The Secret of *Castle Rackrent*

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Abstract

Often described as original or inimitable, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* has a reputation as a one-off experiment, a type of writing not to be attempted again in the author's own lifetime. This essay reappraises the novel's reputation, not in order to deny its exceptional status but rather to renew our understanding of Edgeworth's precocious literary achievements. I analyze *Castle Rackrent*'s distinctively bookish approach to the past in relation to the culture of Irish Romanticism, arguing that ideas of agency and mediation are central to the novel's astonishing ability to reimagine relationships between voice, print, and history.

The claims often made for *Castle Rackrent*—the beginnings of Irish writing in English, the first Irish novel—belong to a quintessentially romantic understanding of national particularity, linking creativity, place, and culture. Connections between literary originality and romantic nationalism—what Fiona Stafford calls the link between "the new idea of originality and the equally new idea of the nation" (13)—are often pinpointed to the years "around 1800," tying Edgeworth's novel almost too neatly into the emergence of a romantic historicism.[1] Some scholars have resisted these connections. Ian Campbell Ross queries the "often-repeated identification of national literature with a romantic notion of the nation state," arguing instead for the merits of a broader and deeper Irish literary history that can reckon more fully with its Enlightenment origins (17). Yet there remains something tantalizing and elusive about *Castle Rackrent*'s appearance in May 1800, a slight single volume, published anonymously and advertised as a rare flower blooming amidst "the rugged and thorny paths of literature" (Rev. of *Castle*). In what follows I offer an account of *Castle Rackrent*'s formative and knowing role in

the shaping of a distinctive Irish romanticism. I draw on book history, cultural history, and literary form in order to better understand the novel's oblique relationship to a shifting history, tracking the ways in which its artfully arranged "tension between evasion and revelation" (Kreilkamp 27) reconfigures relationships between orality and print, past and present, and fiction and reality.

Too often sequestered as a splendid curiosity, *Castle Rackrent* is attached at countless points to a wider media ecology from which it derives meaning and to which it continues to contribute, keeping the question of colonial authority vibrantly alive. Almost a hundred years after its first publication, Irish novelist Emily Lawless described *Castle Rackrent* as a book apart: "a transcript direct from life, unaltered in the telling, unshackled by any theory, unhampered by moralising, *Castle Rackrent* stands alone" (92). Lawless's vivid phrases testify to the novelty of Edgeworth's creation and help to explain its enduring interest as both brilliant literary original and clever copy. But what kind of originality is vested in "a transcript" taken from life? And can the novel really be described as free from "theory" or morals, given its long and difficult relationship with the constraints of nationalist cultural politics? Arguably, it is Edgeworth's highly distinctive interest in the relationship between "life," "telling," and "theory" that constitutes her originality and shaped her lasting legacy. Her remarkable contribution to the development of nineteenth-century realism has recently been asserted by James Chandler, who argues that "the peculiar circumstances and prodigious talents of Maria Edgeworth positioned her to make her distinctive contribution to this mode of writing" and argued also by Yoon Sun Lee who shows how Edgeworth's plots "represent a crucial step in the development of fictional realism" (36). But we should not lose sight of the "puzzle" identified by Chandler (192), that these developments occurred "in a place and time that many literary historians might find

surprising and in ways that are too easily overlooked if we take too narrow a view of Irish realism" (204). In what follows, I consider the literary distinctiveness of *Castle Rackrent* in relation to its cultural context, offering a new account of its highly particular experiments in romantic realism.

In *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth tests the possibilities of a particularly dense mapping of imagination onto history. Her explorations seem all the more remarkable when we consider the scale, pace, and substance of the changes that she witnessed: widening inequalities, the growing power of a centralized British state, unprecedented demographic growth, and the immiseration of the Catholic population. Edgeworth also undertook the task of testing the limits of what fiction could achieve for Ireland, its history, and its people in the context of an Irish romantic book culture in transition. Where Andrew Piper can define British and European romanticism as a condition of "what happens . . . when there are *too many* books to read" (12), the burgeoning networks of print were only slowly making their way across the island of Ireland around 1800. No new novels were published in Dublin in the 1790s and although reprinting of fiction and poetry continued apace until the Act of Union, the overall "meagre total of original work" reflected a faltering industry with a small readership (Benson 373).

Edgeworth wrote *Castle Rackrent* in the context of a culture marked not by print saturation but rather by scarcity, with literacy in transition and Irish print communities yet to take shape. Behind the novel's preoccupation with the relationship between orality and print lies the language shift from Irish to English, "a lengthy, largely silent and ad hoc process, its pace and impact varying greatly according to region, class and even individual experiences" (Dunne 45). From the mid eighteenth century to the end of the Famine, Ireland was, in Niall Ó Ciosáin's words, "an intensely bilingual and diglossic society" (*Print* 6), home to a transitional linguistic

situation that left its impress on Irish writing in English. In Tom Dunne's account, "[t]he modern Irish novel in English was . . . 'born on the boundaries of two languages' in the first decades of the nineteenth century, as the replacement of Irish by English, in train for centuries, reached even the poorest classes" (44).

Castle Rackrent has a special place in this origin story. Announcing itself as an oral tale in the speech of family steward Thady Quirk and drawing on Edgeworth's own memories of that servant's voice, *Castle Rackrent* is an accomplished performance in print. Largely written in the voice of an illiterate Irish peasant, *Castle Rackrent* enacts the transition from orality to print via its commitment to the rhythms of everyday Irish speech, in particular in its use of Hiberno-English and forms of broken or interrupted speech. The plot sees the landowning Rackrent family—originally named O'Shaughlin, presumably having converted from Catholicism to Protestantism during the eighteenth century—displaced from their powerful position as subsequent generations squander the family fortunes. None of the four Rackrents have children and, as the estate descends collaterally, so too their hold on power weakens. Finally, exploiting the incompetence of the last of the Rackrents, Thady's own son, Jason Quirk, buys up the land and becomes owner and master.

Castle Rackrent pursues its interest in ownership and power not only at the level of the plot but also as a matter of form. Even as the unfolding drama of the plot revolves around Jason's ascent to the position of agent for the Rackrent estate, closely related aesthetic negotiations take place at the level of narrative: Thady's oral narrative is represented in print, with the preface and glossary serving to mediate between the book and its audience; a tale of past lives is made meaningful for the readers in the present. The concept of mediation (meaning "agency or action as an intermediary" ["Mediation," def. 2a]) helps to account for Edgeworth's

ability to manage this array of transitions between and across Irish and English, orality and print, times and cultures. Reading the novel's social and formal concerns together in this way underlines its "bookish" take on its own political moment: the novel takes full advantage of the capabilities, or affordances, of the printed page in the romantic era and places ideas of agency at the center of the novel's world.[2]

To locate *Castle Rackrent* in the context of a burgeoning romantic-era book culture is not to lose sight of its connections to a divided colonial society. It may seem almost too obvious to remark that Edgeworth's first novel maps rifts in eighteenth-century Ireland onto composite and divided page space. Her glossary, footnotes, and endnotes provide historical and cultural information and prompt readers to move between narrative levels, as the accreted past is spatialized on the printed page. Critics, though, have tended to interpret the novel's paratexts strictly in terms of power and control, as in Alex Watson's suggestion that Edgeworth's use of marginal material "attempts to achieve a masculine, imperial domination over the novel's narrator" (57). But the narrative power of *Castle Rackrent* derives not from a conjectural colonialism but rather from the highly particular ways in which different forms of knowledge are distributed across contested page space.

A singular book composed of interconnected and interdependent textual parts, *Castle Rackrent* is situated at the interface of the collision between the literary and the oral in romantic-era Britain and Ireland. From that vantage point, it addresses the limitations and possibilities of print.[3] Dahlia Porter has shown that a number of romantic-era texts published around 1800 used composite methods and strategies to "navigate and capture a seemingly ungraspable totality," that is to say, a world of "information saturation" (2, 3). *Castle Rackrent* partakes of that context but it never loses sight of its location amidst a print culture that is afflicted by issues of

constraint. Elsewhere, I have written about the slightness of the form of the Anglophone novel in relation to the linguistic and cultural copiousness of peasant culture and shown how a number of Irish novelists sought to remedy the inadequate reach of their prose by efforts to lend texture and tactility to their books (Connolly). In the case of *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth's preface, glossary, and notes offer a particular kind of mediated intimacy, bringing readers into proximity with a palpable and varied community of knowledge, preserved in print, referring to shifting realities.

A layered set of literary and political possibilities and relationships—including tensions between orality and print, past and present, landowners and peasants, fiction and reality—give *Castle Rackrent* its distinctive shape. And even as these oppositions are destabilized by Edgeworth's ironic narrative, they open into other, multiple, and overlapping, contradictions: *Castle Rackrent* is regularly named as Edgeworth's great achievement, but its distinctive style sets it apart from all the other books published throughout her long career. The novel is often located as a foundational text in Irish literary history and yet its author herself was cast off by that same developing tradition, the victim of a cultural nationalism doubly uncomfortable with the figure of a Protestant woman writer. Distinctions between authentic "Celtic" or "native" Irish writers and Anglo-Irish authors such as Edgeworth had already emerged in her own lifetime (Mitchel 13) and were to shape her subsequent reputation, further inflected by Victorian expectations of narrative propriety in women. Ellen O'Connell Fitz-simon, eldest daughter of Daniel O'Connell,[4] characterized *Castle Rackrent* as a novel of "revolting unpleasantness," finding it "overcharged in its details . . . crudely and coarsely drawn" (498).

For these cultural reasons, *Castle Rackrent* cannot be easily read in terms of what Piper (referring to the definitive nineteenth-century Weimar edition of the works of Goethe) describes as the romantic "theory of the printed book: that it was capable of functioning as a timeless and

unchanging object which was itself totemically capable of holding together the social form of the nation" (20). Ann Rigney makes an analogous argument in relation to Walter Scott, tracking a long "Scott century" from the publication of *Waverley* in 1814 to the hundredth anniversary of Scott's death in 1932, across which the writer's works came to encompass and express Scottish national identity (13). During these decades, Rigney argues, Scott's writing was prized both for its "monumentality" and its "mobility": major collected editions such as the Waverley edition of 1832 as well as actual memorials in stone (most famously the Scott monument in Edinburgh) worked alongside a cultural appreciation of Scott's books as prized singular items, available for editing, translation, and adapting, mobile objects within a wider media culture (19).

Thinking about Edgeworth in this bookish context places her on the "mobility" side of Rigney's equation. There was no major or "monumental" authorized nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century edition of the books (in contrast to Austen and Scott); nor was there a nineteenth-century material culture associated with Edgeworth the author (such as that surrounding Robert Burns). The publishers Simpkins and Marshall approached Edgeworth in 1847 (just two years before her death) to ask for a new preface and notes for a projected collected edition on the model of Scott's Magnum Opus; she refused, saying that her stories "require no national explanations, and I have nothing personal to add" (Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 9). In 1845, the travel writers Samuel Carter Hall and his wife Anna Maria Hall traveled to Longford especially "to avail our selves of the privilege and advantage of spending some time in the society of Miss Edgeworth." Edgeworthstown House, they wrote, "may almost be regarded as public property":

> From this mansion has issued so much practical good to Ireland, and not alone to Ireland, but the civilised world,—it has been so long the residence of high intellect, industry, well directed genius and virtue,—that we violate no duty by

> requesting our readers to accompany us thither—a place that, perhaps, possesses larger moral interest than any other in the kingdom. (266–67)

Other developments in literary tourism probably prompted the Halls to think in this way: Walter Scott's home at Abbotsford opened in 1833, while Shakespeare's house in Stratford-upon-Avon was bought for the nation in 1847 and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust established in the same year. But the Halls also knew the practical difficulties linked to enshrining Edgeworth's memory in a divided island beginning to feel the first effects of famine, just as the author herself surely felt the difficulties of "national explanations" in those same years. In 1935, just as "the Scott century" came to an end, Edgeworth's house was sold out of the family and its library broken up.

Although *Castle Rackrent* was not widely reviewed on its first appearance, its peculiar texture was noticed by the *Monthly Review* in May 1800:

> The Memoirs of the Rackrents are not of a nature to admit of extracts, without injury to the whole; the structure of which is of so peculiar and singular a cast, that the reader, to be himself pleased, and to do justice to the author, must be enabled to judge of the connection and dependencies of the several parts. (Rev. of *Castle* 91)

Part of what makes *Castle Rackrent* a "peculiar and singular" book is a relationship to history and politics at once particular and plural. As "An Hibernian Tale, taken from Facts, and from the Manners of the Irish Squires before the year 1782," it offers access to a recognizable Irish history. That framework though is ruptured by repeated narrative references to recent memory, while the closing remarks about contemporary politics (the Act of Union, passed into law on 1 January 1801) draw readers' attention to the workings of the narrative, reflecting on its own methods via the literary device known as metalepsis.

Castle Rackrent's precocious forms of self-reflection draw on the bookish practice of joining up and connecting pieces of text, so as to provoke thought and draw out conclusions, part of a wider philosophical and pedagogical practice of "arranging, comparing and connecting

observations and experiments" (Porter 183), methods first used by Edgeworth and her father in *Practical Education* (1798). In this context, it is helpful to review the novel's emergence in the 1780s and 90s, considering its place amidst Edgeworth's early experiments in observation, agency, and method. Starting with her play *The Double Disguise* (1786) and the story "The Bracelets" (*c.* 1787), Edgeworth began to write work that featured "ordinary people going about their common everyday business" (Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 152). Her embrace of natural voices and forms can be located in the context of the late eighteenth-century renewal of pastoral by William Cowper and George Crabbe (Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 153). Yet Edgeworth's progress towards "a frank and detailed realism" (Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 153) did not run in straight lines. *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795, 1798) gave epistolary and essayistic shape to questions of women's education, female authorship, and the domestic conduct of wives. The experimental qualities of *Castle Rackrent* owe much to these earlier efforts to address open and curious young readers on their own terms. Often in the early writing, Edgeworth sets out to take apart a set of literary conventions and expectations. With "Angelina" (*Moral Tales*, 1801), she published a satire on contemporary sentiment that shares qualities with Austen's writing of the same decade. Meanwhile, Edgeworth continued to aim for success on the stage, beginning *Angelina* as a play and sending the short satiric drama *Whim for Whim* to Richard Brinsley Sheridan in 1799.

None of this, however, quite prepares us for *Castle Rackrent*, which began life between 1793 and 1795 as a short dramatic monologue spoken in the voice of an Irish servant, most probably existing as an oral performance delivered by Edgeworth to family audiences in Clifton and Edgeworthstown (Butler, "Introduction" viii). From this, Edgeworth developed the dynastic story of the first three Rackrents, finally adding Condy's story as the novel's second section. We know it existed as a manuscript by 1798, when Edgeworth wrote to her father's new father-in-

law, Daniel Augustus Beaufort, to enquire whether he had "anything to alter or correct in the Rack Rent families" (Butler, "Introduction" ix). Butler argues that the first section of the novel was committed to paper between 1794 and 1796, while the second section was probably written between 1796 and 1798. The Glossary was added in the autumn of 1799 (Butler, "Introduction" ix). *Castle Rackrent* appeared in January 1800 as an anonymous octavo volume costing four shillings, going into a second edition in 1800; but Edgeworth's name did not appear until the third edition of 1801. The first Dublin edition seems to have been printed from the third London one, and in the same year Johnson had the novel entirely reset and printed for a second London edition. There were two more Dublin editions by 1802, as well as a pirated American edition in 1802 and another London edition in 1804.[5]

Edgeworth's London publisher Joseph Johnson paid her one hundred pounds for the novel, and she went on to earn three times that sum for *Belinda* a year later. Edgeworth's original footnotes were sent to the publisher with the text in time to be printed routinely at the foot of the page, while the glossary was printed after the preface and "Advertisement to the English Reader" in the first edition (all subsequent editions placed it at the book's end) (McLoughlin 368). Where many writers around 1800 used footnotes rather than endnotes (Porter 153–54), Edgeworth's footnotes are relatively scarce and her glossary (or endnotes) more profuse. To this extent, her novels differ from those of Lady Morgan, where copious quantities of explanatory material are gathered at the end of the page, often crowding out the main narrative.

With readers required to move across the page and between the pages of the book, *Castle Rackrent* breaks down the distinctions not only between orality and print but between fiction and a wider world of referentiality. Yet even as it settled into its life in print, the novel's "extended prior career in oral form" (Butler, "Introduction" ix) continued to make itself felt. Thady's

narrative is a remarkable exercise in giving print form to an extended oral performance, its conceptual underpinnings made clear by the footnotes and the glossary. Readers can register the effects of the transition from speech in notes such as this one on the word "pin": "*Pin,* read *pen*. It formerly was vulgarly pronounced *pin* in Ireland" (28). Changes made to later editions chiefly concern "phrasing and grammar" (with some new notes added), and some of these alterations offer evidence of a back-and-forth movement between voice and print: "Minnouth" in the first edition of 1800 became "Maynooth" in later editions, while "purchaser" was changed to "perchaser" and "sister" to "shister" (McLoughlin 367–69).

The preface declares its affiliation to half-finished sentences and overheard conversations as offering a truer form of fiction, and the printed novel as a whole bears the pressure of this commitment to partial and fragmented forms. The novel's glossary notes can usefully be thought about in these terms: although often associated with learned interventions from the editor, the notes practice a particular kind of naturalness, one associated with conversational modes, asides, and digressions. The tone and content of the glossary note on "*A raking pot of tea*" (Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* 65), for instance, is familiar from eighteenth-century epistolary culture and may well draw on Edgeworth's experience as a writer of letters. The note in question depicts an after-party debrief in an Irish country house, where women, exhausted from dancing, huddle over the kettle, "giggling and scrambling" with the maid to arrange the tea-table and share gossip, "confidences," and "railleries" (65). An early letter from Edgeworth to her school friend Fanny Robinson, begun 15 September 1783, remarks that "[s]o many things come into my head when I think I have done with you that my postscripts are almost as long as my letters. Besides a post script is a most convenient receptacle for odd questions & odd thoughts—pell mell—" (qtd. in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 154). Edgeworth's letters also often imagine and address different

layers of readership. She wrote to her cousin Sophy Ruxton in February 1805 that "[t]he habit of shewing letters is a vile practice" and she did not like the idea of having to tailor her correspondence to the tastes of "Miss This and That" or "Miss T'other" (Edgeworth, *Letters from Ireland* 89). Edgeworth knew and understood the quasi-public culture within which her private letters circulated and sometimes marked off passages as private or not to be read aloud. A moving letter from Edgeworth to Sophy Ruxton, dated May 1813, contains a section marked "private," written partly in French for additional security: having confided the dashing of her romantic hopes for Etienne Dumont, Edgeworth then returns "to our public history" (Edgeworth, Letter to Sophy Ruxton).

The ways in which *Castle Rackrent* exploits the affordances of the printed page can be connected to these layered forms of address. Not only do notes make a "convenient receptacle" for the accreted matter of Irish social and political history, they also address and enact the levels, forms, and locations of colonial knowledge: a context that is renewed within our own media moment. Discussing his 2019 non-fiction book on Brexit, the Northern Irish novelist Glenn Patterson remarked:

> I decided at the outset that with events moving so fast I wanted to have some way of commenting on what I had written earlier in the text, sometimes earlier in the same day. I decided I wanted footnotes. Footnotes get a bad rap. "Too academic," is the charge. To which I say, is the Sky red button academic? Is googling to see who that is playing the flatmate of Kate Ashfield, who plays Simon Pegg's girlfriend in Shaun of the Dead, even while watching the zombies eat Dylan Moran, academic?

Patterson's remarks about footnotes help us to think of *Castle Rackrent* as participating in what Andrew Burkett has identified as "an embryonic Romantic-age concept of media" (17). Even if Edgeworth's footnotes do not belong to an everyday media landscape in which books jostle for space alongside television and the internet, they partake of just the kind of naturalness that

Patterson identifies: a multi-layered narrative response to a situation moving at alternate speeds, on different temporal levels and across different media.

Castle Rackrent's footnotes are also where the novel's transition from real-life story to printed book is made manifest. While the narrative tone varies between judgment and sympathy, the notes very often mark real-world conditions in which different kinds of knowledge emerge. In the process we encounter what Cassidy Picken terms "the conditions of exchange between editor and storyteller" (190). The novel's fictional editor figure offers an explicit analysis of those conditions:

> Several years ago he related to the editor the history of the Rackrent family, and it was with some difficulty he was persuaded to have it committed to writing; however his feelings for "*the honour of the family*" as he expressed himself, prevailed over his habitual laziness, and he at length completed the narrative which is now laid before the public. (6)

In Picken's discussion of this passage, "the act of representation occurs in the transaction between persons who are propertied and others who are not" (182). Yet the seeming tension between the idle world of oral story-telling and the productive domain of print—the latter associated with land ownership—is at least partly undone by Thady's presentation of himself in the guise of publisher. At the novel's outset, Thady Quirk presents himself not as narrator of the Rackrent chronicles but rather as a publisher willing to share his own story:

> Having, out of friendship for the family, upon whose estate, praised be Heaven! I and mine have lived rent-free, time out of mind, voluntarily undertaken to publish the MEMOIRS of the RACKRENT FAMILY, I think it my duty to say a few words, in the first place, concerning myself. (9)

"Publisher" is likely used in the early modern sense of meaning "A person who prepares and issues a book or document to the public, as author, editor, printer, or bookseller," obsolete from around 1800 ("Publisher," def. 2a), rather than its more recognizably modern form, meaning a professional in the world of books. But these different meanings co-exist and are tracked within

Castle Rackrent: Thady's initial promise to say a few words concerning himself is scarcely realized, and it falls to the composite narrative—the published book itself, with its many textual layers—to allow readers to glimpse Thady's story.

Within the plot, writing proliferates, though in different modes. The legacy of the first of the Rackrents, Sir Patrick, is variously marked by an inscription on a broken punch-bowl kept in a garret, testifying to his fame as "the inventor of raspberry whiskey" (10), and by a "handsome marble stone in the church of Castle Rackrent, setting forth in large letters his age, birth, parentage, and many other virtues, concluding with the compliment so justly due, that 'sir Patrick Rackrent lives and died a monument of old Irish hospitality'" (24). Between these two poles of liquid memory and solid stone, readers encounter memoranda, circular letters, writs, notes of hand, leases, list of debts, school textbooks, play-bills, and printed ballads.

The novel presents its varied world of print and writing against the backdrop of the tightly bound connection between print culture and improvement in Ascendancy Ireland, where improving ideas spread through print while books as objects themselves constituted material emblems of progress. The preface to Arthur Young's *Tour in Ireland* makes an explicit connection between the wider culture of improvement and the responsibility to publish one's own story. Young asserts that

> it is necessary that every gentleman residing in the country, and practising agriculture, should write and publish an account of so much as falls within the sphere of his observation: The experience of centuries has shown us how much this may be expected. Were it done, such journies as I have registered and published, would have been perfectly unnecessary. A man who has attended some years to husbandry in one place, would have it in his power to gain a far better and more particular account of every circumstance than it is possible a traveller should procure. (iv–v)

Edgeworth was very interested in the implicit tension outlined by Young—between deep and close observation founded in the facts of location versus the shallow knowledge acquired via

travel—and developed these ideas across all of her Irish novels, from *Castle Rackrent* onwards. In doing so, she drew on the rhetorical resources of Union (described by Edgeworth in a letter to her father as "the Bill of Bills") (qtd. in Butler, *Maria Edgeworth* 184) and the ways in which it had generated a wider print culture as part of which Irish identity became unavoidably associated with the political power of the written word. Margaret Mount Cashell's anti-Union pamphlet *A Hint to the Inhabitants of Ireland by a Native* (Dublin, 1800) argues that publishing is vital:

> At a crisis when every thing most dear to Irishmen is at stake, when their country trembles on the brink of an unfathomable abyss, and the monster of despotism stands ready to devour them; it becomes the duty of an individual to declare his opinions, and to throw his mite of disapprobation into the national fund. At a time when *unanimity of exertion* is the only requisite, and *energy of action* the only salvation, no person can be too insignificant to publish his sentiments; for, however ignoble the organ by which it is expressed, the "still small voice" of truth *will* be heard, and the incontrovertible arguments of self-interest *must* be remembered. (3)

Mount Cashell probably means women by her remark that "no person can be too insignificant to publish his sentiments," but her suggestion resonates strongly with Thady's narrative. Edgeworth's preface makes similar claims, insisting that marginal voices, truth, and self-interest are closely allied and that print belongs to all sectors of society in this politically charged moment.

Edgeworth also understood that the discourse of improvement did not always make a smooth transition into print. Connections between observation, writing, and social progress were pervasive but yielded a sense of gaps and insufficiency as often as they did neat alignments between literature and improvement. Her joking account of her father's wish for her to add a new post-Union generation of tales to the text of *Castle Rackrent* in or around 1810 drew both on architectural metaphor and local knowledge: "my father wishes to have some *additions* made to

it—and I fear in this instance *additions* will not according to the Irish usage of the word be synonymous with improvements" (Butler and McLoughlin xii–xiii).

Improvements form part of the ironic texture of *Castle Rackrent*. When Sir Murtagh's wife teaches the children to read and write, literacy is presented as part of a tightly focused scene of education, work, commerce, and domesticity:

> However, my lady was very charitable in her own way. She had a charity school for poor children, where they were taught to read and write gratis, and where they were kept well to spinning gratis for my lady in return; for she had always heaps of duty yarn from the tenants, and got all her household linen out of the estate from first to last; for after the spinning, the weavers on the estate took it in hand for nothing, because of the looms my lady's interest could get from the Linen Board to distribute gratis. (12)

Print itself points the way to the problems with education in this passage. Even as an older world is summoned up by the texture of the telling, our ability to notice the repeated word "gratis" in print underlines the ironic invocation of a mode of charity for which the poor pay dearly. These ironies multiply in the figure of Jason Quirk, who represents a revenge wrought through reading, writing, and education. A good scholar and a "cute lad" (16) who might be made into a priest, Jason takes on clerking duties for the Rackrent agent. Better at "book learning" than Sir Condy Rackrent, with whom he shares a school room, Jason makes himself master of penmanship, documents, and memoranda. He begins by copying accounts for the agent "for the pleasure of obliging the gentleman," then becomes himself a tenant on the estate, drawing on knowledge gleaned from the estate papers; then steps in to act as agent. Meanwhile he buys up Sir Condy's debts and notes in hand and finally confronts his landlord, culminating in a theatrical scene in which the landlord "puts his hands before both his eyes, and cried out 'Merciful Jasus! what is it I see before me" when confronted with "the sight of bills and load of papers all gathered on the great dining-table" (42).

Aileen Douglas suggests that Jason's skill with documents is a logical development of "the pedagogical notion that to copy a text is to make it one's own": "Edgeworth shows that the copyist comes to possess not the text alone, but the property to which the text refers" (160). These links between literacy, writing, and ownership propel the novel into the future, as I have been suggesting, but also open a rift between the generations: "the literate son of an illiterate parent, Jason Quirk represents a phenomenon that would exercise social commentators for decades to come: the possible break in families caused by children's access to literacy" (Douglas 159).

That "possible break" is probed and tested within the narrative of *Castle Rackrent*, especially in its final section. Caught between the servant-class life of his childhood and the responsibilities of his position as landowner, Sir Condy is faced with a choice between two women: Judy M'Quirk, Thady's cousin, to whom he has made "something like a promise of marriage," and Isabella Moneygawl from a neighboring estate, with whom he enjoys a fashionable flirtation. When Thady suggests that "it's all over with our poor Judy," Sir Condy disagrees and tosses a halfpenny to guide his choice:

> "I'm come to a determination upon the spot;" with that he swore such a terrible oath, as made me cross myself; "and by this book," said he, snatching up my ballad book, mistaking it for my prayer book, which lay in the window; "and by this book," says he, "and by all the books that ever were shut and opened, it's come to a toss-up with me, and I'll stand or fall by the toss; and so, Thady, hand me over that *pin*† out of the ink-horn," and he makes a cross on the smooth side of the halfpenny; "Judy M'Quirk," says he, "her mark."‡ God bless him! his hand was a little unsteadied by all the whiskey punch he had taken, but it was plain to see his heart was for poor Judy. My heart was all as one as in my mouth when I saw the halfpenny up in the air, but I said nothing at all; and when it came down, I was glad I had kept myself to myself, for to be sure now it was all over with poor Judy. "Judy's out a luck," said I, striving to laugh. "I'm out a luck," said he; and I never saw a man look so cast down: he took up the halfpenny off the flag, and walked away quite sober-like by the shock (28–29).

Even as Sir Condy protests his fondness for Judy, the narrative places his fecklessness on display. But it does so in the context of a "vibrant culture of partial literacy" that was taking on new meaning in the rapidly changing world of Anglophone print (Ó Ciosáin, "Oral Culture" 191), represented here by the footnote marks that frame peasant speech. That world of speech and song is further signified by Thady's "ballad-book," on which Sir Condy takes his oath. But when the halfpenny coin falls on the obdurate surface of the flagged floor, it materially reroutes the destination of the plot, away from a spoken promise to a peasant woman and towards the more recognizably literary plot of Sir Condy's subsequent marriage to the fashionably sentimental Isabella.

The two footnotes present in the passage direct readers to the relationship between speech and writing (the difference between "*pin*" and "pen," cited earlier) while the focus on the plight of those left behind by social change underscores transitions between past and present, Ireland and England:

> It *was* the custom in Ireland for those who could not write to make a cross to stand for their signature, as was formerly the practice of our English monarchs. The Editor inserts the fac-simile of an Irish *mark*, which may hereafter be valuable to a judicious antiquary—
>
> Her
> Judy x M'Quirk
> Mark.
>
> In bonds or notes, signed in this manner, a witness is requisite, as the name is frequently written by him or her. (28)

By inserting "the fac-simile of an Irish *mark*" within the note, the novel makes a commitment to small-scale graphic particularity, drawing readers' attention to the potential cultural value of a flat mark made on a printed page.

In this key scene, Edgeworth exploits what Porter describes as the capacity for "page space" to pose "questions of agency and control" (15). Judy's "x" inscribes the crossing of

possibilities and futures, not only personal but political, historical, and textual. Julia Carlson has shown that Wordsworth's romanticism depends on a relationship between nature and the printed page: the poet's declared affiliation to natural forms in speech and landscape "materialized," she shows, "within a matrix of inscriptional projects" that included "the charting of terrain and the notation of language by cartographers, elocutionists, prosodists, and the writers of tours and guidebooks" (8). Edgeworth similarly engages with practices of visual and typographic notation, shadowed here by the powerful presence of a legal system to which colonial subjects have not been afforded full access.

That a future antiquarian is likely to be drawn to this "mark" reminds us that *Castle Rackrent* not only represents a world that is fading away but also enacts that passage on the page. The transition between past and present imagined by the novel is now recognizable as a quintessential expression of the romantic historiography that Edgeworth helped to invent: writing premised on absence and loss, animated by the historical self-consciousness of the post-revolutionary era and poised to record change. As the future encroaches upon the feudal, fitful, and feckless habits of the Rackrents, its coming is flagged in the narrative by books, reading, and writing. Introducing the narrative of Sir Condy, the last of the Rackrents, Thady recalls how he used to tell him "stories of the family, and the blood from which he was sprung, and how he might look forward, if the *then* present man should die without childer, to being at the head of the Castle Rackrent estate" (25). Accounting for his own tales as a "prophecy," Thady's narrative seems to cleave to oral and folk context. And yet in the same description we are told how the young Sir Condy attended the local "little grammar school" alongside Jason, who helped him in "his book-learning." Though Sir Condy goes to "the college of Dublin" (25), his is a life of hunting, drinking, and courting; Jason, on the other hand, is soon explaining estate matters to his

father's master and acquiring his own land and property along with the agency of the estate. Condy, despite his formal education at Trinity regresses into a failed feudal world while Jason's sharpens the acquisitive skills he needs to triumph in a new commercial culture.

The preface explicitly articulates this marking off of past from present via books. Hoping that "his readers will observe that these are 'tales of other times:' that the manners depicted in the following pages are not those of the present age" (6–7), Edgeworth's editor draws his evidence from fictions rather than life, asserting that "the race of the Rackrents has long been extinct in Ireland; and the drunken Sir Patrick, the litigious Sir Murtagh, the fighting Sir Kit, and the slovenly Sir Condy are characters that could no more be met with in Ireland at present than Squire Western and Parson Trulliber in England" (7). The suggestion that the race of the Rackrents belong to the past is reinforced by connecting them to other fictional characters, the names drawn from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. In making this connection, Edgeworth draws on and develops the resources of fictionality, in particular the idea that greater credibility could be found in a well-turned plot rather than the contingencies of real life, or in what Catherine Gallagher calls "a nonreferentiality that could be seen as a greater referentiality" (342). Yet Edgeworth also works against "nonreferentiality": in her use of the name "Rackrent" for her fictional family, she adopted and popularized a highly resonant term with clear connections to a recognizable world of excess and extortion.

Edgeworth's writing could not itself stand outside of these competing claims to truth and reality. Her own fictions were, over time, subject to further acts of displacement, as her novels came to represent a bygone past or indeed the very idea of pastness—a way of expressing distance. A "household name" from as early as the 1820s (Butler, "Introduction" xiii), Edgeworth was often invoked as an exemplar of boring respectability in the nineteenth century.

In Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872), Lady Linlithgow reads *Pride and Prejudice* in her bedroom and plans to borrow *Adam Bede* from Mudie's Circulating Library; meanwhile, "Miss Edgeworth's novels" are respectable enough to be kept "down-stairs" (384). While "Miss Edgeworth" might operate as a synonym for old-fashioned respectability, the term "Castle Rackrent" became, as Thomas Bartlett puts it, "shorthand for all that was bizarre and burlesque amongst the Irish governing elite" (x). When Charles Abbot, Chief Secretary in the immediate post-Union period was travelling around Ireland "on the mandatory getting-to-know-the-country tour," he confided to his Viceroy, Lord Hardwicke, that he had "dined one day at a thorough Castle Rackrent, but pray never say so" (Bartlett 8). Thomas Henry Lister's silver fork novel *Granby* (1826) already noticed the resonant possibilities of Edgeworth's title: the foolish Lady Harriet Duncan gushes about literature and hopes that her friend likes "nothing of Miss Edgeworth's or Miss Austen's. . . . You cannot think how I was disappointed in Northanger Abbey, and Castle Rack-rent, for the titles did really promise something" (148). Fictional usages of the term often sketch out a state of affairs even more dire than that found in Edgeworth's novel, as in the depiction of dissolution and buffoonery found in *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) by Charles Robert Maturin: "a castle-rackrent, an house of disorder and riot, where a bad dinner, vilely dressed, and attended by careless servants, was washed down by floods of wine, that were swallowed with the precipitation of men who were in haste to forget themselves" (221). Something like a pleasant expectation of characteristically Irish disorder is captured by Lady Morgan in her *Dramatic Scenes from Real Life* (1833) when a visiting English lady begs an Irish servant to "tell us all sorts of stories about this old castle Rack Rent" (25–26).

Castle Rackrent seems already to know and reflect upon its piecemeal future, incorporating within its frame the makings of its own explanatory context, in the shape of the

preface, footnotes, and glossary. Its later life forms part of an ongoing intermedial process by which books become, in Christina Lupton's words, "touchstones in a practice of revising, of packaging up our differences as a story" (65). The novel's title, in particular, continued to find new applications as it served to signal a falling away from modernity that is represented not only within novels but by them; fiction itself partakes of the quality of pastness that marks its relationship to the question of reality. Writing about the dangers of rabies in Ireland in 1850, the novelist W. H. Maxwell described the terrible state of a run-down house near Mullaghmore in County Sligo, a "Castle Rackrent" with dismounted doors and gates and a "partially unslated" roof (153), surrounded by bad-tempered, diseased dogs. Edgeworth's title was used in Parliament in 1847 to describe the ransacking of the Treasury by Anglo-Irish landlords in the aftermath of the Famine via the Encumbered Estates Act ("Bentinck Bubble"). Passed in 1849 to enable the speedy sale of indebted estates, the Encumbered Estates Act was part of the changing world of post-Famine Ireland. The Edgeworths themselves wondered at its efficacy, again by reference to *Castle Rackrent*: a draft 1849 article written in Harriet Edgeworth's hand criticized Anglo-Irish landlords for continuing to exploit tenants ("Not satisfied with screwing up the rent to the uttermost farthing, they are rapacious and relentless in the collection of it") while worrying also that government measures might prove useless: "even yet we fear that working of the encumbered estates Commission will show that the Sir Kits and Sir Condys are not extinct &c that their propensities, if not so very glaring & obtrusive as those of their predecessors have in fact been attended with consequences not a jot less disastrous to others & themselves" (Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* 310).

As the phrase came to signify ruinous corruption and a political mentality that had outlived its historical moment, it found its way across the Atlantic. Frances Anne Kemble,

former actress and wife of the Irish plantation master Pierce Mease Butler (descendant of the United Irishman and slave-owner Pierce Butler), couched her reactions to plantation life in the American south in terms derived from Edgeworth's novel, depicting a typical planter's home as "such as a well-to-do English farmer would certainly not inhabit." "All things have a Castle Rackrent air of neglect, and dreary, careless untidiness, with which the dirty, barefooted negro servants are excellent at keeping" (116). And the novel's appearance in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) marks a return to Edgeworth's own enigmatic and recursive style. In the scene where Nick Carraway invites his cousin Daisy for tea, planning to effect a surprise reunion between her and Gatsby, they exchange words at his door:

> "Are you in love with me?," she said low in my ear. "Or why did I have to come alone?"
> "That's the secret of Castle Rackrent. Tell your chauffeur to go far away and come back in an hour." (119)

It may be that the reference to *Castle Rackrent* signals something about the insecurity of life in West Egg, letting readers know that Daisy should be wary of Nick's rented house and Gatsby's gaudy mansion alike. Or perhaps the shadowy presence of Edgeworth's novel in Fitzgerald's depiction of fated American lives stands in for a kind of credibility that resides in a jagged relationship between fiction and the world. In either case, *Castle Rackrent* has cast off its cultural moorings but retains the paradoxical qualities that marked its origin in early nineteenth-century Ireland.

Perhaps in recognition of these very qualities, Elaine Freedgood enlists *Castle Rackrent*—alongside Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*—for her revisionist effort to fashion an alternative genealogy for the nineteenth-century novel. The shared tendency of these titles to rupture their own fictional frames means that they practice a kind of realism that operates across different

levels of reference, creating what Freedgood calls “fissures that suggest infinite folds of space and time.” Disparate as they are, the novels that Freedgood lists are connected by their ability to “suggest that we can imagine, and therefore inhabit” alternative possibilities (xv). The examples given above show some of the ways in which *Castle Rackrent* found its way into new environments, a process that continues in the strange, absorbing scenes in Anna Burns’s 2018 novel *Milkman*, in which the narrator (known only as “Middle Sister”) reads nineteenth-century novels, including, of course, *Castle Rackrent*, as she walks about the city. Details are sparse but most readers recognize the time and place as Republican-area Belfast in the 1970s, a time of violence and distrust. To encounter Edgeworth’s precociously accomplished novel amidst Burns’s Booker prize-winning prose is not however to be made aware of the power of fiction in understanding changing societies. Rather, it is to begin to grasp the contours of a set of circumstances in which fiction seeks out forms that allow it to approach what Burns calls the “the dark mental energies” (89) of a time and a place: its digressions, evasions, and secrets.

Notes

[1] See Mark Salber Philips on the ways in which romantic genres of historical knowledge took shape “circa 1800” (141).

[2] A bookish approach thinks about literature as “at once a materially embedded activity, caught up in a thick network of concrete material relations, and an intensely symbolic activity, engaged in the less easily defined pursuit of authority and legitimacy in a competitive artistic and professional (as well as commercial) arena” (Ferris and Keen 8). For a “bookish” history of Irish romanticism, see Connolly.

[3] The earlier history of Irish fiction gives ample evidence of earlier uses of footnotes and endnotes, from Thomas Amory's *The Life of John Buncle, Esq* (1756–66) to Stephen Cullen's *The Castle of Inchvally; a Tale — Alas! too True* (1796). The latter includes footnotes on aspects of national life, oriented towards an English reader.

[4] Ellen O'Connell Fitz-simon was the author of *Darrynane in Eighteen Hundred and Thirty-two, and Other Poems* (Dublin, 1863).

[5] Edgeworth found herself in London while Johnson was preparing a fourth edition (to appear in 1804): she wrote to her brother Charles Sneyd Edgeworth (her "dear Sneedy Weedy") to "beg dear aunt Mary will look in my bureau for a note about *fairies* for Castle Rackrent—it is written in her own hand" and also reports that her sister Charlotte "has given a good Thady for a frontispiece" but this never appeared in print (Edgeworth, "Letter to Charles Sneyd Edgeworth"). Some later editions (1810 and 1815) had illustrations of which Edgeworth did not approve: "they are not Irish I think—they are an English person's ideas of Irish" (Butler and McLoughlin vii). Visiting England in 1818, Edgeworth saw illustrations for *Castle Rackrent* drawn by John Sneyd (1763–1835, Rector of Elford in Staffordshire, collector of Gillray): she professed great admiration but they never appeared in print. See the letter from Maria Edgeworth to Elizabeth Waller, 24 November 1818: "[John Sneyd] has shewn me his drawings for Castle Rackrent of which I had heard so much and which . . . far surpass my expectations. It is wonderful how he never having been in Ireland could form such good notions of Irish people and *clothe* his ideas so well. He has made *portraits from imagination* of your friend *old Thady*" (Edgeworth, *Letters from England* 141).

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