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Title	Maria Edgeworth's revolutionary morality and the limits of realism
Authors	Ó Gallchoir, Clíona
Publication date	2000-06-01
Original Citation	Clíona Ó Gallchoir; (2000) 'Maria Edgeworth's Revolutionary Morality and the Limits of Realism'. Colby Quarterly, 36 (2):87-97.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol36/iss2/4
Download date	2026-10-10 17:03:16
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/468

UCC
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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Colby Quarterly

Volume 36
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

June 2000

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Colby Quarterly, Volume 36, no.2, June 2000, p. 87-97

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Maria Edgeworth's Revolutionary Morality and the Limits of Realism

by CLÍONA Ó GALLCHOIR

> In these times, no sensible person will venture to pronounce that a change of fortune and station may not await the highest and the lowest; whether we rise or fall in the scale of society, personal qualities and knowledge will be valuable. Those who fall, cannot be destitute; and those who rise, cannot be ridiculous or contemptible, if they have been prepared for their fortune by proper education. In shipwreck, those who carry their all in their minds are the most secure.
>
> Maria Edgeworth, "Madame de Fleury" (*Tales and Novels* 10: 137)

ONE OF MARIA EDGEWORTH'S most constant and characteristic themes is a sudden change of fortune. *Patronage* (1813) opens with an actual shipwreck; the sequence of events that follows results in the Percy family finding themselves evicted from their comfortable home and beloved estate. *The Absentee*'s Grace Nugent discovers that she is really the daughter of an English army officer named Reynolds, an identity which she holds for a fleeting moment before becoming the wife of Lord Colambre. *Emilie de Coulanges* deals with the fate of French emigrés in the Revolutionary period who, like the characters in "Madame de Fleury", the tale from which my opening quotation is drawn, offer the most direct illustration of the ways in which individual lives are subject to sudden changes. The best-known and most controversial of Edgeworth's narratives of transformation is *Ennui*, in which the Earl of Glenthorn undergoes a revolution in his personal identity when he discovers that he is by birth Christy O'Donoghue, son of a blacksmith, substituted for the true earl by his nurse.

The frequency with which sudden reversals, discoveries and transformations featured in Edgeworth's work was addressed explicitly and at length by John Wilson Croker in his 1812 review of the second series of *Tales of Fashionable Life*. Before commencing on the review proper, he determines to discuss "the violent and unnecessary vicissitudes of fortune and feeling which disfigure, in a greater or lesser degree, every tale of the first *livraison* of this work [i.e. *Tales of Fashionable Life*, vols.1-3, 1809]" (329). Croker goes on to give a fairly lengthy list of such incidents:

> Of this character are, the disgusting duel on which the whole drama of 'Belinda' turns; the change at nurse of the heir of Glenthorn for the son of the blacksmith, which constitutes the plot and produces the denouement of 'Ennui'; the nauseous folly of the romantic friendship in 'Almeria'; the indelicate and unlikely incident which operates the conversion of Colonel

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Pembroke in 'the Dun'; and the threadbare improbability of Emilie de Coulanges' refusing to marry the son of her friend, because her heart was engaged to an interesting unknown, and the stale surprize of discovering this same interesting unknown to be the very son of her friend. (330)

In his comments on *The Absentee* towards the end of this review, Croker, moreover, adds that "the denouement of the heroine's ... history affords a striking illustration of the charge we have been compelled to make" (337). He insists that this kind of flaw is "of such frequent occurance [sic]" in Edgeworth that it can be considered "*characteristical*" (330, 329).

The lesson which this reviewer is attempting to communicate is that fact and probability are not identical: "we are prepared to insist that, while the '*vrai*' is the highest recommendation of the historian of real life, the '*vraisemblable*' is the only legitimate province of the novelist who aims at improving the understanding or touching the heart" (329). What Mitzi Myers has termed Edgeworth's "penchant for the unnatural incident and the bizarre conclusion, the creaky plot and the freaky finale" (152), is usually discussed, with good reason, in the context of Edgeworthian realism and its contribution to this literary mode in the nineteenth century. The consensus seems to be that Edgeworth's moral purpose is both the source of her achievements in realism, and the stumbling block to a more fully naturalistic art. Croker, however, gives a hint which has not yet been taken up when it comes to discussing Edgeworthian improbability. "Violent catastrophes and strange vicissitudes", he writes, "occur now and then in the history of mankind; but they are so rare that, as lessons of conduct, they have little effect on the mind" (330). Edgeworth's improbable incidents are thus a little more than eccentric or romantic: they intervene in the personal histories of the characters in the same way that "violent catastrophes" interrupt world history. This is, moreover, Croker's second use of the word "violent" to describe the improbability that offends him.

It seems almost disingenuous of Croker to insist on the moral inutility of unexpected and violent events, given the storm of debate and controversy that followed the French Revolution and was concerned, precisely, to determine its moral meaning. It may well be that his choice of words reflects a political unease with Edgeworth's interest in the idea of sudden change and reversal of fortune. Croker's insistence that such incidents are characteristic registers a disturbance in his response to a novelist whom, in common with his colleagues at the *Quarterly Review*, he regarded broadly favourably, but not without a degree of suspicion (Butler 341-42).

The suspicion would have been all the more alarming in the light of Edgeworth's explicit address to the middle classes in her *Popular Tales* (1804). These were greeted by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* with approval and enthusiasm, and placed immediately in the context of the Revolution controversy: "this is an attempt, we think, somewhat superior in genius, as well as utility, to the laudable exertions of Mr Thomas Paine to bring disaffection and infidelity within the comprehension of the common

people" (330). Jeffrey emphasises the pioneering realism of the *Tales*, which he regards as the foundation of their moral utility, and although he registers the fact that "many of the incidents are childish, and several of the stories unmeaning and improbable" (331), he expresses no anxiety as to the effect of such improbability. For Jeffrey, Edgeworth represents "things as they are" in a manner calculated to stabilise rather than destabilise the status quo.

Edgeworth's design was, however, rather more complicated than this. Her intention was not simply to discourage "disaffection and infidelity", but to promote new social configurations, whilst avoiding the suggestion of Jacobinical sympathies. According to Gary Kelly, Edgeworth's fiction:

> promoted her and her father's version of the economy of merit and money in forms designed to subsume the prerevolutionary and revolutionary social and economic critique while serving the postrevolutionary need for models of social reconciliation, economic development and national identity. ("Class, Gender, Nation and Empire" 93)

There is, therefore, in Edgeworth a tension between the stasis of domestic realism, which purports to describe things as they are, and a desire to propose models of change.

The effect which this had on her fiction is well described by an anonymous reviewer for the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1825, who had to a degree the benefit of hindsight in mounting the following objection to:

> the singularly complicated and artificial plots of Miss Edgeworth's stories. It cannot be doubted that these greatly injure the general effect of the works of which they form so important a part, by destroying their verisimilitude as wholes ...
>
> These elaborately artificial plots of Miss Edgeworth's Tales, united with their otherwise perfect truth of delineation, give to them a mixed character, and prevent them from being regarded as either true pictures of what we are, or ideal ones of what we might or ought to be; leaving them hanging, like Mahomet's coffin, between the heaven of one, and the mere earth of the other, without absolutely belonging to either. (qtd. in Butler 349)

The idea of Edgeworth's fiction existing somewhere between heaven and earth is all the more intriguing given that a feature of writing aimed at the lower classes in the postrevolutionary period was its intention to supplant the romance and fantasy which was the dominant mode of existing chapbook literature. The ideological meanings of fiction in this period are summarized as follows by Gary Kelly:

> there was an increased emphasis on techniques of domestic realism and 'fact'; fictionality was seen as a sign of the impractical, the speculative, the imaginative, and moral or artistic excess—qualities associated with the French Revolution and Jacobinical utopianism, especially in the writings of Edmund Burke and his followers.... On the other hand, a taste for fictionality and narrativity was also supposed to be a sign of the unenlightened mind, unregenerate moral self, or—worse—the 'pre-modern' or even pre-literate consciousness of the childlike common people. (*English Fiction of the Romantic Period* 71)

The *Popular Tales* self-consciously allude to the traditional preferences of lower-class readers for fiction that departs from the limitations of the everyday and promises total transformation. Whilst censuring delusive and dangerous fantasies, they suggest that there is a right way to achieve a change in

one's status. Whereas "The Lottery" attempts to point out that sudden wealth in itself does not guarantee happiness and may lead to misery, the exemplary Gray family in "Rosanna", by contrast, whose success is the result of hard work and cooperation, prompts the narrator to remark that "good-will is almost as expeditious and effectual as Aladdin's lamp" (*Tales and Novels* 4: 312). This comment, on one level, negates the fantasy which previously characterised the greater portion of popular literature, but it also invites the reader to share in a modern fantasy of transformation.

"Lame Jervas", which was the first of the *Popular Tales* to be written, in 1799, illustrates two problems that recur in the intersection of realism and the promotion of social change. The increasingly unlikely adventures of its eponymous hero suggest that Edgeworth's realism is subject to her desire to produce narratives of transformation, whilst the tale's conclusion betrays moral anxiety about the conditions and consequences of change.

Jervas is the familiar blank sheet on which a new version of class relations is to be written: "Where I was born, or who were my parents, I do not well know myself; nor can I recollect who was my nurse, or whether I was nursed at all; but, luckily, these circumstances are not of much importance to the world" (*Tales and Novels* 4: 4). His earliest memories are of being put to work at the age of six or seven, sifting the rubble discarded from a tin mine in Cornwall. As a result of cruelty and injustice, Jervas learns to be devious and to care little about his work or his fellow workers. A decisive change occurs when he experiences kindness for the first time at the hands of his master, the mine owner. Thus when he realizes that a group of miners led by Jonathan Clarke intends to defraud the master by hiding a load of ore and selling it for their own profit, Jervas determines to warn his "benefactor". For this Jervas, in a spirit of true capitalism, is rewarded with a share in the profits of the ore he helped to safeguard. But it is really only at this point that the narrative begins; fearing for his life if the scheming miners discover who betrayed their secret, the benevolent master removes Jervas from the mine and places him in a rather unspecified position of apprenticeship in the household of a friend.

Jervas is steered in the direction of science and the pursuit of the useful arts by his kind master. Having successfully constructed a model of the tin mine in which he used to work, and garnered the attention of some influential gentlemen as a result, he is apprenticed to a travelling lecturer and demonstrator. Again, his diligence and loyalty stand him in good stead and he attracts the attention of a gentlemen who is looking out for a suitable candidate to teach at the school founded in Madras by Andrew Bell.[1]

Edgeworth constantly stresses the gradual quality of Jervas's progress and the way in which her narrative diverges from tales of sudden, inexplicable, and implicitly unmerited good fortune. But the limits of this type of progress

1. For a description of Bell's "monitorial" system of instruction, and its currency in contemporary debate, see Richardson 91-95.

are reached quite quickly, and, in some respects, her protagonist is no less a hero of fantasy than Aladdin himself. The location shift to India prompts Jervas, as the narrator of his own life, to remark that "[y]ou will, I am afraid, be much disappointed to find that, upon my arrival in India, where doubtless you expected that I should like others have wonderful adventures, I began to live at Dr. Bell's asylum in Madras a regular quiet life" (4: 48). Edgeworth is thus at pains to point out how her tale differs from more frivolous productions in which the introduction of an exotic location is the cue for improbable adventures. In spite of this disclaimer, however, a series of exotic adventures is precisely what ensues.

Having briskly dispatched Jervas's first four years in Madras, in which he worked diligently during the day, and, "when the business of the day was over … often amused [himself], and the elder boys, with [his] apparatus for preparing the gases … speaking-trumpet, air-gun &c." (4: 48-49), Edgeworth proceeds to unfold a jaw-dropping tale which results in Jervas's acquiring a substantial fortune. This is, in Edgeworth's characteristic fashion, substantiated with a lengthy footnote which reprints letters sent by one William Smith to his mentor, Andrew Bell, whilst residing at Devanelli Fort, where he was requested to present a series of scientific experiments and demonstrations to the court of Tippoo Sultan and to instruct "two aruzbegs, or lords" in the use of mathematical apparatus (4: 49-50). Jervas is requested to make a visit to Tippoo Sultan in order to make a similar series of demonstrations. Although it is not recorded what direction William Smith's life took after his stay at Devanelli Fort, in Jervas's case this invitation acts as the kind of magical device that Edgeworth's emphasis on gradualism and the reward of effort has until now precluded.

Jervas's expertise and hard work win him the Sultan's favour with the result that he is ultimately made manager of the Sultan's diamond mines at Golconda, where he uses up-to-date machinery for the further exploitation of mines that had been adandoned, thus bringing increased profits. Jervas's acquisition of wealth is explained in rational terms to his audience; he digresses, in fact, to explain to his former mining colleagues the benefits of his decision to live on as small an amount as possible, whilst investing his salary and increasing his savings through compound interest (4: 66). The fact that the process whereby money is created from nothing by the operations of interest is deliberately addressed to a plebeian audience suggests that, once again, Aladdin's lamp is being replaced by more modern methods of acquisition. In spite of these rationalised explanations, however, Jervas's trajectory is in truth a transformation: beginning life as the lowliest worker in a Cornish tin mine, we leave him having gained a fortune as the master of a diamond mine in India. The tale, moreover, concludes with an appropriately gripping finish, in which the hero is thrown into prison on the orders of the Sultan, who has been tricked by a scheming merchant into believing that Jervas has defrauded him. He is dramatically rescued by his former pupil, the Sultan's enlightened son, Abdul Callie, and a loyal servant named Saheb.

Francis Jeffrey felt comfortable in describing "Lame Jervas" as a tale that illustrated "the rewards of industry". In spite of the didacticism that is so commonly associated with Edgeworth, however, it is actually remarkably difficult to fix firm and simple "morals" to Edgeworth's moral fictions. The eventual absurdity of such an effort is well illustrated by the chapter headings which, according to R.L. Edgeworth's "Preface", were supplied by the editor for the first edition. These chapter headings were so evidently unsuccessful that they were omitted when the collected edition of Edgeworth's works was published in 1832–33. Thus we come across statements which range from the obscure—"Both Sides Positive"—to those with a glaringly self-evident quality, such as "The Passionate and Capricious are often Unjust", and, most hilariously of all perhaps, "Tygers and Despots make Dangerous Friends". We are here, surely, in the territory of the "strange vicissitudes" to which John Wilson Croker objected: it is, after all, only useful to those ambitious young men hoping to impress Tippoo Sultan with their knowledge of mechanics and engineering to be reminded that both tigers and despotic leaders are to be avoided.

Jervas's first friend, the owner of the tin mine, toasts his success at the end of the tale by declaring, "May good faith always meet with good fortune". An appropriate moral, one might think, for a woman of Edgeworth's class, eager to see progress and to foster a society in which merit and effort will be rewarded, but also anxious to imagine that the lower classes will remain in "good faith" with their ostensible superiors. Jervas's story has such an exemplary quality, however, that it can hardly help exceeding its own bounds: so anxious is Edgeworth to imagine what rewards might await the truly industrious that she involves herself in quite another set of problems: those of the morality of wealth and power. Jervas comments on the dreadful conditions at the diamond mines, where the slaves were treated "scarcely as if they were human beings", and "nothing but my hopes of finally prevailing on the sultan to better their condition, by showing him how much he would be the gainer by it, could have induced me to remain so long in this situation" (4: 72). This theme comes to dominate the final pages of the tale. Jervas concludes his narrative with his thoughts as he left India:

> As the wind filled the sails of our vessel, much did I rejoice that the gales which blew me from the shores of India were not tainted with the curses of any of my fellow-creatures. Here I am, thank Heaven! once more in free and happy England, with a good fortune, clean hands, and a pure conscience, not unworthy to present myself to my first good master, to him whose humanity and generosity were the cause of— (4: 81)

at which point he is interrupted by the same benevolent master. The speech, however, begs the question of whether it is, in fact, possible for a person born in Jervas's station in life to acquire the kind of wealth that he now has and still to possess "clean hands".

Edgeworth can be described as attempting to imagine shifts in social structure that are like victimless, bloodless revolutions, but her own plots prove that there is no such thing. Another of the *Popular Tales*, "The

Manufacturers", is more obviously unsuccessful in concealing the fact that social change involves failure as well as success. The story concerns two brothers who inherit a manufacturing concern from their uncle. Whereas William is content to concentrate on his duties as the manager of the factory, Charles employs an undermanager and devotes himself to the pursuit of a fashionable lifestyle. What follows is relatively predictable, in so far as Charles makes an entirely unsuitable marriage with a lady of fashion considerably older than him. This marriage involves the exchange of his name for her more patrician one. Unable to manage either their finances or their emotional lives, the couple descend into misery. Finally, Charles calls on William, who offers him help, on the condition that Charles break off his relationship with his mistress, a liaison that has ruined him financially and contributed to the collapse of his marriage. There is a powerful sense of moral mastery in William's handling of his would-be modish brother. Throughout the tale, William's lack of fashionable polish and pretensions is stressed; in the conclusion this plainness is represented as the guarantor of integrity and strength.

Following the death of his dissipated wife, Charles reassumes his own name and dedicates himself to a life of conscientious hard work, in spite of the ridicule that such a reformation causes among his former fashionable acquaintance. Charles is unperturbed, as he "well knew, that in less than a twelve-month, they would forget such a person as Charles Germaine had ever existed" (*Popular Tales* 2: 366). In the first edition of the *Popular Tales*, this transformation is underscored by his remarriage: we are told in the last two lines of the tale that "his second choice was as prudent as his first had been unfortunate; he married Miss Locke, and forgot the years of misery which he spent with Mrs Germaine" (2: 367). What is surprising about this is, not so much that Edgeworth chooses to round off her hero's story with his marriage to an enlightened governess with an obviously allusive name, but that, by the time the tale was reprinted in the 1832–33 edition, the remarriage was omitted. Evidently, it was felt that the neat disposal of one wife and the adoption of another was perhaps a somewhat brutal way of making a point about social pretension. It makes clear what Edgeworth, perhaps, wished to obscure: that the kind of historical process described in "The Manufacturers", whereby a decadent, extravagant, unproductive aristocracy is replaced by a progressive middle class, produces victims.

Ennui is, of all Edgeworth's tales, the one to which the phrase "violent and unnecessary vicissitudes of fortune" best applies: the Earl of Glenthorn does not simply lose his fortune or estate, he loses his very identity. The author herself appeared to sense the awkwardness of utilising the rather fantastic device of a "change at nurse" in order to bring to a conclusion her tale of the fall and rise of the Earl of Glenthorn. The chapter in which the revelation is made thus opens with the following reflection:

'Le vrai n'est pas toujours vraisemblable,' says an acute observer of human affairs. The romance

of life certainly goes beyond all other romances, and there are facts which few writers would dare to out in a book, as there are skies which few painters would venture to out into a picture. (*Ennui* 273)

The plot of the "change at nurse" is clearly a metaphor for revolution, and has been interpreted as such by Irish critics in the twentieth century, who see in this bizarre incident a metaphor for the "peasant threat" sensed by Edgeworth and her class (Dunne 107). *Ennui* is, however, a multilayered reflection on the meanings of revolution in an Irish context, of which the fear of native insurgence is, for Edgeworth, just one. As we have seen, Edgeworth had in any case an ambivalent attitude towards the kind of sudden change implicit in the concept of revolution. Although the *Popular Tales* emphasise the idea of gradualism and present it as the realistic alternative to the fairy-tale transformations of the popular narratives with which her tales competed, the presentation of Jervas, for instance, as a subject without memory, family background, or context suggests that Edgeworth's project was in essence to "make new", to build a future without reference to the past. Her tales of the French Revolution, *Emilie de Coulanges* and "Madame de Fleury", assert strongly that reversals of fortune may convince individuals of the necessity for both self-exertion and cooperation, thus producing unexpectedly positive results. Revolution and transformation in *Ennui*, therefore, are not simply expressive of fear and insecurity, though the attempt to map these progressive interpretations onto an Irish context proves complex.

Many accounts of *Ennui*, such as those of Tom Dunne, Seamus Deane and Thomas Flanagan, pay scant attention to the chapters which precede Glenthorn's arrival in Ireland, thus failing to register the insistence with which Edgeworth seeks to portray her "hero" as an utterly decadent aristocrat, whose faults and vices contribute to a fall into revolutionary disorder. Glenthorn's account of his attempts to banish *ennui* is thick with literary and historical references which introduce the spectre of the French *ancien régime* in all its excess, such as when he compares his own gluttony to that of Louis XIV. Nor is the French Revolution the only precedent invoked; Glenthorn remarks that "epicurism was scarcely more prevalent during the decline of the Roman empire than it is at this day amongst some of the wealthy and noble youths of Britain" (153). Edgeworth sketches the consequences of Glenthorn's decadence in the image of a failed marriage followed by a household insurrection:

ruined by indulgence, and by my indolent, reckless temper, my servants were now my masters. In a large, ill-regulated establishment, domestics become, like spoiled children, discontented, capricious, and the tyrants over those who have not the sense or steadiness to command. (166)

Later, in Ireland, Glenthorn muses that "*ennui* may have had a share in creating revolutions" (249), a thesis that seems to have been proven already with respect to his life in England. Thus, the first revolutionary moment of the tale takes place in England: Glenthorn arrives in Ireland as a quasi-emigré.

The second moment of revolution is of course the depiction of the United

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Irishmen's rebellion of 1798. The manner in which these events are represented, as some commentators have observed, is thin and unconvincing, and certainly bears little relation to historical reality. The episode involves a group of intriguers, leagued by a secret oath, who plan to murder Glenthorn and seize his lands. The plot is foiled, however, when Glenthorn is alerted to it by his foster brother. The fact that Edgeworth, who along with her family was physically endangered during the rebellion, relegates the violence to the status of non-event in her fiction, suggests a rather weak denial of reality.[2] The treatment of the violence is, however, more than simply palliative. In minimizing the significance of the rebellion, Edgeworth seeks to make a more general argument about the transient nature of violent upheaval and its consequences. For Glenthorn, the rebellion is simply one more temporary distraction from *ennui*:

> *Unfortunately for me*, the rebellion in Ireland was soon quelled; the nightly scouring of our county ceased; the poor people returned to their duty and their homes; the occupation of upstart and ignorant *associators* ceased, and their consequence sunk at once. Things and persons settled to their natural level. The influence of men of property, and birth, and education, and character, once more prevailed.... My popularity, my power, and my prosperity were now at their zenith, *unfortunately for me*; because my adversity had not lasted long enough to form and season my character. (248-49, original emphasis)

Glenthorn's success in foiling the revolutionary plot is, therefore, no success at all. The removal of the external threat is no guarantee that he may not generate the conditions for collapse once more through his own weakness and flaws. The role reversal that follows the revelation that the earl and Christy O'Donoghue were changed at nurse does not represent a revolutionary collapse, therefore, but a necessary stage in the reconstruction of her hero's identity.

Edgeworth deliberately plays with revolutionary echoes, such as the former earl's description of himself as being in the position of an "abdicated monarch" whose subjects, the Glenthorn tenants, persist in bringing him homely gifts of rural produce (308). Faced with the knowledge of his origins, however, the one-time earl, "O'Donoghue" as he is now called, does not accept the circumstances of his birth as definitive of his identity. He in fact is "new born" and begins to create a new identity for himself, as a professional relying on application and merit. In a sense, Glenthorn is as much an "orphan" as Jervas: the shock of discovery does not provide him with an alternative family history, it enables him to begin again, freed from any inheritance. Or, like Charles Darford of "The Manufacturers", he may be said to abandon his former self, to the extent that in his case also his fashionable friends may forget that such a person ever existed.

But the conclusion of *Ennui* suggests that the search for a universal framework within which to read the Irish past and present was not successful. Although the former earl succeeds in grasping the principles of survival, his

2. For an account of the experiences of the Edgeworth family during the rebellion see Butler and Dunne.

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foster brother fares very badly. He had himself protested all along that he was not fitted for life as an earl, but his wife's social ambition dictated that he should accept the offer to take possession of his hereditary wealth and title. Under the new regime, Glenthorn Castle becomes "a scene of riotous living, and of the most wasteful vulgar extravagance" (309). The melancholy conclusion to the self-destructive career of excess at the castle comes abruptly, almost as a postscript to the narrative, when the former earl learns from his foster brother that Glenthorn Castle has been burnt to the ground, and that the son and heir has been killed in the blaze. *Ennui* thus concludes with yet another revolution, in which the former earl, now married to the heir-at-law, Cecilia Delamere, once again takes possession of the Glenthorn estates and begins work on rebuilding the castle. *Ennui*'s conclusion is overshadowed by tragedy: the Irish tenantry, as represented by the blacksmith earl, though innocent of revolutionary intent, are nevertheless punished for their inability to manage the social upheaval of "revolution".

As I have suggested, the strange vicissitudes which beset the life of the Earl of Glenthorn resemble those of the protagonists of the *Popular Tales* in a number of ways. Like Charles Darford, he has a failed marriage and undergoes a change of name. Both men adopt the names of their more nobly born wives, though with a crucial difference which reflects the impact of local tensions in Edgeworth's Irish writing. Having fallen in love with Cecilia Delamere and fulfilled his promise to her to prove himself by making a success of his legal career, the former earl submits to his mother-in-law's objection to his "vulgar" name, O'Donoghue. The marriage and change of name also signal O'Donoghue's restoration as the Earl of Glenthorn. In "The Manufacturers", by contrast, marriage to a gentlewoman and the adoption of her name precipitate the moral and financial decline of the middle-class protagonist.

It could be argued, therefore, that Edgeworth's Irish fictions are more socially conservative than her narratives of the onward march of the progressive middle classes in Britain. Unlike the exemplary case studies of the *Popular Tales*, the victims of social change in *Ennui* are the lower classes. One could argue, however, that *Ennui* is more realistic in its representation of social change than the relentlessly optimistic *Popular Tales*. In its depiction of the peasant-earl as the blameless victim of change, *Ennui* may reflect the moral unease of those who, as the bearers of a modernizing revolution in the sixteenth century, prospered at the expense of others.

In addition to its more circumspect account of social and economic change, *Ennui* also departs from the "modern" programme of domestic realism in its narrative style. The extent to which writing aimed at the middle and lower middle classes was designed to counteract the preference for the marvellous is particularly evident in "Lame Jervas", perhaps because it was the earliest written of the *Popular Tales*. Explicit reference is made throughout to the kind of narratives popular among its target audience, such as criminal confessions and tales of oriental adventures. Jervas is, in fact, motivated in

part to narrate the story of his life in order to correct the "strange and ridiculous stories" (*Tales and Novels* 4: 1) which circulated among the miners following his abrupt disappearance, and which amount to the absorption of his fate into folklore and oral tradition. Domestic realism and its social mission to integrate the lower classes into a middle-class system of morality and economy demanded the representation of characters and settings hitherto ignored by literature. This was in many respects a radical development, particularly when viewed in an Irish context. Its achievement is ambiguous and paradoxical, however, since the authors of fiction in the mode of domestic realism were also intent on eradicating the characteristic narratives of the classes and groups they addressed. *Ennui*, with its adoption of folkloric themes, represents a singular exception. As I have suggested with reference to the *Popular Tales*, Edgeworth's commitment to the limits of strict probability was always in tension with her desire to produce stories of transformation. *Ennui*, set in a country repeatedly revolutionized and threatened with revolution, adopts a native metaphor both for the "strange vicissitudes and violent catastrophes" that have punctuated Irish history, and for the means of their resolution.

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