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**‘A big book about England’? Public and Private Meanings in Maria Edgeworth’s**

*Patronage*

**Claire Connolly**

Announcing her intention to write ‘a big book about England’, Madame de Staël asked Lord Byron his opinion of Maria Edgeworth’s novel *Patronage*. The conversation occurred in March 1814, just a few months following the novel was first published, at a dinner hosted by the poet and patron Samuel Rogers. Byron responded (in his own account of the evening) by saying that he thought it ‘very bad for *her*, and worse than any of the others.’<sup>i</sup> *Patronage* thus figures as a point of reference in Madame de Staël’s plans for a large-scale political fiction but also disappoints expectations, with a variety of other readers noting their dissatisfaction in a range of registers: the novel was judged to be ‘dull & heavy’ (Frances Burney); ‘the greatest lump of cold lead I ever attempted to swallow’ (Susan Ferrier); ‘vulgar’ (Byron again); and ‘*bitter*’ (Princess Charlotte).<sup>ii</sup> My argument here attempts to understand the place of Edgeworth’s fiction at this London dinner table (a space where private individuals engage in public discussion in a characteristically modern manner) and to offer an analysis the failed ambitions of this ‘immensely serious novel’.<sup>iii</sup>

In a later comment, Byron elaborates on his negative reaction by comparison with other fictions from the same year: Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer*, Lady Morgan’s *O’Donnel*, and Walter Scott’s anonymously-published *Waverley*.<sup>iv</sup> A letter to his publisher John Murray offers this sweeping survey of fiction in 1814: ‘Waverley is the best & most interesting novel I have redde [*sic*] since—I don’t know when—I like it as

much as I hate Patronage & Wanderer—& O'donnel and all the feminine trash of the last four months.’<sup>v</sup>

This last comment may be seen as exemplary of its cultural moment. Peter Garside's authoritative bibliographical study of the Romantic-era novel identifies a 'male invasion of mainstream fiction' taking place in the early years of the nineteenth century, with 'female dominance' in the 1810s reversed by the 1820s.<sup>vi</sup> The reputation of Jane Austen was thus established 'not against the grain but during a period of female ascendancy',<sup>vii</sup> the conditions for which were created by the early successes of writers like Burney and Edgeworth. Furthermore, the masculine capturing of the novel described by Garside and exemplified in the figure of Walter Scott encodes a wider cultural phenomenon, whereby the novel itself moved into the cultural mainstream.<sup>viii</sup> Ina Ferris's study of the achievement of literary authority shows how gender relations help underpin and secure this shift in generic hierarchy. A central part of her study is the transfer of literary authority to Walter Scott from Maria Edgeworth, prior to Scott the 'most celebrated and successful' of living novelists.<sup>ix</sup> Ferris locates the publication of *Patronage* as central within this shift, with the reviews of 1814 erecting hitherto invisible 'gender boundaries' around Edgeworth's fiction.<sup>x</sup>

*Patronage* is the most overtly 'political' of Edgeworth's novels, in the specialised sense of concerning itself with the machinery of power, matters of state and the intrigues of ministers. As a novel of public life, *Patronage* takes politics and the professions as its canvas. The Percy sons pursue legal, military and medical careers; meanwhile their father is a country gentleman whose early connections bring him into contact with the highest political circles. Their cousins, the Falcolners, aggressively pursue these political

connections and become part of the machinery of power wielded by Lord Oldborough, a minister of state whose reputation is under threat at home and abroad. The younger Percy daughter, Caroline, marries a German Count, while her sister Rosamond is united with the secretary of a great politician; thus the fiction threads diplomacy and political intrigue through the domestic plot.

*Patronage* is, as Marilyn Butler has convincingly argued, characterised by three main intellectual and political concerns:

a severe representation of English public life as subject to a form of corruption that spreads downwards from above and derives from the Francophilia of the English upper classes; an implied preference for professional and commercial-class values and for the egalitarian and communitarian republican ethos; and a self-conscious preoccupation with languages, including networks and a variety of codes, from literary allegory to forgeries, libels and cryptograms.<sup>xi</sup>

These interrelated themes are repeated across Edgeworth's other fictions of upper-class English life and come together in *Patronage's* development and promotion of a public sphere modelled on an idealised domestic situation. The Percy family are committed to a generalised Northern Protestant cultural identity, as seen in Caroline's marriage to the liberal German nobleman, Count Altenberg;<sup>xiii</sup> the brothers are committed to careers in the professions and are beneficially and happily connected to the world of commerce; the senior Mr Percy is the agent by whom the final secrets of an encrypted diplomatic document are revealed. The Percy family and their connections thus provide a network of

linked characters and story that help to draw these three strands together into a difficult and densely textured fiction that has been described as the ‘least readable of the Edgeworth novels’.<sup>xiii</sup>

Much of the negative reaction to *Patronage* was generated by Edgeworth’s topic: cynicism and corruption in contemporary British public life. Reviews were quick to suggest that the Irish novelist was trespassing on forbidden territory: Sydney Smith in the *Edinburgh Review* likens her to a tourist in an unfamiliar land, sending back just the kind of hasty impressionistic judgement of which she herself despairs in her Irish fiction.<sup>xiv</sup> The reviews, discussed in more detail below, afford a fascinating series of images that serve to remind readers (as well as the author herself) of the borders between private and public life. ‘The cabinet of the reigning monarch is no place for a novel’, comments the *Quarterly Review*, querying the novel’s depiction of corruption at court.<sup>xv</sup> The ‘propriety of making ministers of state among the “dramatis personae” in a novel’ is itself in doubt, with a chorus of reviewers blaming Edgeworth’s ignorance of British life for these errors of taste and discretion.

The issue of gender provides the key to Byron’s response above and is, I suggest here, the means of decoding *Patronage*’s attempt to renegotiate the boundaries between private and public life within the ambiguously-situated genre of the novel. My argument is influenced by Harriet Guest’s account of the ‘small change’ occurring in the meanings of femininity in the long eighteenth century; and especially by her description of ways in which the value of concepts like domesticity, patriotism and sensibility are renegotiated in the context of the demands of a commercial society in times of war.<sup>xvi</sup> Guest encourages us to see domesticity in this period as negatively rather than positively

characterised; conceptual and elusive rather than concretely embodied or envisioned. This is in line with what Butler identifies as the ‘theoretical’ and ‘abstract’ plane along which *Patronage* as a whole operates.<sup>xvii</sup> The defence of domesticity is moreover fraught with contradictions: Guest reminds us that Edgeworth is one of a series of Georgian literary women who work to endorse a model domestic sphere as essential to the national good, yet whose own biographies provide strong alternative models of public and professional lives.<sup>xviii</sup>

By the time Edgeworth wrote *Patronage*, an influential set of debates (to which she had herself contributed in the 1790s) had created the conditions in which the public roles of women as participants in the British state could be frankly debated. *Patronage* plays a part in those deliberations, and its abstract discussions of virtue and duty are strongly marked by the atmosphere of the Napoleonic wars. Furthermore, Edgeworth was increasingly involved in debates about Ireland that serve (at very least) to complicate the notion that there is any single version of British life to which women might or might not contribute. Even the novels which feature an English setting (*Belinda*, 1801; *Leonora*, 1806; many of the *Tales of Fashionable Life*, 1809 and 1812; *Helen*, 1834) do not attempt to disguise English values as universal ones, and a prominent feature of all Edgeworth’s fiction is the testing of national norms, often by placing what are assumed to be shared values in antagonistic relation to other cultures. How then do we read Edgeworth’s ‘English’ novel *Patronage* in relation to her better-known Irish fictions? This essay is concerned to track problems of place and address in *Patronage* and to produce an analysis that interrelates gender and politics in a manner sympathetic to the novel’s own design.

The presence of ‘six young men pursuing five different professions’ can, as Butler has suggested, resemble ‘a deliberate’ and somewhat schematic variation on the Edgeworths’ educational treatise, *Professional Education* (1809), here made palatable for ‘the popular novel-reading public’.<sup>xix</sup> Noting the novel’s educational purpose, Walter Scott feared that ‘the union of so many stories’ would work against the main thrust of Edgeworth’s fiction.<sup>xx</sup> W.J. McCormack also diagnoses a lack of continuity, describing *Patronage* as a ‘large and discrete work, its official concern with the effects of patronage on the young being to some extent blurred by the very number of young people who populate it.’<sup>xxi</sup> McCormack is willing to interpret this blurring in terms of a postmodern patchwork effect; a network of meanings that continue to pose a challenge to reductive readings of Edgeworth’s cultural time and place, and in particular the relations between places, genres and temporalities. My essay follows McCormack in seeking out a more extensive interpretation of ‘the union of so many stories’ found in Edgeworth’s fiction.

In contrast to the cohesive histories proposed in contemporary novels by Jane Austen and Walter Scott, *Patronage* presents us with a certain structural and conceptual disorder. Comparisons with Austen and Scott raise difficulties of generic classification, however, with implications for the novel’s own interest in the interplay of private and public meanings. Is *Patronage* a domestic novel or a historical one? Butler suggests that a contemporary reader would have ‘assumed comfortably that he or she was reading a story of the closing phase of the Napoleonic wars, after the French armies had been driven out of Germany’. And yet she also shows how Edgeworth draws a longer seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history into her text, with allusions to ‘the Jacobite

politics of the first half of the eighteenth century’ evoking a sense of contested national pasts.<sup>xxii</sup>

In any case, the category of historical fiction is not open to Edgeworth in any unproblematic way: critics since Byron have preferred to see her past-oriented fictions as categorically different from Walter Scott’s novels of Scottish and British history, with Ina Ferris and Katie Trumpener suggesting the intermediate category of ‘national tale’ as more appropriate to Irish novels by Edgeworth and her contemporary Lady Morgan. Trumpener’s authoritative study of the relationship between national tale and historical fiction suggests that ‘[t]he 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.’<sup>xxiii</sup> It is difficult however to determine the location of *Patronage* even on the edges of such a graph, and worth noting too that the novel features neither in Trumpener’s own wide-ranging book nor in Ina Ferris’s more recent account of the national tale.<sup>xxiv</sup> It should be possible, however, to place *Patronage* on a spectrum that stretches from the national tales of Sydney Owenson and Edgeworth herself through the legitimate historical novels of Walter Scott and on to the English fictions of Jane Austen. Reviews repeatedly return to the success of her Irish fictions, and implicitly suggest that *Patronage* is being read as a novel of the British nation.<sup>xxv</sup> That Miranda Burgess has recently described Austen herself as the inventor of ‘the British national tale’<sup>xxvi</sup> should suggest mutual interpenetration of these modes of address as well as the risks involved in narrow assumptions about nationality and genre.

In McCormack’s provocative essay on Edgeworth’s historical imagination, he notes *Patronage*’s Anglo-Irish textual provenance. As well as its apparent setting (chiefly

Hampshire and London, with off-stage trips to the West Indies, Germany and the Netherlands; coupled with a vivid sense of sea journeys, both naval and mercantile), *Patronage* betrays its 'ideological origins' in the Ireland of post-Williamite Protestant landowners, with their distinctive interest in dispossession, inheritance and legal title. Topography is thus textualised, according to McCormack, in a series of acts of translation that manifest themselves only as part of 'the dynamics of ... rival, even irreconcilable readerships'.<sup>xxvii</sup> Proceeding with this wider project of translation, McCormack uncovers a series of moments when the text reveals a deeply embedded, even 'hermetic' interest in Ireland. Secreted details of Irish history are thus revealed in McCormack's wide-ranging interpretations via a series of heroic acts of densely intertextual interpretation.

The critical labour required here should suggest one of the major reasons why Maria Edgeworth is not normally accorded the title of historical novelist, in spite of *Patronage* subjecting so many of its characters to what Trumpener calls 'the dislocations of the historical novel'.<sup>xxviii</sup> My argument here is not however that Edgeworth's fictions can be unproblematically enrolled within a tradition of historical fiction. Rather, I suggest that the difficulties that Edgeworth does encounter in framing facts within her fictions (complications that would require another essay to detail and analyse) are heightened by her desire to create a series of related structures within which to understand the events she describes: nationality, gender and class are not simply made to serve the greater cause of comprehending the historical past but themselves form part of the destination of Edgeworth's analysis. Distentangling these structures is as difficult in analysis as presumably was intended in narrative design; this essay however focuses on gender,

choosing (in the context of the present volume) to foreground an aspect of Edgeworth's interests normally overlooked by critics keen to track the politics of her Irish writings.

I argue that *Patronage*'s concern with gender shadows all the major intellectual concerns of the novel and may have been responsible for its failure to achieve anything like the coherent picture of a past society managed by *Waverley* in the same year. Edgeworth's desire to produce an account of public life that has women at its core means that the novel is driven to seek out a new structural model within which to shape relations between public and private spheres. Before discussing this project in more detail, however, it is worth considering the twin reputations of Edgeworth the author and the genre in which she had made her mark, in and around 1814.

### ***Patronage and the state of fiction***

Upon the appearance of so successful a candidate for general applause, it becomes the duty of those who claim any influence over the public mind to ascertain the grounds on which its reputation is founded, and strictly to examine the probable consequences of its favourable reception on the taste or morals of the age.

Review of *Patronage*, *British Critic*, I, 1814

Edgeworth was at the pinnacle of her career in 1814: she was paid £2,100 for *Patronage*, in the year in which, as Butler points out, Scott earned £700 for *Waverley* and Austen paid to publish *Mansfield Park* herself.<sup>xxix</sup> The novel did not sell well however, especially in its second edition, and the post-*Patronage* period saw falling sales coupled with

increasingly suspicious reviews that culminated in the sternly hostile reception accorded to Edgeworth's publication of her father's *Memoirs* in 1820.

Reviews of *Patronage* agree that Edgeworth's reputation (her place on the public stage) means that her novel must be treated to close scrutiny. There is in this period a new sense of the seriousness of the novel as a forum: 1814 is the year in which John Dunlop's three volume *History of Fiction* was published, just four years after Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 1810 collected edition of the British Novelists. In reviewing *Patronage* for the *Quarterly Review*, the politician John Ward takes the opportunity to survey the history of prose fiction from the ancients to the moderns. Ward identifies the novel as the genre of privacy and modernity, with both concepts understood in terms of a steady feminisation of society. The social development of which the novel is an emanation or expression is understood in terms of the increased influence of 'that steady settled influence of women upon society ... which in modern times has given grace, variety and interest to private life, and rendered the delineation of it one of the most entertaining and most instructive forms of work of art'.<sup>xxx</sup>

*Patronage* displays a high degree of self-consciousness concerning fiction, always understood in terms of the role of women as readers and writers. Rosamond Percy figures as a kind proto-novelist in the narrative: early in *Patronage* she casts the shipwreck with which the novel opens into a drama of her own making: "So," said Rosamond, "here was the fine beginning of a romance with a shipwreck, that ends only in five square merchants, who do not lose even a guilder of their property, and a diplomatist, with whom we are sure of nothing but that he has lost a bundle of papers for which nobody cares."<sup>xxxii</sup> Rosamond is the novel's letter-writer and story-teller, her romantic imagination

answering to readerly expectations of a different kind of fiction, the appeal of which Edgeworth registers via Rosamond's responses to events as they unfold. The genre of romance is thus domesticated within *Patronage*, incorporated into Edgeworth's realist fiction and made part of its texture.

*Patronage* also deploys the kind of anti-novel discourse associated with the work of post-revolutionary women writers. Respected characters voice their criticism of the ill effects of the passive consumption of popular fiction, while Godfrey Percy appeals to his family's hatred for 'novel like concealments and mysteries'.<sup>xxxii</sup> And yet *Patronage* also features a spirited defence of novels, in particular those penned by the best English women writers (Austen was to feature a very similar scene in her novel of 1818, *Northanger Abbey*). Godfrey Percy, about to go to join his regiment, declares his admiration for Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Inchbald and Frances Burney: all authors of novels that are 'just representations of life and manners, or of the human heart'.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Narrative efforts to construct a clear line separating bad from good types of fiction and to establish a lineage of admirable novelistic achievement (in which Austen respectfully includes Edgeworth in her rewriting of this exchange) were not entirely successful. They did not insulate the author from charges of impropriety and impertinence: *Patronage* was thought to assume a knowledge of the public world to which Edgeworth, living a sheltered life in the Irish midlands, could or should not pretend.<sup>xxxiv</sup> John Ward reads Edgeworth's attempts to depict English public life in terms of the distasteful intrusion of reality into the arena of artifice, realised in his review in images that contrast material reality with attempts to recreate its effects: a ray of light shining in an artificially illuminated room or a real waterfall 'playing amidst shrubs of

wire and rocks of pasteboard'. Reality itself is distorted by its improper translation into fiction, creating difficulties of judgement and perception. Edgeworth herself later wrote of the 'useless light' of *Patronage's* moral: 'Useless because too glaring — especially for tender eyes'.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Edgeworth's impropriety is further understood in terms of theatricality, specifically a move from intransitive to transitive forms:

Where the Irish character is to be delineated, her countrymen themselves will bear the strongest testimony to the fidelity and strength of the portrait. But where Diplomacy is brought upon the stage, she has evidently been but a spectatress of the drama; she has not been admitted behind the curtain, to converse with these heroes of the tragic-comedy of life, and to view them unmasked in all their native colours.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The *British Critic* goes farther, and accuses Edgeworth of the kind of low sensationalism associated with unlicensed and illegitimate theatrical venues. Commenting on a 'disgusting' and 'gross' incident in the novel where Buckhurst Falconer saves a bishop from choking, the reviewer remarks: 'Of the delicacy of such a scene, we can only say, that it would hardly have been tolerated by the gallery at the Olympic Pavillion'.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

This turn to theatre as metaphor suggests the difficulties encountered by reviewers in comprehending the mode of address and construction of this complex fictional creation.

## ***Patronage and violence***

Early reviewers agreed that *Patronage* displays a high degree of design and a corresponding interest in the disintegration of established forms. What McCormack calls ‘the novel’s setting at a time of the breaking of nations’<sup>xxxviii</sup> extends itself into even the smallest and seemingly most secure units of collective identity: army regiments, professional coteries, even families, are all subject to internal and external pressures and the novel yields several instances of fissures and cracks in such units.

*Patronage* opens on a note of insecurity, with uncertainty giving way to confirmed catastrophe. The opening scene, which takes place in the home of the Percy family, might come straight from a Gothic text like Charles Robert Maturin’s play *Manuel* (1817) or Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. The gathered family hear gusts of wind and troubling noises: the first indication of interior setting or location comes as Rosamond rushes to a window, ‘opened the shutter, and threw up the sash’.<sup>xxxix</sup> The sound of warning guns fill the house and Mr Percy and his son Godfrey rush to the coast in order to aid the victims of a shipwreck.

The separate and exemplary fates of the Percy family form the main thrust of Edgeworth’s fiction and are often read in terms of the manifestation of a prim and bookish didacticism. As John Ward puts it in the *Quarterly*, ‘the desire of instructing is too little disguised. The reader sees too plainly that he is under discipline. .... Morality ought not to smell of the lamp.’<sup>xl</sup> Yet the opening of this ‘notoriously didactic novel’<sup>xli</sup> features an anxious family gathered in a barely-realised location and quickly scattered by an off-stage catastrophe. A later scene, in which the family leave their home because of a

loss of fortune, sees the dissolution of quasi-feudal relations that obtain between the Percys and their tenants and the traumatic arrival of a new lord of the manor. The ‘discipline’ involved in reading *Patronage* thus involves the disintegration of social and political relations as a precursor to the wider changes envisioned by the plot.

*Patronage* forms part of what Harriet Guest has identified as a broader post-revolutionary depiction of domesticity menaced by the demands of war and the exigencies of empire.<sup>xlii</sup> The novel might further be understood in terms of Clíona Ó Gallchoir’s account of Edgeworth’s ‘revolutionary morality’. According to Ó Gallchoir, ‘[o]ne of Maria Edgeworth’s most constant and characteristic themes is a sudden change of fortune’.<sup>xliii</sup> The Percys in *Patronage* fall from fortune ‘at one stroke’.<sup>xliv</sup> For Ó Gallchoir, ‘the frequency with which sudden reversals, discoveries and transformations featured in Edgeworth’s work’<sup>xlv</sup> should be read in terms of the revolutionary climate in which the novels appeared, with the aftermath of the French Revolution and the more recent experience of rebellion in Ireland in 1798 especially worthy of attention.

When Edgeworth reworked *Patronage*’s shipwreck scene in her Irish novel of 1817, *Ormond*, allusions to 1798 form part of the texture of this sub-plot.<sup>xlvi</sup> In *Patronage* itself, moreover, the violent opening begets further carnage. The shipwreck leads to a sequence of disastrous events for the Percy family, culminating in one of the ‘violent and unnecessary vicissitudes of fortune and feeling’ of which John Wilson Croker eloquently accuses Edgeworth in his *Quarterly Review* account of her *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1812). Some Dutch carpenters who are survivors of the shipwreck are given shelter by the Percys but drunkenly cause a fire which reaches the centre of the house. The family save much by their efforts, but the library is consumed in flames. In the process a vital

document is lost (actually misplaced, as we eventually learn), without which Mr Percy cannot prove his entitlement to his house and land. As a consequence the family are dispossessed and suffer a change of consequence and fortune.

A strong sense of wartime Britain emerges here, reminiscent of Edgeworth's *Popular Tales* (1804), where characters dwell under constant threat of fires, spies and abduction. Also evident is a more immediate sense of the confusion and change witnessed by the Edgeworth family in the summer of 1798, when the battle of Granard brought the United Irish rebellion within eight miles of the family home. Of most interest in this respect is the destruction of the Percy library: in contrast to letters written during those summer months, which emphasise the confusion and chaos of the event, Edgeworth's retrospective account of the rebellion of 1798 focuses on the calm after the storm, the return home synecdochically represented by the family library:

Within the house everything was as we had left it — a map that we had been consulting was still open on the library table, with pencils and slips of paper containing the first lessons in arithmetic in which some of the young people had been engaged the morning we had been driven from home; a pansy, in a glass of water, which one of the children had been copying, was still on the chimney-piece. These trivial circumstances, marking repose and tranquillity, struck us at this moment with an unreasonable sort of surprise, and all that had passed seemed like an incoherent dream.<sup>xlvii</sup>

The family library is saved in fact only to be destroyed in fiction; *Patronage* imports the conflict and carnage of 1798 to the heart of Hampshire, just as a later account of a crowd who attempt violence on the person of Lord Oldborough strongly echoes the killing of Lord Kilwarden in Dublin during Robert Emmet's rebellion in 1803 and serves to bring the spectre of revolution into the safe haven of British parliamentary politics.<sup>xlviii</sup> The same politician concludes the novel by embracing 'the pleasures of domestic life'.<sup>xlix</sup> The move towards domestic peace remains strongly marked by previous public difficulties, however, suggestive of an interpenetration of private and public space that forms the subject of the next section.

### **Private and Public Spheres**

In her earliest publication, *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), Edgeworth suggests that women have the capacity to unite different professional specialisms in the domestic sphere: this is the bedrock of national unity and a strong guarantor of social progress. Novels from *Belinda* and *Leonora* through to her final fiction, *Helen*, all locate women's authority within the domestic arena; in the process, however, they showcase admirable and attractive older women who freely cross the threshold between private and public worlds and thus figure an ongoing questioning of the division that the narratives seek to establish. The relationship between private and public spheres in the long eighteenth century is now at the centre of a growing body of work by historians and literary critics who seek to revise rigid notions of separate spheres and open up a more nuanced understanding of the public roles of women. Such debates, which routinely recognise the

centrality of Edgeworth's contributions but stop short of considering the Irish side of her *oeuvre*, have the potential to revitalise the study of Ireland's first professional woman writer and to open up a longer and more complex history of Irish feminist writing.<sup>1</sup>

The Edgeworths' *Essays on Professional Education* (1809) insists that professional education begins in the home. Parents of a budding lawyer or doctor must form the taste and aptitudes of their sons for the tasks that lie ahead. This commitment to a privacy that is always turned outward allows us consider what Guest calls "“extra-legal” or “private” forms of public citizenship”<sup>li</sup> and their role in post-revolutionary women's writing. Guest summarises the public/private division as an ‘opposition between a masculine public sphere of political power and a sphere of privacy which is much more difficult to characterize, but which almost always includes or overlaps with the domestic’; she also draws our attention to particular, often localized spaces where more fluid relations between privacy and publicity are possible.<sup>lii</sup> An example of the latter might be the ‘female privy council’<sup>liii</sup> described early in *Patronage*, when the Percy women review the various merits of the shipwrecked men they have entertained at dinner. While clearly cast in an ironic mode, the comment does serve to point up the wide-ranging and serious discussions in which Mrs Percy and her two daughters engage throughout the novel. Percy Hall, the ancestral family home, is an exemplary instance of ‘that private world from within which public faces emerge’,<sup>liv</sup> with a stained glass representation of Caroline Percy performing a brave rescue serving to interest the affections of her future husband, Count Altenberg, long before he meets her in person.

*Patronage* displays a self-reflexive interest in genres that belong to both private and public worlds: biography, letters, diaries, private theatricals. In the case of the latter,

the audience wonders whether to behave as if they are in a private home or at a theatre. Ought they clap or mark the distinction between the private and the public stage by genteel silence?<sup>lv</sup> Such uncertainty releases a productive energy in *Patronage*, in particular serving to establish the proper reticence of Caroline while continually driving her character in the direction of publicity. The narrative carefully regulates its representation of her relationship to the stage, noting both her proper refusal to act before an audience and her willingness to spring on the stage and prevent an embarrassing trick being played on the lead actress. The reluctant Caroline thus appears before the public and is rewarded with applause, encores and the approving glances of her future husband.

The emblematic role that *Patronage* accords to both Percy sisters is best understood via a comparison with earlier Edgeworth story, *The Contrast* (from *Popular Tales*), which also features two families that pursue different paths to prosperity. The Franklands are the proto-Percys of the plot and suffer a similar fall from economic grace (a fire is also to blame). *The Contrast* is remarkable for its evenhanded treatment of the male and female characters. Farmer Frankland is condemned to an almshouse and a dependence on ‘public charity’. The aversion of ‘the English yeoman’ to charity is presented as an honourable prejudice; meanwhile the family strive to restore their father to independence. They separate but, fairy-tale fashion, agree to meet in twelve months time; by then the two brothers and two sisters have all acquired sums of money through virtue and hard work. All go into the world and undertake paid work — the family quickly reject the idea that one of the sisters will stay at home and care for their father — and all experience difficulties of life in public world of employment, but overcome these and emerge with reputations intact and financial futures secure.

*Patronage*, by contrast, marks the difference between its male and female characters much more distinctly. This is partly a measure of the Percys' class difference from the world of *Popular Tales* (the Frankland sisters undertake work unsuitable for a gentry family) and partly the effect of the symbolic (and thus immobile and still) roles assigned to them by the narrative. Mr Percy preaches the virtues of travel and is of the opinion that it is 'advantageous for the eldest son of a man of fortune to be absent for some years from his home, from his father's estate, tenants and dependants, to see something of the world, to learn to estimate himself and others'.<sup>lvi</sup> The mobility or otherwise of his daughters, however, emerges as a source of dispute in the novel, most audible when the family have lost their fortune and retired to a remote part of Hampshire. A family friend, Lady Jane Granville, advises Mrs Percy to send the girls to London: there, they will play out their private lives on a public platform and tread a much surer path towards profitable marriages. She greets Mrs Percy's assertion that her daughters have perfect liberty at home with incredulity: 'You might as well talk of leaving them at liberty in the deserts of Arabia. You don't expect that knights and squires should come hither in search of your damsels?'<sup>lvii</sup> Lady Jane Granville mocks Mrs Percy's optimistic attitude toward the marriage market and assures her that 'We are not now in the times of ancient romance, when young ladies were to sit straight-laced at their looms, or never to stir farther than to their bower windows.'<sup>lviii</sup> Caroline and Rosamond remain at home on this occasion, although the narrative does manage to propel them into the public and into the arms of proper suitors.

*Patronage*, however, continues to insist on privacy even as it promotes publicity. The bower image is revisited in volume three of the novel, in a scene that sees Caroline

returning to the remote family home with a new dislike for ‘the stillness of retirement’: ‘the favourite glade, which formerly she thought the very spot so beautifully described by Dryden, as the scene of the “Lady in the bower;” even this she found had lost it’s charm’.<sup>lix</sup> Caroline is subsequently described tending to her garden in a scene that reiterates (and in the process renovates) a well-established trope in women’s writing. In 1799, Hannah More deploys just such an image in order to remind readers that women must always excel at local detail rather than abstract general thought:

A woman sees the world, as it were, from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects which he how stands on loftier eminence commands.<sup>lx</sup>

The image of Caroline’s ‘little elevation’ strongly recalls Austen’s deployment of restricted garden spaces to in her characterisation of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Where Austen’s gardens are ‘circumscribed spaces’, however, ‘metonymic of the ideological boundaries that the world of the novel inscribes’,<sup>lxi</sup> the view that opens up from Caroline’s garden is conjectural and speculative. Furthermore, *Patronage* is intensely aware of the national and cultural specificity of its garden space and addresses the Englishness of the image with a frankness that would be foreign to More or Austen. Caroline discusses her garden with Mrs Hungerford, and the narrative puts in place an explicit set of connections between a taste for cultivated nature and ‘domestic virtues’. Mrs Hungerford further remarks: ‘Our friend, Count Altenberg, was observing to me the other day, that we Englishwomen, among our other advantages, from our modes of life,

from our spending so many months of the year in the country, have more opportunity of forming and indulging these tastes, than is usual among foreign ladies in the same rank of life'.<sup>lxii</sup>

*Patronage* might be read as celebrating the domestic virtues in its choice of genre as well as plot and characterisation, but the novel as whole represents an impure mixture of narrative styles: domestic fiction, historical novel, national tale. The highly-worked metaphor of English femininity discussed above surely issues from Edgeworth's awareness of the deployment of gender in the construction of cultural boundaries within the genre of the national tale. *Waverley's* Flora McIvor and Lady Morgan's Glorvina shadow the description of Caroline here, and *Patronage* as a whole can be seen to be allusively aware of allegorical depictions of Ireland as woman. This attentiveness to the national meanings of femininity is vividly realised when Caroline and Rosamond both sing their choice of lyrics by the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell. Rosamond's choice is Campbell's 'The Exile of Erin', a poem composed by Campbell on having met some of the exiled United Irishmen in Hamburg. Three of the stanzas, including the first and last, end by invoking the United Irish motto, 'Erin go Bragh!', or, 'Ireland for ever'. Caroline on the other hand opts for the robustly British 'Ye Mariners of England', which salutes the British flag as it goes into battle. As Butler suggests, the two women here recall images of Britain and Ireland as sister nations,<sup>lxiii</sup> their different national spirits both represented and reconciled in Scotch song.

The imaginative participation of Rosamond and Caroline in concepts of Britishness and Irishness remind us that, as Guest makes clear in her study, debates on matters of gender cannot be separated from questions about nationality and the conditions

of citizenship.<sup>lxiv</sup> Written and published in the context of the Napoleonic and Peninsular wars, *Patronage* endorses a domesticity that can be positively martial in outlook, as when Caroline insists on the public consequences of romantic love, and its capacity to distract men from their duty:

But the highest and the fairest, those of the most cultivated understandings, of the tenderest hearts, cannot love bring them down to the same level, the same fate? And not only the weaker sex, but over the stronger sex, and the strongest of the strong, and the wisest of the wise, what is, what has even been the power, the delusions of that passion, which can cast a spell over the greatest hero, throw a blot on the brightest glory, blast in a moment a life of fame!<sup>lxv</sup>

The narrative makes an explicit connection between the education of a prince and the education of a beauty,<sup>lxvi</sup> meanwhile Caroline's brother Godfrey does not hesitate to describe her fit to be 'the mother of heroes'.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Kathleen Wilson has written about the double consciousness that eighteenth-century women had to take on, as 'women'' and as national subjects:

Women's bodies and minds functioned symbolically and literally as the bearers of national values and ideals ... just as their alleged 'characters' were taken to encapsulate the best and worst features of national manners, yet in both cases, the abstract and symbolic could serve very particularized purposes.<sup>lxviii</sup>

According to Wilson, women represent the nation allegorically or symbolically (as Britannia, or as exemplary mothers and educators) but also represent its ethos, with feminization as an index of civilization and changes in women's behaviour serving as an indication of general progress or decline. These values are embodied by Rosamond and Caroline in *Patronage*, although they are not divided between them in any straightforward way. The 'private forms of public citizenship' which the novel proposes drew particular kinds of censure, however, that focus on the author's ignorance of the public world rather than on the narrative attempts to imagine new forms of affiliation. One of *Patronage's* key scenes, in which Caroline chooses to accompany her father to prison rather than return to Germany with her husband was severely criticised for its misunderstanding of legal technicalities surrounding imprisonment;<sup>lxix</sup> meanwhile, its negotiation of national and cultural allegiance went unnoticed.

## **Conclusion**

*Patronage* can be seen to concern itself with what Nancy Fraser has summarised as the fundamental aspects of modernity as influentially defined by Jürgen Habermas: 'paid work', 'state administration', 'citizenship' and 'familial and sexual relations'. Read in this light, the 'the union of so many stories' of which Scott and other readers complain can be seen as an effort to interrelate features that were coming to define ordinary life. For Fraser, 'gender norms run like pink and blue threads' through these component parts of Habermas's model.<sup>lxx</sup> Guest, who cites this work, turns to Edgeworth's early work as part of her effort to unpick these threads; the preceding discussion has attempted to

follow through this project and show how, in the case of *Patronage* at least, green threads also loop through the narrative, adding a distinct note of contestation to its depiction of modernity.

Joe Cleary has argued that ‘a complex, contested history of claim and counter-claim means that in an Irish context the term “modernity” is stripped of its semblance of obviousness.’<sup>lxxi</sup> *Patronage*’s failure to respect traditions and customs of English life might be read in these terms. The harshness of Edgeworth’s attack on public life produced a horrified reaction in the reviews: John Ward can scarcely believe that *Patronage* is suggesting that ‘crimes ... of a very dark dye, have been committed by English ministers too commonly, to excite any very strong feeling of self-condemnation in the minds of the perpetrators’. He recoils at novel’s suggestion that ‘publick men in this country ... have been in the habit of sacrificing justice, humanity, and publick duty, to private interest or private vengeance.’<sup>lxxii</sup>

In *Patronage*, we witness a process whereby Edgeworth’s Enlightenment thinking mutates into something like the ‘heightened intellectual scepticism’ towards the promises of progress that Joe Cleary finds in nineteenth-century Ireland more generally.<sup>lxxiii</sup> With this in mind, we might notice the long shadow cast by illicit forms of knowledge in the novel, ranging from the encrypted document eventually decoded by Mr Percy; to the secret history of Lord Oldborough’s affair with an Italian Catholic and the fate of their illegitimate son, Mr Henry; and on to Alfred Percy’s ‘prophesy’, expressed in a letter to his brother Godfrey, that ‘Attorney Sharpe, and our worthy relative Mr Robert Percy, who you saw conjuring together, will work us wo.’<sup>lxxiv</sup> These various intrigues are unravelled in a final act of narrative closure, but the novel’s concluding tableau returns us

to melodrama and forms associated with illegitimate dramaturgy rather than realist fiction: Lord Oldborough strikes a pose, clasping his lost son in his arms and cries out in broken phrases. The novel thus closes as it had opened, with surprise, gesticulation and exhortations.

Rather than presenting domestic spaces that act as safe and sheltered ‘correctives to Britain’s broader economic and social decay’ (as in Austen’s *Emma* or *Persuasion*),<sup>lxxv</sup> *Patronage* presents a domesticity that is mobile (affections and ties remain intact despite the move from the great Hampshire estate to the Hills and the scattering of the family), open to the public world (manifested in the narrative by Alfred and Godfrey’s dispatches from the frontline of their professions) and accommodating, even welcoming, of foreign influence, whether it be German, Dutch or Irish.

One answer to the often-cited question of why Edgeworth turned away from fiction about Ireland from 1817 onwards may be the difficulty, first clearly seen in *Patronage*, of producing a publicly-oriented realist novel true to the complex nature of women’s feelings and experiences at times of national self-scrutiny. In this respect she stands at the head of an important line of Irish women’s writers, stretching from Elizabeth Bowen to Kate O’Brien and on to Anne Enright. The seriousness of Edgeworth’s commitment to the reform of the institutions of British public life, however, means that some readers remain reluctant to engage with gendered aspects of her thought.

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<sup>i</sup> Lord Byron's journal entry for 6 Mar 1814 reads as follows:

On Tuesday last dined with Rogers,—Mad[am]e de Staël, Mackintosh, Sheridan, Erskine, and Payne Knight, Lady Donegall, and Miss R. there. Sheridan told a very good story of himself and M[ada]me de Recamier's handkerchief; Erskine a few stories of himself only. *She* is going to write a big book about England, she says;—I believe her. Asked by her how I liked Miss [Edgeworth]'s thing called [*Patronage*], and answered (very sincerely) that I thought it very bad for *her*, and worse than any of the others.

*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: Murray, 1973–94), III, 247; quoted in Peter Garside, Jacqueline Belanger and Sharon Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800-1829*: <http://www.british-fiction.ac.uk>. Date accessed: 10.05.04.

<sup>ii</sup> Anecdotal responses to *Patronage* cited in full in Garside, Belanger and Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800-1829*: <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/anecdotal/patr14-20.html>. Date accessed: 12.06.04.

<sup>iii</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>iv</sup> *Patronage* was actually published in December 1813, but given the publication date 1814.

<sup>v</sup> Letter from Lord Byron to John Murray II, 24 July 1814. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: Murray, 1973–94), IV, 146; quoted in Peter

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Garside, Jacqueline Belanger and Sharon Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800-1829*:

<http://www.british-fiction.ac.uk>. Date accessed: 10.05.04.

<sup>vi</sup> See Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era', in Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling (eds), *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, Vol II: 1800-1829* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 63, 75; also Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>vii</sup> Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era', p. 75.

<sup>viii</sup> Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, p. 1.

<sup>ix</sup> Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 6.

<sup>x</sup> Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, pp. 67-8.

<sup>xi</sup> Butler, 'Introductory Note', p. xix.

<sup>xii</sup> See Clíona Ó Gallchoir's discussion of the influence of Germaine de Staël's conception of a unified Northern Protestant identity on Edgeworth in her 'Maria Edgeworth and the Rise of National Literature'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1998; see also Butler, 'Introductory Note', pp. xx-xi.

<sup>xiii</sup> Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 337.

<sup>xiv</sup> [Sydney Smith], Review of *Patronage*, *Edinburgh Review* 22, 1814, 416-434 (434).

<sup>xv</sup> [John Ward], Review of *Patronage*, *Quarterly Review* January 1814, 10, 301-322 (312).

<sup>xvi</sup> Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750—1810* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2000); see also Kathleen Wilson, *The Island*

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*Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003).

<sup>xvii</sup> Butler, 'Introductory Note', p. xviii.

<sup>xviii</sup> Guest, *Small Change*, p. 134.

<sup>xix</sup> Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 330.

<sup>xx</sup> Letter from Walter Scott to Richard Lovell Edgeworth, 18 Feb 1815; quoted in Garside, Belanger and Ragaz, *British Fiction, 1800-1829*: <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/anecdotal/patr14-20.html>. Date accessed: 12.06.04.

<sup>xxi</sup> W. J. McCormack, 'The Tedium of History: An Approach to Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage* (1814)', in Ciarán Brady (ed.), *Ideology and the Historians* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1991), pp. 77-98 (p. 85).

<sup>xxii</sup> Marilyn Butler, 'Introductory Note', Maria Edgeworth, *Patronage*, Volumes VI and VII of *The Novels and Selected Works of Maria Edgeworth* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), VI, vii-xxx (p. xii). [Originally published in four volumes].

<sup>xxiii</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 131.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>xxv</sup> For a discussion of this aspect of reviews of *Patronage*, see Jacqueline Belanger, 'Educating the British Reading Public: British Critical Reception of the Irish Fiction of Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan, 1800-1830'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1999.

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- <sup>xxvi</sup> Miranda Burgess, *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order, 1740-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 154.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> McCormack, 'The Tedium of History', p. 91.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, p. 142.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Butler, 'Introductory Note', p. xxvii.
- <sup>xxx</sup> [Ward], Review of *Patronage*, *Quarterly Review*, 301-302.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 15.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 86.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 52.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> See Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority*, p. 67.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Maria Edgeworth to [? Dr Holland], n.d. [1817], National Library of Ireland MS. 8145; quoted in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 440n.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Review of *Patronage*, *British Critic*, I, 1814, 164.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Review of *Patronage*, *British Critic*, I, 1814, 167.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> McCormack, 'The Tedium of History', p. 90.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 7-8
- <sup>xl</sup> *Quarterly Review*, pp. 308-9.
- <sup>xli</sup> Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 329.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Guest, p. 320-1: see her readings of poems by Jane West and Felicia Hemans (*The Mother*, 1809 and *The Domestic Affections*, 1812).
- <sup>xliii</sup> Clíona Ó Gallchoir, 'Maria Edgeworth's Revolutionary Morality and the Limits of Realism', *Colby Quarterly*, 32, 2 (2000), 87-97 (p. 87).
- <sup>xliv</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI 100.

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<sup>xlv</sup> Ó Gallchoir, 'Maria Edgeworth's Revolutionary Morality', p. 87.

<sup>xlvi</sup> For evidence see Claire Connolly, Introduction to Maria Edgeworth, *Ormond* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. xxix-xxx.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Memoirs of Richard Lovell Edgeworth*, 2 vols (London, 1820), II, 232; quoted in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth*, p. 139.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 166.

<sup>xlix</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VII, 252.

<sup>l</sup> See Guest, *Small Change*; also Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Irish Feminism', *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2004).

<sup>li</sup> Guest, *Small Change*, p. 8.

<sup>lii</sup> Guest, *Small Change*, p. 11.

<sup>liii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 11.

<sup>liv</sup> Guest, *Small Change*, p. 13; drawing on Dena Goodman.

<sup>lv</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VII, 32.

<sup>lvi</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, 55.

<sup>lvii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 125.

<sup>lviii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 126.

<sup>lix</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VII, 63.

<sup>lx</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), 8. 29-30; quoted in Guest, *Small Change*, p. 181.

<sup>lxi</sup> Kathryn Sutherland, 'Introduction', Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. vii-xxxiii (p. xxxi).

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- <sup>lxii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VII, 63.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Butler, 'Introductory Note', p.xiv.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Guest, *Small Change*, p. 16.
- <sup>lxv</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 120.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 161.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 87.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Kathleen Wilson,
- <sup>lxix</sup> For a full discussion of the legal and other errors of which Edgeworth was accused, see Butler, 'Introductory Note'.
- <sup>lxx</sup> Nancy Fraser; quoted in Guest, *Small Change*, p. 311.
- <sup>lxxi</sup> Joe Cleary, 'Irish Modernity', in *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. \*\*.
- <sup>lxxii</sup> [Ward], Review of *Patronage*, pp. 311-312.
- <sup>lxxiii</sup> Cleary, 'Irish Modernity', p. \*\*.
- <sup>lxxiv</sup> Edgeworth, *Patronage*, VI, 93.
- <sup>lxxv</sup> I am drawing here on Miranda Burgess's reading of *Persuasion*; Burgess, *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order*, p. 181.