxtaposes the often-contrasting behaviour of two children of the same or different sexes. Maria Edgeworth's stories are also compared with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). Moreover, Queen Victoria, as she was a ten-year-old girl, wrote a story based on the first volume of Maria Edgeworth's *Harry and Lucy Concluded* (1825). This essay examines the influence of the author's production on the future Queen. In conclusion, this essay shows how Maria Edgeworth's moderate approach in promoting women's education appears to be more.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Edgeworth, Education, Female Education

1. *Maria Edgeworth's Early Lessons for Boys and Girls*

In *Practical Education* (1798), Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Edgeworth, lay down an educational model using an empirical scientific method based on rationality and the observation of children. Although this method applies to both boys and girls, Maria Edgeworth often remarks in her literary works that girls ought to have a slightly different education compared to that of boys. In *Practical Education*, this difference is justified by the authors' concern for women's happiness, which they consider "of more consequence than their speculative rights" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996 [1798], vol. I, 259). Therefore, she and her father "wish to educate women so that they may be happy in the situations in which they are most likely to be placed" (*ibidem*).

In her stories for children, Maria Edgeworth often makes this belief apparent when describing some of her female characters. An example of

this notion can be found in “The Bracelets”. This story takes place in a school for young girls, where the teacher, Mrs. Villars, in order to keep alive her pupils’ desire to excel, rewards successful application with a bracelet. In the story, two girls compete for the prize: Cecilia and Leonora, who are also best friends. The bracelet is won by Cecilia – an active and ambitious girl with an enterprising disposition who is “more eager in the pursuit, than happy in the enjoyment, of her wishes” (Edgeworth 1822 [1796], 3). Cecilia finds herself unhappy with her success, because she realizes that, though she is very accomplished, she is not as amiable as her friend Leonora. Therefore, Cecilia proposes to give a prize to the most amiable girl, and her companions and Mrs. Villars welcome this idea with great enthusiasm. The author uses this setting to oppose the two girls and show to her readers which disposition of character is more advantageous for a young woman. Leonora is described as a girl “... of a contented, unaspiring, temperate character; not easily roused to action, but indefatigable when once excited” (*ibidem*). The author characterizes Cecilia as vain since she is more dependent upon the opinion of others. Her vanity makes her more apt to offend, and she often falls victim to passionate reactions. Therefore, while Leonora is eager to avoid doing what is wrong, Cecilia cares only about doing what is right. Maria Edgeworth lays Cecilia’s faults on the kind of education she has been imparted:

Her mother died when she was very young; and though her father had supplied her place in the best and kindest manner, he had insensibly infused into his daughter’s mind a portion of that enterprising, independent spirit, which he justly deemed essential to the character of her brother; this brother was some years older than Cecilia, but he had always been the favourite companion of her youth; what her father’s precepts inculcated, his example enforced, and even Cecilia’s virtues consequently became such as were more estimable in a man, than desirable in a female. (*Ibidem*, 39-40)

On the contrary, Leonora, who had an education more proper for a girl, can manage her conduct and temper. This attitude allows her to be more compliant and used to restraint – which, as a woman, she is to expect in life (*ibidem*, 40-41). Leonora’s reliance on her judgement and her satisfaction with her own approbation make her more independent from the opinion of others, yet more agreeable and worthy of their respect.

According to Maria Edgeworth, “girls should be more inured to temper than boys, because they are likely to meet with more restraint in society” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. I, 258). Therefore, command of temper should be taught early in life, to girls in particular, because “much of the effect of their power and of their wit, when they grow up, will depend upon gentleness and good-humour with which they conduct” (*ibidem*). Moreover, while an ill-humoured man can compensate with other qualities, no good quality or accomplishment can balance the want of

temper in a woman, who inevitably becomes unpleasant for her friends. Maria Edgeworth depicts another example of an ill-humoured girl in the short story "The Birthday Present" (1796). Here, the main character's cousin, Bell, is portrayed as a capricious and bad-humoured child: she has a great love for finery, she often deceives her mother, and spends most of her time with her maid, Nancy. Whenever Bell throws tantrums, her maid and her mother try to calm her down by satisfying her whims or by offering her distractions. Bell thinks that on her birthday, she should be the centre of attention and that her whims should be indulged more than usual. However, people indulge her only because she is still a child. Maria Edgeworth finds that women with this kind of character in adult life are only a nuisance to their family and friends. What puzzles the reader the most is that Bell is always unsatisfied, and neither she nor the people around her can understand what makes her unhappy.

Maria Edgeworth, when she speaks about the appropriate literature for children, argues that it is preferable to make them read stories whose characters have few faults and can be examples of good conduct. Therefore, in her stories, it is easier to find positive examples of good-natured female characters. Many such characters can be found in *Harry and Lucy Concluded: Being the Last Part of Early Lessons* (1825), where the parents of the two siblings educate their children following the methods described by Maria Edgeworth and her father in *Practical Education*. In this book, the readers can find differences in the education of Lucy if compared with that of her brother. Throughout the book, there are many examples of Maria Edgeworth's ideas on how a good-tempered girl should behave. In *Harry and Lucy Concluded*, the siblings' parents decide to take them on a trip to a place near the sea-shore. Lucy and Harry must share a trunk, and Lucy is the one who packs it. She does it so neatly that her mother compliments her, but later, Harry comes and tells her that they must pack his camera obscura as well. Not only does Lucy have to repack the trunk, but she also has to give up her handmade shell tray to make the camera obscura fit. Moreover, while she is repacking, her temper is challenged by Harry's constant advice, until she does as he suggests. Lucy's mother thus praises her exemplary behaviour:

'My dear little girl,' said she, 'I am glad to see, not only that you are good-natured to your brother, of that I did not doubt; but I am glad to perceive, that you are good-humoured too. Good temper is necessary, even to the most good-natured people. I have often seen good-natured people more ready to make great sacrifices than little ones for their friends; but the little ones are most frequently wanted, especially from women, almost every day of their lives. And if they make these in a good humoured, obliging manner, as you, Lucy, did just now, they will be beloved, and, as far as they can, will make the friends they live with happy'. (Edgeworth 1825a, vol. I, 160)

In *Harry and Lucy Concluded* there are also adult, good-tempered women, whose role is to set an example for both Lucy and the young readers. One of them is the siblings' mother, whose example is a source of inspiration for Lucy. An instance of another good-tempered woman is Mrs. Frankland, with whom the party spends their time at Frankland Hall, in Staffordshire. On the third and last day at Frankland Hall, during a boating party, Harry asks Mr. Frankland if they could go and see a mill. Mr. Frankland agrees, but Mrs. Frankland is doubtful because she has an old friend waiting for her, and she does not want to be late. In the end she agrees presuming that it would take only half an hour to visit the mill. Unfortunately, it takes Mr. Frankland and Harry longer, and they arrive late. The old man is very crossed with Mrs. Frankland, and nothing would suit him. Nonetheless, Mrs. Frankland does not lose her good temper and does her best to soothe him until Harry explains to him the reason for their lateness. After that, the old gentleman forgives Mrs. Frankland and regains his good-humour. However, the ladies who have witnessed his lousy mood, declare that they would not have borne him, and that Mrs. Frankland was too good. The latter stops them from speaking ill about her old friend. Lucy witnesses all this, and this is her reaction to Mrs. Frankland's behaviour:

Lucy admired and liked Mrs. Frankland for speaking in this manner. She resolved, that when she grew up, she would be equally good-tempered, and would bear with the foibles of old friends, even if they happen to be a little cross. Above all, she resolved that she would be as steady as Mrs. Frankland, in defending them in their absence. (*Ibidem*, 301)

Harry and Lucy Concluded begins with a dialogue between Lucy and her mother. This conversation raises two important questions, deeply connected between them, concerning girls' education: namely, Maria Edgeworth's opinion on the importance of accomplishments and literary and scientific studies.

Lucy has recently come home from her aunt, where she had been staying for a time because her mother was ill. After coming home, she realizes that she and her brother do not get along as they used to. When Lucy shares her feelings with her mother, she realizes that the reason why they grew apart lies in the fact that, while she had been staying at her aunt's, she had been employed in different kinds of activities, if compared to her brother's. In the past, they used to study together mechanics and "scientific things". At her aunt's, she had employed in activities "more necessary for a girl", such as arithmetic, drawing, dancing, music, and work (*ibidem*, 12-13). Although these activities make her happy, she is sad because she cannot spend time with Harry as before. She cannot keep up with the things he has learned in her absence. Harry, on the contrary, cannot keep

up with her in other areas, for example, her wit, which she had learned at her aunt's by reading poetry and plays. Lucy's mother helps her come up with a solution: she tells Lucy that she should ask Harry to help her catch up with him. In exchange, she can help him understand wit.

In *Practical Education*, female accomplishments are widely discussed in the chapter "On Female Accomplishments, Masters, and Governesses", where Maria Edgeworth's opinion on the subject is made clear. She finds that her contemporaries give too much importance to the accomplishments of a woman. There are many reasons why this happens. Female accomplishments are considered objects of universal admiration. Besides, they are seen as tickets of admission to a fashionable company and are supposed to increase a young lady's chance in the matrimonial lottery. Moreover, "accomplishments have also a value as resources against ennui, as they afford continual amusement and innocent occupation" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996 [1798], vol. III, 6). The author focuses on this last observation to prove an important point. Since "women are peculiarly restrained in their situation, and in their employments, by the costumes of society", diminishing the number of these employments would be cruel (*ibidem*, 7). Therefore, women should instead be encouraged to "cultivate those tastes which can attach them to their home, and which can preserve them from the miseries of dissipation" (*ibidem*). Moreover, when it comes to marriage, men of value look for different kinds of talents in a woman. It is also worth considering that very few women continue to practice music, drawing, dancing after marriage. Therefore, Maria Edgeworth argues that it is more advantageous for them to be employed in the cultivation of literature and science since these subjects are more likely to contribute to their happiness in adult life.

These observations lead us to the second theme taken on in the dialogue: the well spread opinion of Maria Edgeworth's contemporaries that women should not be educated in literary and scientific subjects. This matter is brought up by Lucy, who tells her mother about a gentleman's reaction when he learns that Lucy used to study "scientific things" along with Harry at home:

... he laughed in a particular sort of way, scornfully. And he said, that it was well for me I had left off such *learning*. That I should be a much more agreeable woman without it; that ladies had nothing to do with science, or ought to have nothing to do with it ... He said, that scientific ladies are always displaying what they know, or what they do not know. Those were his very words. He said, that scientific ladies were his *abhorrence*. And he looked as if he abhorred them terribly. I was very sorry at the time, that he knew papa had taught me any thing along with Harry. I was ashamed and frightened, and I thought it was all wrong. But now that I am come home, I think, that it was all right; for I see how much papa likes that you should know the scientific things that he is busy about, and how happy it makes you; and I want to go on again

with Harry: only I wish, mamma, that all people were of the same opinion about *this*. (Edgeworth 1825a, vol. I, 15-16)

The point of view of this gentleman is often taken up both in *Practical Education* and *Letters for Literary Ladies, to Which is Added An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification* (1795) as a common objection not to introduce women to scientific subjects and literature. Maria Edgeworth and her father are firmly convinced that for a woman to be both agreeable and happy, the cultivation of understanding is of the utmost importance. To do this, Maria Edgeworth argues that women should develop their reasoning powers and acquire a taste for literature and science. However, great care should be taken in the way these subjects are taught, mostly in the case of girls (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. II, 52-53).

In *Practical Education*, Maria Edgeworth and her father stress the importance of the way each subject should be taught, that is, by never trying to explain to a child something that at his or her age cannot be understood yet. However, when something is explained, it should be done by using words which are intelligible to the comprehension of the child, taking great care in the quantity of information handed out each time. Moreover, before venturing to add new information, parents and masters should make sure that the child has fully understood what he or she has previously been taught. This kind of teaching method is in itself very avant-garde for Maria Edgeworth's period, taking into account that the most common practice of learning was by rote. It is even more so, considering the common opinion of her period, namely that reason, knowledge, and science, are unsuitable or dangerous to women, while wit, and superficial acquirements in literature are object of admiration in society. Maria Edgeworth disagrees with this opinion and claims that it is better to teach a woman little but to teach it well. The complete knowledge of small things allows young women to learn more and to employ that information to understand and acquire new concepts. The author argues that, if people in the past have failed in this endeavour, it is because their teaching methods were unsuitable. In this regard, Lucy represents the exemplification of this notion: she is aware, even afraid, of the danger of becoming a vain woman. She always asks her mother whether she thinks she is putting her knowledge to the right use. Very often, the male characters of the book – Lucy's father and Harry, for example – remind her never to display her knowledge because her understanding of the various subjects is incomplete. Moreover, by showing off her knowledge, she would only raise unpleasing feelings in the people around her.

Maria Edgeworth believes that scientific subjects can positively influence women's domestic life. For instance, girls who are taught culinary arts may take great advantage from studying chemistry. Maria Edgeworth describes one such example in an episode in *Harry and Lucy Concluded*. The

two siblings and their parents visit a foundry where they meet Mr. Watson, the master of the works, and get acquainted with one of his sisters. As her father was a chemist, she had often been in his laboratory and thus learnt this subject by observing his experiments and by later trying them herself. This knowledge of chemistry allows her to make sugar-plums and to embellish baskets by the process of crystallization. During their discussions, both Lucy and Harry inquire whether the knowledge of chemistry has made her happier. She answers that knowing more about chemistry has never prevented her from doing other, domestic things, and to this her brother adds:

‘Her being something of a chemist has not spoiled her hand for being a good confectioner,’ said he. ‘On the contrary, it has improved it, for she knows the reasons for what she is doing. All confectioners and cooks must be chemists for so much, but they do not know the reasons why they succeed one time and fail another. With them it is all knack, and hap-hazard, or what we call *practice*, at best.’ (Edgeworth 1837 1825c, vol. II, 44)

In Maria Edgeworth’s opinion, arithmetic is also an essential subject for young women, as they should be accustomed to keep the family accounts, and “their arithmetic should not be merely a speculative science” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. III 279). Throughout *Harry and Lucy Concluded*, Harry always relies on Lucy to help him with calculations. However, this subject should be combined with the virtue of economy. Young women “should learn the price of all necessaries, and of all luxuries; they should learn what luxuries are suited to their fortune and rank” (*ibidem*).

The cultivation of women’s reasoning powers is helpful in the management of female sensibility and the repression of those “fine feelings” promoted by heroines in novels (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. II, 50). Maria Edgeworth claims that novel-reading is very harmful to the happiness of women because novels tend to represent fictitious female characters that their readers may end up imitating, as she shows in her story “Angelina”, published in the story collection *Moral Tales* (1801). Anne, the heroine of this “satire on novelettish sentimentality”, has lost her parents at the age of fourteen and then went to live with Diana Chillingworth, a lady whose happiness lays in living in a high company in London (Butler 1972, 161). Anne’s parents had educated her by cultivating her literary taste with works of imagination but omitting to cultivate her judgment or to give her any “knowledge of realities” (Edgeworth 1821 1801, vol. II, 157). Consequently, she elopes to join a female correspondent, Araminta. The latter is a novel writer, whose novel is said to be based on her own life. After reading the novel, Anne decides to start a correspondence with Araminta. This correspondence lasts two years, until Anne – who uses Angelina as her *nom de plume* – decides to join her unknown friend and escapes from “the

follies of the society in which she now mixed” (*ibidem*). Anne’s actions are caused not only by her distorted idea of reality but also by the unsuitable guardianship of Diana Chillingworth, for whom it would have been better if Anne were a vain girl, instead of being “a young woman of considerable abilities”, as the author describes her (*ibidem*).

Another danger connected with novel-reading is that girls used to the intense emotions described in novels expect them in their everyday life. “They must have tears in their eyes, or they are apprehensive that their hearts are growing hard” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. II, 51). They accustom themselves to such great stimuli that they cannot get used to the languor of everyday life. In “Angelina” there can be found more than one comic example of how Anne’s idea of reality differs from the reality itself. One of such instances is when Anne meets a harper – to whom she does not appear in her right understanding because of her passionate behaviour – and comments: “A mere modern harper! – He is not even blind” (Edgeworth 1821, vol. II, 163). Anne feels even a greater disenchantment when she finally meets her *unknown friend* and finds her to have “vulgar looks” and to be a drunkard, and her love interest – Orlando/Nat – to be a fool, whom she mistakes for a footman. The heroine’s reaction is thus described:

... Angelina was ‘revolving in her altered mind’ the strange things, which she had seen and heard in the course of the last half hour; every thing appeared to her in a new light; when she compared the conversation and conduct of miss Hodges with the sentimental letters of her Araminta; when she compared Orlando in description to Orlando in reality, she could scarcely believe her senses; accustomed as she had been to elegance of manners, the vulgarity and awkwardness of miss Hodges shocked and disgusted her beyond measure. – The disorder, &c. – for the words must be said – slatternly dirty appearance of her Araminta’s dress, and of every thing in her apartment, were such as would have made a hell of heaven; and the idea of spending her life in a cottage with Mrs. Hodges Gazabo and Nat overwhelmed our heroine with the double fear of wretchedness and ridicule. (Edgeworth 1821, vol. II, 229-230)

Maria Edgeworth claims that to obviate to the stimulus of dissipation and of romance, women should cultivate their reasoning powers, and acquire a taste for science and literature. Thus, their sympathy and sensibility will be engaged with habits of useful exertion and they will be able to feel the affection that surrounds them and enjoy the happiness both of everyday life and that described by others (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1996, vol. II, 53).

2. Comparison between Maria Edgeworth and Mary Wollstonecraft

During Maria Edgeworth’s time, education and more precisely, female education, was a widely discussed question. Alan Richardson proposes a

subdivision in three trends of opinions on the matter: the conservative, the radical and the liberal compromise such as provided by the Edgeworths' (Richardson 2004 [1994], 61). Components of each group tend to diverge in relation to the women's rights, yet often some common ground can be found among them. A comparison between Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas – which belong to the radical trend – to Maria Edgeworth's is an excellent example of that. The latter often exemplifies her position in her work, as, for example, in the chapter "Women's Rights" in her novel *Belinda*. Notwithstanding this evident estrangement from Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas, the two authors have much in common. They both agree on the point that if women are denied the chance to develop their reasoning powers, they can do nothing but become troublesome companions to their husbands and relations (Topliss 1981, 16-17). They both wish women were more educated, but because of two different reasons. Mary Wollstonecraft believes that more knowledge leads to "virtue", to achieve which women should be ready to risk becoming outcasts of society (ivi, 20). Maria Edgeworth thinks that education contributes to women's "happiness", above all within the society in which they live.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a collection of stories for children, *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1788), in where she describes the process of re-educating two young sisters. They are put in the hands of a near relation, Mrs. Mason, because, though children of wealthy parents, their early education was spoiled by the "management of servants, or people equally ignorant" (Wollstonecraft 1796 [1788], VII). The fourteen-year-old Mary is said to have "a turn to ridicule", while the twelve-year-old Caroline has become vain, because of her good looks (*ibidem*, VIII). In these stories are applied some of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on girls' education, which she also illustrated in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787). By comparing the two authors' works, it is possible to find common ground when it comes to children education and, more precisely, to the education of young women.

Both Maria Edgeworth and Mary Wollstonecraft agree that children should be protected both from real and fictitious bad examples of conduct. Mary Wollstonecraft mentions the bad influence servants may have on children's education; Maria Edgeworth finds that family acquaintances pose the same threat. However, both agree that children's understanding should be developed gradually and much care should be taken when their questions are answered. Mary Wollstonecraft mentions this right in her introduction to *Original Stories from Real Life* stressing the importance of examples in teaching (*ibidem*, v). She also acknowledges the overrated importance given to social accomplishments. In the chapter "Virtue to Mrs. Trueman – The Use of Accomplishments, Virtue the Soul of All", Mrs.

Mason takes Mary and Caroline to Mrs. Trueman, whom their guardian considers an example of conduct. Mrs. Trueman is playing the guitar and is singing when they arrive. After listening to the performance for a while, Mary comments that she would give the world to be able to sing so nicely. Mrs. Trueman overhears her and comments by saying that Mary values accomplishments too highly, because, even though they give grace to virtue, they are nothing without real worth (*ibidem*, 132). Mrs. Mason adds that accomplishments can help women make themselves pleasant to their domestic friends, but virtue is much more valuable.

Mary Wollstonecraft also believes that it is very essential to manage young women's temper and this should be done by employing reason. When a woman submits to a parent or a husband without conviction, she is likely to end up exercising the same tyranny over her servants, since "slavish fear and tyranny go together" (Wollstonecraft 1787, 63). However, in the chapter "Anger – History of Jane Fretful" the author describes a different situation. Mary and Caroline argue over who is more entitled to feed the birds they saved some days before – the argument ends in the death of a bird. Mrs. Mason reprimands them calmly by saying "it is always a proof of superior sense to bear with slight inconveniences and even trifling injuries, without complaining or contesting about them" (Wollstonecraft 1796, 26-27). She also adds that by not reacting good-humouredly when such inconveniences occur, one endangers domestic peace (*ibidem*). Afterwards she tells them the story of Jane Fretful as an example of an example of bad conduct. The description of Jane Fretful's early life bears similarities to Maria Edgeworth's character Bell in the above-motivated story "The Birthday Present". Jane's weak mother never allowed her to be contradicted, and she was used to seeing everybody giving way to her humour. Thus, she started to think the world was made for her. She always used to cry, to be a victim of violent passions; in short, nothing could ever make her happy. As in Bell's case, things were made worse by the servant who raised her. All kinds of tantrums were allowed.

Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth share the conviction that though reading is "the most rational employment, if people seek food for the understanding", it should not include "those productions which give a wrong account of the human passion and the various accidents of life, ought not to be read before the judgement is formed, or at least exercised" (Wollstonecraft 1787, 49-50). Both agree that books about abstract subjects should not be given to children. Religious education is of the utmost importance for Mary Wollstonecraft. However, she discourages letting children read theology books, as they are not addressed to them. She claims that it is better to teach concepts by examples.

The question of religious education is what makes Maria Edgeworth's and Mary Wollstonecraft's works for children so different between

them. One of the reasons *Practical Education* did not gain all the fame it deserved was the Edgeworths' refusal not to deal with religious education in their book. This refusal has to do with their conviction that religion is an abstract concept, something the child cannot understand as it cannot be experienced by his or her senses. Therefore, children should not be introduced to religion until they have acquired some understanding of easier abstract concepts, such as friendship, respect and love. The Edgeworths are sure that the child, once his or her understanding is enough developed, will come to understand religious concepts on his or her own. However, as Mary Wollstonecraft underlines, the parents' help should not be underestimated. The difference between the two approaches may seem small; however, the effect that the two authors' productions produce on their readers vary significantly. To better understand it, it may be useful to see an example.

Original Stories from Real Life begins with the chapter "The Treatment of Animals – The Ant – The Bee – The Goodness – The Lark's Nest – The Asses". Mrs. Mason takes Mary and Caroline for a walk with the hope of making them enjoy the surrounding beauty, while the girls' attention is all into killing some insects. Mrs. Mason does not reprove the girls. She steps out of the footpath to avoid treading on some snails. She wets her feet, something the children know she would avoid, as she has lately been ill. By this contrivance, Mrs. Mason starts to explain why it is unreasonable to kill insects or animals unless it is done to protect oneself from harm:

You have already heard that God created the world, and every inhabitant of it. He is then called the Father of all creatures; and all are made to be happy, whom a good and wise God has created. He made those snails you despise, and caterpillars, and spiders; and when he made them, did not leave them to perish, but placed them where the food that is most proper to nourish them is easily found. They do not live long, but He who is their Father, as well as your's, directs them to deposit their eggs on the plants that are fit to support their young, when they are not able to get food for themselves. – And when such a great and wise Being has taken care to provide every thing necessary for the meanest creature, would you dare to kill it, merely because it appears to you ugly? Mary began to be attentive and quickly followed Mrs. Mason's example; who allowed a caterpillar and a spider to creep on her hand. (Wollstonecraft 1796 [1788], 3-4)

In the first chapter of *Harry and Lucy Concluded*, after Lucy and her mother speak about the gentleman's bad opinion on scientific ladies, Lucy is afraid that the knowledge she acquires, will cause her to become a vain woman. Her mother reassures her, as both her father and she are confident that the knowledge Lucy will acquire will make her more eager to learn more, and not to parade her knowledge in front of other people. Moreover, she adds:

‘you will perceive, that, by acquiring knowledge, women not only increase their power of being agreeable companions to their fathers, brothers, husbands, or friends, if they are so happy as to be connected with sensible men, but they increase their own pleasure in reading and hearing of scientific experiments and discoveries; they acquire a greater variety of means of employing themselves independently, and at home. But above all, the acquisition of knowledge not only enlarges but elevates the mind, by filling it with admiration and gratitude towards that bountiful Providence, who has established such wise laws for the welfare and preservation of the world’. (Edgeworth 1825a, vol. I, 18)

At that moment Lucy does not understand well what her mother means. However, at the end of the book, Lucy recollects these words. She first makes sure that her mother does not find her vain after all the new things she has learned during their journey and then she says:

I begin to feel the truth of what you have often said to me, that the more we learn of what are called the works of nature, and of the wonderful inside of our own minds, the better we must become, and the more *pious*. I am not sure whether pious is the right word, or *religious*; but you know what I mean. (Edgeworth 1925 [1825b], vol. III, 350)

What can be remarked by comparing these episodes of the two books is that Mary Wollstonecraft tends to mix religion and rational notions and to bind them together. She proposes a deductive method of teaching religion. Maria Edgeworth, on the other hand, allows her characters and her readers to learn rationally about the wonders of the world and to let them come – with the help of their parents – to the conclusion that all these wonders must be created by a higher being. Therefore, her method of bringing children to the notion of religion may be called inductive.

3. Maria Edgeworth’s influence on a young Queen Victoria

Maria Edgeworth’s *Harry and Lucy Concluded* was also one of Princess Victoria’s favourite books, and Lynne Vallone argues that Edgeworth’s production had a significant influence on Victoria’s personality, both as a daughter and a monarch. In fact, at the age of ten and a half, the young Victoria wrote a story, entitled “Sophia and Adolphus: in the Style of Miss Edgeworth’s *Harry and Lucy*”. There are two copies of the story in a paper-cover exercise book, one in pencil, the other, shorter version, in ink (Vallone 2001, 49). Lynne Vallone is not sure whether the story was written as a task or an independent undertaking. However, the careful and detailed illustration which accompanies it and the dedication to her beloved governess Lehzen, point to an independent project.

It is interesting to see how a ten-year-old girl – and not just any girl, but the future Queen of England – interprets Maria Edgeworth's book and how her version of the story varies, because of the influence of her own experience.

Princess Victoria, in addition to *Early Lessons* and *Frank*, had in her library all the six volumes of *The Parent's Assistant*, *Harry and Lucy Concluded* in 4 volumes and a volume entitled *Edgeworth's Little Plays* (*ibidem*). Being accustomed to Maria Edgeworth's "rationalistic discourse on child-rearing", Victoria tries to imitate it in her story (*ibidem*, 50). She also follows the main plot-line as that of the first volume of *Harry and Lucy Concluded*: Sophia's and Adolphus's parents take them to a trip to some friends, as in *Harry and Lucy Concluded*. It is interesting to notice that Victoria describes in her story an ordinary, middle-class family and that the values associated to her characters – charity, neighbourliness, literary appreciation, economy – decidedly belong to this social class (*ibidem*, 51-52). Her success in describing such a context may be also influenced by the fact that Princess Victoria sees the family life described by Maria Edgeworth's tale as the fulfilment of a life she never had. Fatherless, after the departure of her beloved sister Feodora in 1828, the young Victoria was left alone with her patronizing mother. Even though she had the company of her governess, Lehzen, her evenings were spent in the company of her mother's friends, as Victoria describes in her journals (*ibidem*, 52). Therefore, it may be said that in her stories Victoria reconstructs the family life she never had.

In a passage where Sophia and her mother are found considering the worthiness of some new acquaintances, the young Princess Victoria takes up the theme of the value of accomplishments and the fault of novel-reading. Sophia prefers the company of the talented Smith girls to the vicar's children, because one of them, Maria, "plays on the piano and sings and dances and speaks French", while the vicar's daughter Louisa does not. Sophia's mother answers that Maria may be able to do all that, "but she never reads any good books she always reads novels which cannot impress any good knowledge of geography or history". She also adds that she should not like to see her daughter making "fashionable and affected acquaintances", she would prefer her to keep company with such simple, but well-informed girls, as Miss Louisa (*ibidem*). Princess Victoria was well aware of the downfalls of novel reading, since her mother, the Duchess of Kent, paid much attention to what her daughter read. In fact, only later, after Victoria succeeds in freeing herself from her mother's control, she would start choosing the books she would read, though always following her friends' advice.

However, there is an element present in Victoria's fiction, which does not belong to Maria Edgeworth: the element of drama, which is connected rather to the romantic tradition and the princess' tastes, than to Maria

Edgeworth's style (*ibidem*, 53-54). Victoria, in a letter to her sister Feodora, indicates her preference for the melodramatic over the historical. Moreover, she had always been fond of theatre and dramas, as her drawings prove. Thus, in her story one can find also episodes full of pathos, like the one in which Sophia predicts the drowning of her brother, if he goes ice skating. This kind of episodes replace Maria Edgeworth's parts in which she describes machinery. What is more relevant, to avoid this kind of descriptions, young Victoria makes it hard for her characters to finally get to see these examples of industry (*ibidem*, 53).

Another fascinating aspect of Victoria's story is her female character. In *Harry and Lucy Concluded*, it is Harry who instructs Lucy, while the latter, who seldom finds herself in the position of knowing more than her brother. Moreover, in Victoria's story, Sophia becomes the foster sister and tutor to an orphaned girl, Mary Eustace, who loses her parents during Sophia's family stay at the cottage (*ibidem*, 54).

In the third book of *Harry and Lucy Concluded*, Harry burns himself while saving a child from a fire and, as a result, he is confined to bed for some weeks. During his convalescence, Lucy dutifully takes care of him and also tries to be a good companion by discussing with him on different subjects. This experience helps her understand that knowledge can make her a good companion for the people around her. In Victoria's story, Sophia is also a dutiful sister, but "she never condescends domination to her brother", while Lucy's role as a sister is that of "gentle subordination" (*ibidem*, 55).

4. Conclusion

Maria Edgeworth's style and ideas undoubtedly owe much to the context in which she lived and to many authors of her time, such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Compared to the latter, it may be argued that her position on female education was not strong enough to change women's situation in society. However, it should be considered that without her tendency to make compromises, her works would not have been allowed to occupy the shelves of almost every middle-class girl, and most certainly not the future Queen's library shelf. Could it not be that Maria Edgeworth's condescending and delicate manners – which make her consistent with her literary characters – had the effect of a Trojan horse, introduced right into the heart of the 19th century conservative society? Promoting with rational arguments the advantages of educating women in the subjects accessible only to men, without making it look like a threat, may have been the only successful strategy to start breaking with tradition. Though the efforts of other writers of the same opinion undoubtedly had significant impact, the works of such writers as Maria Edgeworth may have been the starting point of women's emancipation. The new image of women in so-

ciety promoted by Queen Victoria was undoubtedly influenced also by the Maria Edgeworth's characters. Even though women were confined in their traditional role, the growing attention to their situation in society was proportional to their increasing self-awareness and the realization that change was necessary in this respect.

Moreover, Maria Edgeworth's production has a higher importance when considered from the purely educational point of view. The educational methods developed together with her father were innovative even if compared to the theories on education promoted by Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke.

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MARIA EDGEWORTH IN THE PRACTICE OF EDUCATION: A GREAT WRITER AND A MODERN TEACHER

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Abstract:

The aim of the essay is to emphasize how Maria Edgeworth's stories are still alive and have a great educational value not only for their moral intent, still relevant to our pupils, but also as authentic literary material to teach English in primary schools that every teacher can rely on. The universal values of Truth, Justice and Humanity are still fundamental in our multiethnic and globalized society. Over the years, in collaboration with Raffaella Leproni and students of Roma Tre University (Dept. of Education) many educational-didactic projects based on Edgeworth's stories have been developed and carried out, in particular *The Purple Jar*. The original text was appropriate didactic material used for English language teaching in 4th and 5th grades of primary school.

Keywords: Edgeworth, education, experience, family, justice

During the last years of the eighteenth century we can note a growing need for a specific literature useful for child education. It is an important moment in the European pedagogic landscape, because for the first time, the needs of children as readers are considered, accompanied by the birth of a specific literature. In this period Maria Edgeworth was a pre-eminent figure in European literature, not only as a writer but also for her innovative pedagogic ideas.

Thanks to the widespread diffusion of her works, education takes on an important role on the European cultural scene, developing new theories that posit a fundamental role for women, not only as mothers, but also as educators.

Maria Edgeworth is an author who has played an important role in fostering, with her writings and ideas, women's access to education, since she personally had to take care of a large family and also manage a school. Her works were appreciated throughout Europe, placing her in the lime-

light of the contemporary European cultural scene, counted among the most famous and important writers.

It is precisely the aspect linked to education, that distinguishes many of her works, to which I have devoted my attention, collaborating with Raffaella Leproni, and in particular, Edgeworth's pedagogical idea of educating children through a story, a means so congenial to them. Leproni foregrounds the importance of the scientific nature of Maria Edgeworth's pedagogical thought, stating that for the writer "l'educazione dei bambini non è solo un compito genitoriale o didattico, è una vera e propria scienza sperimentale" (Leproni 2015, 79)¹. This is particularly evident in her essays *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) and *Practical Education* (1798), *Early Lessons* (1801) and *Popular Tales* (1804). She is very modern in her pedagogical intent: she grounds her idea of education in scientific and experimental terms, whose processes and results are monitored through observation that can be considered the foundation of all educational practice. The idea of experience, as a theoretical and practical foundation is an essential tool for learning concepts that, in Edgeworth's pedagogical vision, must be concrete, familiar and have a strong link with children's everyday reality. These ideas are the same as those developed, at a distance of about a century, by figures such as Froebel, Dewey and Montessori in the context of the famous *pedagogical activism*, we teachers are still referring to, in our daily activity. Another concept particularly dear to Maria Edgeworth is *peer-tutoring*, a methodology that nowadays seems to be an innovative didactic strategy that is so widespread, but in the eighteenth century she declared that interaction between peers is an indispensable means to achieve effective and natural learning. Learning is a process that happens by way of the proposal of concrete models, either positive or negative, because there is no educational and pedagogical intent that can be achieved without them; in Edgeworth's perspective, the little readers can be led to identify themselves with the protagonists of the tale, Pedro and Francisco, for example, and led to imitate the model, which is always the virtuous one. The concepts underlying Maria Edgeworth's innovative pedagogical thinking were revolutionary for her time and today they still maintain an absolute validity: i.e. the need for an education shared between child and adult, the learning based largely on example and experience, the importance of narration as a privileged means of knowledge, the vision of an education aimed at building one's own, strong and solid individual identity, correctly inserted into a social context. An education, finally, aimed at sharing

¹ English translation: The education of children is not only a parental or didactic task, it is a real experimental science.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

ethical values, very well expressed, for example, in *The Little Merchants*: “‘As honest as Francisco’, became a sort of proverb amongst them ...”; “and I tell you again, the boy will not do well in the world, neighbour, if you don’t look after him in time” (Edgeworth 1825, 225). The family and the teaching of adults have a pre-eminent role: they have the duty to educate and propose appropriate behaviours and they have to be the positive reference model for the children. Maria Edgeworth: why should we introduce her stories to children of the 3rd millennium? Because the themes she offers are, though linked with her historical context, still current and deal with universal issues, close to the daily lives of children of every age. Edgeworth wrote her tales for several reasons, including the narrative need to entertain, but also to educate her siblings, the reason why the moral and pedagogical intent is indeed evident and is a strong point in all her stories, pervading them and making them so absolutely universally valid even for current generations.

Over the last ten years, trainee students at Roma Tre University Education Department, under our supervision, devoted to primary school pupils 60 hours of educational and didactic projects, especially based on the tales *The Purple Jar*, and *The Little Merchants* both taken from the collection *The Parent’s Assistant*, published in 1796. These didactic projects, despite their own peculiarity and specificity, about glottodidactics, have followed some common methodological lines, favouring communicative and audio-oral approaches. These approaches highlight the effectiveness of communication as opposed to grammatical accuracy, aiming to provide the learner with the tools that allow him/her to interact actively in real communicative situations. It is clear that learning a second language takes place more effectively if it is framed in a series of realistic tasks and real or plausible interaction contexts. During the lessons the children have, thanks to role play and role-taking, put into practice realistic linguistic situations, such as buying and selling in a fruit market or a day shopping in the city centre. We developed individualized didactic planning, which allows learning according to pupils’ different cognitive styles, adopting teaching strategies that involve children in multidimensional activities (graphic, physical, musical, etc.) aimed at enhancing their motivation and interest and stimulating all their intelligences (Gardner 1983, *passim*). We considered it very important to encourage interaction between peers and group activities to develop children’s *prosocial* skills; for this reason we planned and realized many didactic situations based on group work and *cooperative learning*, in a joyful and positive setting. During the presentation of the different phases of the stories, for example, each single group drew picture describing a phase of the plot, accompanied by short, simple captions in English, together depicting the entire story. For children, movement is not just a need, it is above all one of the privileged ways of learning, also for the acquisition of another language. We and our trainee

students often referred to the *Total Physical Response* (T.P.R.) methodology, developed by James Asher in the 1970s, based on oral comprehension skills linked to the carrying out of commands and actions; the teacher gives orders to the children who perform actions. In a second phase, the pupils themselves give orders to peers showing that they have acquired vocabulary and morpho-syntactic structures. This methodology, so engaging for the children, proved to be very effective also because they were able to leave the desks for a ludic didactic experience during which they could reproduce the actions of the characters told in the stories. In this sense, the T.P.R. has been used in an integrated way with role play and role-taking, other extremely effective and engaging methodologies that encourage intense emotional and cognitive involvement, in a playful and joyful learning experience. Obviously the main methodological resource was storytelling, conveying and facilitating the comprehension of the text through the use of many images. The sentences of the text were repeated several times, first chorally and then individually.

All the activities were designed in a playful way and by adopting several didactic strategies with the aim of fostering comprehension of the sentences, consolidation of the vocabulary and therefore acquisition of the language. Storytelling, of course, was the preferred teaching methodology. Telling stories is a human need and it starts from a millennial tradition that has evolved over the centuries with the appearance of written language, developing into different forms and literary genres. Narrative has an incredible charm and as a result is vital for effective teaching. Tales present situations in which a character pursues a goal, carries out actions that, in every specific culture, are considered suitable. The structuring of thought and the acquisition of rules for communication, which characterize the narrative form, represent the basis for the literacy process, because through narration a course of reflection is triggered, aiming at the construction of interpretative meanings of reality and the diffusion of shared cultural values. So the choice to propose Edgeworth's tales: her stories are still alive and have a great educational value, not only for their moral intent, still relevant to our pupils, but also as authentic literary material to teach English in primary school. The universal values of Truth, Justice and Humanity are still fundamental in our multiethnic and globalized society and classrooms. The textual organization adopted by Edgeworth, based on recursive lexical forms, is a way to enhance linguistic acquisition and learn ethical behaviour. The words are often repeated, with an extensive use of synonyms: it is a useful strategy for the expansion of the little readers' lexical repertoire, as highlighted by Raffaella Leproni:

The repetition of *formats* and situations, the use of the enumeration of facts and the effective use of actual communicative expressions help the acquisition and the consolidation of multiple linguistic structures and of the con-

cepts linked to them ... Rosamond (and the pupils with her) learns through the storage of reasoned experience: at the repetition of a same situation she learns, each time, new considerations that can allow her to form an autonomous judgment. (2012, 46-47)

And further:

The child isn't taught a lesson, but it is ensured that he/she acquires it through his/her experience with situations and language; at each format repetition there is an experience repetition that gradually improves the capacity of judging of the child, which little by little becomes independent from the adults. (*Ibidem*, 48)

It is clear that on the educational level it represents an excellent learning strategy, fostering the thought organization to exchange experiences and knowledge through the activation of multiple skills: cognitive, linguistic, mnemonic and meta cognitive. In every story we can find characters sharing with the reader features and experiences that are intrinsic of human nature. Certainly a fundamental role was played by the choice of the tales: using authentic materials was a successful choice, above all for motivational aspects. The children knew that "The Purple Jar" and "The Little Merchants" are stories written in English for English children; they are very different from the artificial, short texts in the textbooks, usually used during ordinary lessons: they are "real" and being able to understand and follow the plot for the pupils had the taste of a conquest, gave them a boost to self-efficacy and self-esteem, increasing interest in language and motivation to learn. The strength of these stories also lies in language simplicity and immediacy. This authentic material is easily comprehensible even by non-native English children.

Of course, sometimes it was necessary to change the text, but in a very light and limited way, making the sentences shorter and without subordinates; but the lexicon and morphology are very simple so there was no need to change it significantly. To ease text comprehension, each sequence of the story was composed of a drawing, representing a fundamental scene of the story, associated with a small caption. It was efficient to observe each drawn scene and then discuss with the pupils what was happening to the characters, exhorting them to make predictions about what could have happened after, just guessing from the images and the short sentences. Maria Edgeworth's stories had the function of *Pre-text* and *Con-text* to enhance English language learning both from the morphosyntactic and lexical angles. We always tried to connect the plot with the proposal of various lexical sets, related to clothing, food, family, the city, jobs, the sale and so on ... What has emerged and has been particularly important is that children found the stories interesting and exciting, to the point that they often did not realize that they were told in a different

language. Oral productions always started in a choral way, then gradually we moved on to simple and brief situations of individual expressions, as suggested by the *Rule of Forgetting* (Krashen 1983) according to which we acquire a language better when we forget we are learning it (see Bosisio 2005, 39). The children, while playing, didn't think that they were studying and learning: participating in a ludic activity distracted them from the performance of the task, because their attention was focused on the game and its dynamics. Of course, at the beginning, when we told them that we would read a story in English, the children made objections, being afraid they would not understand, but then, as the story was presented and joyful activities helped text comprehension, they realized that it was possible, that it could be understandable and they were totally focused on the plot, so that every concern and fear vanished.

After the narration, we always planned and implemented activities based on reflection and meta-cognition, during which the pupils showed remarkable self-observation skills. Everyone said that reading and listening to the story of Rosamond, Francisco and Piedro in English was fun and made it easier to understand and remember many new English words. The protagonists of "The Little Merchants", Francisco the honest and Piedro the cunning, are characters we can easily find, with the necessary updates, in a contemporary adolescent context. Moral teaching is absolutely valid and acceptable: those who act with rectitude and honesty receive consensus and respect therefore they can be happy, while those who act with cunning and deception determine their own failure and lose both esteem and friends. "In all his childish traffic, Francisco, imitating his parents, was scrupulously honest, and therefore all his companions trusted him" (Edgeworth 1825, 83). Pupils, at the end of the narration, commented favourably, saying that the story was fun and interesting; most of them identified themselves with Francisco, admiring his honesty and sincerity, stating that "Piedro is so funny because he always wants to be cunning, but then he loses". It happened that some children would have preferred a different ending, in which there was a positive change in the personality of Piedro the cheater, hoping that he could become as kind, polite and honest as Francisco. In short, they felt the need for a happy ending, which they are used to, listening to modern stories or watching Disney cartoons. The considerations of these third millennium children clearly showed that Maria Edgeworth's teaching is absolutely alive and current. For example, children have perceived Rosamond's story as a tale of two centuries ago, because the protagonist has the same needs, whims, the same fragility that they have. Walking holding hands with their mother looking at the shop windows in the city centre is a common experience, to desire an object that has no use is a frequent attitude of our sons, daughters and pupils. Children, facing the unknown words in the text, were more and more able to understand the dialogues, thanks

to the use of images and short captions; it turned out to be a very useful and efficient methodology. After spending a couple of days discovering the story through the images, pupils were able to understand the meaning even without them, simply by reading the text. We decided to start the lessons from well-known situations, involving cognitive, linguistic, musical, physical, social and emotional components (see Freddi 1990) to allow pupils to learn in a context that is familiar to them. Also acting out the main passages of the tale proved to be a valid strategy to grasp the sense of the entire story. Children, through role-playing, lived personally the narrated events. It allowed them to grasp aspects that could not be easily understood by simple reading, such as the pain of a stone in a shoe. We often decided to use technology too, by presenting the images with captions in Power Point, a methodological choice that made the storytelling moment, more captivating; the times when the children expressly requested to listen again to parts of the stories were not infrequent. During the narration, we stopped reading, to ask questions about the plot such as: "What can you do with a vase?". Someone said that perhaps there is something special in the jar, while a child said that Rosamond would have put some goldfish in it. The answers to the questions were accompanied by several comments on how the story could end: some children agreed with Rosamond's dad, others would like her mother to buy her new shoes immediately. What emerged in these brainstorming activities is that the message from the consequences of Rosamond's choice are current and realistic even today. Rosamond's parents' attitude is not condescending: they leave her free to choose and this leads the child to accept the consequences of her mistake. She remains firm and determined in her choice. The exaltation of fundamental values such as consistency with one's choices, the value of things and the importance of money is evident. Among the various activities proposed, we asked the children, divided into groups, to imagine and write in English a different ending. For instance one group, in a fourth grade, concluded with Rosamond's mother buying her new shoes so she could play with her friends in the park and go to visit the glass house with her father and her little brother; while another group imagined that Rosamond is still happy with the transparent vase and she can use it as a vase for flowers in her room. Children, after reading the text, made their own considerations, here are some of their comments:

'Rosamond was not clever: she found herself with broken shoes for a vase!'

'Her mother is strict, but right!'

'I would not have behaved like her, I would have listened to my mother!'

'We learned that our choices have consequences!'

'This story has taught me that appearances deceive and parents must be listened!'

'Mom gives her the opportunity to learn!'

Of course Rosamond is sad at the end, but she learned the lesson so well that the last sentence is...

‘Oh mamma, ... how I wish that I had chosen the shoes—they would have been of so much more use to me than that jar: however, I am sure—no, not quite sure – but, I hope, I shall be wiser another time’. (Edgeworth 1825, 151)

What didactic prospects can we imagine for the future? I hope the trend will be presenting the study of English with alternatives to traditional teaching methods; teachers should aim to provide a positive, ludic setting, based on Edgeworth’s tales, fostering English learning. The goal should be to let the pupils experience success, satisfaction and efficiency, which is possible by stimulating the use of English not only for performing school tasks, but by exalting its communicative potential and the endless occasions to use it. Educational-didactic projects could evolve with a wider use of new technologies, with the daily involvement of the LIM or multimedia games with which the children have instrumental familiarity, it would be effective to allow an active, shared learning, in a playful and motivating atmosphere promoting collaboration, cooperation leading to the realization of organized collective authentic tasks as recommended by the Italian Ministry of Education’s *Indicazioni Nazionali*.

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EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE, DISPOSITION:
FROM *THE PARENT'S ASSISTANT* TO *HARRINGTON*

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Abstract:

Maria Edgeworth skilfully pictures strategies for building and coping with social identity, through education. The role of the institutions, as well as of educators – masters, parents and authority in general – needs, therefore, to be critically analysed and questioned.

Keywords: Edgeworth, education, *Harrington*, *Irish Bulls*, knowledge, social identity

The essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment; and the essence of this suspense is inquiry to determine the nature of the problem before proceeding to attempt at its solution.
(Dewey 1997 [1910], 74)

Evil communication corrupts good manners
(Edgeworth 1907 [1796], 325)

Social belonging and the development of the individual are issues that inform the entire production by Maria Edgeworth and her father Richard Lovell. Whether we examine Maria's celebrated Regional novels, her complex pedagogical works including her stories for and about children and her essays for parents, we always find that her main aim – at times explicitly declared, at others "only" implicitly evident – was to inculcate people with the idea that only a proper education might make an individual a rightful part of the very society he or she already lives in.

The main values sustaining and underscoring this kind of education cannot be found, however, in accidental fashion or trendy philosophic ideas. What Maria and her father call the "science of education" needed to be built on grounds so solid that they were capable of resisting the ever-changing priorities dictated by the times, by politics and chance, while, at the same time, respecting historical and human accidents (like birth, fortune, gender, and so on) in order to fulfil its duty towards the juvenile and mature sectors of society alike:

The question, whether society could exist without the distinction of ranks, is a question involving a variety of complicated discussions, which we leave to the politician and the legislator. At present it is necessary that the education of different ranks should, in some respects, be different. They have few ideas, few habits, in common; their peculiar vices and virtues do not arise from the same causes, and their ambition is to be directed to different objects. But justice, truth, and humanity are confined to no particular rank, and should be enforced with equal care and energy upon the minds of young people of every station. (Edgeworth 1907, 2)

1. Education

Where, then, was Education meant to be bestowed upon the minds of young people, and possibly generously offered to their communities too? The family was, of course, the privileged place from which to start, as, until 1831, no national education system had been set up in Ireland.

The reasons making it difficult for all children to obtain an education resided in a number of religious and political issues concerning the majority of the population. In the first place, education was perceived as a private opportunity permitting the wealthy to bring their children up in accordance with their social status; secondly – but not for general relevance –, due to religious concerns, children attended different schools according to their families' faith. Catholics, as well as other dissenters, like Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers for example, had not got the right to be educated in their own creeds in Protestant schools; on the other hand, no Protestant family would have allowed their children to be taught by a Catholic/dissenting preceptor. Philosophical reasons were also at stake; in 1768, answering John Brown's proposal for a national education scheme, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) wrote *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, where he asserted that any such scheme would have prevented the intellectual and scientific progress of the Nation, replacing the "originality" of British minds with a "uniformity" of reasoning, violating the sanctity of the domestic sphere, and – even worse – favouring "despotism", allowing the Government ideological control over the minds of children. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and William Godwin (1756-1836) adopted similar stances. It is worth noting that, as they all belonged to families of dissenters, all three thinkers (Priestley, Paine, and Godwin) had a clear view of the Anglican cultural hegemony that would accompany any project of national education in the British countries.

The idea of changing attitudes towards education was a notion planted towards the end of the 17th century, in particular by John Locke (1632-1704), whose enlightened and tolerance-oriented views had become the most authoritative reference for the development of educational/peda-

gological studies in 18th century England. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), he clearly expressed the urge for a change in the parental attitude towards children, which up to then was extremely rigid and punishment-centred (especially physical punishment)¹. Locke argued that the child should and might be taught an idea of fear and respect towards the adult without being beaten:

Beating is the worst, and therefore the last Means to be used in the Correction of Children, and that only in Cases of Extremity, after all gentler Ways have been try'd and prov'd unsuccessful: which, if well observ'd, there will be very seldom any Need of Blows. (Locke 1752 [1693], 106, 84)

as John Aubrey (1626-1697) too theorised, although he was not in favour of a material compensation for good behaviour unlike John Evelyn (1620-1706), who was. Locke promoted a more liberal attitude towards the child, favouring a broader *curriculum studiorum*, not centred mainly on religion and catechism, or dealing only with precepts, prescriptions, duty, guilt and punishment (merely hinting at merit and reward). He held that studies should dwell on topics such as philosophy, history, law, mathematics, music, even dancing, and speaking – English first of all, then other languages as French, Italian or German. Education, in his view, should aim at making men² capable of integrating with society, while equipping them with both erudition and practical knowledge – capacities that came mostly from a critical comparison with the reality in which they lived.

Locke's heritage transforms education into a social matter making it slowly abandon its main religious imprinting with a shift from theology to morality which acquires a social perspective, involving parents and educators alike in actions directed to teaching children how to become active members of the civilised British world. For the child, breaking the rules should no longer mean being punished for disobeying the Laws of the Lord, of whose authority the father (and mother) was an extension, but, more im-

¹ Before Locke, feelings towards the education of children were generally somewhat “autocratic, indeed ferocious” (Plumb 1975, 65). Richard Allestree (1619-1681) described the rigid conditions in which English children were educated in detail, pointing out how they were often condemned to physical constriction to limit the expansion of their bodies, and because they were considered innately sinful, bearers of sin: “The new born babe is full of the stains and pollutions of sin which it inherits from our first parents through our loins” (1658, 20). In any case, the most common advice to parents focused on punishment rather than on action. In his *History of Childhood*, Lloyd deMause claims that the earliest reports of children who had not been beaten by their parents or guardians can be traced back to 1690; before 1700, out of over 300 manuals on how to bring up children, only three (Plutarco, Palmieri and Sadoleto) did not recommend that fathers beat their offspring (1995, 42).

² Women, until then, were rarely considered.

portantly, become a matter of conscience and acknowledgement of accepted/acceptable behaviour to which a Gentleman must adhere.

Schools, of course, had to change accordingly. Though whips and canes were still common, especially in the old public and grammar schools (and supported by authorities like Dr. Johnson), the model proposed in new schools and in the growing number of handbooks dealing with the care and education of children, focussed on education as a means by which to provide the child with accomplishments – not only notions, but also skills and talents capable of “guaranteeing” him a job and a relevant social position. The anonymous author of *Dialogues on the Passions, Habits, Appetites and Affections, etc. Peculiar to Children* (1748), claimed that the main duty of education was to increase children’s virtues rather than “their abounding in human literature”, through benevolence and sympathy, possibly avoiding shame and fear (see Anon. 1748, 8, 17-18).

By the middle of the 18th century, a new vision on education had started to spread, leading to the establishment of a considerable number of private academies, paralleled by the development of a new type of children’s literature, and sustained by an enormous amount of money that families were now ready to spend on their children’s development and activities. To put it in Plumb’s words:

The repercussions on the world of children were very great. Society required accomplishment, and accomplishment required expenditure. The children’s new world became a market that could be exploited. Few desires will empty a pocket quicker than social aspiration and the main route was, then as now, through education, which combined social adornment with the opportunity of a more financially rewarding career for children. (Plumb 1975, 71)

Parents began to invest in their children’s education as a projection of their social status and as a valuable asset aimed at improving their social rank and position. Social attitudes were paired with moral imperatives, social education becoming the founding principle of educational practice; considering the growth of the middle-classes and their hunger for social/political/cultural acknowledgement, being “well-bread” (in modern terms, “cultivated” rather than “educated”) implied being prepared to undertake one’s pathway towards adulthood equipped with a solid baggage containing both notions, behaviours, and social abilities enabling the individual to face the world.

Society responded: mothers and fathers willingly began to spend increasingly larger sums on the education of their children, though they also invested in their entertainment and amusement:

Children were expected to be companions of their parents in ways, which would have been impossible in the seventeenth century, because the attractions did not then exist. Exhibitions of curiosities; museums; zoos; puppet shows; circuses; lectures on science; panoramas of European cities; automata;

horseless carriages; even human and animal monstrosities were available in provincial cities as well as in London ... The emphasis was on marvels, curiosities that were new and remarkable, and usually mechanical or optical; hence many children were given a keen sense of a new and developing and changing world in which mechanical ingenuity, electricity and science in general played an active part; a totally different cultural atmosphere to that in which their grandfathers had lived. Their cultural horizons, too, were widened by the availability of music to listen to in festivals and concerts, the cheapness of musical instruments, and the plentiful supply of music teachers; the same is true of art. (Plumb 1975, 85-87)

In the second half of the 18th century, education had finally reached the status of key-element in the building of identity, both at individual and social level. True, knowledge had to be paired with accomplishments, but it was considered as an indispensable quality for any respected member of civilised society. Education had become an investment in the actual condition as well as the future of people. It was now the concern of learned men (and women) to act properly with a view to transferring their knowledge and accomplishments to the next generations – and enabling the present generation to do its part in building the character of their children. Like any other novel and fashionable phenomenon, the education of children too witnessed excesses – which “the advanced radicals – the Burghs, the Days, the Edgeworths” openly condemned:

Many, particularly the Edgeworths, disapproved of the growing indulgence of parents towards their children, particularly the waste of money on useless toys. Maria Edgeworth denounced dolls and dolls’ houses, had no use for rocking horses, and strongly disapproved of baa-lams, squeaky pigs and cuckoos, and all simple action toys. She was for a pencil and plain paper, toys which led to physical exercise hoops, tops, battledores and a pair of scissors and paper for a girl to cut out her fancies; later boys should be given models of instruments used by manufacturers: spinning-wheels, looms, paper-mills, water-mills which ... were easily available. (*Ibidem*, 91)³

As people began to feel the need of raising their children properly to guarantee them a place in the world, the school system, too, underwent

³ See Edgeworth 1801 [1798], 2-5, 23-26. Plumb remarks on Edgeworth’s modernity in dealing with what we could today describe as a prodrome for consumerism: “Maria Edgeworth resonates with modernity, but the interest in her long discussion of toys lies in the huge variety which obviously abounded in the 1790s, a variety not as extensive, of course, as today, but reflecting our world rather than that of seventeenth-century England. Indeed, wherever we turn in the world of children-clothes, pets, toys, education, sport, music and art, their world was richer, more varied, more intellectually and emotionally exciting than it had been in earlier generations” (Plumb 1975, 91).

several changes, especially in Ireland⁴. The open contrast regarding educational supremacy involving the churches was causing overt opposition to the multi-denominational system. Although the Anglican Church of Ireland represented the minority of the population, it was supported by the government in a bid to promote Protestantism; on the other hand, the Catholic and Presbyterian institutions, which had both suffered because of the Penal Laws and obstructionism⁵, were now seeking formal support from the state. Initially, the Government supported the education of the lower classes by annually funding the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland (the Kildare Place Society):

⁴ During the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, poor, learned men travelled around Ireland to offer classes in barns and anywhere else a few students might be assembled. This phenomenon was given the nickname of “hedge schools”, because some classes were taught in the shelter of a hedge as readily as in a building. Their quality was generally uneven, partly due to the variety of the learners, partly to the very few materials available for exercising reading and writing (mostly the Bible or popular, and cheap novels), partly to the fact that teachers were mostly itinerant and, more often than not, unqualified. In time, however, some of these schools earned a fixed place in a community, the classrooms equalling the majority of mainstream classrooms with proper textbooks. Catholic families in many cases considered them a better alternative to Protestant schools or to no schooling at all. *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (2007 [1998]) reports that in 1824 there were 9,000 schools of this kind with an estimated 400,000 pupils in attendance at hedge schools during the 1820s. Meanwhile, a small number of day schools associated with the Church of Ireland were also in operation. In 1811, some entrepreneurs from Dublin (some Quakers and members of other religions) decided to contribute to the improvement of educational opportunities for poverty-stricken youth, and founded the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland, which had its headquarters in Kildare Place. Their commitment paid off, and, in the end, the Society was granted state funding. The monitoring system on which they based the education provided at school was inspired by the pioneering work of Joseph Lancaster, an English educational reformer, who, in 1801, founded a free elementary school that organised one-room schoolhouses for the poor. Teachers could indicate their better students and designate them as monitors to train younger or less-proficient peers. Each student monitor was assigned 10 students to school. By way of contrast, at Kildare Place they tended to avoid beatings, which they substituted with public shaming, professing a milder conception of education. The daily practice of reading the Bible without providing any interpretation, though, infuriated Catholics, who refused to accept the validity of the King James’s Bible. By 1831, national schools took over from the Society whose funds from the state ceased. Separation of church and state was adhered to in theory, though not in practice (see Brown 1953, and “schools” in *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*).

⁵ Until 1782, when Gardiner’s act repealed the earlier Penal Laws, it was illegal for Catholic teachers to teach Catholic children (Akenson 1970, 44). Gardiner’s act, anyway, prohibited the endowment of any Catholic educational foundation in Ireland and required that every Catholic teacher obtain a licence from the Anglican bishop of their diocese. This last requirement was abolished in 1792 and with the Relief Act of 1793 all penalties regarding Catholic teachers were withdrawn (Burton 1979, 29).

Relationships between the churches were very hostile in the 1830s. Deep rooted animosities existed, all the more so in a climate of live proselytism when new patterns of power were evolving. For the Catholics, the Emancipation Act of 1829 was the symbol of a recovered status and was followed by a decade of consolidation and church building. On the other hand, for the Established Church, it represented a giving in to Catholic demands which would subsequently gather momentum and erode the position of the Established Church in Irish society. O'Connell's Repeal Campaign of 1830 added to the apprehension. (Coolahan 1983, 38)

Proposals for enhancing the precarious situation of schooling in Ireland emerged. Speaking before a Parliamentary Committee, Roman Catholic Bishop James Doyle (1786-1834)⁶ promoted the idea of a Model School, seeking to improve on the informal hedge-school system while indicating the role that a firmly established education system might play in appeasing the country:

I do not see how any man wishing well to the public peace, and who looks to Ireland as his country, can think that peace can be permanently established, or the prosperity of the country ever well secured, if children are separated at the commencement of life on account of their religious opinions. (Quoted in Webb 1878)

In his vision, public peace and the prosperity of the country depended considerably on bringing children together at an early age, which would “prepare the way for better feeling in Ireland”, as it would permit the formation of “those little intimacies and friendships which subsist through life”, bonds that unite children brought up together for the rest of their lives – “the finest feelings in the hearts of men” (*ibidem*).

In 1831, Edward Stanley (1799-1869), Chief Secretary for Ireland – later 14th Earl of Derby, in a letter to the 3rd Duke of Leinster, outlined the basis for the new State-supported system of primary education. Aimed at providing non-denominational education for all Irish children, he corroborated the ideas expressed by Doyle, on the belief that if children from all denominations learned together they could then live in peace as adults (see Cohen 2000, esp. 52). His letter remains the legal basis of today's National School system as it provided the two main principles that

⁶ James Warren Doyle, O.E.S.A. (1786-1834), Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin in Ireland; formally named in August 1819 as Michael Corcoran's successor. Signing himself as “J. K. L.” (James, Kildare and Leighlin), he published many works professing Catholic emancipation in both Irish and British society. Doyle was invited to give evidence on the state of Ireland to parliamentary enquiries in London in 1825, 1830 and 1832 (see Webb 1878).

still inform it: that children of all religious denominations be taught together in the same school, while religious instruction remain separate. A National Education Board was established, consisting of seven commissioners of education, all volunteer, unpaid dignitaries: three Anglican, two Presbyterian and two Roman Catholic⁷. School inspectors were designated, to make sure all national schools followed the rules established by the Board. All children were to be taught secular subjects together; religious instruction, instead, was separate and outside of school hours.

No hint of proselytism in this new school system was formally conceded; this attracted initial support from the Churches, though this did not last long, and the commissioners were ultimately forced to back down and allow schools to become informally denominational:

the opposition which non-denominational schooling faced was largely based on the idea that education is an extension of pastoral care and as such cannot be separated from religion. All the major churches saw it as their prerogative and were alarmed by the intrusion of the state into their sphere of influence. (Coolahan 1981, 5)

⁷The first members of the National Education Board were The Duke of Leinster (a liberal Protestant); the Most Reverend Dr Whately (a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, recently arrived from England); the Archbishop of Dublin (Established Church); the Most Reverend Dr Murray, Archbishop of Dublin (Catholic Church); Dr Sadlier (Provost of Trinity College); the Reverend James Carlile (a Scottish Presbyterian of the Synod of Ulster with a keen interest in education); A.R. Blake (a Catholic who had served on the Education Commission of 1824-27 and on the Poor Law Commission of 1830); and Robert Holmes (an independent-minded Unitarian barrister).

“Thus the Board fulfilled Stanley’s desire for ‘men of high personal character, including individuals of exalted position in the church’ as well as ‘professing different religious opinions’ [*Letter from chief secretary Stanley to the duke of Leinster*, [196] HC18312, xxix]. At the request of the Board itself, three other commissioners, Sir Patrick Bellew, Richard Greene, and J.P. Kennedy (who resigned shortly afterwards) were appointed in May 1838. The Reverend James Carlile resigned in 1838 and was replaced by Dr Henry. In June 1839, Viscount Morpeth, Chief Secretary for Ireland, Alexander MacDonnell, and John Corballis were appointed. In January 1840, Lord Plunket was appointed as a Commissioner. Therefore, in 1841 the original seven had become thirteen, reflecting the denominational composition of eight Established Church members, four Catholics, and two Presbyterians” (Coolahan 1983, 39).

A high level of public accountability was expected from the National Board. In response to queries from the Lord Lieutenant, the Board issued its first Report in 1834 and thereafter, until its abolition in 1922, annual reports and, when appropriate, detailed appendices, regarding its work (*ibidem*, 42).

The population, instead, showed great enthusiasm and many families sent their children to these new National Schools⁸.

The new educational system implied the development of a new method of teacher training, the monitorial system of teacher training, formally established in 1845⁹. From then on, promising pupils were given the opportunity, when of age (18) to become monitors in National schools while taking extra lessons in order to be able to pass the King's or Queen's scholarship exam within three years. This, in turn, enabled them to enter a training college. Model schools were specifically designed to train monitors; the larger ones also had boarding facilities for males, females and infants. The central model school was set up in Dublin in 1835 (Wylie 1997, ix). Despite the system's apparent goodwill teachers were intended more as agents of the state, "assisting in consolidating its hegemony through winning the consent of the masses whose interests it clearly opposed" (Doyle 2003, viii). Doyle held that its ideological mission was appreciation and acceptance of the immutability of the existing social order by the Irish "poor": while "the academic curriculum was intended to impart little more than functional literacy and numeracy to the vast majority of the poor", the teacher became "a tool in moulding the attitudes of the multitude towards the state" (*ibidem*), fostering and supporting "the formation

⁸ Later on, during the second half of the nineteenth century, first the Catholic Church, and later the Protestant churches accepted the legal position of "all religious denominations together". Where possible parents could choose to send their children to a National School under the management of their particular local Church. By the end of the century, the system had become increasingly denominational; families chose schools that educated primarily in their own religion. The legal position *de jure*, that all national schools are multi-denominational, remains to this day.

⁹ See ante, footnote 5, and Magee 1995, 102. For a full account of the monitorial system and the model schools, see Doyle 2003 (10/2019). Coolahan describes the development of teacher training in the years following Stanley's proposal: "The Board very quickly took action on Stanley's directive of 'establishing and maintaining a model school in Dublin and training teachers for country schools' by converting the outhouses in Memon Street to model schools. The school for boys opened on March 8, 1833 and that for girls on April 15, 1833. However, Stanley's other requirement that, prior to employment, teachers should have received previous instruction in a model school in Dublin, proved to be impracticable. Accordingly, the first group of teachers summoned to the model schools in February 1834 were existing teachers who now undertook a three-month course in the model schools. ... The model schools in Tyrone House were ready for pupils on March 11, 1836 and for teachers in October ... From 1835, it was clear that the Board conceived of the training course as a two year one but the exigencies of teacher supply meant the continuation of what were now half-yearly courses of five months, each allowing a double cohort in each year ... During the seven year period from 1834 to 1841, the Board put 781 teachers through a training course" (Coolahan 1983, 44-45). See also *Eighth Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland for the Year 1841* [471], HC 1843, xxxiii.

of ideologies and collective beliefs which legitimate state power and underpin concepts of nationhood and national character” (Green 1990, 29).

In compliance with the regulation of the National School System,

the emphasis was decidedly on permitting entry only to those that satisfied the moral requirements deemed necessary in a teacher. The primary aim was to remove teaching from the realm of the self-appointed private educator and to bring it under government control. (Doyle 2003, vii)

Education, when regulated and controlled, had now acquired the status of “formative agent of social, religious and civil attitudes”, and the teacher was becoming a mediator in countering ideas hostile to the interests of the state, as well as in promoting values bonding the existing social order (*ibidem*). By the end of the eighteenth century, this belief in the positive power of education was supplanting an earlier fear of its capacity to subvert. Bishop John Law of Elphin (1795-1810) framed the issue in the following harsh terms:

Education makes all the difference between wild beasts and useful animals, all the distinction between the Hottentot and the European, between the savage and the man. (Quoted in *Second Report of the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor of Ireland*, 1814, 10)

The quote, used by the commissioners of the Society to confirm the importance of educating the lower classes, derives, significantly, from Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s *Fourteenth Report from the Commissioners of the Board of Education in Ireland*, dating back to the 30th October, 1812 (House of Commons, henceforth H.C. 1812-1813, App. No. 3, 341). Though committed to supporting the established Church, Edgeworth was outspokenly in favour of religious tolerance (we might even venture to hint at the idea of *respect* when reading the educational texts he and Maria published, and her stories, which supported their theoretical aspects in everyday practice). In the whole production by the Edgeworths education alone –intended for all people, regardless of social position or religion –was supposed to provide the means by which the Irish people might control their own destiny and avoid cultural annihilation. As a member of both the Select Committee of the Irish Parliament on the Education of the Poor (1799), and the Commission of Inquiry on Irish Education (1806), Richard Lovell was able to make his views widely known on topics as diverse as curriculum, teaching methods, religious instruction, and the place of work and exercise. It seems plausible that, having but recently published *Practical Education* (1798) –countersigned by Maria –, he was the leader of the movement which aimed at reintroducing the subject of education into the Irish parliament.

Maria, on her father’s commitment to the cause of education as a commissioner for the Parliament, wrote:

In 1806, under the administration of the Duke of Bedford, who, happily for Ireland, was then its Viceroy, a board of commissioners to inquire into the education of the people of Ireland was appointed by His Grace. My father had claims to the honor [*sic*] of being of this board, as having brought into the last Irish parliament a bill for the better education of the people, as having resided long in Ireland, and as being a person, whose principles of toleration had been manifest in his conduct, and whose zeal for the improvement of education was known by his writings. These claims were felt; and in the most handsome manner, without any direct or indirect application on his part, he was appointed one of the commissioners. They received no salary. Their board lasted from 1806 to 1811. Their meetings were attended regularly, at every summons, by all the members, who assembled for that purpose in Dublin, though many lived at distant parts of the country. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 305)

In the *Report* he and his fellow-commissioners presented to the Irish Parliament in 1799, the third, fourth, and sixth resolutions envisaged a more structured and more controlled system of education than the one which subsisted at the time. Burton remarks that the resolutions “contain the germ of the ideas of teacher certification, payment by results, and regular school inspection.... The committee was asking, in fact, for a national system of education for the children of Ireland” (1979, 27), ambiguously indicating that “...the establishing one or more Schools in every Parish or Union of Parishes in this Kingdom would be useful to the Public” (*Report to the Irish Parliament*, Edgeworth R.L. 1799); “the resolution [in fact] although specifying that a school should be set up in every parish does not say that it should be set up by the parish” (Burton 1979, 27); “Indeed one could accept the resolution and argue for an interdenominational or even a catholic school” (*ibidem*).

The Report was debated twice, and on February 26th the House instructed Edgeworth and three other members to submit a Bill. Edgeworth’s speech introducing the Bill was fully reported in the *Dublin Evening Post* of April 2, 1799. Though no draft has been discovered to date, in the Edgeworth family papers there are some sheets headed “A Bill for the improvement of the education of the lower orders of people in this kingdom”, dated 1799. According to Burton,

if, as seems likely, this was the Bill put before the Irish House of Commons on 28th March 1799, then what Edgeworth and his colleagues were proposing was nothing less than the establishment of a national system of education for the poor of Ireland, regardless of faith. Its most radical proposal, which even went beyond the recommendations of the 1791 Report, was for the establishment of catholic schools with catholic teachers appointed by catholic priests. (*Ibidem*, 28)

Edgeworth is reported as having said that

The happiness, the tranquillity, not only of the lower orders, but of all ranks, all descriptions of people in Ireland, depend upon the amelioration of our national education ... In a war of opinions, it must inevitably be the *mind* that will decide the victory ... Not with all the treasure which our enormous increase of taxation throws into the hands of our Executive Government, can you devise any new system of coercion from which we can flatter ourselves with permanent security, until the *minds* of the people are, by proper instruction, medicined to repose. (*Dublin Evening Post*, 2 April 1799)

The Bill was dropped in the end. The reasons for its rejection were not made public, though

it appears, from the emphasis which Edgeworth laid in his speech on finance, that he was told that money could not be made available at a time of national emergency when priority must be given to matters of defence. This Edgeworth could not accept. (Burton 1979, 29-30)

Perhaps, the real reason for the disappearance of the Bill was that the government was not yet ready

to envisage an organized national system of education which would contain catholic schools whose teachers had been appointed by catholic priests. Also, it must be admitted, the Catholics of Ireland may not have been ready to send their children to a school, even though run by a catholic teacher, that had come into being as part of a national system. (*Ibidem*, 30)

Thirteen years after his first official speech to the Dublin Parliament¹⁰, in a letter to Dr. William Stuart, the Anglican¹¹ Lord Primate (appendix to the aforementioned *Fourteenth Report from the commissioners of the board of education in Ireland*, 1812 – and included in the 1820 edition of his *Memoirs*), Edgeworth's position is again clearly established:

There is but one method, that appears to me practicable in this state of things: to let Protestants appoint masters for Protestant children, and Catholics choose masters for their own schools. ... There are many places in Ireland, where Protestants and Catholics are taught to read and write, and to say their respective catechisms, by Catholic masters, – there are on the contrary other places, where every attempt of the most enlightened and benevolent people has failed, to collect the children of Catholics under a Protestant master; but in most places it has been observed, that, where no

¹⁰The Dublin Parliament ceased to exist after the Act of Union came into effect in 1801. From then on, all questions regarding Ireland became the prerogative of Westminster.

¹¹Ireland had and has two Primates of All Ireland, one Anglican (Church of Ireland) the other Roman Catholic, both with their seats and Cathedrals in Armagh, Northern Ireland, the Island's traditional ecclesiastical capital.

particular circumstance has arisen to awaken religious animosity, or well – founded suspicion, the best teacher, whether Catholic or Protestant, soon attracts all the scholars, and the inferior master is obliged to give way; and it is obvious, that in all cases, *where the two sects agree, there need be no separation.* (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 463-464)

He held that the benefits deriving from a similar arrangement would spread in many directions: mutual distrust would diminish, the best teachers¹² would be employed regardless of their religion, and the entire population benefit. Edgeworth underlined that “all the ministers of the Gospel” should respond to the principle of Christian charity, according to which “It can never be good policy, to degrade the ministers of the Catholic religion in the eyes of the people, whose consciences they are to direct, and whose morals they are to form” (*ibidem*, 465). This Edgeworthian principle was put into practical effect in the school Richard Lovell and his son established at Edgeworthstown in 1816. The school was a resounding success, mainly because of the natural talent that young Lovell Edgeworth had as a teacher. Maria recorded with obvious pride:

In the school established at Edgeworths Town, in 1816, by my brother Lovell ... there are now (March, 1820), above 170 boys of the lower, middle, and higher classes, Protestants and Catholics. The seminary flourishes; has succeeded beyond our utmost hopes; and is approved of by both Protestant and Catholic ministers. (*Ibidem*, n. 453)

Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth, among many other distinguished visitors, came to Edgeworthstown to admire it. It failed ultimately only “because Lovell Edgeworth, though a born teacher and *bon viveur*, was not a born accountant, and his sister, Maria, stepped in, sent him away, and closed the school down” (Taylor 1986, 48). The building is now a small museum, but the local administration is working to reopen the school.

A full decade before Doyle’s Model schools, and nineteen years before Stanley’s national reform, “far from wishing to destroy what has been already done” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 465) Edgeworth was formally advocating for a new school system, based on merit, mentoring, and peer tutoring; a school able to act in the interest of the state, showing all people that they belonged to the Kingdom, making them “*think justly*, and thus make them peaceable subjects, and good members of society” (*ibidem*, 463):

¹²In the 1799 draft, Richard Lovell Edgeworth mentions the chance to have a master or mistress officially appointed to the school.

Beside these parish-schools, I propose that a number of new schools should be established. These I would divide into two classes, preparatory and provincial. From the preparatory schools, which should be day-schools, I would have a certain number of boys selected from time to time, and draughted into the provincial schools, where they should be clothed, lodged, boarded, and instructed, for two, or perhaps three years, at the public expense.

Thus a considerable number of boys, of the best conduct, and of the best abilities, would be taken from the ranks of the profligate and ignorant, and would be indissolubly attached to the laws and government of the country. ... These [schools] should be erected ... in such places as should suit the population of different districts. (*Ibidem*, 466)

Subjects to be taught ranged from general “reading, writing and arithmetic” to “book-keeping, surveying, agricultural economy, practical mechanics, and such parts of practical chemistry, as are useful in the trades and occupations for which they are designed”, though no method for the teaching of these subjects was to be imposed as exclusive¹³, and the level of teaching had to be “suited to the age of the pupils and to their previous acquirements”, taking also into consideration the fact that some topics were not suitable for girls, so that “Wherever girls are taught, they should be dismissed with the younger class” (*ibidem*, 470). Great care was to be taken with the language spoken by teachers and pupils alike, as the issue of improper use of the English language by the Irish was a question the Edgeworths felt keenly (as Richard Lovell proudly remarked):

A distinguished member of our Board has observed, that many of the evils, which we suppose to arise from want of education, or from difference of religion, in Ireland, arise from difference of language* [*Grattan], from the lower classes continuing to speak Irish, instead of learning English. This may be the case in some parts of the country, but certainly not in the county where I reside; wherever it is the case, proper methods should be taken for remedying it; the multiplying the number of English schools seems to be one of the means most likely to succeed. It should be considered, for the honour of the docility of the Irish, that they have within these few years made a greater progress in learning English, than the Welsh have made since the time of Edward the First in acquiring that language. (*Ibidem*, 469)¹⁴

¹³ “In the preparatory schools for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, advantage should be taken of all the improvements, which Dr Bell, Mr Lancaster, and others, have suggested; and their plans may be still further improved: there are means of teaching children to read with more ease, more certainty, in much less time, and at less expense, than any that are in use at present at public schools; but no particular mode of teaching should be exclusively enjoined; the best will soon make its way by its own superiority” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 470).

¹⁴ The idea recurs in implicit and ironical terms in the short story of “Little Dominick”, the sixth chapter of *Essay on Irish Bulls* (see below).

The selection of appropriate teachers was a pivotal point in Edgeworth's proposal. Their integrity needed to be established, for a number of reasons, first, because being Protestant or Catholic, they were to address children of different religious beliefs according to the prevailing religion of the place where the school was built. The same criteria applied to both the choice of the masters who were to be in charge of the pupils' education, and the appointment of commendable students as monitors of their peers:

The greatest care should be taken in the choice of these masters, and they should be removed immediately upon a report of ill conduct made by the inspectors, or upon such information as the commissioners could rely on. ... After the second year of the establishment of the preparatory schools, the boys should be divided into two classes, an upper and a lower; the second class should be taught by monitors chosen from the first class; but I totally disapprove of the indiscriminate appointment of monitors; great care must be taken in their selection; only the best informed, and the best tempered boys should be employed; good temper should be preferred to abilities, because, in teaching, good temper is of more consequence than the most shining abilities. (*Ibidem*, 466, 469-470)

To Edgeworth, the quality of the masters guaranteed the improvement of the children, as "much less than one hour's lively attention in the pupil will improve his understanding, under proper teachers, more than ten hours listless impatience under the tuition of a common pedagogue in a common school" (*ibidem*, 470). Great care was therefore to be devoted to checking the moral attitude and the competence of those who would teach, as well as the way masters assessed their pupils' progress and establishing a virtuous parallel system of monitoring of both teachers and students¹⁵. To achieve a similar goal, some specific schooling and positive examples were essential, so much so that Edgeworth foresaw the establishment of a dedicated institution, conceived for the professional education and training of masters (which was promoted in the school he opened):

Whatever plan may be adopted for the education of the classes, a seminary for masters is indispensably necessary; some of the most promising pupils from Dr Bell's and Mr Lancaster's schools might be invited to this country; a succession of persons properly qualified to be masters might afterwards be supplied by selections from our own schools. By proper encouragement, I think a school for masters might be established at Wilson's Hospital. (*Ibidem*, 471)

¹⁵ "The masters should be obliged to keep a weekly register of the morals and acquirements of every boy in the upper class of each school: this register should be kept by simple marks, under the heads of truth, honesty, obedience, and scholarship. The inspectors should verify the contents of these registers from time to time by inquiry, and by examination of the boys in the different branches of their instruction" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 468).

More than any other thing, the whole “plan of popular education” Edgeworth devised was conceived to meet the needs of the people, especially of the lower classes, who had begun to consider the education of their children as the most powerful mean to keep them “employed, and consequently out of mischief”, and above all as a means by which to provide them with some chance of improving their social condition. In spite of the fact that sending their children to school meant losing their help in making the family’s ends meet. Edgeworth claimed having proof that

the poor are now uncommonly anxious to procure education for their children: as a proof of this, I may mention, that in a number of private letters, which I have lately had an opportunity of seeing from young men abroad in different parts of the world, I have found most urgent entreaties to their parents, or their wives, *to keep their children to school.* (*Ibidem*)

He realised that this urge represented a great opportunity for fostering integration, at religious, ethnic, cultural level while it could trigger a positive chain of advancement and progress in the general social conditions of the whole nation, due to the consideration that the new school system he proposed paid to merit, industry, and self-improvement. It was the best way, in short, to promote active, responsible, proud citizenship all over the British Kingdom:

... this anxious desire, that the children should be instructed, is the best preparation, the best omen, for the success of a plan of popular education; and the plan I now propose would hold out many peculiarly alluring circumstances: the keeping of registers in the schools; the selecting, from the evidence of these registers, the most deserving pupils, without distinction of religion to be sent to public examinations in the provincial schools, would, in the first instance, give confidence in the impartiality of the system, and excite strong emulation; the further certainty, that the successful candidates at these examinations would be sent to the provincial schools, where, without expense to the parents, their education would be continued so as completely to prepare them, at their entrance into life, for employments and *situations* in a rank or step above their own, must operate as a powerful motive, both on parents and children; a motive which would excite the energy of the young, and secure the cooperation of the old: the poor would see that advancement in many lucrative and honourable occupations is thus laid open to industry and merit; they would perceive, that those only enjoy rational freedom, who have thus the power of obtaining, by their own exertions, what in other countries, is reserved exclusively for persons, who are born in the higher ranks of life. The riches and distinctions, that may be acquired in many occupations, will thus be considered as a fund opened to every individual in the state; and though, in human affairs, a multitude of unforeseen circumstances retard and obstruct the advancement of individuals, yet where the way is open to all, none can justly complain of being necessarily kept down below their fellow citizens. (*Ibidem*, 471-472)

Fellowship, mutual understanding and emulation are at the core of any social system. Reasonable promotion of these natural values among young people through a national school system could (and still can) bridge differences, while increasing happiness and welfare, which should be the main goals – along with the progress of human knowledge and understanding – of any civilised society:

... we may hope to see children grow up in real friendship together. The whole sum of their pleasure is much increased by mutual sympathy. This happy moral truth, upon which so many of our virtues depend, should be impressed upon the mind; it should be clearly demonstrated to the reason; it should not be repeated as an *a priori*, sentimental assertion.

Those who have observed the sudden, violent, and surprising effects of emulation in public schools, will regret the want of this power in the intellectual education of their pupils at home. Even the acquisition of talents and knowledge ought, however, to be but a secondary consideration, subordinate to the general happiness of our pupils. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801 [1798], vol. I, 247)¹⁶

2. Knowledge

The progress of knowledge has spread now so far, that it cannot be stopped without destruction to those, who attempt to arrest its course. The people *will* read, and *will* think; the only question that remains for their governors is, how to lead them to read such books, as shall accustom them *to think justly*, and thus make them peaceable subjects, and good members of society. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 463)

Maria and her father had very clear ideas about the texts people should read *to become good members of society*¹⁷. Even though they formally did not presume to supply a list of good and bad readings, in their works they commented extensively on the most popular titles available, and on their contents. Their attentive criticism was founded on the idea that children derive their first impressions of the world from the narrations they receive, mostly from the books they read or have read to them, as well as –

¹⁶ See “The Barring Out”, below.

¹⁷ An interesting overview of the reception of new kinds of books, such as science books, for children, “reveals the extent to which religious differences could affect parental attitudes to the natural world, reason, the uses of the sciences, and the appropriate way to read and discuss books. Although the sciences were admitted as suitable for children, the issues of the subjects to be chosen, the purposes they were intended for, and the pedagogical methods by which they were presented, were still contested” (Fyfe 2000, 453).

as mentioned above – from the example they receive from adults, whether through direct comparison or reading:

Many able writers have laid down extensive plans of study, and have named the books that are essential to the acquisition of different branches of knowledge. Amongst others we may refer to Dr. Priestley's, which is to be seen at the end of his *Essays on Education*. We are sensible that order is necessary in reading, but we cannot think that the same order will suit all minds, nor do we imagine that a young person cannot read to advantage unless he pursue a given course of study ...

If parents would keep an accurate list of the books which their children read, of the ages at which they are read, it would be of essential service in improving the art of education. We might then mark the progress of the understanding with accuracy, and discover, with some degree of certainty, the circumstances on which the formation of the character and taste depend. Swift has given us a list of the books which he read during two years of his life; we can trace the ideas that he acquired from them in his *Laputa*, and other parts of *Gulliver's travels*. Gibbon's journal of his studies, and his account of universities, are very instructive to young students. So is the life of Franklin, written by himself. Madame Roland has left a history of her education; and in the books she read in her early years, we see the formation of her character ...

Formerly it was wisely said, 'Tell me what company a man keeps, and I will tell you what he is;' but since literature has spread a new influence over the world, we must add, 'Tell me what company a man has kept, and what books he has read, and I will tell you what he is.' (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, 343-344)

Their pedagogic production, therefore, provided a series of trustworthy instances which sought to equip different readers with different levels of knowledge, according to their social condition, their characters, and their needs, while accompanying them along the pathway of their (life-long) education. Despite the accidental differences in status, the Edgeworths firmly believed in bringing up all young people ("the juvenile portion of society", as they called it in the Preface to *The Parent's Assistant*) according to some main principles that might be endorsed by all political, religious, and social parties. Principles of "justice, truth and humanity" (Edgeworth 1907, 2) that, once acknowledged and acquired, should enable youngsters to detect and avoid or positively cope with the bad examples and behaviour they might encounter.

To the Edgeworths, education meant providing models to emulate when positive, to reject when negative. A thoughtful educator, they held, should be able to choose carefully the examples to set before children, the people to put children in contact with, as well as the books to offer them to read, especially at the earliest stages of their development, so as not to expose them prematurely to vices they were meant to avoid in the future. Bad example was, therefore, extremely important when acquiring knowledge, as it contributed to point to the right behavioural path chil-

dren should follow by providing negative evidence upon which to build their critical thinking:

Were young people, either in public schools or in private families, absolutely free from bad examples, it would not be advisable to introduce despicable and vicious characters in books intended for their improvement. But in real life they *must* see vice, and it is best that they should be early shocked with the representation of what they are to avoid. There is a great deal of difference between innocence and ignorance. (*Ibidem*, 3-4)

This idea had already been expressed in almost the same terms in *Practical Education* (1796), where the word “knowledge” recurs 89 time in volume I, and 139 in volume II; here the main focus was on raising adults’ awareness on their own conduct and social responsibilities:

It may be laid down as a first principle, that we should preserve children from the knowledge of any vice, or any folly, of which the idea has never yet entered their minds, and which they are not necessarily disposed to learn by early example. Children who have never lived with servants, who have never associated with ill educated companions of their own age, and who, in their own family, have heard nothing but good conversation, and seen none but good examples, will, in their language, their manners, and their whole disposition, be not only free from many of the faults common amongst children, but they will absolutely have no idea that there are such faults. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, 289)

As the title of the book suggests, education intertwines with experience. Empirical knowledge of things and facts should always be paired with the learning stemming from books and theoretical instruction. So much so, because, to be useful, experience needed people to be active, as education requires effort and labour on the part of the pupil; in both cases, the satisfaction deriving from the achievement of a goal provides the necessary motivation for striving even further:

The truth is, that useful knowledge cannot be obtained without labour; that attention long continued is laborious, but that without this labour nothing excellent can be accomplished. Excite a child to attend in earnest for a short time, his mind will be less fatigued, and his understanding more improved, than if he had exerted but half the energy twice as long: the degree of pain which he may have felt will be amply and properly compensated by his success; this will not be an arbitrary, variable reward, but one within his own power, and that can be ascertained by his own feelings. Here is no deceit practised, no illusion; the same course of conduct may be regularly pursued through the whole of his education, and his confidence in his tutor will progressively increase. On the contrary, if, to entice him to enter the paths of knowledge, we strew them with flowers, how will he feel when he must force his way through thorns and briars! (*Ibidem*, 47)

Twentieth and twenty-first century pedagogic theories, which see pupils as the main active focus of the whole educational process, may have drawn a lot from the principles contained in *Practical Education*. One example is the approach the Edgeworths suggested when they considered play as a form of work, therefore a didactic strategy combining what in modern terms we call *learning by doing* and the *ludic approach* to learning:

Children, it is said, work hard at play, therefore we should let them play at work ... it is certainly true, that when children are interested about any thing, whether it be about what we call a trifle, or a matter of consequence, they will exert themselves in order to succeed; but from the moment the attention is fixed, no matter on what, children are no longer at idle play, they are at active work. ... We can connect any species of knowledge with those occupations which are immediately agreeable to young people ... (*Ibidem*, 48, 50)

Being the privileged vehicle for the transmission and acquisition of knowledge for the Edgeworths, language played a pivotal role in the personal development, both at individual, and social level, and had, therefore, to be taken into careful consideration in educational terms. First, at audio-oral level, because children learn to speak in order to express their needs and thoughts; then when addressing the skills of reading and writing instruments which permit them to perfect the notions acquired and respond to and possibly, implement their general knowledge. A proper mastery of language allows and binds relationships; it outlines a person in social terms, and contributes to the construction of social circles, as well as defining the social abilities of citizens.

Words, therefore, the way they are chosen, formulated and conceived, form and inform all communication, fostering or impeding a true understanding of facts and ideas:

Words, as M. Condillac well observes, [*“*Art de Penser*”] are essential to our acquisition of knowledge; they are the medium through which one set of beings can convey the result of their experiments and observations to another; they are, in all mental processes, the algebraic signs which assist us in solving the most difficult problems. What agony does a foreigner, knowing himself to be a man of sense, appear to suffer, when, for want of language, he cannot in conversation communicate his knowledge, explain his reasons, enforce his arguments, or make his wit intelligible? In vain he has recourse to the language of action. The language of action, or, as Bacon calls it, of ‘transitory hieroglyphic,’ is expressive, but inadequate. As new ideas are collected in the mind, new signs are wanted, and the progress of the understanding would be early and fatally impeded by the want of language. (*Ibidem*, 53)

Language issues concern all stages and domains of human growth, as the mindful use of language should meet the exigencies of the person’s

development: “It is a nice and difficult thing in education, to proportion a child’s vocabulary exactly to his knowledge, dispositions, or conformation; our management must vary ...” (*ibidem*, 56). The way a person speaks is not only a means for communication, but it constitutes the very essence of thought formation and advancement. This idea is reinforced when we come to social accomplishments and needs, as language is a vital means by which to establish one’s position in civilised society:

As long as gentlemen feel a deficiency in their own education, when they have not a competent knowledge of the learned languages, so long must a parent be anxious, that his son should not be exposed to the mortification of appearing inferior to others of his own rank. It is in vain to urge, that language is only the key to science; that the names of things are not the things themselves; that many of the words in our own language convey scarcely any, or at best but imperfect, ideas ... (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, vol. I, 387)

A further point, to this extent, is the need for recognition of one’s language status: mastering language allows people to “have a voice”, to be heard, and to have their role acknowledged at all social levels. Language reflects people’s attitudes towards other people, but also towards principles and reasoning. The inability to master standard English, for example, dooms the speaker to a condition of social inferiority or bullying, precisely because of the linguistic features that characterise their speech. In Edgeworth’s works, for the first time in “English” literature, the identity of characters takes explicit shape through the language they speak and their narrative modality, moving from individual to fully social only when the linguistic process is completed, and they have then fulfilled their educational path¹⁸. Tuite (2011) highlights this process in terms of “materiality and corporeality of language” (739) in print:

[Language] is deeply somatic and positions the subject in relation to place, class, time and social space. Where embodied language has the capacity to embarrass the speaker, print enables the transcendence of those fixities of space and time, and escape from embarrassment, precisely because it is not embodied. In print, a colonial or regional speaker speaks without the stigma of the accent or brogue, where such ‘taints’ are invisible. Maria Edgeworth’s reputation as the first regional Irish novelist was established on account of her sensitivity to precisely such particularities of speech. Her representation in print of such particularities of speech is significant as a strategy of national antiquarianism because it works against the homogenizing and virtualizing effects of print that erase such differences. (2011, 732)

¹⁸ On this point, Susan Manly (2007) skillfully underlines the ability of Edgeworth to give voice to unheard(able) people, such as women, children, poor, and social aliens/minorities. See also *Essay on Irish Bulls*, below.

All fields of human activity rely on language as a tool by which to acquire and promote knowledge; it must, therefore, be learned, improved, and adapted according to the peculiarities of the subject involved, in the most natural way. The main strategies for the acquisition and retention of language for specific purposes hinted at in *Practical Education* still lie at the basis of the *Content and Language Integrated Learning* methodology currently applied and fostered in schools:

We have found from experience, that an early knowledge of the first principles of science may be given in conversation, and may be insensibly acquired from the usual incidents of life: if this knowledge be carefully associated with the technical terms which common use may preserve in the memory, much of the difficulty of subsequent instruction may be avoided. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, iv)

3. *Disposition*

Pupils are valued as active participants in the process of education, and their trust in their masters' competence and modalities is fundamental to the construction of a shared context for learning, where "disposition" becomes a two-way device to "increase the wisdom and happiness of mankind" (Edgeworth 1907, 2). On the one hand, it refers to the master's propensity to impart knowledge and education to pupils; on the other, it represents the pupils' attitude and inclination towards the knowledge, notions and behavioural models offered to them:

By thus stating honestly to our pupils the extent of our ignorance, as well as the extent of our knowledge; by thus directing attention to the imperfections of science, rather than to the study of theories, we shall avoid the just reproaches which have been thrown upon the dogmatic vanity of learned preceptors. 'For as knowledges are now,' says Bacon, 'there is a kind of contract of error between the deliverer and receiver; for he that delivereth knowledge, desireth to deliver it in such a form as may be best believed, and not as may be best examined; and he that receiveth knowledge, desireth rather present satisfaction than expectant enquiry; and so rather not to doubt, than not to err; glory making the author not to lay open his weakness, and sloth making the disciple not to know his strength.' [Bacon, vol. I. page 84]. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, 104)

Drawing from Condillac, Edgeworth suggested awareness and self-analysis on the part of both educators and learners: "attention to the manner in which we acquire, and in which we arrange our knowledge, is necessary equally to those who would learn, and to those who would teach, with success" (*ibidem*, 318). The method Maria and her father fol-

lowed, and suggested their readers should follow, represents the first ever scientific approach to education, based mainly on experience: data collection, analysis, report, reflection. Art becomes science, and, as such, acquires a status of enlightened incontrovertibility; ironically “descending from the elevation of style” required to art-works, educators – “those only who know with what ease and rapidity the early association of ideas are formed, on which the future taste, character and happiness depend” (Edgeworth 1907, i) – rise up to promote the development of all individuals into rightful citizens, in the name of progress:

To make any progress in the art of education, it must be patiently reduced to an experimental science: we are fully sensible of the extent and difficulty of this undertaking, and we have not the arrogance to imagine, that we have made any considerable progress in a work, which the labours of many generations may, perhaps, be insufficient to complete; but we lay before the public the result of our experiments, and in many instances the experiments themselves. In pursuing this part of our plan, we have sometimes descended from that elevation of style, which the reader might expect in a quarto volume; we have frequently been obliged to record facts concerning children which may seem trifling, and to enter into a minuteness of detail which may appear unnecessary. No anecdotes, however, have been admitted without due deliberation; nothing has been introduced to gratify the idle curiosity of others, or to indulge our own feelings of domestic partiality. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, iii)

Practical education should begin very early, for the sake of the children as well as of their families; a well-raised child, properly educated and cared for in his/her development, will not be a burden to the family. On the contrary, parents would save time and energy by paying attention to the early behaviour and consequent cognitive development of their children; they should not “prevent them from acquiring knowledge by their own experience” or “break the course of their ideas” on the presumption of “saving them trouble” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1798, vol. I, 9). Educators should proceed in their teaching according to the children’s learning pace and strategies, allowing them to experience, systematise and metabolise the knowledge they are acquiring, possibly making learning agreeable to them¹⁹;

¹⁹ Though a strong supporter of pleasure in learning, Maria highlighted a number of issues concerned with the application of the method, due mainly to a possible increase in the need of being amused in order to acquire content: “It has been the fashion of late to attempt teaching every thing to children in play, and ingenious people have contrived to insinuate much useful knowledge without betraying the design to instruct; but this system cannot be pursued beyond certain bounds without many inconveniences. The habit of being amused not only increases the desire for amusement, but it lessens even the relish for pleasure; so that the mind becomes passive and indolent, and a course of perpetually increasing stimulus is necessary to awaken attention” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, 46).

thus proceeding, children would develop a personal disposition of mind, enabling them to think critically:

We first observe particulars; then form some general idea of classification; then descend again to new particulars, to observe whether they correspond with our principle.

Children acquire knowledge, and their attention alternates from particular to general ideas, exactly in the same manner. It has been remarked, that men who have begun by forming suppositions, are inclined to adapt and to compress their consequent observations to the measure of their theories; they have been negligent in collecting facts, and have not condescended to try experiments. This disposition of mind, during a long period of time, retarded improvement, and knowledge was confined to a few peremptory maxims and exclusive principles. The necessity of collecting facts, and of trying experiments, was at length perceived; and in all the sciences this mode has lately prevailed: consequently, we have now on many subjects a treasure of accumulated facts. We are, in educating children, to put them in possession of all this knowledge; and a judicious preceptor will wish to know, not only how these facts can be crammed speedily into his pupil's memory, but what order of presenting them will be most advantageous to the understanding; he will desire to cultivate his pupil's faculties, that he may acquire new facts, and make new observations after all the old facts have been arranged in his mind. (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, 102-103)

Furthermore, it is very important to understand what can be taught at a certain moment, as not every kind of information can be appropriately processed at any given time; "seizing the happy moments for instruction, moments when knowledge immediately applies to what children are intent upon themselves", marks "the success, both of literary and moral education" (*ibidem*, 305), securing the understanding of the lesson. Strategies may vary, but children should always be the focus of the process; furthermore, they should always be assisted and encouraged in their progress, by establishing emotional connections and preventing the erection of affective filters on their part. These precepts still inform educational methods which view teachers as "learning facilitators", and present many analogies with the system proposed by Maria Montessori a century afterwards:

We should employ ourselves in our usual manner, and converse, without allowing children to interrupt us with frivolous prattle; but whenever they ask sensible questions, make just observations, or show a disposition to acquire knowledge, we should assist and encourage them with praise and affection; gradually as they become capable of taking any part in conversation, they should be admitted into society, and they will learn of themselves, or we may teach them, that useful and agreeable qualities are those by which they must secure the pleasures of sympathy. Esteem, being associated with sympathy, will increase its value, and this connection should be made as soon, and kept as sacred, in the mind as possible. (*Ibidem*, 243)

4. *Characters and characteristics*

What sort of education, knowledge, disposition do we find in Maria Edgeworth's texts, then? And what masters are pupils (and readers) going to meet along their pathway of studies?

One of the stories collected in *The Parent's Assistant*, "The Barring Out", proposes a positive model of master for young adults. Dr. Middleton, the head of the school where the story is set, is calm, reflexive, benevolent, though firm and consistent in his principles; he drives sense into his schoolboys by treating them "like reasonable creatures", explaining the meaning of words and things to them. His nature, as well as his manners, provide an excellent example of what Maria (and her father) believed worthy of emulation; in particular, his full character and role are evident at the end of the story when the culprits are discovered – and defeated:

'Sir,' said Archer, 'they are conscious that they have done wrong, and so am I. I am the ringleader. Punish me as you think proper. I submit. Your punishments—your vengeance ought to fall on me alone!'

'Sir,' said Dr. Middleton, calmly, 'I perceive that whatever else you may have learned in the course of your education, you have not been taught the meaning of the word punishment. Punishment and vengeance do not with us mean the same thing. *Punishment* is pain given, with the reasonable hope of preventing those on whom it is inflicted from doing, *in future*, what will hurt themselves or others. *Vengeance* never looks to the future, but is the expression of anger for an injury that is past. I feel no anger; you have done me no injury.'

Here many of the little boys looked timidly up to the windows. 'Yes, I see that you have broken my windows; that is a small evil.'

'Oh, sir! How good! How merciful!' exclaimed those who had been most panic-struck. 'He forgives us!'

'Stay,' resumed Dr. Middleton; 'I cannot forgive you. I shall never revenge, but it is my duty to punish. You have rebelled against the just authority which is necessary to conduct and govern you whilst you have not sufficient reason to govern and conduct yourselves. Without obedience to the laws,' added he, turning to Archer, 'as men, you cannot be suffered in society. You, sir, think yourself a man, I observe, and you think it the part of a man not to submit to the will of another. I have no pleasure in making others, whether men or children, submit to my *will*; but my reason and experience are superior to yours. Your parents at least think so, or they would not have intrusted me with the care of your education. As long as they do intrust you to my care, and as long as I have any hopes of making you wiser and better by punishment, I shall steadily inflict it, whenever I judge it to be necessary, and I judge it to be necessary *now*. This is a long sermon, Mr. Archer, not preached to show my own eloquence, but to convince your understanding. Now, as to your punishment!'

'Name it, sir,' said Archer; 'whatever it is, I will cheerfully submit to it.'

'Name it yourself,' said Dr. Middleton, 'and show me that you now understand the nature of punishment.'

Archer, proud to be treated like a reasonable creature, and sorry that he had behaved like a foolish schoolboy, was silent for some time, but at length replied, 'That he would rather not name his own punishment.' He repeated, however, that he trusted he should bear it well, whatever it might be. 'I shall, then,' said Dr. Middleton, 'deprive you, for two months, of pocket-money, as you have had too much, and have made a bad use of it.'

'Sir,' said Archer, 'I brought five guineas with me to school. This guinea is all that I have left.'

Dr. Middleton received the guinea which Archer offered him with a look of approbation, and told him that it should be applied to the repairs of the schoolroom. The rest of the boys waited in silence for the doctor's sentence against them, but not with those looks of abject fear with which boys usually expect the sentence of a schoolmaster.

'You shall return from the playground, all of you,' said Dr. Middleton, 'one quarter of an hour sooner, for two months to come, than the rest of your companions. A bell shall ring at the appointed time. I give you an opportunity of recovering my confidence by your punctuality.'

'Oh, sir! we will come the instant, the very instant the bell rings; you shall have confidence in us,' cried they, eagerly.

'I deserve your confidence, I hope,' said Dr. Middleton; 'for it is my first wish to make you all happy. You do not know the pain that it has cost me to deprive you of food for so many hours.'

... Dr. Middleton looked round at their eager, honest faces, with benevolent approbation. 'Archer,' said he, taking him by the hand, 'I am heartily glad to see that you have got the better of your party spirit. I wish you may keep such a friend as you have now beside you; one such friend is worth two such parties. As for you, Mr. Fisher, depart; you must never return hither again.' (Edgeworth 1907, 342-346)

Education should, therefore, be imparted by those whose "reason and experience are superior" to the pupils', and therefore perceived and acknowledged as authoritative and respect-worthy. This bottom-up recognition allows one to act within the realm of respect instead of that of fear by sustaining the authority of the schoolmaster, "necessary to conduct and govern [the pupils] whilst [they] have not sufficient reason to govern and conduct [them]selves". Dr. Middleton well deserves the respect his schoolboys show him, as his first wish is their happiness – a happiness which still has to be regulated by respecting the laws, in order they are "suffered in society" once they become men. His authority stems from his role, his knowledge, his disposition, but above all, from the trust (and consequent responsibility) parents invest in him, and it is. Family and school should always work in synergy, to enforce the same values in the minds of young people.

For Edgeworth the task of educating adults is a difficult one, as they have already developed a mind about the issues of the times they live in and the context they inhabit. In Irish literary history, a very powerful means to this end proves to be irony. Satirical and ironical writings spread

quickly, reaching a massive reading public, while triggering discussion in different circles. Jonathan Swift's (1667-1745) works, his novel and pamphlets²⁰, provided a useful model to Maria and her father, who adopted a similar strategy to address situations related to social behaviour deriving from stereotyping and prejudices – often leading to bullying.

Many of their texts designed for adults are veined with irony – sometimes more explicit, in other cases left to the reader's ability to detect it.

Essay on Irish Bulls (1802) is perhaps one of the most eloquent examples of this Edgeworthian bent for ironic and satirical writing, aimed at the development of individual identity rescheduled in social terms of what later generations would call relativity and respect – in the era of Enlightenment, "tolerance" sounded like the most up-to-date of achievements²¹. Here, education is intended more for the English than for the Irish, as the explicit goal of the text – declared only in the Conclusion – is a "sincere wish to conciliate both countries" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1802, 315), on account of the fact 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. (*Ibidem*, 308)²²

²⁰ Swift's fortune as a satirist begun with *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), though it was through his Irish-defensive works, *Gulliver's Travels* (*Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*, 1726) and *A Modest Proposal* (*A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland Being a Burden on Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*, 1729) that he gained popularity as an Irish patriot. The power of his ironical touch was such that *Gulliver's Travels* had three official printings in the same year, and another one the following year (pirate copies were circulating too), plus being immediately translated into different languages all over Europe.

²¹ For an in-depth account of the history of bulls and blunders before and after the Edgeworths' *Essay*, see Earls 1988.

²² "In Edgeworth's formulation, a cultural 'learning' occurs on both sides of the border, facilitating an international crossover of customs. This figure of international crossover will prove the cornerstone to Edgeworth's rewriting of Burkean nationness; and the notion of education supporting such a crossover links her rewriting to eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism. In Edgeworth's Irish novels, education is the key to both individual and national improvement: it is the foundation of the well-governed estate and the foundation of the well-governed nation. More specifically, a slow process of education instills transnational understanding in the Irish people while retaining the bonds of local attachment by which the nation is secured. The centrality of education not only suggests Edgeworth's wish for a rooted yet cosmopolitan or transnational judgment, but also distinguishes her writing from constructions of national identity as national character, linking her thought to earlier cosmopolitan constructions of universal human subjects. It is no accident that she chooses to conclude her discussion of education in the

In Edgeworth's view, language acquires the status of a reconciliatory means, instead of being a contradictory element; the "bull" is no more a mere incongruity (or "laughable incongruity" of ideas imputable to a certain people because of their linguistic incapacity); it becomes, rather, a sort of oxymoron, where "contradictions meet: to reconcile these, Irish ingenuity delights" (*ibidem*, 222). According to Wohlgemut,

[t]his second, revised definition of the bull as oxymoronic trope shares a marked affinity to the Edgeworths' understanding of the Anglo-Irish position: the Anglo-Irish position is not a static deadlock or incongruity, but rather an active and ongoing reconciliation of contradiction. (1999, 655)

In "Little Dominick", one of the tales included in the pamphlet, language is the discriminating factor used to target the eponymous character as a victim of bullying. Dominick, an Irish boy "born at Fort-Reilly, in Ireland, and bred nowhere until his tenth year" is sent to school in Wales by his stepfather "to learn manners and grammar" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1802, 67); there he is bullied because of his improper pronunciation of English by his Welsh master, Mr Owen ap Jones etc., who speaks with a strong Welsh accent²³. In the story, the schoolmaster's viciousness is expressed through his power to punish the boy, "not for his vices but for his vicious constructions" (*ibidem*, 68). Dominick is helped to overcome the ordeal by Edwards, the son of a Welsh gentleman whom, in the end, many years afterwards, Dominick will help to get out of prison by paying his debts.

Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth with the following words of her father, in which national identity is presented as the influence of a specific education on a universal subject: "Did God give different minds to different countries? No! the difference of mind arose from education. It therefore became the duty of Parliament to improve as much as possible the public understanding – for the misfortunes of Ireland were owing not to the heart, but the head; and the defect was not from nature, but from want of culture.' By claiming national difference as anchored in education ('culture' rather than 'nature'), Edgeworth gives to national identity a sociocultural foundation, and thereby opens a space in which change can take place" (Wohlgemut 1999, 647).

²³ The episode revisits Richard Lovell's boyhood and the upsetting beginning of his schooling, when he was whipped by his schoolmaster and bullied by his classmates: "I had been sufficiently tainted with Irish accent, and Irish idiom, to be the object of much ridicule, and much secret contempt. I beat one boy, who was taller than myself, for mocking me; and in a short time I acquired the English provincial accent of my companions so effectually, as to give no fair pretence for tormenting me on the subject; but I still retained the name of Little Irish" (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. I, 48). "In a form of testimony that transfigures biographical plots into affective history, [Maria] bears witness to and reworks this traumatic childhood history as part of her satire of English imperialism. In the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, the schoolboy Richard Lovell Edgeworth, 'Little Irish', becomes 'Little Dominick', and the same traumas of beating by the schoolmaster and teasing by his schoolmates are inflicted upon him" (Tuite 2011, 734).

The use of the English language, the main topic of the story, is reported and analysed here while describing the actions and the reactions Little Dominick faces. As often happens in schools, the masters' behaviour informs the schoolboys' attitude thanks to emulation; Dominick's companions, observing and imitating their schoolmaster, soon learn how to use bullying language to prove their supposed strength and power over a weaker comrade:

This unlucky wight was flogged every morning by his master, not for his vices, but for his vicious constructions, and laughed at by his companions every evening for his idiomatic absurdities. They would probably have been inclined to sympathize in his misfortunes, but that he was the only Irish boy at school; and as he was at a distance from all his relations, and without a friend to take his part, he was a just object of obloquy and derision. (*Ibidem*, 68)

The strategy that Little Dominick adopts to subvert his position does not involve fighting his companions or his master. Instead, he uses his wits to learn better rather than learn more, under Edwards's supervision. Edwards sets an example for their schoolmates: he does not mock Dominick because of his grammar mistakes; instead, he provides instances of analogue evidences in popular English texts – while he supports Dominick in mocking Mr Owens ap Jones's Welsh accent. The grammar memorizing exercises that the master imposes on Dominick as a punishment prove sterile: in the end, the boy's knowledge does not improve, although he is able to repeat he is unable to understand the meaning of the pages he has learnt by heart. On the contrary, the experience Dominick acquires at Edwards's during the holidays they spend together allows the child to “spring rapidly in his studies”, surpassing “every boy in the school, his friend Edwards only excepted”, until, “now no longer Little Dominick”, he blooms into a well accomplished gentleman – “the reputed author of a much admired pamphlet on Indian affairs” –, returning to England after several years “not miraculously rich, but with a fortune equal to his wishes” (*ibidem*, 79-80).

The power of Mr. Owen ap Jenkins ap Jones is completely vanquished at the end of the story, when Dominick calls him only “Jones”: to Dominick O'Reilly esq., and to those who respect him, his former schoolmaster has lost all the opinionated inheritance of his supposed genealogy, and consequently all social importance. On the contrary, Edward's influence – that of a true, just, human mentor – deeply informs Dominick's mind and behaviour, in a life-long learning perspective. The lesson about language as well as the social perception of words is clear: education, properly administered, allows individuals to develop a critical attitude towards their own situations. Education combats the internalisation of linguistic self-hatred²⁴:

²⁴ See Shapiro 2003, 83: “Maria Edgeworth's addressing a political problem through linguistic means is effective at a time when fissures and distrust had engendered a sys-

by using reason filtered by irony to demolish the strength of bullies, proving the reasons of the individual to the group by using incontrovertible examples capable of disarming the opponent – at least linguistically –, and demonstrating its ability to generate and enhance personal, intercultural and social awareness and self-confidence.

Harrington (1817) marks a further step in proving the role of combined knowledge and education in the construction of social individuals. The story is told by the protagonist in the first person. The familiar tone he uses, as well as the discourse techniques he employs to internalise other characters' thoughts²⁵, induce the reader to forget the female author pulling the strings of the plot and gently leading us to experience what *Harrington* does throughout the *Bildungsroman*. The action takes place in the past, but is explained in the present; the reader is exposed to two different perspectives at the same time, and forced to build his/her own idea by critically rethinking the narration presented in the light of the narrator's point of view. According to Page, "*Harrington* fits squarely

tem of prejudice and oppression by England toward Ireland. According to Edgeworth, the colonized position of the Irish caused them to feel inferior and to internalize linguistic self-hatred; she asserts that the majority of them did not speak English well, or spoke it with marked variation. She warns: 'Impute a peculiar incurable mental disease to a given people, show that it incapacitates them from speaking or acting with common sense, expose their infirmities continually to public ridicule, and in time this people ... may be subjugated to that sense of inferiority, and to that acquiescence in a state of dependence, which is the necessary consequence of the convocation of imbecility' " (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1802, 20).

²⁵ Maria Edgeworth has been a pioneer in many respects; she has written about topics and using literary strategies and forms which were not only unusual for or precluded to women at her time (and for some time after her), but also new and unexplored to most men authors. One of the features that characterises some of her writing is a peculiar capacity of portraying the mind of her characters, taking the readers by the hand into their thoughts, without them realising that they are plunged into a tension between different times (present of the narration, past of the events narrated) and perceptions (in-self and other-self). The morphology of tension she pens out acquires a further dimension when it applies to male narrators in her stories, who balance their tales in the double-front timelines that verbally translate sketches or detailed images into the mind of the reader. The seamless chains of discourse she allows her characters to build in order to portray to what extent they have internalised the ideas and speeches of other characters, represent an innovative narrative model. In particular, her first person male narrators do not give the reader information directly; the reader's perception of events and characters is instead filtered by and through the very same narrative process. The characters' identity, meanwhile, takes shape through the language they speak and their narrative modality, moving from individual to fully social only when the linguistic process is completed, and they have then fulfilled their education path. Edgeworth writings acquire then a further tension, as they enlighten a modality of syncretism that will be developed almost a century later by modern(ist) authors such as Woolf and Joyce.

into Edgeworth's oeuvre and her oft-stated insistence that the author is first and foremost a moral teacher. *Harrington* is a novel of education in several senses of the word" (2004, 134).

The despicable stories the seven-year-old boy is exposed to by his nanny, Fowler, turns him into a frail creature, incapable of exerting his critical thinking. Due to his lack of experience, the boy trusts his adult reference/model and the literature she provides (the stories she tells, the books he reads) and so he creates primary stereotypical and prejudicial associations in his mind, which will inform his development until early adulthood. To prove her point, Maria refers to one of the most authoritative voices of her times:

Shall I be pardoned for having dwelt so long on this history of the mental and corporeal ills of my childhood? Such details will probably appear more trivial to the frivolous and ignorant than to the philosophic and well informed: not only because the best informed are usually the most indulgent judges, but because they will perceive some connexion between these apparently puerile details and subjects of higher importance. Bacon, and one who in later days has successfully followed him on this ground, point out as one of the most important subjects of human inquiry, equally necessary to the science of morals and of medicine, "The history of the power and influence of the imagination, not only upon the mind and body of the imaginant, but upon those of other people." This history, so much desired and so necessary, has been but little advanced. One reason for this may be, that both by the learned and the unlearned it is usually begun at the wrong end. '*Belier, mon ami, commences par le commencement,*' is excellent advice; equally applicable to philosophical history and to fairy tale. We must be content to begin at the beginning, if we would learn the history of our own minds; we must condescend to be even as little children, if we would discover or recollect those small causes which early influence the imagination, and afterwards become strong habits, prejudices, and passions. In this point of view, if they might possibly tend to turn public attention in a new direction to an important subject, my puerile anecdotes may be permitted. These, my experiments, *solitary and in concert, touching fear, and of and concerning sympathies and antipathies*, are perhaps as well worth noting for future use. (Edgeworth 1817, 19-21)

The adult *Harrington* (the narrator of the story) acknowledges the damage done by both written and oral texts: "the less I understood, the more I believed" (*ibidem*, 5) is the reason why he trusted his nanny's stories. Furthermore, while acting as a public apology for Edgeworth's previous misrepresentations of the Jews, politely represented to her by Mrs. Lazarus Mordecai in a letter she wrote to Maria, the novel explicitly questions the authority of books and written texts in general:

And here I must observe, that not only in the old story books, where the Jews are as sure to be wicked as the bad fairies ... but in almost every work of fiction, I found them represented as hateful beings; nay, even in mod-

ern tales of very late years, since I have come to man's estate, I have met with books by authors professing candour and toleration—books written expressly for the rising generation, called, if I mistake not, *Moral Tales for Young People*; and even in these, wherever the Jews are introduced, I find that they are invariably represented as beings of a mean, avaricious, unprincipled, treacherous character. Even the peculiarities of their persons, the errors of their foreign dialect and pronunciation, were mimicked and caricatured, as if to render them objects of perpetual derision and detestation. I am far from wishing to insinuate that such was the serious intention of these authors. I trust they will in future benefit by these hints. I simply state the effect which similar representations in the story books I read, when I was a child, produced on my mind. They certainly acted most powerfully and injuriously, strengthening the erroneous association of ideas I had accidentally formed, and confirming my childish prejudice by what I then thought the indisputable authority of *printed books*. (*Ibidem*, 30-31)

The point the narrator (the author) makes is clear: when a child is poorly guided into developing knowledge through experience, he or she will almost inevitably acquire a distorted view of reality.

In the course of the novel, Harrington passes from the bullying hands of his nanny to those of his mother. Though loving, Mrs Harrington proves to be the epitome of superficial ladylikeness, fulfilling all the characteristics of a well-accomplished, self-centred and poorly-informed *dame à-la-mode*. She deals with her son's supposed nervous fits as long as she can show him off like some sort of wonder, her parental care exhausting when the child runs out of fashion, and she turns, as a result, to more ladylike occupations, like balls and social meetings, to preserve "her own health" (*ibidem*, 18). Harrington's father turns out to be a slightly better guide. Swearing that no one will turn his son into "a Miss Molly", he snatches him from "the *female doctrine*" (*ibidem*, 27) to make a man of him. Exercise, good readings, even politics – to which the boy seems to pay great attention—are a good remedy for the overly feminine attitude generated by the models to which his son had been exposed. Under his father's care, Harrington seems to improve, regaining his health and slowly shifting from his "unreasonable" fear of Jews to a sort of contempt. Notwithstanding this, Harrington's father also exploits him, as a promotional "object" at one of his political receptions where the boy's ability is put on show – by chance – as the father's merit²⁶. Moreover, by publicly praising him for

²⁶ "... my father, with a smile and a wink, and a side nod of his head, not meant, I suppose, for me to see, but which I noticed the more, pointed me out to the company, by whom it was unanimously agreed, that my attention was a proof of uncommon abilities, and an early decided taste for public business. ... he caught me in his arms, kissed me, patted my head, clapped me on the back, poured out a bumper of wine, bid me drink his toast, 'No Naturalization Bill!—No Jews!' and while I blundered out the toast, and

his attitude against the Jews, though the boy did not understand what his father's "friends" and "enemies" were saying, his father makes Harrington feel "[e]xalted, not to say intoxicated", worsening his prejudice and deepening his need for acceptance: "The feeling of party spirit, which is caught by children as quickly as it is revealed by men, now combined to strengthen still more and to exasperate my early prepossession" (*ibidem*, 40). Party spirit is what triggers Harrington's experience as a bully; in this respect, the third chapter of the novel is particularly significant, as it describes, for the very first (detected) time in literature, school bullying presented by the bully himself. The scene may likely have inspired a similar one in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). In Edgeworth's novel the incident takes place during Harrington's fourth year at school. Young Lord Mowbray – forced to pay his debt to Jacob, a Jewish boy-peddler whom he and his party (including Harrington) tormented and whom he had tried to cheat-tries to roast the poor boy in front of the fire. Mowbray's brutality, in strident contrast with the three core Edgeworthian principles of education and citizenship – justice, truth, and humanity²⁷ – makes Harrington overcome his "long dormant associations", and "all the feelings and principles of party spirit, which had first been inculcated by my father at home, and which had been exercised so well and so continually by my companions at school, as to have become the governing power of my mind" (Edgeworth 1817, 43-44).

In these circumstances, the figure of the schoolmaster is almost absent, and takes the form of a letter to Mowbray's mother, Lady De Brantefield, reprimanding her son's misconduct and sentencing his duty to pay his debt. Education of upper classes, before their sons were sent away to colleges like Eton, Harrow and Rugby, for example, was the task of the family; though, here the point is that the knowledge Harrington requires in order to overcome his prejudice cannot be provided by any preceptor but only by his own experience. The boy's education develops thanks to his internalisation of different models (and words), up to the moment when experience and reality urge him to exert his critical thinking and challenge the incarnation of his ideas; he fights Mowbray using the self-same words Mowbray had employed to enrol Harrington in his party.

tossed off the bumper, my father pronounced me a clever fellow, 'a spirited little devil, who, if I did but live to be a man, would be, he'd engage, an honour to my country, my family, and my party'" (Edgeworth 1817, 40).

²⁷ See Edgeworth 1907, viii (quoted *infra*, 248 e 264); for a deeper account on literature and bullying, see Leproni 2018, 139-152.

5. In conclusion – and still to wonder about

Edgeworth's conception of practical education as a strategy for processing information through experience informs the whole of her production, and invests all aspects of human development, encompassing both the form and the content of all and any kind of knowledge. Her writing evolves around some core ideas of identity, citizenship, and morality; ideas that she (and her father) deem necessary to achieve some degree of happiness in both private and social life. Language is for her the most powerful means to many ends: it shapes ideas, permits communication, qualifies people and enables them to take an active part in the social community where they live.

While her pedagogical texts maintain a didactic tone, in her fiction the characters assume the role of mentors, working as "peers" to the readers, forging emotional bonds based on trust, empathy, and, in most cases, reliability. The language used is colloquial, and mimics real spoken language; dialogue carries the action forward while simultaneously building the characters up in the mind of the reader.

Thus, depending on the issues the text aims at addressing, Maria is able to adapt her stylistic features to a different kind of education. "Little Dominick" is

a pedagogical tale, one of the most important genres for the Edgeworths. It represents a pedagogy of bad education, a return to the primal scene of instruction in the imperial language which is also a scene of punishment. The anecdote of bad English becomes an allegory of bad pedagogy, and bad parenting as a model of imperial relations between England and the rest of the empire. Here, the teacher is not an educator, but an enforcer of rules who inflicts symbolic violence upon the boy. (Tuite 2011, 737)

while *Harrington* is a *Bildungsroman*

... a pioneering exploration of childhood psychology in adult fiction", dealing with "pressing political questions concerning the social and legal status of those deemed to be dissenters and aliens, and convincingly argu[ing] that literature – including writing for children – has a profound impact on politics and legislation through the perpetuation or challenging of powerful emotive stereotypes". (Manly 2004, 57)

In both cases, the relationship linking the real past, the fictional past, the real present and the fictional present is reconstructed by the reader, induced to cope with what Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief", and acknowledge the identity of the male characters as narrators and agents for a woman writer, through a free flow of language triggering real life and emotions.

The lesson to be learned, which forms the basis for any critical attitude in thinking, as well as in any activity, is simple and harsh at the same time:

“In education it is more necessary to preserve the mind from prejudice, than to prepare for the adoption of any system” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1801, vol. I, 321).

In a life-long learning perspective, whereby we never stop stocking up information, we should attempt to make the knowledge we acquire an effective basis for further experience, a useful, permanent, continuously improving feature of our present and future selves:

It is not sufficient, therefore, in education, to store up knowledge; it is essential to arrange facts so that they shall be ready for use, as materials for the imagination, or the judgment, to select and combine. ... if knowledge becomes immediately useful, or entertaining to them [children], there is no danger of their forgetting. (*Ibidem*, vol. I, 309)

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APPENDIX

EDGEWORTHSTOWN: THE LANDSCAPE FROM WHERE MARIA EDGEWORTH DREW HER INSPIRATION

Edgeworth Society
Edgeworthstown (<<https://edgeworthstown.net/>>)

Abstract:

Edgeworthstown or Meathas Troim, meaning “fertile ridge”, takes its name from the celebrated Edgeworth family, who were settled in Ireland following the granting of 600 acres of land by James I in 1619. The granting of this land was part of the policy of the plantation of confiscated lands in Ireland by the British Crown. The town is in the County of Longford, in the Province of Leinster, approximately 100 kilometres west of the capital Dublin. It has an urban population of approximately 2000 inhabitants, 33% of which are non-national. Its main economic activity centres around agriculture and its ancillary services.

Keywords: Edgeworthstown, Edgeworth Society, Maria Edgeworth, Richard Lovell Edgeworth

1. *The Edgeworth Family*

During its first 150 years in Ireland, the family would have been absentee landlords, using middlemen to collect their rents from poor Irish tenants. Locally the position of the landlord would have been justly resented mainly due to the neglect of duty to their tenants.

Richard Edgeworth, grandfather to Maria, due to family circumstances, was raised at Pakenham Hall with the Pakenham family. Being exposed to an extensive library and to family members steeped in culture and literature, he went on to study law, and married Jane Lovell, the daughter of a Welsh Judge; she was a woman of rare qualities, cultured and liberal minded, a devotee of the philosopher Locke, and in every respect admirably suited to the man she married.

To this union was born in 1744, in Bath, England, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. He was educated at Trinity and later Oxford. In 1782 he returned to Ireland as in his own words: “I thought it necessary ... to

sacrifice my taste to my duty”, adding “I had always thought, that, if it were in the power of any man to serve the country which gave him bread, he ought to sacrifice every inferior consideration, and to reside where he could be most useful” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. I, 360). Edgeworth was influenced by the Enlightenment views of the English midlands industrialists and philanthropists with whom he associated. He had always hoped that this industrial development could be mirrored in the Ireland where he decided to reside. It also coincided with a campaign for constitutional reform of the Irish parliament in its relations with Britain. This change is reflected in Maria Edgeworth’s most well-known work, *Castle Rackrent* (1800).

Thus began a new period in the life of Edgeworthstown. Edgeworth was returning to an Ireland with a Parliament that was in a word independent. When he returned home he found evidence of gross neglect on the part of his agent. In the words of his daughter Maria: “Wherever he turned his eyes, in or out of his house, damp, dilapidation, waste appeared” (Edgeworth R.L., Edgeworth M. 1820, vol. II, 2). The condition of his estate and the lot of his tenantry was not a whit better. One of his first acts was to abolish the horde of petty tyrants who lorded over the unfortunate peasantry – the agent who collected rents, the driver who took large leases and husbanded out small patches at exorbitant rents. These were the first to go, and tenants were instructed that in future rents would be paid direct to him at his house. He recognised the tenant’s right, and agreed to the renewal of all leases or compensation for improvements; he set his face firmly against subdivisions and subletting, and granted leases to Catholics and Protestant without question.

Having put his house in order, and provided just and equitable leases for his tenants, Edgeworth proceeded to build decent houses for them; he encouraged them to improve their cabins by adding chimneys and windows, comfortable thatches and boarded or good earthen floors. He had to overcome the natural prejudices and antipathy of his tenantry, whose ingrained hostility, resulting from years of oppression and grinding poverty, made them suspicious and had destroyed almost all desire to work and improve their lot. Many of these prejudices disappeared completely when it was known that Edgeworth, though strict, was very just and had neither political nor religious bias. He sought loyalty by suggestion rather than command, and relied upon example to instil a sense of decency, self-reliance and industry.

Education and its importance occupied much of Maria’s and her father’s mind. Before the demise of the Irish Parliament, Richard Lovell Edgeworth had put forward a bill to deal with the poor state of education for the people. In 1806 an Education Commission was established, and Edgeworth was appointed as one of the commissioners. This was an opportunity for Edgeworth to again advance his ideas on education

and put them before the government. Edgeworth's contribution to the commissioner's final report was considerable: he sustained the case for universal education, and strongly condemned the narrow attitude of a large body of opinion which maintained that education could be a dangerous weapon in the hands of the poor, as it would enable them to read what was harmful and pernicious and thus imbue them with what many held to be false and anti-social doctrines. Edgeworth demolished this all-too-common attitude, and suggested that the opponents of universal education might as well object to the appetite for food as "poison might be swallowed instead of wholesome nutriment" (*ibidem*, 461). An outstanding feature of Edgeworth's plan was its freedom from religious bias, something that is top of the agenda in Ireland today. In the conclusion of his report, Edgeworth made an appeal to fellow commissioners stating that:

If a solid foundation be laid by the commissions exertions, time will mature what shall have begun, and the blessings of a good education will increase the security and happiness of Ireland beyond the most sanguine hopes of that government which instituted the Board. (*Ibidem*, 472)

Ireland had to wait until 1831 for the establishment of The Board of Education; Edgeworth was by then deceased, but Maria was a signatory to the establishment of the first National school in Edgeworthstown in 1840. Before this, the family had established seven privately funded schools in the community¹.

During this period Ireland continued to experience change and Edgeworthstown was no exception. During their lifetime in Ireland the family survived rebellions (in 1641, 1798 and again in 1916), they lived through famine and immigration, political change, the Act of Union, Catholic Emancipation, Home Rule and finally Independence.

The final direct connection between the town and the family came to an end in 1935, when the family decided to leave the family seat. Since 1935, there have been mixed opinions as to the legacy of the family. We in the Edgeworth Society believe their contribution and relevance is worthy of continuous examination; also because of the many historical sites associated with the family and still serving the community. These include the 1840 Schoolhouse; Edgeworthstown House, known as The Manor, the ancestral home of the family, built in 1720 by Richard Edgeworth – which now serves as a Private Nursing Home; St John's

¹ This legacy is carried into the present day with the local community establishing an Early Childcare Centre and running annual child centred programmes such as poetry and short-story competitions as well as playground science events as part of its annual programme of events.

Rectory, thought to be a dower house of the Edgeworth's and later used as a rectory. This is one of the most historic houses in the area: Oliver Goldsmith resided here while receiving his early education in the town. Henry Essex Edgeworth, known as L'Abbé Edgeworth, was born here. He later became a priest and attended to Louis XVI at his execution during the French Revolution. Isola Wilde, sister to Oscar Wilde, died here while visiting her aunt. Oscar wrote his poem "Requiescat" in her memory, and made regular visits to her grave. The rectory now contains the Edgeworth Portrait Gallery, Edgeworth books and memorabilia. St John's Church and its adjoining graveyard remain an important part of the Edgeworth legacy. The present church was built in the early 1700s on the site of an earlier church; it was known as the "Church of the Edgeworths". The church contains many memorials and plaques to members of the Edgeworth family, the graveyard contains many fine headstones and table tombs including the Edgeworth family vault where Maria and her father are interred.

2. Background to Society

In the mid 1960s a group of local people decided to establish the Edgeworth Society with the aim of protecting, conserving and promoting the rich heritage of the town. The Society in its constituted form continued until the mid-1970s. Not having a permanent premise to display its collection and suffering from the loss of its driving force the society ceased to function. The importance of the legacy was not lost within the community, a number of local people continued, in an ad hoc basis to take an interest in the family. The Edgeworth collection assembled by the Society and the collection that remained in The Manor was handed over to the County Longford Library service for safe keeping and remains there to this day. Plans are afoot to build a new community library in Edgeworthstown and it is planned that the extensive collection will be relocated in the building.

Over the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-2000s members of the community, mainly under the direction of the Edgeworthstown & District Development Association Clg continued to work towards protecting and conserving the town's built heritage. Meanwhile members of the local historical society continued to research and acquire memorabilia associated with the Edgeworth family.

Over 230 years ago Maria Edgeworth returned to live in Edgeworthstown; what she found was a community living in grinding poverty and poor housing, a country in the middle of political change. A fair assessment of their contribution to the advancement of the social and cultural wellbeing of the country can only be a positive one.

If she were to return to the Edgeworthstown of today she would find that her name and her legacy has not been forgotten or dismissed although she would still find a section of the community divided as to whether her legacy should be celebrated. She would find a modern National School with 450 pupils covering 19 nationalities, an Early Learning Centre for pre-school, her former walled garden being used as a Horticultural Training Centre and her house being used as a retirement home for older people. The Edgeworthstown of 2017 faces many challenges not too dissimilar to those faced in the past. The town has a population of 2000 inhabitants, 33% of whom are non-nationals made up of 19 different nationalities. It suffers from the decline facing many rural communities, the closure of its banks and family businesses and the brain drain of its young educated people. The challenge of the integration and education of its new inhabitants. The embracing of different cultures within a small rural community with no previous experience in dealing with such situations, the uncertainty of what Brexit will bring. Political tensions are again to the forefront with the divorce between Northern Ireland and Europe.

3. *The Present*

In 2016, the Select Vestry of St John's Church, custodians of St John's rectory, reached a decision, that due to diminishing numbers within its community, it would no longer be possible to retain a rector in the parish. Following discussions with Edgeworthstown & District Development Association Clg, an agreement was reached where the Association would take possession of St John's rectory with the view of establishing a centre dedicated to the legacy of the Edgeworths and other historical figures associated with the town.

To progress this project the Association established "The Edgeworth Society". The society is made up of members of the association and members of the community with an interest in the project. The society also has a number of associate members who receive updates on the work of the society via an e-newsletter. The society operates under the Articles of Association adopted by the committee. The aims of the society remain similar to the aims of the original society, the protection, conservation and promotion of the town's rich heritage.

Since 2015, the society has developed the Edgeworth Heritage Trail, which is a guided tour of the town, visiting the ancestral home of the Edgeworths, St John's rectory, St John's Church and graveyard and the 1840 Schoolhouse. The trail tells the story of the Edgeworth family and the broader history of the town. A new detailed visitor information brochure was produced in 2017. Alongside this work on the ground, the so-

ciety continues to develop a network of people interested in the legacy of the Edgeworth's. This is being done through social media, and attending conferences and events relating to the family².

4. *Future Aims & Objectives*

Ireland is experiencing a tremendous growth in cultural tourism, promoted worldwide by Fáilte Ireland under the "Ireland's Hidden Heartlands" initiative. We have identified a number of sites in the town associated with the family: the walled gardens of the ancestral home, St John's rectory with its historical connections to the Edgeworths, Goldsmith and Oscar Wilde and St John's Church and graveyard containing the Edgeworth family vault where Maria is interred. Finally there is the Old Schoolhouse, one of the oldest in Ireland and built with the support of Maria Edgeworth.

The year 2019 will see the commencement of the building of a new community library, which will house an extensive Edgeworth collection. These sites have been developed and form part of a guided tour telling the story of this remarkable family.

To create a sound foundation for the future, the society needs to grow and strengthen its membership base. It needs to secure a permanent premise for its Edgeworth collection and develop a source of funding needed to progress the project.

It is hoped that following on from the development of the trail the society can create a wider awareness of the legacy of the family, which in turn will attract visitors to the town. Plans are afoot to appoint a writer-in-residence who will bring a new and exciting element to the project.

5. *Collections*

Research indicates that there is an extensive volume of books, manuscripts, letters and documents associated with the family scattered all over the world. Some are in private collections with others available in public institutions such as Longford County Library and Archives, the Royal Irish Academy, the National Library of Ireland, the Pollard Collection in Trinity College Dublin and the library at the Royal Dublin Society. The collection in Edgeworthstown includes an extensive Edgeworth Portrait Gallery obtained from the National Gallery of Ireland. The collection also includes a number of Edgeworth works from the family library. There

²The society is also available to provide information on the family through its enquiry section on its web site <www.edgeworthstown.net> (10/2019).

is also a number of personal items, including a purse, a glove, letters and a lock of Maria's hair. It would be the intention of the society to identify the location of all these items and to prepare a site map to make it easier for scholars and interested parties to access them.

6. Visitors to Edgeworthstown

The Society welcomes visitors to the town and the Edgeworth Heritage Trail allows them to immerse themselves in the landscape from which Maria Edgeworth took her inspiration. The Society also welcomes students with an academic interest in 18th and 19th century literature.

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Fig. 1 – A section of the picture gallery in the Maria Edgeworth Centre in Edgeworthstown



Fig. 2 and 3 – The recreated 19th-century school room, whose ideals were based on the principles of Maria Edgeworth and her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth.



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Edgeworth Society (see Matt Farrell). <<https://edgeworthstown.net/v7/index.php>>.

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INDEX OF NAMES

- Adburgham Alison 105
 Aikin John 219
 Algardi Z.O. 91, 105
 Allestree Richard 249n.,281
 Anceau Éric 103n.,105
 Applewhite H.B. 105
 Ariosto Ludovico 33
 Arnot M.L. 105
 Asher J.J. 242, 246
 Aubrey John 249
 Austen Jane XIII, 12, 102, 107,
 153n., 157, 162-163, 162n., 175,
 181-184, 186-188, 190-201

 Babb H.S. 162n.-163n.,175
 Bacon Francis 31, 31n., 43, 65, 266,
 268, 277
 Bailey Brigitte 126n.,138
 Ballaster Rosalind 105
 Barbault A.L. 126n.,140, 210-211,
 213, 214n., 217, 219
 Barbour F.M. 125, 125n., 138
 Barchas Janine 193, 198
 Bardine Bryan 200
 Barolini Helen 131, 138
 Baynes William 215, 219
 Beccaria Cesare x, 47, 51-55, 51n.,
 59
 Beesmyer Irene A. 188, 198
 Bell Andrew (Rev.) 114, 138, 219,
 225, 232, 261, 272, 114n., 260n.
 Bernadette Whelan xv, 176
 Bewick Thomas 216, 219

 Bilger Audrey 183, 185, 198
 Birkhead Edith 187, 199
 Blake A.R. 145, 254n.
 Blenerhasset Thomas 34, 37, 43
 Borin Françoise 94-95, 105
 Bosisio Cristina 244, 246
 Bouten Jacob 153
 Bowen Elizabeth XI, XII, 7, 109,
 112-123, 114n., 119n., 121n.,
 167n.
 Bree Linda 182, 198-199, 201
 Broad Jacqueline 36, 105
 Brooke Henry 40, 188-189
 Brown John 64, 138, 248, 252n.,
 279, 281-282
 Bryskett Ludowick 33, 43
 Burgess Miranda 110-111, 122
 Burke Edmund 7, 92-93, 105,
 111n., 123, 131, 131n., 148,
 154-155
 Butler Marilyn 7-8, 12, 19-20, 22-
 24, 41, 43-44, 48, 59, 63-65, 70,
 73, 75, 77, 109-112, 122, 154,
 177, 181-183, 187, 199, 201,
 229, 237, 282
 Buttarelli Annarosa 94, 105

 Campbel Ross Ian x, 44-45
 Cantarella Eva 150, 154
 Cantimori Delio 82n.-83n.,105
 Cardoso M.A. 246
 Carlile James (Rev.) 254n.
 Cass Jeffrey 138

- Chaigneau William 40, 40n., 44
 Charo Ema 153n., 154
 Cheigny Bell Gale 133, 138
 Child L.M. XIII, 34, 53-55, 70-71, 70n., 113, 126, 128-130, 132-134, 132n., 136n., 137-139, 144, 191, 193, 196, 205-220, 225, 228, 233, 236, 239-240, 243, 245, 249-250, 265, 267, 269, 275, 278, 289n.
 Clarke D.M. 34n., 44, 105, 206n., 219, 282
 Clarke Norma 34n., 44, 105, 206n., 219, 282
 Comoglio Manuel 246
 Connolly Claire 77, 110, 110n., 122, 154, 159, 175, 183, 199, 281
 Coole D.H. 154, 172
 Cotta Ramusino Elena 109
 Cowell John 174-175
 Craig Maurice 114n., 123
 Croghan M.J. 165-166, 165n., 175
 Croker John Wilson 170, 188, 199
 Cronin John 162, 162n., 175
 Cumming Alan 154
- Davis Paul E.H. 105, 175
 Day Thomas xv, 8, 11, 13, 20, 29, 39n., 65, 71, 101, 103-104, 107, 111, 121n., 128-131, 143, 149, 171, 173, 175-176, 213, 216, 220, 225-226, 241, 252n., 255n., 289n., 290
 Deane Seamus 175, 208n., 220
 De Bonald Louis 92, 92n., 105.
 de Condorcet Nicolas 143-144, 151, 154
 De Felice Renzo 82n.-84n., 105
 DeGiacomo A.J. 175
 De Gouges Olympe XI, 81, 97-98, 98n., 105-106, 152
 De la Barre F.P. 99, 99n., 105
 de Petris Carla x, 1, 3, 5, 9, 13-18, 21-23, 39n., 44, 134
- de Staël Germaine 131-134, 133n., 138
 De Talleyrand-Périgord Charles-Maurice 97
 Devincenzo Giovanna 105
 Dickinson Emily 127-128, 128n.-129n., 138
 Didier Béatrice 105
 Dijkstra Bram 101, 106
 Dobbs Arthur 35, 44
 Dorn Judith 97, 106
 Douglas Aileen IX, XIII, xv, 40n., 41, 44-45, 128, 128n., 138, 164, 205, 218, 220
 Douthwaite Julia 183, 199
 Doyle James Warren 253, 253n., 255-256, 255n., 259, 282-283
 Duhet Paule-Marie 106
 Dulong Claude 106
 Dunne Tom 208, 220
- Edgeworth John 34
 Edgeworth Richard Lovell x, 1, 4-5, 7, 9, 12-13, 17, 19-20, 22-24, 29-31, 33n., 34-35, 36n.-39n., 37-39, 42, 44, 48-50, 49n., 53, 55n., 56-59, 61, 73, 128, 128n., 130, 133, 133n., 158, 167n., 172, 176, 184, 206-208, 207n., 213, 215, 247, 256, 259-260, 259n., 274n., 281-283, 287-288, 293-294
 Egenolf S.B. 109, 110n., 123
 Eger Elizabeth 126, 139
 Evelyn, John 249
- Feci Simona 106
 Ferguson Moira 154
 Fernández Rodríguez Carmen María XII, XIII, 135, 137, 139, 159, 160n., 176, 181-182, 187, 189, 199
 Fielding Sarah 206, 220
 Fitzgerald Garret 7, 25, 177, 187
 Fitzpatrick Dean Joan 159, 176

- Fitzsimons Eleanor 2n.,25
 Flexner Eleanor 154
 Fogel Michèle 106
 Ford S.A. 193, 199
 Foster R.F. xiv, 2, 56, 122-123,
 168n., 170n., 176, 183, 236
 Freddi Giovanni 245-246
 Fuller Margaret xii, 125-140,
 125n.-126n., 128n.-129n.,
 131n.-133n., 136n.

 Gallagher Catherine 183, 199
 Gammaitoni Milena xii, 141
 Gardner Howard 241, 246
 Gard Roger 194, 199
 Garofalo Anna 88-90, 90n.-91n.,
 106
 Garside Peter 163, 163n., 176
 Garside Peter, 163, 176, 163n.
 Gilbert S.M. 9, 101, 128, 139, 183,
 199
 Giraldi Giambattista 33
 Glendinning Victoria 113, 121,
 121n., 123
 Godwin William 51, 53, 59, 101-
 102, 106-107, 147, 152, 154,
 248
 Godwin, William 59, 101, 107, 152
 Gonda Caroline 183, 199
 Green Karen 118, 122, 126n., 139,
 142-143, 142n., 256, 282
 Grenby M.O. 206n.,215, 220, 282
 Grene Nicholas 167n.,172, 176
 Grubgeld Elizabeth 118, 123
 Guazzo Stefano 33
 Gubar Susan 128, 139, 183, 199
 Gurley Gregory 176

 Hall Joseph 9, 17, 19, 31, 31n., 39,
 44, 116, 123, 146, 146n., 174,
 226, 287
 Hare Augustus 24, 175, 211, 220
 Haslett Moyra 126n.,139
 Heller Deborah 126, 139
 Heller Steven 126, 139
 Henderson Willie 131, 139, 154
 Hollingworth Brian 162, 176, 187,
 200
 Holmes, Robert 254n.
 Hone J.M. 116, 123
 Hooke Robert 215, 220
 Horwitz B.J. 196, 200
 Howard Robert Bishop 38, 246
 Hunt Lynn 106
 Hunt Margaret 106
 Hutton R.H. 192, 200

 Inglis Henry D. 42, 42n., 44
 Inglis-Jones Elizabeth 12, 25
 Ingrassia Catherine 106
 Italia Iona 96n.,106

 James II King 4, 35, 252n.
 Janin Jules 102, 106
 Jeffrey Francis 138, 188, 200
 Johnson Claudia 97, 139, 143, 145,
 147n., 150n., 151, 154, 192,
 194-195, 200, 250
 Johnson Joseph 97, 139, 143, 145,
 147n., 150n., 151, 154, 192,
 194-195, 200, 250
 Johnson R.B. 97, 139, 143, 145,
 147n., 150n., 151, 154, 192,
 194-195, 200, 250
 Joyce Jeremiah 214, 220, 276n.

 Kaplan Deborah 195, 200
 Karcher C.L. 132n.,139
 Kearns F.E. 134, 139
 Kelley Mary 133-134, 139
 Kelly Gary 74, 139, 154, 183, 200
 Kilfeather S.M. 77, 154, 183, 200
 Kirkham Margaret 192, 200
 Kirkpatrick K.J. 134, 139
 Kowaleski-Wallace Elizabeth 22,
 25, 68n., 77, 183, 185, 200
 Kramp Michael 194, 200
 Kreilkamp Vera 111-113, 113n., 123

- Kurdi Maria 173n., 176
- Lancaster, Joseph 252n., 260n.
- Law, Bishop John of Elphin 31, 38, 252n.-253n., 253, 256
- Leeney Cathy 172, 173n., 176
- Leinster (The Duke of) 14, 253, 287, 254n.
- Leone Stefania 90n., 106
- Leproni Raffaella ix, xiv, 141-142, 144, 145n.-146n., 154, 239-240, 242, 246-247, 279n., 283
- Levy D.G. 105
- Liliosa Azara xi, 81, 283
- Lilley Ed 61, 64, 77
- Locke John 132, 132n., 142n., 143, 151, 237, 248-249, 249n., 283, 287
- Lock John 4, 66, 293
- Lubbers Klaus 110, 112n., 123
- Luppi Fabio xii, 157
- Macaulay Thomas Babington 42-44
- MacDonald E.E. 137, 139
- Major Emma 25, 35, 71, 112, 115, 118, 122, 125n.-126n., 139, 254
- Manly Susan x, 47, 55, 59, 77, 154, 167n., 176, 192, 267n., 280, 282-283
- Mariani Andrea 106
- Marroni Francesco 106
- Marshall Megan 51, 59, 126n., 140, 282
- Marshall P.H. 51, 59, 126n., 140, 282
- Martineau Harriett 126, 131, 131n., 140
- Matteson John 128, 128n., 140
- McBride Ian 30, 44
- McCarthy William 126n., 140
- McCormack W.J. xv, xiiin., 111n., 112, 113n.-114n., 123, 157n.
- Meaney Gerardine xv, xiii, 157n., 175-176
- Mellor Anne Kostelanetz 135, 140
- Michals Teresa 209n., 220
- Mikhail E.H. 172, 172n., 176
- Modugno Crocetta Roberta Adelaide 106, 152n., 155.
- Montessori Maria Tecla Artemisia 240, 270
- Morash Christopher 160, 176
- Mori Amelia xiv, 239
- Mousset Sophie 106
- Moynahan Julian 188, 200
- Murphy Paul 62n., 77, 173, 176
- Murphy Sharon 62n., 77, 173, 176
- Murray Christopher 138, 164-165, 164n., 171, 175-176, 183, 200, 254n.
- Murray Patrick 138, 164-165, 164n., 171, 175-176, 183, 200, 254n.
- Murray (Rev., Archbishop of Dublin, Catholic Church) 138, 164-165, 171, 175-176, 183, 200, 164n., 254n.
- Myers Mitzi xii, xv, xiiin., 154, 187, 200, 206n., 207, 209, 220
- Napier Taura 118, 123, 176
- Napier T.S. 118, 123, 176
- Nash Julie ix, xv, 131, 140
- Newby P.H. 22, 25
- Newman D.J. 106
- Ní Chuilleanáin Eiléan xi, 44, 61
- Nixon Edna 155
- O'Brien Karen 163, 163n., 175-176
- O'Connell Daniel 6, 42-45, 160n., 253
- O'Day Rosemary 107
- O'Dowd Mary xv, xiiin., 157n., 175-176
- O'Gallchoir Clíona 183, 200.
- Ó Gráda Cormac 131n., 140
- Owens C.D. 165, 176, 183, 200, 275

- Owens Weekes Ann 183, 200
- Paine Thomas 145, 148, 155, 248
- Pakenham Valerie 39, 42, 44, 77,
157, 160n., 173-175, 174n.,
207n., 220, 287
- Paul Lissa 29-30, 32, 41, 45, 175-
176, 206n., 214n., 220, 281, 283
- Peltz Lucy 126, 139
- Penigault-Duhet Paule 155
- Persico Gemma 107
- Peterson Uta 107, 140
- Petty William 37, 37n., 288
- Piccolomini Alessandro 33
- Plumb J.H. 30-31, 36, 45, 205, 221,
249n., 250-251, 251n., 283
- Plumb J. H. 30-31, 36, 45, 205, 221,
249n., 250-251, 251n., 283
- Poovey Mary 107, 195-196, 200
- Popova Violeta XIII, 223
- Praz Mario 101, 107
- Priestley Joseph 130, 145, 248, 264
- Prior Thomas 35, 95, 191, 255n.
- Radner J.N. 165, 176
- Ramsey Goodman Katherine 107
- Rattner Gelbart Nina 107
- Rava Enzo 87, 107
- Remport Eglantina 171, 176
- Richardson Alan 40n., 126n., 140,
230-231, 237
- Richardson Sarah 40n., 126n., 140,
230-231, 237
- Robinson T.F. 8, 48, 157, 163,
163n.-164n., 167, 167n., 176,
209, 215
- Roche Anthony 158n., 173, 177
- Rose Margaret 6, 107, 165-166
- Rousseau Jean-Jacque 20, 84-86,
85n., 100, 107, 130, 143, 145,
149, 154-155, 199, 237
- Rousseau Jean-Jacques 20, 84-86,
85n., 100, 107, 130, 143, 145,
149, 154-155, 199, 237
- Russo Giovanni 81, 107
- Sabor Peter 199
- Sagal A.K. 97, 107
- Sand George XI, 81, 102-105,
103n.-104n., 107, 131
- Sapiro Virginia 155
- Scacchi Anna 133, 140
- Schettini Laura 102, 106-107
- Schofield R.E. 143, 155
- Schöpp J.C. 136, 140
- Scott J.W. 6, 12, 102n., 107, 110-
111, 129n., 198, 259
- Sheehan C.A. 193, 200
- Sheridan Elizabeth 7, 40, 40n., 45,
148, 157, 159n.-160n., 175
- Sihra Melissa 173n., 177
- Slack Paul 29-32, 41, 45
- Slade Bertha Coolidge 158, 177
- Sledziewski E.G. 92, 107
- Smith W. LeRoy 194, 200
- Sonnet Martine 3, 107
- Southam B.C. 192, 200
- Soya Michiko 194, 201
- Spender Dale 155, 182, 201
- Spenser Edmund 33, 43-44, 119
- Stefanelli Maria Anita XII, 125
- Stern K.J. 107, 128
- Stone Lawrence 3, 17, 107, 245
- Stuart William 96, 258, 282
- Sunstein Emily W. 155
- Swift Jonathan 6-7, 32, 35, 38,
38n., 45, 95, 151, 175, 264, 273,
273n.
- Synge John Millington 7, 157, 164-
165, 168, 168n., 173, 177
- Tasso, Torquato 33
- Tauchert Ashley 155
- Todd Janet 155, 182, 198-199, 201
- Tomalin Claire 155
- Topliss Iain 147n., 148, 155, 231,
237
- Torrens Hugh 221

- Trimmer Sarah 214, 221
 Trumpener Katie 37n., 41, 45,
 110n.
 Usborne Cornelie 105
 Vallone Lynne 234, 237
 Van Dijk Suzan 107
 Verzella Massimo 106
 Victoria Queen XIII, 105, 113,
 121n., 123, 223, 234-237
 Viens K.P. 138
 Von Mehren Joan 126n., 140
 Vovelle Michel 107
 Wachelder Joseph 221
 Wakefield Priscilla 214, 221
 Waldron Mary 195, 201
 Walker Kim 184, 201
 Walkowitz J.R. 103n., 108
 Wallace T.G. 192, 201
 Wardle R.M. 155
 Watson George 110-111, 123, 182,
 201, 219, 229
 Weiss Deborah 155
 Whately (Rev., Archbishop of
 Dublin, established Church)
 254n.
 Whelan Bernadette xv, XIII.,
 157n., 175-176
 William III King 2, 7, 13, 35, 37,
 37n., 40, 44, 47, 50-51, 53, 59,
 73, 101, 106-107, 131, 140,
 143, 145, 152, 154, 168, 172,
 177, 192, 215, 217, 219, 248,
 258-259
 Wollstonecraft Mary XI, XII, XIII,
 81, 97-104, 99n., 106-108,
 126, 141-156, 143n., 145n.-
 147n., 152n.-153n., 200, 220,
 223, 230-234, 236-237
 Woodworth M.A. 188, 201
 Woolf Virginia 99, 106, 153n., 156,
 175, 276n.
 Wortley Montagu Maria 96, 99,
 108
 Wright C.E. 138
 Yeo E.J. 155
 Yeats W.B. XII, 4, 7, 43, 157-158,
 165, 167-173, 167n.-168n.,
 170n.-171n., 176-177
 Young Arthur IX, XIII, 3, 8, 10, 13,
 22, 37, 39n.-40n., 40-41, 45, 53,
 61, 64, 66, 70, 75, 88-89, 100,
 117, 129-130, 133, 143-144, 146,
 154, 182, 192-193, 199, 206,
 208-209, 211, 213-214, 218-220,
 224, 226-236, 248, 259, 262-266,
 271-272, 278-279, 291

Opere pubblicate

*I titoli qui elencati sono stati proposti alla Firenze University Press dal
Coordinamento editoriale del Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue,
Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia
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